

Reflections

MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize

A good hairdresser

Highly commended

MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize

I took an immediate dislike to him when I met him 10 years ago. He had an irritating manner that annoyed me. He was middle-aged, short, solidly built with a swarthy complexion and carefully groomed dark hair greying at the temples. He rarely made eye contact and when he spoke his words seemed to slide out of the corner of his mouth.

He greeted his customers with a simple "Signor" and with a wave of his hand clasping his scissors indicated where to take a seat. Occasionally he would hail a passer-by on the street with a "Buongiorno!" and a wave of his scissors in the air. He rarely spoke otherwise. If he did it would be some caustic quip or grunt directed at the talkback radio show host on the loudly crackling radio in his small crowded shop. He showed little interest in his customers, preferring, it seemed, to stick to the job at hand or look out the window onto the street. Despite this lack of conversation and a lack of eye contact, his attitude seemed to me to indicate he was doing you a favour cutting your hair; take it or leave it, he didn't give a damn.

His shop was across the road from the hospital where I had started a new busy job caring for critically ill children. Out of convenience I had him cut my hair on three or four occasions until, fed up with his manner, I found a hairdresser more to my liking.

For me it's a very personal and often a pleasurable experience having a haircut. I can sit back in a comfortable chair, relax and, cocooned in a flowing drape, snooze or perhaps engage in idle chat for 20 minutes or more, and escape the demands and responsibilities of my hospital work dealing with sick children. A little conversation may be pleasant, but it isn't necessary. Just to sit and doze while the hairdresser quietly snips, buzzes, shaves, combs and brushes in silence can be soothing beyond measure. I prefer to have the same hairdresser. Wherever I have lived I have sought out a hairdresser and, once found, I have loyally attended until either he or I have had to move on.

Recently my regular hairdresser, a pleasant enough although rather fastidious Englishman, whom I had taken some time to warm to, closed up shop and left without warning, leaving me with the need to find a new hairdresser.

Some weeks later when in need of a haircut I walked out of my local library and saw on the other side of the road a red and white barber's pole and behind it a men's hairdressing shop. Impulsively I stepped off the footpath, dodged through the busy road traffic and entered the shop.

There he was. I recognised him immediately. He must have moved shops. "Signor" he said and indicated



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doi: 10.5694/mja13.10359

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with his scissors to take a seat. He gave no indication he recognised me, not that he would or should after so many years. He was a little grey, his face more lined, and his body more rotund but the same irritating manner remained. He still failed to make eye contact and still had an irritating offhand manner. I was tempted to leave but sat down where directed, picked up one of the few tattered magazines scattered on a grubby low table and waited my turn. His radio, set on a talkback radio show, crackled loudly just as it had done 10 years ago.

On one side of me sat a big red-faced flustered middle-aged man trying without success to restrain a small child. The child rocked backwards and forwards on his chair, climbed over the top of the chair, banged his hands on the magazine table and tore pages from the magazines. The child ignored his exasperated father's pleas to behave. The hairdresser ignored them both.

Seated on my other side was an elderly, frail and sickly looking man leaning forward with his hands on his knees. His hair was sparse and uncombed and his skin wrinkled, pale yellow and loose. There was dried spittle on his lips and his jaundiced sunken eyes had a fearful haunted look. On his far side a young man sat with his right arm around the old man's shoulder and spoke quietly to him. The old man occasionally nodded. Both seemed oblivious to the noise in the room from the child and the radio.

The child was next in line for a haircut. The hairdresser without a word looked directly at him and motioned to him with his scissors to come forward. The child became quiet instantly but clung to his father as the father carried him forward and placed him in the chair. The hairdresser quickly draped the child and began the haircut, ignoring the child's furtive pleading glances towards his father. As the haircut progressed I watched the child in the mirror and saw his facial expression gradually change to wide-eyed interest in the hair falling about him. When completed the hairdresser lifted the child out of the chair, passed him to his father and, quickly looking towards the old man, indicated with his scissors that he was next.

The old man was helped slowly forward by the young man and gently eased into the hairdressing chair. Although his back was facing me I could clearly see his haunted yellow face in the large wall mirror in front of him.

The hairdresser turned the radio volume down and his manner seemed to completely change as he attended to the old man. I watched intently. Gone was the mute, who-gives-a-damn attitude. Replacing this was a look of the utmost kindness and concern as he carefully

placed the drape around the man and gently applied the foamy lather to the man's cheeks, chin and neck with a shaving brush. He spoke to him in a quiet caring voice as he slowly and carefully removed the creamy white foam with a cutthroat razor to expose the worn sallow cheeks. He continued to talk in a quiet monotone as he gently shaved the man's chin and neck. Once completed he softly massaged the aftershave balm into this newly shaven neck and face. Finally he cut some stray hairs off the back of the man's neck and gently combed and patted the unruly hair into place. Throughout all this the man would occasionally nod in response to the hairdresser's soft words but said little, although the suffering face in the mirror seemed more relaxed. When finished, the hairdresser helped him slowly from the chair shook his hand and with a "Signor" passed him to the supporting arms of the young man and arm-in-arm they moved slowly out of the shop onto the street and gradually out of sight. There had been no payment. I was touched by this scene.

I was next in line. The radio volume was turned up. The tenderness left the hairdresser's face as he tied the drape around my neck and not looking at me said "How do you want it done?", followed by the old look I could see in the mirror ... as if I care.

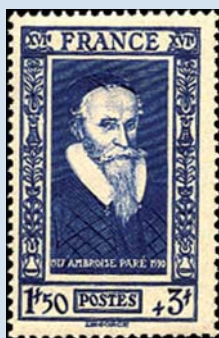
I think he must have been deep in thought about the old man or perhaps he had noticed me watching him because this man who had never made conversation with me suddenly said "My sister has cancer. She's doing it tough, just like that old man. He's got cancer that's spread. He hasn't got long. His son brings him along once a week so I can give him a shave".

Just as he was finishing with me the telephone rang. He stopped, grabbed the phone and talking out of the side of his mouth I heard him say "Yeah. How old is the kid?" and then "Sure, I'll come after work and give him a haircut, no problem" and then "What ward's he on? 3B, sure, I know the cancer ward".

I suddenly realised that my hairdresser, the man I thought didn't give a damn about anybody, was going after work to the oncology ward of the children's hospital where I worked to give a child a haircut. Once again I was touched by this man's actions and ashamed for misjudging him. This man who can calm a misbehaving child, this man who shows great tenderness and kindness to a dying man and this man who goes to a children's hospital after work to cut the hair of a child with cancer is surely a good man. I don't care if he rarely talks or looks as though he doesn't give a damn. I have found myself a good hairdresser and I'm going to stick with him. □

Stamps of greatness

Ambrose Paré (1510–1590)



AMONG the greatest figures of the Renaissance and unquestionably the greatest surgeon was Ambrose Paré.

He was born about 1510 at Bourg-Hersent near Laval in Mayenne in France. He became a barber's apprentice but soon left the country for Paris, where his interest in surgery — then the prerogative of barbers — was aroused.

He began his surgical training as a dresser at the Hôtel Dieu, where he was a companion surgeon for three or four years. He then qualified as an army surgeon. The campaigns in Italy from 1536 to 1545 afforded him a vast

experience in military surgery and he made himself the greatest surgeon of his time by his courage, ability and common sense.

In his "Methode de Traicter les Playes" (1545) he recommended ligating an artery at the site of haemorrhage. This was first practised by Damvillers but had fallen into abeyance since the time of Celsus.

Paré brought the method into general use. Paré's greatest contribution to surgery hinges on the baneful effect of the pseudo-Hippocratic and Arabian doctrine, "that diseases not curable by iron are curable by fire".

Giovanni de Vigo (1460–1520) had taught, like Brunswig before him, that gunshot wounds were poisoned burns and, therefore, should be first treated with a dressing of burning oil.

During a battle in which the supply of oil gave out Paré began to use simple bandages and was surprised to find next morning that

those who were treated in this way were in much better condition than the others.

He at once championed the new method and generally introduced into operative surgery simple methods of procedure.

He invented many instruments, made amputation safe with the ligature, was the first to popularise the use of the truss in hernia, did away with the strolling surgeons' trick of castrating the patient in herniotomy, introduced massage, artificial limbs, artificial eyes (made of gold or silver) and staphyloplasty and made the first ex-articulation of the elbow joint (1536).

He described fractures of the neck of the femur, strangury from hypertrophy of the prostate and was the first to suggest syphilis as a cause of aneurysm. As Howard Kelly points out, he was probably also the first to see flies as transmitters of infectious diseases. He also described carbon monoxide poisoning (1575).

In obstetrics he made podalic version viable and practicable and had the courage to introduce artificial labour in uterine haemorrhage.

His principal works are his treatise on gunshot wounds (1545), his essay on podalic version (1550), his great treatise on surgery (1564), "Cinq Livres de Chirurgie", and his discourse on the mummy and the unicorn (1581), which successfully disposed of an ancient therapeutic superstition.

The figure of this genius of a man, indefatigable worker, honest to the highest degree, endowed with but little culture but with a magnificent spirit of observation, is one of the most vital in the whole pageant of medical history.

Paré died in Paris on 20 December 1590, at the age of 80 and was honoured postally by France in 1943 on a National Relief Fund stamp as one of its greatest surgeons.

AMA Gazette 1977; Oct

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These are edited versions of a series that first appeared in the AMA Gazette.