



Source: Rory Carroll, 'Militants target barbers of Baghdad', *The Guardian Unlimited*, 07/07/05
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She remembered a story written sixteen years ago by her husband when he was in Toronto. She begins to read it.

The barbershop is an arena of men that will soon be an anachronism. Invested with secrecy and ritual, shared confidences, a patient companionship and the rare instance of men touching men without competition, they are doomed to disappear into the changing patterns of goods and services.

I am of a generation that for many years associated the barber with one of many lost parental battles. In more recent times, baldness, in part hereditary and in part self-imposed, has kept me away. But even baldness has its degrees, and travelling in Canada, I ostensibly needed a haircut. My barber, Luigi, was short and precisely manicured. Despite 26 years in Toronto, he still spoke thick English. He understood my particularity, the concise limits of my degree, and so he approached his task with meticulous care. He cut my hair with the clippers, corrected minute unevenness with the scissors, shaved my neck, even trimmed the outlaw hairs off the tops of my ears.

A barber's shave is a ritual invested with psychological violence, from the many sequences in films and stories, from the sensation of skin stretched taut over a bare neck, from the images triggered in memory by the glint of the straight-edged razor. Yet it is also the caress of the father, the intimate touch of a man, when our rituals are generally so devoid of tenderness.

The shave that Luigi gave me that day was more painful than I'd imagined and infinitely more caring. Four times he lathered my face and reshaved me to achieve the smoothness he sought, pinching skin to stretch it taut, cradling my chin in his soft hands, inspecting my face so close I could feel his breath on me at times. He washed me. He treated me gently. He rubbed alcohol onto my skin, kneading my raw and tingling flesh to ease the shock. He addressed the minute details of his focus, to his satisfaction. He dusted me with the softest white brush.

I felt such a rush of emotion for this man, this old man who had held my face in his hands and touched me so kindly. He understood, I think, and when I asked him for a photograph, he combed his own hair, meticulously, and stood proudly.

* * *

Now, alone in Paris, she was without guidance. No one here could assure her of a risk-free path. She was out of her own country and found it difficult to make decisions. But today the problem had to be confronted. How to go about it? She was too shy to stop a woman in the street and have to struggle with the language: so hard to convey the precise meaning, especially when it came to the

important matter of where to get a good haircut.

She perceived from the number of well-groomed men in the area that here, in this small section of the city, perhaps more than any other, appearances mattered. She would have to walk these narrow streets, peering into shop-fronts, looking for the right constellation of visual cues. She passed by several salons which may have been acceptable but for that ominous beast in the corner: the retro hairdryer helmet on wheels.

She came across a tattoo parlour. Surely if you were in the business of body adornment, she thought, you would know about the masters and mistresses of hair in your immediate environment. It was a shame the woman at the counter spoke so little English. She would have to reach into the recesses of her own unreliable vocabulary. Fortunately, she found all that was required under 'c': *chercher, les cheveux, couper, cet arrondissement*. It wasn't really a recommendation but the young woman pointed further up the street, towards the Beaubourg.

She scanned the shop through the plate glass. No blowdryers on wheels, only men: men in the chairs, men wielding scissors, men talking to other men via mirrors, one man sweeping, another one shampooing, and right in the front a sweet-looking, slightly-built Asian man at the counter. One last sign clinched it for her and that was the sign on the window itself: just one word—an invitation to engage in life itself—'Sing'.

He assured her he could fit her in that very afternoon. Nor was he phased by her already short hair. There was just one thing: she wouldn't permit him to use the electric clippers—as short as possible but by hand only. She knew it would be stretching both time and talent, but the display of manual skill was the thing she enjoyed most about this ritual. Besides, at that time, she needed physical contact, even if it were only at the hands of this stranger.

She knew she made him nervous. She could see her own taut expression in the glass. But it wasn't often she put her trust in the hands of another man, another cutter that is. When the cut is this short, each hair counts. Round and round he went, checking, cutting, sculpting, thinning, refining. Gradually her facial muscles relaxed, her breathing became deeper and she started to ask him about himself. She'd seen very few Asian men in Paris. It was his shop. He'd been here eight years. He'd been in Paris thirty years. He came with his parents. They escaped from Cambodia. They'd been refugees. The name of the shop was in fact his name. His name was Sing. She would be back.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from stories by Neil Roberts and Barbara Campbell.