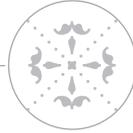


FROM

The Price of the Haircut: Stories

BY BROCK CLARKE



On Monday, an unarmed black teenage boy was shot in the back and killed by a white city policeman. On Tuesday, there was a race riot in our city, a good-sized one. On Wednesday, the mayor formed a committee to discover why there had been a race riot, and on Friday he held a news conference to announce the committee's findings. The mayor told us (we were watching the news conference at David's house, because David's house had the biggest TV and was farthest away from where the riot had been) that the committee had initially believed the race riot had been caused by a white city policeman, who shot in the back and killed an unarmed black teenage boy — because there had been other unarmed black teenage boys shot in the back and killed by white city policemen, fifteen in the last five years to be exact, and because, of course, the riots had happened the day after the boy had been shot — but the mayor put the matter to us as he'd put it to the committee: that this was too familiar, too obvious; that riots had been caused by events like this too many times already; and that would-be rioters would be desensitized, bored, even, by such a thing, and would never, at this late date, riot for such a reason. The mayor had scolded the committee for their highly unimaginative findings, said that they should be ashamed of themselves for falling back on such a tired rationale and for not thinking outside the box (and we were a bit ashamed of ourselves, because we, too, had assumed that the riots had been caused by the shooting, and that meant we were stuck thinking inside the same box as the committee).

Anyway, the mayor told the committee that its initial findings were no good and that they should go back and find something else. And so they did, and this time, the mayor told us, the committee had found the true cause

of the riot: it had been caused by a barber named Gene who charged eight dollars for a haircut and who had said something racist while giving one of these eight-dollar haircuts, and the customer who had been getting the eight-dollar haircut had responded in kind and the word had gotten out, and one thing had led to another and to another until it finally led to the riot. The mayor brought out charts and graphs that showed, exactly, how one thing could lead to another, and he also brought out eyewitnesses and experts who testified that, yes, indeed, this barber was to blame for the race riot, and then they showed us an enlarged picture of Gene, who had a good head of white hair and a thick white mustache and large glasses with translucent plastic frames and who looked much like all our grandfathers, which made sense, since each of our grandfathers had also said not-a-few racist things in his time, and all in all the whole presentation was convincing in the extreme. The mayor concluded by saying that he was certain this revelation would help begin the difficult racial healing process and restore our confidence in our unjustly criticized police officers, and then the news conference was over.

“Wow,” we said, turning off the television set. “*Eight-dollar haircuts.*”

Because for years we’d been paying fifteen, seventeen, sometimes *twenty plus* dollars for haircuts, and the haircuts weren’t ever good, weren’t ever good enough to justify the amount of money we’d spent on them, and often, after we’d had our hair cut, we’d sit around telling each other that the haircuts didn’t look *that* bad, that maybe if we *parted them differently* they would look better, and that in any case the bad haircuts would eventually *grow in*, and it was embarrassing for us, grown men all, to have to sit around and lie like this to ourselves and to each other about our awful, expensive haircuts. It was emasculating, if you thought about it, and we did, all the time: we thought, for instance, about how we could never imagine our fathers sitting around telling lies about *their* haircuts, and how this was another way in which we’d failed to live up to their example, and how if we were to continue to get such bad haircuts, then our self-esteem would be totally and permanently in the crapper and if we were to continue to pay so much money for those bad haircuts, then our sons wouldn’t be able to go to the best colleges, either, and would end up like us, graduates of cheap state universities who had unfulfilling jobs and who sat around fretting about our bad, overpriced haircuts.

Because they really were bad haircuts, and we really had paid way too much for them. Trent had paid fifteen dollars to get a severe Roman centurion haircut that Mark Antony might have been jealous of; Michael had paid seventeen dollars to have his sideburns butchered so badly that one was gone entirely and the other had, somehow, gotten longer, thicker, more mutton-chop-ish; David had paid *twenty-five dollars* to get a haircut that was all business in the front, all party in the back. Right after he got that haircut, David ran into his ex-wife on the street (all of our wives had left us, and although they, our now-ex-wives, never said as much, we all knew they had left us in large part because of our bad haircuts, and who could blame them, really: because who would want to be with a man with such an awful haircut, and who could respect a man who paid so much, time and time again, for such an awful haircut?), and she took one look at him and said, “Hey, nice haircut.”

“Really?” David said.

“No,” she said.

“She actually said that,” David told us. “And then she laughed; it was a mean laugh.” David was wearing a baseball cap when he told us this story — he was, like the rest of us, over forty and too old to wear a baseball cap — but none of us called him on it, because of his truly horrific haircut and what his wife had said about it, and, believe me, our empathy for him was huge, especially mine: because I can’t even tell you how bad my haircut was and how much I had paid for it. Even now, it’s too difficult to talk about.

But maybe it wouldn’t hurt so much to have such bad haircuts — we’d resigned ourselves to having bad haircuts; we’d known no other kind — if we didn’t have to pay so much for them. If we only had to pay eight dollars for our haircuts, then it wouldn’t be nearly as awful, nearly as humiliating. It would have been like we were getting a *deal* on our bad haircuts. That was our thinking.

“But wait,” Trent said. “What about the riots? Are we really going to give this racist barber our business?”

He had a point, and we spent a highly engaged few minutes discussing the matter. Because the riots really were horrible and life-changing for so many people — so many abandoned and not-quite-abandoned buildings set on fire; so many white motorists pulled out of cars and beaten; so many

department stores ransacked and looted; so many black men harassed, beaten, shot at with rubber bullets, maced, and arrested by police in riot gear. So many restaurateurs and nightclub owners who had risked all by investing in the impoverished but architecturally significant part of town where the riot had taken place; so many of these brave pioneers who had gutted and refurbished these architecturally significant buildings and who had turned them into brewpubs and sushi bars tricked out with Italian marble and complicated track lighting, who had made a successful go of it and had managed to convince, with their many off-duty police officers as security, white suburbanites that it was safe to come back into the city again, at least for a few hours on a Friday or Saturday night — these people were ruined, too, or at least their investments were, or at least their investments were until the city came through with the no-interest loans it was promising to these restaurant and nightclub pioneers. Yes, the riot really had been horrible, and were we, as right-minded, left-leaning, forward-thinking men of the world, were we really going to patronize the hateful barbershop that had caused all this misery and destruction in our city?

Because we really were right-minded, left-leaning, forward-thinking men of the world. For instance, the day after the riot we had all leapt into action. David, who teaches history at one of the underperforming city high schools, sent his ninth graders to the school resource center to watch videos of civil disturbances from throughout our nation's history. Trent, who works at the main branch of the city library, scrambled to set up a display of books by Malcolm X, Larry Neal, Maya Angelou, and other radical black writers, even though it wasn't anywhere near African American History Month. Michael, who's a waiter at a local steak house, began soliciting and accepting donations from his customers on behalf of the dead black teenager's mother and father. Me, I work in a silk-screening shop, and we had all these T-shirts left over from the last riot — twelve or so years ago now — that read NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE, and I put them in boxes outside the shop, with a sign on the boxes that said the T-shirts were free to any socially conscious citizen who wanted them. But was all this enough? Wasn't it also our duty to do something proactive and civic-minded in the wake of the riots, like not get our haircuts, no matter how cheap they were, at the racist barber who had caused the riot, as the mayor had so clearly demonstrated?

But as David argued, that was easy for the *mayor* to say: because he had an excellent haircut, and no doubt he had an excellent haircut because he had the money to pay for it, and because it was easier to get an excellent haircut after already having had previous excellent haircuts, and you could only get those previous excellent haircuts if you had the money to get them in the first place. And then there were the four of us, who could not afford and had never been able to afford the kind of haircut the mayor had, who were permanently shut off from the world of excellent hair by virtue of our middling salaries and our long history of bad haircuts, and yet we were also doomed to pay too much for these bad haircuts, much like the black people who rioted were doomed to pay too much, for instance, for lousy foodstuffs at the understocked and overpriced neighborhood grocery store, the only grocery store they could go to, because it was the only one within walking distance and so few of the residents of the neighborhood could afford cars. Because when you thought about it, David said, we were helpless, just like the rioters were helpless; we were caught in a vicious cycle, just like the rioters were caught in a vicious cycle; we were desperate, just like the rioters were desperate, and desperate people do desperate things, things they probably shouldn't. Yes, desperation made the rioters riot, and desperation would make us get eight-dollar haircuts at the racist barber, too.

Well, it was a spectacular piece of logic all right, and we sat there quietly for a while, as if the logic were something beautiful in the room, something so very beautiful that it was the exact antithesis of our so very ugly haircuts. We sat there awhile, admiring the logic, contemplating it, not wanting to disturb it, until David, who owned the logic and had the right to decide how long we would sit there in silence admiring it, finally broke that silence and said, "Come on, let's go."

THE PRICE OF THE HAIRCUT: STORIES

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