

## Little Creatures

by Jane Kokernak

They cling; they scurry; and, covert survivors, they hide. Ectoparasites that live on top of their hosts, not inside like tapeworm, they have six clawed legs that hook onto their host's hairs or clothes. Mouth parts suck blood and eat dermis, too. Wingless, they stick close to the roots of the hair, as if taking cover under the leaf bower in a forest, invisible to giant eyes that roam above. Their color is a particular non-brown, like the color of frozen dirty winter slush or dried marsh grass that's brown and silvery and that changes as it moves. This color is strategic.

The first time I see a flash surfacing from a wave of hair, I am absentmindedly raking my eyes over the top of the head of my son, whose full height hits me just below the chin. The top of his head, which I hardly ever notice much less study, passes me in the kitchen on its way out the door. The flash registers, along with my barely formed thought about what it might be. I pluck at it affectionately, a chance to touch his hair. The odd dot (a figment?) dips down again into lush hair. A baseball hat and backpack go on. He slips out the door to wait for the camp bus. I stop thinking about him and his hair.

There are three ecological niches for three types of lice, all of which descended over six million years from one louse, a parasite that made its home in the full body hair of an ancestor of both humans and chimps. As the human species evolved and gradually lost most of its fur, the louse differentiated into three types. *Pthirus pubis* or “crabs” live in the pubic hairs of the adult human; *Pediculus humanus corporis* live in the clothing that humans wear; and *Pediculus humanus capitis* live among the hair shafts on the human head. All feast on human blood. Of the three, head lice, which descended on my home and three children like a plague, are what obsess me.

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Eli, an eleven-year-old boy, was the first of our three children to complain about the itching. I check the shower for dandruff shampoo and insist that he use it. “Leave the suds on for the full three minutes.” During the night, he frequently gets

out of bed to go in the bathroom and drink water. In the morning he is cranky, and this is my fault. “Mom, I can't stop itching my head. The dandruff is getting worse. The shampoo is not helping!” He claws at his head.

I remember the moment in the kitchen: the flash, the disappearance. After his next shower, I settle Eli into a chair and peer at his wet hair and rake my fingers through it. His head is crawling with a little shimmering army. These are not the random flakes of dandruff.

I recall my mother checking my own long hair, daily, at the crown and around the ears and at the nape when I was a child, and so I check these places on my son's head. Cemented to strands of water-darkened brown hair are the minute egg sacs. With those I'm not sure what to do, so first I concentrate on the live ones, pinning them between the nails of my thumb and first finger. I see the red blood dots on Eli's white scalp where he has been bitten by the lice, which secrete the saliva that cause humans to scratch. The nits – those persistent egg sacs – must be removed, too, but they are still inert, and the next day is soon enough.

Children are attracted to stories of the disgusting, and, as I pick through Eli's hair, nipping the lice with my nails, I recall finding out from some source as a child that some “native people” - Eskimos I think - groomed each other's hair constantly, not only picking the lice and nits but eating them. I don't remember where I learned this, but as my memory tries to fill in this hole I see a picture, a line drawing, of a woman and child with black hair, as black as the dirty oil our fathers drained from cars into wide shallow pans and then poured over the grate that capped the catch basins in the street, who wore white fur robes that made us think of polar bears, and who smiled and were absorbed in each other, one picking at the other's inked hair. To me and to my friends this was a sign of the depravity of people who lived in the wilderness and wore animal skins and ate whale blubber: they were so primitive that their ways of displaying affection seemed animalistic.

This was in 1975 in Massachusetts. Our mothers and school nurses, in pants suits or A-line skirts, parted and combed our hair looking for the eggs, and, when they found one, they pinched their nails along one hair and scraped the egg off. They rinsed their hands and combs in antiseptic solutions. They threatened to cut our hair short if we couldn't sit still. We sat still, the backs of our bent necks aching.

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Almost thirty years later, also in Massachusetts, on my first night as a nitpicker I find 12 or so. Lice are prehistoric creatures with immense evolutionary stamina, and they resist the insecticide that I massage through my son's hair and the next day through my younger daughters' hair. Permethrin promises to “kill lice and their unhatched eggs with usually only one application,” but it doesn't. Adapted and immune, the lice grip the bases of hair shafts. They seem sleepy, drunk on poison, so I have time to sight and catch them before they sober up and escape back into the jungle.

I dip the fine-toothed louse comb into a container of burning hot water and swirl. Captured ones float for a few moments before sinking. The lice are dark enough in the container of water that I can count them. Occasionally the count

seems not to add up so I hold the comb up near my eyes to look for bodies trapped like seeds in human teeth and find them there, suspended sideways between the plastic teeth. Their lash-like legs, scurrying in air, seem always to move in this workmanlike way, regardless of footing, unable to take me in as a threat, not afraid of me as a predator in the way that mice are afraid. I make my thumb and forefinger into pliers and close over the head and tail of each and drag it down the space between tines. I feel the substance, like nut meat, and I imagine eating them. I do this enough times so I think always of eating them when they are pinched in my fingers like this. It would be so easy to eat them that I feel drawn to doing it in the way I feel drawn to letting my body go over the barrier at the edge of the falls or on the upper level of an open air parking garage. *It's that close.*

I do not eat them. It's not something that I would do.

Working in the kitchen, I bend children's necks over the edge of the sink and rinse from their long hippie locks the white cream that smells like deodorant, fresh and chemical. I lean over them and into them, trying to see. The gentle pressure makes us close, and I wonder if they are aware of my body, as I am aware all the time when I am with them of their bodies and what their parts feel and smell like. Water straightens and darkens their hair as it runs through. They are hypnotized.

That first bout with lice we have to cancel our vacation, not wanting to bring our public health problem from our town to Stowe, Vermont to some beds waiting for us in a nice resort. At home - grounded, like delinquents – Jimmy and I pull apart beds and load sheets into the washer and later dry them at the hottest setting. We separate covers from comforters and fill the trunk of the car with flannel and down and deliver it all to the huge front-loading washers at Bubbles Laundromat. We pay the Thai woman who is the proprietor and her teenage daughter to handle them all. At home again, we vacuum the mattresses, the floors, the rugs, couch, pillows. We roam through the house grabbing all the pullovers and hats in current rotation and pile them near the washer. Stuffed animals go into plastic bags that we knot tightly and put into a closet.

It's Labor Day Weekend, 2004. School begins the Thursday following the holiday. There is a lot to do to get three afflicted children ready. "No nits" policies are prevalent across the U.S., and our local public health and school regulations prohibit children with active lice infestation from attending school, due to the highly communicable nature of pediculosis. Other children in our elementary school have been sent home by the school nurse, who regularly inspects the heads of all the children, more than 600 of them. Nationwide, lice epidemics account for 12 to 24 million school absences annually. We will join the ranks.

I crouch in the aisle at the pharmacy and study the packaging of lice shampoos and lotions. I compare fine-toothed combs. I buy a basketful of pricey products. I search for information online and find conflicting advice. Within weeks, I have substantial experience with the parasite's life cycle and treatments to counter it.

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Lydia and Grace are eight and four years old. Their patience for sitting upright and holding still their heads while I comb through their washed hair, narrow

section by narrow section, is limited. The first time I try it this way Lydia waits five minutes and then barks at me to “stop pulling my hair, okay?” She wiggles the whole time, and won't stop talking, engaging in a kind of one-sided bickering with a mostly silent me. Finding and scraping the white glue-hard eggs from her hair takes almost two hours, and it's night. The relative quiet of the house does not soothe her. Unwilling to appreciate my calm attention to her head, she keeps snapping at me: “Cut it out! You're hurting me!”

At the back of her head I retort: “Lydia, you can't go back to school unless I get these out!”

She wails, more plaintively, “Mom, how would you like it?”

I bring my stress response down a notch or two. “I'm almost done.”

We finish. Down the drain I dump the plastic container of hot water flecked with the egg sacs, like sand swirled into water.

Grace is next. The smallest, she can fit lying prone on the counter, with her head propped on a folded towel at the edge of the sink. She whines; I rub her limbs; she puts her thumb in her mouth and stops stirring. When she was a newborn, I discovered Grace's animal love for the water when I first gave her a bath and shampoo in this sink. The crying that started when her clothes were removed stopped as the warm water ran over her skull. In the several weeks that marked the beginning of Grace's life, frequent wetting and shampooing of her head developed into a technique we used to soothe her. As I rinse her hair and pick the nits and lice, she falls gradually asleep. Weeks later, when the lice rise up again, I treat Lydia this way, and the calming effect is the same.

Eli is old enough to sit still, and so, for his nit picking, we set up outside on the front porch. I'm on the top step with my tools around me, and he sits on the next step down, between my feet and knees, which are parted just enough to give him space to sit there. Sometimes he leans on one of my knees or the other, as if they were arms of an upholstered chair. It's a holiday weekend, and the neighborhood seems empty. No one passes by and catches us.

I comb through his hair and delouse him. Eli is pliable and moves his head this way and that in response to signals from my fingers. We talk about not much: guitar lessons, food, school supplies. This might be the longest I've touched him since he was four or five, and I linger in my task. Two younger sisters came along and distracted my attention from him. The lice become an opportunity for sustained periods of touching and not touching, talking and not talking. People say sometimes that they “fell into” something: a habit, a job, love. In this instance, we don't fall; we lean. With a comb, I section his hair, swooping the sides forward over his ears. Starting at the nape, I comb one-inch sections of wet hair down onto his neck. I pick up a ribbon's width, spread the strands, and run my fingertips down them, feeling for the bump of an egg. With my nail tips, I pick them off. Over and over and over I do this.

I tell Eli about my hazy, childhood knowledge of the grooming habits of Eskimos. He is not disgusted by this or any of the creature things that people do. And although the lice drive him and the girls mad with itching, all three seem matter-of-fact about being infested with parasites. Sure, they groan when, after their baths, I call them over to rake my fingers through their hair, they also relax under the spell of

my methodical hands. Years later the teenaged Eli tells me that he misses it, the treatment: “That felt good, Mom.”

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Lice and their offspring are sturdy. The female lays her eggs on the hair shaft and cements them there with a protein-rich matrix not unlike the components of hair itself, which explains why the shampoos and solutions fail to unglue them. Even ones that are dislodged may survive long enough to find a new host. Nits, in their hard shells, survive 10 days away from a human host. A louse can live for 24 to 36 hours on the fibers of a hat, pillowcase, brush, or sofa cushion. Transmission is head-to-head or indirect.

At first, it is repulsive. The knowledge that the heads of one’s children are teeming with vermin is something to stomach. After their showers and before a treatment, we together sit in their messy rooms, with dirty clothing on the floor around us. It’s easy to feel poor and afflicted. We bicker.

Lice make me pay attention. Inspect. Scrutinize. I don’t always like what I see: wax in children’s ears, freckles and bites on their heads, nose hairs, teeth tartar, chapped lips, and rings of grime.

Lice disrupt my routine and get me to miss work. Children stay home from school. After I soak and smear a head for what seems like the tenth time and probably is, I plunk a little girl in front of the television and let her eat lunch there, too. I break the house rule.

Exhausted in mind though not really in body (I’m upper middle class, after all), I flop in a chair and read an issue of *People* that I’ve already read. A conglomerate of celebrity “moms” is on the cover. I try to picture one of them getting the call from the school nurse or squirting the poisonous lotion onto one of their toddlers. Impossible. She or her nanny would hire someone – a former nurse or mother of grown children who runs a business with a cute name like Lice Busters -- to handle it. It costs \$400 a head to delouse it, maybe \$1,000 for the red carpet all-natural delousing treatment. She pays it.

I call our pediatrician, and I hope she’ll give me a prescription for something strong the kids can take to kill the lice from the inside out. She advises me to treat the child with an over-the-counter preparation today and then repeat in one week. “That should work,” she declares.

“I’ve already done that! I want the drug fix!” I want to say but don’t. Sighing, I hang up, pretty sure that I already know more about this health topic than the doctor does. Like a terminal cancer patient, I’ve researched new treatments, alternative treatments, and risky ones, too. I’m ready to offer three otherwise healthy children to medical science: “Study them.” The smell of the insecticide in the drugstore lice lotion is driving me mad. I’ve stopped liking it.

The two other children arrive home from school. They join their sister in front of the television, and I ignore all three of them. In a couple of hours, it’ll be dinner time, and then, after that, inspection time. I know how that’ll end and I’m tired in advance. Shampooing, smearing, and then pinch after pinch after pinch after

pinch. They'll go to bed late. I'll go to bed after I clean out the sink and throw the towels in a hot water wash. My feet will ache.

In bed, I'll forgive myself. None of us has to love taking care of our children every minute of every day. We just have to do it.

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We cycle through infestations and delousings for months, through two school years and two summers. My husband helps me, but it's just helping. I am always the inspector and picker.

Jimmy doesn't seem to have the inclination or patience to do the daily checks. He's in good company: ninety percent of fathers don't. A few times, he briskly checks the children's heads, dubs them "clean," and then a day later they are scratching. The lice repopulate, and weekends are taken up with massive loads of laundry and treatments. I spend hours bent over the kitchen sink. My feet feel big, like the bricks they were when I was pregnant, and the backs of my thighs and lower back burn.

The school nurses, too, are driving me nuts. There is almost hysteria among the communities at Grace's preschool and Eli and Lydia's elementary school about what's being billed as a head lice "epidemic," and every day there is a story about another child being sent home. Sometimes the child sent home is one of mine, and sometimes this occurs a day or two after we have completed a treatment cycle. Although there may be a few dead and dried nits still attached to hair strands, I could assure the nurse that they are impotent. The live ones – the head leapers and egg layers – are swimming through the town's sewer pipes. I want my children in school.

Is lice infestation an irritation, a condition that makes us uncomfortable and grosses us out, or a real medical problem? Photocopied form letters on school stationery come home crumpled in school bags, reporting the identification of a child who "shows the presence of nits and/or lice." The text, which recommends parental inspections of heads, hats, and furniture, is both clinical and alarming. Although we seem to get one of these letters at least once a week during the school year, rarely do we find out through the grapevine who is suffering. I'd like to talk to the other parents, if only to trade tips and commiserate. When it's our family that's the cause of the form letters, I spread the word, "It's us." I want someone to call me and say, "We've been there, too." No one calls.

There's a stigma to lice, and I'm not sure what's at the root of it. After all, the head lice epidemic largely affects school age children, six to 12 million a year in the U.S. We're not, as a culture, afraid to discuss other school age illnesses, like asthma and food allergies, so why head lice? Head lice are not sexually transmitted, although pubic lice are, and perhaps the two conflate in the public's imagination. Body lice are prevalent among the homeless, so head lice, too, may be associated with poverty and poor hygiene.

Maybe that's it: lice are dirty, whether you're talking about grime or sleaziness. If contagions are preventable, then a head full of lice is an outward sign of poor fastidiousness and moral failure.

Really, though, lice are indiscriminating, an equal opportunity pest. Indeed, I had head lice – as many mothers do -- during one of the several times my children seemed to be farming them on their heads. At first, the itching seemed sympathetic. I'd comb lice from hair for hours, absorbed in hunting elusive prey, and later as I lay in bed and tried to go to sleep, my head felt as though its surface was crawling with microscopic feet.

Normally I settle into the sheets like a corpse. On the lice nights I'd turn and thrash. In the dark Jimmy would ask, "Is everything okay?"

I'd answer with a question: "What if I have lice?"

"Turn on the light. I'll check."

And he'd put on his glasses, look through my dark, straight hair, mutter "Hmm" a few times, and then finally say, "I don't see anything."

Light would go off. I'd lie there. Moments later, I'd sense again the crawling.

Into the bathroom I'd go. My face was as close to the mirror as I could get and still see myself. Not able to see my own head as well as I could my children's, I found nothing and eventually went to bed. Sleep took over.

One day, though, after I finished spitting out toothpaste water into the bathroom sink, I raised my head, glanced at myself in the mirror, and glimpsed a louse skimming along a strand that brushes across my forehead. I leaned closer and saw it dip down into the hair. Visual confirmation of a concrete event made me relieved and squeamish at once.

I went to work, where I did not tell my officemate about the sighting. I decided, simply, that I did not want to deal with consequences. I had already taken enough sick days from work to stay home and fumigate my house and delouse my children; I had few left.

Are omissions lies? Not always, but, in this case, yes. Later I speculated that such momentary lapses, which come during times of great fatigue and hopelessness, are a kind of engine that helps disease spread.

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I research lice and their life cycle; I test one poison against the other; I wash pillowcases in the hottest water they'll stand; and I rake my fingers incessantly through the children's hair. They tire of me, so I go into their darkened rooms with a flashlight and inspect their heads as they sleep. Grace bats her blind hands against her ears when she feels the flutter of my hands or my breath on her cheek but does not wake up. Eli and Lydia lie stone-like as I touch them.

I stay longer than I have to, and I turn off the flashlight and look at them in the glow from the hall. As babies, I held, nursed, and learned them. I see how they have changed, yet I recognize traces of their infant selves. Their full lashes and earlobes, his high and flat cheek bone, her flared nostrils, her eyebrow line. Smells rise from the sheets – chemical shampoo, summer dirt and salt, underpants – and I try to call up the memory of different odors, of milk, soap, and soaked diapers. I almost catch it.

One particular night, I lay face down on my bed in a posture titled, "Mother, Collapsed." I have just washed and treated my own hair with whatever lice shampoo

or lotion we have. It's only eight o'clock or so, and the children are still awake: Eli, in his room doing homework, and Lydia and Grace, in our room lurking around me. Jimmy is tired and sits nearby reading.

The girls nuzzle into me. One sits up and puts her hand through my hair. "Do you want us to check you?"

My eyes are closed. "Sure," I say.

For a long time, these two crawl their quick, little hands through my hair. It flops on my face and gets brushed away. Individual strands are picked at and tugged. Knees nudge my sides and the palms rest their weight on my back. I'm all meat, like a cat or a sow with her litter crowding around.

They call their brother, their father: "Come and see. Mom has lice!"

I don't move. Light from the bedside lamp and their attention warms my face. The four quarrel over what to do.

These stages, when I'm in them, feel repetitive and endless, like loops. I wish for them to pass, for days to advance, to get beyond difficulty, beyond the lice problem. And finally the long moment passes, and the constant visitors, as if more by miracle than handiwork, depart. And I, in my fickleness, long for their return.



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