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On the first day of his holiday Sol awoke at the same hour he always did, showered, breakfasted and then set off to the newsagent's to collect a paper. On his return he spent about three minutes reading it before turning to the crossword. Sol had the sort of mind that could make short work of crossword puzzles. Generally he completed them on the bus to work before the journey was half over. He would then throw his newspaper dismissively on to the nearest empty seat and make a show of shaking his head in frustrated annoyance at how undemanding it had been. The other travellers would pretend not to notice, but once Sol had alighted at his workplace, they would circulate the discarded paper amongst themselves to learn Sol's solution to the clues that had left them stumped.

'Right!' said Sol, aloud, as people often do who live on their own. 'What have we got today. Let's see: "Sharp merchant is merchandise." Oh dear, is that the best they can do?'

And he wrote 'tart' in the appropriate place. He completed three other clues with equal facility but then – unprecedentedly – came to a halt. He lingered a minute on the clue, then passed on to the next, which was equally baffling. He knew well it was futile to linger more than a few seconds; you saw it right away or not at all. Clues did not (or should not) yield to time or patience. He looked for the name of the

compiler, but there wasn't one. That this was not the usual compiler was plain. And though he complained often enough that the puzzles were too easy, it still irritated him to have to get used to the ways of a new compiler.

He put down the newspaper and picked up a book, which he read for about half an hour. Then he tidied the flat and prepared an early lunch. After lunch, while in the bathroom, he caught his own reflection in the mirror. He moved his head from side to side, and said aloud:

'Yes, definitely getting a little shaggy. I'll go for a haircut. That'll occupy about two hours. Walk in the park afterwards, shopping, home, cook meal, television. Bed. Another day gone.' He felt satisfied and smiled at his reflection.

At the hairdressing salon he usually patronized the receptionist turned the pages of a leather-bound book, and with each turning leaf an appointment receded into the future.

'Sometime in the next half-hour would suit me well,' said Sol assertively.

The woman smiled, not certain if he was joking.

'You'll appreciate, I am a regular customer,' Sol added.

'We might be able to squeeze you in – in October?'

'I've something on in October, and I'm not sure I want to be squeezed at all, as you put it. As if I was a blackhead, or some irritating afterthought. But if I have to be squeezed in, I'd prefer tomorrow.'

She made a pretence of checking the book. 'Can't do tomorrow. Booked solid. *Sorry.*'

'I can usually get an appointment no bother.'

'Alas, we can't go on repeating the past endlessly,' replied the woman, sounding, Sol thought, like a New Age therapist. 'I don't like to turn customers away, but . . . you could always try somewhere else.'

While Sol was sure there must be other hairdressing shops

within the town he had no knowledge of their precise location, so he simply walked the streets looking about him. As he turned into the high street he could see men working at the roadside. A number of stones from the pavement had been removed from their customary position and lay around haphazardly. There was a dreadful screeching noise as one of the thick square slabs was cut with a high-speed rotating saw. A cloud of fine dust filled the air and settled on nearby cars and windows. Sol stood a moment, waiting for the cutting to be complete. But it was not and the workmen seemed unwilling to make concessions to passing pedestrians. So he turned left, into a side street, and walked along it a little way to the beginning of a service road that ran parallel to the High Street and between two rows of shops. He would use this, he thought, to bypass the bothersome roadworks, rejoining the High Street at a point beyond them.

There was some activity in this service road. At the back entrance of one of the shops boxes were being unloaded from a van and carried inside, while from another a figure emerged and deposited some empty cardboard boxes into an already overflowing skip. As Sol continued he was surprised to see – on what was after all a back alley – a shopfront, with a plate glass window, a sign and a door. He stopped to survey it. The sign read:

### ***Hairdresser***

To the point, unadorned, and mercifully devoid of silly puns.

Sol was puzzled. He was sure he had passed this way before but had never noticed any such shop. He attempted to squint between the gaps in the slatted blind but could not make out any of the features within. He hesitated, then pushed open the door. A bell jangled somewhere inside.

He stood in a small reception area. There was a doorway, opposite the one he had entered, filled with hanging strands of beads, alternately round and ovoid and set in a larger, repeating pattern of dark and light woods.

‘A nice touch,’ Sol thought. ‘So much better than plastic strips.’

He was about to examine it more closely when there was a dry rustling sound, as of a Latin percussive instrument, as the wooden curtain was swept aside to reveal a man of much the same age, height and build as Sol.

‘Hello,’ he said, with a hint of suspicion.

Sol stared. He then smiled and appeared embarrassed. ‘I, um . . .’

The man rested his arm against the door jamb waiting for Sol to finish.

‘Forgive me,’ said Sol. ‘I couldn’t help noticing—’

‘Yes?’

‘That we’re a little similar in appearance. Remarkably similar, actually, if we look past the hair and the clothes.’

The man studied Sol for a few seconds, then answered:

‘Don’t know. I have trouble remembering what I look like.’

‘Well, believe me, there’s definitely a resemblance. A marked resemblance.’

The man shrugged. ‘So what? How many ways can you arrange two ears, two eyes, a nose and a mouth.’

‘I think there’s more to it than that,’ began Sol. ‘For instance—’

‘What can we do for you anyway – don’t tell me! You want a haircut!’

‘Er, yes. I do, actually.’

The man smiled. ‘Of course. Now, let’s see . . .’ He opened the salon’s appointments book at the first page, glanced at it, and then at his watch. ‘Well! Talk about

luck! The only free slot we have today, and it's right now.'

'Fine. I'll take it.'

'No time like the present, eh?'

'Do you find that as well?' asked Sol.

'Name?'

Sol informed him.

'Hi. I'm Parlando.'

'Par-lando!?'

'Yes. *Parlando*. Why?'

'Oh, nothing. It's not a common name in these parts, that's all.'

'Okay, it's not my real name, if that's what you're driving at.'

'I wasn't—'

'Krebs. Krebs is my real name.'

'Ah! Yes. I can see why you changed it. Parlando seems much more appropriate for a man of your profession. I mean, if you'd elected to drive a steamroller for a living – say – then Krebs would be perfectly appropriate.'

'I toyed with Splendido.'

'Possibly a bit immodest,' offered Sol after some reflection. 'And people would expect a conjurer, or some tawdry showman. They'd phone the salon asking if you "do" children's parties. No, I think your decision was, again, the right one.'

'Names are so important. I can't understand why some people just accept the one they were given at birth, if it has nothing to do with what they are. It's just a random name. Mind you, Sol's not so bad.'

'Thank you.'

'Now would you like me to cut your hair?' asked Parlando, a touch impatiently, as if it had been Sol that introduced the digression.

'If you would be so kind, yes.'

Parlando held out his arm, ready to sweep aside the curtain, but then hesitated. He looked at Sol.

'Don't assume,' he said, 'just because you were able to get an appointment right away, that business is bad.'

'No, I won't.'

'It's actually very good. If you'd come here this time yesterday, I would have turned you away. But we had an unfortunate cancellation, and – you've not been here before, have you? I mean, you didn't get that haircut here.'

'No. I usually go . . . down the road.' Sol gestured vaguely.

'Yes. The less said about them the better.'

'Is it so bad? My hair?'

Parlando laughed sardonically. 'I think we can probably salvage something.' He reached out and ran his fingers through it. 'First thing is a good wash. And some conditioning. I've just the thing that'll put life back into it. After you.' And he indicated the curtained entrance.

'This is amazing,' exclaimed Sol, astonished at the space that opened up before him. 'It's much bigger than I imagined.' He looked back through the curtains to confirm just how narrow and modest was the frontage. He laughed. 'I mean—'

'How big did you think it would be?' asked the hairdresser. He appeared quite anxious to hear Sol's answer.

'What? Oh. Let me see. Say, 35 by 25 by 12,' replied Sol, who had a good head for figures.

'Feet?'

'Yes.'

Parlando surveyed the room. 'It's funny, most people think it should be about that big. And I can see what you're saying. There is a certain seemliness about the dimensions you suggested, a pleasing proportion. But I'll say to you what

I say to the others: if that was all the space I had to work in, I wouldn't last a week in this business.'

'Economies of scale,' said Sol, remembering a phrase from his secondary education.

As well as spacious, the salon was luxurious. There were thick carpets of burgundy and cream, soft music and sweet scents. There was lustrous chrome that caught the light and portrayed a distorted world in miniature. Floral displays were in abundance. At each of the many work bays there were soft, flexible chairs that could bend and rotate to match the dimensions of the quirkiest body. Sol complimented Parlando on the décor, and told him he was surprised that something so opulent should be found here in the town. Would it not all be more at home in the most exclusive area of a wealthy and cosmopolitan city?

Parlando chuckled. 'You're very kind. That's where we started out. But I don't know. Put it down to egalitarian principles. Dreary little provincial towns like this need a leaven for the lump. Of course, I still get customers from the city. They've followed us here. I can't turn them away. They're like old friends.' He stopped walking and looked at Sol. 'Perhaps in time you'll become an old friend too. It's really one big happy family here.' And he invited Sol to savour the harmony that pervaded the salon.

'I don't see why not. I'm so far very impressed. However, and excuse me for being so proletarian, but luxury has a price – and, well, how much will this haircut cost me?'

'I don't know, Sol. I don't impose a price structure on my customers. I ask them to put their own value on the service they receive. Wait until you've seen the end result and then pay us what you think it's worth. Here!' He pointed to a hatchway. 'We'll get fixed up with shampoo and conditioner.'

Once more Sol was amazed by what he saw. It was like

an old-fashioned pharmacy, with shelves lined with bottles of coloured liquid. There were benches where white-coated technicians sat blending liquids with beakers and measuring cylinders. There were even Bunsen burners, and bulbous flasks linked by lengths of glass and rubber.

‘All our customers have their own individual blends. If you continue to patronize us, we’ll get one for you too. Once we get to know your hair. We’ll start with something basic, though.’ He called over one of his staff. ‘Some Formula 23 for Sol, with a touch of 11; about eight parts to one.’

‘Very good,’ answered the technician.

‘Of course,’ continued Parlando, ‘we produce everything on the premises. That’s the only way you can be sure what you’re getting is good. Would you like to see? We’ve a few minutes. Your washing bay’s not quite ready.’

They went through a door next to the ‘pharmacy’ into a short corridor that led to a production plant where soap was produced in stainless-steel apparatus, along with all the other toiletries and lotions that were used in the salon. There were carboys of caustic potash and drums of coconut oil.

‘Alas, we can’t grow the coconuts locally. We import them from Sri Lanka. We find they’re the best. This is where we crush them.’ Parlando pointed to a press, which was in the process of being loaded. ‘We couldn’t get permission for an alkali plant, so we buy that in. Somewhere up north. But to be frank, alkali is alkali, however and wherever it’s made. It’s the organic stuff that’s so unpredictable. The perfumery’s next door, but we could perhaps leave that for another time. I think Rachel is now waiting to wash you.’

Sol lay in Washing Bay 7, on his back, almost horizontal, his neck resting in a groove on the rim of a heart-shaped sink. It was an odd position, he thought, and perhaps not altogether intended. The young woman named by Parlando as Rachel

appeared to struggle with the controls of the sophisticated chair so that he was pivoted and jolted this way and that, up and down, till finally he was flipped so vigorously that his whole body lost contact with his seat. Rachel had giggled and apologized. Sol suggested the sensitivity mechanism might be at fault. Sensing a risk of being catapulted across the room if the adjustments continued, he assured her that his present horizontal position was tolerably comfortable.

Rachel soaked his hair with warm water and then worked in a palmful of Formula. He enjoyed the feel of her fingertips moving back and forth over his scalp in a slow rotational motion. The shower was adjusted so that once more warm water flowed over his hair, and as it did so she coaxed out the suds with her hand.

‘Not too hot, is it?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘You know the good thing about this Formula? It really cleans without making a lot of suds.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, really,’ she replied, a defensive edge to her voice, as if he had doubted her statement. He was about to reassure her on this point when she continued:

‘You don’t need a lot of suds to get things clean. People think you do, but you don’t. It’s not the suds that do the cleaning. They’re just like, you know, air . . . mostly.’

‘Really!’ exclaimed Sol, modulating his inflexion to sound as if he had been ignorant of this fact and so now was grateful to have had his wonderment at the world increased.

She turned off the tap. ‘There, that’s you. Listen, I’ve got to leave you for a minute. I’ll be back. Don’t go away.’

Sol was not sure how long he lay there, but his neck grew increasingly uncomfortable where it rested in the ceramic groove, until it felt as if gripped by an irate schoolmaster. His face felt hot and there was a ringing in his inner ears. He

shifted his body a little this way, a little that, but the relief was only temporary. When still the woman did not return, he decided enough was enough. Awkwardly he sat up. He reached for a towel, rubbed his hair, then patted it into some sort of order with the palm of his hand.

He noticed a curved sheet of shoulder rubber on the table next to his chair and tried to reach it as little streams of water were already finding a way past the plastic cape and dampening his shirt collar. It was, he recalled, similar to the rubber shield he had been given to guard his genitals when last he was X-rayed.

'I'm not intending to breed in the foreseeable future,' he had joked to the woman who had conducted the procedure.

'It's just a precaution,' she had replied.

'Isn't it funny how rubber and precautions seem to go together?' Sol had said, attempting to push the conversation to a more intimate level. He liked women in clinical white coats.

Impatience now drew Sol back to the present situation. He reached out and touched a red-knobbed lever attached to the chair. There was a hydraulic 'shoosh' and he instantly withdrew his hand. Tentatively he gripped the lever once more and, with relatively few movements, adjusted the chair to the vertical position.

'It's really not so difficult,' said Sol to himself.

He removed the cape, then wiped away the water that was still running off his hair.

He drummed his fingers on the arm of the seat. More time passed, but Rachel the hair-washer did not return.

Sol's attention was then caught by the sound of flowing water from the next washing bay. He stood up, put his ear against the wall and listened for a few seconds. Then he noticed a forked stream slowly advancing underneath the partition. He shook his head and began to wonder

about the quality of a salon that had at first impressed him.

'It's no good having flash beaded curtains, and a perfumery,' he said to himself, 'if you don't get the damn basics right. Like plumbing, and staff that stay in one place.'

He looked up and down the corridor outside his bay, but there was no-one in sight. He knocked gently on the door to the next bay, then entered. There was a man lying back in the chair with his head resting on an overflowing sink. He lay quite still, seemingly oblivious to Sol's presence.

'Um, excuse me,' said Sol. 'I think I should tell you. Bit of a problem, I'd say.' He stepped forward and turned off the tap, although water continued to cascade from the basin. Sol stepped out into the corridor and called out:

'Hello?'

But once more no-one answered.

He re-entered the washing bay.

'What a mess! What's she thinking of?' continued Sol, directing his remark at the supine form. 'Wandering off. My washer disappeared too. It's really not – hello?'

There was no response.

Sol moved closer, peered at the face in the bowl and realized he was looking at a dead man.

He should have been horrified, but he was not. Yes, there was a little frisson of shock at the moment of realization, but mostly his reaction was one of puzzlement. Things like this shouldn't happen in a hairdressing salon. Plenty of people die under surgery and occasionally at the dentist, under anaesthesia. But at the hairdresser's? Surely not a venue generally associated with mortal hazards. People didn't send you cards saying 'Good luck with your haircut!', did they? Yet this unfortunate fellow had come to this salon for a routine haircut and one of the employees, so it seemed, had managed to drown him.

Sol heard hurrying footsteps. He turned to face the door just as Parlando burst in. He looked, aghast, at the corpse, then at Sol.

‘What the hell’s going on here?’ he shouted.

‘I think he’s—’

‘What have you done?’

‘Me? I’ve not . . . What have *I* done?’ replied Sol, his finger pointing at his own chest, an expression of pained innocence on his face.

Parlando looked more closely at the corpse. He picked up a limp wrist and felt for a pulse. ‘My God. He *is* dead!’ He looked accusingly at Sol.

‘Well, you don’t think I had anything to do with it – do you?’

‘I don’t see anyone else. What are you doing in here anyway? I told you Bay 7.’

‘I know. But I was left. I saw the water on the floor and came through.’

‘You came through. You didn’t come when you heard a man drowning, though!’

‘I didn’t hear anything.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous! Have you never seen a person drown?’

‘No.’

‘They don’t just lie there and suck in water, you know. They thrash and struggle like mad. Fight for breath.’

‘I didn’t hear anything, I tell you,’ replied Sol, growing angry.

‘Oh my God, I don’t need this. It’ll ruin us.’

‘What about the girls? Maybe they saw something?’

‘Who was attending to you?’

Sol reflected. ‘You said her name was Rachel.’

‘Rachel?’

‘Yes.’

*'Rachel?'*

*'Rachel!'*

'I see,' said Parlando wearily. 'It might interest you to know we've got three Rachels here.' He paused. 'One's on maternity leave, one left last week, and one phoned in sick this morning.'

Sol was about to point out that there were actually, then, only two Rachels working at the salon, when Parlando continued:

'She told you her name was Rachel?'

'No. You did.'

'And you believed her?'

Sol seemed bemused. 'Look here—'

But Parlando was looking over the body. He seemed calm once more. There was even compassion in his expression. Sol also fell silent and looked down at the body, and a certain solemnity crept into the moment.

'The thing is,' observed Parlando, 'whoever may have killed him – and I'm not saying who. It's not for me to go accusing customers. It may even have been an accident. Let's not rule that out.'

Sol nodded.

'But the thing is,' continued the hairdresser, 'it's too late for the most important individual in this drama. Him.' And he indicated the corpse with a movement of his head.

Sol could only agree. 'We'll need to call the police,' he suggested.

'I don't think so,' answered Parlando firmly, and almost before the words were out of Sol's mouth.

Sol looked at him quizzically. 'What do you mean? Of course we have—'

'I can deal with it, thank you.'

'But it's the law!'

'I said, *I* can deal with it.'

‘Well, I’ll call them, then.’

‘No! No police. Definitely not,’ said Parlando hotly. ‘Do you want to ruin me? I don’t want to spend the next twenty years in a stinking prison cell. Do you?’

‘I’ve not done anything! *I* didn’t kill him!’

‘You tell that to the police. I’m not sure they’ll believe you. It all looks a bit suspicious, doesn’t it?’

‘Bloody hell, this is ridiculous. I was reclining in my chair, all the time.’

‘Okay, I believe you.’

‘The girl will tell you—’

‘Rachel? Ah yes, Rachel. The girl who left last week, phoned in sick, and is having a baby.’

‘No, the girl who washed my hair.’

‘See how easy it is to get confused?’

‘I’m not confused.’

‘Aren’t you?’ Parlando put his arm around Sol’s shoulder. ‘Just trust me, okay? I know what I’m doing. Leave it to me. This thing will never have happened. All traces of the incident will be erased. It will be as if the clock were turned back.’ He pushed open the door of the bay and looked up and down the corridor outside. ‘Now let’s get this body shifted.’

The corpse was heavy and as they transported it down a narrow winding staircase the head banged on every step.

‘Christ sake!’ said Parlando. ‘Have some respect for the dead!’ He was at the front with one of the corpse’s legs under each arm. Sol, at the rear, had the harder task of trying to lift a dead weight upwards by the wrists. He was uneasy about handling dead flesh. He wasn’t particularly squeamish, but had read somewhere that – though living skin is a very effective bactericide – once death supervenes, microorganisms multiply rapidly. He had tried to support the weight with his hands under the torso, where at least there

was clothing between his hand and dead skin, but he could not keep a grip.

‘Rest a minute,’ said Sol. They had reached the bottom of the stairs, and that was a blessing. Strange chemical smells hung in the air. Sol could see into a room where flasks and other experimental apparatus bubbled away.

‘What’s all this, then?’ he asked.

‘Don’t trouble yourself,’ snapped Parlando. ‘Just things to do with the operation of a hairdressing salon. It’s not as simple as people imagine to run a place like this. Look!’ He threw open a door. ‘This is the laundry. Okay? No great mystery. There’s a lot of washing to do in a place this size.’

Sol looked into a room filled with noise, steam and stainless steel. It did indeed seem to be exactly what Parlando said.

‘Come on, let’s get the job done.’

‘I may decide not to make you my regular hairdresser,’ said Sol.

‘Suit yourself.’

‘Where’s it going?’

‘We can just drag it now. Here!’ He handed Sol a leg.

A man emerged from a room to Sol’s left, stepped over the corpse, and continued down the corridor.

‘Here! This room *here*,’ said Parlando, after they had dragged their load along several more corridors.

Inside, the room was tiled white and it was cool enough for the water vapour in their breath to condense.

Sol dropped the leg he was holding and stood transfixed. On a slab in front of him was a cadaver. A female, about thirty years old. Her head had been shaved.

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ said Parlando before Sol had a chance to say anything. ‘These things happen, all right?’

Sol looked at Parlando. ‘What the bloody hell’s going on here?’

'Look, this one's nothing to do with you. This time tomorrow it won't even be here.'

Sol looked over the body on the slab. To his shame, it crossed his mind that she had a nice figure. 'And did this one drown too?' he asked.

'I don't know, I'm not a pathologist. Now let's go, or do you want to stand here gawping at her all day?'

'No.'

'Good. Then help me lift this fellow on to the slab. Thank you.'

'What happens now?' asked Sol.

'Don't worry, we have people who'll take care of him. And her. It's quite complicated, preparing a body for burial. Or cremation, or whatever. You can't just sling it out the back and let the dogs eat it, you know.'

Minutes later the two men stood in the foyer.

'And remember,' warned Parlano. 'Not a word.' Looking at Sol's still-damp hair, he added

'You didn't get your cut, did you?'

'Just a wash.'

'Well, we'll skip the charge for that, in the circumstances.'

'Thank you.'

'Pleasure.' Parlano opened the door to the street and a bell rang somewhere close by.

They exchanged solemn nods, and Sol left for home.