

BARBER BURDEN

In the mid-1900s, there was a period of brutal violence in Colombia known as La Violencia. The following story is set in this time period and explores the tension between ordinary citizens, such as the barber, and the military.

Lather and Nothing Else by Hernando Téllez

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He didn't greet anyone when he came in. I was sharpening my best razor. And when I saw him I began to tremble. But he didn't notice. I continued to sharpen the razor to hide my alarm. Then I tested it against the tip of my thumb and held it up to the light again. He was removing his bandolier,¹ with its holster dangling. He hung it on one of the nails in the wardrobe and placed his kepi² on top. He turned around to address me and, undoing his tie, said "It's hot as h—. Give me a shave." And he sat in the chair.

I estimated it had been four days since he had last shaved. The four days the latest expedition to hunt down our people had lasted. His face appeared sunburned, hardened by the sun. I prepared the foam meticulously.³ I cut a few slices off the bar of soap and let them fall into the bowl. I added a little warm water and stirred it with the brush. It soon began to lather.

"The troops must need a shave as bad as I do."

I kept on beating the lather.

"But you know what? It was a success. We got the leaders. Some we brought back dead, some are still alive. But soon they'll all be dead."

"How many did you get?" I asked.

"Fourteen. We had to go in pretty far to find them. But they're paying for it now. And not one of them will come out alive, not one."

He leaned back in the chair when he saw I was holding up the shaving brush, full of lather. I still hadn't put the sheet on him.

That's how disoriented⁴ I was. I took a sheet out of the drawer and tied it around my client's neck. He didn't stop talking. He took for granted⁵ that I was on the side of the new order.

"The town has learned its lesson from what happened the other day," he said.

"Yes," I replied, as I finished tying the knot on his dark, sweaty, neck.

¹ a shoulder-belt with loops or pockets for ammunition

² a military cap with a flat top and horizontal brim

³ **meticulously** (adverb) showing careful and great attention to detail

⁴ **disoriented** (adjective) unsure about what to do

⁵ to assume that something is true without questioning it

“That was pretty good, wasn’t it?”

“Very good,” I answered, as I picked up the brush again.

The man closed his eyes, sighing with fatigue, and waited for the cool caress of the soap. I had never had him so close. The day he ordered the townspeople to gather in the schoolyard to see the four rebels hanging there, I caught a glimpse of him. But the sight of the mutilated⁶ bodies kept my eyes from lingering on the face of the man who was responsible for it all, the man whose face I was now going to take in my hands. It wasn’t an unpleasant face, for sure. And his beard, though it made him appear older, looked good on him. His name was Torres. Captain Torres. A man with a good imagination; after all, it hadn’t occurred to anyone before him to string up the rebels naked and use various parts of their bodies for target practice.

I started to apply the first layer of soap. His eyes were still closed.

“What I wouldn’t do for a little sleep,” he said. “But there’s a lot of work to be done this afternoon.”

I lifted the brush, and, feigning casual unconcern, asked, “Firing squad?”

“Something like that, but slower,” he replied.

“All of them?”

“No. Just a few.”

I returned to the task of lathering his beard. My hands began to shake. The man couldn’t have noticed, which was a relief. But I wished he hadn’t come. Many of our people had probably seen him come in. And having the enemy on your home turf imposes certain conditions. I’d have to shave that beard like any other, with the greatest care and as if he were my best customer, making sure that not one drop of blood emerged from his pores. Making sure that the razor would not get caught in the little clumps of hair. Making sure that his skin would come out clean, taut,⁷ and smooth, and that when I brushed the back of my hand against it, not one hair could be felt on its surface. Yes. I was a clandestine⁸ revolutionary,⁹ but I was also a barber of integrity, proud of the diligence with which I practiced my profession. And that four-day-old beard needed a lot of work.

I picked up the razor, opened the two handles at an angle, opened the blade, and began my task, heading downward from one of his temples. The blade responded impeccably. His beard was stubborn and hard, not very long, but dense. Little by little, his skin began to appear. The blade emitted its usual sound, and lumps of soap mixed with little hairs accumulated on it. I paused to clean and then sharpen it because I’m a barber who does things right.

⁶ **mutilate** (verb) to injure or harm by removing or damaging parts

⁷ **taut** (adjective) stretched or pulled tight

⁸ **clandestine** (adjective) kept secret in order to deceive someone

⁹ a person who takes part in a revolution or uprising against the government

The man had been keeping his eyes shut. Now he opened them, lifted his hand from underneath the sheet, touched the part of his face that had become free of soap, and said, "Come to the school at six this evening."

"The same as the other day?" I asked, horrified.

"It might be even better," he replied.

"What are you planning on doing?"

"I don't know yet, but it'll be fun." He leaned back again and closed his eyes. I approached the razor poised.

"Do you plan on punishing all of them?" I ventured timidly.¹⁰

"All of them."

The soap on his face was drying. I had to get started. I looked onto the street through the mirror. The same as always: the corner store and two or three customers inside. Then I looked at the clock: 2:20 p.m. The blade continued its descent. Now the other temple and down the cheek. A dark beard, thick. He should let it grow, like some poets and priests do. It would look good on him. Many people wouldn't recognize him. And that would be in his best interests, I thought, as I gingerly moved the blade up his neck. That's where I had to be most careful, since the growth, although still in its early stages, was clumping. A curly beard. The tiny pores could open and release their pearls of blood. The pride of a good barber

like me hinges on not letting this happen to any client. And this was an important client. How many of our people had he ordered killed? How many had he ordered mutilated? Better not to think about it. Torres didn't know that I was his enemy. He didn't know and neither did the others. It was a secret known to very few, precisely so that I could inform the revolutionaries about what Torres was up to in the town, and what he planned on doing each time he set out on an incursion¹¹ to hunt them down. Needless to say, it was going to be very difficult to explain how I had had him at my mercy and then let him go, alive and shaved.

The beard had almost completely disappeared. He looked younger, as if years had been taken off since he came in. I suppose this is what always happens to men when they've been to the barber's. Torres was rejuvenated at the stroke of my razor, yes, because I'm a good barber, the best in this town, and I don't say this out of vanity. A little more soap here, under the chin, over the Adam's apple, on that major artery.¹²

It's so hot! Torres must be sweating too. But he's not afraid. He's serene, not even worried about what he's going to do with the prisoners this afternoon. I, on the other hand, with this razor in my hand, scraping and scraping this skin, making sure that blood doesn't spill from those pores, wary of each stroke, cannot think calmly. [Darn]

¹⁰ *timid* (adjective) fearful, nervous, or shy

¹¹ an invasion or attack

¹² a tube-shaped vessel that carries blood from the heart to the rest of the body

him for coming; I am a revolutionary but I am not a murderer. And to think how easy it would be to kill him. And he deserves it.

Does he? No; what the [heck]! No one is worth the sacrifice of becoming a murderer. What could be gained from it? Nothing. Others come along, and then others, and the first ones kill the second ones and they kill the third group, and it goes on and on until everything is a sea of blood. I could cut his neck like this: Jab! Jab! I wouldn't give him time to protest and since his eyes are closed he wouldn't see the glint¹³ of the blade or the glint in my eyes. But I'm shaking like a real murderer. From that neck, a torrent¹⁴ of blood would spurt onto the sheet, onto the chair, onto my hands, onto the floor. I'd have to shut the door. And the blood would be flowing along the floor, warm indelible,¹⁵ uncontainable, out into the street like a thin, scarlet stream. I am sure that a hard jab, a deep incision, would be painless. He wouldn't suffer. And what would I do with the body? Where could I hide it? I'd have to flee, leave all of this, take refuge far away, very far. But they'd hunt me until they found me. "The man who murdered Captain Torres. He slit his throat while giving him a shave. A coward." Or, "The man who avenged our people. A name to remember (fill in my name). He was the town barber. No one knew that he supported our cause..."

¹³ a tiny, quick flash of light

¹⁴ a strong and fast-moving stream of water or other liquid

So which is it? Murderer or hero? My destiny hinges on the blade of this razor. I can push down a little more on my hand, lean like silk, like rubber, like sheepskin. There is nothing more tender than a man's skin and the blood is always there, ready to flow. A razor like this does not let you down. It's my best razor. But I don't want to be a murderer, no sir. You came for a shave. And I will do my duty honorably... I don't want to be stained with blood. By lather, and nothing else. You're an executioner and I'm only a barber. Each in his place. That's it. Each in his place.

His face was now clean, smooth, and taut. The man sat up to look at himself in the mirror. He rubbed his skin with his hands and felt it fresh and like new.

"Thank you," he said. He headed toward the wardrobe to get his belt, gun, and kepi. I must have been very pale and my shirt felt soaked. Torres buckled his belt, put his gun back in its holster, ran a hand over his hair mechanically, and put on his kepi. He took a few coins out of his pocket to pay me for my services. Then he started to walk toward the door. He paused in the doorway for a moment, turned around, and spoke.

"They told me that you'd kill me. I came to find out for myself. But killing isn't easy. I know what I'm talking about."

And he headed down the street.

¹⁵ making marks that cannot be eliminated, forgotten, or changed