

## Scissor Happy

*Zurich Airport: 5.30 pm.* I'm wandering aimlessly round the departure area, trying to while away the three hours before my connection to Ankara, when I see it: an array of hardware to delight the heart of any would-be hijacker. Hunting daggers and pocket knives of all sizes, each with that reassuring Swiss Army logo – white cross on a red background. And, like the traditional red and white of a barber's shop, it's beckoning to me.

My Mizutani scissors are stashed away with the hold baggage and I'm missing them already. Heart thudding lightly, I walk in and am pounced on by a well-groomed shop assistant. I sense her disappointment when I pass over the *SwissChamp* with its *sixty-four individual components*, opting instead for the mid-range *Victorinox 91mm climber*. Tweezers, bottle opener, small blade, keyring, large blade. A reamer – whatever that is, and most importantly, a pair of fold-out scissors. I have no inkling these flimsy little things will be pressed into service.

\*

*Flight THY59, Zurich to Ankara, 11.30 pm:* like some religious rite observed only by a faithful few, the safety demonstration draws to a close. And that's when I notice you.

I can tell a lot from the back of a person's head. Most people never see their own, or only fleetingly, at the hairdressers. A perfunctory glance, then the mirror is whisked away.

As I examine your tresses in the dim light I can see that, roughly five weeks ago, somebody made a terrible mistake with a pair of blunt shears.

\*

*12.00 pm:* Drinks are offered and small hazelnut pastries distributed. The plane is about a tenth full. When you sweetly asked if it was OK to fully recline your backrest, I slipped onto

the adjacent empty seat. Actually, if I'd stayed put, you'd almost be in my lap. So now, I'm right next to your reclining, sleeping head, your hair fanned out on your travel pillow. The air vent is open and your feathery tresses move slightly. For the first time in a long while I feel a real thrill bubbling up inside.

Because I've decided I'm going to cut your hair.

Why? Why on earth would I want to give you a surprise haircut like this? And yet I feel sure you'll be pleased – how could you not be? Hair styled by Michel. One-time owner of a chain of exclusive salons from Harlesden to Watford. *Genius* was the word used at the time, and I never denied it. It spurred me on to higher things. I strain my eyes to inspect the damage. Did you cut it yourself? Surely *trimming* would be a more accurate description!

I look around me swiftly. Most people are sleeping, or comatose. For a moment it pains me that nobody will ever know who it was that liberated you from this coiffurial disaster, but anonymity is key – especially for someone with my record.

'If they catch you they'll section you all over again!' Bonita, my Case Officer, would say. But even as I hear her voice, I am mentally dividing your scalp into sections. It's how we organise things, to match up the lengths. I work out that by clambering from one seat to another. I'll be able to access each side.

\*

*1.10 am:* The interior of the plane is quiet as a ghost ship.

Ready? I feel a stab of danger, or excitement. Am I really going to do this?

Let me say, first of all, you have a glorious head of hair. If I can just allow myself to be poetic for a moment, it's like a dark flowing stream – fine and full-bodied. That's why it hurts me to see how it's been hacked about. My fingers are literally itching to work through your layers.

I recognise the signs. We talked about it often enough during those interminable CBT sessions. That sensation of a light switching on in my brain. My system flooding with cortisol. I'm supposed to count down from a hundred. And did I mention? I'm supposed to be on meds, but don't worry! I never felt better.

'How mad does this make me – on a scale of one to ten?' I once asked Bonita as I applied her foils, at the same time squinting at my file which was open on her desk.

'Michel – I wouldn't describe you as mad,' she said, 'you're just – scissor-happy.'

\*

Right – to work! A quick scan of my fellow passengers, then open out the scissors on the brand-new Swiss army knife. Or try to! I should have paid more attention during those two weeks I spent in the cub-scouts. Screwdriver, bottle opener, multi-purpose hook ... this must be a wire-stripper. Everything but the accursed scissors has popped out smoothly and easily. Breathe, counting down, one hundred ... ninety-nine, ninety-eight. Where the hell are those scissors? Aha, here they are, on the other side next to some ... ouch! very sharp blades. And breathe – ninety-five, ninety-four ... I've chipped a nail, but I manage to retract everything without bloodshed.

If anyone sees me brandishing this, they'll have me trussed up and tased within five minutes. Nobody here is going to believe I'm trying to correct a haircut – to do some good in a world of bad hair days.

\*

I was never happier than when I started out aged fifteen, sweeping up mountains of hair-cuttings at Antonioni's Salon. Long hours unclogging basins, spraying toxic substances into nests of stiffened curls. Heady fumes of ammonia, peroxide and damp hair. Then – under strict supervision, my first cut! It was like coming home. I was on a fast track to stardom.

Customers would insist on *Michel*, which caused not a little jealousy. Eventually, I struck out on my own and Michelangelo's was born.

\*

I plan to start from just above your ear, avoiding your in-ear headphones. I manage to make a couple of snips – ah! That's got it: all I have to do is even it up. It won't be perfect, but I can already see the improvement.

Oh-oh, I've taken off a bit more than I meant to.

There's not enough light. Which is both a good and a bad thing. Nobody can make out what I'm doing, but it means I can't be as precise as I'd like.

\*

The first time Archie came to my salon he wanted a cut, and a colour – something I secretly abhor in men. But I never turn away business and so I mixed up the peculiar shade of nicotine he requested to cover his greying hair. Three open buttons on his shirt revealed a tan-bed torso. If he wasn't wearing a medallion, he should have been.

By this time I was well-established. Local football stars, the Lady Mayoress – everybody came to Michelangelo's where my scissors held sway.

'You know something Michel?' said Archie, one day as I tackled his burgeoning sideburns, 'you're not realising your assets. You could be making a lot more –'

'I see sir. Could you tilt your head a bit this way please?'

The first time Archie talked about his *vision*, I remained detached. But he came back every two weeks, and each time he would drip-feed me a more magnificent version of a scenario with myself enthroned at the head of a hairdressing empire.

One can only take so much flattery without cracking. Strangely, after several months of this, Archie had begun to seem less grotesque. The high-tar shade of his hair no longer offended me. It looked natural, pleasing almost.

Soon we were driving around scouting locations. Archie introduced me to a designer named Ned, whose vision for Michelangelo's was – if this were possible, even camper than the Sistine Chapel in Las Vegas.

'How much is all this going to cost me?' I asked Archie.

'Michel – genius is not enough. You've got to have vision!' he said, as he flourished some papers for me to sign, *here, here and here.*

My bankruptcy, when it finally arrived, felt like a relief. All would have gone smoothly, had it not been for the judge in charge of the hearing. Whatever they said at the time, I did not savage her with a pair of scissors! It was just that her haircut, a kind of mullet-nouveau, was all wrong. I tried to explain that a loose bob would help to soften her face, but she was having none of it. She shrieked as if I were a demon barber! I was manhandled into an unmarked white van and put in a cell.

\*

*1.50 am.* There's some crackly announcement on the loudspeaker but I scarcely hear it. I'm hoping, praying, you will turn your head so I can even up what I've done.

Christ! A flight attendant is coming over. She starts saying something to me, smiling. In my terror, her voice sounds underwater.

'No thanks,' I hide behind my hairdressing magazine. *Just go away!* I think, then realise she's telling me to buckle up. *Turbulence.*

But she leaves you, Rapunzel, delicately snoring. You must have taken something because you're out for the count.

Suddenly, without warning, you swivel your head to the other side and snuggle down into your travel pillow. Dammit! I can see that I've completely missed a section. I stifle a groan – what have I done?

\*

I was lucky to have been sent to Lockwood after getting sectioned. During the years that followed I had many appraisals, most of which stated that I posed no danger to the public whatsoever. But the truth was, I didn't want to get out into the world again. Archie had run off with my money. My beautiful flagship salon was now a Betfred, and the fittings had been bought up by a rival. That would hurt the most, having to walk past Cl'haire, seeing erstwhile clients sitting beneath my state-of-the-art drier hoods reading Hello! magazine. At Michelangelo's we always had the latest edition of Vogue.

At Lockwood I began, informally, to snip the hair of my fellow patients. News of a *patient waving scissors around* reached the Head of Security. When I managed to persuade her to ditch the chignon, she looked ten years younger – and incidentally, less scary. She wore her authority lightly. That's what a good haircut can do.

They let me send away for better equipment. The Mizutani shears were pricey and I had explain in some detail about the importance of a clean cut. As my life blossomed, I began to reduce my dosage. The assistants who brought round the medication were mostly clients of mine. We bandied jokes as I deftly swapped out placebos for my pills.

Lockwood! I'd give anything to be back there now, joking with my friend Soran, the hospital porter. A Turkish barber by trade, he was the only person I allowed near my own hair. One day, Soran begged me to help him: it was his sister Leyla. She had nobody to do her wedding hair – having fired three hairdressers, with the fourth on the way out as we spoke.

'You alone, would I entrust with this task.'

I agreed and Soran fixed me up with an all-day pass. It felt strange to be leaving my home of so many years.

I spent a wonderful day in Leyla's bubbly company. She fed me pastries as I worked on her luxuriant black mane, fixing ringlets and spraying them into a soft sculpture. She was entranced.

‘Michel, you shouldn’t be locked up! Hiding your talent – it’s a sin!’

I smiled and nodded. Leyla would never understand that Lockwood, far from being a prison, was my refuge. I hoped that in the excitement of the wedding celebrations she would forget all about it. No such luck.

She began to visit me regularly, bringing more pastries.

‘In Ankara you could start a new life! Our family will welcome you with open arms. They will appreciate – your genius!’

*Genius*: that word again. I could feel myself respond to it, melting into its light. It’s not arrogance – more of an inner knowing: *this is what I was put on earth for – to cut hair*.

Leyla’s sense of the dramatic required that I make an exciting getaway, hiding in a laundry cart or shinning down a drainpipe. Soran gave me a wink whilst recounting my ‘escape’ as we screeched away in her Mercedes van.

The truth was I had simply walked out of the gate. As far as I know, nobody came after me.

I would miss Lockwood far more than it would miss me.

\*

As the plane begins its bumpy descent. People are shuddering awake. You take a sip of water as you bring your seat upright. *Please, please don’t look in the mirror*, I silently beg you. I have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I stumble off the plane, almost tripping down the metal staircase.

The baggage seems to be taking years! I feel my stomach cramping as I watch the motionless belt. You notice me glancing over at you, and in that lightning way we interpret facial expressions, perhaps you’re already thinking: *that friendly man who sat behind me, who said it would be OK to recline my seat so I could crash out*. I check my phone. You can’t

see that it's switched off, and that anyway I don't have any friends, or none that would answer a call from me at this time of night.

Finally! My suitcase appears and I pull it off the belt, resisting a powerful urge to open it and check my scissors. I look at you again, praying that the brightly coloured headscarf you are now wearing – according to local custom, does not slip to reveal your ravaged hair. I do my best to breeze through passport control, nodding at two heavily armed border guards.

*4 am local time:* Ankara is buzzing, despite the graveyard shift. I flick my eyes over the exit wondering which of these people are waiting for you – is it that noisy family, or the guy clutching a bunch of roses a bit too tightly?

Best if I don't wait around to find out. I flag down a taxi, show him the address that Soran wrote down for me. The driver is bald, and I find that restful. I sink back into the seat as we slip away into the anonymity of the not-quite-sleeping city.

The warm, peachy light of a new day is spreading over the horizon. Storekeepers are already rolling up their shutters. Grocery stores, corner cafes, their lights flickering awake. But I have eyes only for the red and white striped barbers' signs which glow against the dawn sky. I'm picturing the thousands of heads of hair out there in this city. Every scalp a personality in itself. Each individual follicle, answering to its own call, growing in all directions, ignorant and independent of the person beneath, no matter how much they think they are in control.