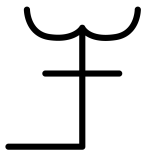


On the coffee table beside his cellphone charger sits a book he doesn't recognize: a small bound volume with gilt-edged pages. He turns to the flyleaf: *The Holy Bible*, King James version, printed in New York, 1851.

He flips through the mottled tissue-thin pages, the march of miniscule verses. Though he doesn't remember buying the book, that doesn't mean he didn't. Often he buys a dozen moldy old volumes at a time, enjoying the notion of all the hands that have held them over the years.

He examines a gold insignia stamped into the leather. Not a cross, as befits a Bible, but some weird variation:



Then he notices something inserted like a bookmark between the pages. He opens to the marked page. In the seam is a long lock of hair, a reddish brown shade, silky to the touch.

How long has it lain here preserved and undiscovered? Whose was it? Rolling the strands absently between his thumb and forefinger, he glances over the text someone has marked in thick pencil. The verse describes the angel Gabriel appearing to a virgin in Nazareth. A common enough passage.

Suddenly, the pain returns: a noose ripped tight about his neck. For a few seconds he is unable to breathe.

A second later, the pain abates. Hoyt feels dizzy, confused. About to reach for the gin, he realizes the lock of hair is still in his hand.

Its luster has faded, the strands now feel dry, coarse, wiry. Repulsion fills him, as if he holds the desiccated souvenir of a dead thing.

He tries to shake the strands off, but they cling to his fingers. Bolting to the kitchen, he stamps the foot pedal on the garbage pail, flipping the lid open. He scrapes the tangled hair into the bag, dumping orange rinds on top. The lid falls shut.

In a frenzy, he cleans the kitchen, the sun setting behind Rowell Hill as he sweeps up broken plates, washes dishes, wipes the table clean of crumbs and congealed spills. Tossing the sponge in the dishrack, he turns to leave.

The garbage pail catches his eye. He halts, disbelieving his eyes. The lid is lifting, forced up by a profusion of snarled auburn hair, which expands, growing over the brim, tendrils searching blindly for the floor.

As if it lives.

Grabbing the pail, Hoyt runs out the front door toward the woods, feeling the hair curl like brittle vines over his hands.

Dusk obscures the path through the trees. Veering off, he crashes through the underbrush, arriving at the edge of his junk pit: a shallow ravine where he chucks old appliances, paint cans, truck batteries and rusted lawn chairs. Hurling the contents of the pail down the slope, he stands panting, peering into the darkness of the pit.

Somewhere it's there, growing. Hoyt kicks dead leaves over the edge, to bury the horror, then gropes his way back to the house.