

To the Hairstylist Who Always Knows What's Best for Me

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by Annie Marhefka

for Katie

You ask me what I feel like doing to my hair every time I take my spot in your chair, propping my feet on that metal bar and resting hands in my lap while you drape me with that black cape, gently securing it at the nape of my neck. Sometimes I know what I want and I tell you: *Let's cut it short!* or *Can you do that ombre thing you did a couple years ago again?* Other times I let you decide: *Got a new color you want to try on me?* or *How do you feel about bangs?*

You stretch out the ends of my hair, feel their texture between your fingers, lean in and inspect my roots, the silvery streaks creeping in at the base of my scalp. You never say no, *That won't work, you don't have the cheekbones for that* or *That color will wash you out*. You suggest, instead, *How about a soft highlight* or *Maybe a short bob instead?* You artfully steer me away from the bad ideas and towards the good decisions.

While you paint color onto sections of hair separated between foils, we chitchat about where we've traveled recently and the latest *Real Housewives* franchise drama, and that new docuseries you need to discuss ASAP. I sit, sipping on my mocha latte while you stand and snip, stand and snip, stand. I don't think I've ever seen you sit.

I'll never forget that day I came to you, my mother dying in the hospital, came to you because my mother told me to, told me on her deathbed I had to keep my appointment, that I couldn't cancel my hair appointment on behalf of her dying. I had wanted to fight her but those days, it was about comfort measures, and she had said the thought of me switching from blonde back to brunette comforted her. She had said *I always liked your hair darker. Please sweetie. Go.*

I had gone, I had gone to you, and I had wept in that chair as I told you my mother was dying and had asked me to go brunette and you said nothing as you dripped chemicals over my head, the pungency of the ammonia stinging in the air between us. You didn't try to say *I'm sure she'll get better*, like the others had, you just plastered my hair to the foils, soft swipes of your brush petting the crown of my head. You took longer shampooing my hair that day, I'm sure, knowing I was headed back to that hospital room when I left you. My neck slung back into the basin of the ceramic shampoo sink, your hands circulating suds into scalp, the warmth of the water engulfing me. How I wanted to lie there forever, neck resting on a towel, the roar of the spraying water muting everything else. How I wanted to stay there, where my mother was still alive, still dying but alive alive alive. How I knew that leaving meant she was closer to dying than when I had arrived.

And you, all these years later, you have never suggested that I go back to blonde.

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland, whose writing has been published by *Lunch Ticket*, *Fatal Flaw*, *Literary Mama*, *Reckon Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *HAD*, and others, and her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Annie is the Executive Director at Yellow Arrow Publishing, a Baltimore-based nonprofit supporting and empowering women-identifying writers. She has a degree in creative writing from Washington College. Follow Annie on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at anniemarhefka.com.

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