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## The Year without a Summer

by Victoria Cooper

You can learn a lot from a hairdresser.

You feel that while cocooned in a black leather swivel chair, safe under gown, your deepest, darkest secrets will ooze into pools by your feet along with the split ends. But you would be wrong. For you learn information in this mirrored retreat that you could never have contemplated before you approached the washbasins of knowledge. These jewels of fact, these pearls before swine, are deeply precious.

But what?

A hairdresser explains the misdiagnosed symptoms of coeliac disease as opposed to gluten intolerance; they inform which school has a terrible reputation despite the Outstanding OFSTED report. They advise that magenta is never a bathroom colour, and point out that Pisceans are easy going but make lousy DIYers. Conversely, your hair is their barometer; without words or gestures, just from the shortness of your layers, you know immediately that they argued with their husband the night before.

You learn who has had their ovaries removed; who vomited in the back of a taxi the night before and whose flea bites are hidden under their snood. But the most interesting, the one you anchor in your magpie mind, the one popped in your pocket with twitching fingers; bouncing inside you, desperate to be released, is simply that there will be no summer this year.

I am not sure how hairdressers know these things, they just do.

However, to describe these encounters as pure pedagogy would be wrong; at a salon, like no other meeting of minds, you candidly discuss how you hate your mother, husband, children, job and cellulite without a pause for breath or an iota of embarrassment. You vent, release, divulge and purge in a disgustingly joyful manner. I often consider how strange it is that this level of honesty goes unrepeated elsewhere. Dentists or opticians never get to the nub of your personal crisis, never peel away at those layers of self-doubt.

Maybe we feel less able to reveal when we have to spit out afterwards. There just seems to be something mutually intimate in a cut and blow dry that a dental examination or surprisingly even the ping of a latex gloved smear test cannot replicate. For you would never learn that the duty nurse has just been dumped or that the hygienist has terrible haemorrhoids.

So, when next visiting your hairdresser and they advise against purchasing barbecue tools; listen. Don't doubt them, just nod and take note.