

Coupons

by Joanne Bell

It's going to be a disaster, Julie thought, tepid water trickling down the side of her face and into her ear. Soggy puffs of foam were just visible above her eyelids. Her gold earrings would be rusting. Rigid fingers prodded at her skull, languishing in slow strokes down the side of her head. Her neck was tilted painfully back on the ceramic rim, like a half-snapped branch.

'Is that ok for you?' an adolescent voice prompted, out of Julie's eye-line.

'It's fine.' she replied to the garish blue ceiling, an ingrained politeness adding 'Thanks.'

This, she thought, is what you get for coming somewhere with a coupon.

Each time Julie went to a new salon she'd judge them on differing intricacies: the smell of the conditioner; how hot the water was; the colour of the walls; music on the radio and if they had a jar of mints or sweets at the till. As a habit it could have developed from her mum, who nudged her from a young age into judging a restaurant on the quality of its napkins. So far today had been sloppy.

The girl urged her up from the sink, binding her hair in a half-stiff baby blue towel. It felt as if it might fall open at any moment and she anticipated the surprise, the unwelcome spring of fabric and wet hair on her face and neck. Her black cloak, the kind they always slink over you to catch falling hair, shuddered as she landed in the almost comfortable salon chair, the black of it becoming less black under the spot-lit station. The girl who shampooed her hair had a hot pink streak in her own short, dark bob, shaved at one side. She asked if Julie wanted a cup of tea and Julie nodded, softening her face and smoothing her palms down under her blacked-out knees. Julie hated the girl's hair. Annoyingly she was awed by her trendiness, a bold and purposeful aesthetic. It made her feel shabby - slatternly - by comparison. The girl was also vexingly young. What did it matter to her if she splashed a little water on someone's face, or left gloopy conditioner on their ears? Few people would say anything at all.

Facing the mirror meant there was nothing to look at but her own face, no hair floundering around the edges. Instead a white landing strip of skin stuck out awkwardly at the top. Beneath it her chin was too pointed. Her lips were thin and dry, a colour closer to beige than red. She thought it was how a child would draw a face on a paper plate - two run-of-the-mill eyes, one nose and one mouth - all of them floating in the middle of nothing. Sexless, alien and naked.

Two seats away a girl with a hedgehog stack of tin foils on her head was talking quietly on her phone. Next to her a blonde lady in her fifties was having her sleek new hairdo blow-dried. Julie caught the blonde lady's eye in the mirror, flushed and immediately looked away. Then she sat, still, simmering in discomfort. There were no magazines. The thrum of a hairdryer sent sporadic bursts of hot air on to her shoulder. It made her black cloak flutter like a murky, half-moving, puddle.

When the girl with the pink streak returned, her clumsy hand, painted with neon pink nails, bore Julie's cup of tea, complete with a half-melted chocolate digestive on the side. She smiled, putting the saucer on a glass shelf beside the mirror. It lingered there, an inch too far away for Julie to reach it.

Twenty minutes earlier Julie had been greeted by her stylist, a chubby girl called Chloe in her mid-twenties, wearing a loose black tunic over red tights. She had a smooth air of authority and a pretty face: smoky eyes; deep red lipstick and blusher that plumped out her skin. Her hair shocked Julie, it was platinum blonde with at least a month's worth of dark brown roots at the top. It had been pulled into a loose knot, high on her head, strands poking out like water from a sprinkler.

‘So what we doing today?’ Chloe had asked in her thick and local accent. It sounded like the Jeremy Kyle types Julie had seen having aggressive domestics in front of the discount supermarket. She kept her reply vague, something about layers and a trim. She never knew how to describe her fairly nondescript haircut. Plus it was good to appear trusting: Water Sprinkler Hair had the scissors.

‘Sweet. So I’ll take about this much off?’ Chloe concluded, her fingers showing a space the size of the hook on a hanger.

‘Great.’ she nodded. ‘Great.’

Julie angled forward for her cup of tea just as Chloe came back, munching on something. Her palms fell dejectedly into her lap again, although she smiled. The cheap black satin on top of her felt comforting; a thin curtain obscuring her movements.

‘Going out tonight?’ Chloe asked breezily as she tugged out the matted ends of Julie’s hair.

‘Yeah. Not sure where though. It’ll just be in town somewhere. A few drinks, maybe go dancing later.’

‘Better get you looking good then!’

‘How about yourself?’

‘Nah, I’m just going to stay in. My pals are all going out but I’m tired of it - the same people, same boring places. Everyone knows everyone, it drives me mental.’

‘This place can be like that.’ Julie murmured back, mildly stunned by her stylist’s forthrightness.

Chloe told a story about her last client, who used permanent dye to turn her hair a deep blue colour and wanted it magically blonde again. Julie listened, eyes fixed on the hands moving through her hair and the haphazard glint of scissors.

‘It’s like she had no idea that permanent dye was permanent and it’s not exactly easy to go from dark to light. The other way’s grand, I can make you as dark as you like. I was worried I’d need so much bleach her hair would fall out.’

Julie gave a slight laugh. In that second it felt almost wonderful to her, the freedom of smiling.

They kept chatting and Chloe worked on at her hair: measuring lengths by eye; squeezing wet sections; slashing their ends.

‘You from Edinburgh yourself?’ Chloe asked, breaking a peaceful lull.

‘No, I came here for uni.’ The words were reluctant, like an uncomfortable fact you have to admit to the doctor. ‘But you went to school here. Is your family still here?’

‘Yeah almost all of them. I stay with my Da. My ma’s on about moving to Spain with her bloke and most of the time I wish she’d just get off and leave us. She does everything for my brothers and their kids though. They’re way older than me and rely on her to do their washing - it’s ridiculous.’

‘You have nieces and nephews then?’

‘Yeah. Seventeen.’

‘Bloody hell!’

Chloe laughed. A soft warmth spread across her face.

‘Yup, big family. I think they all expected me tae be preggers before I left school but I’ve got a brain. Too young. Such a stupid thing to do.’

‘Hard to get out of once you’re in that. Your life isn’t your own.’

‘Tell me about it. Half of my friends have babies now - all that feeding and changing and no having any money to yourself. No thanks.’ She paused, scooping the top layer of Julie’s hair up and securing it with a clip. ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a buyer for a retail chain.’

'Ooooooh very glam.'

'Not really. It's sitting at a desk all day. How long have you been a hairdresser?'

'Seven years.'

Underneath her cloak Julie's shoulders softened.

Then conversation somehow became easier. They chatted about school and how they had both loved English. Chloe told her she unexpectedly achieved an A in her exam and Julie felt something twinge in her chest. It was a day she remembered clearly, the thin, white letter and the disappointment, her mum telling her it was ok, that all the best people failed a little. At times Chloe stopped cutting to finish a diatribe on the slow bus route; or her friends; or the girl in a night club who stood on her foot. Stationary, she reminded Julie of a glass figurine of a dancer her mum had kept in her living room cabinet. It was white and pink with a tiny flower painted at the base. There was a small crack on the back of her left arm, which they tried to hide by turning her sideways.

Soon, Chloe went back to talking about how much she disliked the people and places around her. Julie asked if she might live somewhere new.

'I dunno. My friend Courtney is going to Australia in January, she's wanting me to go with her but it's so expensive. And I don't wanna go there and be a hairdresser. I'm tired of it.'

Julie looked at her as she talked. Discontentment fell out of her like dust.

Chloe told her she'd thought about becoming a mechanic and watched Julie's face crinkle in surprise.

'Aye the guy in careers said I should go and do something like beauty. At least there's no grease on my hands.'

Julie grinned at the thought of this girl lying on her back underneath a car, face covered in oil. Her hands fidgeted playfully under thin black material. Precisely cut sheaths of hair scattered to the floor like feathers. The crinkle of foils, fake-posh phone voice of the girl who washed her hair and abrasive hum of hairdryers went on.

'See? So much better.' Chloe stated, pulling out a strand of hair and showing Julie clean ends.

'It feels great' Julie agreed, realising she has no idea if that was true; her hands were still bound under the cooling material on her knees, darkened further by the appearance of her own shadow.

She wanted it to be true. Her hair was being blown dry with professional brush, taken seriously. Why shouldn't it be? But her heart was beating quickly again. She looked only ahead, thinking about what would happen if she hated it, what this girl has done to her. The tired and fed up girl full of opinions. The girl who didn't want to do her hair. The girl who might talk about her too when she left. This is what you get for coming somewhere with a coupon. Don't expect too much for too little.

Julie thought about the lie. She wasn't going out later. She had no plans at all. Lately she'd been crying a lot. Looking in the mirror, or at the half-closed boxes in her kitchen, or at the photograph on her windowsill brought a winding kind of pain. When she got home from work she usually filled a hot water bottle and lay with it on her couch, listening to the old jazz records. Her Mum's favourite was *Stardust* by Nat King Cole. Or *What a Wonderful World*, the song they'd played at her Auntie's 60th birthday party. Her mum wore a blue silk dress that night, the one she'd told Julie about on the phone. It was daring. It made her look younger, fabric splaying out beneath her hips like long, slim flower petals. Julie thought she looked beautiful. Her skin was soft and healthy. The gold band on her finger shone as she moved, speaking, laughing, dancing. They'd taken it off her, after, saying it was a

stroke of luck to have kept it in one piece. The balding man behind the desk held it up with a dirty thumb and finger, offering it to Julie like some kind of prize.

The two records came from the house, after. Those, the jewellery and twenty seven old photographs, bound together with an elastic band. She had left all the ornaments, including the figurine. Susie might have taken them she supposed. Not that it mattered. Even the smell of floral washing powder and sweet talc, her smell, even it was already gone.

Half of her hair was dry now. It looked frizzy. Julie's eyes shimmered red. The back of her throat clogged and burnt with unwept tears. It is just hair she thought: just hair, just hair, just hair. This girl has done what I asked of her and she's not getting paid well for it. I'm sitting here like the queen. Judging her. Who am I to do that? Why do I have to think like this?

But I hate it. It's thick and frizzy like a bush and my fringe looks like it hasn't been changed at all. One side might be longer than the other. This is hopeless.

Her fingers formed fists underneath the cloak. Her mum would have told her to breathe. Her mum wasn't here. She'd tried to wear the ring once, on her hand. It looked old and tarnished and squeezed her flesh uncomfortably. The last time Julie had her hair cut was four days before they found her, twelve days before the funeral. It felt like a different, lighter kind of life.

'So I've just got to do your fringe now' Chloe said, 'I'll take a little off and if you want more just let me know.'

Julie released her hands, letting hot blood circulate. Chloe was in front of her, skilfully defining the front of her face. Her movements were neat and professional.

'There. What do you think?'

'It's great.'

'I'll just let you see the back' she waved a mirror slowly around the back of Julie's head. Her hair shone, straight and sleek.

'It looks lovely. So much healthier. Thank you.'

Chloe flushed, smiling. 'You've got lovely hair you know. Beautiful colour, lovely and thick. We're doing this deal again. I'll write down my name on a card for you.'

Julie nodded. Chloe helped her shed her black cloak; it slipped from her limbs like skin from fish. Her old red-dark hair floated to the floor.

The purple coat felt good as she put it on, cosy. It had been warmed by the radiator. The comfort reminded her. Julie felt herself hot, pressure pushing again from the inside out. Everything prickled: memories pulled half open.

Chloe gave her the card.

Julie thanked her and added a weak 'Have a nice day.'

'You too - enjoy your night out! Oh and hey, I really like your earrings. Angels right?'

Julie fingered the golden studs and nodded. 'Yeah. They were my mum's. I love them.'

Chloe nodded, smiling.

The small bell above the door jingled as she walked out.