

Old Nothing- Cameron Porsandeh

"When do you suppose they'll stop?" asked the grey haired man by the window.

"Oh, sooner or later I suppose," replied the man getting a haircut. It had been sometime since his last one.

"It's amazing how he's holding up," answered the first man.

"It's hardly amazing. What choice does he have?" They all considered this.

"I suppose you're right."

"Of course I am."

The barber, who generally avoided conversation, now spoke up.

"A good client, that man was."

"What?" answered the man getting the haircut.

"A good client. Got his hair cut every two weeks. Never complained. Always gave a fair tip."

No one said anything.

"Do you suppose he has family?" asked the man by the window.

"No. He's far too young to have a family," answered the barber.

"I don't mean children, I mean any sort of family at all."

"I wouldn't know," answered the barber.

The man at the window refilled his coffee cup from the back room and then returned to the window.

"Like an animal really."

"Who?" said the man, now getting his sides thinned. He wondered whether a man with as little hair as himself should bother with a haircut at all.

"All of them I suppose. The beaters and the beatees".

"That's a funny way of saying it," said the barber.

"Of saying what?"

"Of referring to the victim as the beatee."

"Well that's what he is, isn't he."

No one said anything.

"The thing is?" said the man at the window before he paused, "the thing is, you can never really tell."

"Tell what?" replied the man who was now getting his neck lathered up for his shave.

"Whether he deserved it or not." Silence. "Although I suppose you could say that no one deserves it." He stared at his coffee.

"It's sad but true," said the barber.

"What is?"

"That things don't always happen for a reason." For a moment he stopped shaving the man before him and stared out the window. The foam from the blade he was holding slid down onto his forearm and then fell to his shoe. "Damn it," he muttered.

"It's only cream," said the man at the window.

"Damn it anyways." He walked to the end of the room and wiped his shoe off with a towel.

"That's the wrong way to look at it," said the man getting a haircut, "All people sin and so all people deserve to be sinned against. The beatee deserved it in one way or another. To say otherwise is to claim he's perfect."

No one said anything. The sun peaked through the clouds.

"Do you think the heat will slow them down?" asked the man by the window.

"Slow who down?"

"The beaters, of course."

"I think so," answered the barber. "The heat tends to make people tired. The sun wears everything out."

Another man entered the barber shop. The bell on the door gave a slight jingle.

"I work by appointment only," said the barber.

"But I need a haircut," answered the man, "I can wait."

The man by the window laughed. "There's a place down the street that needs the business. Go there."

The man quietly left.

"Have you guys read the paper today?" asked the man getting his hair thinned in the back.

"A little," they both answered.

With this, the man drinking coffee gathered his belongings and wished them both good night. He stepped out the door and turned in the direction of the beating even though his destination was the other way. He approached them from the left and stopped to ask for directions to the nearest diner. The beatee, now covered in blood, raised his head and pointed in the direction of Hastings, a well-known diner.

"I'm actually looking for something a little more classy, if you know what I mean."

They all stopped again. The beatee couldn't raise his head. One of the beaters offered, "Two block's further is Trent's. Good fish."

"Thank you." The man finished his coffee and walked up the road.

"OLD NOTHING"

"Why are we doing this??" You will be taking part in a Socratic seminar tomorrow in which we will be discussing this story. The discussion will assess your understanding of the story- both what is explicitly stated in the text, and what is left out for the reader to infer. This worksheet will support your active participation in tomorrow's seminar as these will be the foundation of the discussion. You will be able to use this during the discussion and I will collect it afterward.

1) Give a brief summary of the selection:

2) From what perspective is the story being told? (choose one)

- 1st person
- 3rd person objective / limited
- 3rd person omniscient / unlimited

3) How do you know? (Support your answer with evidence from the text)

4) In the box below, (A) sketch what you imagine the men in the barber shop were witnessing.

5) Give evidence from the text to support your picture.

6) The story gives you few details. How did you come to your picture of what was going on, specifically details that may have not been explicitly stated in the text?

7) The author opens with "When do you suppose they will stop?" (A) What questions does this raise in the readers mind? (B) Why do you suppose the author begins the selection this question instead of starting with a description and / or explanation of what was going on?

- A. _____
- B. _____

8) There is one phrase that is repeated 3 times in the story. What is it? _____

9) What can you infer about the writers use of repetition of this idea? What was he trying to express to the reader by repeating this 3 times?

10) What character trait (shared by all the men in the barber shop) is highlighted by this author?

11) How does he use the juxtaposition (contrast) of what is going on inside and outside to accomplish this?

12) What does the writer imply about the men? Do you think the men in the shop are "bad people" or might there have been other factors in play in their not attempting to step in or call for help? What might you conclude about this?

13) Give one quote from the text that reflects the indifference of one or more of the men:

14) At the end of the story we see someone engaging in a savage beating of another person stop and offer help to the other man looking for a "classy" place to eat. How is this ironic? What does this suggest about the duality of man?

15) What is the theme (author's message for the reader) of this story?

16) What questions do you still have about the story? (Things you still don't get...)

17) What can you speculate about the significance of the title of this selection?
