

Sunday, Oct 28

2007 Raleigh News &amp; Observer

## Gestate

By ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

Sheila stood in her kitchen, spooning vinegar into a bowl of mayonnaise, taking care it did not curdle. When it was ready, she added a dash of salt and dumped it on her boyfriend's head. Carlos eased back toward the sink to let Sheila rub the mix into his scalp with her gloved hands.

It had been two months, and the lice had not yet left. Neither had Carlos, but that wasn't his fault. They'd agreed Carlos would move out as soon as he found work. Then the lice arrived. This was the fourth time Sheila had fumigated the house and washed the sheets, clothing and curtains. Earlier applications of blue, burning chemicals to Carlos' scalp had done little to kill off the parasites and their spawn. Sheila had faith the mayonnaise would work.

Between the coin-op laundromat and the infestation section of the pharmacy, Sheila had spent a paycheck on lice-removal products. Never had she bought so many shower caps. Rubber gloves. Deet. Tiny steel combs. She'd come home that afternoon, late from an extra shift at the coffee shop, to learn that, somehow, between watching sitcoms and cooking dinner, Carlos had caught lice again. "This mayonnaise business sure beats chemicals," Carlos said. He tilted his neck to meet the pressure of her gloved fingers, and his cheek brushed against her breast. "Maybe I should try to catch lice again," Sheila edged away.

"Sorry," he said. "Let's hope this is the end of it," she said. Sheila wound a sheet of plastic wrap around his head, pressing it against his slick hair. She dabbed a dry cloth around his brow and temple to keep the mixture from dripping into his eyes, then covered his scalp with a shower cap. "It says to wait an hour, okay?" Sheila said, checking the directions in her library copy of *Yen for the Moon: Managing Menses and Home Health*. "Then we comb it out."

Sheila scanned Carlos' neckline with a magnifying glass. "They're everywhere," she said. "But at least they look dead." Sheila set down the glass and wrapped a large towel around Carlos' shoulders. She combed through his slick hair and sectioned his locks with a new rattail comb and plastic clips. She hunched under a bright reading lamp, removing every egg, each dead body, with the steel comb. She wanted him clean. The sooner the better. Five days? Eight? The lice gestation period was relatively predictable. She'd give it a week. With every few strokes of the comb, she wiped its wire teeth with a tissue. As she completed each section, she contemplated how to tell Carlos, job or no job, he'd have to leave after this last round of lice was gone. Tell him, she thought, combing just above his ear. Tell him you're through paying his way. Tired of coming home to jarred pasta sauce and the television. She hit a snarl at the temple and pushed through it roughly. "How's it going up there?" Carlos asked. "Almost done."

As she combed, she noticed the smallest of bald spots on the very top of his head. In their three years together, she hadn't seen it before. His hair was thick, with dark waves, and they'd joked that Sheila, with her blond, wispy locks, would probably go bald before he did. She touched the spot with her pinky finger and opened her mouth to speak. "I've been thinking when this business is over,

Sheila heard, "I'm going to move." Sheila stopped combing. "What about work? Where do you plan to go?" "Anywhere. My parents, if I have to," Carlos said. "I'll sleep on the couch in a shower cap." Sheila drew a deep breath. Carlos had been hiding out to find a good job, not just any job. The lice

had quarantined him. He'd stopped scanning the classifieds and sat watching TV, a notebook or his laptop across his knees, trying to make use of his time by writing a screenplay. A screenplay!

When Carlos turned to face Sheila, she took a step back. "Watch your hair," she said. How could he not want to stay here until he found work? The apartment would be nearly empty without Carlos, she could watch his, the TV, too. No. This is good, she thought. He needs to leave. I don't even watch TV. "I can't keep living off you," he said. "I don't know why I didn't move out right away, when we first talked about it."

Sheila's laugh came out like a hiccup. "I know. The job..." Carlos stared at his slippers, then looked up. "It's not just about the job," he said. "I was ready to leave. But I'm still here. I thought maybe there was something making me stay."

"Are you talking about the lice?" "Maybe, at first? I don't know," he said. "But all you want is for me to leave. I can tell."

Sheila stared at the globs of oil trapped on the silver comb. "That's not true," she said. "I don't think you should move to your parents'."

"Where I go isn't your concern," he said. "Or, it shouldn't be." Sheila shook her head. "Can we talk about this later? When the lice are gone?"

Carlos arranged the greasy towel into a turban. "Sure. But I'm moving on this," he said. "I'll call my folks tomorrow."

Sheila didn't answer him. "Are we done here?" Carlos said, standing up. "For now," she said. "Go shower. I have to check your scalp when your hair is dry." Carlos closed the bathroom door behind him and Sheila sat down at the kitchen table. She wiped back tears. She picked up the magnifying glass and stared at the last batch of nits trapped in the teeth of the metal comb. Dozens of sturdy, oval eggs trapped in oil, so many little lives. The vinegar loosens the eggs from the hair, she'd read, it doesn't kill them. Squished into tissues were the nymphs and adults, suffocated by mayonnaise oil, lanky, flat ant long front legs, each one shaped like a pale, flat ant. Five days from egg to nymph, shed head. Three more to adulthood, then baby bites on the scalp. More eggs borne of human blood. Then what? Sheila looked at their apartment scribbled bare of its linens. The wooden floor held the scuffmarks of so many parties. They'd made love on the very chair on which she sat. She heard the familiar rattle of pipes and valves coming from the walls of the bathroom, and she squirmed again at the eggs. She raised the comb to her head and placed its tiny teeth against her scalp, closest to the part, and pulled it through her hair.

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