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*For Charlie Sheppard*





Mom's running around like a maniac, trying to make our living room look normal. Good luck with that. You can hang Walmart landscapes where the hairdo pictures go, drape nylon sheets over the dryers and cover the sinks with trays of pretzels, but a hairdressing salon is a hairdressing salon.

Monday to Saturday, Mom's "gals" — "Don't call them clients!" — gossip around the dinette set or watch TV from the dryer chairs. But today is Sunday and we're getting ready for company, which means I'm helping Dad drag the shag carpet up from his insurance office in the basement. It lives there 'cause "Try vacuuming hair off shag all day."

The carpet stinks worse than my principal's armpits. I'm not sure if it's from the damp concrete or Dad's sweaty feet; he takes off his shoes during panic attacks. Thank God for the fumes from Mom's rinse-sets, sprays and peppermint foot scrubs.

I lay out the carpet while Dad gets the Hide-A-Bed from the spare room so we can pretend we have a sofa.

Mom's at the sink mirrors, too busy fussing with her wig to notice. She's developed "alopecia," which is this thing where your hair falls out. Seeing as she's a hairdresser, my English teacher would call that irony. Me, I call it karma.

"Is my wig okay?"

"It's fine. People can hardly tell."

"But they *can* tell?"

"Only if they're looking."

Mom glares. "You!"

"So when are we getting Granny?"

"Granny's not coming," Dad says, wheeling in the Hide-A-Bed.

"But she's always here, Sunday dinner."

He squeezes it between the dryers. "Tonight's special. We don't want her upsetting Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess."

"Granny's not welcome because of *them*?"

Mom tugs at the back of her wig. "She'd be in that dirty plaid dress and black sweater. Lord knows how many times I've tried to wash them."

"If you're saying Granny stinks, she doesn't. Old people don't sweat."

"It's not only that," Dad says. "Who knows what she'd say?"

“The truth. Granny says what she thinks.”

“No, she *doesn't* think. That's the problem.” Dad fans a fashion magazine under his armpits.

“Enough about your granny,” Mom says. “Get dressed.”

“I'm hardly naked.”

“Your cousin won't be wearing jeans. If you'd kept your church clothes on, there wouldn't be a problem.”

“Except I'd be dead. Who even *has* to go to church in high school?”

“Quit dawdling,” Dad says.

“Dawdling? I'm hardly three.”

“Then stop acting like it.”

*Talk to my butt.* I stomp to my room.

“What's gotten into her lately?” he asks Mom as if I'm deaf. “Is it a phase?”

“Yeah. My *life* is a phase,” I toss over my shoulder and slam the door behind me. Last summer, they took my phone and grounded me for stuff I didn't even do. Now they're on about Granny all the time. And they wonder why I'm mad?

Tonight's going to be brutal. If Granny were here, we'd play footsie under the table when we were bored and try not to laugh. Without her, how will I cope? I give her a call. “Hi, Granny.”

“Pumpkin! I was just thinking about you.”

“I was thinking about you, too. Sorry I won’t be seeing you tonight.”

“You were going to see me?”

“Yeah, but I can’t now ‘cause of Mom and Dad. But I’ll drop by tomorrow like always.”

“Good. I’ll save you a seat on the glider.”

I smile. “Love you, Granny.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

We hang up and for a second I feel happy. Then I open my closet. *Sigh.*

I text my cousin Madi: “What you wearing?”

She doesn’t answer. She’s probably texting a million friends about the cool party last night I wasn’t invited to. I hope her thumbs fall off.

I put on this stupid Junior Miss outfit Mom got me. It makes me look like I’m in kindergarten only taller. At least it’s not one of Madi’s. Everyone at school knows I wear her hand-me-downs, especially when she says stuff like, “Was I ever that flat?”

Madi’s my best friend except I hate her. When we were little, she decided what toys I could play with. Now she decides who I can have as friends, which is nobody except the cool kids at her table in the caf. And they’re not even

friends. They don't invite me to their parties and I have to laugh along when Madi throws shade about my hand-me-downs and where I live.

*What kind of loser puts up with that?*

A loser like me, that's who. I'm so like my parents it makes me puke. 'Cause for the record, Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess coming here isn't "special." It's *unbelievable*, as in seeing Martians at Burger King unbelievable. My parents pretend it's 'cause Uncle Chad's so busy with his tractor dealership and Aunt Jess with her social committees. But the *real* reason is we live in a one-storey aluminum box near the highway and they live where the houses are two-storey brick and the streets have sidewalks.

I mean, Aunt Jess doesn't even drop by for Mom to do her hair. She and Madi go to Sylvie's over in Woodstock 'cause, "Sylvie isn't a hairdresser: she's a stylist." Also, she was born in Montreal and has this "Je ne sais quoui," which is about all the French Aunt Jess knows.

*Is Mom calling me?*

"Zoe, for the last time, get out here. They're almost at the steps."

I take my place at the door, five steps back from my parents. Dad's changed into the special herringbone suit he wears when he's asked to do the scripture reading. He

pats the jacket pocket where he keeps Grampa's lucky watch.

The Mackenzies knock. Mom counts to ten before opening the door, so they won't know she's been hovering at the window.

"Jess, Chad, Madi!" Mom says, like this is a pleasant surprise.

Apparently the Mackenzies didn't get the memo about tonight being special. They're wearing what Aunt Jess calls "leisure attire." Oh yeah, and Madi's in jeans. Designer, but still. She takes one look at my Junior Miss outfit and her eyes go, *Please tell me I never wore that. Ever.*

Mom hugs Aunt Jess like she's her long-lost sister, which is sort of true.

"You didn't need to go to all this trouble," Aunt Jess says, glancing at the nylon sheets on the hair dryers.

"No trouble," Mom says, as if Aunt Jess meant it.

"Oh, and what have you done with your hair?"

Mom blushes. "Just a little this and that."

Uncle Chad hands Dad a bottle of wine. "A little something for dinner." By which he means *their* dinner, since my family doesn't drink. Except for me: apparently I'm this raging alcoholic for sneaking half a beer at Madi's two years ago. Which She Gave Me.

All the same, Dad takes it 'cause, hey, it's Uncle Chad

and Aunt Jess. Mom offers them seats on the Hide-A-Bed; she and Dad sit on the sink chairs. This is when Madi and I used to go outside, only since high school she's allergic to being seen at our place — which, okay, so am I. Instead we go to my bedroom.

Madi closes the door and gives me a look. “You’re not going to get the money.”



## 2

I make a face: *Money? Hunh?*

Madi sighs like I'm simple. "So your family can buy the old Tip Top Tailors? So your mom can move her salon to Main Street? That's why we're here. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." I totally don't.

Madi rolls her eyes up into her head. I hope they stay there. "You are *such* a bad liar. So, okay: Your mom called my mom about us coming to dinner, and my mom said, 'How about a restaurant?' 'cause eating here? Really? But your mom said no, it had to be private, so she and your dad could ask *my* dad about a loan; and my mom was too embarrassed to say, 'What, are you *kidding?*'"

*Am I hearing this?*

"Anyway," Madi goes, "my dad tells Mom, 'If your dumb-ass sister and her idiot husband can't get a bank loan, they should put his mother in the county nursing home, move into *her* place, and sell their dump for cash.'"

"Your father wants to put Granny Bird in Greenview Haven?"

“Well, she’s hardly normal. Mom says she’s demented.”

“Aunt Jess said that in front of you?”

“It’s hardly a secret. Your grandmother’s a garbage picker.”

“She is not. Granny collects things other people don’t want.”

“Yeah. It’s called garbage.”

“Quit it. There’s nothing wrong with her.”

“To you, maybe. But ask our moms.”

“As if they’re something special.”

“Well, *mine* is.”

“Only ‘cause she married Uncle Chad. Granny’s way more special than her.”

“Oh, she’s special all right. Mom’s *so* humiliated: ‘Why did Carrie have to marry into the Birds? If only she hadn’t gotten in trouble.’ See, that’s the difference between us. *My* parents wanted me.”

“So did mine.”

“Maybe that’s what they tell you, but Mom knows different.” Madi checks her nails. “Speaking of being unwanted, I was trying to find a nice way to say this, but there *is* no nice way, so I’m just going to say it: stop talking to me at school, stop sitting at my table, and don’t visit my locker. Okay?”

I feel seasick. “Madi?”

“Sorry if that sounds harsh, but everyone thinks you’re a joke. Especially Katie and Caitlyn.”

“Katie and Caitlyn? They were nothing before they got tits.”

“Excuse! Me!” Madi says. “They look up to me. So stay away.”

“But we go all the way back to when we were little.”

“Don’t remind me.”

*Why am I pleading? Stop it. Stop!* “And what about last summer when your cousin Danny came to visit from Saskatoon? Who hid your condoms? Who hid your hash? Me. In my old Barbie Dreamhouse box, right where you told me. And when Mom and Dad found them, who got yelled at and grounded and lost her phone for two months? And I didn’t tell. Ever.”

“So what if you had? I’d have said you were lying and you’d have been in *more* trouble. You know it, too. Remember when we were on play dates and I’d pretend you hit me and your mom made you sit in the corner? Too funny.”

“You’re so unfair.”

“It is what it is.”

“You only say that ‘cause your dad says it and you think it sounds adult. Well, all it sounds like is, you’re a big suckhole who thinks I should eat your shit.”

Madi smiles like she’s Aunt Jess. “You’re so immature.

Speaking of which, Ricky Saunders is totally out of your league, so quit dreaming.”

“Who said I’m into Ricky Saunders?”

“Come on. The way you look at him over at the jocks’ table and drool when he comes by my locker with Dylan? Dylan’s my boyfriend, you know: it’s embarrassing. Gross.” She sits on my bed, pulls out her phone and texts.

“Get off my bed, Suckhole.”

Suckhole giggles. Apparently, some friend has said something hilarious. “Yeah, I told her,” she texts back.

“You think you can laugh about me in my own room?”

I grab for her phone.

“Stay back or I scream.”

“Dinner,” Mom calls from down the hall.

We squish round the dinette set. Uncle Chad has a beer gut and Aunt Jess is “well-upholstered” so it’s hard to move my elbows. Dad says grace. I want to scream.

For the next half-hour, Madi’s halo is so big I’m surprised her head doesn’t cave in. She sits up straight like I’m supposed to, says please and thank you, and even eats her turnip. Meanwhile, Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess make small talk about his tractors and her running the Fall Fair Committee.

Mom and Dad don’t say anything. They just nod like zombies on happy pills. I’ll bet Uncle Chad’s told them

about the loan. After dessert, he pushes back his chair and pats his belly like it's a baby.

"That was some meal, Carrie."

"Yes, it was just lovely, just lovely," Aunt Jess says and glances at her watch. "Why, look at the time."

It's not even eight o'clock, but who wants to hang around a funeral? We head to the door. Aunt Jess is all, "We really must do this more often," and Mom and Dad are all, "You betcha," only it looks like they're trying not to vomit.

Uncle Chad squeezes Dad's shoulder. "It is what it is."

"Oh well, we'll find a way," Dad says with his goofy shrug. "Where there's a will there's a way, right?"

Uncle Chad shoots him a look like he's terminal. "That's what they say."

The door closes.

Mom pulls a Kleenex out of her sleeve. Dad takes off his shoes.

I put my hands on my hips. "So when were you going to tell me?"

Mom dabs her eyes. "What?"

"About Tip Top Tailors. About moving the salon. I mean, excuse me, aren't I part of the family?"

"You eavesdropped?" Mom says.

"As a matter of fact, Madi told me. She also said Granny's demented, Dad's an idiot and you're a dumb-ass."

“How dare you talk to us like that?”

“I’m quoting.”

“Don’t tell tales about your cousin,” Dad says. “Madi’s well-behaved.”

“Like Satan is well-behaved.”

“Go to your room.”

“Not before you tell me what’s going to happen to Granny.”

Dad squeezes his toes. “Nothing’s going to happen to Granny.”

“It better not.” I go to my room all tough, but inside I can hardly breathe.