

Squabbling Scissors

Every six weeks, or so, I get bullied by the sad eyes of a mild mannered man and go and have my haircut. One of the routes home from work, if it is too hot or too wet to walk all the way, is to catch the bus to the centre of our little *bairro* and walk for five minutes up the hill, and there are two routes to do this. One is a direct, no nonsense route and which brings me straight out onto our street opposite our flat. The other is a bit further but takes me home via the handy supermarket at the bottom of the road, useful for those odds and ends we otherwise forget to buy. Like anything to eat. I therefore tend to go the slightly longer route more often, because memories are failing and we often seem to have a fridge full of food but nothing for dinner. This route also takes me past the door of the local barber, and the owner, a humble, slightly bowed man, is frequently standing on the doorstep wringing his hands and looking mournfully for customers. I am one of his customers and there are only a certain number of times I can watch the light in his eye go on when he sees me, only for it to dim again as I greet him cordially and pass on my way. Alternatively, it might be his brother who is standing on the doorstep looking forlornly into faces of prospective customers. He is not quite so humble, and has a villainous glint in his eye, but the look of hope, and its dashing as one walks by, is no less poignant in such a man. Now I will admit that it can be the day after I have actually had my hair cut by either man when one or the other will still greet me with baleful hope, but at least then my resolve is steely and my head is shorn and I am not to be persuaded. After six weeks my reserves

of steel have run low, my locks grown shaggy and I grin sheepishly and get corralled in and submit myself to a shearing.

This all sound quite straightforward, but there is a problem. The two brothers have clearly worked together all their lives, and look as if they are approaching retirement age any time now. More importantly, they are barely on speaking terms. To make the whole matter worse I am seen as one of their prime customers and I have no one to blame but myself. I do quite enjoy the business of being trimmed, especially in the old fashioned way that the brothers apply their trade, with a variety of different types of scissors, steel combs, cutthroat razors and hot towels. As a result of being cosseted for half an hour, and frequently drifting close to the land of slumber where naiads are teasing my hair and blowing in my ear, I tend to tip rather generously. That is, I round up the ridiculously cheap price these brothers charge to the nearest note, and it is still a bargain at half the price. I frequently spend the time, when not avoiding the tricks and traps of the naiads, in speculating how much business the brothers do and, hopeless as I am at business myself, I can be sure that these two must be even worse. Why, even if they both had customers queuing for eight hours a day, and if they opened for six days a week, then the maximum that they could gross would be a little over a thousand euros a week. They are open all of those hours, but I know that they rarely have two customers at a time, and are frequently standing on the doorstep wringing their hands and looking for me to boost their income. They recently took

out a bank loan to refurbish the shop (don't ask me how I know; I just do). What's more, they don't own the premises, but rent it. Then there is light and water on top of that and I wonder if there is any money left at the end of the week to pay themselves. I sometimes speculate that the tip I leave could be the only money that either of the brothers have to feed their imagined, extended families of forty eight, and that if it only arrives every six weeks or so then they are sharing very thin gruel indeed. No wonder, then, that when I do eventually enter the premises, I am a prize to be pampered, and one to be guarded jealously from the other brother. I am fully aware that each time I end up in the

hands of brother meek or brother glint then the resentment, one of the other, increases.

The poison spitting stage has been passed, and now my capture by one or other of the brothers is treated in ice cold silence and I wonder if the revenge stage is approaching. At which point will I be taken hostage by one of the them? How long will I be able to endure twenty four hour haircuts? How long will it take before I run out of money and am turned into meat pies?

Funny thoughts go through your head when a man has clicketty-clack scissors at your ear and a razor at your neck.