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## FIGARO ON WHEELS

*Tutti mi chiedono, tutti mi vogliono,  
Donne, ragazzi, vecchi, fanciulle*

(Everyone asks for me, everyone wants me,  
Women, boys, old people, girls)

Rossini, *The Barber of Seville*, Act 1, Cavatina

1

**B**illy Bob Morton (to his friends, “BB”) couldn’t do math. This was no knock on the Jefferson County schools; both the elementary and the middle/high school had done their darndest to pound basic principles of science, particularly mathematics, into BB’s skull. All their attempts had failed. Not only was BB unaccomplished in subjects requiring an analytic bent, but he flunked even American History and English.

When he was finally released to society in June 2015, after twelve years of wasted institutional effort, BB could barely read and write and had a limited vocabulary in which coarse and curse words predominated. His doting but disappointed mother (on food stamps since her husband skipped town when BB was three) had to round up help from all her relatives and friends, but was able to raise enough money to send BB to study cosmetology at a vocational school not far from their home in Monticello. BB did not complete his training but emerged with sufficient skills to get a job

at a barbershop/hair salon on Route 19, blocks away from the Piggly Wiggly.

BB was skillful as a barber and remained employed for nearly four years, by the end of which he had managed to save some money by living at home and limiting his partying with friends to a couple of cans of whatever beer was on special. He used all his savings, plus a loan from the barbershop, as the down payment on a used black Honda CB500X from a motorcycle dealer in Tallahassee. He would have preferred a Harley like his friend Chuck owned, but he could not afford it, and the CB500X was good enough for his driving around in Monticello and immediate areas; once, in March, he drove it all the way to Valdosta to the azalea festival, and the machine did well on the longer ride.

BB had reached the ripe age of 23 and was leading a reasonably tranquil life when everything was turned on its head as the pestilence struck. At first, the growing national disaster left little mark on him. The Florida panhandle was far from the big population centers, and none of the two thousand inhabitants of Monticello was affected by the outbreak. However, as weeks passed and the magnitude of the disaster became more palpable, cities and then entire states were placed on lockdown and non-essential activities came to a halt. Jefferson County's turn to shut down finally came, and most businesses were ordered to close, or did so voluntarily. The barbershop that employed BB was among the first casualties. BB was laid off, as were the other two barbers and the hair stylist.

For BB, the loss of his meager income was a matter of grave concern. He had started dating cute Nancy Phillips, and his need for spending money was increasing. He still owed on his motorcycle purchase and had developed a taste for weed, all of which made it more difficult to accept the directive to stay home twiddling his thumbs and earning no money.

After two weeks of inactivity, a casual conversation with his girlfriend set the wheels in motion for a change in BB's life. She, who was ever devoted to first lady Nancy Reagan, complained that she had trouble achieving the long, fluffy, perfectly layered look of Mrs. Reagan because her hair was growing wild for lack of care. "I haven't gotten my hair done in weeks. I can't stand to look at myself in the mirror anymore," she whimpered.

BB frowned and pecked her on the cheek. "Dear, I think I can take care of your problem. I'll be back." He got on Condi (as many

car owners do, he had baptized his motorcycle), went home, and in a few minutes returned with his set of hair care tools, which he had removed from the barbershop when he was laid off. “I’m a barber, not a hair stylist, but I watched Joyce Wu as she worked on ladies at the salon,” he explained.

Nancy was a bit reluctant to let him have a go at her hair, but beggars can’t be choosers. She sat down as he produced a pair of long shears and began singing a poor imitation of Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line.” Half an hour later, he escorted Nancy to the large hallway mirror and presented the results of his handiwork.

“It’s wonderful!” exclaimed Nancy. “You should hire yourself out to do this!!”

That night, BB was having one of his now infrequent beers with George Byers, his aunt’s husband and one of the smartest folks he knew. Unlike BB, George graduated from high school, attended college, and went on to become a real estate agent and stock advisor. Between the two careers, he had earned enough to see himself comfortably through the current depression. When BB related with unconcealed pride his success in rescuing Nancy from the doldrums, George picked up on her casual remark and commented: “You know, BB, the girl is right. There must be hundreds of people in this area who are suffering because they can’t get their hair properly cared for. What you need to do is provide your services to them. You could become a travelling barber, a hair stylist on wheels. You would start raking money in no time flat!!” He took the napkin from under his beer glass, extracted a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket, and began scribbling figures. “On the average, how long does it take for you to give a haircut?”

“About twenty minutes,” answered BB.

“And a lady’s hair, assuming no shampooing, etc.”

“A little longer; I’m not that skilled and women are fussier.”

“So, counting time lost in commuting, you could do at least ten clients a day. Say thirty bucks a shot, and you got yourself about \$300 a day, minus travel expenses. How does that grab you?!”

BB was loath to douse cold water on George’s enthusiasm. “But I don’t know anybody!” he lamented.

“AHH!!” George gave an incredibly wide Cheshire cat smile. “I know scads of people, from Biloxi to Jacksonville. We’ll write a brochure and send it by e-mail and slow mail it to my contact list,

and all you have to do is sit down and answer the phone. You'll be busier than a one-legged man in an ass kicking contest!"

"Don't I have to get some kind of a permit or a license to do this?"

"Maybe. But by the time the law catches up with you, you will have enough money raised to pay any fines and hire a lawyer to get the paperwork taken care of."

"And will people allow me in their houses? Everyone is getting locked up and avoiding contact with strangers."

"You can lie and say you have been tested and are fine. Because you are fine, right?"

"Yes, I am. Still, the whole thing seems a little chancy, if you know what I mean."

"Look at it this way: what do you have to lose? I'll help you with the mailing and provide any references. All I want is a ten percent cut of the takings."

BB could not think of any more objections and let himself be carried away by George's enthusiasm.

## 2

BB, or as George's flier referred to him, the "Figaro on Wheels," had to wait almost a week before the first call came in. It was a widower from Panama City, an old client of George, who wanted BB to give haircuts to him and his three children. BB negotiated a fee of \$100 plus \$20 in transportation costs. It took him two hours to get there, an hour and a half of work, and a couple of hours on Condi to get back—half a day of labor for about a hundred and twenty bucks; not such a great deal.

George listened patiently to BB's complaints. "You have to build a client base. After you have enough clients, you may be picky as to which calls to take and which to turn down. But, for the moment, be patient and take it on the chin."

As usual, George was right. Other calls followed, some as far as Destin, but mainly from Greenville, Wacissa, Havana, and Tallahassee and its suburbs. By the end of two weeks, BB had done a dozen jobs and had several more already scheduled. Better yet, he was getting commendations from his new clients, and word of mouth referrals were coming in. At that point, he started setting limits on his service area: he would travel for free no more than 20

miles in any direction, and he would set a per mile charge for clients beyond that range.

Even with those limitations, as the lockdown continued and the pestilence took its toll on cities, towns and rural areas, the demand for BB's services kept increasing, to the point where he considered taking in an apprentice to help meet the demand. The Figaro on Wheels had become a minor celebrity throughout the Florida Panhandle.

## 3

The first sign of trouble came when George paid BB an evening call at his mother's cottage. The dwelling was exceedingly modest and in poor repair and was seldom visited by anyone outside the immediate family and social workers from the welfare agencies. George's surprise appearance at his door concerned BB: "George! What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

George walked in and proceeded to close and lock the door. "Is your mom awake?" he whispered.

"No, she always goes to bed early," replied BB in a matching low voice. "Can I get you something to drink?"

George shook his head and sat on the sofa, motioning BB to sit next to him. "Yesterday I had a call from your first client."

"Mr. Stubbs, the guy from Panama City? Nice fellow."

"Yes, he is a nice guy, but was in distress."

"Why?"

"He claims that after you came to cut their hair, he and two of his boys came down with the pestilence. He says that he keeps himself and the kids out of contact with the outside world since the start of the epidemic and even has his food delivered. He had you come in because his children were pestering him about their long hair and he thought that they needed to look presentable. Anyway, I told him that you are very scrupulous in making sure all your equipment is sterilized, and you are certainly not a carrier, so the infection must have come from somewhere else. I'm not sure he believed me, but I was able to calm him down. He and his children had a few rough days but seem to be on the mend."

BB was silent for a while. "I do keep all my gear clean and I disinfect everything—both before and after each client. And I was sick with the flu for a couple of days, but I recovered right away."

George scowled. “Did you ever hear of Typhoid Mary? You may, in fact, be a carrier of the organism that causes the pestilence.”

“Naw, it was just a coincidence, I’m sure.”

“Well, let’s wait a couple of days to see what happens, but if I were you, I would cut back on my appointments right away.”

BB chose to remain unconvinced and kept to his regular schedule until, the following week, he found Nancy in tears. When he asked what was wrong, she replied: “My friend Linda, you know, the one whose hair you cut a few days ago, is down with the pestilence and may die because she is diabetic and has other health issues.”

BB grimaced but said nothing.

#### 4

BB’s philosophy of life was uncomplicated: work hard, obey the law as much as you need to, mind your own business, and let others take care of themselves. He was not used to dealing with ethical dilemmas, and the situation he was facing was outside his moral compass. He was not sure whether he had been a carrier, or if he remained one still. He dared not get tested because if he was found to carry the organism, he could be quarantined for an indefinite period of time and lose a lot of money. Moreover, some of the people he might have infected could take legal action against him. On the other hand, perhaps George was right, he should stop going out on Condi and lay low until the epidemic had run its course.

He enjoyed the increased income and would prefer to continue his profitable trade as long as possible, while minimizing the risk of discovery. Finally, he came up with what he thought was a good solution: he would only take clients that were relatively young and in good health; even if he inflicted the disease on them, there should be little in the way of consequences. After all, Mr. Stubbs and his children had fully recovered.

His business was reduced, but he continued to do the traveling barber routine and added a buck or two more to his bank account. It was the American way, he reckoned.

As it was inevitable, after nearly three months of running his travelling barber operation, BB's activities had become notorious. A small human-interest piece about BB's "public service" ran in the *Panama City News Herald* and was soon picked up in the *Tallahassee Democrat*, other newspapers in the Gannett chain, and ultimately *The Miami Herald*. In a nation hungry for uplifting tales of ingenuity amidst the crisis, the story surfaced in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and all the major broadcast networks. All of a sudden, BB acquired the status of a folk hero. He became the center of an intense debate on whether hair care was an essential business so that salons and barber shops could stay open in a crisis, or whether individual initiatives like his should be encouraged instead. The issue remained unresolved.

He began getting requests for interviews, which he declined—politely at first, then more vigorously—and all sorts of correspondence, from fan and hate mail to solicitations and proposals. A Chicago businessman wrote suggesting the creation of a "Figaro on Wheels" franchise that would sell BB's name and endorsement to individual entrepreneurs throughout the country. BB was overwhelmed by the unexpected attention and tried to shut himself out of the limelight and sought to limit his public appearances to visiting his customers.

Alas, the genie was out of the bottle and, in addition to the media and the general public, BB caught the attention of the authorities. Several State agencies in Florida began examining his running an unlicensed business, his failure to abide by the lockdown rules, and more importantly, his failure to pay taxes on his earnings. The Internal Revenue Service also got in the act, discovering that BB had never filed a Federal income tax return and, in the current year, had made no self-employment tax filings. In short, BB became more sought after by the regulators than a honey bee nest detected by a sloth of hungry bears.

BB was indicted on various charges both in State and Federal courts and was ultimately convicted of tax evasion. The sentencing judge was deaf to his pleas for clemency and his lawyer's argument that BB was only trying to provide a service to the public; BB was sentenced to ten years in prison, to be held at the Federal Correctional Institution of Marianna, Florida, not far from the theater of his crimes.

The harshness of the sentence was perhaps linked to another story by an investigative reporter who looked closely into BB's operations. In an article published while the trial was in progress, the reporter revealed that BB was potentially responsible for infecting several dozen people with the pestilence and indirectly causing the deaths of at least four elderly men and women. This story was never brought up at BB's trial or his sentencing, but the presiding judge was in his late seventies and might have taken umbrage at BB's practices.

BB was taken to Marianna. He wanted to bring his barbering gear with him to continue practicing his trade, but sharp metal objects were not allowed in the prison, so he had to look forward to spending his years in jail fraternizing with the other inmates and dreaming of the day he could return to society and become again the proud, law-abiding citizen he always thought himself to be.

The malady that had afflicted him and caused him to cut back on his trade from fear of being a carrier turned out to be garden variety flu, not pestilence, so he was ripe for the disease to catch up to him. Barely two weeks into his incarceration, fraternization with the prison inmates caused him to contract the pestilence.

He was deathly ill but survived. When he recovered, he asked for leave to resume his trade and was granted permission to do so, since now he was probably immunized from the disease and could approach other prisoners, healthy or infirm, without fear of contagion. He became quite popular with the jail population, which nicknamed him "Figs," and after serving a year of his sentence his lawyer applied for parole on good behavior grounds.

He was released on probation on the condition that he perform three hundred hours of community service—as itinerant barber for the general population, still on lockdown. He took again his role as Figaro on Wheels and gained much acclaim in the greater Tallahassee area as a modern version of Florence Nightingale.

When the pestilence was finally over and the barbershop near the Piggly Wiggly opened again, BB was rehired and resumed his former job. But not for long: his guru George Byers talked him into taking advantage of his fame to run for office.

BB demurred: "But I can barely read and write and know nothing about politics."

George, as usual, laid BB's fears to rest: "You are a man of the people, not a pointy headed Eastern liberal. That is actually a big plus with the electorate in these parts. As to your political sav-



vy, all you need to say is that as a Republican, you are pro-guns, pro-life, and pro-business, and you'll get elected.”

BB took George's advice, and went on to become the youngest ever member of the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners. Six years and three elections later, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives.

He grew fat and wealthy in the service of the public and died of a stroke ten years later, leaving nearly a million dollars in the bank. A glorified version of his life story was made into a successful TV miniseries; Condi is on permanent display in Tallahassee's Museum of Florida History.