

English 469
Professor Anne Fadiman

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. ~Edward Scheinman

La Barbieria

by Edward Scheinman

The doctor, a short, preppy guy with a short, preppy haircut, is delivering a sermon on death while Anthony trims his sideburns.

“I’m in good shape,” he’s saying, “and I mean *good* shape. But even yesterday, I ran five miles and when I woke up this morning I could hardly walk. I’m getting old. And sooner or later, *boom*, prostate disease. It’s coming for you, it’s coming for me.”

Anthony laughs, exchanging the clippers for scissors. “Oh, I don’t worry too much about that,” he says as he fixes a goofy cowlick. “There are ways to escape. I hear if you eat enough tomatoes...”

The doctor rolls his eyes at the mirror. “Yeah, if you eat a bushel of tomatoes a day, that might work.”

Anthony sets the scissors aside and uses a dollop of gel on the bangs. “Well you know, it’s the acid in the tomatoes that’s so good for you,” he says. “That’ll keep you going.” Anthony parts the hair and holds a mirror to the back of the doc’s head.

“Tomatoes, huh?” The doctor laughs. “Is that why you’re always so happy, Anthony?”

Anthony undoes his smock and smiles. “Well, I say, you stay happy, you never die...right?” He looks around the room. We’re all nodding, and I can’t help thinking that if he’s right, he’s going to live forever.

Anthony Mongillo grows big beefsteak tomatoes in his herb garden. His tomatoes are doing well this year despite the lack of rain, he tells me, but they're just not as plump as they have been in the past. He also grows evergreens to sell at Christmas. (I imagine him trimming the trees with oversize scissors and wetting them down with Barbicide to facilitate the styling process.)

Gardening takes up much of Anthony's free time, when he's not barbering at the Y or fulfilling his duty as jovial *pater familias*. His home in Cheshire, where he has lived since 1970, is now the nucleus of what Anthony calls his "family compound," the neighborhood that contains his three children, his six grandchildren, and his sister's family. It's the same kind of tight family atmosphere that Anthony knew as a boy in Benvenuto, a small town outside of Naples.

"There are always parties going on in the compound," he laughs, "since my family is so big. We eat, we drink, we sing. Sometimes I let my grandkids win at *bocce*."

Anthony looks like an Italian Johnny Cash. He's got a strong chin—worthy of an emperor—and an Augustan nose, so that when he's not smiling he could almost pass for a tough guy. The problem is that he's rather short (five-foot-seven, by my reckoning) and almost always smiling. His complexion is healthily dark, his white hair is combed back in a mini pompadour, and his hairline is impressively low.

He speaks perfect English and will talk with you about whatever you want—his favorite topics being sports (he roots for the Yankees and Giants) and politics (he roots for the Democrats). "That's the job," he tells me. "You gonna be a barber, you gotta know how to talk about everything." His speech has a graceful rolling motion, or sometimes a more animated

cadence so that he sounds like Chico Marx. When he says “barbershop,” he adds a syllable somewhere between the “bar” and the “ber” by lingering on the rolled *r*.

I became a regular at the Y when I found that for \$16, I could get a great haircut and a twenty-minute chat in Italian. The first time I met Anthony, we bonded over European soccer and the relative merits of players like Vieri, Del Piero, and Totti. By my second haircut, I had plucked up enough courage to try out my Italian 130 skills. Anthony is very patient and makes a conscious effort to slow down his speech so that I can understand. When I fumble for a word, he is happy to finish my sentence for me. He is a nimble barber and a graceful conversationalist, always tailoring his speech to yours the same way he adapts his cut style to the peculiar needs of each customer.

The Y shop has been a New Haven fixture since its founding by a Frenchman in 1909. Bernard hints mysteriously that the shop’s history “may go back even further,” but I have found no evidence for this claim. After the Frenchman, the shop came into the ownership of a German, before Anthony and his brother-in-law Enzo took over in 1957. “The French started it, the Germans tried to take over, but the Italians won!” Anthony declares.

The shop has moved five times since Anthony bought it, mainly thanks to the university’s hyperactive “improvement” projects on Broadway. The shop occupied three different locations on Broadway before moving to York Street in 1997. “They were taking out all the small stores on Broadway,” says Anthony, “and putting in big stores.” The university had hoped to put the Y on the second floor right above Ashley’s on York. Anthony shakes his head. “I said no way. If I had gone upstairs, I woulda been shot. Who wants to walk upstairs to get a haircut?”

Anthony came to America in December of 1954, when he was eighteen. His uncles had already made the move, and Anthony came over with his father, his sister, and his brother-in-law Enzo. In three years, Anthony got a job in an upholstery store, learned English in night school classes, and trained for his barber's license in Hartford. In 1957, he got his license, and he and Enzo bought the store. In 1960, Anthony became a citizen.

"America was a rich word, back in the 50s," Anthony explains. "In Europe everything was old, bombed, or dead. America, you just think about it—*rich*." Anthony uses this word often when describing America. In our Italian conversations, he calls the word "America" a *parola ricca*: it's rich with connotations of freedom, security, opportunity, and, well, riches. That's the *sogno Americano*, says Anthony, and he believes in it. His veneration of both the land and the idea of America is one of the reasons he follows American politics so assiduously. "America used to be everyone's favorite," he laments. "Now, everybody doesn't like us."

Like the *parola ricca* of America, Anthony's barbershop is both a place and an idea. The shop has moved many times, been commandeered by the French, the Germans, and the Italians, and survived the disposable razor and revolving hair trends. Still it is the Y. Yale memorabilia from the 1957 Broadway shop still cover the walls, supplemented with signed photos and balls from more recent Yale teams. The impressive array of sports equipment makes the shop seem like a cross between Mory's and a locker room. There's a crew oar from 1962, Indian-style wooden lacrosse sticks, sabers, fencing masks, hockey sticks, hockey masks, footballs (signed), soccer balls (signed), baseballs (signed), a YALE BULLDOGS golf bag (signed), and a boating hat (unsigned). On the wall hang framed engravings of Harkness Tower, Sterling Library, and Saybrook College, photos of old football stars, and—right above the register—a photo of Enzo cutting Anthony's hair on Broadway in 1971.

One of the chairs from the old shop—perhaps the one in which Anthony is sitting in this photo—is now on display in the window. The chair is a year older than Anthony (it was built in Chicago in 1935) and apparently weighs a lot. “It takes four guys much younger than me to lift it,” Anthony tells me. “Back in the old days, I had to tiptoe around that chair and stretch and reach, because I’m short and the chair was too tall.” Next to the chair in the window stands an American Flag, its colors echoed on the other side of the window by the revolving barber’s pole. The symbolism of the barber’s pole, I am told, is open to debate. The following is a generally accepted interpretation:

- The pole itself symbolizes the pole patients would grip while having their blood let.
- The red and white symbolize bloody bandages.
- The blue and red symbolize venous and arterial blood, respectively.
- Pewter basins on the bottom and top of the pole symbolize the vessels into which barber-surgeons would drain blood.

The irony is that the Y is no longer a barbershop—at least not on paper. Anthony changed the name from “Y Barbershop” to “Y Haircutting” in 1980 because long hair had been in fashion for so long, and also because men found it cheaper and easier to shave their own beards. But Anthony and Bernard still call it the “barbershop,” and Anthony insists that his haircuts are better than trendy salon cuts.

“I know lotta people don’t even like salons,” he says. “They work different, with the small scissors. You can’t get the haircut you want.” Still, Anthony realizes that salons are in and barbershops are out. “Barbershops are traditional, yes? But the young generation, they don’t wanna be a barber. There’s more money in salons, you know.”

Anthony speaks nostalgically of the 50s, when he charged a mere \$1.25 for a haircut. Since then, he says he’s raised it by 25 cents a year.

“In 1965, I charged \$4.25,” Anthony recalls. “In the 70s, I charged about \$6.00. In the 80s, the whole economy changed, and I raised it to about \$11.00.” Today it’s \$16.00 for a standard cut, and Anthony says he’s making good money.

How can an old-fashioned barbershop compete successfully with the new salon market? A hairdresser that I know in Omaha puts it this way: “A lot of guys don’t want to have their hair cut by some trendy chick. It makes them feel too metro.”

Archaeologists tell us that when man first decided to give himself a haircut, the only implements at his disposal were clamshells or sharpened animal teeth. Eventually, man graduated to the custom of stretching his beard across a log and hacking it off with a flint axe. The axe-wielder, no doubt, did not consider himself a barber; he was just a friend offering help with the bi-annual shave. Shaves in ancient Egypt were also done on the buddy system, with a flint or (on a good day) a sleek copper razor. In early Rome, the beard was an essential symbol of masculinity, though later it became the sign of servility or vulgarity. Pliny the Elder asserts that the clean shave first became popular when Scipio Africanus, conqueror of Hannibal, decided to keep a private barber for daily shaves.

The first known organization of professional barbers—as opposed to the amateur axe-wielders of prehistoric times—was founded in France in 1094, during a time when the church was desperate to regulate the hair length and shave styles of Christendom. In 1163, the Council of Tours ruled on theological grounds that clergy, who were serving as surgeons at that time, should be banned from drawing blood. Thereafter, it was barbers who practiced surgery and dentistry as well as the cosmetic and hygienic trimming of hair. John Gay’s verse from *A Goat Without a Beard* captures best the grotesque nature of the medieval barber’s function:

His pole with pewter basin hung;
Black rotten teeth in order strung;
Ranged cups, that in the window stood,
Lined with red rags, to look like blood;
Did well his threefold trade explain:
Who shaved, drew teeth and breathed a vein.

Of course, the threefold duties of the medieval barber made him an inevitable charlatan. His knowledge was crude and his means still cruder; with leech-setting and bloodletting as his staples, it's no wonder he became such an unpopular figure. Steve Martin's *Saturday Night Live* lampoon of "Theodoric: Medieval Barber of York" certainly did no favors for the posthumous reputation of medieval barbers.

But then, barbers have always gotten a bad rap. An old Russian proverb declares that "it is easier to bear a child once a year than to be shaved every day." A similar medieval European adage alleges that "barbers learn to shave by shaving fools." Benjamin Franklin insisted on shaving himself in order to "avoid the uneasiness one is sometimes obliged to suffer from the dirty fingers or bad breath of a slovenly barber." Then there is Sweeney Todd, "the demon barber of Fleet Street," who killed his customers to make meat pies. One of the most bizarre stories comes from historian Richard Corson, who describes how the Roman Emperor Comodus, "to while away the time, would commandeer a barber's shop and cut off the noses of the customers." (It isn't clear whether the emperor was playing a demented joke or making a fashion statement.)

By the sixteenth century, the barbershop had become a social hub, the place to go for news and gossip as well as the occasional trim. Often, the barber would keep musical instruments on hand for the idle strumming of anyone who wished to play, so that a man could get his news, his music, and his haircut all in the same place. There was even a standardized etiquette for behavior in a barbershop, though penalties varied between European countries.

Handling the razors without permission, making jokes about the cutting of throats, calling hair powder flour, and fidgeting with any of the barber's tools would incur a fine and result in expulsion from the shop.

That atmosphere—a community combined with a place of business—thrives today at the Y Haircutting shop on High Street. Their clientele are loyal, their location is central, and their the old-school Yale spirit is abundantly evident. Nowadays the background music is not lutes and violins but merely the steady drone of ESPN, which as far as I can tell plays constantly from 8:30 till 5:30 (except on Saturdays, when the shop closes an hour early). Bernard, Anthony's nephew, likes the Steelers. Ron, who has worked at the Y for ten years and has gotten haircuts there since he was thirteen, is obsessed with the Green Bay Packers.

On the morning of Halloween, talk centers around the World Series. A ninety-year-old professor emeritus walks in. His face droops in soft wrinkles below his big tortoiseshell glasses, and his hair lies in thick combed-back curls (white like Anthony's, but without a part). Sitting down, he starts to talk animatedly about Chicago's victory the night before.

“I was very pleased with the White Sox, Anthony. How about you?”

“Ah, my friend, I didn't know you were a White Sox fan.”

“Well, given the choice, I was happy,” he shrugs. “They played some beautiful baseball. That Venezuelan coach, Ozzie Guillen, he's just great. He's like a fox, he sees everything. Hey, that shave-powder you sell...I don't like that stuff.”

The talk drifts back and forth between various topics, often jumping from one to another without any warning. The professor and Anthony are good friends, and their conversation has an

easy familiarity to it. When the subject switches again to politics, it becomes clear that Anthony and the professor are vehemently on the same page.

“I wanna get that guy Cheney,” says the professor, sounding more like an ex-prizefighter than an academic. “This is just like the Nixon times. I wanna get that guy.”

Anthony agrees. “You said it. With Clinton, he balanced the budget, he did a lotta good things. These Republicans never learn. Bush wants to get rid of everything—healthcare, social security, welfare. Hey, what’s your problem with the shave-powder?”

“You can’t get it out of the container! It’s sealed shut.”

Anthony shows him how to twist the top off, and the old man thanks him profusely. “This is good shave-powder,” says Anthony. He’s not using the clippers at all on the professor, just scissors and a comb, which he keeps dipping in Barbicide. “How do you want your eyebrows?” he asks. He trims them vertically and then discreetly snips the professor’s nose hair and ear hair. He does this without asking, as if they’ve done it a hundred times before.

As the professor rises to leave, Anthony helps him to the door. “Don’t rush,” says Anthony. He helps the professor put his coat on, bags the shaving powder, and holds the door open. “I will see you soon, my friend.”

With the professor gone and no customers on deck, Anthony decides to reorganize the bottles that line the counter—slipper oil, hand moisturizer, water spritzer, green styling gel, and special pomade. In front of the bottles lie the assorted tools of Anthony’s trade—a large pair of scissors, a small pair of scissors, clippers, tweezers, and razors. Anthony uses Andie’s™ clippers and Diane™ stainless steel scissors, and refuses to switch brands because, as he says, “You get used to the balance.” He also prefers traditional hard rubber combs, which he keeps in

a tall jar of Barbicide beside the mirror. The Barbicide, he tells me, is useful against germs but useless against lice.

The secret to Anthony's craft, I am convinced, is in his footwork. He's constantly shifting his weight, bending forward or leaning backward but never unsteady. His special poise comes from the elbows—he holds them away from his body, at chest height, achieving a lightness of touch that exceeds even Bernard's, and certainly Ron's. By now, I've watched Anthony deal with every conceivable hairstyle (for men, at least—he claims that he cuts women's hair too, but I have never seen a woman in his shop). I've watched him take more than a foot of hair off one student; I've watched him shave another kid's head entirely. (“Hey, look...you got a nice a-round head!”) Policemen come into the shop all the time, usually to get a 50s buzz cut but sometimes just to talk football.

One customer in particular has stuck in my memory, mainly on the strength of his eyebrows: great grey bushy things that taper upward at the ends like the ear tufts of a horned owl. He's a caricature of the debonair scholar. There's a certain pomp in the static wave of his hair; his face is wrinkled in a way that suggests he's spent a great deal of time thinking; his glasses hang from a cord just below his red paisley tie. At 11:45 on the morning of Halloween, he breezes into the shop. “Hello, Anthony. I've got to be at Mory's by noon.” He speaks in a distinguished South African accent of recent trips to Hong Kong. Anthony gives him a conservative trim—so conservative that I have a hard time telling the difference—and gets the job done in plenty of time for the man's three-block walk to Mory's.

Next in line is a college kid with a thick beard who tries to bargain for a shave. “I know you guys don't do wet shaves, but...”

“Yeah,” Bernard explains, “we stopped doing wet shaves years ago. I’d do it for you, but we don’t have the facilities here any more. We haven’t had sinks in the shop for five years.”

“Is there a way you could just cut it down a little, so that I can go home and do the rest myself?”

A look passes between Bernard and Anthony. Anthony nods and Bernard tells the kid to sit down. “We really don’t do these any more, but I think we can make an exception.” Bernard uses a straight razor to trim most of the beard away, working deftly and deliberately. The sound of the razor slicing away at the thick roots is clean and percussive. Once the beard is tamed, he stops at the mustache, grinning at the guy in the mirror. “So, you wanna go with that 70s porn star look, or what?” The kid laughs and shakes his head, and off goes the mustache.

The warm smell of Barbicide is the predominant scent in the room, and it’s pleasant—just like the silvery snipping of scissors and the hum of the clippers. While Bernard shaves, Anthony tidies the shop. He uses a blow drier to clear his chair of the previous customer’s hair, which he then sweeps into the corner with a big push-broom. As the day goes on, hair piles up in the corner of the shop, billions upon billions of dead cells left behind by owners glad to be rid of them. By five o’clock, the pile will begin to resemble an Ewok.

Another policeman walks in and gives Anthony a hard time. “Where’s your Halloween costume? You can’t tell me you’re not dressing up.”

Anthony shrugs. “I’m dressing up as a barber. You like?”

The next and final customer before Anthony’s lunch is Norman, an art historian from Germany who comes over several times a year to work at the YUAG and, more importantly, to get his hair cut at the Y. “What do you think, Anthony, do I need a hair cut?” (Another accent: German, but not thick.)

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” Anthony laughs and Norman takes his seat. “This guy, he comes all the way from Germany to get his hair cut here,” Anthony explains to me as he wipes off the scissors on a cloth.

Anthony has a deal with Norman: every time Norman comes to the shop, he has to bring a joke. “I promised you a new joke every time,” says Norman, “so here it goes. A man goes to a bar and has a few drinks. When he’s ready to leave, he pays the bartender, gets off his stool, and falls down. People help him to the door, let go of him, and he falls down again. Next day, his wife is nagging him: ‘I know you were drunk last night,’ she says. ‘How did you know that?’ he asks. She answers: ‘The bar called—they said you left your wheelchair.’”

It’s a pretty bad joke, but Anthony laughs politely and says “That’s-a good, that’s-a good.” Norman doesn’t smile or laugh. He seems to take jokes seriously.

“Well, I have to get all my jokes from Germany,” says Norman, “because there aren’t any jokes here.”

Anthony disagrees: “No, there’s a lotta jokes here. You wanna hear one?”

Norman nods at the mirror, and Anthony tells his joke.

“So there’s two men at St. Peter’s gate. St. Peter asks, ‘How did each of you die?’ The first man says, ‘I froze to death.’ The second guy says, ‘I thought my wife was cheating on me, so I came home from work in the middle of the day to catch her. I ran upstairs to the bedroom, I ran outside to the gazebo, I ran downstairs to the basement, then back upstairs and finally I had a heart attack.’ The first man looks at the second and says, ‘Well, if you’d looked in the freezer then we’d both be alive.’”

Enzo died in 1993 at the age of 58. In 2001, Anthony turned 65 and arranged to put his nephew Bernard in charge of the shop so that he could go into partial retirement. He now works Mondays, Tuesdays, and Fridays, and spends the rest of the week working in his garden or playing with his grandchildren. He says he has no plans to retire altogether, though he has welcomed the extra free time. “I’m not giving up yet,” he says. “As long as I’m feeling good, I’m gonna keep it going. All the young people, they keep me young too.”

I like to think that I am one of the people who help keep Anthony young. On my last day of reporting, I decide to don the smock for a trim and a bout of Italian. Business is slow, and Anthony works leisurely while we talk. He starts with the scissors, taking an inch off the front and top; then he switches to clippers, trimming the sideburns and nape. We drift into Italian and talk about soccer (*il calcio*), the Beatles, and hair. Anthony tells me that my hairstyle—short, parted on the right, and pushed up in front—is called a “Princeton.”

“We used to joke with the kids who asked for a Princeton,” he laughs. “We’d say, ‘What are you thinking? This is *Yale!*’”

He lays aside the clippers and picks up the small scissors to cut the arch behind my ear. Then he uses a soft brush to wipe the hair off my shoulders. By now, there is a customer waiting to be seated. Anthony and I shake hands, and he starts tucking his next victim into a fresh smock.

As I walk to the door, it dawns on me that one day I will have to leave New Haven, and that when I do I will miss Anthony. So I turn around and thank him again and say that I hope to see him soon.

“Ah, don’t worry, my friend: hair’s never gonna stop growing.” He smiles and shrugs. “That’s-a the beauty of being a barber.”