

Shear Disaster

By: Annalisa Wilson

School's out for the summer, and we were free, free to stay up late and sleep in; free to go outside without worrying about homework or studying for tests; free to do or not do anything we chose. It was a break from the daily morning routine of begrudgingly dragging myself out of bed, shuffling to the bathroom to shower, brush my teeth, blow dry my hair, and "do something with it," as my mom would say to me every morning, like the Pledge of Allegiance.

The relationship between my mother and my hair was volatile and contentious, to say the least. As a little girl, my mop would beckon to my mother like a calling from the dark side. She would feel compelled to chase me with a brush and these awful ponytail holders, the ones shaped like the number eight with a bead on each end. The trick was to wrap the elastic part around the chunk of hair you were pulling up as many times as it took to stretch the skin away from the face, leaving you looking like a Geisha, to the point where your eyes became mere slits, relieving you of your sight and the ability to blink. When installing the device, my mother would hold one end of the beaded torture device between her teeth. She would wrap the elastic around and around and around about a thousand and one rotations, to make sure my hair couldn't escape. I cannot express how many times I secretly wished for the elastic to break in my mother's mouth so the bead would knock her eye clean out of its socket. Maybe then she would know the pain I had to endure every time she had mistaken the skin on my head for Stretch Armstrong. Every time she was able to catch me, I walked away from the event emotionally scarred and with two clumps of ponytails on either side of my head. On the rare occasion that I could elude my mother and her elastic torture devices, my hair would sing a joyous hymn and fly wild and free.

Little did I know that this war would eventually come to an end. One especially scorching Saturday morning, the air was thick, and despite the sun blazing, a dark presence lurked inside our house. Maybe it was nothing, but it still had me a little freaked out. I had walked past my mother on the way to the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice, and she hadn't said a word about my hair. To test the waters, I walked past her a few more times, and still, nothing. Had she finally made peace with my disheveled mop? What was this madness? To make matters even more concerning, my mother had a special little twinkle in her eye. She had a sly, barely there grin, as if she knew a secret, and nobody, not even Jesus, knew what that secret was.

That Saturday morning started like every other summer vacation Saturday. My father owned his own business. If he had a large project or an important client, he would go to work very early to come home while the sun was still out. We were plopped in front of the television, watching the barrage of Saturday morning cartoons we looked forward to all week. I remember the exact show and the scene we were watching when my Cheshire Mamma Cat entered the room with an out-of-character extra little oomph in her step. The Banana Splits were on, and they were getting hot dogs from a hot dog cart vendor at the beach. A picture of a gigantic, super red, smiling weenie was painted on the side of the cart. It had an extra-large patio umbrella that could shelter an entire town from a rainstorm. It was striped with every color of the rainbow. As usual with those quirky Banana Splits, shenanigans were afoot, and a food fight erupted. Fleegle the Beagle poured a whole gallon of mustard down a customer's shirt. I remember being so wrapped up in the scene's tension that I could smell the mustard. It had an awful sour smell and made my stomach do a little somersault. Little did I know that that smell was denoting the presence of an evil force that was about to hijack my perfect Saturday morning.

"Finish your breakfast quickly because we have a lot of things to do today," my mother said, all innocent and doe-like. We were so excited to sacrifice the remainder of our Saturday morning routine for my mother's shenanigans that we ate with the swiftness of an inmate being marched off to the electric chair. My Nutella sandwich was getting stale, and the bread was as hard as a crouton. Despite our best attempts to delay my mother's plans, she always found a way to push forward with her mission, leaving us no choice but to follow along.

I remember standing in the entrance hall in front of the yellow hall cabinet and matching mirror ensemble. The cabinet was a mustard yellow and had gold pin striping painted around the entire perimeter. The front of the cabinet had gold fleur-de-lis accents on each of its two doors. It didn't stop there; the matching mirror had fleur-de-lis carvings around its entire frame. Gold paint airbrushing sat in every nook and cranny like forgotten treasure, quietly gleaming in the shadows of the ornate furniture. Fashioned in the King Louis VI style of opulent tackiness, it was the last stop to check yourself before leaving the house. I was looking at myself in the mirror, a little concerned that my mother had still not commented about my hair. I had given her more than ample opportunities.

It was a humid June day, and the elements wreaked havoc with my poofy Diana Ross coif. It was huge, and the curls just threw their hands in the air, relinquishing all power to the elements. It didn't even put up a fight; it just surrendered and called it a day. I was trying to gather what I could to harvest a single

ponytail when my mother said I wouldn't need that for where we were going. Huh? What does that mean? I would find out very shortly, and believe me, it was not pleasant.

I grew up in the western suburbs of Chicago, in the little out-of-the-way town of Darien. One strip mall housed all the essential retail outlets one would need. There was a grocery store (a family-run business) and a pharmacy with a post office booth in the store's back corner that could fulfill all of your mailing needs. It was a full-service post station where one could purchase stamps or mail packages internationally. They also offered a service where you could exchange electrical ohm points for light bulbs. The electric company ComEd had an incentive program that awarded its customers with ohm points. These points could be 'traded in' for light bulbs. Points were rewarded based on how much electricity a household used. A program that, in this current climate, would not be kosher. Today, rather than encourage its customers to use as much electricity as possible to build a legacy stash of lightbulbs that would last throughout the millennium, they shame you into living in the dark. The strip mall also housed an Ace hardware store, dry cleaners, a barber shop, and a beauty parlor next door. It was your run-of-the-mill 1940s beehive constructing, helmet head blow dryers. Sitting under the dryers was like being locked in an isolation booth and tanning chair all at the same time. You could smell your hair singeing as the heat cooked every strand, each second feeling like an eternity of discomfort.

The shop was decorated in the most awful shade of cotton candy pink. The name 'Flo's Beauty Parlor' was painted on the window, written in pink calligraphic cursive. As my mom parked the car, we were quickly disappointed. Relegated to the comfort of the back seat, we thought we were along for the ride while Mom ran her errands. Not so. We were told to exit the vehicle and follow behind. I had never seen my mother walk with a bounce in her step, but that morning, she looked like Tigger. The excitement and joy in her gait were really starting to scare us. Standing on the sidewalk in front of the beauty parlor, the smell of butterscotch candy and Aqua Net hairspray seared a path through my nostrils into my brain. As mom opened the door, a puff of odiferous, ozone-killing fumes slammed into our faces like running headfirst into a wall with a bike. My brother had done it several times for fun, and in that moment, it was something we would rather be doing. After we unstuck our lips and pried open our eyelids, we exhaled. With our heads bowed, we followed my mom to the counter like a mother duck leading her unhappy ducklings. We let out a collective groan and trudged along behind. What could be worse than watching Mom getting coiffed on a Saturday that was perfect for running through the sprinkler in the backyard? The horror began to finally unravel as I heard my name and my sister's names fall out of her mouth.

Without a moment to plan an escape, a pleasant older woman with hair teased to the Gods, smelling of lavender bathroom air freshener and decorated with assaulting blue and red makeup, ushered me to the lone wash basin in the back of the shop. It was pink, and the rim was worn, exposing its brown porcelain base coat. I was wrapped in a pink vinyl cape, then lifted onto a booster seat, which was also pink and worn. For an older woman, Elsbeth had freakishly strong upper-body strength. With that vinyl leaden cape weighing me down, formulating an escape plan would probably not work in my favor. My mother had thought about everything. She was nothing if not thorough. After washing my hair with boiling water and a garden rake, I was escorted to a shiny pink vinyl chair, the kind that made it feel like you were being molded into place, unable to move as the sticky surface clung to your legs. Vacating the chair meant you had to peel your melted skin from the vinyl, the uncomfortable sensation like ripping off a second layer, leaving you feeling exposed and slightly violated. "So, what are we doin' here today?" Elsbeth said, snapping her gum like a chewing cow. Before I could even blink, my mother smiled and said four of the most horrific words ever uttered in the history of my world. "Cut it all off." She said it with a smile so big I could see her back teeth and part of her epiglottis. "Oh, doll, are you sure? Do you know how lucky she is to have this hair? The waves and natural highlights? People pay good money for hair like this. Don't ruin this pretty little pixie's hair," she said, pink gum popping between her molars. My mom was determined not to be swayed from her decision, and the words 'cut it short' fell from her lips. It felt like the air got sucked out of the room. Elsbeth's cheeks burned hot pink, and I swear I saw tears in her eyes. My head was swimming, and it felt like I was falling down a rabbit hole. It felt like a tornado was inside of it, all twisty and shattering my brain. I was sweating and shaking. Was this what it felt like to have a stroke? I could see the hurt on Elsbeth's face. The cracks in her makeup screamed heartbreak. She truly pitied me. I pleaded and begged my mom not to ruin my life at such a young and fragile age. The shortcut translated into 'military crew cut for girls.'

I don't remember much of the actual chopping. I was discombobulated, and my head was still swirling. I remember looking at the ground and seeing the remnants of a massacre. Tufts of hair littered the floor, with tiny specks of the pink, checker-tiled floor peeking through. I could hear the scissors slicing off my curls and waves, killing me a little more with every snip. It was snowing black curls and waves, black like my mother's heart. Why is she doing this to me? I tried to rack my mind, playing back every single disobedient act from the past few weeks. Nothing came to mind. This was cruelty at its finest. I put myself in a trance while staring at my reflection in the mirror. Tears were burning behind my eyeballs, but I would not give my mother the satisfaction of seeing them roll down my cheeks.

The memories have all faded into black and white, and I'm not sure what the finished product looked like. I must have blocked it out of my memory, similar to when one witnesses a murder. I don't remember my sister getting in the chair after me or how we got home. All I could remember was my brother's evil cackling laughter and my sister's hyperventilating sobs. Her hair was thin and straight, so she looked way worse than mine. My pixie cut ended up looking more like a Beatles mop top. Did Elsbeth use a bowl as a guide? Could be, I don't remember. Bless her hair sprayed and Maybelline electric cotton candy pink and blue makeup soul. Every time our eyes met, she looked guilty. She kept apologizing and calling me honey. My mother was the customer, and no matter where in the world we were, she was always right, even if it meant making her daughter look like Davy Jones.

Back at home, I stood in front of the mirror in my bathroom, pulling on my hair as if I could make it grow. I held my breath, concentrating all my energy on my scalp, willing my follicles to grow. It would be a big deal if I could make it grow even a sixteenth of an inch. It didn't work. Nothing worked. All I managed to accomplish was to make myself dizzy and give myself a headache. I began frantically searching the house for a hat, which was futile. We were not hat people. I rummaged through the house from top to bottom, tearing through every closet and cabinet, and all I came up with was a mini-Strawberry Shortcake umbrella. You better believe that I thought of making that umbrella into a hat. I would take anything as long as it covered my head. I called at least 30 hair salons to ask how to make hair grow faster. Nothing. Just a few snickers and a whole lot of humiliating confessions about "my stupid mother's bright idea to make me look like Mo from the Three Stooges." I was all out of ideas. To make matters worse, the calendar said that I only had two more months until school started. I would have to leave the house looking like GI Joe.

I never knew the power I had to make my mother cry until the moment when, through burning red-hot frustration, I erupted like a dormant volcano. I don't remember the exact words I used. I saw black, and the room was foggy. The few ugly words I do remember saying shot out of my mouth like daggers: "I am sick of your know-it-all attitude. Who made you a fashion expert? You're older than anybody I know, so how could you possibly know what style is?" I added these gems for the grand finale: "Next time you want to see short hair, go get your own haircut. And "Too bad you hate me so much, because you will be stuck with me for the rest of your life. I will never get a boyfriend or get married. Who wants to marry a girl who's ready to report for Army duty?" After I finished my verbal explosion, I just stood there, out of breath, with tears of rage and frustration burning my eyes. It hadn't occurred to me that I had gone so far until I saw the shiny buckle of my mother's slipper flip up towards her hand. Like a ninja, in one swift motion, she hurled her wooden clog at me, aiming straight for my head. With all my hair gone,

there wouldn't be anything to cushion the blow, so I ducked just in time for the shoe to hit the screen door and land with a thud on the rug. We both stood there and looked at the shoe just lying there. It was a split second when something else awful happened. The devil had reclaimed my soul, and I turned to her and growled, "You should be glad that didn't hit me in the head. Since you cut off all of my hair and the padding is gone, I could have gotten a cut and would need stitches. That would make you happy, wouldn't it?" There was nowhere I could run or hide to protect myself from my mother's rage. Then, she did something way worse than beating me to a pile of ashes. She sent me to my room and told me to wait until my father came home.

I had finally done it. My death certificate was signed and stamped. My life was over. I was cooked and would be served to the lions. Then, I had a flash of a silver lining. This might actually work in my favor, I thought. If I were dead, I wouldn't ever have to be seen in public with this awful haircut. The funeral could be a closed casket, and I would be free from humiliation. I sat on my bed in that room for what felt like days. My sister crying into her pillow made the waiting even worse. Was she crying because she wouldn't have a sister anymore, or was she mourning her own embarrassing appearance? On Saturdays, my father was always home by lunchtime. I heard the garage door slowly slide up the track. Then his car door opened and closed. Usually, we could tell what kind of mood he was in by how hard he slammed his car door. Today was an in-between kind of day, which was the most dangerous kind. The littlest thing could tip the scales either way, and today I had a feeling I knew which way that scale would tip.

My bedroom was above the garage. My father would always enter the house through the interior garage door. The first thing he would do was toss his keys onto the pool table that was in front of the entrance. He would then take off his shoes and belt and go to the bathroom to change and wash up. I could hear every single move. Then I listened as my mother began screeching. She even threw in a few tears for good measure. Oh, she sure knew the right buttons to push with my father to get the reaction she was looking for. I heard his heavy footsteps as he came bounding up the stairs. My bedroom door flew open and hit the doorstep so hard it made that funny farting sound that always cracked me up, except for today. I could see the fire in his eyes and the smoke puffing out of his ears. He froze and just stood there looking at me as if I were a piece of dog poo stuck on the bottom of his shoe. "What happened to you? Why do you look like that?" I was shaking like a tree in a windstorm. I shrugged because I knew that if I opened my mouth, nothing good would come out of it. With that look of disgust on his face, he spat, "Did you ask for this?" I shook my head, and despite my best efforts to hold them back, the tears were gushing from my eyes like waterfalls. My sister was sitting on her bed, and my father noticed her

hair. She was his favorite little princess. As she sat there, looking like a third son, her wide eyes locked on him, tears streaming down her cheeks like a silent plea. "What ... Why ..." he was speechless. He was clenching his jaw so tightly his lips disappeared into his mouth. Listening at the bottom of the staircase, my mother was not pleased with my father's reaction. This was not going how she had anticipated. She must have flown up the stairs to my room because she appeared like a vapor. She stood there in shock. Why was I still vertical, breathing, and not beaten into a pile of rubble? My father turned to her and redirected his fiery, raging eyes. "What did you do to my girls? Why would you do this? They look ugly and silly. Why? Why?" He looked at us with disgust, shook his head, and left the room. My mother stood there looking defeated and embarrassed. She thought for sure she had an ally to support her insanity. There was so much I wanted to say, but my sister, knowing me all too well, kept pinching me on the back to shut me up.

Today, as I stand in front of that same mirror and table ensemble in the entrance hall of my home, looking at my tangled mass of curls, waves, and frizz, I find myself waiting for my mother to walk in and tell me to do something with my hair. I would never again let her control what I do. Yet, every time I look in the mirror, her voice still echoes in my head. Now that she's gone, I'd give anything for her to be here, to criticize my fluffy, uncontrollable nest. Though I'm proud of letting my wild mane frizz out and do as it pleases, sometimes getting what you want doesn't bring the satisfaction you expect.

