

Francesco's

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Vic peered through the door of the barber's shop, then stepped inside. There was no one in the front room, only the wooden shelves stacked with ancient hair creams, a counter with an antique cash register. Two steps led through to the back room, from which Vic heard some vague clicks.

He followed the sound to find a man in the chair, having his hair trimmed by another man with the look of a convict. Another chair was empty. Neither man turned to look at Vic, but he smiled anyway and made to sit on one of the stools, presumably placed there for waiting clients. As Vic descended a heavy figure arose from the far corner of the room – Vic hadn't noticed him in the shadows, beyond a further door. Maybe that's a store room, he thought, or the room where they chop up the dead bodies.

The man pointed Vic towards the empty chair, a man who might have been an ex-boxer or a bouncer or the head of the five families. This must be Francesco, Vic thought, remembering the sign above the door. Vic sank into the weak leather chair as Francesco scowled at his wild mop of hair. Vic grinned in apology and said that he just wanted it tidied up, nothing too drastic. Francesco grunted and looked at the other barber – let's call him Vito. Vito snarled – revealing a single gold tooth – and said something in Italian.

As Francesco worked slowly about his head Vic realised that the man was wreathed in fag-stench. The heavy hands – Vic wondered how Francesco forced his fingers through the scissor handles – wafted the bitter smell of cigarettes old and new around. Vic felt the cloud coming in at his eyes and ears to brew up a headache.

Francesco combed and snipped in silence, while in the next chair the other customer stared dead ahead. Had they drugged or hypnotised him, before the ritual slaughter? There was a large television in the high corner of the room and Vito watched the racing as he worked. Vito was markedly younger than Francesco, in his late twenties perhaps, with the narrow strength of a soldier. He told his customer about the bet he had placed, the horse he had going in the next race.

‘That’s the one,’ Vito pointed with his scissors. ‘Bodega Girl, eleven to two.’

The man in the chair said that he didn’t know anything about gambling, and even less about horse racing. He wanted to keep the conversation light without causing offence. Vic couldn’t see him but he sensed a sheepish smile. They were in this together.

‘Eleven to two,’ Vito said. ‘What do you think? Twenty quid I’ll win a hundred and ten.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ said the man in the chair.

Vito ran through the horse’s recent form, the list of reasons why it couldn’t fail today at Haydock. Vic heard the TV commentator preparing for the race and pictured the horses circling slowly behind the stalls. Francesco was still trimming Vic’s hair, apparently uninterested, but when the race started he rested his paws on Vic’s head to watch the TV with Vito.

Vic tried to twist his eyes but couldn’t turn them far enough. He could feel two meaty fingers along his forehead – when Francesco lifted his hands would they leave a yellow stain? There was no way Vic could shift his head, clamped in front of the mirror. He felt like the buzzer in a game show. In the reflection he saw the point of Francesco’s scissors dangling by his temple. He decided not to even try to follow the action but to listen to the commentary instead.

Bodega Girl was in the leading group through the first two furlongs of the three-year-old sprint, and all was going according to Vito's plan. Vic heard him cackling as the horse quickened to take the lead inside the final furlong. Beneath his pungent load Vic was starting to feel slightly sick. Francesco then raised one paw from Vic's head to pat Vito on the shoulder, just as the commentator began to mention Mint Tulip.

The rank outsider came to dispute the lead. The two horses were flat out, neck and neck. The commentator called it on the line. Mint Tulip by a whisker. Vic couldn't see but it sounded like an exciting finish. Not that he felt like pointing that out to Vito.

Francesco resumed work and Vic took the chance to flash an eye towards the other chair. Vito's face spelled murder. He waved the scissors wildly as he spoke. His customer shifted nervously under his blanket.

'Fifty to one,' Vito said with exaggerated contempt. 'The horse was fifty to one. How could any man back that?'

No one gave him an answer. Francesco laughed like a friendly bear and concentrated on Vic's hair.

'This racing, it's all corrupt, all fixed.' Vito drifted into Italian, both snipping and gesticulating with his scissors. His customer looked like he was trying not to breathe.

Vito's displeasure seemed to have cheered Francesco up and he cut happily away, giving some shape to Vic's mass of fair hair. He wasn't any more talkative but he moved faster, quicker now than Vito, which was a relief to Vic. Eventually he fetched the hand-mirror to show Vic the back of his head. Vic said it looked fine before he had even seen it. Francesco pointed Vic through to the front room to pay.

As Vic stood he caught an urgent, plaintive glance from his fellow customer, still waiting to be finished off by Vito. I'm sorry, pal, there's nothing I can do. Each man has to look out for himself.

'That's thirteen pounds,' Francesco said at the till, his first words of the transaction. He offered Vic a deadly smile at the obvious lack of thirteen pounds' work.

Vic checked his wallet and drew out a twenty. 'Keep the change,' he grinned back. Francesco seemed puzzled as Vic walked out of his shop. His heavy smile drooped to a scowl.

Mint Tulip at fifty to one, Vic thought, back in the daylight. What a touch. Twenty quid at fifty to one, the pink slip sitting in his wallet – not a bad return on the afternoon. It's easy when you know.