A Dangerous Haircut

John Farrell

At one-thirty on a spring Saturday in 1994, Elaine Martin was in a café not far away from the pharmacy where she worked sitting across from a young woman named Jeannie Wilkins, a remorseful customer who had insisted on taking her to lunch. Earlier that week Jeannie had disgraced herself by making a scene at the pharmacy because Elaine was too slow filling her prescription for birth control pills. When she came back to apologize late that afternoon Elaine told her it was a very minor infraction, not worth worrying about, but Jeannie clung to the word *infraction*, insisting that she didn’t want anyone to be able to think of her as having committed something like that. So Elaine agreed to have lunch.

Jeannie Wilkins was a striking blonde with long, thick hair and big green eyes. Elaine figured her for about twenty-five. The morning of the infraction she had been looking very professional in a raincoat and scarf. Today she was casual in a light blue sweater and slacks, with a black band in her hair. Elaine noticed right away that Jeannie got a lot of attention from passing males and that she was not unaware of it.

“Please believe me when I tell you that I don’t usually behave the way I did the other day,” Jeannie said. “I really appreciate people who work with the public the way you do. I know it’s incredibly difficult.”

“I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t enjoy it,” Elaine told her. She was sniffing a hint of condescension.

“It was ridiculous of me to get upset. You weren’t even being that slow. I was just having a bad day. I had an argument with my husband and I was in a foul mood.”

Elaine formulated a discouraging smile. She was the kind of person who brought out people’s life stories without wanting to. “Please forget about it, Jeannie,” she said. “Now that we’re here having lunch, it’s as if it never happened.”

“That’s very kind. You’re married too, I see.”

“Yes.”

“Children?”

“Two teen-age boys and a little girl.”

“That’s incredible. How do you all that, and a job and a husband too.”

“He can be helpful at times.”

“I’m glad to hear that. What does he do?”

“He’s a gynecologist.”

“That would be helpful. It must save on expenses.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want him to treat me professionally. I mean, it’s nothing about him. You wouldn’t have your own husband as your doctor.”

“Of course, that was silly of me. But it must be interesting having a husband who’s such an expert on women, though, inspecting them all day. I hope you don’t mind me saying that.”

“He’s an expert on certain aspects of women, I’d have to say, but not necessarily the more important ones.”

“You’re right, Elaine. I agree with you. Our bodies aren’t the most important part of us. But they do make us who we are, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure how you mean that.”

“I was thinking, what if you have a very infectious laugh. You might not be especially inclined to laugh, but because it has so much effect on people, you do it a lot more. You might even be a more light-hearted person because of it.”

“That’s possible,” Elaine agreed. “There’s a sense in which things like your face and your laugh are your destiny. They’re the instrument you have to play.”

“I find that fascinating. I had an aunt whose face was extremely vague. It was a large, doughy face with small, black eyes. Because of that face, it took me years to have any idea what she was thinking. If she was thinking at all. In fact I’m still not sure. She never married and scarcely had friends. I sometimes think she never became anybody because of that face.”

“But don’t you think it was because you knew her and knew she was a vague, remote person that you saw her face that way?”

“You might be right, but it’s so hard to picture her face belonging to a lively, sharp person like you, Elaine. I feel as if I know you already. She was such a blunt instrument by comparison.”

Elaine could see that Jeannie was a little awkward but that she was also rather amusing. “There’s an old game that’s sort of related to this,” she told her. “I got it from the French writer Proust.”

“I haven’t read him.”

“I was a French major in college. Well, do you know how it is when you look at a face in a painting or a good photograph. You don’t look for a thought inside the face looking out at you. Instead you see a meaning set into the face by the artist. The face has a quality that the artist wants to exemplify, a certain idea of a character or a type, with different features expressing different traits—old and wise, maybe, or naive and silly, or strong and heroic. And because there’s nothing else behind it, the face is just that thing, that expression.”

“I think I know what you mean, but how would you play a game with that?”

“What you do is, you look at the actual people in the room around you and imagine that their faces were created by an artist. There’s no mind behind the eyes. They’re there only to express the artist’s conception. So what do they mean? See that guy over there in the red sweater?” Elaine was tilting her head toward a man about sixty sitting by the window. “If you saw him in a Rembrandt, what would his face express?”

“The first thing I notice about him,” Jeannie said, “is that his mouth curls down a bit on the right side, and that suggests to me a bit of callousness or contempt.”

“I agree. And at that age it’s rather set in place, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And the way the window light falls on the right side of his face emphasizes that downward sneer, doesn’t it?” Elaine added.

“You’re right, very much.”

“That must be intentional on the part of the artist. What do you make of the eyes?”

“They’re rather weak. Slow. At least from here they don’t seem to move very much.”

“What does that say to you?”

“It says he’s not in touch with the world very much.”

“I agree.”

“He has a cruel detachment about him.”

“Yes. He’s ready to dismiss a thing before he even looks at it.”

“This is fascinating. Or do you think maybe his cruelty is defensive, because he can’t see what’s there in front of him.”

“You might be right. His gaze isn’t just weak, it’s uncomprehending.”

“So is he really cruel? Or is he just frightened?”

“Well, a fine work of art bears more than one interpretation. But I don’t see much uncertainty or fear in him. He’s rather composed, set in his ways. I’d say that, given his age, and the wear and tear on his face, even if his sneer used to be defensive, by now it’s heartfelt. He’s grown into the features of his mask. And that’s the point. He’s frozen in an undiscriminating contempt.”

“And what about the red sweater?”

“It betrays an obvious lack of taste, which goes with his indifference to others. Of course if we got to know him he could turn out to be a perfectly decent fellow!”

Jeannie was obviously delighted by Elaine’s performance in the game of faces. She couldn’t resist asking her what Rembrandt would have meant by her own face.

“I was afraid you would ask me that,” Elaine said, “because now that I’ve met you I already have an idea how you actually inhabit your face. First of all it’s a beautiful face.”

“Thank you, Elaine.”

“Too beautiful for Rembrandt, in fact, and much too well lit. But you could be a Vermeer. Your blondeness is dazzling, and your eyes draw attention right away. They’re quite bold and honest. You’re not like Monsieur Red Sweater, there. You’re very attentive to the world and what’s in front of you. In fact your eyebrows seem to be constantly calibrating the distance between yourself and the world, inviting it closer and pushing it away.”

“This is like having my palm read only with my face.”

“Your eyes were fierce, by the way, the other day when you were telling me off at the counter, with your brows contracted downward. Quite impressive. But today they are quite warm. Your smile is warm too, but it’s a little inward-looking. It puts on a set front against the outside world. It says I’m comfortable in myself and I’m not sure I want to know what you think of me. It invites us to share your own view of yourself.”

“Yes, Elaine, that’s just me. I don’t want people to know too much. Just take what I give you.”

“The whole impression of the painting suggests an attractive elusiveness, but the thing that’s being hidden isn’t anything dark. A little youthful puckishness, perhaps. The artist was clever in giving you that headband to keep your hair back. The broad forehead adds seriousness to the eyes and makes the smile a little more complicated. We do want to know what’s behind there.”

“Elaine, you’ve made me so much more interesting than I actually am. I’m going to keep my inner blandness a secret.”

“I’m afraid we’re all doing that.”

“Not you, Elaine. I can’t imagine what artist could come up with you. But if you don’t mind, I have another painting for you.” She opened her purse and took out the photo of an attractive young man about thirty. He had thick long hair, almost down to his shoulders, and a bold, acquisitive gaze focused directly into the camera.”

“Is this your husband?”

“Not exactly.”

Elaine’s interpretation of Jeannie’s pictorial physiognomy wasn’t entirely candid. She minimized the self-protectiveness of Jeannie’s smile and didn’t mention the naiveté of her big eyes or the anxiously self-conscious eagerness of her mobile eyebrows. Nor was she brutally frank about Joshua, the man in the photo. She pronounced him self-confident and fun-loving, but in fact a certain sensual cruelty was evident in the shape of his mouth, though more subtle than the man with the sweater, and Elaine didn’t have to be an artist to recognize that long hair was an inescapable sign of hyper-masculinity, with all of its drawbacks. It took her awhile to think of the artist who would have painted Joshua until she remembered Durer’s self-portraits. As far as Elaine was concerned, it was a good thing the Renaissance and the sixties were over, keeping this long-haired narcissistic type from hiding among the common run of courtiers and hippies. In the bourgeois light of the 1990s, they stood out like Tarzan among the apes. So Elaine was ready for the story that Jeannie was going to fill her in on over several lunches.

Jeannie was happily married to a man ten years older than herself, a man she truly admired and who was smitten with her. Her husband had a fine career ahead of him as a prosecutor. He had high hopes of being state attorney general. She pronounced him idealistic, hard-working, generous, and kind. And he was certainly attractive. He was a husband you could be proud of. But then Joshua.

Joshua was a gloomy, conceited, complicated young man Jeannie had met at Starbuck’s on her lunch break. She didn’t normally talk to strange men, of course, but he asked her about the book she was reading, The Fountainhead, by Ayn Rand. He told her it was Nietzsche for the self-pitying executive. He didn’t think much of it, and she didn’t have a defense. Later on it turned out that he himself was an architect like the character in the book. Joshua asked if she would meet him for lunch, and she said she couldn’t, but he gave her his phone number anyway. By the time she became friends with Elaine, Jeannie was meeting Joshua twice a week. It was easy for her to get away. Her husband was busy and trusted her without a second thought.

Elaine feared that Jeannie was getting herself into a bad place. She professed to love her husband, and though she regretted his long hours, she enjoyed being the prosecutor’s wife. Joshua, on the other hand, was difficult to get along with and critical of her way of thinking about almost everything. This rattled her but kept her on the hook. He was free to set his own hours, so he was always available. And as much as Jeannie admired her husband’s work, Joshua had all kinds of big ideas about architecture and art and “Theory.” His intellectual world was very different from Michael’s, which centered upon crime and punishment, what the law says and doesn’t say. Joshua like to call “The Archangel Michael.”

Two weeks later in the café the man with the sweater was back, and this time he had a young woman with him. She was facing Jeannie and Elaine, and this gave them the chance to interpret her features artistically. She was pale, anxious looking, and anemic, and was wearing running clothes. “She’s just the opposite of her papa,” Jeannie said. She’s a picture of vulnerability and openness. Hanging on his every word.”

“How do you think the artist conceives her?”

“I’m not sure. What does she represent?”

“She’s not fixed in one expression the way he is. She’s more mobile. That requires more decision on the artist’s part. I was thinking that if they were in the picture together, and the artist had to fix her expression, it would be as strained and exaggerated as his is closed and grim. She has to work hard to get a rise out of that frozen mug.”

“So her expression is a response to his.”

“Well, that’s the way it works in art, doesn’t it? One character is designed to bring out the features of another.”

“Yes, naturally.”

“And maybe to understand anybody’s face you need to see the faces it grew up responding to.”

“Elaine, you are a deep one. You know what I’d like to do? I’d like to go talk to them and test out our theory.” Jeannie was half getting out of her chair.

“But it’s only a theory about their images,” Elaine said. “We don’t even know who they are!”

“I suppose not.”

“Here’s a story for you,” Elaine told her by way of distraction. “When I was in college there were these two professors who drank together every afternoon at a local bar. Both of them were nervous wrecks. One of them talked so fast and continuously that nobody could interrupt him, and the other one interrupted so continuously that nobody could finish a sentence. I always thought their conversational styles developed in tandem. One kept lathering on the words for fear of being interrupted and the other one kept jumping in to stop the momentum. They were a perfect pair.”

“So I have a question for you, Elaine, though it’s a little embarrassing. Do you still have your dolls?”

“You mean the ones I played with as a child?”

“Yes.”

“I kept a couple of my favorites till my kids got to them and tore them to shreds. That’s what they do, they tear your own childhood to shreds.”

“Do you miss them?”

“Not really. My kids have thoroughly replaced them. That’s part of being a mother. You get to relive your childhood through your kids. It replaces your childhood, really, with somebody else’s.”

“I still had my favorite dolly in my bedroom at home. I hadn’t really looked at her in years, but the other day for some reason she caught my eye and it suddenly occurred to me what the artist was trying to say through that face. She’s an absolutely silly, primitive, childish creature. Stupid really, not even in a funny way. And then I looked at myself in the mirror and I had exactly the same expression! It actually made me cry.”

“O Jeannie,” Elaine said, trying not to laugh. It was this strange simplicity that made the girl so lovable.

The next time Elaine saw Jeannie she could tell from the first minute that she was upset. “He’s cheating on me,” she said.

“Michael?”

“No, Joshua. I found a woman’s lipstick in his wastebasket and when I asked him about it he didn’t deny it. All he could say was he never minded me having a husband.”

“That is a point.”

“I know it is but I’m still mad. He was so completely not embarrassed.”

“You know I’m always suspicious of men with long hair. It always seems like a transgression onto women’s territory, that they’re so completely unembarrassed.”

“Yes, and he takes more time with it than any woman I know. You’d think he was posing for the big screen. I actually feel competition!”

Elaine found this hilarious. “I knew it,” she said.

“Well, I’ll show him,” Jeannie told her. “He’s going to wake up and find those locks on the floor.”

“You’re joking of course.”

I’m *not* joking of course. Just watch me. Michael is out of town till tomorrow, so I’m going over to Josh’s late this afternoon and when he falls asleep after sex, which he usually does, I’m going to give him the Sampson treatment.”

“That story doesn’t end well.”

“We’ll see. This is going to be Delilah’s second chance. Meet me here tomorrow and you’ll hear all about it.”

Elaine went back to work after lunch but all she could think about was Jeannie’s plan. At first she couldn’t believe in it, but the more she thought about it the more it seemed possible that her friend might carry it out. After all she was oddly impulsive. In spite of her good nature, she was the kind of person who would yell at a woman behind the counter; she would consider approaching strangers at another table with no other excuse than her curiosity about whether their personalities matched their faces. By the time Elaine got off at six o’clock, the possibility had her in a genuine panic. What would this guy do to Jeannie if he woke up and found that precious hair of his had been ravaged? She tried calling Jeannie at work but she wasn’t there. At home there was no answer. Joshua wasn’t at his firm. She found his home number in the phone book but there was no answer there either. Should she just go home and hope for the best? It was impossible. Josh’s apartment building was only a few blocks away, and Elaine found herself walking over there without knowing what she was going to do. She found Josh’s buzzer and pressed it. No answer. Had something terrible already happened? She tried again. Then she heard footsteps behind her. A teenaged kid with a grocery bag came up and opened the door. Elaine ran up to the fourth floor and banged on Josh’s door. What was she going to say if it was just him in there? Have you killed my friend Jeannie? She knocked again and again but apparently there was nobody home. There wasn’t a sound from inside.

Elaine had a long, sleepless night. She tried Jeannie again early in the morning but still there was no answer, and didn’t show up for work that morning either. Elaine began to think about calling the police. She got to her lunch meeting with Jeannie right on time and looked around the room but couldn’t find her until suddenly a woman sitting right in front of her said “Hello Elaine.” It was Jeannie. Elaine hadn’t recognized her because her long blonde hair had been radically cropped. She looked like Jean Seberg.”

“Jeannie, where have you been?”

“I have a lot to tell you Elaine.”

“I was worried sick about you. Did you cut Joshua’s hair?”

“Not exactly, but it’s been cut. More stylishly than I would have done.”

“What?”

“Here’s what happened. I told Joshua your theory about men’s long hair and hypermasculinity and the Renaissance and he thought it was totally hilarious and absolutely right.”

“Yes?”

“And I also told him that I wouldn’t see him anymore unless he cut it off and didn’t see other women.”

“Okay.”

“And he agreed as long as I cut my hair as well and give up Michael. So we shook hands on it and so on, and went to the barber, and then out on the town to celebrate.”

“I can’t believe it! Does he look like Jean Seberg too?”

“I don’t know who that is, but he’s definitely been tamed. I can’t wait for the two of you to meet.”