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Scalped, 1981

by Janna Brooke Cohen

Jackson said he had the flu, again. The *flu* meant that our father slept or smoked Hindu Kush all day in his room, and me and Siddhi knew to leave him alone for a while, a week or two, until he came out on his own with some new, exciting plan.

We looted the many rooms of our house to scavenge supplies for marathon sessions of make-believe. Jackson stayed put while we spent days building a colossal blanket fort over our worn batik sofa, crouching inside to tune in for the comfort and counsel of *Diff'rent Strokes*, *The Brady Bunch*, *One Day at a Time*, *Happy Days*.

We ate through all the food in the kitchen, including the yellow sticks of uncooked spaghetti (the trick was to suck them long enough to soften them with saliva), and gave ourselves diarrhea from eating backyard bananas, kumquats, avocados, and star fruits.

"I'm already eight and a girl," I said to my brother. "So *I'll* do the cooking."

"So what, Sienna!" Siddhi crossed his little arms at his chest. "I'm six and three-quarters *and* a boy. Which means, I have a penis and you don't."

"So what. Penises look silly and stupid." It went back and forth like that until Siddhi punched me in the chest. We rolled in the dirt, landing a few good hits, and then we forgave each other, because if not, it was too lonely.

* * *

On the second Thursday of the flu, Nana Ellie entered the house with her signature greeting: "Come now. You'll eat something."

Within the protective darkness of Fort Blanketania, I whispered to Siddhi, "Do everything she says, and maybe she'll let us move to her condo this time." He grinned, and slapped me ten.

Nana wasn't the warm nest of motherliness I wished and prayed for, but she more than made up for it with bad cooking. Even with my belly cramped and growling, I knew to be wary of the brown paper grocery sack on her hip.

"On the scale of 1 to 10, what do you give Nana's recipes?" Siddhi whispered. Good thing too, if he didn't want a lickin'.

"Probably, like a 1.3. You'll understand that soon, when I teach you *decibels*," I said. Siddhi nodded.

Nana opened and slammed things in our house, but we stayed in Fort Blanketania, hoping to finish our TV show. "Who wants hot cereal?" she called from the kitchen in the special way she had of making a question into a command. It was early September in Miami Beach, and though Siddhi and I were too young to check the temperature, like dogs, we dealt with the heat by keeping ourselves still and staying in the shade. Nana pushed the hot cereal no matter the season. "Well?" she hollered, and she stormed into the room and

clicked off *Sesame Street*.

"We have to get out," I said.

"But she's making *gag potion*." "Gag potion" was Siddhi's name for Nana's hideous, lumpy farina. We entered the kitchen in time to see her pour the brown and white cereal grains into the boiling water. She stirred them exactly once. Then she clanked the spoon down on the counter and sighed, "*Oy gevalt!* I'd like for this to get *done* already."

Nana was in a permanent rush. When she took us places, she dragged us. Her hugs and kisses were all-of-a-sudden-lightning-strikes that usually hurt a little, and after she did them to you, she checked her lobes to make sure she still had both clip-ons, and that her necklace with the diamond Star of David was turned right side up.

"Sid, come here. Sit down! Sienna, let's go already. What in the hell is taking you so long? *HERE!* For God's sake. Take some hot cereal."

Siddhi tried stalling. "Nana, knock knock?"

"What is it, Sid?" Nana ladled the slop into the first bowl for me.

"You have to say 'Who's there?'"

"Who's there?" Another bowl found Siddhi.

"Boo."

"What?"

"You have to say 'Boo who?'"

"Boo who."

"Nana, why are you crying?"

"What? I am doing no such thing. What in the hell is the matter with you? Eat your hot cereal before I give you a lickin'!"

Nana didn't bluff about lickin's, so under her one raised eyebrow, I got set to choke down my cereal. I emptied about nine of her sugar packets into my bowl, unintentionally doubling its contents. No amount of sugar or stirring smoothed the lumps, some of which were large enough to need chewing.

Siddhi's strategy was speed. He shoveled three bites at a time and willed himself to swallow, following up with deep, barfy gags. He seemed pretty serious about his membership in the Clean Plate Club, because when he puked up the last bite, he kept his mouth closed and swallowed it back down again with another eye-bulging croak: the sound of victory, the hard way.

I ate slowly until Nana left to bring a tray of hot cereal and tea to Jackson's room. Then, with no better choice, I spooned several lumps onto the floor. When Nana returned and saw the mess, she lifted me off the chair by my free arm and

whacked me three times on my tushie with a wooden spoon.

“Nana, I can’t eat it. I just can’t eat it,” I cried.

“That’s enough of that! You’ll eat it,” she hollered and fed me a refilled, unsweetened bowl. Siddhi stayed at the table with me, even though he was excused.

After the cereal, Nana sized us up. Me. Siddhi. We were still damp from our morning swim. Even snarled and wet with pool water, Siddhi’s hair was spun gold, feathery waves with sun-bleached stripes, and it went past his shoulders like a surfer dude. The dirtier it got, the more colorful and pretty, I thought. Nana smiled at him, curled a glowing lock back behind his ear and said, “I don’t care for such long hair on boys.”

My own hair was thick, near black, and curly. I rarely washed it, because we only had peppermint soap, which burned my eyes, plus it was more beautiful under the pool water. Mine worked best as mermaid hair. When Nana examined my soggy knots, her smile fell off. She grabbed a handful of my hair, gave it a little tug, and dropped it. “*Oy yoy yoy*, what are we supposed to do with this rat’s nest?”

During the last flu, Nana took us to her condo with the puffy silver wallpaper, the big drawer of hotel pads and pens, and the carousel of black-and-white photos from the olden days. She had Aunt Paula staying there too, because of divorce, and Aunt Paula—thank goodness Nana went to mah-jongg—cooked enchiladas with black olives sliced like Lego tires and cheese she let us grate ourselves. “Is Nana so mad because Papa Murray died?” Papa Murray died before I was born, but I knew death squeezed people on the inside, so that they look the same but aren’t and never will be again. I was too little to be anything but sad when my mom died, but I was angry about Jackson’s flus, and I knew that madness and sadness probably came from the same thing.

“Nope. Ma was a bitch long before that,” Aunt Paula said as she let Siddhi lick sour cream off a spoon.

“Bitch,” Siddhi repeated, dripping white from the corner of his lips.

“How does she get money then?” I asked.

“Oh, well. Between Pop’s life insurance, the army pension, and the sale of their house, he left Nana pretty comfortable.” I pictured Nana snuggled into a soft, fluffy nest of dollar bills.

“How much do *I* have in life assurance and army?” Siddhi asked, which made Aunt Paula laugh. She never answered.

I collected Nana’s story of Papa a sentence at a time.

When the plumber asked if her husband was at home, she said, “*Aiysh*, that man is better off in the ground!”

“You want to know a little something about Murray,” she told the friend we ran into at the Green Stamps store. “Here’s something: He was a pain in my ass.”

And when I asked how they met, she said, “Murray was a soldier in the service.

Very handsome in his uniform, so you'd never know he was a nincompoop."

When Aunt Paula left her third husband, Nana said, "All you kids get *dah-vorst* nowadays. You didn't get a *dah-vorse* in my day. You went to your mother for a week, and then she sent you back to your philandering bastard of a husband."

I asked Aunt Paula, "Did Nana and Papa Murray love each other?"

"Love was different back then, Sienna. Ma married Pop to get away from her parents; same reason I married Gary. They were tickets out. When you're so young, you don't really know any better," she said. "And Pop was forever depressed." I didn't know what that meant, but I didn't want to know any more sad things about them, so I stopped asking.

After she washed the dishes, Nana told us to find our shoes. "Get in the car, *kinder*, we'll go run some errands so your father can rest."

* * *

Nana ushered us inside the little shop with the swirling candy-cane pole out front and seated us on the waiting bench. I studied the dark wood-paneled wall covered in push-pinned Polaroids of satisfied customers, none of whom were females, let alone little girls. The lone, old-man barber wore an apron over his shirt and trousers. I admired its pressed, bleached-white cleanness. He had friendly, watery eyes and one gold tooth on the side of his grin.

"What lovely granddaughters you have, Eleanor," he said.

"I'll tell you something, Ernie," said Nana, clamping her hands over Siddhi's shoulders. "This one's a boy. For Christ's sake, make him look like one!" Nana knuckle-pinched Siddhi's cheek and plopped him into the chair. The barber took out a shiny black cape and smoothed it by whipping it out into the air with a loud snap. Siddhi flinched and then giggled as Ernie fastened the cape around his little neck. Next he stood my brother up, put a stack of three phone books down on the seat, and placed him back on top. Siddhi smiled at himself in the mirror, and that made me smile too. I waited on the bench and crossed my legs at the knee to show Ernie that I was, indeed, the girl-child.

"How shall I cut it?" he asked as he took out the comb and scissors.

"Like a goddamned *boy*," she answered. I noticed that Nana's snapping turned Ernie a little nervous. He patted Siddhi on the head. "Such length. Have you ever been to the barber before?" Siddhi shrugged, smiled. If he had, he couldn't remember. "Well, we'll get you all fixed up."

One glimpse of the scissors, though, and Siddhi began to wail. I understood. We loved our hair. We braided it and used it to make animal ears and face masks when we played make-believe. We lifted each other up by it and put things we found from home in it, like feathers and leaves for crowns, and avocado and Vaseline for horns and twists. When we climbed trees or played spies and secret agents, we used clumps of hair for walkie-talkies, and when Siddhi had nightmares, I twirled his hair to help him back to sleep.

I didn't know this old man with the scissors, this *Ernie*, and his friendship with the likes of Nana did little to help me trust him with Siddhi's precious locks.

“Sid, sweetheart,” Nana cooed (she always called him Sid, because *Who in the hell names a Jewish boy Siddhartha?*), “stop crying now, *bubbeleh*, before I give you something to cry about.” Siddhi closed his mouth, and I saw him working hard to cry with no sound, but his body shook up and down, and his trying not to cry caused extra tears and mucous.

“Nana,” I hoped to help, “Siddhi only feels sad because he wants to keep his—”

“Shush, Sienna!” Nana barked at me, and fresh off of the sting of her wooden spoon, I obeyed.

“No, Nana, please, I don’t want a haircut,” Siddhi pleaded, sliding from the phone-book stack. “I like my hair how it is.” He had a snot caterpillar coming out of each nostril.

“Sid, don’t be ridiculous. You look like a *feygelah*. Ernie here thought you were a girl. I’ve had enough. Now sit down and stay still before I give you a lickin’. After we’re done, I’ll get you a frankfurter and a malted at the lunch counter. Okay, sweetheart? That-a-boy.” Nana always had a little smile for Siddhi. I went over to the chair and wiped the snot from Siddhi’s nose with the edge of my shirt.

Off went the smile. “Lovely,” said Nana. “Now you’re filthy. Sit down.”

The whole business must have rattled Ernie too, because he switched his comb and scissors for clippers and changed beautiful lion Siddhi into G.I. Joe in less than a minute. Siddhi’s hairs were only a little longer than a bald man’s, and they stood straight up like a freshly mowed lawn. He looked down at the blond-hairy floor, then wide-eyed at me—but kept quiet, as I planned to do, because that promised hot dog and shake would be our first good meal in two weeks. Plus maybe, just maybe, Nana might agree to let us live in her condo where, in 7F, her friend Esther Cohn’s husband had a slot machine that took real pennies, and when we got three cherries, he let us keep the winnings. Sure, the building was all old people, and they like you to have neat hair and keep quiet, but then we could go to school instead of just hanging around with Jackson and his flus, and his stinky pot smoke, and his silly girl friends who never stayed long enough to become any kind of mothers.

“My, oh my, Sid,” said Nana. “You look like a movie star.” Ernie released him from the cape, and Siddhi climbed down from the chair and kicked the pile of hair as he came back to the waiting bench. “Your turn, Sienna.” Nana beckoned me with her painted pointer finger. “This one’s the girl,” she told Ernie, “but go short on her too. God knows when she’ll be back. My hippity-dippity son doesn’t *believe* in haircuts.”

Ernie traded the clipper back for his scissors and plucked a black plastic comb from the canister of blue water. Until that second, I was sure I’d get buzzed like Siddhi, who sat with both hands rubbing his head. I patted his shoulder. “See, didn’t hurt a bit,” I told him as I got up to take my turn.

It took Ernie a long while to comb through my tangles. I squinted to keep my eyes from watering, and focused on the scent of his cologne rather than the pain in my scalp. As he yanked, he sprayed water on my head and chatted with Nana. “My daughter tried to take me to one of those, uh, y’know, the protest rallies, a few years back?”

“Oh, yeah?” Nana half listened as she leaned against the wall next to the mirror

and flipped through an old issue of *Time* magazine.

"Yeah. It was a while ago. Some nonsense about Vietnam." He pronounced it like it rhymed with ham.

"Yes, well," Nana said. She had no intention of bad-mouthing Jackson, her favorite, so she switched to someone whom she felt more comfortable criticizing, and then the conversation perked up: "She might know my meshugga daughter, Paula. *Oy gevalt*, that one…"

Siddhi met my eyes in the mirror, so I crossed mine and did fish lips to make him smile.

Ernie continued raking my uncooperative hair. "Get this: My daughter, Shana, she drags me to this thing—sit still, honey—anyway, she's there giving flowers out to every person around, and I'm thinking this is why I work like a *schwartza* to put you through the college over there, so you can spend my money on some damned flowers for all your little friends—chin up, honey—bunch of bums, all of them." When Ernie said the last part, he combed roughly through a snarl, and I let out a squeal. "Ooh, sorry, honey." I was about to cry myself, but I then I saw Siddhi in the mirror, his eyes pulled into slits and his tongue flapping in and out of his teeth. He took me past cry and straight to giggle.

"Be still, Sienna!" Nana hollered. Then to Ernie: "They're all a buncha bums, that whole generation. That Paula has yet to do anything worth a damn. Didn't even finish school. She dropped out to marry another bum…and if men like you and Murray hadn't fought in the goddamned war, we'd all be speaking German right now. She's a pain in my ass… All of those kids are a no-good pain in my ass."

When it seemed Ernie had removed every last knot from my hair, I stared at myself and took a second to admire how pretty I looked. "Oh, thank you," I said in my most grown-up, ladylike voice, and I leaned forward, ready to rise and pose for my satisfied-customer Polaroid.

"I haven't even started yet, hon," Ernie said, sneaking Nana a smile while gently pushing me back into the chair by my shoulders. He tied my hair at the bottom of my neck, where it itched me.

"Short," repeated Nana.

Ernie let the scissors chew across every strand of my hair, right above the rubber band. Then he waved the severed ponytail above my head and sang some kind of "woo-hoo" sound. In the mirror, Siddhi's eyes and mouth went wide in his honeydew-melon head. My own felt like a helium balloon and lifted me to standing.

Ernie clucked his tongue. "Not quite yet," he said, and nudged me back down. He combed all of the remaining hair out—easily now—around my face and eyes, placed a deep metal bowl down on my head, and snipped the hair that showed beneath its edges.

"Cool! How come I couldn't get that thing on my head?" Siddhi whined, and Nana gave him a little smack on the hand to silence him. When Ernie removed the bowl, my head looked like a rotten mushroom.

“See. There. Now I can take you into a restaurant!” Nana approved.

The glistening wet ends of my ear-length hair curled up toward the ceiling. It made me warm and dizzy to see so much of my body hanging dead in Ernie’s hand. I wished my ponytail might magically reattach itself; that I could show Ernie how it felt by cutting off all of his gray hairs, and that I was daring enough to pull Nana’s Neil Diamond *The Jazz Singer* cassette from her car stereo and yank out all the tape into a big mess so she could never listen to it again, but this was not Neil Diamond’s fault, and there was a hot dog at stake. I stood up, and again, I said “Thank you.”

* * *

My hot dog was warm in its soft white bun loaded with ketchup, mustard, and sweet relish. With no hair to weigh him down, Siddhi spun round and round on the lunch-counter stool.

“Nana?” I asked.

“Mmm,” she said without turning from her lunch.

“Can we go home with you from now on?”

Nana took another bite of her knish, chewed and swallowed it while I waited. Then she turned just enough to see my plate and said, “You eat a frankfurter with sauerkraut and mustard. You’ll ruin it with ketchup.”

A little girl with long, curly pigtails walked past our stools with her young, pretty mom. “Bathroom?” she asked, pointing ahead.

Nana nodded. “All the way in the back.”

“Thanks,” said the mother. “What nice looking boys you have there.”

Nana smiled wide. “Thank you,” she said. She let the lady walk away mistaken as she took another big mouthful of knish.

When Nana went to the bathroom, Siddhi told me, “Let’s grow our hair back so long that it goes past the floor.” We shook on it.

* * *

Nana took us straight back to our house after lunch. From the living room windows, she could see Jackson sleeping on a deck chair by the pool. She stared at him for a while, and I stood next to her. I noticed the terrible state of the slanty-roofed clubhouse we built between the shed and the canal a while back. Tomorrow, if it is sunny, Siddhi and I could take it apart and build a new-and-improved one near the big banyan tree. Maybe, if we found the right supplies, we could add an elevator to a second floor.

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