

The Salon

Put on your red shoes and dance the blues is the first thing I hear walking in. The air smells violently chemical. But somehow everyone's face is calm and laid-back, like they somehow desire the stench. For a whole half of one second I get twinges of fruit, but it is definitely chemical fruit, phony fruit.

I forgot why I am here. But then I remember it is because I need a haircut. But why am I *here*, like, here-here. I remember that my mother still makes these appointments for me, and plus Delaney is here. She's been cutting my hair since I was fourteen. I haven't seen her in years.

I just moved home from Denver after finishing school. Broke and jobless, I moved back in with my parents. They, and now I, live in a stupidly posh suburb just north of Chicago. Both *Home Alone 1* and *2* were filmed here. I don't know where the third one was filmed, because it was crap. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* was also shot in the area. Same with *The Breakfast Club*, actually my father went to the high school they filmed that movie in. It's no coincidence that all of these films feature white people enduring very white conflict -[my parents went on a vacation to Paris and left me all alone] - [where do we go and what do we do after high school?] [college?] [high school identity]—what a luxury high school identity is, very luxurious [My mother gave me these pearls] - [I tried to commit suicide].

The modern day bourgeois hair salon is honestly dreadful. And I don't mean dreadful in the everyday way we normally think of the word dread, like: I dread my morning classes, or H.O.A. meetings, or the way we feel toward FM radio. I mean it, in I guess the German or Danish way, like, an incomprehensibly demoralizing state of being, one deeply seated. I mean the word in all its seriousness. It's a lived phenomenon that is innately objectless, indeterminable. It makes my liver or pancreas hurt. I know squat about anatomy, but I can feel one of my organs—in that general abdomen area—throbbing. Like when you stub your big-toe real bad and you can literally take your pulse by touching it. One hundred and two throbs per minute.

Behind me are cream-colored double doors I just walked through, and immediately to the left of the doors is a granite counter-top on which rests an opulent glass contraption that dispenses water. In its interior center is a tall clear cylindrical tube that's stacked with alternating slivers of lemon and cucumber. And next to the expensive water thing is a gold plate with a half-eaten loaf of coffee crumb cake, which has a heavy dusting of powdered sugar on top. Above the counter is eggshell cabinetry with little glass windowpanes filled with neatly arrayed, mini and very cute, white coffee mugs.

There are two old ladies in line ahead of me, one of whom is speaking gibberish to a young, very orange looking receptionist. I heard the phrase: *graduated bob*—that can literally mean almost anything. I cannot look away from the goddamned travesty of a treat counter. Sunlight reflects off the white dazzling granite with myriad of dark specks. My abdominal organ hurts even worse after looking at the lemon and cucumber water. I badly want some. I bet it's delicious, different and original tasting in a subtle type of way. But I'm too embarrassed.

As grooming and self-care appointments go, the hair salon frightens me more than the dentist, the shrink, even more than my old, very Jewish pediatrician. His name was Dr. Taxman. He drove a Mercedes, all black, and his license plate was simply, 'TAX.' One time when I was fourteen I was in TAX's quarantine room suffering from a type-D flu. And while he was figuring out what the hell to do with me some small young woman—who must've been a nurse or an intern—interrupted him by saying Ms. Goldfarb had been on the line for ten minutes and needed to schedule an appointment to get her baby weighed. And under the fluorescents, which, by the way, make human flesh look shadowy and cavernous, and amidst the sound of me rolling around on thin wax-paper, and my mother's eyes, fatigued and heavy, looking at me turning green, actually green, TAX shouted at the young lady, "Tell her to take it to a fuckin' butcher!" My mother's eyes shot up, away from me, and I laughed. I tend to do that, even in my most sickened state.

My memory begins to hurt. Self-absorption, self-consciousness, I'm reminded of what being a white American college graduate feels like. I'm reminded that I just saw Nicholas Cage wearing a cat suit in the parking lot. I'm reminded that I want to be pleased, impressed, and pampered. I'm reminded that I judge myself against microscopic aesthetics. The sparkling granite, the way its strategic placement catches sunlight, the way it's blinding and imposing, and beautiful.

"Let me guess," says the young receptionist. She looks like a pumpkin, or maybe her diet consists of way too many baby carrots. She has dark hair, big colorful eyes, wearing tight black clothes, and a shirt that hangs low so I can see her cleavage. A silver chain dangles there with a metal owl pendant with turquoise eyes. Strategic move on her part, I'm guessing. And I cannot help but look at the owl resting against her spray tanned skin in the small shadowy canyon created by her two breasts just falling short of touching each other. This gaze is somehow Darwinian. She's probably seventeen and attends the colossal public high school that's nearby. I don't think I can speak.

She clicks and scrolls through her data—or whatever is on that computer in front of her.

She says, "Wait—don't tell me. You're seeing Delaney, aren't you?"

I nod, still disoriented from the miasma.

"Your name is Charlie, isn't it?" She then chuckles, "There aren't a lot of guys coming through here."

I nod again. I smile. The smile feels long, crooked and painful. But it was a fast and phony smile. I fear now that if I start to speak, no words will come out and I won't even know it.

I hand the young receptionist a check for forty-five dollars that my mother wrote. I walk a few steps to a room that's even brighter than the lobby. The stockyards: lots of sunlight, two rows of bodies, each one placed in front of her very own mirror. They all sit still and upright, wearing black smocks, getting their hair done up in the clever ways that magazines tell them to. I see Delaney.

"Charlie," she says, while cutting the hair of an old lady.

"Hey, how are you?" I ask. Good, language works, still.

"Ha, Go get shampooed, stranger. Be with you in a bit."

I walk to the hair washing stations and wait on a small leather couch. There are four washing stations in total. I park and watch four Latina women go to town washing hair with black latex gloves on. The black latex glove must be the strongest type of latex glove, the black-belt of latex gloves. Not even TAX whipped out the black gloves. His were always a light blue. This part of the process—the hair washing stations—must be where transcendence happens.

All their faces are placid. Like they're lying on a beach with tri-fold foil mirror's out in front of them. They're glowing. The wrinkles around their mouths are flattened, de-stressed, their legs kicked back and heads surrounded by shiny black gyrating digits. All their eyes are closed, effortlessly. The eyes are not scrunched or forced closed. The top and bottom eyelids are practically melted shut. It's as if all of them have floated away somewhere warm and gorgeous, Florida Keys maybe, palm trees ahead and salted oceanic zephyrs in the face. Delirious satiation sails them away.

I think it's my pancreas, now. I'm almost positive it is. I want to stick a pin in it. Relieve the pressure. I wonder, is there a pancreatic latch I can twist open somehow? I feel humiliated, sitting on this couch staring at the hair-washing zone, and before I know it my head is inside a gigantic porcelain globe.

A portly pear-shaped Latina lady—who has small eyes and a warm smile—begins speaking to me with an accent.

She asks, "How's the water sir, fine?"

"It's fine," I say. But it is better than fine. It is like Jacuzzi water, several degrees warmer than my body temperature. It's perfect. But the thing is, the temperature of the water could be freezing and I'd have said it was fine. No matter what she asks as it relates to myself, I have to say, fine. Fine. I'm fine.

"Ok. Ok." She says. "Who's cutting your hair?" And before I can answer she answers, "Delaney."

Her belly bulges out quite a bit and her body absorbs mine. We become one as she reaches over me to massage the back of my scalp. I lie there. My long legs with grey Keds on their feet hang off the footrest. My hands grope around the tips of the armrests.

My head is being attacked from every which way. The behavior of pleasure is profoundly difficult to experience and I know she is trying. That's her job: wash my hair, massage me, pamper me, sail me away to goddamned Florida. That is where my grandparents went to die.

Her black-latex gloves feel shamefully nice pulsing, gripping and releasing the tendons on the back of my neck. A symbiotic rhythm between her rubbing and my pancreas pulsing harmonizes. My eyes will not close so I stare at the white ceiling that has big thick squared dark wooden logs intersecting each other, the same way that the Lincoln Log structures did that my brother and I used to build at my other grandparents' lake house in Door County. This aesthetic gives the salon a contemporary, homey cottage type of feel that imposes upon me a nostalgic memory.

Now, on to Delaney. I sit in the chair. She wraps a black cloak around me and buttons it behind the back of my neck. It's tight. But one button lower would be too

loose. The cloak turns the shape of my face into a blown up balloon that is near its maximum holding capacity.

"What are we doing today?" she asks.

"Nothing crazy," I say. "Short and thin."

"Wow. Your hair is so thick!"

I cannot tell if this is an insult, a compliment, or a petty annoyance of hers. I take it as none of the above and I say, "Yup."

"So. Done with school? Philosophy, right?"

"Yeah. All done now," I say. "Good memory."

"Well, your mom came in a few weeks ago. She reminded me."

"Ah. Of course."

"So what do you do with philosophy now?"

I sit there. I stare at myself.

This is, by far, the worst part of the entire experience. I am utterly faced with the-I who stares back at me. I cannot stand it. There are three lines shooting across his forehead. They have abnormal depth. Have I been angry?

"What was that?" Delaney asks. She's standing behind me, buzzing the back of my neck with a trimmer.

"Oh—nothing. I'm not sure what to do now."

"That's OK," she says. "See any movies lately?"

"I did, actually. Just saw this one about a self-proclaimed nymph."

"Hm," she says. "I didn't catch that one."

I wish I hadn't said that. My cheeks look gigantic. There is something going on with my chin. It's different from my old chin. I think the problem with my pancreas is serious. One hundred and twenty-three throbs per minute. I feel it throbbing under the smock.

"What was that?"

"Am I talking out loud?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Fine. I'm fine."

I ask a stranger if anything in life I've done prior to this atomized moment can be undone. I start laughing, I feel something pop.

"Charlie?" shouts Delaney. "Call an ambulance!"

A circle of ladies surrounds me. Two of them have enough foil in their hair to pickup coded KGB radio waves. I hear the young receptionist on the phone say that a young man has just fallen out of his chair at the Red Cottage Salon, and that he's turning a greenish bluish color. He is on the ground, now, laughing hysterically.

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"Wake up. Slowly, Slow—one—two—three."

Clap!

"Charlie. Do you know where you are?"

"Yes. In a damn psych ward."

"Who am I?"

"Dr. Goldberg,"

“Do you know what just happened?” Doctor Goldberg hands me a consent form that’s signed with my handwriting. I sit up a little bit on a long black leather chair. “You just under went narco-hypnosis,” he says.

“Yeah?” I say. “How’d that go?”

“Well. To be honest, this form of hypnosis is rather unorthodox. But we were more than successful in recovering the entire experience of what led to your. er—breakdown. In fact, you recounted the experience with frightening detail. Turns out you are very susceptible to hypnosis.”

“Great.”

I feel my side. The stitches were recently removed. The surrounding flesh feels mushy, like the skin of an overly ripe avocado. I shouldn’t pick it.

“I have never seen a panic attack cause one’s pancreas to explode. What I have come to is that your pancreas burst first, then you panicked.” He pauses briefly, looking at a clipboard. “But there was obviously, very intense panic leading up to that. So where we go from here is a bit, hmm—murky.”

“That sounds very ordinary,” I say. “I mean, if one of your organs explodes inside of you, and you don’t know what the hell it is, I’d imagine panic being a typical reaction.”

“Yes,” says Dr. Goldberg. “I’m inclined to agree with you, however, your thoughts and feelings, er—the way you retold the day in the salon, was honestly quite startling. Do you—er, have you ever thought of ending your life? Hurting yourself or others in anyway? Ever go on any insane spending sprees? Ever think you are the best or worst thing that ever walked the face of the earth?”

I say, “I hurt myself all the damn time, but I don’t think you’d understand the fact that I’m aware that I hurt myself. I know it is not hurting anybody else but I. Life is too hard to not hurt oneself. And—no to the rest of your questions.”

“Hmm,” Goldberg says, and then he strokes his beard and taps his black and silver Mont Blanc pen on the clipboard. On the wall behind him are several plaques telling me that he knows what he is talking about.

“At the very end of the hypnosis, you said that you were speaking to a stranger, do you remember what the stranger looked like?”

“Yeah.” This is a huge duh, “It was me,” I say.

Goldberg makes an odd noise indicating that he was either thinking, clearing his throat, or had to pass wind, silently.

“We’re going to have you under our care for at least 72 hours to run some more tests. It’s pretty standard. You’re free to walk around the unit and engage with other patients. We have books and movies. They are actually watching *Sixteen Candles* right now. Love that movie. Before you get out there would you like some water? —With lemon and cucumber?”

My pancreas starts to hurt.