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ENGL-3130-001

April 25, 2025

Sweeping Up Hair and Gossip: A Visit to My Grandma's Beauty Salon While I Was in
Elementary School

Before the beginning of 2025, before her legs began to fail her, my grandmother, Sheila, worked for about forty years as a hairstylist in a beauty shop in Greenville, Tennessee. I have grown my hair long so that it falls past my shoulders for three years now. In that time, not even my grandmother's barber scissors have touched my hair. It has been about two years since my last visit to her old shop, and I doubt I will go back. In December of 2024, my grandmother turned seventy-five years old, and her once-sturdy calves began to resemble grapes, all swollen and purple; they could no longer support the weight of her age. After nearly two weeks of unending persuasion from my mother—Christy—and me, my headstrong grandmother sold off her barber chair (her part of the shop) and began to rest her legs at home in retirement. Lately, thoughts and memories of her old shop have been stepping into my mind.

I used to get my hair cut every third Friday after school when I was seven years old and in the third grade. With the shell of my backpack, I trudged towards the shop's scarlet front door, my stiff arms swinging at my side, sleepy from a long day of memorizing multiplication tables and new vocabulary words. I had to knock because the door was too heavy for me to open it

alone, and my mom wanted me to practice manners and courtesy. After a few moments, I heard the creaking of the door and the ringing of the shopkeeper's bell. Some elderly man let me in while his wife was getting her hair done by one of my grandmother's colleagues. I thanked him, smiled, and rushed towards my grandmother's black barber's chair and jumped in it before she could even turn around.

My grandmother had the look of someone who had been in a struggle with a family of cats before I arrived. As I fidgeted in her chair, my grandmother turned to greet me, kissed my forehead, and wrapped a parachute-style barber cape around my neck while brushing silver, whisker-like hairs from her apron onto the tile floor. She never had to ask what cut or hairstyle I preferred. I sported the same crew haircut throughout all of elementary school. My hair was short and uniform on top, with the sides and back clipped even shorter. My grandmother just began to glide and snip with her scissors while she asked me about how school was that day. I told her that I had a terrible day at school, even though I didn't. When I told her that, she set her scissors on the counter, disappeared into a dark back room, and returned with a plastic bowl of crystallized candies wrapped in strawberry-patterned paper, which I dubbed "church candy." Church candy was my preferred form of tooth decay when I was a kid. It tasted like strawberries, as the wrapper suggests, and was sweet and a little tart. I thought I was clever for lying about having a bad day in exchange for a brief, sweet euphoria. Of course, I now realize I could have just asked.

As my grandmother sheared away the hairs on the back of my neck, I sat as still as I could, sucking on a piece of church candy, looking through the assortment of hair care supplies and equipment that filled the shabby counter. Although I was never asked to, I kept track of my

grandmother's supply of volumizing hairsprays and mint-scented shampoos while she trimmed my hair, leaving me with nothing to do but stare at whatever was nearby. I took it upon myself to ensure that she had everything she needed in case someone came in through the door with their hair on fire or had another type of hair emergency. *Scissors, shears, plastic guards, moisturizing shampoo, neck powder, hair oil, brushes—oh...uh-oh; she's out of protectant spray. I'll tell her. That was a nice catch. I probably just saved someone's life.*

While I wasn't reading the inscriptions on the potions displayed on the counter, I found myself gazing at the kittens featured in calendars. These calendars hung next to wooden plaques that were engraved with Christian passages and prayers, like Philippians 4:13: "I can do all this through him that gives me strength," all set against the backdrop of the room's partially sun-bleached, white wallpaper. I attempted to remain still by distracting myself, which felt like a job in and of itself. Despite my boredom, my sugar high made everything seem to vibrate with energy, including my body. *Maybe rereading that Philippians verse will give me the strength to refrain from scratching my nose.*

With a clunk, my grandmother placed her silver scissors on the counter and asked my mother to check that the hair on both sides of my head was the same length. The lengths were always the same, so she did not need to ask, but she did. Perhaps she simply enjoyed seeing her daughter smile and affirm her work. After being assured that my hair was neat, my grandmother plodded over to the small black wire shelves containing her cartons of Pinaud Clubman powder and fan-shaped neck dusters. She returned to my chair, placed her supplies on the counter, powdered and brushed my neck, and took off my barber cape, spilling trimmings all over the

rubber mat underneath it. I leapt from my chair and tightly hugged my grandmother to thank her. Then it was time for my sole assigned task: sweeping up. I stepped into the faintly illuminated supply closet, leaving a trail of blonde fuzz behind me. Dusty cobwebs hung from the walls, like antique tapestries. I snatched a cheap plastic dustpan and a splintery broom and fled, fearful of arachnids lurking in the darkness. When I returned, my mother was already sitting in the barber chair getting her ends trimmed, gossiping about my aunt Jenny. I began to sweep slowly around them while eavesdropping.

“Jenny spent \$200 on plushies at Walgreens yesterday,” my grandmother said, softly moving her scissors through the ends of my mother’s hair, her voice full of exhaustion.

My mom went wide-eyed. "\$200?" my mother gasped, clutching her chair's cushioned arms to keep from flinching. “How many more does she need?”

My grandma started to smile. "I have no idea; her room is already packed with clutter,” my grandma giggled. “It’s hard to walk through there. She should rent a dumpster and get rid of most of that junk."

My mom blew a strand of hair off her nose. "I think you should call the A&E Network and see if you can get her on an episode of *Hoarders*," my mom sighed. "She has to learn shame."

After sweeping up the last of my blonde hair from the floor and emptying the dustpan into a trashcan, I offered to sweep the rest of the beauty shop. I was always willing to pick up some more dirt off the ground and off of strangers. When people are cozy in a barber's chair, they

tend to spill secrets. Maybe it's due to the jet-like noises made by the dryers, the side table piled high with half-decade-old dusty issues of *Southern Living* and *People Magazine*, or the medical-like miasma of Barbicide on nearby shelves. Whatever the reason, barber chairs instill venom in tongues. And I love it. Peggy and Lucile, two of my favorite people to listen to, sat in dryer chairs, their heads covered by hole-riddled helmets. Those two reminded me of Waldorf and Statler from *The Muppets*: an elderly best-friend duo who cracked critical jokes and laughed heartily at themselves. I eavesdropped on them as they chatted in loose-fitting maxi dresses layered with wool coats, their beaded pocketbooks glowing in their laps.

"I went to Ester's house the other day to talk about who is coming over for Sunday dinner," Lucile explained, turning her head to face Peggy. "She never did say your name."

Peggy shrank back into her chair. "What?" Peggy gasped.

Lucile began to frown. "Y'all didn't have a falling out, did you?" Lucile asked, staring at the studded pins on Peggy's black dress.

Peggy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't think so, but I have to get invited somewhere," Peggy asserted, her face stiff with determination.

Lucile adjusted her striped sweater's neckline. "Well, you wouldn't want to be there anyway, because Ester will be cooking," Lucile chuckled and rested her hand on Peggy's shoulder.

Peggy gagged, tilted her head back, and closed her eyes. "Oh lord," Peggy grimaced. "Did you know she burned the turkey at Thanksgiving last year? I'm glad I'm not being invited."

My grandmother brushed the last hair off of my mother's shoulder and removed her cape with a satisfied smile. They exchanged a few more rumors about my grandmother's neighbors and shared knowing glances. Their conversation dwindled, and silence enveloped that corner of the room. My mother called for me as she neatly tied her red hair into a bun. I smiled at Peggy and Lucile as I walked away, clutching the worn handle of the pushing broom and the pliable dustpan. I returned the equipment to the storage closet, bolted to my grandmother, thanked her, and hugged her. Her firm embrace had left me with a jumble of red, silver, and blonde hair that fell from me like confetti. I said my goodbyes to my grandmother and walked out of the shop in celebration, excited to return next month, holding my mother's hand.

About the Author

The author was born and raised in East Tennessee and is currently working on an English undergraduate degree at a state university.