

THE MOONLIT PAGE

The Other Side of the Cape



An illustrated story for a quiet evening

By eleven forty-five, everyone had advised Victor to keep busy.

One customer recommended walking. Another recommended a shed. A third had begun explaining a complicated card game while Victor was trimming around his ears, which was not the moment to introduce four imaginary opponents.

Victor thanked them all. He had been a barber for forty-three years and knew how to agree without promising anything.

His final customer wanted the usual cut and no fuss. Victor appreciated this until he realized that the man was apologizing for having no speech prepared.

"I haven't prepared one either," Victor said. "Keep your chin down a moment."

When the man had gone, the shop was quiet.

The corner windows made bright squares on the floor. Nadia, who had worked beside Victor for five years and would be running the shop from Monday, was washing the last of her tools. He swept around his chair, checked the counter and folded the clean striped cape he had put aside that morning.

It was a habit to leave one ready for whoever came next.

No one was coming next for him.

He put the cape on the chair's arm, then moved it to the counter because that was where he always kept it. The small correction seemed unnecessary, but he made it anyway.

Nadia dried her hands.

"Are you going anywhere now?"

"Home, eventually."

"Would you like a haircut first?"

He looked in the mirror.

He needed one. He had known he needed one for a week, but a barber could overlook his own hair quite efficiently while concentrating on everyone else's.

"Have you time?"

"We're closed for lunch. Sit down."

Victor walked around the chair, which was not the route he normally took to work at it. He sat, found the footrest and looked at the shop from the middle of the mirror.

The view was familiar and wrong. He could see the waiting chairs directly behind him. From here, the crack in the old wall clock's wooden case was almost invisible. A corner of the framed photograph near the window caught the sun.

Nadia lifted the striped cape.

"Collar comfortable?"

He nodded.

"How would you like it?"

"The usual."

"I've never cut your hair."

This was true. Victor usually went to his friend Anton's shop across town. They had trained together and had long ago stopped asking each other what they wanted.

"Shorter," he said.

Nadia waited.

"Not too short."

She smiled at him in the mirror.

"I know. I'm hearing myself," he said.

They discussed the length at the sides and how much to leave on top. She showed him with the comb. He made an actual choice, which seemed to take longer than it should have for something he asked other people to do every day.

Then she began.

For a minute he followed each movement in the mirror. His right hand rose under the cape when she reached for a different comb. He had been about to pass it to her.

Nadia saw the little tent his hand had made.

“Something wrong?”

“No. I was helping.”

“I've got it, thanks.”

He put his hand back on his knee.

The scissors made their small, regular sound close to his ear. Outside, someone wheeled a shopping bag past the window. The clock ticked. Victor had been in this room for most of his working life, but he was used to supplying part of its noise: the cupboard closing, the brush moving, his own voice asking someone to turn slightly.

Now he could hear Nadia's shoes on the floor as she moved around the chair.

"You needn't entertain me," he said.

"I wasn't planning anything elaborate."

"I meant—"

"I know."

They were quiet for a while.

A few pale clippings settled on the cape's dark stripe. Victor noticed that one stripe had faded more than the others. He had washed and folded the cape so often that he had stopped looking at it spread out.

When Nadia asked him to lower his chin, he did it.

After a moment he laughed.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. I'm following an instruction."

"It's going very well."

At the end she held up the hand mirror so he could see the back. He tilted his head, considered it and nodded. It was a good cut. Not Anton's exact cut and not one he would have made in precisely the same way, but his own head looked comfortable in it.

Nadia removed the cape. Victor stood and reached for its edge.

"I'll do that," she said. "Your coat's by the door."

He took it from the hook and turned towards the window, where his reflection was faint against the bright street. He could see enough.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Before leaving, he stopped beside the appointment book.

"Four weeks?" he asked.

"Thursday morning?"

"Not too early."

She wrote his name in a space that had never contained it before.

Victor put on his coat and went out. Across the road, he paused at the bakery window. For once there was no need to choose something he could eat standing behind a counter. Inside, a table beside the window was free.

Four moments to remember

A small memory card for retelling the story in your own words.

1. Victor completes his final barbering morning amid customers' retirement advice, then folds a spare striped cape although he has no next customer.
2. Experienced colleague Nadia offers him a haircut; in his own chair he must describe what he wants rather than saying "the usual."
3. He catches his automatic urge to pass tools, lets his hands rest and hears the shop from the customer's side while following Nadia's instructions.
4. He accepts the finished cut, books his first appointment as a customer and notices an available bakery table rather than needing food to eat at work.