

When I Was Young

by Laura Seel

The third-most exciting (koff, koff) highlight of my Christmas this year was picking up my Auntie Pat at her retirement trailer in Haines City, home of citrus outlets and retirement trailer parks, and bringing her back to our house for an overnight visit. My Auntie Pat—better known to my cousins, brothers and me as “Auntie Poot” or “The Pooter,” has hardening of the arteries and clinching of the pocketbook and is sometimes difficult for the family to take.

“You fetchin’ the Poot this year?” asked my brother, who usually gets stuck with this job.

“Yep.”

“Better stop at a roadside bar and buy her a few Manhattans. Makes the ride easier.”

That proved to be unnecessary; Poot was delightfully chipper even though we were driving during cocktail hour and despite the fact that I didn’t bring her back any Wedgewood china from England. She regaled me with tales of life at the trailer park: square dances, shuffleboard tournaments, water aerobics, shopping expeditions and potlucks. I listened and mm-hmmmed politely but was conscious of my tone of voice; I not only felt, but also sounded like I was indulging a five-year-old’s kindergarten stories. That’s when the Pooter took me by surprise.

“Yes, that’s the wonderful life of an old person, Laura,” she said.

First of all, she said my name. That was weird. Second of all, she looked at me

when she said it. I smiled at her and she looked away and chuckled. I was the one being indulged; at least my ideas about old people were. She’s a sharp old Poot.

The second-most exciting highlight was a visit to my hairdresser, or beauty technician as I’m almost sure she would like to be called. This is not your ordinary haircut experience.

The shop is owned by two middle-aged women, Brenda and Johnny. Between them, Brenda and Johnny beautify nearly every wealthy, important, prestigious person in town. They’ve got lawyers, doctors, city commissioners, accountants, even the mayor. They don’t cut hair that well, but they are a good dose of real humanity.

Brenda and Johnny rent out chairs in their salon to other hairdressers whose clientele consists mainly of senior citizens. Consequently, pacemakers go haywire when Brenda drops a brush and

screams, “Shit!” at the top of her lungs. And Johnny’s colorful descriptions of her ex-husband drown out the polite conversations going on at other chairs.

My parents both go to Brenda, and so do I. My mom goes round and round with her because Brenda gets to talking with Johnny or flirting on the phone with her 4 p.m. who’s called to cancel and squirts hair spray in my mom’s ear or burns her scalp with the hair dryer. Every time I come in, Brenda and Johnny coo over what a “good-lookin’ thang” my dad is. I keep that to myself so that we can all keep going there.

A melodrama unfolds nearly every day. One time I went, Brenda’s niece was being held hostage in her house by her cocaine-crazed ex-boyfriend, and Brenda gave the 911 operator an earful. Another time someone was having a birthday and Johnny brought out liquor that had been stashed behind the perm solutions at 3 in the afternoon.

When I arrived this time, Brenda and Johnny were telling Johnny’s 2 p.m. about how they went to have their fortunes read in the gypsy town near Orlando, and found, to their astonishment, that Brenda had been a French madame in a former life and Johnny, a Japanese man. As if that weren’t enough—“Get this, Elaine—wekneweach other! You believe that shit?”

“Well, that makes sense, don’t it, Brenda, ‘cause we get along so well,” Johnny theorized.

“Yep,” Brenda agreed. “We roll all over the floor, fightin’, screamin’, cussin’...”

“Yeah, and then we get up and have another beer, don’t we, Brenda?”

“Yeah, then we get up and laugh our asses off!”

Laughter (from Brenda, Johnny, and their customers) and strange, tense looks (from other chairs) ensued. Just then Johnny finished the middle-aged man she had been working on.

“Hey, look at this, Brenda!”

Brenda walked over and looked. And burst into laughter.

“I gave him a rinse! You believe that? He’s got black hair again!”

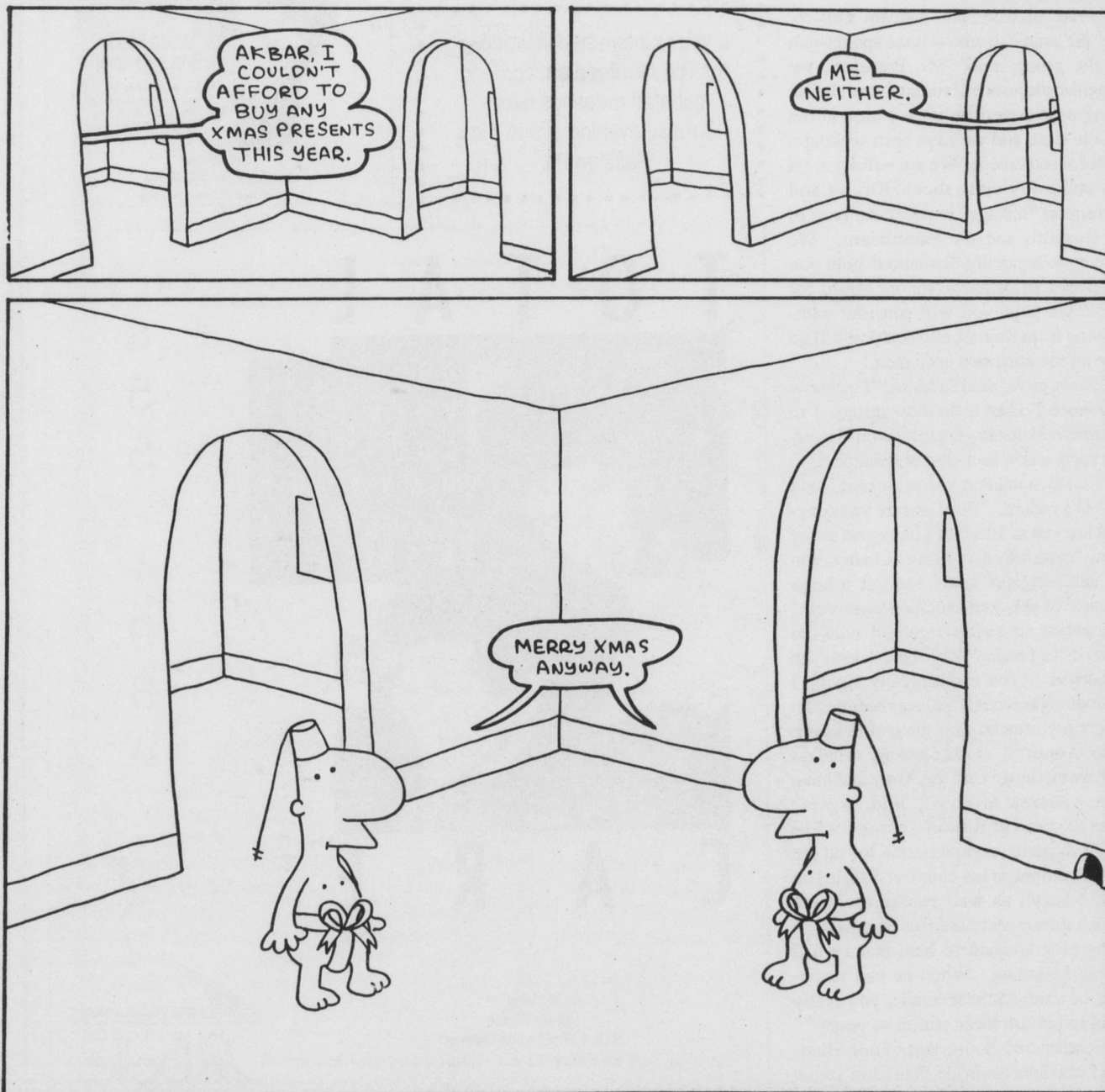
They guffawed over this for a minute as if it were a fluke. The man didn’t catch the joke, and neither did I, and neither did all the old ladies in the other chairs, and neither did Elaine, but that’s okay. People keep coming back to Brenda and Johnny because they laugh when they find something funny and they cry when they feel like it and they tell dirty jokes that they make up themselves. You can’t just sit back and observe it; they pull you in, offend you, teach you, entertain you, and for a half-hour or so you feel like a real human being. All this for a flat rate of \$18.

The His ‘n Hers Salon is a sharp contrast to the most exciting highlight of my Christmas break. The person involved is a lady in her 70s who can’t laugh when she feels like laughing or cry when she feels like

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LIFE IN HELL

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