

The Mysterious Painting

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On a Sunday night Jack was at the cinema with his girlfriend Daisy. They were watching the film >>**Seven Years in Tibet**<<. Jack was absolutely fascinated, not by the movie itself but by the marvellous actor Brad Pitt. In fact it wasn't Pitt's acting that fascinated Jack so completely, it was the actor's extraordinary haircut. His nicely trimmed hair was indescribably stylish especially from behind and made him terribly envious. Jack forgot all about the film and his girlfriend. The only thing he could focus on was this unique haircut. He couldn't get it out of his mind. Several times Daisy tried to engage

Jack in a conversation. She whispered nice words like "I love you" or "Oh, my darling" in his ear. - No response.

Jack was far away in his dreams. He identified with the actor completely. It was him now who had this exceptional haircut.

After the film the couple went to a restaurant in Leicester Square. Jack wasn't hungry. He wasn't thirsty, either. He neglected Daisy. He ignored the waiter. The haircut wouldn't leave his thoughts. He went to the toilet although he didn't need the toilet. What he was looking for was a mirror in which he could examine the shape of his head from all angles. The shape was perfect, exactly like Brad Pitt's head, but the haircut was a real disappointment to him. For so many years he had been dissatisfied with what hairdressers called a nice haircut. He had tried out every imaginable way to show the hairdressers what he wanted, with no success. He tried describing it, they showed him photos of models and celebrities, but never ever did they manage to give him what he wanted. Sometimes he showed his disappointment, sometimes he tried to hide it in order not to insult the hairdresser. He had almost given up the idea of finding a haircut that he liked. Now he knew exactly what he wanted. His only problem was how to find a hairdresser who could put his ideas into action.

Jack decided to go back to Daisy. He didn't want to make her wait too long. He was wondering whether he should discuss his problem with her. When she asked him how he liked the film he started telling her about the haircut. Daisy couldn't believe what she heard.

"Jack", she said, "I like the haircut you have. I like your face, your broad shoulders, your elegant neck, your wonderful eyes and your soft skin. Why are you bothering about your haircut?"

"Oh, darling", answered Jack and took her hand, "I don't even know why this haircut is so important to me. I feel so uncomfortable about the way I look."

They talked about nothing else all evening, and late at night when Jack was brushing his teeth in front of the mirror, he looked at his hair and said to Daisy: "Well, you are right, dear, it's not too bad." However, privately he thought that the hair at the back was not trimmed perfectly. He went to bed anyway and had a good sleep and a nice dream that night.

In the morning he was late for work. He rushed out of the house without breakfast and got on the tube to Queensway where he worked at the reception desk of a hotel. In the early hours of the morning an airport shuttle with tourists from Austria arrived. Jack made them fill in check-in-cards, and occasionally he looked at what the tourists were writing. A young girl aroused his attention because she was writing with her left hand. She was

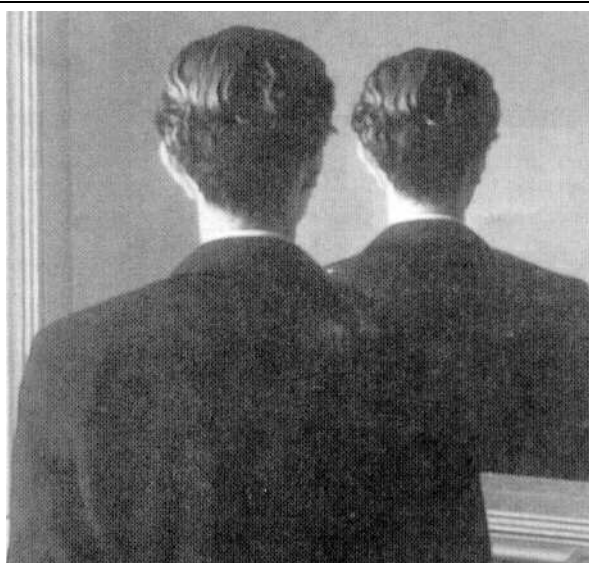


Image 1: René Magritte
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left-handed, like himself. He watched her writing and realised that she seemed to have some difficulties with the word "*profession*". She looked desperate. He smiled and asked her: "What do you do?" She answered: "How do you do." He smiled again, realising that she was not very good at English. So he added: "What's your profession, Madame? - I mean, .. what's your job?"

Now she smiled at him, too. "Ha-Hair", she answered, pointed at her hair and demonstrated with her hands how she would use scissors.

"You are a hairdresser?" guessed Jack and waited impatiently for confirmation.

"Yes", she replied, "a hairdresser." Without the slightest suspicion she said thank you to the speechless receptionist who stared at her in disbelief. She finished filling in the check-in-card and took her room key, which Jack had dropped on the desk in his excitement. She left without paying any attention to the puzzled receptionist who wanted to say something but simply couldn't.

At this very moment the telephone rang. It was Daisy: "Hi, Jack!" she shouted into the phone. "When are you coming home in the evening?"

"At about 6 o'clock, darling."

"How about some pizza in Covent Garden?"

"Good idea, I will be hungry. I'm not going to have lunch today."

"OK, let's meet outside Covent Garden Tube station at six thirty then."

"All right, Daisy. Bye."

"Bye, Jack. Lots of kisses."

Jack produced the sound of a kiss, put down the receiver and wrote a note: Covent Garden Tube Station - 6.30, Daisy. He stuck it to his desk.

At about 12 o'clock the Austrian girl came down and asked Jack if he could recommend a good restaurant where she could have lunch. Jack, who felt extremely hungry, offered to accompany her to *The Bull*, his favourite pub just around the corner. Resi agreed. At the pub they ordered jacket potatoes and two pints of Spitfire, Jack's favourite bitter. The girl didn't like the beer. She was used to Austrian lager and couldn't believe that there was no froth on the beer. But she drank it anyway and it made her giggle and talk continuously.

Jack liked the way Resi talked, her Austrian accent, her simple vocabulary, her way of describing things he couldn't find a name for. The only correct sentences she spoke were proverbs like "**An apple a day keeps the doctor away**" and "**When in Rome do as the Romans do**", which she had learnt at school from a book called **Ann and Pat**¹. Jack wanted to know what kind of haircut was fashionable in Austria. It was too difficult for Resi to answer that question. So Jack asked her if she could name famous Austrians whose haircuts served as models for the typical Austrian. Those who came into Resi's mind first were Karl Moik, Bertl Göttl, Herbert Fux and Sepp Forcher². As Jack didn't know any of them she had a good opportunity to practice the English **questions with "to do"**. "Do you know Niki Lauda³? Do you know Arnold Schwarzenegger? Do you ..." Jack knew Lauda and Schwarzenegger but he was not very impressed by their haircuts. In simple words he tried to tell Resi his problems with British hairdressers and asked her if she had seen the film "Seven Years in Tibet". Like so many Austrians Resi had seen the film. She knew quite well what haircut Brad Pitt had. As she was a hairdresser the features that struck her most when she saw a person were the shape of the head and the haircut. Jack got so excited, he even trembled. He saw his chance to get what he had been looking for for such a long time. "Do you think you could give me a haircut, Resi?" he asked.

¹ Ann and Pat, legendary Austrian schoolbook by Walter Kacowsky

² all of the mentioned persons are local Austrian celebrities in the fields of film, politics and weather forecast

³ Three times world Formula One champion

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"Oh", Resi replied, "it is Monday⁴. I'm not used to working on Mondays. In Austria hairdressers have their day off on Monday. But I will make an exception. By chance I have my equipment with me, in the hotel."

Jack was indescribably happy and said: "I'm on duty in the afternoon, but would it be possible in the evening, let's say at 6 o'clock?"

"Sure", Resi replied and giggled.

At five past six Jack entered Resi's room. Everything was ready. Resi offered him a seat and started her work. When Jack asked her for a mirror she refused. "If you want a perfect haircut, you must trust me."

Jack felt a bit uncomfortable. His head was literally in Resi's hands. He closed his eyes. So many thoughts ran through his mind. "I don't know her. Is she really a hairdresser? She mentioned Niki Lauda. I hope she won't give me a haircut that forces me to wear a cap⁵ for the rest of my life. And Moik⁶? Well, it's not the haircut that can be blamed for his looks. Oh, how sensitively she is touching my head. Her hands are so soft. I really trust her. She must be a good hairdresser. And she hasn't got a reason to spoil my haircut. She likes me. I helped her with the registration card. I recommended The Bull. She will not disappoint me. ..."

"Finished", she said at last, "now you can look in the mirror."

Jack dashed to the bathroom and couldn't believe what he saw. It was definitely not Brad Pitt's haircut, but it was not too bad, either. Actually it was quite nice. The longer he looked into the mirror the more he liked the haircut. The back of his head especially was a real sensation. With a second mirror he examined the back in detail. His happiness seemed to reach its climax when something in the mirror gave him a terrible shock. He had seen the clock. It was 6.30, he was far away from Covent Garden and Daisy was waiting for him. His feelings of happiness turned into feelings of guilt. He dashed out of the room with an expression of horror on his face.

When Resi saw him she was shocked, but before she could ask him he was gone.

Jack took the next tube to Covent Garden. When he arrived Daisy was no longer there. He walked around aimlessly and without any hope of finding her. "How angry she must be," he thought. He wondered what excuses he could make and what he could do to reconcile her. Suddenly a voice brought him back to reality. It was an artist.

"Shall I paint you, sir," he said. "There is still some paint on my palette, I must use it up, otherwise it will dry out."

"No, thanks", Jack replied and went down to The Strand. Suddenly he thought: "Why not?" and he went back to the artist.

"Excuse me", he said, "I have a strange wish. Can you paint me from behind? A young girl cut my hair today. I'm absolutely satisfied with this haircut, especially the back, my problem zone."

The artist couldn't hide his big smile. He agreed and showed all his skill. People stopped and looked at the model as well as at the painting. Many were smiling, others seemed to be puzzled. Within half an hour there were about a hundred people gathering around the artist. Even jugglers and clowns came along to see how someone could attract such a big crowd. Two unicyclists made their way through the crowd and observed the painter's work from up above. And before the painting was finished a camera team for the Evening News tried to start filming the unusual scene. They interviewed Jack: "Oh, what a strange idea to have the back of one's head painted! Are you unhappy with your face?"

"Not at all", Jack replied, "you won't believe me if I tell you the real reason."

⁴ For centuries it was common all over Austria that hairdressers had their day off on Monday.

⁵ Since his 1976 fire accident at the F1 race in Hockenheim Niki Lauda has been wearing a red cap to cover his skin transplants.

⁶ Karl Moik has earned worldwide recognition with his Musikantenstadl

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"Please tell us!"

"Well, to cut a long story short, an Austrian hairdresser cut my hair today, and it is exactly what I have been looking for all of my life. The back is particularly nice, isn't it?"

"And so you are having the back of your head painted?"

"Yes, I want to have a picture to show hairdressers how to cut my hair for the rest of my life."

A photographer for **The Sun**⁷ wanted to take a picture. He asked Jack to stand behind the painting which was quickly put in a frame. This photo appeared not only in The Sun but also in a famous London Fashion Magazine **HELLO**, and hairdressers all over the country cut it out and put it in their catalogues with all those model haircuts. Every now and then a customer chooses this picture as a model for his haircut. And Jack, who apologised to Daisy for being late is a happy and well balanced man now. His dream has come true. And whenever he needs a haircut, he has a hairdresser come to his house, puts on his suit that he was wearing when the painting was made, sits behind his painting and has his hair cut. With a special arrangement of mirrors he compares the real haircut with that of the picture.

In spite of incredible efforts Jack was not able to find the Austrian hairdresser ever again. She had left London because she thought Jack was angry about the haircut.

The painter has become really successful. People are queuing at his *place* in Covent Garden. A copy of the famous painting is always by his side and he now actually specialises in paintings from behind. Many people want to be painted from behind, especially women who have perfect hair but find their faces ugly. The news coverage made the painter René Magritte⁸ famous.

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⁷ The Sun: British newspaper with the highest circulation figures and the biggest pictures.

⁸ This is of course untrue! Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte lived from 1898-1967.