

The Hair Salon - a short story from the book "Mushroom Omelet"



The Hair Salon

“Keep still dear,” he said, in a tone of voice that was tender rather than reproachful. It was the only thing that kept her reactions in check—at least for the time being. Every time his scissors were near her neck, it was impossible for her to keep still. He moved his hands around her flutteringly without ever injuring or scratching her, but his moves always made her feel uneasy, increasingly so every time, such that in the last two years the unease turned to agitation. So great was her agitation that she had no way of hiding it and so could not keep still. From the roots of her hair at the back of her neck she felt a shiver that slowly rippled down her back and then made a strange sort of leap, piercing her tummy and making her go all numb. She became deeply embarrassed and tried hard to hide her emotions, fearing that either he or the ladies would pick something up. It was the ladies she was particularly concerned about. Nothing escaped their notice. They all sat in a row with their heads bandaged, each under her own private stove, magazine in hand, pretending to read yet each fully aware of every single movement going on around them: the lady next to her... Aristos... who gave what tip... oh! that was a terribly small tip, shame on her! She trembled at the thought of someone realizing she was having butterflies in her stomach, especially if the person who noticed was her mum. Pavlina became all the more anxious because she did not know what was actually happening to her; she could not understand what she feeling and what was causing that feeling. A pair of scissors? Could that be it?...But what about those feelings of shame and unease? What was the reason for that? Despite feeling so embarrassed, she did not want to lose touch with that strong and strange sensation that had come over her; it did not matter that she couldn’t understand or describe it. For hours and days afterwards, she would think back to the shiver in her neck, and if she was lucky enough to immerse herself entirely in her reverie, she could even make that butterfly feeling come back, surfacing from the dark, mysterious depths of her being.

A loud and terrifying *snip* was heard, and it was gone! The scissors finally triumphed over the thick pleat of hair. Aristos bent down slowly and picked up the heavy pigtail from the floor. “Your daughter’s hair is something else,” he said. “Can I keep it for a wig?” The ladies took a break from their studying and raised their bandaged heads. They first looked at the booty Aristos held in his hands and then turned quizzically towards Pavlina’s mother, who did not seem to have heard Aristos because of the loud noise coming from the blow-dryer, or who may have felt embarrassed by the question. She continued reading the magazine article untrammelled, and did not even lift her head.

Aristos continued to hold the thick ginger lock of hair in his hands for a little while, gazing at it in awe, as if he was observing a rare object, a work of art that he had to appraise. Having years of professional experience, he liked to think of himself as an artist—and indeed he was one. He could identify and bring out all the good and fair features in a woman’s face, obscured by unruly locks of hair.

He knew how to tame them, how to smooth out the contours of a face that had been marred by bad taste, or how to hide imperfections—puffy cheeks or a short and thick neck, for example—skilfully cutting the strands into uneven ends in order to create an overall slimmer effect. All his customers left the salon feeling perfectly content. All, that is, except Pavlina. But he was not at all the one to blame. On the contrary, he seemed to be aware of the girl's anguish and tried to be as kind and gentle with her as he possibly could. Besides, the same story repeated itself consistently for the past five years. It always happened at the beginning of the summer as soon as the school exams were over. Apart from the issue with the scissors, which was a source of considerable distress, there was something else she had to face; something that she could not understand and which troubled her even more. However hard she tried at school and got good grades, however easy-going and obedient a daughter she was (in fact, she was one of those worryingly obedient children, and any astute observer—who cared little about the parent's ease and peace of mind—would wonder for how long she would continue to be so easy-going and how profoundly her will must have been damaged); whatever the girl did to satisfy the demands of others, she never managed to win the uneven battle with her mother on the issue of her hair. Every year, as soon as the school exams were over, the journey to the hair salon was inevitable. It was a minor Calvary, marking the beginning of the summer holidays. It was far more convenient for her hair to be short in the summer, what with all the heat and frequent showers, at least that is what her mother claimed, and the truth is that her mother did the same herself. Every year she cherished the hope that this time her wish would be granted—*But I got such good grades! Why are you doing this to me? But I hardly ever let you down! You even told auntie the other day what a good girl I am! Why are you doing this to me?* At first she used to cry in silent submission but as she grew older, the violation made her chest burn with rage. She regarded the matter as a grave injustice, without her having instigated it in the slightest. When the thick pigtail fell to the ground with a thud, landing on the mosaic floor of the salon at the hostile snip of the scissors, the feeling of injustice was followed by the stark reality of an amputation. She was made to undergo what seemed like a punishment, one that made her feel truly terrible. She couldn't have a say in defining her own body, and as the years went by she found it increasingly difficult to understand the meaning of this action and accept it. Yet, in the end, she submitted, and humiliatingly so, something which made her suffer twice as much, not so much for losing her treasure as for being defeated anew.

She had luscious hair, glistening with red tones of copper and falling on her shoulders in gentle waves. Everyone admired it. On cold winter days, her friends at school would warm their hands behind her neck, both as a game and as a caress. It was her most striking and unique characteristic; and in the burning, turbulent age of puberty it was an indispensable part of her femininity.

This sad story had begun when she was about nine years old. Her mum said it had something to do with height and good vision, but the girl sensed that there were other reasons to it, though she could not quite put her finger on it; her mother probably didn't know either. When she was younger, her temper cooled down relatively quickly. She would just forget about it. As the years went by, however, and as her mum's obsession persisted and her daughter's desire and self-determination was being denied over and over again, matters became worse and started to take on other dimensions.

The last year was particularly difficult. The signs of puberty were all too visible in Pavlina, in both body and behaviour. She grew tall, with full breasts and curvy hips. But these changes were relatively mild. She did not undergo a radical transformation of features like other children did. Nor was her look harsher; it was just unfocused, slightly puzzled and searching, as if she did not know where to direct her gaze. On some occasions, it suddenly became intent and intense, as if she had just woken from deep sleep. Her face lost its childish roundness; it became longer and attractively angular. It was obvious that Pavlina had not noticed all of the changes that were taking place on her, but the ones that she was aware of were enough to make her feel uneasy and uncomfortable. It was as if she did not know how to handle her added dimensions. This unexpectedly womanly face gave alternately innocent and provocative looks, something which seemed to be happening without her knowing. She had always been an easy-going child, never causing any real trouble or raising too many objections. So when things started to change, it caused a sensation and even aroused a feeling of dislike among those around her. Her mother was the last to realize that she was dealing with a different person from the one she knew, and one to whom she owed much more attention and respect. She never really gave it much thought and continued imposing herself on the young woman in her usual way.

Although it was almost June, the weather was not getting any warmer. At night it was still quite chilly; a jacket was essential. The exam period was coming to an end. Pavlina revised until late at night, despite her mum's objections. She had even started to drink coffee so that she could stay up. For the first exams, her mother Yiota sat with her for support, but after a few days she almost broke down; she could no longer bear it, so she went to bed and the support went out the window. And that is exactly what Pavlina wanted—to be able to listen to the silence of the night and not to her mother's worries and advice. So far she had done quite well...this was the last exam and then... finito! It was summer! A bitter feeling turned her stomach. It was late. She went to bed.

The next morning, at around eleven o'clock, Yiota kept putting down the receiver in a huff. She was calling the hair salon to book an appointment but the line was always busy. She decided to put it on her list of things to do for the day—after doing the shopping she would pass by the salon and make the appointment in person.

She climbed up the stairs pantingly. Ever since the hair salon had been revamped and moved to the floor above in the same building, she bust a gut to climb up all the steps—sadly the revamp did not include moving to a building with an elevator—she pushed the half-opened door with her foot, then puffing and blowing laid down her shopping bags on the floor. “For heaven's sake, girls...you really overdid it with the phone! I've been trying all morning to get through to you... having to climb a hundred steps just to make an appointment... well anyway... I'd like to book for a blow-dry on Saturday for myself, and a cut for my daughter. What times are available?” The young woman behind the counter stood motionless looking totally lost. “What's wrong, dear? You look petrified! Is it anything I said?” The young lady didn't respond. “C'mon Filitsa! What's the matter? Oh... is it what I said about the phone? C'mon, don't take it so seriously! Don't worry, I won't say anything; besides, I see that Aristos isn't here. But really, you should go easy on the phone next time. Anyway, tell me, what times do you have free on Saturday?” The young woman remained standing there motionless and just stared at her, at the same time shooting nervous glances at the other woman in the salon, who happened at that moment to be giving a rather rotund lady a root lift and was avoiding any sort of involvement in this brief exchange, focusing all her attention instead on the root lift as if she were performing a delicate surgical operation. “Look, will you tell me what's going on here? Speaking of which, where's Aristos? What's happened? Has he gone and left you all in total disarray?”

Filitsa made an effort to look through the appointment book, casting furtive glances every now and then at the glazed internal door that separated the main part of the salon from the back room. Yiota automatically turned to look in the same direction. Two figures were dimly silhouetted behind the frosted, tinted glass. A man and a woman. The blow-dryer was so noisy that it prevented the sounds in the back room from reaching the counter. The two silhouettes came together for a while forming a compact, shadowy shape.

“So, Filitsa, have you found anything?”

The young woman opened her mouth to give a reply.

The glazed internal door opened with a creak, and the second woman who was giving the root lift turned towards them, as did the rotund lady.

Out came Pavlina, looking all cheerful and flushed. She had a gamine haircut and a deep purple mark on her long, youthful neck.

Translated by Elina Tsalicoglou