

The Shop

by Daun Daemon

The two of us are standing under the fluorescent lights of our mother's beauty shop. Our arms crossed, we stand on opposite sides of the counter that splits the shop in half and shake our heads at each other under the quavering bulbs.

Yes, she did.

No, I'm sure she didn't.

How can you be so sure? You're always so sure. I think she did.

I don't remember it that way.

Well, I do.

While trying to decide what to do about all the stuff in the shop, which is attached by a breezeway to our childhood home, the older of the two of us had remarked that Mama sometimes washed our heads on Sunday mornings, before church. The younger of us remembers only the Saturday night ritual. Once there were four of us, now only two—the oldest and the second youngest.

When the baby got old enough to have her hair washed, Mama didn't have time to wash four heads on Saturday night. So, sometimes we were out here on Sunday mornings.

Well maybe you were. I wasn't.

You were just too young to remember.

I was old enough to remember that on Saturday nights Daddy stayed in the house to watch Lawrence Welk while we flitted around the shop.

We pause, recalling those long ago nights of activity and anticipation. Mama and her girls out in the beauty shop dancing around, laughing, reading funny stories aloud from the magazines, making brush roller animals for the baby, pretending to be movie stars like Natalie Wood, flipping our hair around like Cher.

We relax, uncross our arms, smile.

We had to be done in time for The Carol Burnett Show.

Remember how Mama would pop a big skillet of popcorn just in time for Carol's walk onto the stage?

She was so glamorous and talented—but as easy to talk to as a regular person.

Mama was like that too, wasn't she? The way anybody could come into the shop

and she would be able to just start a conversation with her as if she'd always known her?

You're right. She could do that, even with men—like the beauty supply salesman or the Tom's Snacks man. That was a talent.

Mama certainly was beautiful, too, glamorous in her own way. Every morning she was out here in the shop early, sweeping her dark hair into a perfect French twist before coming in to coiffure our own messy heads into ponytails or braids before we left for school.

Is that a verb?

What?

Coiffure?

Yes it is. I know for a fact that it is.

You would.

We grow silent and gaze at the messiness of the shop.

We are both thinking, what do we do with it now? How do we dispose of the faded daisy-print curtains, plastic capes, hairnets, hunchbacked hair dryers? Old magazines, tacky with hairspray and dust, are stacked in the dryers' seats. We are amazed to discover a McCall's from 1972, the cutout Betsy McCall paper doll still inside.

These are relics.

Relics of what?

Of a time past.

That sounds so trite. These are relics of something else.

Of Mama, then.

No—of our childhood.

That's trite, too.

Not really.

We let it go. One of us pulls a tiny camera from her purse and begins to photograph the shop, aiming first at the handwritten price list on poster paper that our middle sister made for Mama, what, twenty years ago? Even in her 30s—just a few years before cancer took her—our sister was proud of her neat, careful handwriting. Mama hadn't changed her prices since.

A haircut for \$3.50. Mercy.

Well, Mama thought even that was too high for her factory ladies and rural schoolteachers.

One of us tangles a finger in her own \$95 hairstyle.

We poke around, opening cabinets and examining the aging cans of hairspray, the boxes of hairpins.

We each move to a different corner of the shop, brushing off dust here,

peering into spaces there. We find boxes of unused beauty supplies: permanent solution, toner, styling gel. Gray hairs still cling to some of the brushes lying in a drawer. The linoleum in the corners has gone dark with unreachable grime and is beginning to peel away from the floor.

One of us gasps.

Look at this!

Inside a cabinet, behind dye-stained, threadbare towels sits a stash of menthol cigarettes and a bright purple lighter.

Mama didn't smoke.

Did she?

No. Of course not. Daddy would have had a fit.

Well, what on earth...

We are silent. We are thinking that we knew this woman, our mother. We are thinking that she had no secrets, that in this shop all secrets were told. We remember hearing confessions, seeing tears, witnessing the moments of truth. But those were the other women, her customers.

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Remember when Shirley, oh what was her last name?

Teeter.

Yes! Remember when Shirley Teeter came by that Christmas Eve with her beehive askew and her lip bloody? Mama told us to keep watching the Christmas specials and then came out here with Shirley to fix that bairdo. They stayed out here for hours.

It would take hours to fix a beehive.

We laugh. One of us gestures into the air above her head, whipping it into an imaginary bouffant.

That was the Christmas the year of the drowning, wasn't it?

Yes.

Imagine how Mama felt. Her youngest daughter lost just a few months earlier, dealing with that grief during the holidays. How did she find the strength to comfort

Shirley?

I don't know. I guess I've never really thought about it.

All I know is that I heard more than one story that I shouldn't have. Sometimes those ladies forgot I was out here doing homework. They told Mama all their troubles—beatings, money problems, illness, betrayal—but I don't remember that Mama ever talked about herself to them.

Mama didn't confess her troubles. She was strong.

Mama didn't have troubles. Did she?

We hang around the shop for a little while, searching, not talking. This quiet isn't anything we ever knew out here. Out in the shop. We can't stand it.

She had her own secrets, I'm sure, but no one to hear them. The women all came here to confide in her, not to listen to her.

That seems so selfish, but I'm not sure.

It's not selfish; it's human nature. If Mama had expressed her pain, her grief then they would have been uncomfortable. She was touching them, she was intimate with them, she couldn't violate that trust.

You're right. I believe you're right.

One of us picks up the pack of cigarettes.

What do you think? Should we?

Yes, we should.

We open the pack and pull out two slender cigarettes; the aroma of tobacco is strong enough to tell us that Mama had smoked long after she grew ill. We search for the inevitable ashtray and find it hidden in a box of plastic hair caps.

Shouldn't we light up five? For Mama and all her girls?

That's perfect. Let's do it.

We pull out three more and then flick the lighter. We smile when it flames on the second try.

We've never done this before, smoke together. We may have tried the habit in college or in a stressful time during our twenties. We don't ask each other about that. Instead, we puff, cough and giggle together, two middle-aged women acting like rebellious teenagers.

We watch the five strands of smoke rise up into a singular fog.

Then we begin to tell secrets in honor of our mother.