



Mane trust

FOR AN HOUR EVERY EIGHT WEEKS,
SHE'S YOUR CONFIDANTE, YOUR
CLOSEST ALLY: YOUR HAIRDRESSER

O

ur eyes first met on a Saturday in a first-come, first-serve hair salon in a Calgary strip mall. My six-week-old baby cooed as he slept in his car seat, oblivious to his mother's wild-eyed need for a haircut, any haircut.

I sat waiting, anxiously inhaling the smell of hairspray and the bustle of the busy salon. Eventually, Nayie Mensah — fresh-faced from stylist school — smiled and waved me over. I placed the car seat on the floor, sat down and began one of the most important relationships of my life.

She pulled her fingers through the mess on my head, asked what I wanted and went to work on creating a great haircut. I kept going back to that walk-in salon, arriving before it opened on Saturday mornings to guarantee I'd be her first customer. I followed her to another salon and finally to her own shop, where I learned to book ahead, otherwise I wouldn't get in.

We've been through a lot together: endless layered shags, a few pixie cuts, and both sides of the bangs/no bangs debate. Our conversations can cover anything from African poverty to parties in Calgary. "It's not small talk," Nayie says. "It's a conversation. I actually want to know what's going on in my clients' lives and I share a lot about myself too."

We are best friends for an hour every eight weeks (three hours when I need highlights). I know I am only one of 34-year-old Nayie's many B.F.F.s. Most of her clients are middle-aged women — women she can't help but get to know. "The conversation starts with the hair. But then you start talking and there's more to it; they talk about the husband, the kids, the dog. I know all about them by the time they leave," Nayie says. "And if they're going through something, I can bring humour to it. You can come in crying and

BY JENNIFER ALLFORD



you might leave laughing."

I happily pass out Nayie's number to friends and family, which is why I have to book ahead and perhaps why some women are less generous with their stylists' 411. A friend of mine had just moved to Winnipeg and was shut down cold when she approached a woman at an event to ask where she got her hair done. "I'm not going to tell you," was all the woman said before turning and walking away. My friend stood there with her mouth open, her last haircut growing out.

Fellow Calgarian Liza Mulholland gets asked all the time who does her sassy blond pixie cut. "People have stopped me from Hawaii to Italy to ask about my hair," says the 47-year-old. She's always flattered, but it's always futile. "My stylist doesn't take new clients; she only works for her old clients and friends." Mulholland sees her long-term stylist every five weeks and it's not just about the haircut: "We are phenomenally close."

The actual cutting of hair is only half the equation, says Teresa Banner, a 44-year-old stylist in French Beach, on Vancouver Island. "The skill part of it is only 50 per cent. There are three or four basic haircuts in the world; the rest are variations. What's important is how you make them feel: the experience. The personality part — the vibe you have — is the other 50 per cent."

Banner says to create that vibe, you have to listen to what the client wants and sometimes you have to listen between the lines: "If someone walks in with long hair and says 'Cut it off!' I always ask, 'Are you sure? Are you going through anything right now?'" She says seven of her least favourite words are: "I trust you! Do whatever you like." In those cases, Banner insists on more direction before pulling out the scissors. Most women over 40 have

"been there done that" so they know exactly what they want, but there are still times when she just has to be frank: "Look, your hair isn't going to be an Afro; it just won't do that!"

Alison Broddle, 41, of Vancouver, appreciated the straight talk she received after some home highlighting gone bad. She called her stylist in a panic because great gobs of her brunette hair were now greeny-blond. "When I got there he told me, 'Let's make a deal. I won't try to do your job and you leave the hair colouring to me.'

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Straight talk is also what's required if things go south and the relationship has to end. Nayie has been dumped by clients on occasion. "Usually they say, 'I love you, Nayie, but you're too busy.'" If someone drops her because they didn't like the haircut, Nayie says she wants to hear the truth.

Sally Haney wishes she'd been honest when she ditched her Calgary stylist. The 41-year-old loved his haircuts and his stories about drag queens and temperamental employees, but as they got to know each other better, he started making racist remarks. "He seemed to despise people who weren't white. He proudly told me how he refused walk-ins, especially First Nations people." Haney stopped going to him, and when she ran into him later, she told him she'd moved away. "I wish I'd tapped into the courage that I have now in my forties, and had the guts to tell him I couldn't see him anymore because he

hated people for the worst of reasons."

Personality can make or break the stylist/client deal. And it works both ways. "I've fired two clients because of their personality," Nayie says. "They're always unhappy. It doesn't matter what you do to please them, it doesn't work. It brings everyone down and it stresses me out." Banner also had an impossible-to-please client (she calls them "picksters"). She simply recommended another stylist who would be more conveniently located.

But we all know it's not about location. It's about the relationship: the give and take, the mutual respect. We forgive each other small sins; you forgive the odd nick on the ear and she forgives you (and doesn't charge you) when you get the day wrong and miss your appointment. Stylists will even forgive you if you want to branch out and experiment with someone else now and then. Banner says they understand: "It's like not shopping at the Gap every time," she says. "Sometimes you want to try something new, like H&M."

I admit to one or two frivolous infidelities in my early years with my stylist. But they didn't last, and now, well into my forties, I treasure the monogamy. The baby boy in the car seat now stands six foot three, and the chunky buttery highlights of my thirties have given way to sophisticated brunette locks with strategically placed highlights to camouflage the grey.

I know when I'm ready to embrace the grey, Nayie will help me with expert cuts and just the right pep talks. I know I will still leave her salon — my big, unruly hair transformed into a sleek, pin-straight do — feeling buoyed and beautiful. I will flip my vacuum-packed bob, grab hold of my walker and head out into the day, secure in the knowledge my hair and I are not growing old alone. **M**

