

## **Perfect Hat**

**Perfect Hat was a small store located in the “Historic Nashville” part of town. It was a small plain storefront with no signage, just a few lavender flowers hand painted above a display window with chintz curtains. Its owner was Miss Laura O’Connell. Laura was, what you would call, a natural beauty. She wore no make-up to cover her smile lines or to accentuate her eyes, and no color to obscure the gray among the strands of her long thick predominantly chestnut hair. She covered her striking figure in flattering, but not revealing attire. Laura never spoke of her age and true gentlemen never inquired, although speculation among the less genteel approximated her to be somewhere in her forties. Much younger women considered her to be “hot”, and suffered from loss of attention when being in the same room as her.**

**It was generally believed, but also not discussed by, or in the presence of Laura, that she had been briefly married to a wealthy scoundrel as a young woman. The alleged union was presumed to be brief and had resulted in no offspring. The only things that exceeded Laura’s good looks were her charm and intelligence. Anyone entering Perfect Hat was immediately dazzled by Laura’s bright blue eyes as she**

welcomed them to her store and inquired in her husky southern lilt “how are you on this fine day”. To those she was meeting for the first time she would extend a strong handshake and introduce herself as “Ms. Laura O’Connell, proprietor of this humble establishment”.

In many respects, her establishment was humble with its faded charm. But it also provided a cocoon type comfort that made folks feel like taking off their shoes and putting up their feet. Casually but artfully arrayed about the room were about forty well-worn head mannequins with heirloom hats (these were for ambiance only) displayed in an open room measuring about twenty-five by twenty feet. The space was set up like a comfortable living room with deep couches, upholstered chairs, oak and walnut end-tables and an enormous coffee table. At the open end of the living room was a small cherry wooden sidebar stocked with wine, sherry, brandy, as well as some soft drinks and a good coffee maker. It was in this setting that Laura worked her magic.

Laura only opened her store Wednesday and Thursday evenings as well as Saturdays ten until three. Perfect Hat was not a cash cow although it did, at times, bring in significant income. Laura, you see, normally only sold a few hats per

**week and that was just how she wanted it. For her, matching up the “perfect hat” with the customer was equal parts divination, phrenology, and psycho-analysis. Finding the perfect hat for a customer wasn’t just about getting the correct size and shape for the customers head and face, although those were considerations. The primary goal for Laura in finding the perfect hat was how that hat would help the customer move into their future. It was not out of the realm of consideration that Laura might determine a beat-up old Vanderbilt baseball cap to be the right match for a stylish, affluent, elderly matron. Laura might have come to this conclusion after finding out that the matron was raised in a very wealthy and rigid family who didn’t allow her to play the rough and tumble games she craved as a child. And that the woman still felt cheated because of it. This made getting to know the clientele in a deep and personal way a crucial part of the process. Hence the living room setting.**

**Laura had in fact sold said ballcap to said matron. After the dowager overcame her initial revulsion and started to wear it out in public, she began to meet other fans of Vandy, her alma mater. She soon joined the Vanderbilt Boosters Association which became the new and stimulating focal point of her**

**sunset years. She even indicated, in an updated version of her will, her desire to be buried in the hat.**

**Laura divided her potential customers into two groups. The first were those few naïve souls who simply wandered in looking for some head-gear. Laura politely referred them to one of the many conventional hat-sellers in the area. Group two were those “in the know” folks who had enough patience, curiosity, and open-mindedness to consider the possibility that the right hat *might* change their life. It didn’t take long for Laura to figure out which was which. After Laura decided that the person in front of her was there for a journey of discovery, she invited them to sit in her “living room”, brought them a refreshment of their choosing, and engaged them in conversation. Laura always started with something light such as the recent weather or how the local NFL franchise, the Tennessee Titans, was faring. Laura knew that she would only get the customer to share their hopes and dreams after they had become comfortable with her and her space.**

**The vast majority of Laura’s customers were middle, and older, age males, although, hip, enlightened women and a few young adults also arrived at Perfect Hat in search of a life changing experience.**

**The pricing structure was a model of simplicity. One hundred dollars per hat, payable at the time of the initial consultation. It didn't matter if the hat was an antique hand tooled beaver headpiece or a used, beat-up beret. The price was a hundred bucks, cash, at the end of the initial consultation. Refunds or exchanges were not an option. If that was a problem, the customer was in the wrong store. At the end of that first visit, if she believed she could accommodate them, Laura would take the customer's contact information, their one hundred dollars, and let them know that she would be in touch when their hat was ready for pick up. Sometimes it would be ready in a week and on rare occasions it might take months until the call came that their hat was available. Folks who knew of Laura's methods understood this and waited patiently.**

**The hat also came with personal instructions on how to best utilize it. The most common instruction was "Wear it whenever you go out in public". These were indeed "suggestions", but the savvy client understood that not following them would have disappointing results.**

One Saturday a young man from a local group home was out in the community shopping with some of his housemates and a couple of staff. He spied the simple storefront with the pretty flowers and insisted on going in. None of the other residents were interested so one of the staff, Tina, went with him while the rest of the group proceeded down the street in search of more traditional retail options. The young man's name was Earl and he had Downs Syndrome. He was sweet and affable but generally felt ignored in social situations.

As he and Laura sat and talked, he warmed to her immediately. Tina hovered in the background. She was young African-American woman with no knowledge of Perfect Hat but who genuinely cared about Earl and the rest of her cognitively disabled charges. She was loath to let anyone take advantage of, or disrespect her clients. As Laura and Earl got to know each other Tina started to relax. She could see that Laura did not talk down to Earl and was sincerely interested in his story. Earl eventually explained that what he really liked was telling jokes. He pointed out that the staff and some of his roommates would usually laugh, but outside of the home his humor was largely ignored. He stated that he would like to be a comedian like Eddie Murphy. Tina had known him for two years but had never heard him express himself this

openly before, though she knew he liked to make people laugh. Her perception of Laura had changed from skepticism to admiration.

As the consultation came to a close Laura said “I think I can find the perfect hat for you Earl. It will take a little time and it is going to cost you one hundred dollars cash payable today.” Tina’s protective hackles shot back up. “A hundred dollars?” she exclaimed. “He doesn’t have... well that’s not the issue. But he is not going to spend a hundred dollars on a hat that we can’t even see.” Laura turned to Tina and said “I understand your concern. It is natural to be suspicious. My business operates on the principle of faith. If the faith is not there the hat will not work.” “Work?” replied Tina incredulously. “You make it sound like the damn hat is magic”.

At that point Earl chimed in. “But I want the hat, Miss Tina. And I trust Miss Laura to find it for me. And I do have a hundred dollars.” The fact was that Earl had several hundred in his bank account. The staff was always trying to get him to spend it on outings and snacks like the other residents so he would not accumulate too much money and lose his eligibility

for Medicaid. But his abiding interest was not snacks or outings, it was making folks laugh.

Tina sat down for the first time since she entered the store. “I, ah..., I mean *we* need to think about this”. “Of course.” replied Laura. “I normally require that the customer decide and pay by the end of the initial consultation. But as this situation is a bit more complicated, I will give Earl until next Wednesday to decide and bring in the hundred dollars, if *he* so chooses.”

On the following Wednesday, Earl entered the shop beaming with pride and joy, followed by Tina in a less celebratory mood. Earl proudly presented Laura with a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill. He had insisted the single C note when withdrawing the money from his account. Laura’s eyes gleamed back at his. “Thank you, Earl. I had a very strong feeling that you would be back. So strong that I went ahead and found your hat. Would you like to try it on?” Earl nodded enthusiastically. Laura slipped into the back room and returned momentarily carrying a box. She sat the box down on the coffee table and removed a multicolored beanie complete with a propeller on top and handed it to Earl. Tina gasped. “I thought we could trust you but you are just



perpetuating the worst stereotypes about people with Down's Syndrome." "Let's see what Earl thinks." Laura calmly responded. She guided Earl over to her biggest mirror where her customers traditionally first tried on their new purchases. He looked at himself in the mirror then carefully put the hat on his head. It fit like a glove and his grin got even bigger. He gave the propeller a trial spin and giggled at the smooth action. With Tina still fuming in the background Laura asked "What do you think people will do when they see you wearing your hat, Earl?"

"They will laugh".

"Will they be laughing at you or with you?"

"If I laugh too, they will be laughing with me."

"How will that make you feel Earl?"

"I love to make people laugh."

Laura turned to Tina who was shaking her head with a resigned look on her face. “And I found something else I thought you might like.” Laura said as she removed the rest of the contents of the box. It was a colorful pair of Yosemite Sam (the little guy with the big red beard and two six-shooters) suspenders. She helped Earl put those on and check himself once more in the mirror. “I will have to say that this is the happiest I’ve ever seen you Earl” exclaimed Tina. She then turned to Laura and hissed “And now I’ll have to try to explain to my supervisor why Earl will be in total violation of our goal of “normalization” for our clients.”

“What will you tell this supervisor?”

After a thoughtful pause and a change of tone, Tina stated, “That it is more important to be happy than to be normal.”

“That would make a good slogan for my store. Do you mind if I use it?”

Tina grinned sheepishly and shook her head. “No, I wouldn’t mind at all”.

A couple of weeks later Earl and Tina stopped back for a visit. Tina explained that they had gone to the library, checked out a couple of joke books and with her help, Earl had been working on developing five minutes of stand-up material. She further explained that he would be performing at the group home talent show the following Friday night. At that point Earl approached Laura, took her hands in his, and implored “Will you please come see me tell my jokes Miss Laura?” “Wouldn’t miss it for the world Earl.” She replied. As they left, Tina noticed the new sign over the door. “It is more important to be happy than to be normal.”

On another occasion a handsome older gentleman in an expensive, though slightly worn suit entered Perfect Hat. Laura was used to occasionally having men from the “upper crust” come in to check her out and have a patronizing chuckle at the whole notion of her enterprise. But she treated every individual with respect until they gave her a reason not to. Besides, the “rascals” usually came in twos or threes while this man was alone.

**He took a leisurely tour of the store letting his gaze linger over the display hats before he turned his attention to Laura. His steel gray eyes engaged hers rather than appraising her form. Another positive sign. He introduced himself as Edwin and as they shared a vigorous handshake Laura identified herself. Laura invited Edwin to join her on the couch and he did.**

**As they got to know each other it became apparent that Edwin had come to a cross-road in his life. He had always been adventurous and aggressive in both his professional and private life. That approach had paid off handsomely all the way around. He had become a self-made man with significant financial assets, a multitude of real-life adventures, and a confirmed bachelor who had a colorful history with many ladies, under his belt. But, as he finally confided, he was staring down the barrel of shattering life change.**

**As he explained to Laura, the past year had been littered with traumatic events. A company that he had invested heavily in had gone belly up when the founder had drained it of all monies and fled to a country with no extradition treaty. Shortly thereafter he had been diagnosed with cancer resulting in the removal of his prostate gland. He also confessed that those events combined with his approaching**

seventieth birthday had left him feeling a mere shadow of his former self. "I have no sex drive, very little money, and no more desire for adventure. I feel that I have lost what it was that made me the man that I loved being." Edwin exclaimed softly, punctuating his statement with a sigh. "It sounds like you have had a very interesting life" replied Laura. "Maybe it is time to develop some new interests. I believe that I can find the perfect hat for you."

Laura explained the payment and hat delivery system to Edwin, although it seemed that he was already aware. He stood and took a hundred dollars in twenties out of his wallet. As he handed the cash over, he grasped Laura's hand. As he gazed into her eyes, his once proud countenance seemed to flag. "I really hope you can help me." "We shall both need to have faith" responded Laura.

A few weeks later Edwin was back to pick up his hat. When Laura presented him with a brightly colored single wrap turban he recoiled slightly before composing himself. "Sorry, not what I was expecting". "Life is full of the unexpected now, isn't it?" Laura joked. Edwin returned her smile "Yes it certainly is".

He took the turban over to the big mirror, and after giving it a thorough look over, placed it uncertainly on his head. "I look a bit like an aging hippie" he opined. "Some might see you through that lens" Laura agreed. But as he stared at his image, Edwin seemed to gain resolve. He squared his shoulders and stood up ramrod straight. "In for a penny, in for a pound my dear". As he turned to Laura he said "Thank you very much. I shall go forward with that faith you mentioned. Would you mind if I gave you a hug?" She didn't and he did.

A couple of months later Laura read in the Tennessean (Nashville's daily paper) that one Edwin Kloss was being hailed a hero. It seems that Edwin had witnessed a car crash through a guardrail and watched the car plummet down a steep cliff face in the Great Smokey mountains. He had risked his life picking his way down the cliffside to the wreck. There he had found a young woman, who turned out to be a single mother, dead at the wheel and a screaming infant in a car-seat in the back. He had taken the baby from the car, unwound his turban, and used the fabric to swaddle and comfort the baby. He wrapped the remaining cloth around his neck and shoulders creating a carrier for the baby in order to

**free up his hands. Then he climbed his way back up the rocky cliff face with her in his handmade front papoose.**

**What the paper failed to follow up on was the effect the experience had on Edwin. He felt a link to this orphaned baby like he had never experienced. It was only natural that he would continue to have a significant presence in her life. The joy and satisfaction he felt, from that presence, led him to get involved with other youngsters who lacked parental involvement. Of course, he stopped by Perfect Hat sometime later to report how happy he had become in this new phase of his life. Laura was pleased, but not surprised to hear it.**