



Plastic Hairdos

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The car bumped hard off the high curb in front of Sue's Powder Puff. I shoved the gear into park without even bothering to break, and this caused my mother to lurch forward in the seat beside me. Her patent leather purse (it was the white one now which meant spring was here) tumbled to the floor. She glanced at me nervously and let out a tense little sigh. I knew she was afraid to speak and I liked the edge of power I had.

"Carol, are you coming in with me?" She reached down and picked up the purse. As usual, her hand was trembling.

The pink daisy clock inside Sue's read eight thirty-five. Only five minutes late for the appointment; you would have thought we were five hours late. The drive into town had seemed that long anyway. We had just finished Round One of "I Can't Take It Anymore" and both of us had retreated into silence until now.

"I said, are you coming in?"

I looked out my side window and didn't answer her. In the drugstore a cardboard Michael Landon was grinning at me from the Kodak film display. It felt good to be mean. It felt good to be madder than I really was. I hoped I was making her feel miserable.

"Well, I'll see you then in about two hours?"

Half a block down the street a faded Floyd's Feed Store sign squeaked back and forth on rusty chains. It was so easy to tune her out completely yet hear everything she said and did.

gunned the engine a little, maybe I could make her feel even more guilty. Maybe she would worry that I wouldn't come back to pick her up.

She got out of the station wagon and let the door swing shut by itself. She did that every time; the latch would click but not tight enough. And every time I would have to lean across the seat to open and reclose the door. Her pale green leather car coat was all rumpled in back from where she had been sitting on it. God, I hated that coat. Maybe because it looked so old-fashioned with the three big covered buttons down the front, like something out of the fifties. Maybe it was the pukey green color. And with it she always wore one of those filmy-like scarves knotted under her chin. Today it was the yellow one with the rose pattern in it. Her Saturday outfit even included a little lipstick, but she usually botched it up.

"...Baby I need your love'n..." I turned up the radio and decided to wait in the car for a while. Last year it had been such a big deal to get to drive to town once a week. My new drivers' license was like a freedom pass and I used it every chance I could get. Dad was glad to be off the hook as her chauffeur. But now these weekly hair appointments were a real drag. Up at eight o'clock and into town by eight-thirty every Saturday. Then trying to kill time for two hours while she was washed, clipped, curled, and sprayed. The end result wasn't even pretty either. It looked like plastic. In fact, I think all the ladies in Hartsville had plastic hairdos.

I rolled the window halfway down and slouched back in the seat. Five months. Only five more months and I could get away from this place and from her. Over in front of Floyd's I spied a blonde bouffant and it was heading my way. It was Flora Harris and I could tell that she was all worked up again in a flurry. Probably a new community cause that had something to do with the bundle of posters under her arm. I knew she would spot me and with Flora Harris that usually meant getting drafted for something.

"Hi Carol, isn't it absolutely a glorious day? I hope the rain holds off till at least noon. I just got these hospital bazaar posters from the printers and have to get them out by..."

Flora could only communicate if she was within two feet of you and then she yacked loud enough to be heard for two blocks. I rolled down my window a little more hoping this wouldn't take too long.

"...and it would really save me a lot of time if you wouldn't mind just dropping this one off at Dudley's on your way..."

"Yeah, sure." I slid the poster onto the back seat.
"...thanks so much. Oh say, congratulations on being accepted at Michigan State. I'll bet you're really getting excited. You know my oldest, Donny, had a three point eight six last...."

Oh God. Here we go again with the outstanding Harris clan achievements. If Donny Harris stubbed his toe his mother would make sure everyone in town heard about it.

"...changed his major and now he'll really get a good..."

I wasn't in the mood to listen to her gush through the window at me. Besides, everyone in town knew that Donny Harris was a spoiled jerk.

"...so nice of you to drive your mother into town. She seems better all the time. I hear the doctor says..."

Nice of me? Yeah, right. Nice of me. A nice daughter would do all the things they expect you to do. A nice daughter wouldn't complain about it. A nice daughter should just be thankful that her mother had survived the stroke. Bullshit.

"...better get the rest of these posted..."

Flora bustled into the drugstore. Why did they all have to think I was being so nice? I didn't really mind the cooking and stuff. At least Dad appreciated a decent meal. And it was better than having Mom fumble around in the kitchen. Jeez, she was so gross about some things. Like the way she'd clear the breakfast table and put all the scraps of toast and soggy cereal into Dad's cold coffee cup. Yuck. Why couldn't it just be dumped down the disposal one at a time? And besides that, she was so slow. No, I wasn't being nice.

The thing that got me most of all was her constant criticizing. Us three girls had gotten the routine down and had kept the house running for that whole year without her. Back then, not one of my fifth grade friends ever had to iron shirts or scrub a bathtub. But it had never been quite good enough for her. Even while recuperating she had found little things to bug us about. Joan had spent too much on groceries or Liz had left Windex streaks on the living room window. But they were both married now and it was just me, with only five months to go.

Sue's clock read nine-o-five. At least she had magazines so I decided to kill some time in the shop. It was a small room done in pink and lavender with a speckled tile floor. Setting lotion and hair spray stung my nostrils as I went in. There were three dryers along the far wall and under one dozed a stout dame of about sixty. Funny how a head full of rollers made her look so

strange, kind of like a female form of baldness. I knew it had to be old lady Patterson because she was the other Saturday eight-thirty. I plopped into the seat next to her and thumbed through *Mademoiselle*.

In the mirror behind my mother I caught Sue's reflection. She wasn't really much older than I was. And here she was stuck in a place where back-combing and polyester pantsuits were still in style.

"...and I was just telling your mother that this is my last week 'cause I'm seven months along now...."

I remembered her bulging tummy. She did look a little bigger than last week. Her last week! So now what was Mother planning to do? Sue's was the only beauty shop in Hartsville.

"...sister-in-law over in Emitsburg does a good job and she charges the same...."

Emitsburg! Oh Christ. Now she's going to expect me to cart her twenty miles to Emitsburg every week. Sue babbled on about plans for the baby as I watched her roll up Mom's hair. I could tell that the little ones on the left temple were in too tight by the way they pulled the skin back from her face. I remembered having my hair pulled back like that. It was before Mom had gotten sick. I had been in second grade and my hair had grown just long enough during the summer to wear pigtails for the first day of school. She had pulled it back tight in two rubber bands. I had been so excited about all my new school stuff and seeing my friends again. By ten o'clock my head had been throbbing and I had yanked the rubber bands out. Her eyes met mine from the pink swivel chair. They were moist and red. Good. I hoped the curlers hurt.

"There! All done. Why don't you have Carol get your dryer going while I check Mrs. Patterson." Sue lifted the roaring plastic bonnet next to me.

I still hadn't said a word to Mom since we had argued in the car and I knew it was really getting to her. I could pull off my silent treatment act anywhere we went and no one else ever knew. They all thought I was just shy and that I was being polite. But she knew. Funny how we had invented these little games to hurt each other. Like her game of "I Can't Take It Anymore" this morning.

"I've tried so hard to get along, but my nerves are just shot. Why do you kids treat me this way?"

I hadn't said anything. This was the part where I was supposed to feel sorry for her.

"...I try not to be a burden, but I just don't have the strength yet to..."

This was where I was supposed to feel guilty.

"Carol, why won't you at least talk to me? I can't take this anymore!"

End of Round One.

And on the way home Round Two would probably be "I Can't Help It I Can't Drive" or "You Hate Me Don't You."

I finished the article about "Is There Life After Divorce?" just as Mom was getting her final lacquer of hair spray. She struggled into the green coat and gently tied on the yellow scarf. I went out to start the car. Just once I wished we could get through this Saturday routine without arguing. But damned if I was going to give in.

She slid into the car carefully so she wouldn't bump her fresh hairdo, but she sat without straightening her coat again. Her eyes were dry and cleared now and I didn't feel quite as hostile as before. Maybe we could make it home before Round Two.

"Carol, I was sitting there thinking this morning..." Her voice was nervous but not as shaky as it usually was toward me.

"...since Sue is leaving now..."

Oh great. Here it comes. Emitsburg for next Saturday.

"...well, ahh, I was thinking that maybe I'll try rolling up my own hair next week. I mean, well, since you're leaving in September and all, I think I could probably take care of it myself now."

I looked over at her and a little flush had come into her cheeks.

"O.K." It came out flat and dry and that's all I said. I didn't want her to know that I was smiling inside.