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“The Michelle I Know” story by Alison Lohans

Rob was late. And last night he’d gone to the after-game dance. With Vanessa.

Michelle turned over. The hospital bed was hard and confining. The entire back of her neck felt like one giant pillow crease. She rubbed it and as always, her fingers crept upward to explore the terrifying bleak landscape where her hair was supposed to be. She didn’t have the energy to pound the pillow good and hard. Even if she did, she’d probably knock the intravenous needle out of place and then she’d have to lie there gritting her teeth while nurses poked and jabbed to set another IV.

It wasn’t fair. Sometimes she felt so tired and sick it was even hard to lift the remote control for the TV.

Her clock radio said it was 7:27. Maybe Rob wasn’t coming. She wasn’t much to come to. Not any more. Even after the other kids quit showing up, he’d stuck it out. Once he’d even smuggled in his mom’s poodle pup to break the monotony. But now maybe he was having second thoughts.

All Michelle could see outside the fourth story window was cottony orange light dissolving into darkness. In the distance a siren screamed, drew nearer, then passed beneath her window. If she got up, she’d see blood-red lights flashing below and people hurrying into Emergency, all softened by the winter fog. Sometimes the fog got so thick it looked like you could walk right out the window and keep on going. Michelle’s mouth quirked. In reality, it would be more like plunging down-gown flapping about her, IV monitor and pole and bottles all set to smash on the sidewalk. How much would it hurt, before ... ? But that might be a quick escape.

The guitar started playing again. Michelle relaxed a bit and fidgeted with her earrings. One of the holes in her left ear was kind of sore. She sighed and took out the tiny purple triangle, feeling for a safe spot on the bedside table. If her earlobe got infected, Dr. Warkentin would give her major heck.

She closed her eyes and tried to let the music wash away her frustration. It was total boredom, being in hospital for almost two months.

Probably she was turning into a turnip. Or some kind of squash. No wonder Rob wasn't here. Vegetables weren't the greatest company. At least the music made everything more bearable. This was the third day. Or was it only the second? Time got pretty blurry, cut off from her normal life.

The soft scuff of rubber soles on carpet, the faintest swish of clothing told her that Brenda, the evening nurse, had come in. "Hi, kiddo," came the cheery voice. "Anything I can do for you?"

Eyes still shut, Michelle shook her head. She'd had it with hospitals. With routines. Needles in her arms. Chemotherapy that left her feeling like something a pulp mill spat out.

Brenda's voice prodded at her. "Your friend's late."

Michelle looked dully at the young nurse. "I don't think he's coming."

"Oh hush!" Briskly the older girl straightened the untouched pile of magazines left by the occupational therapist.

"I bet--"

"Watch out for my earnings." Michelle tensed, then heard the predictable thkk sound of a tiny object hitting the carpet.

"Sorry." Brenda stooped. "I'll put it in your top drawer, okay? Now. Your friend. I bet the fog's keeping him.

When I went out at supper it was like walking through whipped cream."

Michelle smiled faintly and waited while Brenda took her pulse and temperature, then checked the drip from her IV bottle.

Brenda patted her hand. "Cheer up. Doctor says your blood counts are super. You're on your way to remission, kid, and you know what that means."

"Yeah," she said sourly. "I get to go home and wait six months before I have enough hair to do anything with." It would be heaven to go home, though. It seemed ages since she'd been someone, with thick dark hair that swished against her cheeks. Who had lots of friends, and clothes that fit right. Who felt like the world was hers.

Now it was safest not to hope.

Brenda tossed her straw-coloured braid over her shoulder, then placed her hands in her uniform pockets. “You’ll feel lots better once you’re home. But you may not want to leave us ...” The nurse’s voice lowered. “You’ve got an admirer right here in our midst and he thinks you’re gorgeous.”

“Yeah, nght. Tell me another one.” Michelle shifted and the IV pole rattled.

“Honest. It sure isn’t me.” Brenda indicated her comfortably padded waistline. “If I ever get a boyfriend I’ll know I’m dreaming.”

“At least you’ve got hair.” What she really meant was that Brenda had a face that was ... friendly. The kind that was sure to draw people to her but it would sound pretty sucky to say it out loud.

“So have you,” Brenda countered. “Where is it, stuffed in the drawer with your washbasin?”

To be exact, the wig was stuffed in the drawer under the washbasin. Mom bought it when her hair first started thinning. It was awful. The colour was right, but that was all. Any way you looked at it, it was fake hair-like what you’d see on a Barbie doll.

Michelle glared at her skinny arms, mottled with bruises and needle scars. “It’s gross,” she muttered. “It’s too hot. And prickly. Who cares, anyhow, with a death sentence hanging over your head?”

Brenda swished across the room to get a handful of clean straws from the cabinet. “Cases like yours go into remission for years now, Michelle,” she said firmly. The way she said it, it sounded like she knew exactly how it felt to lie there at 3:00 a.m., scared cold, and faking sleep as the night shift crept in with flashlights to check the IV and write on the chart. “We had the cutest little guy in here once-he never came back, so we all started thinking maybe he didn’t make it. But Doctor says she sees him every now and then, skateboarding and riding his bike like a maniac.”

Michelle fell silent. In the hallway came the clatter of rolling wheels. Sour-faced Mrs. Begbie paused in the doorway, leaning heavily on her IV pole, her own bald head covered by a turquoise hat with wild feathers. “Nurse,” she wheezed, “can you get someone to bring my pain shot?”

Brenda glanced at her watch. “I’ll go check on it for you, Mrs B.”

Bored, Michelle flicked the TV switch. But that drowned out the guitar. She flicked it off and the screen went blank. Just like she felt. Visiting hours were almost over. Rob wasn't coming.

Suddenly Brenda was back. "C'mon-I'll take you to see Claude. Your admirer. Keep your friend guessing a little, huh?"

Michelle inspected the cool clear tubing that fed sugar water and sometimes, chemo into her arm. "I don't feel like it."

"C'mon, go for it! Put on your wig-you can model it for Dr. Hernandez. He's at the nursing station."

Michelle groaned, then sat up because there was nothing better to do. But she left the wig in the drawer. "This Claude. Is he bald like me?"

"Right on. And he thinks you're gorgeous."

"Oh sure." Wearily Michelle swung her legs over the edge of the bed and let Brenda put slippers on for her. Her knees were bony. And the skimpy hospital gown was too much-even a mannequin would drop dead wearing it. She slid one arm into the hot-pink dressing gown Brenda held ready, but even that looked gimpy with one sleeve dangling because of the IV.

"Glamour!" Brenda's eyes teased her.

"What'd you do with my mink, throw it down the laundry chute?"

"Yep." Brenda's strong arm came around Michelle's waist as she pushed up, grasping the IV pole "And I'm afraid I've got some bad news. It shrank."

Dr. Hernandez, the young resident, looked up and waved as they inched down the hallway. Michelle waved back, then remembered. Rob hadn't come.

"And here's Claude."

Michelle took one look and wished she could turn and run. Except she was too tired.

Claude was old enough to be her father. His arms were bruised like her own. His bald head gleamed with shiny flesh. A guitar lay in his lap.

Dizzy with exhaustion, Michelle sank into a visitor's chair. Some admirer. What was he, a dirty old man? See if she ever listened to Brenda again!

"So you're Michelle."

"Yeah," she mumbled and looked away.

"We're all pretty proud of Claude," Brenda said. "He's been in and out of this place for eight years now, and each time he comes back, we learn something new."

Eight years? And she'd thought eight weeks was torture. "I can hear you in my room," Michelle said hesitantly, since they obviously expected her to talk. "It helps."

Light glowed in the man's dark eyes, and suddenly his face was beautiful. "I taught myself to play in this joint," he said "Drove everybody nuts." His right hand, splinted to keep the IV needle in place, strummed the guitar with a caressing stroke. A flurry of notes scattered.

"You?" said Brenda. "Never."

Outside, a train rumbled past. Michelle fell silent. Ironic how hospitals ended up in the noisiest parts of town. Ironic how she, once with everything going for her, had so quickly been thrust on a shelf, forgotten, and now by Rob, too. Once cancer cells got their claws into you, none of the old rules applied. You were totally at the mercy of doctors and nurses. And the disease.

"It's not so easy, eh?" Claude's soft voice startled her.

Quickly she forced her face into a polite mask. No point in grasping for the sympathy of somebody just as sick-probably forty, and bald besides. Brenda had disappeared; she guessed it was either be polite and talk, or else try getting back on her own. "No," she said. There was a long pause. Claude's bound fingers gently plucked the guitar. "You've had leukemia for eight years?" she burst out.

"Eight years. A long time. It's been pretty hard on the family. But I'm lucky. Most patients my age don't last."

Michelle looked cautiously at Claude, whose shiny bald head had odd bumps and ridges just like hers, who lacked eyelashes and eyebrows. Just as she did. "Do you ever feel like-" She broke off, then barged ahead after a steadying breath: "Like sometimes you'd rather die than be poked by one more needle?"

Claude looked beyond her, out at the night sky. “Sometimes,” he said at last. “But we were each given a life. You don’t throw that out like garbage.”

“I hate it!” Sudden tears trickled down Michelle’s cheeks and she wiped at them furiously. “How I look. How I feel. I hate everything!” She sniffed hard, blew her nose, but couldn’t stop.

“Yeah, it gets that way sometimes.” Claude’s fingers coaxed more notes out of the guitar, sending music spilling into the hallway. Michelle rested her cheek against the ridge of the bedside table. “I’ve been there,” he went on. “But you know, we’re all in this together.”

“Not my friends,” she said bitterly.

“You have to be strong inside,” he said. “Don’t waste yourself fighting the wrong things,”

Michelle traced her fingertip along the hard tabletop. At least this man was better than sour Mrs. Begbie, or Mr. Morris who let himself be wheeled around like a big doll. This man had dignity. Did she?

“Michelle?” Brenda’s voice penetrated. “I found this guy wandering around the hallway. Is he somebody you know?”

Rob! He stood there in the doorway, still bundled up in his jacket, his face tense.

With a great effort Michelle wiped her eyes. “Hi,” she mumbled.

The music stopped. A warm hand rested on her shoulder. “Remember. You’ve got to fight it.”

She managed a wan smile. “Yeah.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Rob said. “That fog’s impossible. I practically had to get out and put my nose on the street just to see the lines.”

“Your attention please.” The cold voice of the intercom spoke with dismissive finality. “Visiting hours are now over.”

“Shush!” Brenda waved her hand at the speaker in the ceiling. “Quick! To your room!”

Shakily Michelle stood up, leaning on her IV pole. Rob moved in to help her. He smelled like fresh air. Which meant she must smell like ... the hospital. Sick. Grimly, she kept her legs moving and her

grip tight on the pole; she'd already learned how hard it could be to get back up after a fall. But visiting hours were over and now Rob would have to go. Her eyes blurred.

"Who was that guy?" Rob asked.

"He's been sick for eight years." She knew she was wobbly, but it felt as if Rob had just shuddered. Walking took so much of her energy that she couldn't say more. Her bed, freshly made up, looked like heaven. Wearily she sank onto it.

But Brenda was drawing the curtains around her. Rob was pulling up a chair. "She says I can stay half an hour if I promise to be good," he whispered.

Brenda winked and disappeared.

Suddenly Michelle didn't know what to say. Here was Rob, late because of the fog. But his face was still tense and his eyes were guarded. "How was last night?" she mumbled.

"Okay," he said indifferently. "We won the game."

They were not on the same wavelength. Needing to be doing something, Michelle reached for her mirror and studied herself. Her shiny bald head, the hony ridges where her eyebrows had once been. She yanked the wig out of the drawer and pulled it on. Loose hairs caught in her right earring. Furtively she glanced at Rob. "Well?" she demanded. "Am I still ugly?"

Rob sighed.

Might well forget it. Who wanted a bald girlfriend who couldn't do anything but cry? "I'm ugly compared to Vanessa." She couldn't help the waspish note that sliced into her voice.

"What's the deal about Vanessa?" Rob's fingers tensed as they dangled between his knees. "I only went for something to do. Vanessa's boring, okay? The whole stupid dance was boring. What else do you want to know, what we-"

"Sorry." She felt heat creeping into her face. "When you were so late, I guess I thought ..." Out of the corner of her eye she watched him. His jaw was tight, but his green eyes were intent on her. "And then because I'm so ugly and everything, I thought ... Oh forget it!" She pulled the wig off and threw it. It landed on her IV bottle and dangled there rakishly.

Michelle bit her lip. It looked so awful she nearly cried-to think she'd hoped Rob might like her better with the wig on. But it didn't look just awful, it looked-awful. So awful that ... A giggle escaped.

Suddenly Rob lurched to his feet. He bowed to the IV pole. "Allow me, madam, may I have this dance?"

Michelle laughed out loud.

Rob grinned.

Michelle clapped a hand over her mouth, trying to keep her voice down, for suddenly she couldn't stop laughing. But she couldn't let herself get carried away. It was all very well for noble Rob to come to the hospital every day to see poor Michelle, who was so sick with leukemia, but ...

"You shouldn't feel like you have to come here all the time," she mumbled. "It's no fun for you. I mean, you've been fantastic, really fantastic, but I don't want you to start hating me because I'm such a ... " She swallowed hard.

Rob had to be set free. It wasn't fair to expect him to be the knight in shining armour. She had to have the strength to let him go.

"Michelle." His voice was quiet; solemnly he lifted a few strands of hair from the wig, rubbing them between his thumb and fingertips. "What we've got-it's based on a little more than hair, you know?"

She hiccupped, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing.

She had to change gears, fast. Deliberately, she rubbed her hand over her bald head. "Well, at least this never gets tangled." She gulped in a deep breath. "How do you think it would look with flowers painted on it?"

Miraculously, Rob was still there. He was even laughing, and his incredible, world-stopping grin was dawning in his eyes. For the first time in months, Michelle felt a real smile swelling inside.

"Now that's the Michelle I know, Rob murmured. He leaned closer.

Just Lather, That's All

Translated by Donald A. Yates

He said nothing when he entered. I was passing the best of my razors back and forth on a strop. When I recognized him I started to tremble. But he didn't notice. Hoping to conceal my emotion, I continued sharpening the razor. I tested it on the meat of my thumb, and then held it up to the light. At that moment he took off the bullet-studded belt that his gun holster dangled from. He hung it up on a wall hook and placed his military cap over it. Then he turned to me, loosening the knot of his tie, and said, "It's hot as hell. Give me a shave." He sat in the chair.

I estimated he had a four-day beard. The four days taken up by the latest expedition in search of our troops. His face seemed reddened, burned by the sun. Carefully, I began to prepare the soap. I cut off a few slices, dropped them into the cup, mixed in a bit of warm water, and began to stir with the brush. Immediately the foam began to rise. "The other boys in the group should have this much beard, too." I continued stirring the lather.

"But we did all right, you know. We got the main ones. We brought back some dead, and we've got some others still alive. But pretty soon they'll all be dead."

"How many did you catch?" I asked.

"Fourteen. We had to go pretty deep into the woods to find them. But we'll get even. Not one of them comes out of this alive, not one."

He leaned back on the chair when he saw me with the lather-covered brush in my hand. I still had to put the sheet on him. No doubt about it, I was upset. I took a sheet out of a drawer and knotted it around my customer's neck. He wouldn't stop talking. He probably thought I was in sympathy with his party.

"The town must have learned a lesson from what we did the other day," he said.

"Yes," I replied, securing the knot at the base of his dark, sweaty neck.

"That was a fine show, eh?"

"Very good," I answered, turning back for the brush. The man closed his eyes with a gesture of fatigue and sat waiting for the cool caress of the soap. I had never had him so close to me. The day he ordered the whole town to file into the patio of the school to see the four rebels hanging there, I came face to face with him for an instant. But the sight of the mutilated bodies kept me from noticing the face of the man who had directed it all, the face I was now about to take into my hands. It was not an unpleasant face, certainly. And the beard, which made him seem a bit older than he was, didn't suit him badly at all. His name was Torres. Captain Torres. A man of imagination, because who else would have thought of hanging the naked rebels and then holding target practice on certain parts of their bodies? I began to apply the first layer of soap. With his eyes closed, he continued. "Without any effort I could go straight to sleep," he said, "but there's plenty to do this afternoon." I stopped the lathering and asked with a feigned lack of interest: "A firing squad?" "Something like that, but a little slower." I got on with the job of lathering his beard. My hands started trembling again. The man could not possibly realize it, and this was in my favor. But I would have preferred that he hadn't come. It was likely that many of our faction had seen him enter. And an enemy under one's roof imposes certain conditions. I would be obliged to shave that beard like any other one, carefully, gently, like that of any customer, taking pains to see that no single pore emitted a drop of blood. Being careful to see that the little tufts of hair did not lead the blade astray. Seeing that his skin ended up clean, soft, and healthy, so that passing the back of my hand over it I couldn't feel a hair. Yes, I was secretly a rebel, but I was also a conscientious barber, and proud of the preciseness of my profession. And this four-days' growth of beard was a fitting challenge.

I took the razor, opened up the two protective arms, exposed the blade and began the job, from one of the sideburns downward. The razor responded beautifully. His

beard was inflexible and hard, not too long, but thick. Bit by bit the skin emerged. The razor rasped along, making its customary sound as fluffs of lather mixed with bits of hair gathered along the blade. I paused a moment to clean it, then took up the strop again to sharpen the razor, because I'm a barber who does things properly. The man, who had kept his eyes closed, opened them now, removed one of his hands from under the sheet, felt the spot on his face where the soap had been cleared off, and said, "Come to the school today at six o'clock." "The same thing as the other day?" I asked horrified. "It could be better," he replied. "What do you plan to do?" "I don't know yet. But we'll amuse ourselves." Once more he leaned back and closed his eyes. I approached him with the razor poised. "Do you plan to punish them all?" I ventured timidly. "All." The soap was drying on his face. I had to hurry. In the mirror I looked toward the street. It was the same as ever: the grocery store with two or three customers in it. Then I glanced at the clock: two-twenty in the afternoon. The razor continued on its downward stroke. Now from the other sideburn down. A thick, blue beard. He should have let it grow like some poets or priests do. It would suit him well. A lot of people wouldn't recognize him. Much to his benefit, I thought, as I attempted to cover the neck area smoothly. There, for sure, the razor had to be handled masterfully, since the hair, although softer, grew into little swirls. A curly beard. One of the tiny pores could be opened up and issue forth its pearl of blood. A good barber such as I prides himself on never allowing this to happen to a client. And this was a first-class client. How many of us had he ordered shot? How many of us had he ordered mutilated? It was better not to think about it. Torres did not know that I was his enemy. He did not know it nor did the rest. It was a secret shared by very few, precisely so that I could inform the revolutionaries of what Torres was doing in the town and of what he was planning each time he undertook a rebel-hunting excursion. So it was going to be very difficult to explain that I had him right in my hands and let him go peacefully -alive and shaved.

The beard was now almost completely gone. He seemed younger, less burdened by years than when he had arrived. I suppose this always happens with men who visit barber shops. Under the stroke of my razor Torres was being rejuvenated-rejuvenated because I am a good barber, the best in the town, if I may

say so. A little more lather here, under his chin, on his Adam's apple, on this big vein. How hot it is getting! Torres must be sweating as much as I. But he is not afraid. He is a calm man, who is not even thinking about what he is going to do with the prisoners this afternoon. On the other hand I, with this razor in my hands, stroking and re-stroking this skin, trying to keep blood from oozing from these pores, can't even think clearly. Damn him for coming, because I'm a revolutionary and not a murderer. And how easy it would be to kill him. And he deserves it. Does he? No! What the devil! No one deserves to have someone else make the sacrifice of becoming a murderer. What do you gain by it? Nothing. Others come along and still others, and the first ones kill the second ones and they the next ones and it goes on like this until everything is a sea of blood. I could cut this throat just so, zip! zip! I wouldn't give him time to complain and since he has his eyes closed he wouldn't see the glistening knife blade or my glistening eyes. But I'm trembling like a real murderer. Out of his neck a gush of blood would spout onto the sheet, on the chair, on my hands, on the floor. I would have to close the door. And the blood would keep inching along the floor, warm, ineradicable, uncontainable, until it reached the street, like a little scarlet stream. I'm sure that one solid stroke, one deep incision, would prevent any pain. He wouldn't suffer. But what would I do with the body? Where would I hide it? I would have to flee, leaving all I have behind, and take refuge far away, far, far away. But they would follow until they found me. "Captain Torres' murderer. He slit his throat while he was shaving him a coward." And then on the other side. "The avenger of us all. A name to remember. (And here they would mention my name.) He was the town barber. No one knew he was defending our cause."

And what of all this? Murderer or hero? My destiny depends on the edge of this blade. I can turn my hand a bit more, press a little harder on the razor, and sink it in. The skin would give way like silk, like rubber, like the strop. There is nothing more tender than human skin and the blood is always there, ready to pour forth. A blade like this doesn't fail. It is my best. But I don't want to be a murderer, no sir. You came to me for a shave. And I perform my work honorably. . . . I don't want blood on my hands. Just lather, that's all. You are an executioner and I am only a

barber. Each person has his own place in the scheme of things. That's right. His own place.

Now his chin had been stroked clean and smooth. The man sat up and looked into the mirror. He rubbed his hands over his skin and felt it fresh, like new.

"Thanks," he said. He went to the hanger for his belt, pistol and cap. I must have been very pale; my shirt felt soaked. Torres finished adjusting the buckle, straightened his pistol in the holster and after automatically smoothing down his hair, he put on the cap. From his pants pocket he took out several coins to pay me for my services. And he began to head toward the door. In the doorway he paused for a moment, and turning to me he said:

"They told me that you'd kill me. I came to find out. But killing isn't easy. You can take my word for it." And he headed on down the street.