

ON SHAVING (© Pascual Delgado – 29-08-2014)

Every time I shave I always remember my father, and one of the most poignant memories I retain from my childhood days: The day my father brought me to the barber for my first shave.

I guess before he passed away at the age of 36, he wanted to accompany his only son in the ageless ritual of the first shave –although truth be told, I had at 12 years of age only the first pitiful wisps of incipient mustache hair on my upper lip.

This initiation was perhaps only practiced in Latin countries and in some Mediterranean cultures –a sort of rite of passage into manhood or secular confirmation ceremony. The first bloom of facial hair on a male child was –up to more recent times– evidence of his arrival at adolescence and the end of innocence, with all the symbolic connotations it carried: virility, courage, chivalry, etc. In Spanish, to be called a beardless kid (“un niño imberbe”) was quite an insult in the old days.

Up to that first shave, I had only visited the barber for my haircut –a radical crew-cut which only left a patch of millimeter-long hair on the very top... standard cut for boys in the fifties –in Cuba derisively called “la malanguita.” Now I was to be introduced into the exotic world of shaving, with all its paraphernalia: the smell of shaving cream, the steam-hot towel, the tonics and secret ointments that only barbers can acquire, mingled with the cigar smoke of the patrons.

The barber shop was at that time a sort of gentlemen’s club, an exclusive domain for males only (no women allowed) where customers could relax and read their newspaper’s sports section, ogle at the half-naked starlets on the walls, and place their bets with the local bookies. Loud and violent debates about the regional baseball teams or about politics were spiced with bawdy jokes involving mostly sex, death and defecation. For a 12-year-old all this was scarier than getting lost in the circus.

Scarier still: the sharpening of the straight razor! The barber takes out this eight-inch-long, sharp razor and begins to sharpen it on a thick leather strap until he can get it sharp enough to slice one hair lengthwise into four equal parts. My eyes bulge out of my sockets in fear as all the men in the barbershop laugh malevolently at the coming tortures I’m about to endure. The barber kicks a pedal beneath my chair and it rises to the level of his face. He begins lathering my babyish face as if it was all covered with hair. The shaving cream is hot but soothing on my cheeks. My father watches proudly as his brave boy sits without flinching or whimpering at the ongoing defenestration.

After what seemed an interminable morning, the ritual was consummated and I could rise from the barber’s chair sans-mustache, now finally a MAN. The after-shave felt quite refreshing when we stepped out to the tropical Havana heat.

I can’t remember what father and I did afterwards. He probably took me to a local café/soda fountain for a tall glass of chocolate ice-cream soda, proudly displaying his

clean-shaven son to all his buddies at the café or pastry shop –which smelled wonderfully of coffee and pastries and freshly-baked croissants, as only Spanish cafés can smell.

My father never sported a full beard, but rather a well-trimmed pencil line mustache à la Clark Gable, which was all the rage among Allied airmen and navy men during the Second World War. He served as a sonar operator on a PT-boat patrolling the Caribbean, hunting for German U-boats. Now, whenever I shave, I often wonder how he shaved aboard that boat heaving and rolling on tall waves in mid-ocean. Did he use a straight razor? I'm not sure if Gillette had already invented the safety razor by that time.

Today most men shave themselves, thus avoiding mutilation at the hand of amateurs. Shaving is an art one learns slowly and after much bleeding. Certain rules are to be imprinted deeply in the subconscious of a man unless he's a masochist: Never shave parallel to the blade. Never shave against the grain. Never shave your nose. Change your razor every month. Dunk your razor in alcohol every night so as to avoid skin infections. Still, a good day is when you don't have to shave till tomorrow, I always say.

By the time of the Cuban revolution, my father had already died of a rare blood disease nobody has been able to diagnose even to this day. He missed the metamorphosis of men's facial hair as full, luxuriant beards, into the symbol of revolution proudly worn by the "rebeldes" who followed Castro into the jungles of the Sierra Maestra mountain range. For a time, every male in Cuba had to grow a beard. It became de rigueur. We also saw wild men with long, shoulder-length hair for the first time in our lives, raised as we were in the pabulum of Americanized pruned faces and Brylcreemed tops.

This carried well into the sixties when every self-respecting hippy and leftist radical had to look like Ché Guevara. This was our legacy to the world, infested today with bearded Jihadist and eco-terrorists of all shapes and colors.

What would my father have said to all this insanity, I will never know. His was a simpler time of clearer moral choices.

But now, every morning as I shave my graying whiskers, sometimes I could swear he's there beside me, guiding my razor and teaching me how to avoid the nicks and cuts, and how much lather to apply so as not to be wasteful,... during wartime scarcity.