

Saloon with View

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I used to play with my hair when I was young and the constant curling and twirling made it stick up like a cocky's crest. My family joked about it, and my father warned that he would take me for a 'crew-cut' if I continued the practice. His threats didn't work, so off to the barber we went. It was the '70s and everyone had long hair, but I came out of that barber shop like a spring lamb out of a shearing-shed.

On the return home we had to collect my sister from my grandparents' house, and my crew-cut and I knocked on the door with more than a little trepidation. My sister roared with laughter when she opened the door. 'You look like a monkey!' Five words that followed me around for years.

I thereafter fondled my hair only in private, gave fervent rebuttals each time my father suggested my hair was getting long, and I learned that the phrase 'just a trim' would achieve my dual aim of getting out of the barber's chair quickly and limiting the hair loss. The mid-'80s would come and go before I showed my ears in public again, and I still flinch when I step into the chair and the barber asks how I would like it.

It is a universal truth that hair-cutting is not a strong consideration for Westerners contemplating a move to the Middle East, but I realised soon after arriving that it should be. Barber shops are called 'saloons' in Kuwait and, when you forgive the misspelling and the irony (alcohol is illegal in Kuwait), you realise that 'saloon' is a perfect name: it conjures an image of a dusty, dangerous, male-only environment where one false move can get you killed. Yes, saloons in Kuwait are dangerous places.

Saloon danger comes in several forms. The most noticeable, but perhaps least dangerous, is an apparent lack of hygiene. There are quite glamorous (and expensive) hairdressers in Kuwait who are ultra-hygienic, but my grey thatch does not warrant such expenditure. I admit that a little of the Scottish in me takes over when I have to spend money on my hair, so I frequent the cheap barbers. The blue stuff they use to sterilise the scissors and combs is not always clean. The chairs look a hundred years old. The ledge underneath the mirror is strewn with hair creams, shampoos, conditioners, and other products that look as though they were packaged before the first Gulf war. And some of the hair on the saloon floor first fell, I'm sure, before oil was discovered. The cheap barbers *do* open a sealed antiseptic package and rub it along the cut-throat before they shave the back of my neck, so that gives me some reassurance.

Then there's the *Leave it to Beaver* danger. If you have ever watched an episode of the American television series from the late '50s, you would know that the Cleaver family in the show sport 'straight' haircuts: short-back-and-sides, bowl-cuts; call them what you will. I am not sure how many haircuts I have had in Kuwait, but each one has been of the aforementioned variety. At the saloon near my apartment, there is a big-bellied Pakistani who often cuts my hair, his huge barrel-gut pressing into my arms or shoulders while he does so. He always makes the same comment: 'Very beautiful style. Is how is hair in Karachi.' I have never asked him to give me a haircut that is all the rage in Karachi, but that's what he does. I am sure he thinks I like it that way – I keep coming back – and I am also sure that if I ever went to Karachi, I would see *Leave it to Beaver* on local television.

You cannot discuss saloons in Kuwait without talking about violence. There are Pakistani saloons, Sri Lankan saloons, Egyptian saloons, Moroccan saloons, Indian saloons and more, and at each one you are beaten to within a falafel of your life. My first haircut in Kuwait was at a Sri Lankan saloon where, by coincidence, the television was tuned to an Australia versus Sri Lanka cricket match. All the barbers were watching, and Australia won a close match that was in its final stages as my turn in the chair came. My anxiety was heightened by the Sri Lankan angst that permeated the saloon, but my hair was cut without incident and, after being shown the rear of my head and agreeing that it was good – it wasn't, but I just wanted to get out of there – I tried to stand. The barber pushed me down, messed up my hair violently, and attacked my scalp. It felt like he was pulling the skin from the bridge of my nose to the top of my head. Then he started hitting me; there is no other word for it. My father would call it a 'clip behind the ear' and I received several. Then he started punching me in the back. The sound of his fists thudding into me reverberated around the saloon. I looked up at the television and saw the Australian players celebrating; I was sure that the Sri Lankan was taking out his frustration on me. Then he started to 'wring my neck,' squeezing and pressing the same spot. I don't know if there is such a thing as a passive-aggressive massage but, if there is, that Sri Lankan gave me one. I realised later that my beating had nothing to do with the cricket; you get one at every saloon.

After I arrived in the Middle East my ear-hair began to grow. I have always despised the old guys who let the grey shrubbery spill from their ears. Now I was in danger of being ridiculed for the same thing. I think it was during my third Middle-Eastern haircut that an eagle-eyed Egyptian barber spotted my ear-hair. He pointed at it and gestured to a plastic pot on the ledge below the mirror. There was a moment when we both paused to look at each other. I can't be sure, but it seemed that everyone was watching us. If there had been a pianola in the saloon, it would have stopped playing. I nodded slowly and felt like a gunslinger accepting a challenge: 'Bring on the wax, *Habibi*. I can take it'.

The barber switched on an appliance – it looked like a little coffee pot – and filled it with wax. I could soon smell how hot it was. He took a flat wooden stick and dipped it into the wax, moved close, and twisted my ear-lobe so it faced upwards. He forced some wax in. Burning pain. Hatred towards all Egyptians. More wax flowing down my ear-hole. For some reason I thought of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. He coated the outside of my ears. I looked in the mirror at the huge monstrous mottled green lumps on each side of my head. My friend took a photograph.

It is perhaps not a surprise that you feel pain when your ears are covered on the inside and outside by hot wax. What *is* a surprise is the level to which the pain increases after a vicious Australian-hating Egyptian tears the wax from your ears. The pain surpasses any you have known: the broken arm; the kidney stone; the girl in grade three who ran off with your best friend; the 1981 Grand Final. And then, when you think you are over the worst of it, the barber takes a cotton bud and dips it into the wax. He comes close again and pushes the cotton bud into your ear canal. Without touching the sides, he thrusts it like a pain-seeking missile until it hits something, perhaps your ear-drum, and it hurts like hell. He puts another cotton bud in the other ear and when the pain has died a little you look in the mirror again. Perhaps a tear wells. People look at you. You look at you. A monkey with a white stick coming out of each raw pink ear. The final insult is when the wax on the cotton bud dries and hardens and the barber pulls it out. It feels as if your ear-drum is coming, too. He shows you the cotton bud; you are face-to-bud with a disgusting green-tipped cluster of grey hair. The expression on his face says: 'Look! This is what I took from your ear, you disgusting man'. The shame of it all.

The first time I had my ears waxed I couldn't believe how smooth they became. They were a little sensitive for half a day, but I could put up with that. I began to monitor my ear-hair closely. Sometimes the barber did not ask if I wanted my ears waxed, so I'd just have a haircut. Then I grew bold; I asked for the wax. I toughed it out. I went the extra mile. The end justified the means. I won't say that I began to enjoy my haircuts, but I could bear them, and I became an active rather than passive participant in the saloon community. I started to say, 'Asalaam a'lykum' when I walked into a saloon. I even talked to some of the barbers as they cut my hair. For perhaps the first time since I was seven-years-old, I was comfortable having my hair cut. The wax seemed to bond me, if the pun can be pardoned, to the saloon community. My hair, although thinning, receding, and greying, was nonetheless neat. My ear-holes were immaculate. I might not have looked forty any more, but my ears looked twenty-five. All was good with the world – until a Moroccan barber bent down in front of me and looked up my nose.

I bought a hair removal device the day after the Moroccan suggested I should wax my nose. I couldn't countenance having my nasal hair waved in front of my face. My new device doesn't work as well as the wax, but it is safer and I can remove the shrubbery in the privacy of my home. I still go to the saloon near my apartment, but I wait until my hair is completely unmanageable before getting it cut; I try to keep the conversation with the barber to a minimum; I abstain from wax; I tell them not to rub my head or shoulders or back any more. I am too old to get beaten up. It is a delicate balance between getting done what needs to be done and having a psychological breakdown.

The last time I went to the saloon the chubby Pakistani was there. He greeted me warmly and slapped the barber's chair with his towel. I sat down, said 'Just a trim,' and waited for my *Leave it to Beaver* cut. The light reflecting off the mirror seemed different. I looked at the reflection of the building across the road and saw that it was being demolished. The half that had been knocked over was throwing additional light into the saloon, and I could see the Gulf in the distance. I sucked in my chin for the Pakistani and he put tape around my neck. His stomach pressed into me as he wet my hair and I looked at myself and felt old. I'd solved the ear-hole hair problem but what about the hair on my head? Was I going to be one of those guys with three or four strands twirled around on top? I'd once asked the Pakistani to cut my hair short, like a crew-cut, but he wouldn't allow it. 'Kuwait sun hot. Need hair.' I acquiesced, but realised immediately that his point was, well, pointless. I hardly walk anywhere. I think he just likes my hair the way they wear it in Karachi.

When a loud noise came from the building site, he stopped cutting and looked across the road. 'Always work. Noise too much. Dust too much.'

'At least you can see the Gulf now,' I said.

He looked at me in the mirror and smiled. 'Saloon with view.'