

Rules Are Made To Be . . .

Connie Kahler, twelve years old, rolled the dice.

“Six,” she said and moved her token from Pennsylvania Railroad to Kentucky Avenue. She paid \$220 to the bank for the property and adjusted her floral headscarf.

“Your turn,” she said and passed the dice to Mila Milligan, also twelve, who came to play Monopoly with her every day after school. Mila self-consciously smoothed her long, golden-blond hair back behind her ear.

“Can I ask you something?”

“We’re best friends, aren’t we?” Connie said.

“What’s it like being bald?”

Mila rolled a three and advanced her token from Virginia Avenue to Community Chest. “Advance To Go. Collect \$200,” she said, reading the card she had just drawn. “Well, I don’t have much of a choice. It’s hard, especially when I look in the mirror. Before, I had such nice, thick hair.”

“It was such a pretty red color too.”

“Chestnut—that’s what my mom called it.” Mila sighed. “And now it’s gone. The boys at school all make fun of me. I hate that.”

“Boys are so mean.”

“My dad says they’re insecure about their masculinity. They try to build themselves up by tearing others down. And my mom says boys don’t know how to show their feelings, so they tease me because they like me.”

“Do you think they like you?”

Connie rolled the dice. A nine. She counted off the spaces.

“Oh, just my luck. Go To Jail.”

“Here, I have a Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free card you can use.” The rules of friendship trumped those of Monopoly.

“Thanks. I don’t think the boys like me very much. I don’t feel pretty anymore.”

“Well, you’re the bravest person I know, and that’s beautiful.”

“But the Bible says long hair is a woman’s glory.”

“You know what my mom used to do when my dad would tell her the Bible says wives should submit to their husbands?”

“What?”

“I’ll show you.” Mila stood up, held an imaginary microphone in her hand, and started to sway her hips as she sang with a gravelly voice, “It ain’t necessarily so, de things that yo’ liable to read in de Bible, it ain’t necessarily so.”

Connie laughed. For a just moment her sunken green eyes sparkled, in spite of the dark circles beneath them.

“Mila, your mom’s here to pick you up,” Connie’s mother called from below.

Connie walked Mila downstairs. “Best friends forever?” she asked when they stood at the front door.

“Forever,” Mila said and turned to walk to her mother’s car.

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“Hi, honey, did you have fun with Connie?” Alexis asked, opening the door of her white Honda Civic for her daughter.

“Mom, I want to cut my hair off,” Mila said as she fastened her seatbelt.

“But you have your grandmother’s beautiful hair. She loves to look at you and remember when she was your age . . . I don’t know, though, maybe a short haircut would look cute.”

“No, Mom. I don’t want to cut it short. I want to cut it off. Shave my head.”

“What? Have you lost your mind?” Alexis turned to see whether her daughter was joking—she wasn’t—and nearly ran the corner stop sign.

“Connie has lost all her hair because of the chemo, and she feels ugly. Besides, the boys at her school make fun of her. I don’t want her to feel all alone.”

“But you’ve been growing your hair for three years. If you cut it all off, you’ll look like a space alien at first and then like a little bird when it starts to grow back. It will take over a year to reach a normal length again.”

“Connie is my friend.” Mila’s eyes moistened, but her voice was firm.

“And if the kids make fun of her at her school, they’ll make fun of you at your school too. Children can be so cruel.”

“Then they’re not really my friends. Connie is my best friend.”

Alexis shook her head. “Well, I don’t much like the idea. I love your long, beautiful hair. But I love your good heart even more. If you really want to shave your head, I won’t stop you.”

“And I want to donate my hair to make wigs.”

“For Connie?”

“No, for other cancer patients. Connie says that people have to accept her just as she is or not at all.”

Alexis did not respond. Now her eyes were moist too.

That evening after dinner Mila sat at the kitchen table, and her mother cut her hair close to the scalp, tress by tress, and carefully laid each one in a long narrow box. When she had finished with the scissors, she went to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom of the master bedroom and took out the razor and shaving cream that had belonged to her husband. Back in the kitchen, Alexis lathered her daughter’s head, shaved off the remaining stubble, and wiped away the leftover foam with a towel.

“There you are, honey, just like the day you were born.”

Mila ran her hand over her smooth head and smiled.

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When Mila boarded the school bus the next morning, all the kids erupted into laughter. Some nudged each other and pointed at her; others doubled up and nearly fell out of their seats; still others slapped their knees or stomped their feet on the floor. No matter what he said, the driver could not quiet them down.

“Egghead!” one boy shouted.

“Cue ball!” another yelled.

“Chrome dome!” hollered a third.

“My eyes! My eyes! The reflection is blinding my eyes!” the boy next to him cried, covering his eyes with his hands.

“Did you forget to use your Rogaine?” someone asked.

“How about Bosley Hair Replacement . . . for Women?” another added.

Peals of laughter followed each exclamation. Mila only smiled.

“I can’t believe she did that,” a girl said to the one beside her, covering her mouth with her hand.

“What was she thinking?” the second girl whispered back. “They’re taking class pictures next week.”

The girl behind them leaned forward and said in a hushed voice over the seat, “She’ll never get invited to another party. They boys will never talk to her again.”

The laughter, stares, and pointing continued as Mila walked down the school hall towards her homeroom class. Monitoring the hall, Mrs. Krabbe, the homeroom teacher, stood outside the door. She wore a drab gray sweater and skirt, her hair pulled back in a tight bun, her horn-rimmed glasses sitting high on her pointed nose.

“Where do you think you’re going, young lady?” Mrs. Krabbe said when Mila approached the door.

“To homeroom.”

“Not looking like that you’re not. You can just march yourself down to the principal’s office. I can see you’re starting your teenage rebellion a year early.”

Mila sat in the reception area outside the principal’s office until Flint Steinherz finished his phone call. When he stepped out of his office in his sharply creased pants, seersucker jacket, starched white shirt, and bowtie, he peered at her over his wire-rimmed glasses.

“What’s the meaning of this? Do you think this is funny?”

“No, my friend has ca—”

“I don’t have time for your smart-aleck explanations. Call your mother to come get you. You’re suspended.”

“But she’s at work.”

“Call her,” Mr. Steinherz said and went back into his office, closing the door behind him.

Mila walked over to the phone on top of the receptionist’s counter and dialed her mother’s work number.

“Mom, I’m sorry to bother you at work, but you have to come pick me up.”

“Why? Are you sick, honey?” She sounded worried.

“No. I got suspended.”

“Suspended? What in the world did you do?” Her tone of voice betrayed her disbelief.

“I didn’t do anything. You did. You shaved my head.”

“I’ll be right there. I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding. We’ll straighten everything out.”

* * *

Forty-five minutes later Alexis was sitting on a wooden, uncushioned, straight-backed chair in the principal’s office. Mr. Steinherz sat across from her behind a massive oak desk on which several stacks of papers were neatly arranged.

“Mr. Steinherz, please reconsider. Mila is a straight-A student. She has been on the honor roll every grading period, and she is a member of the National Junior Honor Society.”

“There is nothing to reconsider, Mrs. Milligan,” he said without looking up from the papers in front of him. “You’re daughter is suspended.”

“But she hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up. “She is in flagrant violation of Article 8.3.1 of the Student Handbook, which clearly states that unconventional dress and hairstyles will not be tolerated.” He looked back down at his papers.

“Did you even ask her why she shaved her head?”

“Her motives are irrelevant. Whatever her reasons, she has violated school policy.”

“Her best friend, who is dying of cancer, has lost all her hair because of chemotherapy. Mila didn’t want her to feel alone.”

Mr. Steinherz sighed, looking up from his papers again. “Mrs. Milligan, we have high standards here at the Liberty Charter School, and we adhere to them strictly. We teach our students conservative values—respect for authority, obedience to the rules, and the importance of law and order. This is not a public school where the students can run wild, drinking alcohol, using drugs, and engaging in promiscuity. Their libertarian laxness is destroying this country.” He took a pen out of the inside breast pocket of his seersucker jacket and signed a paper.

“My daughter is not running wild. She is supporting a sick friend.”

He placed the paper on the bottom of the stack and signed the one on top. “Mrs. Milligan, if we make an exception for one, we shall have to make an exception for all, and then we shall have no more standards. I’m sorry, but sometimes personal sacrifices have to be made for the sake of the common good.”

“Don’t talk to me about personal sacrifices, Mr. Steinherz. I lost my father in Vietnam and my husband in Iraq. And my daughter has sacrificed her beautiful hair, which she is donating to make wigs for cancer patients. First her schoolmates mocked her for an act of compassionate solidarity, and now you’re suspending her.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up again, visibly exasperated. “Mrs. Milligan, I have explained our position. Contrary to popular opinion, rules are not made to be broken; they are made to be obeyed. Your daughter is suspended. Take her home.”

“Suspended for how long?”

“Until her hair grows back to an appropriate length.”

“But what about her education in the meantime?”

“She can either be homeschooled or enroll in public school.” He gave a slight shudder after mentioning the second option.

“Mr. Steinherz, this is so unfair.”

He took off his wire-rimmed glasses and leaned forward, looking directly at Alexis.

“Your daughter has to learn that her ill-considered actions have consequences, Mrs. Milligan.”

“And so will yours, Mr. Steinherz, so will yours.”

Alexis rose, turned, and exited the office without saying good-bye. “Come on, honey, we’re going home,” she said to Mila, who was still sitting in the reception area. Next to her sat Newman Duke, the young and friendly assistant principal. He had been trying to console and encourage her.

When Mila stood up to leave with her mother, he said, “I’m proud of you, Mila. You’re doing a beautiful thing here. Keep your head up, and don’t give up. Study hard while you’re gone. We’ll miss you, but you’ll be back here before you know it. Until then good luck to you and to your friend.”

“Thank you, Mr. Duke,” Mila said. Alexis put her arm around Mila’s shoulder, and they left the building together.

“What are we going to do, Mom?” Mila asked once they were inside the car.

“Don’t you worry that pretty little head of yours, honey. Mama has a plan.”

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Some six hundred children attended the Liberty Charter School in grades one through twelve, with about twenty-five students a grade. In case of school closures because of inclement weather or other such news, their families had a telephone tree in place.

That evening Alexis called her best friend, Ruth Kemp, the president of the PTA.

“Ruth, this is Alexis. We really need your help. My daughter . . .”

As soon as they hung up, Ruth called the vice-president, the secretary, and the treasurer of the PTA. The four officers then each called two “captains,” and each of the eight captains called five “lieutenants,” who called six or seven families each. Two hours later they had reached nearly every parent in the school.

By noon the next day the school office and the school board had received over five hundred phone messages, e-mails, and texts supporting Mila Milligan and protesting the suspension. When Flint Steinherz’s phone rang at 2:15 p.m., it was Henry Dean, the president of the school board.

“Flint, we’ve got a situation on our hands with this suspension thing.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Henry. It will all blow over in a few days.”

“I don’t think it will. We’ve got a ton of messages from parents, and they’re threatening to withdraw their children from the school if you don’t let that little Milligan girl back in.”

“Henry, we’ve got to stand firm. We can’t let parents dictate school policy.”

“You won’t even have a school if they pull their kids out. What’s more, Flint, they’re calling for your resignation.”

“Oh, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I spoke with Ruth Kemp, from the PTA, this morning. If we don’t take immediate action, they’ll go to the newspaper and the television stations. Imagine the headlines—*Twelve-Year-Old Girl Suspended for Supporting a Dying Cancer Patient*. We can’t afford that kind of publicity.”

“But that’s not what happened. She was in violation of the dress code.”

“And those damn investigative reporters are always hellbent on making you look bad, no matter what you’ve done. They’ll crucify us on the evening news. I’m calling an emergency meeting of the school board tomorrow night at a quarter till seven. I want you there to explain your position to the parents. We’ve got to do some damage control. See if you can put a positive spin on this mess.”

* * *

At 6:45 the following evening the seven members of the school board sat behind a long, narrow table on the stage of the school auditorium, looking out over more than four hundred parents in the stair-stepped rows of theater seats. Once Henry Dean had called the meeting to order, he introduced Flint Steinherz to give an opening statement. Mr. Steinherz, dressed in his usual creased slacks, seersucker jacket, white shirt, and bowtie, stepped up to the podium a little to the left of center stage. From his inside breast pocket he took out a couple of sheets of paper, unfolded them, and laid them on the podium. He adjusted the microphone and began to read.

“Esteemed parents, many of you have expressed concern about the recent suspension of a student found to be in violation of the school dress code. Allow me to explain the context of the school’s action, and I am sure you will agree with it. This is not about the merits of a particular case but about the importance of school policy, a policy carefully designed for the safety and well-being of your children. Many of you were alarmed by the state of affairs in the public

schools and did not want your children exposed to the negative influences there. Furthermore, you wanted an atmosphere in which your children could study without distraction and prepare themselves for their future careers.”

Mr. Steinherz looked up, and a number of parents were nodding in agreement.

“To that end the founding committee drafted a student handbook that, among other things, prohibits unconventional clothing and hairstyles. We do not, for example, allow gang-related apparel, sexually seductive clothing, or t-shirt inscriptions glorifying drugs or violence. Instead we insist on tasteful, conventional attire and grooming of the kind your children will be expected to adopt when they enter the professional world. As a result of our policies and strict vigilance in enforcing them your children have been spared the problems with alcohol, drugs, sex, and violence that plague our public schools.”

A brief round of applause interrupted Mr. Steinherz’s talk.

“We strive at the Liberty Charter School to inculcate in our students the traditional American values that countercultural movements seek to erode. As you know, the student in question was suspended for shaving her head. A shaved head is often associated with so-called skinhead or neo-Nazi gangs, who advocate an ideology of xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism incompatible with the best of American traditions. Such an association is one we cannot accept at our school. Our actions were not intended to punish one student but to protect the entire student body. Rest assured, esteemed parents, that we shall continue to act in the best interest of the children you have entrusted to our care. Thank you.”

The audience responded with moderate applause. After it subsided, Henry Dean opened the floor to statements from the audience. Alexis Milligan stepped up to the microphone standing at the front of the left aisle.

“Since my daughter, Mila, is the one who was suspended, I think I should go first. I can speak for my daughter, but before I do, there is someone else I cannot speak for, and you need to hear from her.” Alexis turned around and said, “You can send her in now.”

The back door of the auditorium opened, and a frail young person entered. Placing her hand on the tops of the seats for support, she slowly made her way down the aisle. The short walk seemed to fatigue her. When she reached the front, Alexis lowered the microphone for her and said, “Don’t be afraid, sweetheart.” The little girl began to speak.

“My name is Connie Kahler, I am twelve years old, and I have a cancer called high-risk neuroblastoma. I have been through two rounds of chemotherapy. They haven’t worked. Next week I am starting a third round. If it doesn’t work, the doctors say there is nothing else they can do for me. They say I have about a twenty percent chance of survival. That means I am probably dying. I will never go to high school or college, never have a career, never date a boy, never fall in love, never get married, never have children. I will be dead at thirteen.”

A hush descended upon the audience.

“The chemotherapy makes me sick. I am too tired to do anything. I can’t eat, and if I do, I throw up. I have lost twenty pounds.” She took off her jacket and held her scrawny arms out to the side so the audience could see. “My hair has fallen out, and I am completely bald.” She took off her headscarf and turned from the stage towards the audience, so they could see her bare scalp, her sunken eyes, her drawn cheeks. “When I am sick, I can’t go to school, and I have to stay home all by myself with my mom. No one from my school calls or comes to visit. It’s so lonely. When I’m well enough to go to school between chemo rounds, some kids make fun of me and call me names. Most of them just avoid me. I guess they feel uncomfortable because they

don't know what to say or how to act around someone who is dying. I don't blame them. I wouldn't know what to do either."

Some of the audience members had started to cry.

"But Mila Milligan is my friend. She is my only friend. Even if I had a hundred good friends, she would be my best friend. She comes to see me everyday. We play together and talk about everything. She doesn't feel uncomfortable around me. She doesn't see me as a sick person, a cancer patient, a dying person. She just sees me as me, and she accepts me for who I am. She shaved her head so I wouldn't have to go through this alone. She has always been there for me, she is there for me now, and she will be there for me until the very end. With the cancer, the sickness, the loneliness, I would want to die if it weren't for her. But with her as my friend, even if I'm going to die, I want to live. I just want you to understand who she is and why she did what she did."

When Connie finished and started trudging back up the aisle, there was scarcely a dry eye in the house. Even some of the school-board members were wiping away a tear. The whole time Connie was talking, Alexis stood by her side. She raised the microphone again to speak.

"Thank you, Connie, you're a courageous young lady, and I think you have inspired and moved us all." The audience burst into thunderous applause. When it died down, Alexis faced the school board.

"I hope you can see that what my daughter did was not an act of teenage rebellion. It was not disobedience to the rules. It was not defiance of authority. It was not some kind of antiestablishment fashion statement. And it was most certainly not an assertion of neo-Nazi ideology. Rather, it was a gesture of compassion and kindness, an act of solidarity, an expression of true friendship. Yes, we all want our children to grow up to be good, law-abiding citizens. But

more than that we want them to grow up to be good people. My daughter is a good person, and I am so proud of her. If only my husband, Miles, could be here to see her now. I know he would be just as proud of her as I am. I have to tell you that when she first cut her hair, I thought she was ugly. Now I think she is more beautiful than she has ever been.”

Alexis turned towards the audience. “Some of your children made fun of my daughter on the school bus two days ago. She was not hurt by their jokes, and she is not angry at them, because she knew they did not understand. But she was suspended before she could explain to them why she had shaved her head. If they knew, I think they would support her too. So, when you go home, please tell your children what you have heard here tonight. Thank you.”

The audience rose for a standing ovation, clapping as much for Connie as for Alexis. When they sat again, Henry Dean said, “Who would like to speak next?”

“What else is there to say?” someone from the audience called out. “She’s pretty much said it all.” The entire crowd voiced their agreement.

“Well, then, let’s put it to a vote of the school board,” Henry Dean said. “All those in favor of allowing Mila Milligan back in school raise your hand.” Five members did so.

“All those opposed.” Two members raised their hands.

“The motion is passed. Mila may return to school tomorrow. This meeting is adjourned.”

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Alexis shared the good news with Mila as soon as she got home. The next morning after breakfast she said, “Mila, I want to drive you to school today myself so the kids on the bus won’t tease you before you’ve had a chance to explain things to them.”

On account of the heavy traffic, however, they arrived just before the bell rang. All the students were already in their homerooms as Mila scurried down the empty hall. When she arrived at her classroom, Mrs. Krabbe was still standing at the door.

“Just look at what you’ve started,” she said.

Mila walked through the door and saw the other eleven girls in her class had shaved their heads too.

Later that day it was announced that Mr. Duke, the assistant principal, had been promoted to principal. Mr. Steinherz resigned for “personal reasons.”

Glossary of Names

Mila: dear, gracious (Russian)

Milligan: bald (Gaelic). She shaves her head out of compassionate solidarity.

Connie: constant, steadfast (ultimately from Latin)

Kahler: bald one (German). She faces her cancer and chemotherapy steadfastly.

Alexis: protector, defender (Greek)

Miles: soldier (Latin)

Mrs. Krabbe: crab (German)

Flint: refers to the hardness of the stone

Steinherz: stone (Stein) heart (Herz) (German). He is an unfeeling principal.

Henry: home ruler (Germanic)

Dean: as in English, referring to the senior member of an organization. He is the president of the school board and “rules” the family of the school.

Newman: new man

Duke: leader, general (Latin). He becomes the new principal.