



Should Have Called the Psychic Hotline Today

Jan
Schmidt

Claire walked the six blocks from work to the hair salon. Inside, a world of chrome and mirrors and women, shelf after shelf of bottles of solutions and jars of potions, plastic tubes of secret hair treatments. Talk about an alien spaceship. Rows of high metal chairs in front of mirrors, rows of women waiting for their turn at re-creation, mirror after mirror after mirror. Everywhere reflections. No place Claire could turn.

A young woman with pink hair and an earring in her eyebrow and lower lip, as well as five or so in each ear, greeted her and motioned her to the waiting chair.

Claire climbed up and sat back on the squishy seat. The stylist examined her face, turning Claire's head as if she were a plastic mannequin, whirled Claire around on the chair and from the back, with slim, firm hands, she pushed and prodded Claire's scalp and broken ends. "When's the last time you had your hair cut professionally?"

Claire focused on the bottles and combs on the counter. "Never."

The hairdresser didn't smile. "It shows. The ends are awful. How do you cut? We need to take a lot off."

"That'd be okay. I'd like it short, but not too short. Not layered, but kind of staggered, with like wisps or something at the neck."

"I know what you're saying." She twirled Claire around in the chair again and pushed her back so that her neck rested on the rim of the sink. She lathered her hair and massaged her scalp while carrying on a conversation with the other hairdresser. Their words floated above her head in a colorful garble like a language she didn't understand. Her scalp tingled from the sturdy grip and the firm rubbing.

A child standing on tiptoe at the bathroom sink, eyes held tight against the soap, mom scrubbing her head, hands rough and strong, porcelain pressing in on her chest. A beautiful moment. An intimate moment. Touch, from one person to another.

The hairdresser held the hose over her and warm water poured over her scalp. Then she wrapped a white towel around Claire's head, just like her mother did, folded it tightly, and pulled her, swaddled like a baby, to an upright position.

Claire sat erect in the chair with her head bowed forward as the woman tussled her hair with the rough towel, then began to prod her scalp with her fingers, pulling strands of hair out to their full length, tisking under her breath. She bisected Claire's hair with a comb, then dissected half of her head into areas, holding the sections separate with hair clips, then started to snip. She pushed Claire's head forward to cut the back. Claire stared as small clumps of her own thin dyed-red hair fell lifeless into her lap and onto the floor. She gave herself up to this woman who seemed so in control. Good hands, firm hands. Hands that knew what to do, hands that would transform her.

"Sit still, now." The hairdresser poked her with the comb.

Claire focused on the gray of the apron over her shoulders, hanging in her lap, littered with snippets of what once grew on her head. Her videotape interview with Les, the super of their building. She wanted to figure a way to insert this one section into it, the one in which Les talked about her class at Columbia on race issues. A Rabbi in the same class always appeared empathetic to black issues. One day Les had said something in a very angry tone of voice during a discussion. The Rabbi had asked her why she was so angry, why black people were so angry. "My people lived through the Holocaust and they aren't that angry."

Les had answered: "Because, for us, this stuff is still going on. People talk about the Holocaust as an atrocity. But not about slavery. People say it's in the past, get over it. They romanticize it, make fucking *Gone With the Wind* movies about it, or deny it happened or still practice the mentality that made it possible."

Les said that later, the Rabbi had lit up. "Now I understand. Now I see." Something had passed between them.

The woman started up the hair dryer. Maybe put that towards the end of the videotape. Pushed Claire's head forward again, held strands of hair to dry between her fingers. It felt very short. The woman shut off the loud buzzing, ruffled her hair briskly, and swirled the chair back around to the mirror. "How do you like it?"

Claire gripped the plushy arm rests, her fingers digging in the soft leather. Felt tiny in the oversized salon chair. Peeked up over the bottles and vials on the counter to see their reverse image in the mirror and behind them, another image, a person, small and pale and weak. That was her? So scared and old? A tiny head with shards of hair sticking up this way and that? She crooked her elbow to touch her hair. The horror in the reflection also touched its hair. Horrible. Awful. A disaster. She should have known better. Never let down your guard.

In the mirror she saw the hairdresser's smooth young flawless skin, her nose, pierced, well-shaped and delicate, her hair cut to accent the pleasing shape of her skull. She knew what she was doing. Why did she do this to her? Claire wanted to dissolve, disappear. No one stirred. They were all focused on her.

Had to get out of there. But how? She couldn't get up and walk past all those people. They'd howl. They held the power: the blow dryers, the hot combs. Style and beauty. She was the joke, an invading insect. She had to retreat with as little stir as possible. They could wipe her out with a single look, crush her with the tiniest movement. She dug her fingers deeper into the leather. The room grew huge and infinite. Never trust anyone. It was always the same. It had always been that way. Never trust anyone. How could she have placed herself in this stranger's hands? What was the matter with her? When would she learn?

Just pay the bill and get out. Her voice too loud, squeaky. "It's fine, thanks." Slipped out of her chair as though she was normal, willed her stiff muscles to bend and release, her tightened jaw to relax. She handed the woman a five dollar tip without looking at her. The room elongated, there were now millions of women in chairs with other women standing next to them, hair dryers poised for action. Claire moved in a straight line along the rows of women, her own body grotesque and huge, the mirrors behind the women mocking her, shouting insults, insisting she look, see the horror.

Out on the street, the bitter cold shocked her. Worse with no hair on her head. Her scalp pricked in freezing goosebumps, her ears were exposed and tingling with ice. She couldn't look that bad, she was

being paranoid. She glanced in a window and mussed her hair a little, tried to view it as attractive, stylish, but only a deathly white old woman with burgundy tufts on top of a tiny head met her gaze. Panic. A monster-god from the other side of the mirror had entered her body.

She had to get home and get in bed. She walked quickly with her head down, the sidewalk whizzing by under her feet. As a kid she always walked that way, transfixed by the passing gray cement. Her mom, face contorted in controlled rage, would yank her by her arm, "Don't walk with your head down, you look like you're abused." Then Claire would follow her mother spellbound, unseeing, wrenched forward by her little arm. "You're not an abused child, stop acting like one."

She made her way to the subway and out again. She willed herself through the streets to home. If she could only get inside and never see another soul. She was almost home, only a block away. Safety. Oh no, there was Les.

Les strolled along side Claire, keys swinging. "Hey, you got your hair cut."

"Yeah." Claire felt Les's eyes examining her like a burning laser. Shame rushed through her veins.

"It looks great. Makes me want to touch it." She tousled Claire's hair. "It's soft. You look younger."

Claire shrunk back from her touch. "I looked so old before?"

"No, you know what I'm saying. It looks good." Les's attention shifted to a commotion in front of their building. People were gathering around someone on the ground. Les and Claire moved closer. A man's body was lying in a pool of blood on the sidewalk. His left leg was wrenched around in an uncomfortable looking position, the blood had seeped through his shirt from somewhere in the chest area.

Carlos, the drug dealer who had threatened her yesterday, moaning and wiggling on the cement, his face squinched up in agony and fear. All alone, surrounded by people. "Has anyone called 911?" Les asked.

"Yeah, Nail called. They should be here soon," Shotgun answered. Carlos groaned on the sidewalk.

"What happened?" Claire asked.

"Someone stabbed him up," Pookie said.

The sound of sirens cut off the talk. The police cars and emergency medical vehicles zoomed to a stop diagonally in the street. Claire stepped aside. The medics briefly examined Carlos, hooked him up to an IV, taking his pulse and heartbeats all in one swift unified movement. Then they put him on a stretcher and began to wheel him out into the street to the waiting ambulance. One attendant pushed from one side, the one on the other side held the IV unit while looking at

Carlos. As the gurney moved, a car drove into the lane in front of the ambulance and started to back into the space where they were wheeling Carlos, tail lights moving towards the head of the gurney. Total silence as the crowd slowly comprehended what was happening. Then everyone began shouting. "Backup. Stop. Look where you're going."

The car stopped just inches short of ramming into Carlos. The driver realized he'd almost backed into a man on a stretcher and shifted gears and sped away. Pookie, Shotgun, and Nail were silent for a moment. Then Pookie said, "Did you see that? The man sees a parking spot, don't care if a guy's been knifed, he found a spot."

Nail slapped his knee. "Hard to get a parking space, man. You got to run over someone gets in your way. You got to do it."

"I can't believe it. The man pulls in, nearly runs over Carlos. Carlos been knifed and then he gets run over, all in front of his own home. Now that's a bitch."

"Carlos should have called the psychic hotline today. Should have kept his ass in bed. Knifed and run over. Ohh, baby."

Claire peeked into the back of the ambulance. Carlos was lying amid strangers fiddling with instruments and monitors with blipping sounds and zigzagging lines. No friends had gotten in the ambulance with him. Reminded her of her giving birth, alone, no one to help except hired workers and their whirring, line-drawing machines. The driver shut the doors on her, got in the cab and drove away.

"He knew it was comin'," Pookie told someone when the cops had moved farther down the street. "He tried to rip off one of his suppliers."

"Why they didn't kill him?"

"It's his moms, they don't want to get in bad with her, she the heavy in the business."

Claire had enough. She pushed open the door and plodded up the steps, unable to avoid staring at the cigarette butts, the wet garbage covered in coffee grounds, the gum and the cockroaches scurrying around. She was panting trying to get up the four flights. She couldn't breathe and she could barely lift her legs. They were like lead again. ■

New York Stories

Notes on our contributors

MICHAEL STUART ALLEN is a New Yorker living, not unhappily, in exile in San Francisco. He has worked as a bookstore clerk, psychotherapist, cab driver and multimedia writer before he turned in desperation to fiction. His stories have been published in *The James White Review* and *Modern Words*. He has also written several essays on the life of the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan, most recently in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*.

ALEXIOS ANTYPAS is a poet and short story writer living with his wife and child in Rezekne, Latvia, where he teaches environmental studies at the University of Rezekne. His poems have appeared in *Northeast Corridor*, *The Bitter Oleander*, and other journals. This is his first published short story/fiction.

CHRISTINE BENVENUTO's short stories have appeared in *The Village Voice* and in literary magazines. She is completing a novel for which she was awarded a grant from the Vogelstein Foundation.

NICHOLAS BIRNS was born in 1965 in New York City, where, punctuated by periods in New Jersey and upstate New York, he has lived all his life. He teaches Australian and world literature at New School University and serves as Book Review Editor of *Antipodes*, *A North American Journal of Australian Literature*. He was Chair of a conference on Australian literature held in New York City at the CUNY Graduate Center in April 2000. He has published in many academic and general-interest journals at home and abroad.

PETER CAREY was born in 1943 in Bacchus March, Victoria, Australia. After living in Europe for several years and working in advertising in Sydney, he committed himself to becoming a full-time writer. Though his short stories published in the 1970's are widely acclaimed, he first attracted prominent notice with his novels *Bliss* (1981) and *Illywhacker* (1985), followed by *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) which won the Booker Prize and was later made into a feature film starring Ralph Fiennes and Cate Blanchett. His latest work, *Jack Maggs* (1998) won Australia's prestigious Miles Franklin Award. He is currently working on a novel about legendary Australian outlaw Ned Kelly.

NEAL DURANDO is from Fort Worth, Texas. He lives in Chicago.

PETER JOSYPH works concurrently as a writer, as a painter, and in theater and film as an actor/director. His books are *What One Man Said to Another: Talks With Richard Selzer*; and *The Wounded River*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1993. His stories, articles and reviews have appeared in *Chelsea*, *Salmagundi*, *The Southern Quarterly*, *The Arden*, *Antipodes*, *The Bloomsbury Review*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, *Newsday*, *Studies In Short Fiction*, and in three anthologies: *Sacred Violence; Myth, Legend, Dust*; and *The Four Way Reader #1*.

LINDA MANNHEIM spent the first seventeen years of her life in the north Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights and has since then tried to live in as many different places as possible. She is a Year 2000 recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship and teaches at the University of Miami.

STEPHANIE MOORE was the 1997 Fiction Grant winner, Marin Arts Council. Her stories will be forthcoming in *New Delta Review*, *Pacific Coast Journal*, *BBR* (UK), and recently appeared in *South Carolina Review*, *Florida Review*, *Writer's Voice*, *Sou'wester*, and *Prism* (Canada). In her other life, she's a dancer and lives on a houseboat.

GRACE PALEY published *Collected Stories* in 1994. Her collected essays, *Just As I Thought*, appeared in 1998 and her collected poems, *Begin Again*, in 1999. A long-time political activist, she also taught at Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia and Syracuse Universities.

JAN SCHMIDT writes fiction and fiction/memoir. The piece printed in this issue is an excerpt from her recently completed novel, *A Little Bit of Flavor*. In *Downtown*, she published a series of oral history interviews with hard-core, risky individuals and their brushes with salvation. Other short fiction has appeared in *Ikon* and *Salonika*. She is co-editor of *Venom Press* which publishes fiction and poetry chapbooks, and a Lower East Side quarterly, *Curare*. For the last two years she has been a participant in "Writing at the Crossroads," a workshop led by Eric Darton. She is currently writing a book-length fiction/memoir on her reunion with the son she gave up for adoption in 1969.

KEITH R. WILSON: If you want to know something about me, what I'll say is this: when I was nineteen I got married, bought land in western New York, pitched a tent on it, and built a house. They said I was crazy, but I had a book about carpentry. For twelve years I raised livestock, worked in vineyards, and read everything I could get my hands on. When we started having children our neighbors took up a collection to get us electricity. Later I ran a sawmill until I got tired of making little pieces of wood out of big pieces of wood. I stopped everything and went to college. My wife was so stunned she divorced me. Now I live in Rochester, New York with my second wife and my four children, who are all teenagers at once. I run an inner city mental health program, work part time in the emergency room, and write stories 'til late at night.