



# PRINTER'S DEVIL REVIEW

Norah Piehl. *A Whole New Look.*  
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## A Whole New Look

**G**O AHEAD, HAVE A SEAT. I know this is probably a far cry from your regular beauty parlor. Sorry, your salon. I imagine that's in a suburban strip mall, or upstairs from one of those designer boutiques downtown. Bright lights, sharp edges. Lots of shiny black. Silver. Right?

I know that kind of place. It's got a name like...Ciao Bella. You've got your edgy, hot receptionist with her oversized earrings, her piercings and bad attitude, your eager young hair-washing girls who also sweep up the clippings. Anything for a tip. Then there's the gum-chewing hairdressers. Sorry, stylists. They do each others' hair on breaks, roll their eyes while they share stories about the male customers—sorry, clients—who come in once a week to get their hair cut, bitch about their wives, and check out their stylists' asses.

There's the few token male stylists, too, right, the kind who'd never get hired at your dad's barbershop. Straight guys with curly hair, ironic glasses, or too many tattoos. The gay guys tell stories about their old lady clients who insist on trying to set them up with their nieces and granddaughters, who just can't figure out why Stephen or Daniel's still single. Those guys stick around forever, holding court in their cashmere sweaters and silver hair, queens for life while dozens of lesser royals come and go. Because what don't you see at your salon? Old lady stylists, right? Even middle-aged ones are rare at this kind of joint. Forty's pushing it, though most of these ladies are pretty handy with a makeup—sorry, cosmetics—kit, it turns out. So it can be hard to tell.

So what happens to these women? Do they just spit out their gum, tell off their clients, and ride off into the sunset? Do they just fade away?

Some of them get married, sometimes even to those same creepy guys in the end. Some of them teach at beauty schools, inspiring a whole new generation of gum-chewers. Some of them move to small towns, open up shops on Main Street, start calling themselves beauticians again, remember how to do perms and blue rinses until they're blue hairs themselves.

But most of them end up just like me, setting up shop right here in my trailer, my beautician's chair the most expensive piece of furniture in the living room. Classy, huh?

Around here we trust lifelong customers, word of mouth, and tiny yellow pages ads to keep us going, hoarding tips in a jar for the tough times. Now and again I luck out. Last month Donna Keckeisen's daughter got married: six bridesmaids and two flower girls, plus the mother of the bride, all wanting updos. But you can't count on that every month. I learned that a long time ago.

That's why I was so glad to get the new gig at that Home for the Blind there down Highway 9. Two afternoons a week, a guaranteed paycheck no matter how many customers I see. Sure, the atmosphere leaves a lot to be desired—probably even less glamorous than this place. There's a convenience store for the residents on the first floor, near the foyer, with a chair and a portable sink over in one corner between the granola bars and the feminine hygiene products. Sometimes I stub my toe on the seams in the linoleum floor. For a while, I didn't even have a mirror. But then again, why would I really need one? And there are upsides, too. I have to bring my own boom box if I want music, but I get to pick all the tunes instead of leaving it up to Ian the hipster. I can wear whatever I want, and if my roots start to show a bit, who cares? Not my customers, that's for damn sure. To them, I'm the only game in town.

At the beginning, though, I wasn't always sure who my customer really was. Jeanne at the front desk who signs my check every other Friday? The smock-covered person whose hair I'm cutting? Or is the real customer the grandma or dad who perches on the green vinyl chair over by the bottled juices, telling me exactly what to do, down to the length of sideburns or the angle of a pageboy? "Sara's got a nasty cowlick at the nape of her neck," a well-meaning mother might tell me, like her gray-haired daughter is still in pigtails. "Don't cut it too short back there."

Or a gruff father might greet me by saying, "Number two clippers on the side and the number three on top," the same formula for his son's buzz cut since the boy was five. I try not to glare at them as I work, the way some of them keep up small talk with their relatives, ask them easy questions about activity hours and field trips, even while they're texting or checking sports scores the whole time. The same thing people do everywhere these days, I suppose, but there they don't even try to hide it. Why bother? And really, who am I to judge?

The first couple of shifts, I tried talking to the residents myself, but I kept making a mess of it. Once this youngish guy, Dylan, came in, soon after I started. Poor man looked like someone had been giving him the same bowl cut his entire life. His sister brought him in. You know the type: comes once a month to visit, after work and before cocktails with the girls. She was wearing a pencil skirt and insanely high heels, pacing around and checking her BlackBerry, stopping only to tell me what to do, as if in between her MBA courses and

Bikram yoga classes, she'd somehow managed to pick up her cosmetology license.

But at least we both agreed that her brother needed a change. She wanted bleached tips and lots of hair gel; I was going for floppy bangs, sort of a Tom Cruise look, especially with the mirrored sunglasses he liked to wear. But of course the sister won. Dylan wasn't going to speak up, that's for sure. Why should he trust me, anyway? And in the end, he did look pretty good. "Wait till your friends see you! They won't even recognize you," I said before I thought, but there was no taking it back. He didn't say much, just shook my hand and thanked me softly. But the sister—sheesh. She got all cold, as frosted and spiky as those tips on her brother's hair. "Most of his friends can't see anything at all," she hissed, striding away, as much as that tight skirt allowed her to stride, anyway.

Since, then, I've felt like I've had to learn a whole new way of talking to people. All the usual beauty shop questions are off-limits, meaningless, even. "Do you like the way that looks?" "Do you want your color the same as last time?" "Do you want your bangs cut a little shorter?" I can't even say, "You're going to look beautiful," because even if it might be true, they'd never know, you know? I don't want to remind them.

Anyway, I figured out pretty fast that it's these family members who call the shots. Or pay the bills, which pretty much amounts to the same thing. And a lot of them, maybe even most of them, seem to mean well. They've just forgotten that there's a difference between actually caring for someone and just keeping a weekly appointment. At least they do show up, make sure their relatives have clean clothes, enough food in the fridge, that they're getting their nails clipped and their hair done regularly. At least there's that, even if you have to ask yourself, sometimes, why they've stuck their sister or father in a Home for the Blind in the first place instead of helping them get a real apartment, a dog maybe, a bus pass and a library card like the blind people I used to see all the time in Chicago, striding down subway platforms and navigating the El better than I ever could.

You know, when I moved from Chicago downstate, I was surprised to learn that there even are such places anymore. The very notion seems like something out of the nineteenth century, the kind of place Mary Ingalls went to learn how to read Braille and play music and become a lady. Did you ever read those books? No? That's a shame, but I suppose you're too old now. Maybe you'll have a daughter someday, and you can read them to her.



I was one of those gum-chewing stylists for half my life, you know. Kept my eyebrows dagger-thin, my nails as long and shiny red as Mick's Ferrari. I even dyed my hair black for years—can you imagine? You've probably seen the photos of me, fresh out of high school,

the strawberry-blonde Chassell Strawberry Festival Queen with a tiny diamond already on my finger. But after my divorce, after I ran like hell from Jeremy and the U. P., and everything else, too, I just wanted to be everything that Strawberry Queen wasn't. I was ridiculously young, younger than you are now. But I'd already been married four years. I had left a toddler back in Michigan, for crying out loud. I felt ancient at twenty-two. So at the cosmetology school in Oshkosh, I learned everything I could from the other girls: their diet tips and all-black fashion sense, their bad attitudes, their talent for drawing the best gossip out of their clients or telling their own good stories, their habit of flirting with everyone, even guys they loathed.

I was a quick learner, too. Mick said later that he'd had his eye on me from the first day, that I'd flirted my way right through the interview. I never loathed Mick, of course; I just thought he was out of my league, too big city for me, I guess. Even though I looked nothing like the Strawberry Queen by then, I think I still only imagined myself with guys like the one I'd married, you know? Solid guys like Jeremy who drank Leinenkugel's from cans, who wore flannel shirts and Wranglers, who hunted all fall, snowmobiled all winter, and spent all summer fixing their snowmobiles and telling hunting stories. Mick got manicures, for Pete's sake. But he picked me, for whatever reason, out of all the beauty school graduates who came through Ciao Bella's front doors that spring. He offered me a job that first day and a date not long after.

We never lived together. Did you know that? Mick and I were together eighteen years, once I got over his cashmere sweaters and his Italian leather shoes. And even though I spent every weekend, pretty much, at his condo in Lake Point Tower, I still liked being able to wrap myself in a satin sheet, those nights, and stand in front of the picture windows on the sixty-first floor, looking down at Navy Pier from one side of the condo and on the other out toward Wrigleyville, where I had my very own studio apartment. I never really trusted myself not to fuck—oh, gosh, sorry—mess up this new thing, and I liked knowing I wouldn't have to start over again from nothing if I did.

Doing hair at Ciao Bella was nothing like I'd imagined back in beauty school. I'd fancied myself some kind of artiste, I think, but being a stylist, even at a swanky place on Michigan Avenue, is more like being a therapist or a diplomat, or even a pathological liar, than like being an artist. Eight times out of ten, clients didn't want even the slightest change. They cringed if you suggested toning down their brassy highlights or trimming more than half an inch off their frizzed-out split ends. Even the ones who came in looking for a makeover didn't trust me to make the right choices. A girl might come in with a photo of Winona Ryder torn out of the latest *Us Weekly* and demand to look just like her, even when I pointed out (diplomatically, of course) that even the cutest pixie cut wasn't going to erase her bright red corkscrew curls or her forty extra pounds. "The client is always right," Mick

would say, but he didn't have to watch their disappointment or settle for small tips when what they saw in the mirror didn't exactly live up to the glossy magazine photos.

The most dangerous were the women who came in and practically threw themselves at me, begging me for a whole new look. "Just do what you want," they'd beg. "I trust you." Sometimes they were girls who just walked in off the street on a whim, desperate for any available stylist. Sometimes they were my own regulars. But almost always, these women practically collapsed into my chair, looking defeated and hopeful at the same time. They'd just gotten dumped, or fired, or both, and they figured a new hairdo was the natural first step in their fresh start. But you know what? Even when they claimed to want to turn their future over to me entirely, even when they said "I trust you completely" and "You know best," they didn't mean it, not really. I'd suggest a layered shag, and they'd say they didn't do bangs; I'd propose a darker brown to suit their coloring, and they'd insist on staying blonde. Some of the other girls had a gift. They could make their own subtle suggestions seem like the client's own ideas. But I never got the knack, and I never figured out if my clients were scared of losing control or if they just couldn't let themselves trust me.

Can you blame them? Look at you—I bet you're just a little nervous sitting there, aren't you? Holding your breath a bit until you see what your new color looks like after it's dry, right? I sure don't blame them—or you, either. After everything, I hardly trust myself.



There are forty-six residents at the Home for the Blind, and after I'd been cutting hair there for a few months, I thought I had met them all, one way or another. But one Friday a couple weeks ago, as I was packing up my scissors and getting ready to go pick up my check, a young woman came into the convenience store. The first thing I noticed was that she was alone. That was unusual since, like I told you, most of the time they come in with a whole well-meaning entourage. I noticed her hair next, naturally, not only because of what I do but because, well, you'd have noticed it, too. She was petite, cute even, in her floral T-shirt and dark jeans, but you'd never have known it at first glance. Her blonde hair was long and heavy, like she hadn't had a trim in a year. Tangled. She'd had bangs once, but now, if she'd been sighted, she'd have had to peer through them, like the dusty lace curtains at your grandma's house. As it was, though, she didn't even seem to know. Just like she didn't know that her jeans had a big stain of what looked like mustard on the right thigh. She walked toward me slowly, tentative with her cane.

"Can I help you find something?" I asked her, figuring she was there to pick up Pringles or Band-Aids or whatever else people shopped for on a Friday afternoon just before closing.

"Are you the hair stylist?" she asked hopefully.

“For about another five minutes, I am,” I joked. “But I’ll be back on Tuesday.”

But she looked so disappointed, like she’d dragged herself down here for nothing after all, that I told her I could stay a few more minutes for a consultation, at least. I mean, really, where else did I have to be?

So I helped her into my chair, found out her name—Deena—and asked her what she wanted.

“That’s the problem,” Deena told me. “Somewhere I have a photo so I can show you what I want to look like, but I can’t find it anywhere.” I asked her if anyone could help her find it, and she started to cry. And then I figured it out—she didn’t have anyone at all. No busybody relatives, no bossy friends.

I asked her a few more questions, found out that the picture was in an old photo album but that Deena couldn’t remember which closet it was in, let alone which shelf. So I looked at my calendar for Tuesday—it was wide open—and penciled Deena in for the whole afternoon.

I met her right at her apartment that day—the first time I’d ventured beyond the lobby and the dining room into the residential corridors. Many of the doors in her hallway had been decorated with dried flower wreaths, cheerful wooden cutouts of hearts or birds, homemade cards with crayon drawings and greetings to “Nonny” or “Poppa.” But the door at A16 was bare except for the institutional sign that listed Deena’s name and room number in Braille and embossed lettering. I rang the doorbell and Deena answered in seconds. I wondered if she’d been waiting right behind the door for me to arrive.

Deena’s hair was a mess again, and although she’d changed clothes, her khaki pants still could have used a good ironing. None of the light fixtures in her apartment had working light bulbs. Jeanne had warned me to expect that, but I was still glad that a fair amount of sunlight flooded into the apartment after I opened the blinds on the picture window that overlooked the scent garden outside.

Deena pointed out her two closets—one near the front door, one in her small bedroom. She suggested that I start by looking through the front closet, and she asked if I’d like a cup of tea. I must have sounded surprised when I repeated her offer, because she laughed a little. “I’m not as helpless as all that,” she said. “Give me an electric kettle, and I’m a regular Julia Child.” I accepted, of course, and started looking for her photo album.

It’s weird, you know, digging through someone else’s closets, even if you have permission. It’s not as personal as the medicine cabinet, maybe, but it’s a lot more private than, say, a bookcase. Think about your closet at the dorm—I bet you have at least one thing in there that you’d rather not have anyone find.

I could tell that someone had helped Deena organize her closet at some point, maybe even done it for her. There was a logic there; Christmas ornaments and Halloween



decorations in adjacent bins with Braille labels, cleaning supplies in a tidy crate next to the vacuum cleaner, winter hats and mittens in a basket decorated with snowmen. And on a top shelf, almost too high for me to reach, was a box of mementos: some high school yearbooks, some homemade cassette tapes, and a photo album.

“I think I found it!” I called out to her. Deena was already sitting on the small sofa, two steaming mugs of tea on the coffee table in front of her. I sat down next to her. “Now what am I looking for?”

Deena was quiet for a moment, sipping her tea, so I picked up my cup to do the same but put it down just as quickly. A thin film of oily scum floated on top of my tea, and there were ancient coffee stains on the inside of the rim. “It’s my mom,” she said quietly. “There should be a picture of her holding me when I was a toddler. She’s wearing a green dress with pearl buttons. She’s laughing and trying to keep me from grabbing her big hoop earrings. We’re in front of a lilac bush, and I’m wearing a purple dress that’s the same color as the lilacs. It’s my Easter dress, I think. The sky is so blue in that photo. That’s how I imagine the sky is every day, and that’s how I always remember my mom.”

“So you weren’t always...” I asked hesitantly.

“No,” she said. “We were in a car accident when I was four. My mom died, and they say I had a lot of head trauma. My vision was just wonky for a couple of years, but eventually I went blind altogether. I spent a lot of time those two years looking at the pictures I had of my mom, trying to fix her in my memory. I can see the photo perfectly in my mind, but I wanted you to see it, too, so you’d know.”

By then I’d leafed through the album and found the photo. Sure enough, it was exactly as Deena had said. Her mother was beautiful, her short blonde hair golden in the spring sunshine; it curled softly around her face as she threw back her head and laughed.

“Tell me what you see,” Deena said. So I paged through the album, describing for Deena her yowling newborn photos, her naked baby bath photos, the endless parade of proud and joyful relatives holding the chubby, blonde little girl, catching her at the bottom of a steep playground slide, holding her steady on a carousel pony, clutching her on a plastic toboggan, crouching down with her to get a good look at a bed of daffodils. I didn’t know who any of these people were; I didn’t even know where the photos were taken. I described everyone’s big 80s hair and tight 80s jeans. We giggled at Deena’s tiny denim jackets and overalls and her mom’s Olivia Newton-John leotards.

“Help me look like her,” Deena said when we’d reached the end of the photo album, which didn’t go past Deena’s first day of first grade. “I know it won’t be the same, because of my eyes, but I thought that if I could imagine that I look like her, I might feel closer to her, you know?”



I swallowed hard, offered to take the teacups back to the kitchen before we headed back down to the convenience store. I tried not to gag when I saw the state of the kitchen. It seemed like Deena was trying—dishes were drying on a rack, and she'd recently used a sponge to wipe things down. But she'd missed a couple spots—one canned pea hung out in a corner of the countertop, the wall behind the stove showed splatter marks from what looked like a spaghetti sauce incident, and several of her "clean" utensils still showed stubborn traces of peanut butter or ice cream. I called out to her that I was just going to wash up our mugs real quick, which I did, and rewashed a bunch of her silverware at the same time. I even grabbed some Lysol out of that crate and gave the countertops a good once-over.

When I headed back to return the cleaning supplies to the closet, though, Deena was standing in the kitchen doorway. "You probably think I'm a mess, don't you?" she said with a sad little smile.

I stuttered a little, feeling clumsy, like I'd overstepped Deena's invitation, which I guess I had.

"Don't answer," Deena told me kindly. "I know I've let things go since my Aunt Justine died a few months ago. Myself most of all, you know?" She reached out her hand toward me, and, feeling the bottle of cleaning spray, took it out of my hand. "Aunt Justine was my mom's sister. She raised me after my mom died and my dad...just disappeared.

"When Aunt Justine was alive, we argued all the time. I wanted more independence, but she always wanted to baby me. When she sold her house and moved to the retirement home, she set me up here." Deena laughed a bit as she put the Lysol back into the closet. "Since she's been gone, I think part of me kept hoping she'd show back up here one of these days, clucking her tongue like she'd do and saying, 'See, Deena Bean, I always said you needed me.'" She shook her head. "I can't really remember what having a mother is like, but Aunt Justine's smothering was the closest thing I knew. Now I think it's time for something different."

I didn't say anything right away—I couldn't. Just grabbed the photo album from the sofa and squeezed Deena's hand. "You ready for your new look?" I asked. I hoped my hands wouldn't shake as badly as my voice did. I was terrified, you see.

Do you part your hair here? Oh, on the left side? I should really know these things.



Sheesh, listen to me ramble on about myself. I feel like I know so much about you, but I really don't know you at all. I don't know where you part your hair, don't even know if you have a boyfriend, for crying out loud. Don't worry—you don't need to tell me right



now. Although they might come and take away my license if I can't even get that piece of information out of you. Gossip is a beautician's unofficial stock-in-trade.

What's that? Oh. That. No, we aren't together any more. Mick's still up in Chicago, ruling the roost at Ciao Bella. He hasn't found anyone new yet, as far as I know, but he will soon. Men like him are never alone for long.

Why is it that the worst times are always all tangled up with the best memories? I remember we sat on the patio of my favorite Spanish restaurant, eating spicy shrimp and garlicky mushrooms on one of those endless, perfect July evenings. The patio was draped in ivy and flowers and the crowd was noisy, so we didn't see or hear the thunderstorm until it opened up right on top of us. We ran indoors, found a spot at the corner of the bar, laughing at how drenched we'd become in just a few seconds, how I'd forgotten my sweater outdoors but remembered to grab the pitcher of sangria. He kissed me, then—he tasted like garlic but so did I. "Marry me," he whispered into my wet hair.

I laughed, poured us another round—after eighteen years, who was he kidding? Marriage was for kids and dreamers, not old heartbreakers like us. But then I saw he was serious, and I shivered. The air conditioning was chilly on my damp skin. I told him I'd think about it. I told myself I was just imagining the disappointment in his eyes when I didn't answer right away.

We'd never even talked about marriage before, believe it or not. But then, there I was turning forty, and we both knew my days at Ciao Bella were numbered. I guess Mick figured if we got married, I'd have at least one kind of security.

For more than a month, this unanswered question lurked behind all our conversations. I thought about it constantly, but instead of talking to Mick about it, I did the worst thing possible: I talked to someone else.

He was in town for a convention, a walk-in, my last client on a Friday night. Mick had already left for the evening. He and I had had some tiny argument about something—I don't remember now—but I wasn't exactly eager to rush over to his condo after work. So when this guy, who was so handsome I pretended not to notice his wedding ring, offered to take me out for a drink after my shift, I agreed.

We strolled up Michigan Avenue to a bar at one of the big hotels. And the guy bought me expensive martinis and stroked my hand and listened to my drunken ramblings. The crazy part is that one of the last things I remember from the bar is blubbering into my drink as I went on and on to this total stranger about just how much I loved Mick. How much I loved him, but was just too scared.

Yep, I remember that, and I also remember following this guy upstairs—because of course this hotel was his hotel—and crying after because even a one-night stand with a handsome stranger wasn't helping me answer that question of Mick's.

Only it turned out it did. Because I had to tell Mick what I'd done, of course. I went over there first thing in the morning. I had heavy mascara rings under my eyes and my hair was a mess and I stank like gin. And when Mick saw me, he knew. And at first I thought he was going to forgive me, and I couldn't stand it. So I said, "See? You should have known better than to trust me. Look at me. I've fucked this up, and if you marry me, I'll just fuck it up again and again. That's just what I do." And Mick reached out his hand for me, for a second, before he dropped it and turned away. I rode down the elevator, all sixty-one floors, and walked over to Navy Pier. I rode the Ferris wheel all morning long, imagining all the times I'd looked down at people just like me from Mick's picture window, all those poor people turning in circles, thinking they had the best view in town when really, they couldn't see anything at all.

Sorry. I was imagining myself back there in Chicago for a minute. Do you want it blow-dried? Sure—we can keep talking after.



Oh, right. I was telling you about Deena—why again? It doesn't matter, I suppose.

So have you seen the Home for the Blind? That sounds like a setup for a joke, doesn't it? Sorry. Like I said, I have a tendency to stick my foot in it sometimes. Anyway, it's out on the edge of town. Come to think of it, it probably was around back in the *Little House on the Prairie* days, or not long after. The main building is this huge Victorian farmhouse—wraparound porches, gingerbread trim, the whole nine yards. But someone in the 1970s thought it would be a great idea to tack long, low residential wings on each side, slap on some aluminum siding and call it a day. If you look at just the main building, the place is really old-fashioned—gracious, even; but if you widen your view, it looks like a double-decker Metra train drove right through that lovely nineteenth century building.

Deena's apartment was way down at the end of one of those modern wings. We walked from there to the main building, where the convenience store and salon was, alongside the kitchen and dining room. Everything was a little shabby around the edges, and I wondered just how bad the cutbacks Jeanne had talked about were, or if they just didn't feel the need, you know, to keep up appearances.

When she got to my chair, Deena propped her cane against the counter and sat right down like she was one of my regulars. She reached back and pulled that long, heavy hair back into a ponytail, automatic, like any woman's done a million times before. "You sure you're ready for this?" I asked, half hoping she'd say no.

And then—I'd say she looked at me, but I know that's not right. She turned her face in my direction, though, and said, no hesitation, "Of course. I trust you completely."



How many times had I heard that line before, only to be second-guessed and shot down a million different ways? But Deena, she had no choice, really. And for the first time since graduating from beauty school, standing there with no one watching, I had no idea of even how to make the first cut.

So I opened the photo album to the photo of toddler Deena and her gorgeous mom, propped it up on my counter, and asked Deena to tell me about her. And as Deena talked—sharing some of her own distant memories, some stories learned from other relatives—I stopped worrying and just trusted my hands to do the right thing. I pulled over the portable sink and worked conditioner into that knotty hair until it was slippery smooth.

Deena's mom was named Marlene, and she had been a librarian until Deena was born. Deena was an only child, and Marlene spent every moment with her little girl, as if she had known their time together would be short. She worked at Deena's co-op nursery school, she taught toddler music classes, she ran a weekly story hour at the library. And she loved to throw parties and to play music and hold her baby daughter in her arms as she danced. And as Deena told me the patterns of a life, I found my own rhythm. Twist. Pin. Comb. Clip. Over and over again.

Long blonde strands fell on the floor as I worked almost automatically, focusing on Deena's words instead of my own fear. And finally, it was done. And there she was. Her shorter, lighter hair had sprung into silky waves framing her face, which was radiant and so much younger, all of a sudden. And even when she told me about her mother's long-ago death and about her aunt's recent passing, her teary eyes and sad face, haloed by those bright blonde curls, were absolutely beautiful.

"You're stunning," I told her, without thinking. "I wish you could see yourself."

"Yeah, me, too," she said very matter-of-factly. "Good thing there's nothing wrong with my mind's eye." After her hair was dry and I'd brushed the last clippings from the back of her neck, she reached back as if expecting to feel that heavy ponytail still there. When she reached through air and found her soft new curls instead, she smiled. "Perfect," she said. "I knew it would be." And she thanked me and hugged me and tucked her photo album under her arm and told me she'd be back to see me again. And we both laughed at that, and then I drove back here, more satisfied, freer than I could remember. And then, finally, I called you.



Most of the other stylists at Ciao Bella never even knew I had a daughter. Mick did, of course. His first wife had taken their two kids and moved to New Jersey. He'd had to watch them grow up through photographs and second-hand reports, so we had that in common.

Ciao Bella wasn't exactly the kind of place parents took their kids to get their first haircuts—we left that to the folks at Snippet's Mini-Cuts. But every once in a while, someone would bring in their daughter for a flower-girl updo or just some special birthday pampering. And I'd look at those little girls, hear them laugh and tell stories about seeing the dinosaurs at the Field Museum or the Thorne Rooms at the Art Institute and I'd feel sick. I'd have to go lie down in the break room with the lights off. Sometimes I'd even throw up. On the worst days, I'd just leave, cancel my appointments and take the El north to my studio apartment, hide out until Mick or my friend Angie showed up with hot cocoa and currant scones.

Because it's not true, you know, no matter what they've told you. I thought about it every single day, what I'd done. It's easy to blame everybody and everything but yourself. I used to wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been the prettiest girl on the U. P., if I'd gone to college in Ann Arbor instead of getting married at eighteen. But the simple truth is I was just so sad. I can't even explain it now. Sometimes Jeremy or my mom would have to wake me up every two hours to nurse the baby. I'd have just stayed wrapped up in bed for days on end, otherwise. Sometimes I did anyway, and they gave up and just made a bottle instead. When I did get out of bed, I'd just sit in the rocking chair wrapped in a bedspread, staring out at the snowdrifts that had worked their way halfway up the windows. I felt like I was being slowly buried alive.

Maybe if I hadn't been in tiny Chassell, maybe if I'd been smarter or older, maybe if Oprah had already started talking about finding your best life by then instead of just hauling her wagons of fat around on stage, I'd have figured out different ways to shovel us all out. But as it was, the only thing I could imagine doing was running away. From everything. Either that or dying right where I was.

I never blamed you, you know. I loved you, every minute I held you and all the minutes afterward. Things were just all twisted in my head. I thought that by leaving I'd rescue myself and also save you. I didn't trust myself not to turn you into someone as sad and miserable as I was. But I never blamed you. Or your dad. He's a good father, isn't he? I always knew he would be.

After he got done hating me, especially after he got remarried, Jeremy sent me photos every month, along with your drawings from your art classes, the stories you wrote about your trips to Disney World and Isle Royale. I saved every one. I used to imagine, sometimes, especially when you got into high school, that you and your girlfriends might head to Chicago for spring break or a band competition. I wondered what I'd do if you showed up to get your hair done at a big city salon. But you never did.

So after things with Mick and me went all wrong, when I was looking to leave Chicago

behind for a while and start over again, I headed to where I knew you were. I was so proud that my daughter was studying to be an art teacher—at the best state university in Illinois. Things haven't been perfect. They never have been. But sometimes people surprise you, and that makes it all worthwhile.

I surprised myself, calling you, finally. I don't know why it took me so long or why I finally felt ready last week, after all these years. And you surprised me by answering the phone in the first place and, honestly, by coming here today. But I'm so glad you did. This is just the beginning, don't you think? I mean, we have twenty years to catch up on, and we're not going to do that in one color and cut. I know that. But I've always said that there's no better place to get to know someone than right here. I've heard more stories—and told more of my own—standing around chairs just like this one. It's a start, anyway.

Okay, I think you're all set, hon. Just hold this mirror, let me turn you around so you can see the back. What do you think? Is it everything you'd hoped for? 