

The Kindest Haircut

As I walked past the door of the American Hair Salon, I caught a glimpse of two ladies dressed in black. The sunlight reflecting off the glass made it difficult to see inside. For a moment, I considered walking past—surely, a place like this would be expensive. But my hair had grown quite long, and I needed to get it cut.

I hesitated, then turned back and tried to open the door. It didn't budge.

One of the ladies in black came and unlocked it. A gentle scent of lavender clung to her, like the kind you find in warm towels at fancy places. She was elderly, with Asian features and short but neatly styled hair. Her smile greeted me warmly, a gesture that made me feel at home, as though I were an old friend returning after years.

Inside, the salon wasn't anything fancy. A board on the wall listed the prices for different services. Thankfully, a haircut wasn't too expensive. Beside it stood a humble jacket stand, its wooden frame worn smooth by time. In the right-hand corner, a water filter hummed softly, its gentle buzz adding to the peaceful ambiance. A single potted plant in the corner seemed to add a touch of life to the otherwise quiet room. Soft jazz floated from the speakers above, filling the silence with a comforting rhythm.

"How are you doing today?" she asked as she closed the door behind me.

For a moment, I wanted to tell her—about the endless days, the strange loneliness of a city full of people, and the way time had been slipping through my fingers. But I settled for a simple "Good, thanks."

From the looks of it, the salon was just opening for the day. The combs and accessories were neatly arranged on a tray, and the floor was spotless—no stray hair in sight. The other lady, drying her damp hair with a blow dryer, must have drawn the short straw and had to clean the place before getting ready herself. She didn't look up from her task, and for a brief moment, it felt as though the salon, like the morning sun outside, was still shaking off its sleep.

I hung up my jacket and took a seat. The chair was a little too high; my feet barely touched the ground. But I didn't complain.

"You are my first customer today," she said, glancing at the bright morning sun outside. "Would you like a glass of water?"

Out of habit, I declined, but the dryness in my throat made me immediately regret it.

She studied my hair the way an artist sizes up a blank canvas—thoughtfully, with a quiet sense of purpose. "Very long," she said, not unkindly.

"I've been busy," I said, though the truth was I had just been lazy—trying out a shaggy look that, as people often pointed out, made me resemble a hobo.

She smiled and carefully took the scissors and comb from a sanitizer machine that looked like a microwave. Her hands were steady like a surgeon's but gentle as a feather. She worked with quiet precision, her fingers moving through my hair as if reading a familiar story. As she snipped away, I was reminded of my grandmother, who would run her fingers through my hair when I was a child. She, too, had a way of making you feel at home, even in silence.

The rhythmic snipping of the scissors mixed with the soft jazz, created a strange harmony that reminded me of how each haircut has always been more than just a trim. I suddenly thought of my usual barber back home, Junaid Bhai, who would juggle customers with an effortless rhythm—cutting one man's hair while applying a face mask to another, gossiping all the while. Funny how a haircut always brings back memories.

"Do you miss home?" she asked unexpectedly, as if she could hear my thoughts.

For a moment, I hesitated. It was a question I hadn't thought to ask myself lately. "A little," I admitted. "It's different here."

She nodded. "Yes. But even a place far from home can be kind to you, if you let it."

Meanwhile, the other lady, now done with her hair, busied herself with small tasks—perhaps just to look occupied on a slow morning. She wiped down a countertop, adjusted a comb, her movements unhurried, yet purposeful, as though content in the stillness.

A few stray strands of hair drifted onto my nose. Without a word, the lady took a brush and whisked them away, her expression unchanged. It seemed second nature to her. I muttered a sheepish "thank you," and she chuckled along with me.

When she finished, she pointed to the floor. "See how much hair you had? And now it's all gone."

I couldn't help but laugh at the simplicity of her remark. But something about it lingered.

I paid at the counter, and just as I was about to leave, she placed a wrapped candy beside the receipt. "A little sweet for the day," she said, her smile like a quiet promise of good things to come.

Outside, the wind brushed against my freshly cut hair, cool and light against my ears. I caught my reflection in the salon's glass—neat, lighter, as if I had shed an older version of myself.

The soft hum of jazz still drifted from the salon, a lullaby against the growing hum of the city around me. As I turned the corner, I glanced back. The old lady was already tidying up, moving with the same quiet grace, as if kindness was just another part of the job.

I unwrapped the candy and popped it into my mouth. The taste was familiar, though I couldn't quite place it. Perhaps something from long ago, from a place where kindness felt just as simple.