



FLEECED

THE HAIRCUT HE'LL NEVER FORGET

by George Ding

Seven or eight years ago, when I was in Beijing during summer vacation, I asked my male cousin, who styled his hair meticulously to resemble his idol Jay Chou, where I should go for a quality haircut that was relatively cheap. He recommended an upscale place in Xidan called Mubei – they had a promotion where haircuts were only RMB 35.

Mubei was a well-lit salon located in the 77th Street mall, with a curved bank of windows facing a legion of hydraulic barber chairs.

"Welcome!" shouted one of the employees as she opened the door for me. Even then, hair salons were the most overstaffed places in China.

I told her I wanted to get my hair cut. She led me to an empty seat.

"It's 35 *kuai*, right?" I asked.

"Indeed," she confirmed. "Is there someone specific you'd like to cut your hair?"

"It's my first time here. Anyone is fine," I said.

She nodded. Before long, I was greeted by a man with bangs sweeping across the side of his face like the lead singer of an emo band.

"I'm Ken." He had a great smile. He asked if I wanted my hair cut a certain way. I thought, *What the hell, it's 35 kuai, do your worst.*

"I trust your judgment," I said. "Do whatever looks good."

I knew this meant that he'd give me the haircut he had. Sure enough, I felt one side of my head become a lot lighter than the other. After about an hour, he showed me my haircut in the mirror. I gave him the nod of approval but, instead of ushering me out of the chair, he grinned and asked, "Do you want to dye your hair?"

I thought about this for a moment. I'd never gotten my hair dyed before. I looked at Ken. He made a face like, *Come on, give it a shot!*

I nodded. After all, this was only 35 *juan*, right? Ken went off and returned with two tubes of dye.

He asked if I wanted the regular kind or the more expensive one that would stay in longer.

Nice try, Ken, I thought to myself. I might be young but I'm not stupid. I knew how these things worked. You buy the car and then they try to sell you the rust proofing. I told him I'd take the first one.

So they bleached my hair, then turned it electric blue. He showed me in the mirror. I had to admit, it looked pretty cool. Best 35 *kuai* haircut ever!

But again, as I was about to get out of the chair, Ken asked if I wanted a perm. Again, I thought, *Why the hell not? It's only four dollars. You only live once!*

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So they put my hair in rolls, covered it in tin foil like some futuristic sushi, and put me under a perm machine. They left me there for what felt like an eternity. Every time I nodded off, my head would hit the metal casing and it would burn me awake.

When they finally took the curlers out of my hair, the light outside had faded. Ken spun me around for one final look in the mirror. My hair stuck straight up and then dipped across the left side of my face like a crashing wave. In the middle of this was a zig-zag lightning bolt of sharp blue. I looked like the bassist in Ken's emo band.

To be honest, it wasn't really my style but for 35 *kuai*, I couldn't complain. I walked to the register and pulled out a 50-*kuai* bill. *They've done such a good job, I might just give them a tip*, I said to myself.

The cashier punched some numbers into a

calculator and then showed me the readout. It was three digits which formed an integer close to the maximum number that could be formed with three digits.

I asked, in retrospect, maybe the stupidest question of my life: "Wasn't this haircut 35 *juan*?"

In my memory, everyone in the salon stops and laughs but in reality they were probably doing their best to restrain themselves.

The cashier carefully explained to me that the perm was three-hundred-something, the bleaching was one-hundred-something, and the dye job was another three-hundred-something. But yes, the haircut itself was 35 *juan*.

This was the first mention of money in nearly five hours and now I owed these people RMB 888. I opened my wallet. I had two hundred-*kuai* notes.

Seeing my financial predicament, the cashier said, "Tell you what, just give us RMB 880."

I thought about breaking the window open with a barber chair and seeing how far I could run. In the end, I called my aunt who was on her way home from work. I sat down on the cushions next to the window and waited. No one wanted to make eye contact with me, even with my sweet new hair.

Eventually my aunt showed up and paid the bill. I promised to pay her back. She shot me a look like, *What the f*** were you thinking?* and dragged me out of the salon.

It was an expensive lesson but I learned it well that day: Just because someone doesn't mention money doesn't mean it's free.

Ken was waiting for us at the door. As I trudged out, face ripening with embarrassment, he smiled warmly and gave me his card. I wonder if it's still where I left it, at the bottom of the nearest trash can in Xidan.