

Lather And Nothing Else

translated from Hernando Tellez's story in Spanish, "Espuma y Nada Más"

He did not say hello when he came in. I was polishing my best razor over a piece of leather. And when I recognized him I started to shake. But he didn't notice. To hide it, I continued polishing the blade. I tested it with the tip of my thumb and turned to look at him against the light. At that moment he was taking off his belt with his bullet-holder where his holster was hanging. He hung it on one of the clothes pegs and on top of that, placed his vest. He turned all the way around to address me, and, undoing the knot of his tie, told me: "It's hot as hell. Give me a shave." And he sat down in the chair. I figured he had about four days worth of growth. Four days on his most recent excursion in search of our men. His face appeared burnt, weather-beaten by the sun. I started to meticulously prepare the soap. I cut a few slices from the bar, dropping them into the container, I mixed it with a bit of warm water, and I began to mix it with the brush. The foam soon started to rise.

"The guys in the troop must have as much of a beard as I do." I continued blending the lather. "But we came out well, you know? We caught the top dogs. Some came to us dead and others of them are still alive. But soon, they'll all be dead."

"How many did you get?" I asked.

"Fourteen. We had to go in deep to run into them. But now it's paying off. Not one of them, not a single one, will be spared." He leaned back in his chair upon seeing me with the brush in hand, overflowing with lather. I hadn't put on the sheet. I was definitely flustered. I took out a sheet from the cabinet and tied it around my customer's neck. He didn't stop talking. He assumed that I was one of his party members. "The town must have learned a lesson from what happened the other day," he said.

"Yeah," I responded while finishing doing the knot around his dark neck, smelling of sweat.

"It was good, wasn't it?"

"Very," I answered, while picking up the brush. The man closed his eyes with an expression of fatigue and waited just like that for the cool caress of the soap. I'd never had him so close to me. The day when he ordered the town to line up on the patio of the schoolyard to watch the four rebels hanging there, I crossed his path for an instant. But the spectacle of the mutilated bodies prevented me from concentrating on the face of the man who planned the whole thing, the face I now held in my hands. It wasn't an unpleasant face, certainly. And the beard, while it made him look a bit older, didn't look bad on him. His name was Torres. Captain Torres. A man with a good imagination – who else would have thought of playing target practice with the naked bodies of the rebels before hanging them? I started to apply the first layer of lather. He kept his eyes closed. "I really feel like taking a nap for a bit," he said, "but I have a lot to do this afternoon."

I put down the brush and asked, pretending not to be interested: "Executions?"

"Something like that, but slower," he responded.

"All of them?"

"No. Barely a few."

I went back to lathering his beard. My hands were shaking again. The man couldn't have noticed and that was my advantage. But I had hoped that he wouldn't come. A lot of our men had probably seen him come in. And having the enemy on your turf makes you act a certain way. I had to shave this beard like I would any other, with caution, with care, like that of any other regular, making sure that I did not spill even one drop of blood from a single pore. Making sure that the little circles of his beard didn't deflect the blade. Making sure that his skin remained clean, warm, polished, that when I passed the back of my hand over it, I would feel the surface without a single hair. Yes. I was a secret revolutionary, but I was still a barber of conscience, proud of the cleanliness of my profession. And this four-day-old beard would make for a job well done.

I took the razor, raised the two handles at an oblique angle, let the razor go, and started the task, working my way down on one of the sideburns. The blade responded perfectly. The hair proved tough and hard, not very long, but compact. His skin started appearing little by little. The razor sounded with its typical sound, and upon it fell lumps of soap mixed with bits of stubble. I paused to clean off the razor, took the leather strap again and started to re-sharpen the steel, because I am a barber who does things well. The man had kept his eyes closed, opened them, put one of his hands on top of the sheet, felt the part of his face where the soap started to dry off, and told me: "Come to the schoolyard this afternoon at six."

"Will it be the same as the other day?" I asked, horrified.

"Maybe even better," he responded.

"What do you think you're going to do?"

"I don't know yet. But we'll have fun." He leaned back again and closed his eyes. I approached him with the blade raised

up. "Do you think you're going to punish them all?" I ventured timidly.

"All of them."

The soap was drying on his face. I had to hurry. I looked into the mirror at the street. The same as always: the grocery store with two or three customers inside. Then I looked at the clock: two-thirty in the afternoon. The blade continued its way down his face. Now I worked my way down the other sideburn. A blue, compact beard. He'd let it grow like some poets or priests. It looked good on him. Many wouldn't have recognized him. *All the better for him*, I thought, as I tried to softly polish all of his neck area. Because there I definitely needed to handle the blade well, since the hair, though not so tough, was tangled up in little whirls. A curly beard. The tiny pores could upon up, and release their pearl of blood. A good barber like me is rightly proud in never letting this occur to any client. And this one was a first-class client. How many of us had he ordered killed? How many of us had he ordered mutilated? No. It was better not to think about it. Torres didn't know that I was his enemy. He didn't know, nor did anyone else. I treated it as a secret and told only a select few, precisely so that I could inform the revolutionaries about what Torres was doing in the town and what he was planning to do every time he went out to hunt down revolutionaries. It was going to be very hard, then, to explain that I had him in my hands and I let him go, peacefully, alive, and clean-shaven.

His beard had disappeared from his face almost completely. He seemed younger, with a few years off his face then he had when he'd come in. I suppose that this always happens with men who come in and out of barbershops. Under the stroke of my razor Torres became young again, because I am a good barber, the best in this town, if I do say so myself. A little bit more soap, here, under his chin, on his Adam's apple, on that great big vein. God, it's hot! Torres must be sweating as much as I am. But he's not afraid. He's a calm man who doesn't even think of what he's going to have to do this afternoon with the prisoners. I, on the other hand, with razor in hand, polishing his skin again and again, avoiding spilling any blood from those pores, watching every stroke, can't think clearly. Damn the hour that he came in, because I am a revolutionary but not a murderer. And it would have been so easy to kill him. And he deserves it. Does he deserve it? No, hell no! No one deserves to be the sacrifice that turns other people into murderers. What good could come of that? None, of course. More and more people come and the first group kills the second who killed the third, and it continues on and on until the world is a sea of blood. I could slit his throat, just like that, *bam!* He wouldn't have time to groan in pain and since his eyes were closed, he wouldn't see the gleam of the razor or the gleam in my eyes. But I was shaking like a real murderer. A stream of blood would spill from his neck, onto the sheet, onto the chair, onto my hands, onto the ground. I would have to close the door. And the blood would continue on the floor, warm, permanent, unstoppable; onto the street, like a small scarlet brook. I am sure that with a strong stroke, a slicing cut, he wouldn't feel any pain. He wouldn't suffer. But what would I do with the body? Where would I hide it? I'd have to run, leaving all of this, take cover far, far away. But they would follow me until they ran into me. "Captain Torres' murderer. He cut his throat while he was shaving him. What a coward." But, on the other hand: "He avenged us. A name to remember (my name here). He was a barber of the people. No one knew that he was fighting for our cause..." So what? Murderer or hero? My destiny depended all on this blade. I could tilt my hand a little more, leaning in the razor a little bit more, and plunge it in. His skin would give way like silk, like rubber, like leather. There's nothing more tender than human skin and the blood was always there, ready to spill out. A razor like this never fails you. It's my best razor. But I don't want to be a murderer; no, sir. You came so that I could shave you. And I'm doing the job honorably... I don't want to stain myself with blood. Just lather, and nothing else. You are an executioner; I'm just a barber. And to each his own. That's the way it is. To each his own.

The beard had stayed clean, polished, and warm. The man sat up to look at himself in the mirror. He passed his hands over his skin and felt that it was fresh and renewed.

"Thanks," he said. He approached the clothes peg to look for his belt, his pistol, and his vest. I must have been very pale and I felt that my shirt was soaked with sweat. Torres finished adjusting his belt buckle, corrected the position of the pistol in his holster, and after mechanically smoothing out his hair, put on his vest. He took out some money from his pants pocket to pay me the cost of the services. He stopped in the doorway for a second, and turning to me, he said:

"They kept saying that you would kill me. I came to find out if it was true. But killing's not easy. Believe me, I know." And he continued his way down the street.