

# Barbers of Mauritius and inner Sydney

Bernard Appassamy | 30 January 2017  
3 Comments



**That moment around your ears. You draw and hold your breath, as if that could suspend your fear or stop the unmentionable from happening. In steady notches, the barber's razor follows a perimeter around one ear, along the neck, to the other ear.**

The sideburns, if you are lucky to still grow some, get a single, swift, scraping razor action, with the barber's spare thumb pressing against your temple, and the rest of that hand squeezing the top of your scalp, making sure you absolutely do not move.

I grew up in Mauritius terrified of my father's barber, André.

On the dreaded Saturday afternoon, André announced his arrival by ringing the bell of his black Raleigh bicycle at our gate. Hiding behind curtains, I watched him; always dressed in a suit and tie, André removed his leg straps before pushing his bicycle, with his work satchel looped over the top bar, to the back of our house.

My mother lent André a chair and a small table, and he set up in a shady spot across from the washing pegged to ropes tied between casuarina trees. Soon some of his grooming tools were soaking in a jar of blue tinted Barbicide water.

My father sat down first, with a towel placed over his shoulders, André worked slowly with his manual clippers cutting upwardly the hair on my father's nape and sides. The two men enjoyed catching up. They talked politics and current affairs.

For the longer hair on top, André changed to scissors in his right hand and a comb in the left, holding the strands between his left middle and index fingers, and snipping a straight line across the ends. To finish, after the razor trimming, André squeezed talcum powder on a neck brush and dusted off my father, before a vigorous Brylcreem hair massage, a styling, and a mirror inspection.



I was then summoned and dragged to the chair where the towel was passed on to me, and I wriggled and twitched and writhed. André did his best to keep his calm with me. I must have tested his nerves to a limit when, with neither of my parents in sight, he told me of the day he so badly severed one ear of a young boy who wouldn't sit still that a pig's ear had to be stitched on in replacement. For life. 'I don't believe you,' I replied, but sat frozen from thereon.

"I longed for the timeless, life-enhancing space of my previous barber and his staff: sitting high on the barber's chair, observing the patina on the footrest, the grooming tools lined up, and the relaxed chit chat to the barber."

Fastrack to 2016, when the oldest business in my inner Sydney neighbourhood, a barber's shop I had patronised for the past 15 years, announced through a notice on their door, that their landlord had given them notice to vacate. A service a [Greek-Australian family](#), from father to son, with four employees, had provided six days per week for 50 years, folded.

The late US author Kent Haruf wrote about the 'precious ordinary'. In his final 2014 novel, *Our Souls at Night*, written as he knew he was dying, he builds relationships, families and communities by distilling the simplest, most mundane rituals. He slows the tick of the clock, and like a mindfulness meditation, makes you see the subdued light in your bedroom, and feel the softness of a hand reaching out to hold yours. Haruf peels the layers of a story saluting our most vulnerable need: to connect.

Over the course of many months, I failed to find a suitable replacement for my barber. I was seeking a cadence I resented as a child then, when older, took for granted. Other fashionable salons offered unnecessary fuss, prohibitive costs, a barrage of questions, and gossip.

I longed for the timeless, Kent Haruf life-enhancing space of my previous barber and his staff: sitting high on the barber's chair, observing the patina on the footrest, the grooming tools lined up, and the relaxed chit chat to the barber's reflection in the mirror. I missed walking out on a cloud, with the same glow as my father's all those years ago, and smelling like he did of talcum powder like a baby.

On offer also was an inclusive community, one where tradesmen, students, suits, parents with recalcitrant kids, hipsters — anyone from any walk of life was welcomed and attended to — including women who desired a buzz cut.

The father was retired now but still dropped in, sat at the entrance opening and closing the sliding door, greeting each customer with a smile, and helping out. The son, well aware of his responsibilities, carried the torch with zeal.

Then one night, when I last expected it, an email came through from my former barber, 'Good news. Re-opening barber shop in early December.'

Their new address? Almost within ear shot of a cycle bell.

Bernard Appassamy is a Sydney writer and artist who grew up in Mauritius.

## RECENT ARTICLES BY BERNARD APPASSAMY.

- 1** [First trip to red earth](#)
- 2** [The meaning of cake](#)
- 3** [Broken porcelain illuminates destructive Dutch colonial legacy](#)
- 4** [The masala stone](#)
- 5** [Hyphenated migrant's homeland homage](#)

Topic tags: [Bernard Appassamy](#)

## SUPPORT RESPECTFUL CONVERSATIONS IN A TIME OF DIVISION

If there's one thing that the recent election campaign and its outcome demonstrated, it's the depth of the divisions that exist in our Australian community.

Our politics is focused on point-scoring, personalities, and name-calling across party lines. The media, for the most part, don't help, driven by the 24-hour news cycle and the pursuit of advertising dollars into a frenzy of click-bait and shallow sensationalism.

What does it mean to be an Australian in times like these? What are the values that unite us?

Eureka Street offers an alternative. It's less a magazine than a wide ranging conversation about the issues that matter in our country and our world; a conversation marked by respect for the dignity of ALL human beings.

Importantly, it's a conversation that takes place in the open, unhindered by paywalls or excessive advertising. And it's through the support of people like you that it is able to do so.

[DONATE NOW](#)

## SUBMIT A COMMENT

Word Count: 0

(Feedback is moderated. Please limit comments to 200 words. Comments must be on topic and respectful.)

[SEND COMMENT](#)

## EXISTING COMMENTS

refreshing, exotic, with past and present, describing 2 different countries and places, that we can imagine easily and experience all of those feelings ourselves. Love it and want to read more.

**annie damelet | 31 January 2017**

You forgot to mention the Brylcreem (or was it Brylcreem?) When we first married, my husband INSISTED I learn to use the cut-throat razor so I could shave the back of his neck. How he survived, I'll never know . . . maybe it helped that I'd sometimes just slide the blunt side up and down his neck and hope he didn't notice.

**glen avard | 31 January 2017**

Thank you for this wonderful story Bernard! I needed a happy story today as I am living in the United States, and praying each day that we retain the ideal of becoming that welcoming and inclusive community the barber represents. Each day we seem to be moving away from our ideals. We have never lived them fully of course, but now we seem to be overtly embracing hate.

**Donal Godfrey, S.J. | 01 February 2017**

## SECTIONS

INTERNATIONAL  
MEDIA  
AUSTRALIA  
RELIGION  
ENVIRONMENT  
EDUCATION  
CARTOON  
FAITH DOING JUSTICE  
ARTS AND CULTURE  
ECONOMICS

## CONTRIBUTORS

Featured contributors  
Submit an article  
Margaret Dooley Young Writers  
 Fellowship  
Work experience

## ARCHIVES

Web  
PDFs

## ABOUT US

Home  
Contact Us  
Donate  
Mission statement  
Advertiser  
Privacy Policy

## SUBSCRIBE

Get updates when new articles are published on Eureka Street.

[DAILY EMAIL SIGN UP](#)

[WEEKLY EMAIL SIGN UP](#)