



The Nemadji Review

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FICTION

Haircut

"I'm gonna get the paper," Teddy said. He closed the back door, pulling it hard as he stepped outside. He could tell how cold it was by the amount of white rime around the door. He crunched down the driveway to the mailbox in his ratty old bathrobe and swayback Sorrel boots, the sun a suggestion on the eastern horizon. Jessie had his cup of Folger's ready when he walked in the door.

"Thanks," he said, and sat down at the kitchen table under the buzzing fluorescent light.

"So what's the news?" she asked.

"Same old, same old. Looks like Morningside and Northern Township are still in a pissing contest over who's responsible for County B. They're talking lawsuits now. All that'll do is raise the damn taxes."

"What do you want for breakfast?" she asked.

"Oatmeal is good, thanks." He continued turning pages, reading their horoscopes aloud, and after he glanced at the obituaries said. "I'll be damned. Jimmy Jacobs died!"

"That's too bad hon, you're gonna miss him."

"Yes I am," he paused. "Looks like the funeral is set for Monday at 10 at St. Michael's. The wake's Saturday."

Jessie gave him his oatmeal with a large dollop of brown sugar in the middle. He reached for the milk carton as she refilled his coffee cup.

"Might be time for haircuts today," he said.

She smiled and placed her hand lightly on his shoulder. "Yes it might."

He finished his cereal, got dressed, and pulled on his boots, heavy wool jacket and watch cap. "I'll be out in the shed."

The sun had worked its way up the sky, peeking over the spruces by the edge of the road like a curious child, the day crisp and windless at thirty below. Smoke spiraled up from his neighbor's chimneys.

He shuffled across the yard to the lean-to attached to the garage, a ten by twelve room with windows and a low ceiling, tools were scattered all over the workbench under the windows. An old kitchen stool stood next to the bench, chairs scattered around the room. In the center was a barrel stove.

Teddy found some old copies of the Morningside "Sunrise" under the bench, crumpled them into a loose ball and tossed them into the stove. He stacked kindling on top of the newspaper and laid heavier pieces of

wood on top. He struck a match and lit the paper. After ten minutes, the larger pieces caught fire, popping and snapping. The stove started to throw heat; a good thing, he was getting cold.

He made a pot of coffee in an old aluminum electric percolator. A shelf of stained ceramic mugs were behind the pot. Carl Juncker made his way through the door.

“Morning Teddy. Man, it’s still cold in here!”

“Yeah, yeah. Thought you’d be the first one in the door, bitching about the cold. Sit down. The coffee’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

Carl settled in the chair near the stove and crossed his arms, resting them on his ample middle.

“They say this cold is supposed to hang around all week. Seems a little early don’t it?”

The coffee stopped perking. Teddy reached for Carl’s cup, hesitated for a split second as his hand brushed Jimmy’s cup. “One of these years I gotta wash these mugs.”

The door opened. In stepped Tommy Roller. He beat his arms against his chest and stomped his feet after swinging the door shut. “Gettin nice in here Teddy. When I saw the smoke, I figured it was time for a hot cup of java. Too early for beer I guess,” he smiled.

Teddy replied. “Yep, I figured by the time I got the case out here from the house, the bottles would freeze. If we start too early, any barbering I’d want to do would get worse and the customers’d get surly.”

“Hee, Hee,” Tommy laughed. “We sure don’t want that,” he said, slapping Curt on his knee as he sat down on the chair next to him. Teddy poured a cup for Tommy.

Foot stomping and muffled conversation could be heard outside. Bud Niemi and Albine Formanek, came in with a cold draft. More coffee was poured

The door creaked opened again, and Billy Jacobs stepped in. “I figured you guys would be here!”

They all greeted Billy, a tall, thin man they’d watched grow from a little runt who delivered their papers, into a chemist for 3M in the Cities. He was Jimmy Jacob’s son. An awkward silence followed.

Teddy spoke. “We’re sorry ‘bout your dad, Billy.”

They all nodded.

“Thanks. It was quick. Didn’t see it coming. Doc said he stroked. Not a lot they could do.” He leaned against the workbench and accepted a cup of coffee. “Mom’s not doing well. I don’t know how she’s gonna manage. It’s an awful big house and yard,” he said grim-faced.

“Well, you know we’ll pitch in until she gets a bead on what she wants to do,” said Tommy. The others assented.

While the others chatted, Teddy started a fresh pot of coffee. It would be a long morning.

“Well, before I go, I’ve gotta ask a favor of you guys,” said Billy, draining his cup. He hesitated. “Two favors actually.”

“Shoot. We’re game,” said Bud.

“We’re gonna need pall bearers and I was wondering if you guys would do it?”

They all nodded, Teddy saying, “We’d be honored. Your dad was a good man.”

“Thanks. Then the other thing Ted is . . . Would you cut dad’s hair?”

. . . Ted mumbled, “Geez, I don’t know.” He squirmed. “Don’t the funeral home people have a barber for that? I’d be afraid I’d mess it up.”

“Yeah they do, but any haircut he got from the barber in town wouldn’t be as good as the ones you gave him. It’s bad enough they’ll dress him up in his old suit, put a tie on him and cover him with makeup.”

Teddy scratched his head and frowned.

Billy finally rescued him. “Tell you what. Why don’t I get back to you later in the day?”

“I don’t know. Never been asked to do this before.”

“I know, but both mom and I would be grateful if you did.” He paused. and turned to the others, “Thanks for the coffee and being pallbearers.” He went around shaking their hands. “I’ll give you a call later Teddy.”

It was quiet for a few minutes, the stove moaned in the background. Bud Niemi lit his pipe and Seth Goodnough replenished his chew as sun flooded the room.

Albine leaned back in his chair, tucked his hands under his suspenders and said, “So what you gonna do about giving a haircut to a stiff, Teddy?”

“I dunno,” he replied.

“Guess we’ll all need a haircut,” said Seth, “especially Carl over there,” Carl grinned and scratched his three-day-old beard. “Everyone got a suit for Chrissake?” Seth continued.

“Weddings and funerals only,” replied Carl. “Thing smells like moth-balls. I’ll have to air it out and see if it fits. Got really wide lapels and wide stripes. Wore it at my wedding. I looked like some Mafia guy,” he chuckled.

“So who’s gonna be first?” said Teddy.

“I might as well be me. Gotta get to the office,” said Albine.

Teddy reached into an old wooden cigar box on the workbench.

He carefully uncovered the Oster nickel-plated clippers, scissors, and combs from underneath their green velvet cover. He'd thought about getting a newer electric clipper, but had a hard time giving up the feel of the tool handed down to him from his father. He liked the precision and intimacy of the appliance.

He spread an old bed sheet around Albine and secured it with a safety pin. He worked quickly, using techniques he'd learned from his dad. Each head of hair was different, some more forgiving than others. Albine still had a full head of curls. If you screwed up on his, you could usually fix it so it blended in with the rest.

Albine looked at himself in the old cracked mirror hanging on the door next to the main garage. "My God, you're a handsome devil," he said.

Carl said, "Someone get the shovel from the corner and open the door."

Ignoring the comment, Albine threw on his coat, said good-bye and left.

"So who's next?" said Teddy.

"Might as well be me," said Carl

Carl raised his bulk from the chair. It sighed in gratitude.

"Trim or the works?"

"Might as well give me the works."

Carl's hair was a challenge, chronically thin.

Teddy worked cautiously on Carl's neck, alternating between clippers and scissors, doing quick passes with the comb as he snipped. He finished with what remained of Carl's hair on by combing it straight up and using his fingers to gauge the cut. He combed out the sides and top again, stepped back and called it good.

The haircuts continued. Bud, the last customer, crawled onto the stool.

"So, you gonna cut Jimmy's hair?"

"Yeah. What you gonna do about that Teddy? "Carl said refilling his coffee cup.

"That's a tough one. I been thinking about that ever since Billy left. What do you guys think?"

"Well if it were me, I'd tell him no," said Carl. "I mean that's what you got barbers for."

"Yeah, but this is a family thing. We all know the family and Jimmy was a good friend. Don't you think I kinda owe him something?" said Teddy.

"I dunno. Just the whole thing about working on a stiff. That's not Jimmy," said Carl.

“No it ain’t,” Seth pitched in. “He was a lot more than a cold hunk of meat. All the stories we have about him. He was a legend.”

Bud laughed. “Remember that time we got tuned up our senior year and took Jimmy’s old Packard out deer hunting . . . without guns?” “Yep. We had some big flashlights and went shining deer in a field out by the old saw-mill. Teddy, you spotted one down this forest road and we chased it,” Seth said.

Teddy laughed. “I’ve never seen a spike buck move so fast. When we came to a curve in the road, that deer took the turn, but we kept going straight, got airborne like the Dukes of Hazzard and ended up in a slough up to the axles. Jimmy’s dad was REALLY pissed about that! It took two four wheel drives and chains to get that old bathtub out of the swamp.”

“Then there was the time,” Carl leaned over, shaking his head chuckling, “when he got caught peeing on the ceiling in grade school. We were having this contest and no one was even coming close until Jimmy took aim and hit the light bulb over the sink. I think he shorted the damn thing out and blew a fuse.”

They all were leaning over laughing so hard they cried. When they finally calmed down, Tommy said, looking at Teddy, “But this ain’t helping you answer your question. Jimmy never liked to be touched. Seems odd we’d be doing that after he’s dead,”

“I wonder if that comes from all the whuppings he got from his old man?” said Teddy.

The sun creeped toward midday now, the light cold and weak. Carl stood. “Well, I better get home. The old lady’ll have something for me to do. Thanks for the haircut, Teddy.”

They put on their coats and filtered out the door. Teddy stood alone in the room. He cleaned up, swept the hair off the floor and dumped coffee grounds into the trash can. He opened the door and trudged toward the house.

Jessie was working at her sewing machine in the dining room adjacent to the kitchen.

“Hi Hon. How are the boys?”

“Full of crap like they always are. We had some good laughs telling Jimmy stories.”

“Did I see Billy Jacobs come and go while you were out there?”

He sat down on one of the dining room table chairs facing her. “Yeah, we’re all gonna be pall bearers. Everyone got a haircut. Could you give me one later?”

“Of course.”

“Billy wants me to cut his father’s hair.”

“That’d be nice. He always had you cut it didn’t he? He never liked going to Zeke downtown after they got into that argument about welfare people. Jimmy was glad they had welfare after his dad died in the mining accident.”

“I know Jess, but touching a dead body, especially Jimmy, and cutting his hair?”

She stopped stitching and looked at him over her cheater glasses. “Men have such a hard time touching one another.”

Teddy shrugged. “Way we were raised.”

Jessie hesitated. “Did you like Jimmy?”

“You bet. He was my best friend.”

“Would you even say you loved him?”

“What?” he said, sitting up straight in the chair. He looked out the window through the lace curtains toward the front yard. The same yard he played ball on during hot summer days and the lawn he walked across to get into Jimmy’s old Packard to drive to church when he got married to Jessie forty-five years ago. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Jessie leaned over and put her hand on his arm. “This is gonna be hard isn’t it?”

“Yep,” he said snuffling and wiped his nose with an old red handkerchief. He sighed. “But I owe him.” . . . They were ten years-old when they had gone out to the Washington River to catch Smelt during the spring run. The day was warm and the boys wore “Wellies”, lifted from Teddy’s father’s supply at the hardware store. They carried old galvanized pails and a couple of fine-meshed nets.

The boys set up on a stretch of the river farther upstream from where most fished. While skipping from rock to rock to get to a deeper part of the stream, Teddy slipped and fell into the fast moving water. As he struggled to stay afloat, Jimmy raced down the bank crashing through brush slicing his head on a branch, until he reached an overhanging tree where he grabbed Teddy as he floated by. The tree swayed under their weight, but Jimmy hung on to him until Teddy regained enough strength to pull himself up onto the branch. Exhausted, he hung there until the two of them could shimmied back to shore.

Teddy stood, stretched, and said, “I better call Billy and let him know I’ll cut Jimmy’s hair.”

Jessie stood and embraced Teddy. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and said, “You’re a sweetie. One of the finest men I know.” He returned the kiss and went to make the call.

Don Renaldo, the mortician, greeted him in a reserved, dignified manner. They small-talked for a few minutes. “Well, should we go downstairs and you can get to work?” said Don.

The room was white with ceramic tile walls and fluorescent bulbs that hummed overhead. It smelled of embalming fluid. Around the periphery were an assortment of cabinets, counter tops and sinks. Jimmy’s body was on a stainless steel table, draped with a cloth that left his head exposed.

The mortician went to the top of the table and raised Jimmy’s head with an adjustable head positioner.

“He’s ready,” the mortician said.

Teddy walked to the head of the table, the pulse in his neck throbbed. He grit his teeth as he opened the wooden case with the barbering tools. He took them out and placed them in a row on the counter top adjacent to Jimmy’s head.

Jimmy had thick, bristly, salt and pepper hair. Teddy worked quickly, cutting gently, not sure how to approach the job. With a “normal” cut, the person made adjustments with their head to accommodate the clipping. He hesitated on a couple of occasions, took a deep breath and continued.

He finished the first passes with the clippers and began the trim work with the scissors. As he worked toward the front of Jimmy’s head, he saw the scar left over from his rescue, by his right temple. He stopped, the scissors poised. He put them down on and stroked the side of Jimmy’s head. He wept.

Don came around and placed his hand on Teddy’s arm. “If this is too hard, we can have the barber finish.”

Teddy took in a shuddering breath and said, “No. This is my job – for a good friend.” He picked up the scissors. He finished, stepped back, and called it good.

Don lowered Jimmy’s head and covered it with the cloth.

“Thanks for letting me do this, Don.”

“You bet.”

Teddy gathered his tools, placed them in the wooden box and covered them with the velvet cloth. He turned and looked at Jimmy’s body one more time and walked up the stairs.

He drove west out of town. The overcast sky spat sleet that pinged dully off the windshield. Intermittent bursts of heavier snow washed the landscape and engulfed the car as he drove.

His driving, aimless at first, evolved into a pattern. He returned to places where he and Jimmy spent time over the years: Willow Lake with its abundant crappies, the old rock quarry where they swam in a deep pool of

crystal clear water, now frozen, the white pine stand at the state park and the football field by the high school. He lowered the window there and listened to the wind whistle through the wires hanging from the big lights around the field. He drove back to the park.

He got out of the car by the stand of white pines and walked on the narrow trail to the overlook on the lake. The path had blown clear of snow in the past week. When he got to the deck above the lake, he drew his jacket around him tightly, jamming his hands deep into its pockets. The cold wind off the lake seared and stung his eyes, opened a wound, cauterized it, and blew on. He would find peace, somehow, and Jimmy would be there.

He stood there for a few minutes before the cold was too much. He returned to the car and drove home.

As he came in the door, Jessie rose from her chair in the living room and walked toward him. "Hi. I was beginning to worry about you."

"No need, just driving and thinking."

Jessie put her arm around him and they walked to the kitchen.

~~ Doug Lewandowski ~~

