

Frieda

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I often accompanied my mother to get her hair styled at Frieda's shop. As I walked through the swinging half doors of her beauty shop, I had to duck my head to avoid the doors swinging back into position. They were like the doors portrayed in a western movie. Dodging their unpredictable movement, I imagined I was the swaggering star entering the saloon where danger lingered. I was 8 years old. The smell of chemicals stung my nose. The heated curling and straightening rods hung from the ceiling. The mirrored walls of Frieda's narrow shop reflected my energetic movements, drawing the attention of adults and restricting my interactions with imaginary friends. I felt cramped and struggled to be on my good behavior.

There were three chairs, upholstered in olive green leather. Their color dulled in the yellow lighting of no windows in Frieda's shop. The only natural light was the long stream of sunlight from the front windows of the barber shop whose chairs filled the front bay window of the building where we entered Frieda's shop. Following my mother to the familiar territory of Frieda's shop felt like entering a dimly lit tunnel. I stayed close to her.

But Frieda's smile and low voice seemed to help me forget the scary shadows and strange objects that filled her shop. I enthusiastically accepted her offer of a piece of candy. Frieda stood tall and thin, with light-colored hair this week and slightly darker another week. Her dresses were fitted at the waist, but the skirt twirled as she moved around her shop. She liked having kids around and her laugh was big and welcoming. The disasters my mother's hair endured -- frizzy ends, a blonde color job bleached from her original black hair -- and my dad's reaction ("I did not marry a blonde!") are strong memories.

Frieda and her husband, my parents' handyman and gardener, were always around during my childhood. I left for college when I was 18. Upon my infrequent return visits home, I would bump into Frieda, usually in restaurants my family and I frequented to enjoy a meal together. She and my mother would smile and pull out cigarettes to share while exchanging stories and family updates. Smoking is what they had in common, besides the service Frieda offered. My mother had discovered other hairdressers, mostly out of town. She continued with a friendly young Latino man in south Denver. Getting her hair fixed became an outing, an excuse to escape small town life for a day.

Frieda's smile and openness, along with her attention to her skin and hair, contributed to her ageless demeanor. I discovered from a friend that Frieda was an escapee from a concentration camp. She had been 20 years old. She managed to seduce a German guard and make her way to England, where she found family who helped her get to America. She had a gratefulness about her that permeated her relationships. Behind those dark eyes, I sensed an untold story.

Although I have never encountered anyone else named Frieda, the sound of her name evokes memories of a remarkable lady whom I will always remember.