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Opening extract from

The Way Back Home

Written by

Allan Stratton

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For

Charlie Sheppard



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Mom's running around like a maniac, trying to make our living room look normal. Good luck with that. You can hang Walmart landscapes where the hairdo pictures go, drape nylon sheets over the dryers, and cover the sinks with trays of pretzels, but a hairdressing salon is a hairdressing salon.

Monday to Saturday, Mom's 'gals' – 'Don't call them clients!' – gossip around the dinette set or watch TV from the dryer chairs. But today is Sunday and we're getting ready for company, which means I'm helping Dad drag the shag carpet up from his insurance office in the basement. It lives there 'cause 'Try vacuuming hair off shag all day.'

The carpet stinks worse than my principal's armpits. I'm not sure if it's from the damp concrete or Dad's sweaty feet; he takes off his shoes during panic attacks. Thank God for the fumes from Mom's rinse-sets, sprays and peppermint foot scrubs.

I lay out the carpet while Dad gets the Hide-a-Bed from the spare room so we can pretend we have a sofa. Mom's at the sink mirrors, too busy fussing with her wig to notice. She's developed 'alopecia' which is this thing

where your hair falls out. Seeing as she's a hairdresser, my English teacher would call that irony. Me, I call it karma.

'Is my wig okay?'

'It's fine. People can hardly tell.'

'But they *can* tell?'

'Only if they're looking.'

Mom glares. 'You!'

'So when are we getting Granny?'

'Granny's not coming,' Dad says, wheeling in the Hide-a-Bed.

'But she's always here, Sunday dinner.'

He squeezes it between the dryers. 'Tonight's special. We don't want her upsetting Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess.'

'Granny's not welcome because of *them*?'

Mom tugs at the back of her wig. 'She'd be in that dirty plaid dress and black sweater. Lord knows how many times I've tried to wash them.'

'If you're saying Granny stinks, she doesn't. Old people don't sweat.'

'It's not only that,' Dad says. 'Who knows what she'd say?'

'The truth. Granny says what she thinks.'

'No, she *doesn't* think. That's the problem.' Dad fans a fashion magazine under his armpits.

'Enough about your granny,' Mom says. 'Get dressed.'

'I'm hardly naked.'

'Your cousin won't be wearing jeans. If you'd kept your church clothes on, there wouldn't be a problem.'

'Except I'd be dead. Who even *has* to go to church in high school?'

'Quit dawdling,' Dad says.

'Dawdling? I'm hardly three.'

'Then stop acting like it.'

Talk to my butt. I stomp to my room.

'What's gotten into her lately?' he asks Mom as if I'm deaf. 'Is it a phase?'

'Yeah. My *life* is a phase,' I toss over my shoulder and slam the door behind me. Last summer, they took my phone and grounded me for stuff I didn't even do. Now they're on about Granny all the time. And they wonder why I'm mad?

Tonight's going to be brutal. If Granny were here, we'd play footsie under the table when we were bored and try not to laugh. Without her, how will I cope? I give her a call. 'Hi, Granny.'

'Pumpkin! I was just thinking about you.'

'I was thinking about you, too. Sorry I won't be seeing you tonight.'

'You were going to see me?'

'Yeah, but I can't now 'cause of Mom and Dad. But I'll drop by tomorrow like always.'

'Good. I'll save you a seat on the glider.'

I smile. 'Love you, Granny.'

'Love you too, sweetheart.'

We hang up and for a second I feel happy. Then I open my closet. *Sigh.*

I text my cousin Madi: 'What you wearing?'

She doesn't answer. She's probably texting a million friends about the cool party last night I wasn't invited to. I hope her thumbs fall off.

I put on this stupid Junior Miss outfit Mom got me. It makes me look like I'm in kindergarten only taller. At least it's not one of Madi's. Everyone at school knows I wear her hand-me-downs, especially when she says stuff like, 'Was I ever that flat?'

Madi's my best friend except I hate her. When we were little, she decided what toys I could play with. Now she decides who I can have as friends, which is nobody except the cool kids at her table in the caf. And they're not even friends. They don't invite me to their parties and I have to laugh along when Madi throws shade about my hand-me-downs and where I live.

What kind of loser puts up with that?

A loser like me, that's who. I'm so like my parents it makes me puke. 'Cause for the record, Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess coming here isn't 'special'. It's *unbelievable*, as in seeing Martians at Burger King unbelievable. My parents pretend it's 'cause Uncle Chad's so busy with his tractor dealership and Aunt Jess with her social committees. But the *real* reason is we live in a one-storey aluminum box near the highway and they live where the houses are two-storey brick and the streets have sidewalks.

I mean, Aunt Jess doesn't even drop by for Mom to do

her hair. She and Madi go to Sylvie's over in Woodstock 'cause, 'Sylvie isn't a hairdresser: she's a stylist'. Also, she was born in Montreal and has this 'Je ne sais quoi', which is about all the French Aunt Jess knows.

Is Mom calling me?

'Zoe, for the last time, get out here. They're almost at the steps.'

I take my place at the door, five steps back from my parents. Dad's changed into the special herringbone suit he wears when he's asked to do the scripture reading. He pats the jacket pocket where he keeps Grampa's lucky watch.

The Mackenzies knock. Mom counts to ten before opening the door, so they won't know she's been hovering at the window.

'Jess, Chad, Madi!' Mom says, like this is a pleasant surprise.

Apparently the Mackenzies didn't get the memo about tonight being special. They're wearing what Aunt Jess calls 'leisure attire'. Oh yeah, and Madi's in jeans. Designer, but still. She takes one look at my Junior Miss outfit and her eyes go, *Please tell me I never wore that. Ever.*

Mom hugs Aunt Jess like she's her long-lost sister, which is sort of true.

'You didn't need to go to all this trouble,' Aunt Jess says, glancing at the nylon sheets on the hair dryers.

'No trouble,' Mom says, as if Aunt Jess meant it.

'Oh, and what have you done with your hair?'

Mom blushes. 'Just a little this and that.'

Uncle Chad hands Dad a bottle of wine. 'A little something for dinner.' By which he means *their* dinner, since my family doesn't drink. Except for me: apparently I'm this raging alcoholic for sneaking half a beer at Madi's two years ago. Which She Gave Me.

All the same, Dad takes it 'cause, hey, it's Uncle Chad and Aunt Jess. Mom offers them seats on the Hide-a-Bed; she and Dad sit on the sink chairs. This is when Madi and I used to go outside, only since high school she's allergic to being seen at our place – which, okay, so am I. Instead we go to my bedroom.

Madi closes the door and gives me a look. 'You're not going to get the money.'