

Waiting for Gracie

“Did you check in on-line?” she asked cheerfully.

The receptionist always asks that question the instant a customer enters the salon, but I was so distracted by the piercings in her nose, brows, and below both corners of her mouth that it took me a second to respond. Was that a dragon crawling up her neck?

“No. I’m a walk-in,” I stumbled. I was frantically looking for Gracie, the twenty-something country girl who has cut my hair for the last two years.

I didn’t see Gracie. What I did see were many tattooed stylists with lots of piercings, and swaths of frizzy hair dyed with colors that aren’t natural. Several had patches of scalp that had been conspicuously shaved, presumably not for medical purposes. I imagined each stylist anxiously snapping scissors the way they ritualistically do just before they actually snip a lock. They were ready to give me a haircut that would showcase their creativity and flair. A haircut that would give me much to explain to my family and friends. I flashed back to the time when my Daddy came home with a haircut executed by a teenager fresh out of cosmetology school. Mama took one look and said, “Somebody has butchered your head!” She was not joking.

My first haircut by Gracie was a coincidence. I had gone my usual three months between haircuts. I desperately needed a haircut before attending some event that required me to look respectable. It just so happened that Gracie was the only available stylist when I arrived as a walk-in. Gracie was modestly dressed. No tattoos. No piercings. Or at least none that I could see.

She motioned for me to take a seat in her chair, and softly asked as she snapped the collar of the plastic apron around my neck, “What would you like? Above the ears? A scissor cut?”

“Yes to both,” I probably said, somewhat relieved that she was willing to allow me to participate in these decisions.

I launched into my routine when I'm having my hair cut by a total stranger. "Tell me about your scissors? Are they expensive?"

Every stylist has something to say about scissors. Several have stopped mid-cut to show me the various versions they have, proud to have different types of scissors for different tasks. One told me that she had a \$600 pair of scissors. "Are you using those to cut MY hair?" I inquired. "No," she said. I didn't ask for an explanation. I assumed that my head wasn't worth it.

Other stylists have no special attachment to their scissors. Several have said, "I still use the same pair from Beauty School. They weren't expensive. I keep them sharp. There's a man who comes around regularly who sharpens scissors."

I pretend I don't know about sharpening. That gives them a chance to tell me how important it is to have sharp scissors. Several have shown me scars on their fingers from using "dull" scissors.

Gracie doesn't have expensive scissors. She's taking classes at the local branch of the state university. Paying her own way. Majoring in accounting. Has a boyfriend who goes with her and her family on their July beach vacation every year. Intends to settle in the area close to home.

Gracie doesn't squander her money on appearances. Her hair is long and straight. There is no evidence of experimentation or chemical enhancement.

Education is important to both of us. Gracie knows that I was a college biology professor at a reputable expensive private school. I often ask about her classes and her teachers. She's happy to divulge what her academic advisor has most recently recommended. She's always worried about making a B. Several times she's asked me to look at a homework assignment that has her baffled. I'm honored when she asks for my help. I'm embarrassed to admit I have no idea of the accounting principle that the homework is intended to reinforce. Maybe it is good thing for me to be baffled occasionally. It is hard for me to admit I don't know at least a little bit about any topic.

Gracie is a multitasker. She's a full-time student and a full-time employee. She doesn't have time to squander, yet she never seemed to be rushed. Like most stylists, she can talk and cut at the same time.

She concluded that first session by handing me a mirror and spinning me around so I could inspect the back of my head. "Is that OK?" she asked.

"Better than OK. Look at all that hair on the floor. I feel lightheaded!" Gracie still lives with her Dad so she's accustomed to Dad jokes.

"Would you like some product?" she asked timidly.

"Nah. I'm not a product kind of guy," I replied.

"I didn't think you were, but we're supposed to ask."

"Woops! I almost forgot," she confessed. "Would you like me to trim your eyebrows?"

"Yes, I would!" I said, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. I tried to recover by explaining, "With these bifocals, I can't see well enough to trim them myself."

She made me look as good as she could, given what she had to work with. I was pleased with my haircut. She had even trimmed my eyebrows! She gave me the senior citizen discount without asking. I gave her a tip that surprised even me.

It was about three months before I needed another haircut. I went back to that same salon, hoping that Gracie would be there. She was! She must have remembered me because she smiled when she heard me tell the receptionist, "I'll wait for Gracie." I felt bad for the two stylists lurking in their empty booths waiting to take the next customer. I know they need the work. Stylists don't work here just for fun. None of these women appear to have wealthy husbands or boyfriends. None are the daughters of our city's most influential families.

For the last two years, I've waited for Gracie. I usually check in on-line. My name appears on the monitor. No matter if I'm next up or 7th on the list, I tell the receptionist, "I'll wait for Gracie."

When my turn comes, Gracie and I resume our conversation about her classes, her teachers, the number of semester hours she has left, and the disruption to the beach vacation caused by her aunt being scheduled to work that week. During my last haircut, she told me she was hoping to get a paid internship. By chance, I had an appointment with my CPA to do my taxes when I left the salon. By chance, they had that very morning acknowledged that that they needed to hire some extra help for tax season. I said, "I may know someone who would be a good fit here. She's an accounting major at Upstate. She is paying her own way through school by cutting hair. It sounds like she's a good student. Would you mind if I arrange for her to give you a call? Her name is Gracie."

Right after that tax meeting I drove straight back to the salon. Gracie saw me come in. She was puzzled. It hadn't been the usual three months. It hadn't even been three hours.

Gracie stepped away from her client just long enough for me to hand her the scrap of paper upon which I had scribbled the contact information. "This is my CPA. They're looking to hire. I told them about you. They are expecting you to call."

Gracie smiled in gratitude.

The next time I go to the salon is three months later, which brings me to the present dilemma, when the receptionist with the dragon asked if I had checked in on-line.

"Is Gracie working today?" I asked.

"Let me check the schedule," she said. I studied the dragon while she ran her finger across the printed schedule.

"Gracie is supposed to work 10 to 4 on Saturday," she said.

"I'll wait for Gracie," I said.

I was relieved I had an excuse to leave. On the way to my van, I reasoned, "I'm just being a loyal customer for Gracie," but there was more to it. I had taken one look at the other stylists at work in the salon that day. Body piercings, tattoos,

bizarre hairdos, unconventional clothes and shoes. All of these were conscious choices that say something about the wearer and their priorities and their sense of beauty. I aspire to be tolerant and even supportive of those who have perspectives different from my own, but I fall short. So, yes, I must be guilty of stereotyping and bias and other attitudes I find unacceptable. I know that my daughters have tattoos. Maybe they have piercings. They do have good judgement. They are kind. They are smart. They take their work seriously. I trust them and admire them. I'm proud of them. Maybe I shouldn't be so quick to think negatively of strangers with tattoos and piercings.

Nevertheless, there are other reasons I'll wait for Gracie. Even though it has been three months since my last haircut, what's a couple more days? Besides, I need to find out about that internship. Did she get it? I want to know how the new semester is going for her and get a report on the beach vacation. And when was the last time she had her scissors sharpened?

There will come a time when I arrive at the salon. Gracie won't be there. A receptionist will tell me that Gracie doesn't work there anymore. I know that Gracie will graduate. I sincerely hope she becomes a well-paid accountant. I'll be happy for her, but her departure will also make me sad and anxious. The time is coming when I may have to entrust my head to someone whose sense of what is attractive and appropriate could be very different from mine. And I'll have to start all over by saying, "Tell me about your scissors."

Onward,

GR Davis Jr

28 September 2025