

COUNTING COUP

by

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Characters

JOYCE, late-40s to mid-50s, hair stylist and salon owner, friendly and matter-of-fact.

MAN, same age, a customer, heavy set and nondescript.

Time

Now.

Setting

Beauty salon. A coat rack and a swivel chair stand in front of a counter, which is under a wall mirror. The counter holds hair care tools and products, a photo in a frame, and a modest bowling trophy.

COUNTING COUP

A small beauty salon. JOYCE stands at the cash register, going over the day's receipts. A MAN enters through the front door, tentatively. He wears heavy glasses and a bulky overcoat over neat but baggy clothes.

MAN

Excuse me. Do you cut men's hair?

JOYCE

Sure, why not? Hair's hair and heads are heads, although tails are another matter entirely.

MAN

I just thought maybe...this being a beauty salon and all.

JOYCE

What--you don't want a pageboy?

MAN

No, a trim.

JOYCE

(Laughs warmly.)

Come on. Have a seat. I'll take care of you.

The MAN hangs up his coat. JOYCE leads him to a chair and spins it so that he faces the mirror.

JOYCE (CONT'D)

Cut off maybe an inch all around?

MAN

Sounds good.

JOYCE

Take your glasses?

The MAN gives them up.

MAN

Careful. I'm blind without them.

JOYCE

They'll be safe right here.

JOYCE sets the glasses down on the counter and covers the MAN with a cloth, velcro-ing it around his neck.

JOYCE begins with electric clippers, whose start-up snap and hum fades underneath as she goes to work...

JOYCE (CONT'D)

You're lucky I was still here. Slow day. I thought about shutting down early.

MAN

Business OK, I hope?

JOYCE

Good times, the place is packed, I barely have time to pee. Tough times, like now, people give each other shitty haircuts with the same dull scissors they use to clip coupons. But I can't complain.

MAN

You been at this location long?

JOYCE

Twenty-three years next month. Hired as a stylist and bought the place when the owner retired 15 years ago.

MAN

Nice.

(Beat, indicates the counter.)

You bowl? I see a trophy for a 300 game.

JOYCE

Three times a week. Two-thirteen average.

MAN

I'm impressed.

JOYCE

Also run a kids' league on Saturdays.

MAN

You're a teacher, then.

JOYCE

You could say. I like being around young people. It rubs off, young does.

MAN

That your family? In the photo there.

JOYCE

Yep. Larry and I been married 21 years. Josh and Amy are on their own and Russell's in high school--he's the artist in the family, a painter.

MAN

I see Josh is in the military.

JOYCE

Army, stationed in the Gulf.

MAN

That's tough.

JOYCE

What's worse is Amy going to join him when she's done training. Helicopter maintenance, can you believe it?

MAN

Times've changed.

JOYCE

That they have.

MAN

You worried about them being in the service?

JOYCE

Of course, even though neither one will be on patrol. But with Amy, I worry more about her fellow soldiers than the enemy. You hear so much about harassment.

MAN

She'll be fine. They're cracking down on that.

JOYCE

I'll crack some heads, anything like that happens to her.

JOYCE exchanges the clippers for thin, sharp shears and concentrates on the MAN's neck and around his ears, feathering the hair on the sides and back of his head...

JOYCE (CONT'D)

What about you--you from around here?

MAN

Just passing through. Sales rep. Medical stuff.

JOYCE

You get around a lot, then.

MAN

Everywhere east of the Mississippi.

JOYCE

I'd like to travel more. See the sights. Catch up with old friends.

(MORE)

JOYCE (CONT'D)

(Beat.)

Can I get your eyebrows?

MAN

Please.

(Beat, presently them to her attention.)

You keep up with people online, don't you?

JOYCE

Are you kidding? There's no privacy nowadays. Everything there is to know about anyone is out there, whether you want it or not. But I'm old-fashioned. Computer conversations are great and all, but to connect with someone, really connect, you have to visit with them in person. There's nothing like face to face in the flesh.

MAN

Makes sense. But I know a guy visits old friends even though he has no intention of reconnecting.

JOYCE

Huh? How's that work?

MAN

Well, you should know this guy has a rocky past. He didn't get into drink and drugs 'til after high school, so when he finally got around to it, he kind of went overboard. Couldn't handle getting high but couldn't stop. Short story is at some point he was awful to everybody he ever had anything to do with--crude, insulting, deceitful, mean--the works. A real first-class jerk. Nobody he met in his 20s ever wanted to see him again.

JOYCE

So he got what he deserved.

MAN

Oh, yeah. Thing is, he figured it out later and regretted it, but swore he'd leave his old friends in peace. Promised himself he wouldn't open old wounds by trying to reach out.

JOYCE

Good decision.

MAN

He never forgot the old crowd, though. Was always curious about what happened to them--who got married, stayed married, had families, careers, whatever. Like you said, some details he found online, but he wanted news from each of them first-hand and in person, even if only the briefest conversation.

JOYCE

But you said he didn't want to remind people what a jerk he'd been.

MAN

Right, so what he did was this: Completely changed his look--lost weight, shaved his head, got the Lasik surgery. Then he tracked down the people he used to know one by one and sort of "bumped into" them coincidentally like a stranger might. Talked to them a bit, learned something about their lives, then walked away and never looked back.

JOYCE

And they never recognized him.

MAN

Never.

JOYCE

That's weird--and slightly creepy.

JOYCE undoes the cloth around MAN's neck and proceeds to shave his hairline with foam and a straight razor.

MAN

Yeah, I suppose. But it was better than the alternative. The guy didn't consider it stalking because it was only the one time each and he never did or said anything hurtful or negative to anyone ever again.

JOYCE

And that was it, huh--"ghost in the night."

MAN

Well, it was meaningful to him, a sort of penance. That's why he always took souvenirs.

JOYCE

Souvenirs--like what?

MAN

Some small thing he could slip in his pocket when he left, a memento of his visit. He called it "counting *coup*" [koo].

JOYCE

No idea what that means.

MAN

It's from the Plains Indians, when they went into battle. The most honorable thing a warrior could do was to get close enough to an enemy to harm him but instead just touch him with a hand or a special *coup* stick. Or steal some possession, like the opponent's weapon or a horse.

JOYCE

They should play by those rules in the Middle East.

MAN

Yeah, no kidding. We can hope.

JOYCE

Well, sir, how's that look?

JOYCE turns the chair to the mirror, handing the MAN his glasses. The MAN appraises his haircut approvingly.

MAN

Great...You're good. So what do I owe you?

JOYCE

Twenty dollars.

JOYCE removes the protective cloth, and the MAN pays her, separately handing over a \$20 bill, then a \$5.

MAN

And a little something extra for staying late.

JOYCE

Aw, you don't have to.

The MAN dons his coat, prepares to go.

MAN

Maybe not, but I want to. We had a nice chat. Buy your son the artist some paint or something.

JOYCE

Well, then, thanks. You take care now.

The MAN waves to JOYCE over his shoulder as he leaves. Outside, he pauses to rub his head, enjoying the feel of his new haircut. Then he takes off his glasses and puts them in his coat. From a different pocket he extracts a metal object and holds it up to the streetlight. It's a pair of thin, sharp barber's shears. The MAN thoughtfully snaps the blades a few times in the air, enjoying the snick, snick, snick they make. Then he pockets the scissors and exits. Fade to black.

THE END