

TO THE MANNER SHORN

There are \$100 haircuts out there for a mere pittance

By TOM O'NEILL

As the grandson of two barbers — one an Italian immigrant nicknamed "Lightning" after giving 54 free haircuts in two hours to the children of striking coal miners — I grew up with the ingrained delusion that these necessary evils were rendered gratis by caring elders.

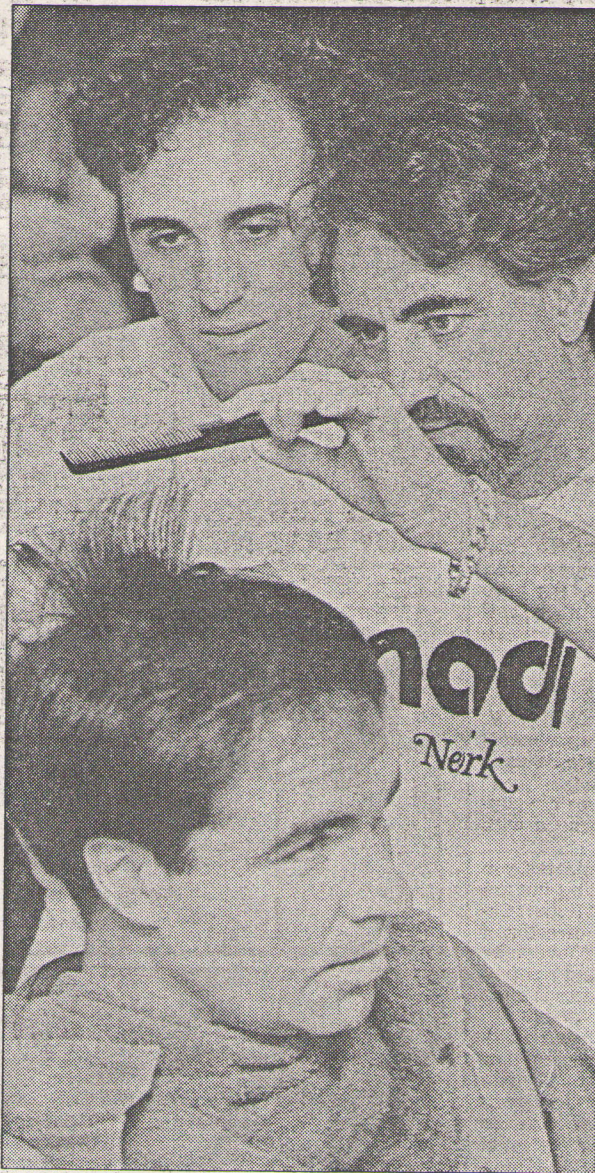
Once weaned from the nest, I was forced to adjust to a world of haircuts for commerce. Now, in what has become ritual, each visit home is inaugurated by a slap to the back of the head by Grandpa Lightning (going on 93) and the jeering shout: "How much did the thieves get for this?"

Since my discovery of the free haircut, I can shout back: "Nothing!"

Now these aren't just any free haircuts given by some hack barber school in Times Square. The hands that touch these tresses may have earlier that day assisted in the royal hair design of Ivana, Jackie O and countless bold-face denizens of Liz, Billy and Suzy columns.

Yes, a lumbering lug of a guy like me, dons kimo-no and settles into chairs warmed by trophy wives and Park Ave. matrons, to be lavished upon by lithe young men in downtown black, under the supervision of legendary hair stylists whose work is a mainstay of Cosmo, Elle and Vogue.

While many salons use mannequins for training, Manhattan's toniest salons prefer human dummies. Usually held one night a week, these training or model sessions allow the assistants to take over the scissors and employ techniques they've been studying all day. The price is mere pittance: a little patience (sessions can last up to two hours), some humiliation (fashion types tend to condescend to nonpaying peons), and a tip — \$5 is sufficient says one salon keeper.



CLIP NOTES: The author pursues the kindest cut. DAN CRONIN DAILY NEWS

My favorite *palace de beauté* is Nardi (143 E. 57th, Tues. and Weds. at 6 p.m., anytime for \$6), where the European staff treats you no less regally than their high-paying regulars.

Co-owner Vincent Nardi ex-

plains that the practice is an Italian tradition first brought to America by Vidal Sassoon. Ironically, since Vidal sold his franchise, Sassoon's new operators now charge \$12.25 for training cuts.

Nardi, who's cut everyone's hair from Madonna to Anna Moffo, claims that all of his assistants are professional stylists — not students.

Trainee Michelle Ross, whose seven years of prior experience included cutting

father-and-son matinee idols, Alain and Tony Delon, says despite the less prestigious clientele of model night, "I am an artist — every cut I give my heart."

The pony-tailed proprietor looks in on each cut. "Since people don't pay, they allow us to stop and communicate among ourselves," says Nardi. "This way we can take the haircut apart, teach new lines and mature in our art."

At oh-so-chic Pipino-Bucherer Salon (601 Madison, Weds. at 6:30), getting selected for a free haircut is akin to passing through the velvet ropes of the club of the moment. This evening I'm lucky; I'm paired with David, an extremely polite and, as it turned out, adept, stylist assistant from Taiwan.

Pipino's training session is fraught with tension. The competitive assistants rarely acknowledge one another and the supervising stylist works the room like a drill sergeant. Perhaps his intimidating manner affected the woman in the chair beside me. Toward the end of the

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A TRAINEE

session, I heard a sniffing which finally erupted into loud sobs, "It's so short!" she cried. "I look like —!"

This brought to mind another free haircut (at a salon which shall remain nameless) during which my lady with the scissors burst into tears when she stabbed me in the neck. Instead of stanching the rapid flow of blood, she cradled my head in her arms. "I feel so awful," she cried, "I've never done that before ... well, maybe the ear, but never the neck."

Some other salons where you can risk injury for a free, usually top-rate cut, are: David Daines (833 Madison, Tues. at 6); Deborah Hair Design (1240 Lexington, by appointment); Jean Louis David (367-369 Madison, by appointment); Suga (115 E. 57th; Thurs., by appointment). Most salons also offer perms, color and highlights for just the cost of the product.

(Tom O'Neill is a freelance writer.)