

The Chair

by Paul de Denus

The room sat quiet except for the gentle click and tick of warm air circulating from radiators bracketing the corner spaces. At the far end, a large mirror hung the full width of the wall. Underneath, two long shelves tracked the length and it was here, along the top shelf where Anton placed the shaving soaps, brushes and mixing mugs. On the lower one, he lined the safety razors in a straight row followed by shears, clippers, hand mirrors and dusters. Directly behind the single barber's chair he placed several bottles of vintage aftershave, Clubman talc and cologne, a sweet musty aroma powdering the air. On a small table, he laid a folded stack of pinstriped cutting capes, reminiscent of the kind used when he was a boy. He paused, pinched and rubbed the soft fabric between his fingers. His thoughts drifted to when he was a kid, to the monthly trip to the barber. He remembered the excitement of walking into the barbershop, the welcoming jingle of the bell and Mr. Greenway's wide smile. *Step on up son*, Mr. Greenway would say, wiping the barber chair with a quick swipe, then adding, *how would you like it today?* as the cape parachuted over his head, the thin paper collar neatly slipped inside the neck of his t-shirt, the gentle tug of fingers along the scalp. *Oh, a little off the top*, he would say, sitting back, settling in. There wasn't a better feeling in the world.

In the small seating area, Anton perused the magazines that lay in a half-fan on a side table. There were current sports, fishing and business magazines and several vintage issues of Time circa the 60's he had found online, the purchase a novelty idea quenching his quiet remembrances from the past. He found a broom and casually swept the spotless floor until he reached the front of the shop. He peered out through the curtain. The roads were evenly sheeted in light snow but the sky was clear. A bus rumbled passed. A dog barked. There was no one on the street. He stepped back from the window and surveyed the room, a satisfied grin on his face. *Open for business*. He had never felt happier.

He went to the barber's chair and placed his hand on the headrest then eased it around in a slow twirl. He stepped back, arm bent, his hand open palmed, patiently waited, as if they were dancing, for the chair to face him again. The chair was beautiful, its ornate round back lined with fine silver button embellishments. The seat was plush dark brown leather and the headrest, large and cushy, was enough to send you off to dreamland if you weren't careful. The adjusting chrome lever along the side gleamed like a monarch's silver scepter and he slowly toggled it back and forth, the chair gently rising and falling with a soft flush of air exhaling from internal pistons. Anton circled the chair, his hand barely caressing the upholstery, then stopped momentarily to rub a slight imperfection in the headrest, a cut in the leather that had been masterfully patched.

Sit. Yes?

The words sat quiet in his head; he couldn't be sure he hadn't actually heard them whispered out loud. The chair was inviting, like a King's throne and a wistful smile settled on his face as he stepped onto the footrest and eased into it, placing his hands lightly on the armrests.

The chair had been purchased at an antiques store, out near Rigby, a quiet little community tucked away near the foothills. The dealer had known little of the chair's history. *It belonged to a barber up in Chesterfield, a Mr. Krug I believe. He went out of business, retired I think.* He had paused. *Got character though. Real character. That's all I can really say about it.* The storeowner had been eager to sell and when Anton had offered a full cash price, the owner had jumped.

Anton settled back in the chair. Above him, the lights flickered briefly leaving a gentle hum.

Sit. Goo-d?

The words were faint but this time he was sure he had heard them. The fluorescent light fixture flickered again.

zaat...zat

He shifted in the chair and looked around. The chair seemed to soften beneath him, his back settling in against the plush leather, his arms relaxed, melding on the armrests.

zizz...zaat...zat

The light fixture again, dimming.

zat...zaat...krug.

The name had come to him as if exhaled. He felt his stomach flutter.

Real character.

Anton's face tightened and he blinked, the thought tracking slowly like a shadow crossing a hill.

How zat feel? You like dat?

Anton turned quickly. The room was empty but the voice was there, again, a not so distant echo.

No? Someting else den?

Anton started to lean forward, found he couldn't move. Cold panic rolled over his body.

A litoll talc?

The clicking of the radiators like teeth clacking, the room now suddenly warmer. White spots flashed before him and he closed his eyes, rasped in a breath.

The sensation of soft bristles along his neck, his eyes jerking open.

Fingers.

He tried to turn his head but couldn't. The room swam, murky as if underwater and he blinked rapidly, realized he was still holding his breath. The chair seemed to hum beneath him, seemed to slowly undulate, then the sound of something so familiar.

Breathing.

Anton felt the pressure of hands on his shoulders pushing down and he screamed to a silent sound. A hand moved from his shoulders, down along his arm to his chest.

You like dat?

A weak moan escaped his lips as the hand slipped to his waist.

How about dat?

There was a warm breath next to his ear, rough stubble next to his cheek.

How about zum off da top?

The voice was low, crude. The sound of sniping scissors fluttered through the air like a wounded bird. The bristly cheek kissed his own, the voice now a whispered conversation. The room swam down, into dimness, then deeper, into darkness.

Next to the front door, the barber pole hung frozen in ice, the small sign beneath, BY APPOINTMENT ONLY, saw-toothed in icicles. On the counter the appointment book lay open. A name circled - client at nine.

Anton stood behind the chair. A shadow crossed behind him.

Dis is lovely. No?

Anton's eyes brightened. Scissors in hand, they waited for the doorbell to ring.

