

Clumps

Isabelle Wentworth

SHE has been losing her hair in clumps. The strands look unreal on her pillow — too long, too dark. And not just on her bed; she finds them pegged to the clothesline, tucked into the back of the couch, tickling the back of her throat. Surely too many? She strokes the scaled belly of paranoia. Her head doesn't look any different though. The hair seems to be all there, still attached to her head. Maybe the bunches belong to someone else. Someone else living in the house — maybe a mad person. Romantically mad, in that old-fashioned, one-size-fits-all, Bertha Rochester kind of way. But probably not.

It's too early to be awake, but she's arguing with someone in her head, not enjoying it, feeling tense with the responsibility of exactly articulating her point. Finally, after several reruns, she feels she has the upper hand and relaxes. She should sleep. She marks this new stage of the night with a gulp of water. There.

Or maybe it's too late to try to sleep now. Maybe a walk? She wanders at night sometimes, though not usually this late. Long walks, always the same streets. Her long fingers search out in front of her, dipping in between the hands of couples, into the ears of dogs. But not tonight. Her sisters will visit tomorrow, all four of them. Which is really too many, as far as sisters go, but it's nice that they will come. They will all have to make conversation, though, which is not easy even with all of them together, five people pitching in. It's not that they're estranged, it's just that the pressure to be close, to *confide*, clags their mouths. She should love them. *More*, she adds hastily. She should love them *more*. Her stomach bubbles with pickled guilt.

Okay, no sleep then. She props herself up, looks around, translates the shapes of the wallpaper. There are grumbles from the cupboard, loud at first, then tapering off. She walks unhurriedly across the room, checks the latch. All in order.

Well, she's up now. She ought to get up and clean; her sisters will be here soon. She really must sweep up all the hair.