

ALBANIAN GENTLEMEN'S HAIRDRESSERS

You know when something false is being said and you feel a duty to intervene. For instance on the street you might hear a stranger needing directions being told to turn left and you want to cry, 'No, don't turn left, turn right, left leads to disaster.' Well, one afternoon I was having my hair cut in the Albanian gentlemen's hairdressers in Pimlico and met such a crisis.

The hairdressers is a pleasant square room with a plank floor. It was a balmy summer's day and light poured in the large street window. I had my eyes closed enjoying the gentle touches of my hairdresser who was no more talkative than I was. In the corner I heard the click of the dice where a few weathered old Albanians in reefer jackets were playing a game of backgammon.

A customer arrived to fill the chair next to mine – the chairs are the traditional solid hairdressers' chairs – and began to talk. I opened an eye and looked at his reflection in my mirror. He struck me as one of those ex-public schoolboys who, living many years in a poor part of London, have adopted a skulking, down-at-heel persona. He was scruffy, unshaven, in need of a haircut in fact, and all this looked to me like an intelligent form of protection. He began to talk sympathetically about Grenfell Tower, which he saw every morning from his bedroom window, about the night of the terrible fire and the awful days that followed. He referenced the neglect in which the housing estates had been held for years and the palpable anger in the streets now.

Cutting his hair was a lean Albanian, who so far remained silent, listening to what his customer was saying.

When there is no other conversation this lean Albanian often needles his boss, who cuts from another chair. He is lean and birdlike while his boss is Greek-looking with a golden pate and they are no doubt related, cousins most likely. Both carry a trace of Communist austerity about them from their homeland.

Last time I came in the boss was fondly remembering a drive on the German autobahn to Austria taking his family on holiday and the cousin needed him about that.

‘Fast cars are dangerous,’ said the lean Albanian. ‘Why do you drive? Driving is dangerous. Why don’t you get a slow car?’

‘I don’t want a slow car.’

‘What is the speed limit in Germany? There should be a speed limit.’

‘There is no need for a speed limit. A good car can go fast very smoothly without danger.’

‘What do you call fast. Do you call sixty fast? I call sixty fast. What if a wheel falls off?’

‘No, I don’t call sixty fast. This is not an Albanian rattle-trap, this is a Mercedes.’

‘At what speed did you drive your family?’

‘It wasn’t that fast. I was always in control.’

The boss finally lost his temper. ‘You always want to pick holes. Do you think I’m going to kill my own family? Shut up now and cut hair.’

So now, as this customer, who obviously had an inside track on the North Kensington situation, talked about Grenfell, the lean Albanian listened.

The customer started to talk about the millions of pounds that were missing from the Town Hall or had gone somewhere they shouldn’t have.

‘So where did the money go?’ asked the lean Albanian, speaking for the first time. The boss was also listening at the next chair.

‘Well, it goes in white envelopes in back pockets.’

‘Not brown envelopes?’

‘It doesn’t matter what colour the envelopes are,’ interjected the boss. ‘Don’t ask a stupid question, just listen.’

So the clandestine ex-public school boy carried on about white envelopes, speaking of Kensington and Chelsea Council as corrupt. Maybe he was showing off and once he had started he was drawn on, speaking so breezily of white envelopes as if they were a normal part of London life. And this is where my blood-pressure went up.

For one he shouldn’t be so willing to be judge and jury. There was too much of that already on the street. The rage and anger was understandable but

activists were using it to draw people into conclusions that were false. There was no institutional corruption that anyone had shown, though no doubt there was no end of ineptitude and negligence. What could certainly be found in the Town Hall was a fair proportion of dedicated selfless senior council employees and it was wrong to forget them. People were telling victims that it was all rigged, that there was no justice or fair play. They were leading them into a catharsis of hatred which relieved some of the anger and grief and turned it towards reciprocal acts of bad behaviour – riot, door-stepping, hounding of council employees, denunciations. In all his talk now, this customer was doing no less than playing into the hands of such people who wanted to overthrow everything and grab power themselves. He should have known better.

When I got down from my chair, haircut over, I said something to him. I mustered less a castigation than a shy rebuke. ‘Excuse me, don’t talk about corruption unless you really have proof,’ I muttered. Perhaps taken aback, he replied sarcastically, ‘Well, thank you for letting me know.’ The Albanians snipped hair tactfully and said nothing. I paid and left.

The Albanians don’t want white or brown envelopes in life, I’m sure. They have escaped corruption. They want to do things the British way.