



SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT 2 FILS

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I have been called a human porcupine. My wild, coarse beard juts out at precarious angles like quills, threatening friend or foe that dares approach my heavily armored face. The act of hugging borders on farcical —any errant strands of hair latch onto my beard with the sureness of Velcro. Kissing is worse: invariably, my wiry hair will leave a lover raw and irritated (often in both face and mood.) Even just brushing a soft hand across my cheek is like rubbing sandpaper over a smooth piece of wood that doesn't need polishing. So for the sake of those around me, I try my best to keep a clean mug.

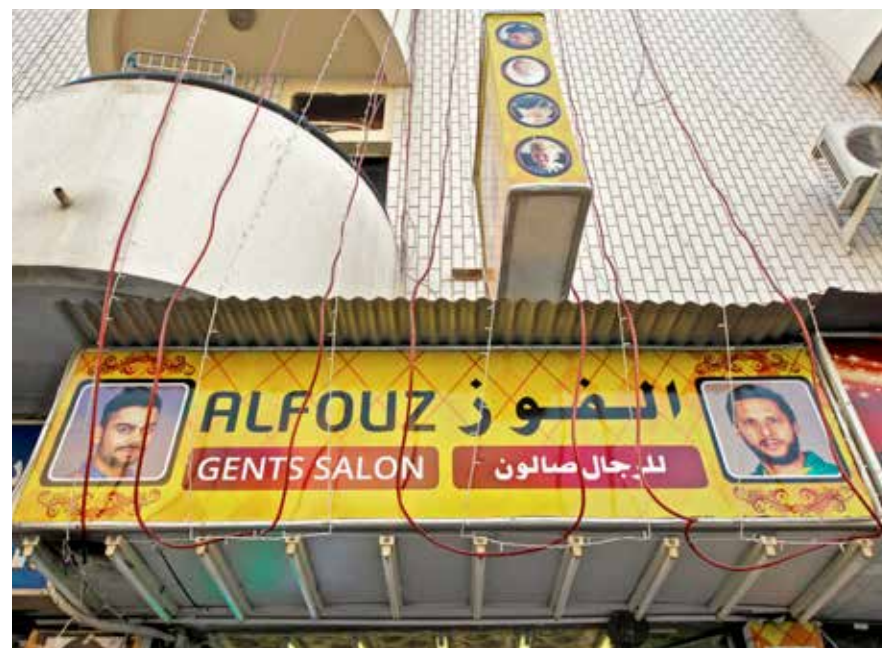
But the task of shaving has always been a tortuous ritual for me, a grueling undertaking that inexorably leads to a mess of bloodied tissues and impassioned cursing. The old wisdom of shaving "with the grain" confounds my beard that spirals out like a galaxy from my angular jaw, refusing to grow in any semblance of a uniform direction. And my general shaving resentment is probably exacerbated by the fact that I am Sisyphus with a razor—once, not three hours after I had shaved, a child noted my perpetual five-o'clock shadow and declared me "a pointy lion". (In my estimation, this is only marginally better than being labeled a porcupine.)

When I moved to the United Arab Emirates from the United States in July of 2010, my troublesome beard did not take kindly to the change. Already battling seborrheic dermatitis—a mild skin inflammation exacerbated by heat and humidity—the unforgiving midsummer sun left my face redder, itchier, and more inflamed. But I was loath to admit that it was not just my beard struggling with the transition to my new home.

Despite my best attempts, I found the media’s standard-issue critiques of the country—the inaccessibility of its cultural spaces, the vapidness of its Guinness World Record superlatives—difficult to ignore during my first few weeks. I was a New Yorker who had just spent the better part of a year studying Arabic in Yemen, and my initial explorations left me with the distinct impression that the UAE lacked both the thriving bustle of Manhattan and the close-knit communality of my neighborhood in Sana’a. I had landed at the start of Ramadan and the height of 45-degree Celsius days—an unfortunate convergence that left me exploring empty streets and feeling like the country’s sole defiant outdoor pedestrian in a relentless assault of fancy cars and malls (and sun-bleached billboards advertising fancier cars and newer malls).

Alone with the deserted sidewalks of Dubai late one afternoon a few weeks after my arrival, I found myself craving the vibrancy of a grungy Lower East Side bar. Or the hospitality of a Sana’a *majlis*. But sweaty and irritated after an aimless stroll through the streets of Deira, I mostly just craved a damn good shave. Scratching my face with the fervor of a flea-ridden gibbon, I started hunting for a spot that could rid me of my pesky whiskers. And then a funny thing happened: I noticed that the whole street in front of me was lined with barbershops.

Their fluorescent signs were everywhere. Two of them flashed the word “BARBER” in the same lustrous green on opposing street corners. Up and down the lane I roamed, signboards emblazoned with the word “SALON” igniting the dusky air with deep reds and regal blues. I fixated on one partially obscured by a dusty old awning for “Khyber Gents



Saloon”—probably subconsciously enticed by the connotation of alcohol in American Old West saloons (I would later find out that “saloon” is a common South Asian cognate of “salon”—alas, no illicit booze to be found).

Loitering outside the Al Fouz Gents Salon for a few moments, I was struck by the cheerful commotion inside—men in various stages of shaving laughing with one another and pointing at a Bollywood film on the old television set mounted to the wall. I looked at my map: I had strolled north and east of the Deira waterfront into Hor Al-Anz. But before I could process more, a stout, bearded man in a starched white uniform ushered me in with a persistent wave. A moment later, I was slathered with foamy mint-scented shaving cream, wedged between a Keralite tailor and a Ugandan driver discussing Obama’s foreign policy while my Lahori barber shoved two Q-Tips covered in sticky black wax up my nostrils.

‘Okay,’ I thought, struggling to process the delightfully unexpected scene reflecting in the cracked barber mirror before me. ‘Maybe Dubai does have a few surprises worth exploring.’

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The story of Hor Al-Anz is a familiar one: an elegant neighborhood once reserved for the privileged, then neglected to the point of disrepair, but ultimately reinvigorated by an influx of outsiders.

Built in the 1980s as a modern development for Emirati families, Hor Al-Anz didn’t serve its intended purpose for long. Just ten years after its completion, local occupants had already begun moving out of the neighborhood’s squat one-story *sha’abi* houses and into newer developments further afield, like the spacious homes of Mirdif. Hor Al-Anz feels like a block of Dubai that was virtually leapfrogged by a generation during the city’s rapid urbanization, built and then cast aside by its intended residents for greener pastures within the same decade.

Today, with the original vision of a quaint Emirati housing development a distant memory, Hor Al-Anz’s residences buzz with the energy of a vibrant working class hailing from the corners of South and Southeast Asia. Balconies flutter with the laundry—the drying uniforms of drivers, cooks, and porters catching the wind. Tenants file out of its utilitarian cement housing and into a world of fast-paced commerce—tea stalls serving piping hot *chai*, tandoor bakeries peddling *roti* (flatbread), travel agencies promising the cheapest flights to Kish Island. And lighting up every few meters of sidewalk into the furthest reaches of the neighborhood: the bright signs for the barbershops of Hor Al-Anz.

Fluorescent signs in English and Arabic above the storefronts officially welcome patrons, while iridescent decals for “barber” or “saloon” in Hindi, Urdu, and Malayalam plastered to many of the barbershops’ windows speak to a different clientele. But signs in any language aren’t really necessary—lingering outside a barber’s glass storefront regardless of your nationality will result in the same outcome: a hearty wave urging you inside.

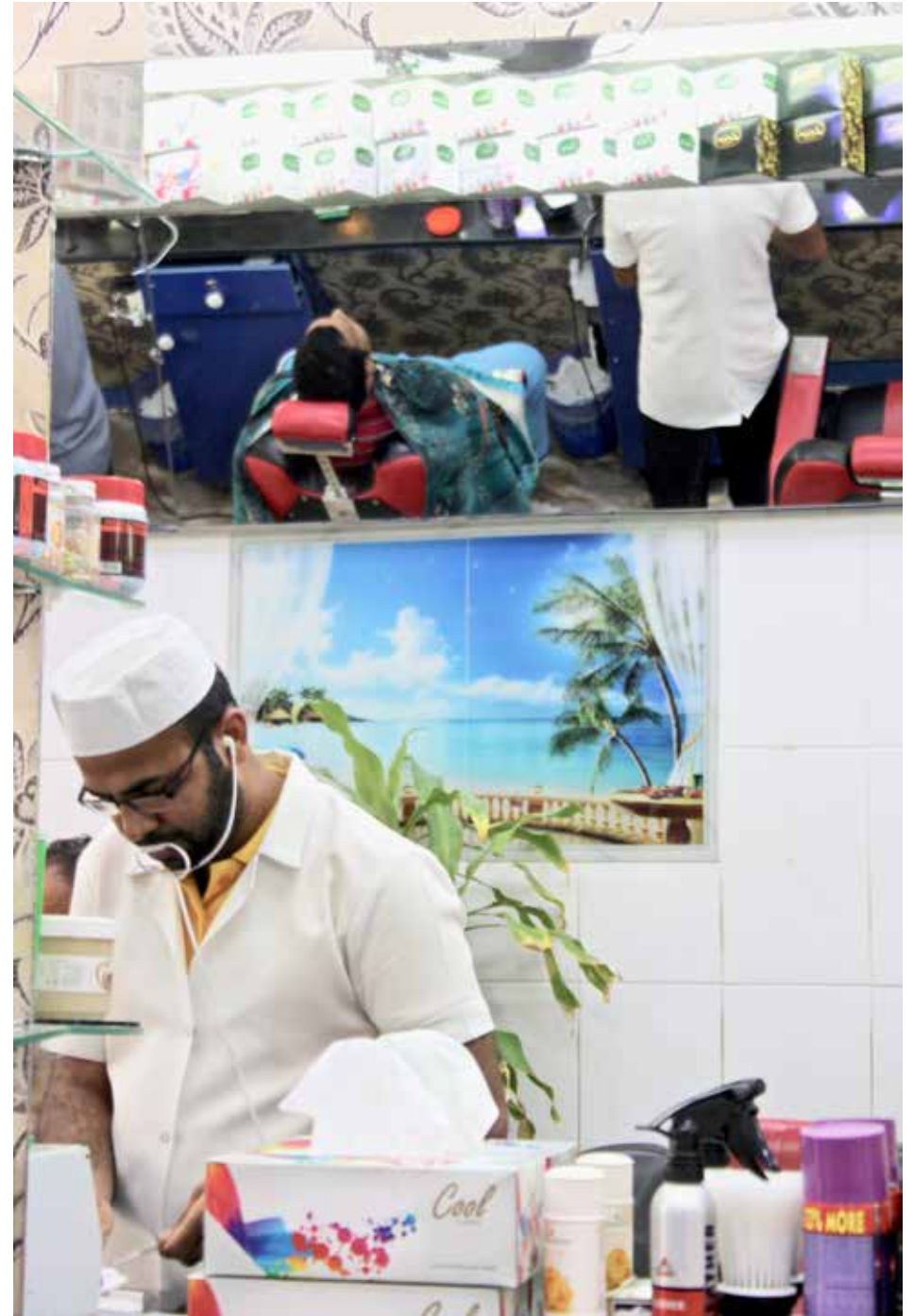
To enter into a barber’s shop in Hor Al-Anz is to enter into a world of improvisation. There is no schedule; no pointing to a clock and asking what time the next appointment might be available. If a barber is free, he’ll motion you over—if not, you grab a crisp newspaper from a stack on the table. Finally sitting in the padded barber’s chair, you can ask for a particular service from the faded menu taped to the wall. SHAVING 20 AED. HAIRCUT 30 AED. But those offers are just part of the story.

Plenty of the best services are unlisted, with prices negotiated based on length of the treatment. There’s eyebrow threading. Steam facials with aloe and avocado moisturizers. Nose waxing. A glorious 30-minute *champissage*², where a barber plies your neck, back, and scalp—and sometimes eyelids—with tender strokes. But even if you request just one particular treatment, a barber may have another idea—if you look

Relate



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particularly oily one day, you may find your face covered in three layers of exfoliating products. Or vigorously rubbed with alcohol until your pores practically disappear. (Not that my flawless skin has ever needed this, of course.)

Inside the barbershop, time is fluid—you stay as long as the barber thinks you need, and you linger as long as you would like. You can continue reading your newspaper. Or lose yourself in a pivotal scene from the film *Sholay* on MBC. Or finish that chat with a fellow patron. In a city that lacks communal urban spaces, the barbershop is a welcome gathering place without a time limit.

In a country where public spheres are so often cloistered by nationality, the barbershops of Hor Al-Anz subvert that reality. In one salon attached to a Muslim butcher, I have watched numerous men from all different countries point to the same faded photo in the shop's window of Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan.

“Even today, everyone wants hair like SRK,” the Pakistani barber chuckled to me.

At another barbershop behind a small grocery, three Nepali deliverymen regularly frequent a Keralite-operated establishment, undeterred that the language of communication is primarily Malayalam. Shaking hands with the barber that bestows them with matching undercuts in the mirror, they shyly admit their initial inspiration for entering this particular shop: a photo splashed across the storefront of a grinning Cristiano Ronaldo sporting the identical hairstyle.

Sports seem to unite almost everyone in these barbershops. Men ask for haircuts like Lionel Messi and take photos of one another's end results. Patrons help each other pull up photos of sports stars on their phones for beard inspiration. And when a soccer or cricket match broadcasts live, men from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka steam into the

shops with the biggest and loudest televisions. During a particularly tense India vs Pakistan cricket match a few years ago, I watched an Indian barber cut the hair of a Pakistani construction foreman while both were standing to watch the television.

“You promise you will not cut me if India will lose,” the foreman laughed. Each courteously waited for the other to cheer or curse a particular run, and both ended up surviving the protracted haircut.

If some barbershops attract customers with wide-screen televisions or pictures of celebrated soccer players, others draw in customers with reputations. One of my favorite barbershops in Hor Al-Anz employs a burly former Pehlواني wrestler from outside Karachi renowned for his meticulous head massages that feature luxurious fingertip kneading and expert neck cracks. Inside the unassuming shop where three tightly jammed chairs share one sink, he regales his diverse clientele with stories in simple English of his wrestling career in Pakistan. In both storytelling and basic communication inside barbershops, anticipated language barriers often prove weaker than expected. One evening I watched a Bangladeshi man try in vain to sooth his toddler crying high atop a booster seat in a barber chair. A Filipino man gingerly walked over and tussled the boy's hair, singing *Sa Ugoy ng Duya*, a famous Tagalog lullaby:

*Nais kong maulit/
Ang awit ni Inang mahal*

“Don't worry,” he said, as the boy's wails calmed to a sputter. “This song helps everyone.”

While friendly chatter and music permeate most salons in Hor Al-Anz, periods of silence serve to connect as well. A lull between topics can fall over the shop with only the light shuffle of newspapers audible.

Or a conversation will halt to respect a man who dozed off in the corner, basking in the midday sun. It is in these moments of quiet that a barber—be he from Hyderabad or Chittagong—will flick his eyebrows toward the sky: “Lift your chin,” his gesture says. Or lightly graze a cheek: “Turn your head to the left,” he asks, words unuttered.

This is the nonverbal barbershop vocabulary spoken and comprehended by both barber and customer, regardless of language. Placing your hand on a shoulder mid-shave sends a heartfelt greeting. Holding up two fingers signifies the length of a cut. Smiling and offering a nod across the shop compliments another man’s haircut; pointing to yourself asks for the same style. Inside this world, a shared fluency in spoken language isn’t compulsory to share moments with the men that surround you.

Having gone for a shave two to three times a week for seven years, I’ve probably sat in upwards of one hundred barbershops in the UAE—from a windowless storefront jammed next to a refinery in Ruwais to one with sweeping views over the western foothills of Ras Al Khaimah’s Hajar Mountains. Most barbershops look and feel strikingly similar, but the ones I most relish and continually return to are that cluster in Hor Al-Anz; they are now the most familiar to me—and that brings a measure of comfort.

I still miss so many things here in the UAE—the *majlis* of my adopted home in Yemen, the bustle of New York, the milestones of my family back in Midwest America. But there is solace in being surrounded by men in the same position—thousands of miles from loved ones and sharing stories of home. And so we all return to a place that brings comfort—from the creature comfort of a fresh shave to the deeper emotional soothing of a communal space.

Each time I’m sitting in that chair, with the last dab of shaving cream tenderly washed away and a splash of lotion applied to my face, the barber peels off my gown and lets me inspect my freshly shorn beard in the mirror.

“*Na’iman*,” he says.

It’s a closing routine that unfolds at each salon with the same concluding word, an Arabic language blessing offered from barber to patron regardless of either’s nation, religion, or language. ‘*You are fresh. You are clean*,’ it imparts.

But it’s the kind of word that remains perfectly untranslatable—a sentiment that lingers in the air, best communicated with a kind smile and a friendly slap on the neck. As I push my way back out into the streets of Hor Al-Anz that I now call a part of my home, I hear *na’iman* mostly as an invitation. “Return here when you need, and we will send you back out again, renewed.”

Majlis: A ‘place of sitting’ for social gatherings or legislative assemblies. In a home, a majlis is where the head of the family hosts guests.

Champissage: Indian head massage, where the head, neck and face are massaged. The word originates from the Hindi term ‘champi’, from which the English word ‘shampoo’ was derived.