

Hairdresser from Hell

Short story by Allison Fine

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The shop was packed. Every person on the planet wanted their hair done before Christmas. There were parties, cocktails, dinners, and gatherings to go to; everybody wanted to look like heaven--even if they felt like hell.

Bathsheba walked around the shop, scissors in hand, entertaining secret fantasies of stabbing some of the more vociferous customers when their heads were turned. She didn't. Even if political rhetoric wasn't her approach, Sheba was, truth is known, a proponent of non-violence. She would never admit this to her draft-card burning mother--it might suggest a mother/daughter alliance too close for comfort.

"Sheba! Did you see the pomade I just ordered?" The shop manager's hair looked like lightning had just struck and electrocuted it leaving it for dead.

"No, Carisse. Is my client washed yet?"

"I doubt it."

The phone rang incessantly. It was annoying. The shop had six lines and it didn't seem like enough. Customers were walking around searching for magazines, smoked and soaked, wet and toweled. There were fifty customers and ten viable magazines. Everyone wanted Vogue or Cosmo for the yearly Horoscope of course.

"What sign are you, Marla?"

"Pisces. What does it say?"

"You'll drown in three inches of water, if I don't cut you first," Sheba said under her breath.

The Cosmo had been passed around so much the cover had come off. It was on the floor underneath Fiona's feet. It looked a bit forlorn all by itself without a cover to give it credibility. Elle was third choice, and it was confiscated before anyone could ask for it. Ladies Home Journal was of no interest at all, and Martha Stewart had been relegated to the bathroom.

"Sheba! Sheba! Come here, will you?"

The new student stylist was in trouble again. She was a pain in the butt. She had just finished beauty college and didn't know what the fuck she was doing. She had no coordination, Sheba suspected she was dyslexic and by her own confession, her "hand to eye" coordination was not quite up to snuff.

In other words, she's a total klutz in need of a brain transplant, Sheba thought. God. She had already saved her several times in the past week, correcting the run-away trains that she deemed haircuts. Several customers came in the shop looking like suburban zombies and left looking like Chemotherapy patients. It was "Nightmare in Lincoln Park." Sheba considered broaching this as a possible film idea to her boyfriend Dave, the filmmaker.

Sheba came over to Monica and looked at her. Monica, herself, was an advertisement for dyslexic hair. It was five colors, some of which had forgotten they were a color and had just decided to lay down and play dead. Sheba gave a cursory look at her.

What is wrong with this person? she thought. She's uncoordinated and she has no taste. Why is she a hairdresser?

"Monica, what's the goal here?" She looked at the head of the woman Monica was butchering.

“She wants a kind of buzz cut or something.”

The woman turned in her chair with great anxiety.

“A buzz what--what’s that? I just want a little trimmed off the back and sides.”

She fingered her head. Sheba quickly removed the woman’s hands from her head.

Looking down she saw a few patches of scalp sticking out.

“Jesus, Monica. You better let me take over.” Monica gave her one of those pity-me looks and handed Sheba the scissors.

“Monica, you know I only use my own scissors. Would you grab them from my station? Anyway, are yours sharp?” Sheba said as she put Monica’s scissors back on the mirrored counter. Monica complied and handed Sheba her own scissors, kept neatly in a black leather case.

“Yes, I just sharpened them yesterday.”

“Well--” Sheba looked at the woman’s hair and began to have a sense of panic rising. It was two days before Christmas and she hadn’t even got all her presents yet. Her mother was in Utah somewhere and couldn’t get home for Christmas. This made her mad. Why did her mother have to sell the house and move to Utah, anyway? What exactly was the point? Her mother had told her it was her life’s last great adventure. She wanted to meet Robert Redford and get discovered as a screenwriter. Instead, she was working at the bagel factory and playing her keyboard in the basement of the local gym. Not an auspicious adventure, Sheba decided. She had to admit she admired her mother for her courage, but there was something pathetic about it.

While she worked in the shop Sheba's boyfriend Dave was running around having fun, roaming the streets of Chicago locating sights for his new Kung-Fu movie entitled "King-Flu", in which all the characters got a new strain of Flu and died.

I want to die, thought Sheba as she surveyed the wreckage that was this woman's hair.

"Ma'am? I'm going to change things around a little. How about a magazine?"

"Sure. Do you have this month's Cosmo?" She was totally oblivious to what was happening to her head.

Thank God, Sheba thought. What would mother do with this, she mused? She'd probably start singing, tell a few jokes, and make everyone laugh. That was her specialty. While shit hit the fan, mom made people laugh.

Well, not me, Sheba thought, this isn't funny.

"Do you have a magazine?" the customer asked.

Sheba winced. Cosmo was somewhere in someone's hands, God knows where or in whose.

"How about--" she searched around and grabbed the nearest thing—"Home and Gardens?"

"Okay, I guess if that's all you got." The customer reluctantly took the magazine and lost herself in it.

Good, she's lost and I can go ask Carisse for advice. Carisse was in the back, grabbing the last of the clean towels.

"Sheba--we've got to do a load soon--this is the end of the towels. Can you?"

“Sure.” Sheba searched around for the dirty laundry hamper. She spied it in the other corner. Grabbing the hamper, she passed by her three waiting customers, all desperately thumbing through magazines they hated. She dumped the towels into the washer and searched for the soap.

“Fuck. We’re out of soap!” Wasn’t Monica supposed to get soap?

Sheba walked out into the shop. She had passed anger three hours ago. She was now the Dweller in Despair.

“Monica, we’re out of soap!” she yelled. Monica was applying color to Beatrice Ford’s hair. Beatrice was the shop owner’s stepdaughter and the Queen of Bitch. No one dared interrupt a stylist doing Beatrice. However, this was a major emergency, and Sheba felt justified. She didn’t want to think what Monica might do to Beatrice’s color, but if she fucked it up, it was her problem. The Lords of Color Karma would come and take her. Preferably to another shop, Sheba mused.

“Carisse. We’re out of soap. I’m going to run around the corner and get some.”

“Didn’t Lyle come with the supply order, Sheba?” Carisse said in her calm, soothing tone. That was the tone she always used just before everything fell apart and she became a whirling cloud of anger. Carisse looked like a Ferris wheel falling apart when she got mad--pieces were flying everywhere and the whole place swiveled around. All they needed was a Ferris Wheel Barker and the place could become a State Fairgrounds. Sheba was lost in this fantasy, when Carisse stuck her face next to hers in uncomfortable close proximity.

“Sheba. Did Lyle deliver the order?”

“Three days ago. We’re out again.”

“Fine. Get some soap. Do a payout from the register.”

Sheba went to the register, grabbed a twenty, and ran out the door. The streets of Chicago were snowy and slushy. Lincoln Park was a hubbub of activity--people were walking and sliding everywhere, packages in their hands, and smiles on their faces.

Fuck them, Sheba thought as she slid into the IGA and ran to Isle six. She grabbed four large boxes of laundry detergent and ran for the Express Checkout. A man ahead of her had a basket filled with twenty rolls of wrapping paper, and a tumultuous plethora of boxes.

Sheba tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

“This is **express** checkout.”

He turned a face with an extra portion of adipose tissue to her and smiled.

“Yeah. Merry Christmas to you too.”

“Merry Fuckmass to you, asshole,” she said softly. Sheba was still trying to maintain non-violence, even if it was only surface. Christmas sucked.

She ran back into the shop, and glanced unwillingly at the desk. Kate was unsuccessfully trying to manage the phone. All six lines were ringing--she had four people on hold--it was phone sex without the sex. All the while, she kept fingering her crotch. Maybe it was phone sex with the sex. Kate was taking a class in Sexual Awareness.

Pretty soon she'll be masturbating and screaming right there at the desk, thought Sheba. She ran back to the laundry room, dumped soap into the loaded washer, and started the cycle. She returned to Monica's customer, who had somehow, by some

miracle, confiscated the Cosmo and was happily engrossed in an article entitled “What Do Men Want?”

Sheba looked down at her hair. There were only two small patches of skin showing, and Sheba thought she might try to cover these by flipping some hair over them. It was repairable--at least until the woman got out of the shop. After she got home and starting combing her hair she might discover--

Oh well, Sheba thought. I can't get all twisted up about this. It's only hair after all! It'll grow back.

She deftly began repair work with her scissors. Her little hands flew, her scissors flashed. Sheba was the Wizard of Hair; everyone knew that. She had brought hairdressing to an art form. As she cut, patched, and re-did, she thought about her brother traveling by train from New York to Detroit to see their Aunt. In two days she'd be on the train to Detroit. Her little sister was getting a ride from Lansing. Everyone would be in one place. All except Mom. Mom would be stranded somewhere in the mountains of Utah, doing her Mom thing. A Vision Quest, or something like that. Thoughts moved around in Sheba's head as she worked. The woman was engrossed in her article. Carisse came over.

“That's lovely Sheba.”

The woman looked up and smiled. Sheba gently but firmly pushed her head back into place.

“Sheba's one of our best stylists,” Carisse said in her pre-Ferris Wheel tone and glided away.

Everything's about to Explode, Sheba thought. She could always tell when Carisse was about to lose it. It was almost time.

“Well, I think we’re done. Would you like a blow dry?” Sheba asked. The customer nodded. Sheba grabbed the dryer and carefully managed to dry her hair while avoiding uncovering the bald spots. After this, she was going to give Monica a piece of her mind. She had three customers waiting and one washed and ready to go, and here she was doing reconnaissance work on Monica’s customer. Where was Monica, by the way?

Sheba walked to the laundry room to check on the towels. Monica was in a body-clench with her boyfriend Milo. Milo was Italian or Greek or something and had a ponytail down to his ass. Right now his ass was up against Monica’s.

“Monica--we’re really busy now. Any chance you could get back on the floor?” It wasn’t her job to monitor Monica, but somebody had to. Monica stopped kissing Milo for a moment.

“Sure.”

Sheba could hear the sound of their lips smacking.

Yuck, she thought. God save me from Monica’s sex life.

“Sheba--Dave’s on the phone!” Fiona called from somewhere in the bowels of the shop. Sheba picked up the extension next to the washing machine.

“Hi. We’re swamped. How’s everything?”

“Fine. George has a friend who can get us into the Aquarium for a few shots.”

“Great. What’re you gonna do?”

“Some of the fish’ll get the Flu. How does that sound?”

“Fine.” Sheba was at a loss about Dave’s creative inspiration. She felt it might come from some kind of childhood trauma or something. That was where all creativity sprang from, wasn’t it?

“Listen, I got to go.”

“Great. I’ll see you tonight. Do you want Mexican?”

“No--Thai.”

“Okay.”

“Bye.”

She hung up. Monica and Milo were still clenched--smacking, kissing, and rubbing up against each other. Other people’s sex was just not that interesting, she realized.

“Monica--”

“Right.” Monica gave Milo one more wet kiss, smiled, and waved her little wave.

“See you later, honey.”

“We’ve got a lot of customers, Monica. I’ve got three people waiting for a wash.”

“Right.”

Sheba looked at Monica. She was probably on Heroin or something. That must be the explanation. Or Ecstasy. She’d heard that was the designer drug of choice these days.

Monica and Sheba entered the shop. Carisse was starting to whirl.

“Where the fuck are my scissors?” A few customers’ heads turned--the new ones. The other ones knew Carisse and kept their noses firmly in their magazines. Sheba went over to Kate.

“Who’s next for me?”

“John Gorgonzola.”

“Oh God--Cheese Head.”

Sheba looked in the lobby and saw John sitting with his nose ring, his earring and his dread locks. What a loser.

“Come on John, “ Sheba smiled, ever the professional. “We cutting off those lovely locks today?”

“You bet. I want a baldhead. That’s where I’m headed--total annihilation. Of the hair, that is.”

“Great.”

Sheba sat him in a chair at the wash sink.

“Monica!”

Monica was somewhere in the shop, but where? Hope Milo has left, Sheba thought. What a jerk.

“So where IS she?” Carisse screamed.

“It’s all under control,” Sheba soothed. Why was she always life’s mediator? She thought.

“I’m here.” Monica slid up to Sheba.

“Wash John, Monica. Pronto.”

“Sure.”

Monica looked down at John and smiled. He smiled back.

“Lean your head back.”

“Merry Christmas” he said.

“You too.”

She turned on the water.

Suddenly he let out a blood-curdling scream.

“Shit!”

“Sorry. Was that too hot?”

Jesus! Was there no end to this girl’s stupidity?

“You’ve got to test the water before you start washing someone, Monica.”

“Right. Sorry. You okay?” She looked down at John. His legs were trembling.

“Yeah. Fine.”

“Sorry John,” Sheba said. He might be a Cheese Head, but he was still a living cheese head.

“Okay.” He looked like he was about to cry. Monica got the water running. She put the nozzle next to his scalp.

“How’s this?”

“Cold!” He started to jump from the chair. “I--I don’t think I want my hair cut today.”

“Wait--I’ll get it right!” Monica called to him as he jumped from the chair.

“Forget it!”

He ripped his smock off and threw it over the chair. “I got to go.”

Sheba watched the whole scene with rapt attention. Monica was a total loser and she wanted to strangle her.

“Monica--did you ever think that maybe this might not be the right profession for you?”

Monica started to cry. Tears streamed down her face.

“I’m so sorry. Are you gonna fire me?”

“I can’t fire you--I’m not the one in charge. But Monica--it’s Christmas--we’re busy and--”

“I’m sorry.” She was in a full-blown sob now. Sheba grabbed some Kleenex from the counter and shoved it into Monica’s little fist.

“Look--I know you think I’m uncoordinated.”

“That’s an under--never mind.”

“I don’t know what to do with my life.”

“Have you thought about Drugs?”

“My sister gave me some of her Prozac, but I’m not sure I should.”

“Forget it, Monica. I was just kidding.”

“Oh. Look Sheba--I really admire you. You are so good. You’re my mentor.”

“Mentor? I don’t know...”

“Sheba.” She started to bawl her eyes out. Sheba moved Monica into the laundry room and shut the door to the shop so nobody would hear.

“I’m a mess.”

“I can see that.”

“I got a boyfriend.”

“I know, Monica. You practically fucked him back here today.”

“He has such a big dick--I don’t know what to do with it!” Monica laughed and cried at the same time.

“Too much information, Monica. Do I really need to know this?”

“TMI?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. You are so cool, Sheba. Everything you do is right.”

“Not really.”

“It seems that way.”

“I fake it.”

“I wish I could fake it.”

“Monica--we got to get back to work.”

“Sure. Listen--I forgot. I got you something, for Christmas. Want it now?”

“Oh--oh, sure.”

Now Sheba realized she'd have to get Monica something too. Monica went to her coat and pulled out a little package from the pocket.

“Here.”

Sheba opened the package. There was a sweet little wooden box. She opened the box and inside was the most exquisite pair of pearl earrings Sheba had ever seen. They were small but lovely, with a dangling golden clasp.

“Wow, these are--” Sheba was speechless. How could Monica have the taste to pick these? “They look--pretty valuable. I don't know what to say.”

“They were my mother's.”

“Your mother's?”

“She died two years ago. On Christmas Day. Christmas always sucks for me, ever since. I always think of her. You know.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean--”

“Are you sure you want me to have these?”

“Yeah, I’m sure, Sheba. My mom always wanted me to go to art school and be a painter or something.”

“So why didn’t you?”

“Well, when she died she left me and my little brother and sister. I had to take care of them--they’re still in school. We need the money. My dad’s somewhere in Nevada so he’s—not much help. He’s in rehab.”

Sheba looked at Monica and saw a different person standing in front her, someone with a history even worse than her own. At least her mother was still alive, even if she was unavailable.

“Thanks, Monica. They’re really beautiful.”

“Will you wear them, Sheba?”

“Well, if you want me to.”

“Yes—wear them now, put them on. I want to see what they look like on you. My mother was dark too, like you. And she always—did everything right, I guess. Except live.”

Sheba took the earrings out of the box and walked over to the mirror. They didn’t exactly go with her outfit, but what the hell. She put them on, and looked at herself. There was something magical about them. Something strange. A certain energy emanated from the earrings themselves, as if they had been blessed or something. Sheba didn’t ordinarily believe in that New Age stuff, but she was sensitive to energy. Maybe an inherited trait, she decided.

“These are--”

“My mom was really a neat person.”

“I guess. They feel--”

“She believed in Good Vibrations. Do you?”

“Not really. But, whatever.”

She could feel an energy enter her--what the fuck? The spirit of Monica’s mother, or what?

“I don’t exactly believe in all that stuff.”

“Yeah, neither do I. Still, those earrings are--”

“Magical.” Sheba completed the sentence. They looked at one another for a second and quickly looked away.

Reflected in the mirror they caught themselves staring; two women in their twenties, one dark, the other light, one crying, one looking slightly surprised.

“Thanks Monica.”

“Sheba. Thanks for--”

“Never mind.”

“No--let me say it. Thanks for being patient with me. I mean it.”

“Okay.”

Sheba gave Monica a little hug. Monica held on tight.

Carisse burst into the door.

“What the hell are you guys doing in here--drugs? There are thousands of customers out there needing your services.”

“Thousands, Carisse?” Sheba asked in her fake incredulous tone.

“Well, not that many, but plenty, let me tell you.”

“Ferris Wheel time,” Sheba said and smiled.

“What?” Monica looked around the laundry room. “I’ll do a load right now.”

“Never mind. Let’s go.” Sheba put her arm around Monica’s waist and they walked out into the shop. It was chaos. It was crazy. It was Christmas.

Sheba caught her reflection as she moved toward her chair and her next customer. The earrings flashed and sparkled with a glow that made her start humming Jingle Bells. Monica laughed and sang with her. The next moment the whole shop starting screeching Jingle Bells. It was unmusical as hell, but it was real. Monica handed Sheba a clean towel.

“You know Monica—do you want to go out with Dave and I sometime—for coffee or something? Maybe we can go over to the Art Institute sometime. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“Meanwhile--will you wash Mrs. Mountebank’s head?”

“No problem-o.”

Sheba flashed her scissors while the earrings shimmered around her porcelain skin. She looked down at Harry, her next customer.

“Hi Harry.”

“Hi Sheba. Nice earrings.”

“Thanks. They were a present from a friend.”

Whipping her deft little hands around she smiled.

“Show time,” Sheba said and began cutting.

