

The Demon Barber of Darwin

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During one of my stints in Darwin, I managed a small shop in an arcade just off the main shopping precinct, one block from the present mall. The next door neighbour was a small elderly barber of indeterminate European origin, irascible and conservative to the point of being extreme right wing, and his nature not being of the sort to make friends easily. Like so many of his kind and generation, he had brought to his new home the old intellectual baggage of war-torn Europe, and while he had been in Australia for many years, he still spoke limited English with a very strong accent. Apparently there was a daughter somewhere, although he had been on his own for some time, perhaps filial ties were long ago sadly eroded by his own fractious nature?

He had survived time, tide, and immigration with what must be the fourth oldest, and most portable profession, after flesh, food, and treachery. Nowadays, there were seldom customers in his shop, apart from similar grey, bowed, and seemingly embittered men of his own generation and origin. New customers who wandered through the Arcade and chanced a haircut in his shop seldom returned as far as I observed; certainly, from what I heard, he offered them no encouragement to do so. He was the oldest business resident, apparently, and the Arcade was some 30 years old, predating Cyclone Tracy, (which had damaged part of the roof), so things were much as they always had been, apart from colours and other tenant changes. A liberal landlord would have been his sole guardian angel.

Obviously, he had a strongly ingrained work habit, as each day he appeared freshly shaved, thinning hair slicked back, opened the rather grimy shop, put on a stained white coat, sat in the barber's chair to read the paper and drink a cup of coffee from a thermos flask he bought with him. He may or may not have had a customer for the entire morning, and seemed resentful of others' customers who passed his shop-front, even leaving his chair on occasion to observe wherever else they may have gone. I did introduce myself when I began to work next door, but was soon put off by the one indifferent haircut I received, and the morning-after hangover smell and ill-nature, plus the endless complaints about poor business and how everything was going to the dogs. If the sad little man was not paranoid, he was very close to it, and imprisoned within his narrow and inward-looking world.

Actually, in his case, the world in which he lived was going to the horses, judging by the racing pages scattered about the shop, and the word was that he sometimes had to be restrained at the city racecourse, confused and inflamed by alcohol, when his "investments" did not pay off. Judging by his age, and this sort of story, a pension must have been his main source of income. Certainly, the shop takings, meagre as they were, would have barely supported him. Perhaps there was simply an element of self-delusion in the maintenance of his work ethic?

He certainly seemed to have the courage of his political principles, however questionable they may have been, as evidenced by the day I saw him send off an Aboriginal who had chanced the shop for a haircut. Of course, the objection was entirely a matter of race, but even with right on his side, the Aboriginal could make no headway in objecting to the treatment he received, though to give him credit, the argument stayed on a verbal level even when the excitable old barber advanced on him shouting and gesticulating. By this time, there was an audience, which included me, and the Aboriginal was prevailed upon to forgive and forget, as several of us impressed on him the fact that the old man was beyond reason in these matters.

It would be better for all concerned if the word was simply passed around about his attitude, rather than bother with any other actions, as his clientele was so limited, anyway. Certainly, the possible loss of his "business" due to civil action and penalty would have been the final bitter blow to the old man, who, by his actions and attitudes, was displaying mental fragility as he faced his own mortality with no easing of the circumstances to which his limited existence had been reduced.

For the rest of that day, the old barber continued to mutter away in the shop, and was more than usually active in his scrutiny of passers-by and the business they were innocently conducting in the Arcade, which contained the usual CBD fringe/low rental health shop, (me in charge), pre-loved clothing, dentist, takeaway, etc. Not too many ideological or social perils were amongst that modest collection of small businesses, yet the demons were certainly lurking for the old man that day, to the extent that when I closed up, he was busy talking to a glass of whisky, perched in the old-fashioned enamelled and leather-trimmed chair in the middle of the untidy shop.

Anyway, business life thereafter in the Arcade continued as usual, barber included. For myself, I found out that I was working for a proprietor who was not paying out for the orders placed, and I was faced with a growing number of frustrated customers. I realized that I had been hired to supervise the running down of the shop, and the disposal of what stock was left. A pity, as I was enjoying the shop, the rather whimsical atmosphere of the Arcade, the daily routine of opening up, and dealing with customers even as they dwindled. Maybe this was the sort of habit that kept the old barber going; if so, then I could empathise with his routine, especially, as in his case, he seemed to be sustained by this, despite the low income.

Almost inevitably, there came a Monday morning when the old barber was late, which turned into non-appearance, which in turn extended to Tuesday morning. The dentist-landlord came to see me, and asked me if I knew where he was, or even where he was living, as there was no information extant as to the barber's present domicile, etc. I did happen to know the building where he lived, which was a complex of pensioner and low-income flats down Smith St. I once had helped him home one day when he was wandering tired and emotional nearby after a particularly bad day at the races, the matters of geography and keys needing outside help, although he had remembered nothing of this later!

Accordingly, I went to the block of flats, found the flat was all closed up, and there was no reply to my repeated knocking. I even resorted to sniffing the small kitchen ventilator in case, although I could only detect the expected rancid cooking smells associated with that sort of external building orifice. I reported my lack of results to the dentist-landlord, the Department of Welfare was then informed of what was suspected and expected, given the old man's age and lifestyle, and matters left to them and the Police. Sure enough, the old man was found dead in the flat, and apart from the arrival of some bailiff-directed removalists to clear out the barbershop a week or so later, I thought that I would be hearing no more of the barber and his affairs. Another solitary and unfulfilled life had come to an end in that traditionally transient no-questions-asked city. Despite, in this case, the length of stay, there were few details, the life ending there much as it had been taken up, apparently some 30 years before.

Eventually, with the stock in the 'health' shop I managed now really running out, as were the owner's options as cash to pay me, I left the Arcade, though with some regret. I went back to the old stand-by of specialised restaurant work, i.e., washing dishes, while

I had a look around for another higher-paying employment option. At least the restaurant had some accommodation upstairs which went with the job, so I took advantage of this to save as much money as possible, thus giving up my current flat when I took the job. I subsequently maintained my work ethic at the restaurant tub, and fed well on the side.

About the same time, a friend offered to sell me a stretched Austin Maxi motor-caravan, which he was no longer using. Since he was also a motor mechanic, and kept the vehicle in good condition, I accepted the offer, which included storing it at his home for a month or so until I was ready to move into it, before moving on from the vagaries of life in Darwin. Another friend, who had fallen on hard times due to illness, was at this time offered a low-budget flat that he could stay in for the rest of his life, offered by the Department of Welfare, and so remove the pressing worries of somewhere to call home, and ongoing security of tenure. I was to be his first guest on the day when I helped him move in, and he was very pleased to be in the position to be able to offer hospitality in his new abode.

After I casually asked him what his new address was to be, he mentioned the flatting complex in Smith though not the flat number. Of course, knowing that there was a demand for such flats in Darwin, and that there could not have been too many vacancies unless due to unexpected circumstances, and although I did not say so at the time, I was nevertheless rather sure that this vacant flat was that of the late, and scarcely well-remarked, or lamented, barber. This was confirmed when preparations were made for the move; my friend's state of health was such that it seemed unnecessary to burden him with this knowledge, and I hoped that no neighbour would make a point of mentioning this to him. The lease had been signed, anyway.

By this time, a month or so had passed since the death of the old man; so, either Welfare had allowed a decent lapse of time before the next tenant came into the flat, or, with a proper bureaucratic attention to detail, the lease had now officially expired, and my friend was now about to make a new and eagerly awaited home in that same flat. The move duly took place one Sunday afternoon, using my motor-caravan, and was soon done, as my friend had little to move, and scant furniture to go with it, owing to the circumstances to which he had been reduced by ill-health. He was soon set up, and the first meal in the new flat was cooked and consumed with a few beers as we watched TV and talked, my friend content in his new home. The flat was clean, Spartan, and recently painted; there was no sign of the recent sad events relating to the barber.

For the next week or so, I was busy with washing dishes, and checking out the motor-caravan amongst other things. One day, my friend whom I helped to move came by the restaurant to see me. He looked a bit peaked, and knowing his state of health, which actually was a result of ciguatera poisoning as a fisherman years before, I was a bit concerned, and asked him how his new home was getting on. He was somewhat embarrassed to tell me that he had not been sleeping too well after that first night he played host after moving in. He wanted me to come and visit him again on the next spare night I had, and he would definitely appreciate the company, perhaps I could even stay the night on his couch...? Perhaps I would have an opinion of the flat...?

Knowing that I would now have to tell him the story of the late barber as previous tenant of the flat, I offered to come that following evening after work, if he did not mind the lateness of the hour, which of course, he did not, and was only too happy to watch TV until I came. Somehow, the TV and the lights on had made things easier, he said, but for some reason, he could still not relax enough to sleep soundly, there was just something 'strange' about the atmosphere of the flat, which was so disappointing to my friend, as he really did appreciate having at last found a secure home after hard times and the consequences of the ciguatera poisoning. With that information, I was sure that I knew the source of the problem, and could see that his fraught nervous system, damaged by the ciguatera toxin, sensitised him to whatever remained of the barber's tenure of the flat. Certainly, his ongoing power bill would be not be of any comfort.

Later that same evening, I came round to the flat with a half bottle of wine from the restaurant, and as we relaxed and talked, I told my friend the story of the barber. He took it better than I thought, and said he thought it was something like that, as he had seen a face reflected from various surfaces in the flat, and it had seemed to fly around the room on occasion. The old barber was obviously loathe to let go of the flat, but we agreed that with time, he might give up and go somewhere else. I would also spend more time at the flat, and we agreed that the motor-caravan would be left at his empty allotted parking place below in the yard, so that I could work on it there instead of doing so elsewhere. I could also sleep there on occasion, and share meals and facilities as required. So, the van was then moved to its new parking place, our modest ghost busting project began, for a few days, my friend got his beauty sleep, and his nervous system began to settle down. Either the experiment was a success, or the old barber was regrouping for his next round of surprises.

Then, the whole business began again a few days later, as if the old barber was now trying with renewed vigour to evict the interloper(s) from "his" flat. More sightings of faces flying around the room, more disturbed sleep, and the lights and TV were back on again 24 hours a day. For my part, I did not suffer the same indignities as my friend, my nervous system not having the handicap of ciguatera poisoning, nor was I ever alone in the flat for any length of time. However, I began to experience something quite bizarre whenever I visited the bathroom. As I stepped into the room, and closed the door, the room temperature seemed to drop, and gooseflesh to rise on my exposed skin. After some 'experimentation', I discovered to the wry amusement of my friend and myself, that, if I stood in the doorway, one half of me would be goose fleshed, and the other half at 'normal' temperature. Apparently, this was the actual scene of the old barber's demise, although, naturally, we would never set about determining or confirming the exact facts.

This particular incident seemed to lighten the atmosphere of the flat, and ease my friend's distress. Of course, there was that rather sad and tragic side to this whole story, regardless of what we knew of the old man; the nature of his solitary death was something to be regretted by any reasonable person, and this flat had been, in turn, his home and solitary haven for many years. We had reached a sort of stalemate, however, as amateur ghost busters. It was then that I made the suggestion to my friend that outside help should be sought to intervene to send what remained of the very territorially minded barber on his way. It was time for an exorcist to be called.

As neither of us had any affinity with conventional religion, the decision was made to approach the Buddhist community in Darwin to send a representative to help my friend. There was a Buddhist at the restaurant where I worked, and I told him the story, and

asked if he could arrange some help. No problem, a couple of elders and a sage would come very soon, and with pleasure; this was quite a common event for this "team" within their own community. A time and date was arranged for an auspicious day that next week, and my friend would only be required to make a small gift, in kind, to the local Temple in return for their services. However, it would be necessary for only the Buddhist representatives to be present, to prevent possible harm coming to the uninitiated who should not be present. Even so, despite this cautionary note, exorcism, it seemed, was a rather stern Western view of what was prescribed; the Buddhists preferred a more gentle type of persuasive send-off or re-direction order for the alienated entities that they encountered at these events.

Accordingly, my friend, in preparation for the prescribed evening, arranged to see a double feature at the city cinema to be on the safe side. I was at work as usual that night.

Being a weeknight, my washing-up and cleaning duties were finished reasonably early. I went to back my room above the restaurant, had a shower, and lay down on my bed under the overhead fan to read for a while, and to unwind in preparation for sleep. I was aware that, somewhere else, a certain ceremony could be going on, or had even been completed, but did not give the matter much thought. I must have dozed off over my book, because without warning I received a terrific jolt, like an electric shock, and I was suddenly wide awake, considerably startled by whatever had occurred. Some time elapsed before I calmed down again, but I was confident that I knew what had happened. Taking a note of the time by my alarm clock, I settled to read until I was drowsy once more. I was certain that I would not be disturbed again that night, but would confirm my reasons for this certainty in the morning.

The following morning, before work, I went around to the flat, and was met by the official, and hopefully the only resident, who said that, yes, the face was gone, he felt much better, and had a sound sleep at last after a good night at the movies. He had come home to an empty flat still redolent of the swell of incense, the 'officiating party' having left some time before. He was actually now waiting for me to do the 'gooseflesh test' to confirm that the source of the mutual discontent had finally moved on. The test was performed, and the good omens confirmed. The old barber had definitely disappeared. From then on, he was even accorded some affection in memory that he did not receive, or necessarily deserve in his sad and dysfunctional life, if only in the telling of his passing, as in this story.

As for my own curious, if unpleasant, nocturnal surprise, after conferring with my Buddhist colleague, I was able to confirm that the time I noted after being jolted awake seemed to correspond to the climax of the barber's sending-off ceremony being perfumed at that particular time. Presumably, in return for my useful suggestion of outside help in dealing with him, which resulted in the successful Buddhist intercession, the recalcitrant barber had paused long enough in his enforced off-world journey to give me a solid psychic 'kick' on the way. True to his earthly nature to the last, the irascible old bugger! I am glad he didn't get the full Western-style exorcist treatment of wide-screen experience, who knows what my experience would then have been.....?