

Blonde

by Thalia Halloran

I'm going blonde. Everyone else seems to have everything figured out for once, so I need a change.

The stylist finishes checking in another client and comes back over to my chair. She is short and her breasts are straining against her leopard print top, stretching the spots until you can no longer see the holes in the middle. The elastic is fighting a war.

Her own hair is streaky, pink and blue over mouse brown, and I wonder for a moment if I should just get up now and leave before she does something irreversible. There's still time to drive home and turn on the television and maybe catch *Seinfeld* reruns or whatever they're airing these days. I could make microwave popcorn and turn down the lights. I could pretend I was a kid and it was late at night and I was trying not to laugh too loud so Mom and Dad wouldn't wake up. I could call Frankie and we could curl up in pajamas like old times, but she probably has plans with Andy. She always has plans these days.

I lean back into the chair and grip the armrests until my knuckles turn white.

"What can I do for you today, then?" the stylist says and begins to knead at my scalp with her rough fingers.

My chest feels kind of tight and I don't open my mouth for a few seconds and when I do I've borrowed my grandmother's German accent that she only trots out on holidays or when she's angry.

"Blonde," I say and relax my hands. "All the American girls are blonde."

The stylist laughs. “So where are you from, honey?”

It’s a bit of a loaded question—I was born in a different place than where I lived longest or where I liked best, and all of those are different from where I live now. I settle on, “Vienna,” because that’s where my grandmother is from and I lived there for a few months when I was a kid.

“Germany?” She talks with her mouth too wide open, like she wants me to count her teeth.

“Austria.”

She begins to pin my hair up to the top of my head with those little toothy clips that only hairdressers and cool girls own. I’ll have to get myself some when I’m blonde. I’ll finally be able to wear a messy bun that looks artful and windswept and accidental and delicately crafted all at once.

I have this theory that I’m going to feel better once I do it. People will be nicer. Guys will smile at me more and rush to pick up my pens when I drop them. Girls will be jealous of me, except the other blondes. We will have an instant camaraderie.

The stylist paints my hair and wraps it up in tin foil. When she’s done I look like an alien from an old Hollywood sensation, an H. G. Wells wet dream. I go and sit with my head in the funny little dryer and everything is warm and I wonder if the tin foil will burn me but I decide that even if it does it won’t matter. You can have horrific burns down your face and neck but with the right shade and shape to your hair you can get away with it.

I close my eyes when the stylist washes the color and the bleach out of my hair. She’s leaning so close over me I can feel the heat of her breath. I’ve got goosebumps sort of and I feel like crawling out of my skin.

Luckily she pulls back once the bleach is all out and I can breathe again as she starts layering some color back in. I don't want my hair to be white, after all. I want golden, cornsilk, strawberry, all-American, beach babe, bombshell, bubbly blonde. Blonde with dimension. Approachable blonde.

I go back to the hair dryer, then get shampooed, then she gives me a blowout. All the blondes get blowouts. I'm not sure I have the money to drop on a weekly one, not since I've been paying the rent all on my own, but I'll have to find it. They'll know if I don't. The crack in the veneer.

The next morning I wake up to sunlight streaming in the living room window. I forgot to set my alarm and I fell asleep on the couch while scrolling through my phone, but the whole rising gently to the midday sun thing feels very blonde so I pad back to my room and strip. I haven't actually touched my bed in weeks, and there's dust on the duvet. I throw on a camisole and shorts and then a big knit cardigan on top of it so it covers one of my shoulders but just sort of slips off the other. That feels like a blonde thing to do, and then I make myself herbal tea instead of my normal coffee, because that fits too. I should have a newspaper that I half-read while I sit on my balcony. I should maybe move somewhere with a balcony.

I have a few unread emails, but that's it for notifications. I haven't posted anything since before Aidan left and I know that out of sight is out of mind. No one knows I'm a blonde yet, and they're all too busy having things figured out to bother with me right now—boyfriends behaving, fights forgotten, mental health monitored. They're probably all staying hydrated and keeping gratitude journals. It's alright. They'll come around. They always do.

I need to show the world my new hair, but I have to think about it carefully before I do it. I can't just post a selfie—I'm terrible at the angles. Anyway, blondes don't take pictures of themselves. They have friends who do photoshoots at golden hour and capture candid where they're laughing and all their teeth are perfect. Their eyes crinkle up but it's cute when they do it. Natural.

I don't really have the kind of friends who take pictures of me. They kind of avoid me when things are working out for them, really, and when things aren't they're always too shaky to hold a camera. We never actually do a whole lot except talk and wish things were better, and sometimes I tell them it'll be okay without really meaning it or wanting it to happen, but that's about it. Taking pictures would suggest we wanted people to see us, but I'm blonde now and I do want people to see me, so I guess I'll just have to find a way.

Later in the day I get a call. Frankie wants to go dancing. It's a Saturday evening and so it makes sense but it feels a bit out of the blue, especially since we haven't really talked since the last time we went out. Her voice sounds a little worried and part of me wants to ask if something happened with her boyfriend again, if she's looking for an excuse to drink, but then I'd have to take care of her and taking care of people isn't what I'm supposed to do anymore. I'm supposed to go dancing, so I say yes. I'm supposed to turn heads, and make friends with drunk girls in bathrooms, and share that little knowing look with every other blonde that says *I recognize you, I applaud you, we are the same, you and I.*

It's kind of cold out but it always gets hot in clubs with all those bodies pressed together so I put on a tube top and a short little skirt and then swipe on some waterproof makeup so it doesn't slip with sweat. Blondes aren't supposed to sweat often but when they do it's supposed

to look and smell good so I splash on some perfume and apply extra deodorant to my armpits and even a little to my back, just in case. Blondes don't wear stilettos because that's trying too hard so I toss on some booties with a little wedge at the back because blondes are either under 5'2 or over 5'7 and I'm neither.

I wonder if people will be able to tell, when I'm there, that I'm a brand-new blonde. I wonder if my voice will give it away, or my eyebrows, or my posture. I think I slouch too much.

Frankie and I meet up at a parking garage two blocks from the club—I walked here but she drove. It's nice to see her, I guess, especially since I haven't in a while and she didn't really say goodbye last time. She says, "Nice hair," but I can't tell if she means it. She has a biting kind of tone whenever she speaks that makes it difficult to tell if she's being sarcastic.

I'm not sure why I like her, but we've known each other since before we lost all our baby teeth and knowing counts for something. Our parents were on the same committee at the UN, so we moved around a lot and often to the same places. We're very different, but I think Frankie is the only person who gets why I am the way I am.

After a moment, she asks, "Is this about that girl on Aidan's Instagram?"

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I know the picture she's talking about, from last Thursday—a girl sitting across the table from him with big blue eyes and hair so blonde it gleamed. We've been broken up a month now, but it still stings to see.

"No," I say, and I can tell she thinks I'm lying, but I double down. "I just wanted a change."

"Just another one of your self-improvement kicks, then?"

I frown. She's the one who called me to come out tonight, so I don't understand why she has to pick apart everything I do. "How's Andy?"

She makes a face, all her features sort of wrinkling up and shrinking in toward her nose, then relaxes and shrugs. This means he's fine. She never wants to talk when things are fine.

In the line for the club we flash our IDs. The bouncer doesn't comment on my hair being different and for the first time I'm sad they don't actually look all that carefully at the pictures.

In the club Frankie says something and I can't quite hear her but I shout back *Yeah!* and laugh because that's what people do in clubs and especially what blondes do. She looks annoyed at me but doesn't say anything else, so I pretend I can't see her grimace. We make our way to the center of the pack and begin to sing and dance and for once it doesn't matter that I'm not coordinated because I'm blonde and I'm untouchable.

A song comes on in Spanish and Frankie and I know the lyrics but once I realize everyone else is just sort of faking singing along, I go mute. Frankie frowns at me but continues to sing, enunciating really clearly so everyone can tell she knows the words. She isn't even Latina. *I* am, but she spent fifth grade with me in Santo Domingo where my dad grew up, attending the American school during the day and watching novelas with my abuelita in the afternoons. Frankie should know by now that it doesn't make us special.

We keep moving, keep dancing, and I'm beginning to feel the power of the hair taking over me. I dance closer to people, dance on them. I push my hands through my hair and they come back damp with sweat and I know that I like that, that people like that. Frankie seems upset for some reason but I keep dancing because I'm not about fixing people anymore.

I order two tequila shots at first because tequila is a drink for girls who know how to party, but then for my next drink I can tell my abuelo would be disappointed if I chose Mexican

tequila over Caribbean rum, so I get a mojito and sip it by the bar while Frankie is in the bathroom.

Frankie sort of dropped off the map about six weeks ago when she and Andy stopped fighting again. She's been like this as long as I can remember—I was always too anxious to make friends with people I knew I'd have to leave, and she'd run off with the first interesting person to look her way, then come crawling back to me whenever we had to move. It isn't worth holding it against her. I got used to it a long time ago.

I didn't really want to bother her while things were working so I found myself alone a lot more, especially because Becca had finally stopped trying to off herself after she found God, and James got into law school, and his girlfriend Maryam got a promotion and started working longer hours. I didn't have anyone except Aidan, really, and after the last time I went out with Frankie, that one foggy night when everything started to get to me, I didn't have him anymore either.

There's a guy who comes over to me and the lighting's bad so I can't tell if he's actually cute or if the blue edges of the shadows are creating the illusion of good bone structure. He taps my shoulder and I flinch at first, hard enough to spill some of my mojito, but then I remind myself that I'm not supposed to flinch anymore. I turn around slowly and he says something like *didn't mean to startle you* and that choice of words, the sort of country lilt to his voice melts me a little. It's hard to hear, though, so I'm not sure if the accent is real or imagined.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he asks next and I'm surprised because people don't usually ask to buy me drinks and then I remember that I have joined the ranks of the elite.

I'm nearly done with the mojito but I'm also getting pretty tipsy and I know that blondes get drunk but they never get hungover and they're never sloppy about it. I tell him sure and say I'll take a daiquiri because it's mostly sugar anyway and I don't have to drink it quick.

He starts to ask me questions and I can only sort of hear him (*huh? yeah, totally, haha! what?*) and eventually he says, “You wanna get out of here?”

I look down and it turns out I’ve emptied the glass and I’m not really sure where the time has gone and normally I would say no and maybe get a bit freaked out and wind up at home on my own but I sort of nod because he seems nice and I’m a blonde now and this is the kind of thing you do when you’re confident and carefree.

It’s only after we’re in a cab halfway across the city that I realize I left Frankie at the club and my phone is dead. She’s probably going to be worried about me, and if I’m being honest my breathing is a little quick, but whenever I get wherever we’re going I’m sure I can get a charger. This is nothing like last time when my phone powered down. It can’t be. I’m completely in control.

I don’t know where he’s taking me and that’s the sort of thing that should worry me—I can feel anxiety nagging at the corner of my mind but I push it back. I’m done being nervous all the time. Usually the only thing that keeps me together is worrying about other people, trying to keep Becca away from sharp objects and Frankie away from sharply dressed men, reminding Maryam to take her meds and reminding James *not* to take Maryam’s meds. I met all of them but Frankie in college after I stopped trying to fit in with the international students and the other Latinos and realized my niche could best be described as (✓) Other. Anyway I’m good at keeping them organized, but when that’s not on the table I start worrying about myself and everything falls apart again. So I won’t worry about myself anymore. I’ll land on my feet. I always do.

As it turns out, this guy isn't the sort of sleazebag to take me right to his place without some conversation so we end up at a 24 hour diner and he orders us waffles. They're too sweet but they soak up the alcohol a bit and I need to clear my head. He's from Oklahoma originally, so I was right about the country in his voice, and he went to college there too so he's new to the city but he's looking to break into the advertising scene because he loves graphic design.

When he asks about me I decide to tell him the basics—Dominican-Austrian by blood, cosmopolitan by upbringing, American by citizenship and schooling and heart. I mention that I'm going through a breakup but I decide not to tell him why. I haven't really said it out loud to anyone yet, not in so many words, and luckily he doesn't pry.

He's sweet, and funny, and I start to forget my phone is dead and Frankie's probably half-crazy. We keep talking and he seems to really like me and when the waffles are gone we don't really notice because we're just sitting there, talking, and then a waitress comes over with the check and we both reach for our wallets because blondes reach for their wallet then acquiesce.

He covers the waffles and shyly mentions he lives a few blocks down and won't I come in for a nightcap. He actually calls it that, a *nightcap*, and even though I should play it cool and go home or find Frankie or something I can't turn him down when he says it like that.

He sticks his hands in his pockets as we walk and I loop my arm in his outstretched elbow. It's bolder than I'd usually be but he just smiles and keeps walking.

At his apartment he fumbles with his keys. We get in and I ask if he's got a phone charger and he goes into his room to grab it and I slip into the bathroom to freshen up. I'm probably still sweaty-sticky from the club and I figure I'll splash my face and neaten the edges of

my eyeliner and maybe dab under my armpits to make sure they don't smell too bad. Maybe I should go home soonish but I'm not really sure how that would operate because I don't do this very often, and he doesn't seem to either but that could just be a trick like last time. Then again, I don't think we made it to the guy's apartment last time before things started going wrong.

I get into the bathroom and hit the lights and the first thing I notice is how very *boy* it all is, not *man* but *boy* with the toilet seat up and one near-empty hand-soap dispenser on the sink next to a tube of toothpaste with finger indents where it has been impatiently squeezed around the middle instead of neatly from the bottom edge.

I register all this before I look up into the mirror and when I do I recoil. I'm still not used to seeing this version of me. After the drinks and the waffles with my head sort of fuzzy I think I look fine but not spectacular. I was supposed to look spectacular. I fix my makeup to see if that's it, but even so I still just look like a person, just as fragile and tangible as before when my hair was limp and lusterless.

Between the *personness* of my face and the *boyness* of the bathroom I feel exposed and uncomfortable and I'm starting to think the nightcap maybe wasn't such a good idea. I go out to the living room again and he's there with the phone charger asking if scotch is okay, and I can't square the man who drinks scotch with the boy who squeezes his toothpaste tube and neither seems like the sort of guy who buys me a drink then takes me to a diner sometime well after midnight. I wonder if any part of him is real and if so which part is, or if I'm making him out to be too simple. I don't think these are the kinds of things that blondes think about but I'm not sure.

I accept the charger and plug my phone in. It vibrates to indicate it's beginning to charge. I take the glass of scotch as well. I feel like the daiquiri is wearing off, or the hair dye. I don't

want to leave now. I don't quite want to stay either, but we get back to talking. He doesn't ask me all that much about myself and when he does I am able to deflect. It's easier than explaining all the things that really led me here. Blondes don't have to explain. They just sort of laugh and the world reshapes itself.

Soon, though, my phone screen lights up as the texts and calls from Frankie pour in. She's alone, she's worried about me, she isn't sure where I've gone, am I okay, did I leave, did it get too overwhelming again, am I alive, am I with someone, please tell her I'm with someone and alive and just an asshole, please don't be a dead asshole. If she hadn't disappeared on me last time, this whole thing would register as paranoia and I'd be annoyed, but as it is I just feel really guilty. Frankie figured out what happened last time and she feels like it's her fault for not babysitting me.

I excuse myself and pop to the bathroom to call her. I explain everything as best as I can but she wouldn't understand because her hair is short and black and it does this thing where it falls in a straight line bob like she used her chin to cut it. Pretty and all, but high maintenance. Dramatic.

She asks me if I'm sober enough to consent to everything this time and I tell her we haven't even kissed yet and that yes, I'm plenty sober and the waffles helped and I'm sorry for bailing and is she okay and does she need me to do anything for her.

She sounds annoyed when she responds. "Jesus, don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"You never call me when you're fine."

"To be honest, it's because I don't think you can handle it. Go deal with your farm boy."

I'm not sure if he is a farm boy or not because I'm not really sure what people do in Oklahoma, but I hang up without saying anything else and go back out into the main room. If Frankie doesn't need me, she won't get me.

Farm-boy-not-a-farm-boy has finished his scotch and smiles when he sees me walking in. I sit next to him on the couch just far enough that it's not too clingy but close enough that our knees are brushing. That seems like the right kind of energy for tonight. Coy, but not too coy. Blonde coy.

He turns and faces me and says something but he's staring at my mouth and so I smile a bit then lean closer. He kisses me and tastes like scotch and syrup but suddenly I'm thinking of the toothpaste tube and the way I don't have any other texts on my phone and this man and Frankie are the only people who really know I'm a blonde now, not including the stylist who did it to me in the first place, and it's not too late to go back and ask her to add the color back in but even if she did it wouldn't be the same and I'd have to keep adding toner in every few months to keep it from fading back to bleached white straw.

He pulls away. "What's wrong?"

I didn't realize I'd frozen up. Blondes don't freeze up. Blondes don't choke. They most definitely don't start crying on the couches of strangers who want to hook up with them and maybe, just maybe, actually get to know them after.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," he says in a sort of whisper-voice. "Want me to take you home?"

I nod. I think there might be snot coming out of my nose.

"Do you want to talk about it? Whatever it is?"

Aidan always left me alone when I was crying, even after that night when Frankie and Becca forgot me at one club because I was in the bathroom when they decided to go to the next

one, and then my phone died and some other stuff happened and I had to walk home barefoot and half-dressed with my head fuzzy and my thighs aching, and by the end I was spending almost every night curled in the cold porcelain of the bathtub trying to stifle my sobs so they wouldn't echo. It only took him two weeks of that to leave me for good. I rub my fingers under my eyes to smudge away the mascara, then sniff so the snot creeps back into my nose.

Oklahoma still has the curl of a worried smile tugging at his lips. I blink a few times, then ask, "Could you do me a favor and get a picture of me?"

He laughs, then catches himself when he realizes I'm serious. That's the other issue—people don't take blondes seriously.

"What, right now? Like this?"

"Like anything. Anywhere. Just a picture."

He nods a bit uneasily and accepts my phone when I hand it to him. I don't get red very easily and I've been told I don't look like I've been crying after I cry, so after a few moments when I start feeling a little better I tousle my hair and strike a few poses on his couch.

When he holds his phone out in front of his face I can see something I couldn't when I looked in his eyes. I think his eyebrows give him away, raised but only half-way, like he's trying and failing to keep them lowered. He's a live wire, Einstein on the verge of a breakthrough, a child in front of a near-finished jigsaw. He wants to know what makes me tick. It's been a long time since anyone looked at me like that. I forgot how much I missed being dissected.

To Oklahoma's credit he has a great eye and the photos look nothing like how I feel on the inside. He asks again if I want to talk about it and I tell him I don't really like talking about myself and that I'll be okay again just as soon as someone else breaks down. I work well under pressure is the thing.

He sort of shakes his head at this and offers to get me a cab again but this time I'm committed and when I kiss him I don't think about him squeezing a big fat dollop of toothpaste onto his raggedy old toothbrush and jamming it all in his small little mouth.

The next morning I head back to my apartment after popping three aspirin and doing my best not to vomit them up. I stop in the mail room and tear the name Aidan Thompson off the address card inside our box and drop the torn-up scrap of paper in the trash. On the elevator I check my phone—it's buzzing with texts from Frankie asking how I'm doing and if I'm hungover and what happened really, and messages from people who saw my couch pictures on Instagram and slid into my DMs, and a half a dozen replies to the Snap story I forgot I uploaded of me singing at the club. No crying, no one asking for a hug or if they can vent at me. Nobody who *needs* me. Dozens who *want* me. I brew myself some tea and change into something that *says I had sex with a stranger last night and it doesn't even matter* and sit at the window and wonder if I should break my lease and move into Oklahoma's apartment. It had a balcony.