

## The Girl with the Pretty Hair

There once was a plain, good-natured woman who lived alone in a quaint cottage near the woods along the coast of southern Oregon. She lived a simple life, often painting, sewing, or preparing grandiose meals for herself (though she saved a few scraps for the cats). Oftentimes, on the weekends, she would go out into the town and have a drink, but she loved the privacy of her humble home too much to stay out very often. One summer evening, while sipping on a martini by herself, she was approached by a handsome young bachelor. He introduced himself, and they hit it off immediately. He started off by telling her stories of his travels along the coast as a lumberjack, explaining his encounters with bears, mountain lions, and, of course, some of the odd people he met along the way. Smitten by his adventurousness and bravery, she went home with him. They quickly fostered a close relationship, and she fell in love with him, going as far as inviting him to live with her in her cottage. Just a few short months later, she announced her pregnancy to her family and to her now-boyfriend with whom she conceived. Being somewhat non-committal, perhaps a bit skittish, the once-charming man she loved was not pleased upon hearing the news. In fact, he skipped town soon after she delivered the big news and he was never heard from again. It is likely that he disappeared into the woods to continue his wild life of adventure, but alas, that is the end of their love story. Distraught by the circumstances following her conception, the woman swore to never allow a man to abandon her unborn daughter in the way she was abandoned. She refused to leave the house, not even to go to the grocery store, or to find work in the town. She raised her daughter alone, never questioning the outside world or the integrity of the men living in it. It was all bad, as she decided, and she was staying out of all of it, forever.

The woman named her unequivocally beautiful daughter Rachel. Understand, though, that Rachel was not like other girls; her golden hair, which grew to be nearly seventy feet long, made her especially beautiful, and this, to her mother, was a dangerous attribute. She needed to come up with a plan to protect her daughter, and her beautiful hair, from being exploited by the dirty, sneaky men who lurked in the woods and on the Internet. So, during the daytime, while Rachel was away at school, the woman would slave tirelessly over a massive construction, one that would protect Rachel from the evil men who scrounged for beautiful, young, and naïve girls, like herself when she was younger. The building was quite simple in its construction; it was a large, circular brick tower, and its height stretched far above the woods surrounding it, giving it quite an incomparable view, and seclusion that was unmatched. The unique architecture made it so that Rachel would never be able to fall victim to a smooth-talking, manipulative man like her father, as it had no stairs and no doors; there was only one very small window with no curtains, and it faced in the direction of her mother's house. By the time Rachel turned eighteen, the tower was complete. At first, Rachel was reluctant to live in the tower, and although the independence of living by herself was enticing, she still wasn't sold on the idea of living in an inescapable space. Her mother quickly convinced her, after letting her know some amenities like a Wi-Fi connection and a grocery delivery service would be available to her, all for free. Rachel then approached the idea with a little more consideration, and she became overjoyed when she had an epiphany; she would never need to attend college or pay off student loans well into a career she would never have, and she would certainly never end up relying on a rich man for everything. Frankly, it all sounded too good to be true. So, she moved in.

At first, Rachel bathed in the luxury of irresponsibility. She spent her days watching television, eating copious amounts of snacks, and watching cat videos on the Internet. Her mother had very strict rules for her, however, and Rachel didn't mind abiding by them, as long as she could continue living in her secluded tower, devoid of all responsibility and regular function: she was not to create any social media profiles, under any circumstances, and the only contact in her cell phone was to be her mother's. She knew her looming punishment, if she were to break her mother's rules, would be to live a regular life, living in a white picket-fenced neighborhood, married to an affluent man who would buy her a new Mercedes-Benz every year on their anniversary. It seemed easy enough, to follow these rules, until months turned into years. Rachel grew tired of watching *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* every Tuesday night. She began to put on weight from her excessive indulgence and lack of exercise; in fact, it made her wish for a set of stairs, not to escape, but so that she could at least move around a bit, and maybe even break a sweat for once. Her discomfort within the microcosm of the world she lived in festered. She longed for company, so her mother brought her a cat. The cat, who she named Kevin, became her only friend, and it satiated her loneliness for quite some time, until it eventually died. Before she knew it, Rachel was going on twenty years old. Her mother rejoiced in her ability to protect Rachel from men during her adolescence, while Rachel grew worried. "Will I ever know anyone other than my mother?" she wondered. "I like being alone, but I get lonely, too, and sometimes I want a companion. Maybe someday, I'll get a boyfriend." A few weeks went by, and Rachel finally mustered the courage to expose herself to the outside world, and everything and everyone it had to offer. She made a Twitter profile, in an act of defiance, but to protect herself from the off-chance of her mother discovering it, she used an alias. Rapunzel was the name she chose, and she reasoned that it was so unique that her mother would never be able to put together that it was her.

As she delved into the Twitterverse, she began to come across other profiles of people who lived all around the world. She followed a few girls, and sent them kind messages, saying things like, "Your eyes are beautiful!" and "You seem so nice. I would love to be your friend." A few replied, and some didn't. Either way, Rachel had never felt more connected with anyone other than her mother than in this moment. Excited, Rachel began experimenting with messaging some boys she came across. A few of them complimented her hair, of course, as its brilliant golden shine made it a commodity that must be protected at all costs, while a few of the men she messaged asked her for explicit photos. Feeling emboldened by her rebellion, Rachel snapped a few and sent them to one who especially caught her eye. He liked what he saw, apparently, because he asked Rachel more about where she lived, and asked about her parents; as Rachel answered each question, he began to better understand her lifestyle, and why social media became an outlet for her. He empathized with her and apologized for his abrasiveness in asking for nude photos. Embarrassed, he offered to take her out on a date, and promised to be a gentlemen thereon. Not knowing how to explain her predicament, Rachel replied, "You can't take me anywhere. There's something... wrong with me." The boy was confused, so he generically assured her. "There's nothing wrong with you, you're perfect just how you are. If you don't want to leave the house, that's okay. I'd still like to meet you IRL. Send me your address, and I'll come visit you." Rachel, not having an address, gave him directions to her tower from her mother's house. He was perplexed, indeed, but he agreed to make the trip. Two days later, he arrived. He was in awe at the height of the tower, and shouted from the ground, "Where are the stairs?" to which Rachel replied, "There aren't any. Here, use this to climb up to my window." She tossed her golden locks down the tower wall, and they collapsed in a dazzling heap in the manicured lawn in front of him. It was

then that he realized what was “wrong” with her: she had a magical affliction, one that made her not only unique, but also especially vulnerable to those who might not have good intentions with her.

When he made it to the top of the tower, he was shocked by the conditions Rachel was living in. Her room was a disaster, with garbage littering the floor, dirty clothes thrown on every surface, and it reeked of stale food. Unimpressed, he suggested that they relax for a bit, while they get to know each other better. “I hope you made it through the woods safely,” Rachel said, excitedly. “I didn’t think you’d actually come.” As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Rachel heard a voice coming from outside her window. It sounded far away, yet familiar. Rachel’s heart sank. “Rachel, sweetie, let down your hair,” her mother called from below. Panicked, Rachel ordered the boy into her closet to hide. “I can’t explain it now, but you probably get the idea at this point,” Rachel said, frantically. She peered out the window, and her mother stood, waiting. She held up a plastic bag. “I brought you your favorite, Chinese takeout!” Rachel rolled her eyes, wondering to herself why her mother thought *this* would be the best time to bring her crab rangoon. She threw her locks down, and her mother climbed quickly, now a professional after the years of practice she had in hair-climbing. Once her mother climbed through the window, she knew something felt off. Rachel was never one to be able to hide her emotions well, and her mother saw right through the fear she tried desperately to hide.

“Something is going on here,” her mother said. “First of all, this room is in shambles. And second of all, I think you’re hiding something from me.” She turned her head toward the closet, with a smug look on her face. There weren’t many places for Rachel to hide things; after all, she lived in a single room with no doors, so the closet seemed the most conspicuous. She slowly approached the closet and reached for the handle. “Wait,” Rachel said, nervously. “Don’t open it.” Her mother giggled as she opened the door with no hesitation. There he was, the boy, staring back at her. Her mother continued to laugh, unfazed by what would be a surprise to most parents. “Honey, if you wanted to have company over, you could have at least cleaned the place up a bit,” she said, gesturing toward the filth that filled her room. Shocked at her lack of anger, Rachel stuttered, “W-What? Y-You’re not mad at me?” Her mother laughed again, saying, “No, Rachel, I’m not mad. But you,” she said, glancing at the boy, “Need to get the hell out of here.” He nodded, looking at the window, and back at Rachel. “Let him down, Rachel,” she said sweetly. She said goodbye to him, as he hurriedly climbed back down the side of the tower.

After he had disappeared into the woods, her mother said, “I had a boy disappear into the woods just like that when I was your age. I put you in this tower to protect you from being abandoned by someone like him.” Rachel, still confused by her mother’s calmness, and not really in the mood for a sob story, asked, “Well, what now? I guess he abandoned me and I learned my lesson, so what is my punishment?” Her mother, caressing a handful of Rachel’s hair, replied, “You’re grounded, Rachel. No cell phone for a month. In the meantime, you really should do something about this pigsty.” She began piling clothes into a hamper, and when she turned around, she realized Rachel was still staring, in awe. “What is it? What did you think I was going to do? Cut your hair off, or something?” her mother asked, chuckling. She took Rachel’s cell phone off its charger and descended from the tower. She waved goodbye from the ground, and cheerfully called out, “See you next week, Rapunzel.”