

# Julian Barnes

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

### I

THAT FIRST TIME, after they moved, his mother had come with him. Presumably to examine the barber. As if the phrase 'short, back and sides, with a little bit off the top' might mean something different in this new suburb. He'd doubted it. Everything else seemed the same: the torture chair, the surgical smells, the strop and the folded razor - folded not in safety but in threat. Most of all, the torturer-in-chief was the same, a loony with big hands who pushed your head down till your windpipe nearly snapped, who prodded your ear with a bamboo finger. 'General inspection, madam?' he said greasily when he'd finished. His mother had shaken off the effects of her magazine and stood up. 'Very nice,' she said vaguely, leaning over him, smelling of stuff. 'I'll send him by himself next time.' Outside, she had rubbed his cheek, looked at him with idle eyes, and murmured, 'You poor shorn lamb.'

Now he was on his own. As he walked past the estate agent's, the sports shop and the half-timbered bank, he practised saying, 'Short back and sides with a little bit off the top.' He said it urgently, without the commas; you had to get the words just right, like a prayer. There was one and threepence in his pocket; he stuffed his handkerchief in tighter to keep the coins safe. He didn't like not being allowed to be afraid. It was simpler at the dentist's: your mother always came with you, the dentist always hurt you, but afterwards he gave you a boiled sweet for being a good boy, and then back in the waiting-room you pretended in front of the other patients that you were made of stern stuff.

Your parents were proud of you. 'Been in the wars, old chap?' his father would ask. Pain let you into the world of grown-up phrases. The dentist would say, 'Tell your father you're fit for overseas. He'll understand.' So he'd go home and Dad would say, 'Been in the wars, old chap?' and he'd answer, 'Mr Gordon says I'm fit for overseas.'

He felt almost important going in, with the adult spring of the door against his hand. But the barber merely nodded, pointed with his comb to the line of high-backed chairs, and resumed his standing crouch over a white-haired geezer. Gregory sat down. His chair creaked. Already he wanted to pee. There was a bin of magazines next to him, which he didn't dare explore. He gazed at the hamster nests of hair on the floor.

When his turn came, the barber slipped a thick rubber cushion on to the seat. The gesture looked insulting: he'd been in long trousers now for ten and a half months. But that was typical: you were never sure of the rules, never sure if they tortured everyone the same way, or if it was just you. Like now: the barber was trying to strangle him with the sheet, pulling it tight round his neck, then shoving a cloth down his collar with thick carrotty fingers. 'And what can we do for you today, young man?' The tone implied that such an ignominious and deceitful worm as he obviously was might have strayed into the premises for any number of different reasons.

After a pause, Gregory said, 'I'd like a haircut, please.'

'Well, I'd say you'd come to the right place, wouldn't you?' The barber tapped him on the crown with his comb; not painfully, but not lightly either.

'Short-back-and-sides-with-a-little-bit-off-the-top-please.'

'Now we're motoring,' said the barber.

They would only Do Boys at certain times of the week. There was a notice saying No Boys On Saturday Mornings. Saturday afternoons they were closed anyway, so it might just as well read No Boys On Saturdays. Boys had to go when men didn't want to. At least, not men with jobs. He went at times when the other customers were pensioners. There were

three barbers, all of middle age, in white coats, dividing their time between the young and the old. They greased up to these throat-clearing old geezers, made mysterious conversation with them, put on a show of being keen on their work. The old geezers wore coats and scarves even in summer, and gave tips as they left. Gregory would watch the transaction out of the corner of his eye. One man giving another man money, a secret half-handshake with both pretending the exchange wasn't being made.

Boys didn't tip. Perhaps that was why barbers hated boys. They paid less and they didn't tip. They also didn't keep still. Or at least, their mothers told them to keep still and they kept still, but even so the barber would bash their heads with a palm as solid as the flat of a hatchet and mutter, 'Keep *still*.' There were stories of boys who'd had the tops of their ears sliced off because they hadn't kept still. Razors were called cut-throats. All barbers were loonies.

'Wolf Cub, are we?' It took a while for Gregory to realise that he was being addressed. Then he didn't know whether to keep his head down or look up in the mirror at the barber. Eventually he kept his head down and said, 'No.'

'Boy Scout already?'

'No.'

'Crusader?'

Gregory didn't know what that meant. He started to lift his head, but the barber rapped his crown with the comb. 'Keep *still*, I said.' Gregory was so scared of the loony that he was unable to answer, which the barber took as a negative. 'Very fine organisation, the Crusaders. You give it a thought.'

Gregory thought of being chopped up by curved Saracen swords, of being staked out in the desert and eaten alive by ants and vultures. Meanwhile, he submitted to the cold smoothness of the scissors - always cold even when they weren't. Eyes tight shut, he endured the tickly torment of hair falling on his face. He sat there, still not looking, convinced that the barber should have stopped cutting ages ago, except that he was such a loony he was going to carry on cutting and cutting until Gregory was bald. Still to come was the

stropping of the razor, which meant that your throat was going to be cut; the dry, scrapy feel of the blade next to your ears and on the back of your neck; the fly-whisk shoved into your eyes and nose to get the hair off.

Those were the bits that made you wince every time. But there was also something creepier about the place. He suspected it was rude. Things you didn't know about, or weren't meant to know about, usually turned out to be rude. Like the barber's pole. That was obviously rude. The previous place just had an old bit of painted wood with colours twirling round it. The one here worked by electricity, and moved round all the time. That was ruder, he thought. Then there was the binful of magazines. He was sure some of them were rude. Everything was rude if you wanted it to be, this was the great truth about life which he'd only just discovered. Not that he minded. Gregory liked rude things.

Without moving his head, he looked in the next-door mirror at a pensioner two seats away. He'd been yakking away in one of those loud voices old geezers always had. Now the barber was bent over him with a small pair of round-headed scissors, cutting hairs out of his eyebrows. This was disgusting. It wasn't even rude. Then he did the same with his nostrils; then his ears. Snipping great twigs out of his lugholes. Absolutely disgusting. Finally, the barber started brushing powder into the back of the geezer's neck. What was that for?

Now the torturer-in-chief had the clippers out. That was another bit Gregory didn't like. Sometimes they used hand-clippers, like tin-openers, squeak grind squeak grind round the top of his skull till his brains were opened up. But these were the buzzer-clippers, which were even worse, because you could get electrocuted from them. He'd imagined it hundreds of times. The barber buzzes away, doesn't notice what he's doing, hates you anyway because you're a Boy, cuts a wodge off your ear, the blood pours all over the clippers, they get a short-circuit and you're electrocuted on the spot. Must have happened millions of times. And the barber always survived because he wore rubber-soled shoes.

At school they swam naked. Mr Lofthouse wore a pouch-thing so they couldn't see his whanger. The boys took off all their clothes, had a shower for lice or verrucas or something, or being smelly in the case of Wood, then jumped into the pool. You leaped up high and landed with the water hitting your balls. That was rude, so you didn't let the master see you doing it. The water made your balls all tight, which made your willy stick out more, and afterwards they all towelled themselves dry and looked at one another, though without looking, sideways, like in the mirror at the barber's. Everyone in the class was the same age, but some were still bald down there; some, like Gregory, had a sort of bar of hair across the top but nothing on their balls; and some, like Hopkinson and Shapiro, were as hairy as men, and a darker colour already, brownish, like Dad's when he'd peeped round the side of a stand-up. At least he had *some* hair, not like Bristowe and Hall and Wood. But how did Hopkinson and Shapiro get like that? Everyone else had willies; Hopkinson and Shapiro already had whangers.

He wanted to pee. He couldn't. He mustn't think about peeing. He could hold out till he got home. The Crusaders fought the Saracens and delivered the Holy Land from the infidel. Like Infidel Castro, sir? That was one of Wood's jokes. They wore crosses on their surcoats. Chainmail must have been hot in Israel. He must stop thinking that he could win a gold medal in a peeing-high-against-a-wall competition.

'Local?' said the barber suddenly. Gregory looked at him properly in the mirror for the first time. Red face, little moustache, glasses, yellowy hair the colour of a school ruler. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, they'd been taught. So who barbers barbers? You could tell this one was a perve as well as a loony. Everyone knew there were millions of perves out there. The swimming master was a perve. After the lesson, when they were shivering in their towels with their balls all tight and their willies plus two whangers sticking out, Mr Lofthouse would walk the length of the poolside, climb on to the springboard, pause till he had their full attention, with his

huge muscles and tattoo and arms out and pouch with strings round his buttocks, then take a deep breath, dive in and glide underwater the length of the pool. Twenty-five yards underwater. Then he'd touch and surface and they'd all applaud - not that they really meant it - but he'd ignore them and practise different strokes. He was a perve. Most of the masters were probably perves. There was one who wore a wedding-ring. That proved he was.

And so was this one. 'Do you live locally?' he was saying again. Gregory wasn't falling for that. He'd be coming round to sign him up for the Scouts or the Crusaders. Then he'd be asking Mum if he could take Gregory camping in the woods - except there'd only be one tent, and he'd tell Gregory stories about bears, and even though they'd done geography and he knew bears died out in Britain at about the time of the Crusades, he'd half-believe it if the perve told him there was a bear.

'Not for long,' Gregory replied. That wasn't too clever, he knew at once. They'd only just moved here. The barber would say sneery things to him when he kept on coming in, for years and years and years. Gregory flicked a glance up at the mirror, but the perve wasn't giving anything away. He was doing an absent-minded last snip. Then he dug into Gregory's collar with his carrot fingers and shook it to make sure as much hair as possible fell down inside his shirt. 'Think about the Crusaders,' he said, as he started pulling out the sheet. 'It might suit you.'

Gregory saw himself reborn from beneath the shroud, unchanged except that his ears now stuck out more. He started to slide forward on the rubber cushion. The comb snapped against his crown, harder now that he had less hair.

'Not so fast, young fellow-me-lad.' The barber ambled down the length of the narrow shop and came back with an oval mirror like a tray. He dipped it to show the back of Gregory's head. Gregory looked into the first mirror, into the second mirror, and out the other side. That wasn't the back of his head. It didn't look like that. It didn't match the front. He felt himself blush. He wanted to pee. The perve was

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

showing him the back of someone else's head. Black magic. Gregory stared and stared, his colour getting brighter, staring at the back of someone else's head, all shaved and sculpted, until he realised that the only way to get home was to play the perve's game, so he took a final glance at the alien skull, looked boldly higher up the mirror at the barber's indifferent spectacles, and said, quietly, 'Yes.'

## II

The hairdresser looked down with polite contempt and ran a speculative comb through Gregory's hair: as if, deep down in the undergrowth, there might be some long-lost parting, like a medieval pilgrim trail. A dismissive flip of the comb made the bulk of his hair flap forward over his eyes and down to his chin. From behind the sudden curtain, he thought, Fuck you, Jim. He was only here because Allie wasn't cutting his hair any more. Well, for the moment, anyway. He thought of her now with passionate memory: him in the bath, her washing his hair, then cutting it while he sat there. He'd pull out the plug and she'd hose the bits of cut hair off him with the shower attachment, flirting with the spray, and when he stood up, as often as not she'd suck his cock, there and then, just like that, picking off the last bits of cut hair as she did so. Yeah.

'Any particular . . . place . . . sir?' The guy was feigning defeat in his search for a parting.

'Just take it straight back.' Gregory jerked his head revengefully, so that his hair flew back over the top of his head and back where it belonged. He reached out of the wanky nylon robe-thing and finger-combed his hair back into place, then gave it a fluff. Just like it had been when he walked in.

'Any particular . . . length . . . sir?'

'Three inches below the collar. Take the sides up to the bone, just there.' Gregory tapped the line with his middle fingers.

'And would you be requiring a shave while we're about it?'

Fucking cheek. *This* is what a shave looks like nowadays. Only lawyers and engineers and foresters delved into their little sponge bags every morning and hacked away at the stubble like Calvinists. Gregory turned sideways-on to the mirror and squinted back at himself. That's the way she likes it,' he said lightly.

'Married, are we, then?'

Watch it, fucker. Don't mess with me. Don't try that complicity stuff. Unless it's just that you're queer. Not that I've got anything against the condition. I'm pro-choice.

'Or are you saving up for that particular torment?'

Gregory didn't bother to reply.

'Twenty-seven years myself,' said the guy as he made his first snips. 'Has its ups and downs like everything else.'

Gregory grunted in an approximately expressive way, like you did at the dentist's when your mouth was full of hardware and the geezer insisted on telling you a joke.

'Two kids. Well, one's grown up now. The girl's still at home. She'll be up and away before you can turn round. They all fly the coop in the end.'

Gregory looked in the mirror but the fellow wasn't making eye contact, just head down and snipping away. Maybe he wasn't so bad. Apart from being a bore. And, of course, terminally malformed in his psychology by decades of complicity in the exploitative master-servant nexus.

'But perhaps you're not the marrying kind, sir.'

Now hang *on*. Who's accusing who of being queer? He'd always loathed hairdressers, and this one was no exception. Fucking provincial Mister two-point-four children, pay the mortgage, wash the car and put it back in the garage. Nice little allotment down by the railway, pug-faced wife hanging out the washing on one of those metal carousel-things, yeah, yeah, see it all. Probably does a bit of refereeing on Saturday afternoons in some crap league. No, not even a referee, just a *linesman*.

Gregory became aware that the fellow was pausing, as if he

expected an answer. He expected an answer? What rights did he have in the matter? OK, let's get this guy sorted out.

'Marriage is the only adventure open to the cowardly.'

'Yes, well, I'm sure you're a cleverer man than me, sir,' replied the hairdresser, in a tone that wasn't obviously deferential. 'What with being at the university.'

Gregory merely grunted again.

'Of course, I'm no judge, but it always seems to me that universities teach the students to despise more things than they have a right to. It's our money they're using after all. I'm just glad my boy went to the tech. Hasn't done him any harm. He's earning good money now.'

Yeah, yeah, enough to support the next two-point-four children and have a slightly bigger washing machine and a slightly less puggy wife. Well, that was for some. Bloody England. Still, all that was going to be swept away. And this kind of place would be the first to go, stuffy old master-and-servant establishments, all stilted conversation, class-consciousness and tipping. Gregory didn't believe in tipping. He thought it a reinforcement of the deferential society, equally demeaning for tipper and tippee. It degraded social relations. Anyway, he couldn't afford it. And on top of that, he was fucked if he was going to tip a topiarist who accused him of being a shirt-lifter.

These geezers were on the way out. There were places up in London designed by architects, where they played the latest hits on a funky speaker system. Cost a fortune, apparently, but it was better than *this*. No wonder the place was empty. A cracked bakelite radio on a high shelf was playing tea-dance stuff. They ought to sell trusses and surgical corsets and support hose. Corner the market in prostheses. Wooden legs, steel hooks for severed wrists. Wigs, of course. Why didn't hairdressers sell wigs as well? After all, dentists sold false teeth.

How old was this guy? Gregory looked at him: bony, with haunted eyes, hair cut absurdly short and Brylcreemed flat. Two hundred? Hundred and forty? Gregory tried to work it out. Married twenty-seven years. So: fifty? Forty-five if he got

JULIAN BARNES

her in the club as soon as he whipped it out. If he'd ever been that adventurous. Hair grey already. Probably his pubic hair was grey as well. Did pubic hair go grey?

The hairdresser finished the hedge-trimming stage, dropped the scissors insultingly into a glass of disinfectant, and took out another, stubbier pair. Snip, snip. Hair, skin, flesh, blood, all so fucking close. Barber-surgeons, that's what they'd been in the old days, when surgery had meant butchery. The red stripe round the traditional barber's pole denoted the strip of cloth wound round your arm when the barber bled you. His shop-sign featured a bowl as well, the bowl which caught the blood. Now they'd dropped all that, and declined into hairdressers. Tenders of allotments, stabbing the earth instead of the extended forearm.

He still couldn't work out why Allie had broken it up. Said he was too possessive, said she couldn't breathe, being with him was like being married. That was a laugh, he'd replied: being with her was like being with someone who was going out with half a dozen other blokes at the same time. That's just what I mean, she said. I love you, he'd said, with sudden desperation. It was the first time he'd said it to anyone, and he knew he'd got it wrong. You were meant to say it when you felt strong, not weak. If you loved me, you'd understand me, she replied. Well, fuck off and breathe, then, he'd said. It was just a row, just a stupid sodding row, that was all. Didn't mean anything. Except it meant they'd broken up.

'Anything on the hair, sir?'

'What?'

'Anything on the hair?'

'No. Never mess with nature.'

The hairdresser sighed, as if messing with nature was what he'd spent the last twenty minutes doing, and that in Gregory's case this all too necessary piece of interference had ended in defeat.

The weekend ahead. New haircut, clean shirt. Two parties. Communal purchase of a pipkin of beer tonight. Get stonking drunk and see what happens: that's my idea of not messing with nature. Ouch. No. Allie. Allie, Allie, Allie. Bind my arm.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

I hold out my wrists to you, Allie. Wherever you please. Non-medical purposes, but plunge it in. Go on, if you need to. Loose my blood.

'What was that you said just now about marriage?'

'Eh? Oh, the only adventure open to the cowardly.'

'Well, if you don't mind my making a point, sir, marriage has always been very kind to me. But I'm sure you're a cleverer man than me, what with being at the university.'

'I was quoting,' said Gregory. 'But I can reassure you that the authority in question was a cleverer man than either of us.'

'So clever he didn't believe in God, I expect?'

Yes, *that* clever, Gregory wanted to say, just *exactly that* clever. But something held him back. He was only brave enough to deny God when among fellow sceptics.

'And, if I may ask, sir, was he the marrying kind?'

Huh. Gregory thought about it. There hadn't been a Madame, had there? Strictly mistresses, he was sure.

'No, I don't think he was the marrying kind, as you put it.'

'Then perhaps, sir, not an expert?'

In the old days, Gregory reflected, barber-shops had been places of ill repute, where idle fellows gathered to exchange the latest news, where lute and viol were played for the entertainment of customers. Now all this was coming back, at least in London. Places full of gossip and music, run by stylists who got their names in the social pages. There were girls in black sweaters who washed your hair first. Wow. Not having to wash your hair before you went out to have it cut. Just saunter in with a hi-sign and settle down with a magazine.

The expert on marriage brought a mirror and showed twin views of his handiwork to Gregory. Pretty neat job, he had to admit, short at the sides, long at the back. Not like some of the blokes in college, who just grew their hair in every direction at the same time, bogbrush beards, Olde Englishe muttonchops, greasy waterfalls down the back, you name it. No, mess with nature just a little bit, that was his real motto. The constant tug between nature and civilisation is what

## JULIAN BARNES

keeps us on our toes. Though of course, that did rather beg the question of how you defined nature and how you defined civilisation. It wasn't simply the choice between the life of a beast and that of a bourgeois. It was about. .. well, all sorts of things. He had an acute pang for Allie. Bleed me, then bind me up. If he got her back, he'd be less possessive. Except he'd thought of it as just being close, being a couple. She'd liked it at first. Well, she hadn't objected.

He realised that the hairdresser was still holding up the mirror.

'Yes,' he said idly.

The mirror was put down on its face and the wanky nylon robe unwound. A brush swooshed back and forth across his collar. It made him think of a soft-wristed jazz drummer. Swoosh, swoosh. There was lots of life ahead, wasn't there?

The shop was empty, and there was still a glutinous whine from the radio, but even so it was a lowered voice close to his ear which suggested, 'Something for the weekend, sir?'

He wanted to say, Yeah, train ticket to London, appointment with Vidal Sassoon, packet of barbecue sausages, crate of ale, a few herbal cigarettes, music to numb the mind, and a woman who truly likes me. Instead, he lowered his own voice and replied 'Packet of Fetherlite, please.'

Complicit at last with the hairdresser, he walked out into the bright day calling for the weekend to begin.

### III

Before setting off, he went into the bathroom, eased the shaving-mirror out on its extending arm, flipped it over to the make-up side, and took his nail-scissors from his sponge-bag. First he trimmed out a few long mattressy eyebrow hairs, then turned slightly so that anything sprouting from his ears would catch the light, and made a snip or two. Faintly depressed, he pushed up his nose and examined the tunnel openings. Nothing of extravagant length; not for the moment. Dampening a corner of his flannel, he scrubbed

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

away behind his ears, bob-sleighed the cartilaginous channels, and gave a final prod into the waxy grottoes. When he looked at his reflection, his ears were bright pink from the pressure, as if he were a frightened boy or a student afraid to kiss.

What was the name for the accretion of stuff that whitened your damp flannel? Ear-crust, he called it. Perhaps doctors had a technical term for it. Were there fungal infections behind the ear, the aural equivalent of athlete's foot? Not very likely: the location was too dry. So maybe ear-crust would do; and maybe everyone had a private name for it, so that no common term was required.

Strange that no one had come up with a new name for the hedge-trimmers and topiarists. First barbers, then hairdressers. Yet when did they last 'dress' hair? 'Stylists'? Fake-posh. 'Crimpers'? Jokey. So was the phrase he used nowadays with Allie. 'Just off to the Barnet Shop,' he'd announce. Barnet. Barnet Fair. Hair.

'Er, three o'clock with Kelly.'

An indigo fingernail stumbled down a row of pencilled capitals. 'Yes. Gregory?'

He nodded. The first time he'd booked over the phone and they'd asked his name he'd replied, 'Cartwright.' There was a pause, so he'd said 'Mr Cartwright,' before realising what the pause had been about. Now he saw himself upside down in the ledger: GREGGORY.

'Kelly be with you in a minute. Let's get you washed.'

He still, after all these years, couldn't slide easily into the posture. Maybe his spine was going. Eyes half closed, feeling for the lip of the bowl. Like doing the backstroke and not knowing where the end of the pool is. And then you lay there, with cold porcelain holding your neck and exposing your throat. Upside down, waiting for the guillotine blade.

A fat girl with uninterested hands made the usual conversation with him - 'That too hot?' 'Been on holiday?' 'You want conditioner?' - while half-heartedly attempting with scooped hand to keep the water out of his ears. He had, over the years, settled into a half-amused passivity at the Barnet Shop. The first time one of these red-faced trainees had asked 'You want

JULIAN BARNES

conditioner?' he'd answered, 'What do you think?', believing that her superior view of his scalp made her the better judge of his requirements. Stolid logic suggested that something called 'conditioner' could only improve the condition of your hair; on the other hand, why pose the question if there wasn't a valid choice of answer? But requests for advice only tended to confuse, drawing the cautious answer, 'It's up to you.' So he contented himself with saying 'Yes' or 'Not today, thank you', according to whim. Also according to whether or not the girl was good at keeping water out of his ears.

She watchfully half-led him back to the chair, as if drippingness were close to blindness. 'You want a tea, a coffee?'

'Nothing, thanks.'

It wasn't exactly lutes and viols and the assembly of idle fellows exchanging the latest news. But there was stonkingly loud music, a choice of beverage, and a range of magazines. He normally picked something like *Marie Claire*, the sort of women's magazine it was OK for a man to be seen reading.

'Hi, Gregory, how are things?'

'Fine. Yourself?'

'Can't complain.'

'Kelly, like the new hair.'

'Yeah. Got bored, you know.'

'Like it. Looks good, falls well. You like it?'

'Not sure.'

'No, it's a winner.'

She smiled. He could do this stuff, customer banter, meant and half-meant. It had only taken him about twenty-five years to get the right tone.

'So what are we doing today?'

He looked up at her in the mirror, a tall girl with a sharp bob he didn't really like; he thought it made her face too angular. But what did he know? He was indifferent to his own hair, and went to Kelly not for whatever skills she deployed but for her restful presence.

When he didn't reply immediately, she said, 'Shall we splash out and do exactly the same as last time?'

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

'Good idea.' He smiled. The same as last time, and next time, and the time beyond that.

He wasn't sure he actually enjoyed being here. The salon had the mixed-ward atmosphere of a jolly outpatients' department where no one had anything serious. Still, he could handle it; social apprehensions were now long gone. The small triumphs of maturity. 'So, Gregory Cartwright, give us an account of your life so far?' 'Well, I've stopped being afraid of religion and barbers.' He'd never joined the Crusaders, whatever they had been; he'd evaded the hot-eyed evangelisers at school and university; now he knew what to do when the doorbell rang on a Sunday morning.

'That'll be God,' he'd say to Allie, 'I'll do it.' And there on the step would be a spruce, polite couple, one of them often black, sometimes with a winning child in tow, and offering an uncontentious opener such as, 'We're just going from house to house asking people if they're worried about the state of the world.' The trick was to avoid both the true Yes and the smug No, because then they had a landing-line across to you. So he would give them a householderish smile and cut to the chase: 'Religion?' And before they in turn could decide whether Yes or No was the correct response to his brutal intuition, he would end the encounter with a brisk, 'Better luck next door.'

Actually, he quite liked having his hair washed; mostly. But the rest of it was mere process. He took only mild pleasure in the bodily contact which was all part of things nowadays. Kelly would lean an unaware hip against his upper arm, or there'd be a brush from another part of her body; and she was never exactly overdressed. Way back when, he'd have thought it was all for him, and feel relieved that a draped sheet covered his lap. Today it didn't stir his mind out of *Marie Claire*.

Kelly was telling him how she'd applied for a job in Miami. On the cruise liners. You went out for five days, a week, ten days, then had shore leave to spend the money you'd earned. She had a girl-friend out there at the moment. Sounded like fun.

JULIAN BARNES

'Exciting,' he said. 'When are you off?' He thought: Miami's violent, isn't it? Shootings. Cubans. Vice. Lee Harvey Oswald. Will she be safe? And what about sexual harassment on the cruise ships? She was a nice-looking girl. Sorry, *Marie Claire*, I mean woman. But girl in a way, because she provoked these semi-parental thoughts in someone like him: one who stayed at home, went to work, and had his hair cut. His life, he admitted, had been one long cowardly adventure.

'How old are you?'

'Twenty-seven,' said Kelly, as if such an age were at the ultimate extremity of youth. Without immediate action her life would be compromised for ever; a couple more weeks and she would turn into that old biddy in rollers on the other side of the salon.

'I've a daughter almost your age. Well, she's twenty-five. I mean, we've another one as well. There's two of them.' He didn't seem to be saying it right.

'So how long you been married then?' Kelly asked in quasi-mathematical astonishment.

Gregory looked up at her in the mirror. 'Twenty-eight years.' She gave a larky smile at the idea that anyone could have been married for the enormous length of time that she had been alive.

'The elder one's left home, of course,' he said. 'But we've still got Jenny with us.'

'Nice,' said Kelly, but he could see she was bored now. Bored with him, specifically. Just another ageing geezer with thinning hair he'd soon have to comb more carefully. Give me Miami; and soon.

He was afraid of sex. That was the truth. He didn't really know any more what it was for. He enjoyed it when it happened. He imagined, in the years ahead, that there would be gradually less of it, and then, at some point, none at all. But this wasn't what made him afraid. Nor was it anything to do with the daunting specificity with which they wrote about it in magazines. In his younger days they'd had their own daunting specificities. It had all seemed quite clear and bold,

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HAIRDRESSING

back then, when he stood up in the bath and Allie took his cock in her mouth. All that stuff had been self-evident, and imperative in its truth. Now he wondered if he hadn't always got it wrong. He didn't know what sex was for. He didn't think anyone else did either, but that didn't make the situation any better. He wanted to howl. He wanted to howl into the mirror and watch himself howl back.

Kelly's hip was against his bicep, not the edge of her hip either, but the inner curve of it. At least he knew the answer to one of his youthful questions: yes, pubic hair does go grey.

He wasn't worried about the tip. He had a twenty-pound note. Seventeen for the cut, one for the girl who'd washed him and two for Kelly. And just in case they put the price up, he always remembered to bring an extra pound. He was that sort of person, he realised. The man with the back-up pound coin in his pocket.

Now Kelly had finished cutting and stood directly behind him. Her breasts appeared on either side of his head. She took each of his sideburns between thumb and finger, then looked away. This was a trick of hers. Everyone's face is a bit lopsided, she'd told him, so if you judge by eye you can end up making a mistake. She measured by feel, turning away towards the cash-desk and the street. Towards Miami.

Satisfied, she reached for the drier and finger-flicked a soufflé effect which would last until the evening. By now she was on automatic, probably wondering if she had time to pop outside for a cigarette before the next damp head was guided to her. So she would always forget, and fetch the mirror.

It had been an audacity on his part, some years back. Revolt against the tyranny of the bloody mirror. This side, that side. In forty years and more of going to the barber's, the hairdresser's and the Barnet Shop, he had always assented meekly, whether he recognised the back of his head or not. He would smile and nod, and seeing the nod reproduced in canted glass, would verbalise it into 'Very nice' or 'Much neater' or 'Just the job' or 'Thank you'. If they had clipped a swastika into his nape he would probably have pretended to approve. Then, one day, he thought, No, I don't want to see

JULIAN BARNES

the back. If the front's OK, the back will be too. That wasn't pretentious, was it? No, it was logical. He was rather proud of his initiative. Of course Kelly always forgot, but that didn't matter. In fact, it was better in a way, since it meant that his timid victory was repeated every time. Now, as she came towards him, her mind in Miami, the mirror dangling, he could raise a hand, offer the indulgent smile he used every couple of months, and say,  
'No.'