

THE BARBER *Reynald Altéma, MD*

Élosius Sam, known simply as *bòs Sius*, was a yeoman and a hard worker. He grew up and lived in a rural area and came from a family where performing hard labor was a badge of honor. He was a short and stocky fellow known for his bubbly humor and prone to prolonged guffaws. His paunch was a witness to his penchant for anything edible. He had a premature recession of the hair on his scalp, and his baldness was forever a source of ribbing at the hands of his friends. As a matter of fact, the refrain *you are letting a barber get away with murder when you go for a haircut* was thrown at him constantly. He had become immune to it and would simply laugh it off. He had limited schooling but made up for his lack of formal education with his street smarts. He emigrated from his motherland of Haiti to the US in 1968 after selling off his cows, goats, and pigs to try to make a go at this land of opportunity. In August 1970, after a string of menial jobs at factories and last as a gypsy cab driver, he accomplished a milestone with his savings accumulated after many hours of overtime. On Saratoga Ave, he opened the first Haitian barbershop in East New York, Brooklyn, near the number 2 train station with a final stop at New Lots.

A new wave of West Indian immigrants who were quick to replace the Caucasians who couldn't reach the greener pasture of LI and or Staten Island fast enough was mushrooming to the delight of realtors salivating over juicy commissions. The sight of dark-skinned individuals moving in was the tipping point. The buzz spread quickly to leave as soon as possible before a precipitous drop in the value of the properties and ensuing urban blight. As it were, integration was defined as "the short-lived period of a neighborhood transitioning from being all-white to all-black." This was a cold premise fostered by centuries of racial animosity and policies of preferential treatment of the dominant group while neglecting the minorities. It was a pure black-and-white calculus with no shade of gray allowed, careful research and analysis contradicting this misconception and gospel be damned.

A barbershop being the center of male fellowship, the beauty parlor filling the same role for females, opening such a business was indeed a milestone, considering the pent-up need for such a service. No longer would the Kreyol-speaking customer launch into tongue-twisting descriptions of the style of haircut, he would only need to choose from *koup 0, 1, nwa* to be understood clearly with nothing lost in the translation. In the case of an Afro ("Fro"), usually, just a shape-up was required; then again, those wearing a "Fro" had no issue explaining what was needed in English. No equivocation meant ease of service and enhanced comfort level, creating the sought-after goal of good customer satisfaction, the capstone of any service business. Proper context needs to be established.

The country was going through major social upheavals in the early seventies. The concept of Blacks sharing a piece of the pie was becoming an idea discussed in board rooms, college admissions offices, and state legislatures to varying degrees. Society was tiptoeing in acknowledging their presence in areas other than sports. Their presence on TV shows was a rarity, ditto for news broadcasting, etc. Hence, foreign Blacks speaking a different language had a double jeopardy. Finding a place where the native tongue could flow easily was no less than an oasis.

Needless to say, overnight, *bòs Sius's* business became a success and doubled as a social center. The cash register was in constant motion. On Saturdays and Mondays, when quite a few customers had the day off, his place was like a mill, flooded with clients. Ever the astute businessman, to assuage the waiting, he installed a stereo system playing the latest hits from the homeland, and various assortments of confections were made available, free of charge. When the ratio of barber to clients became so disproportionate, he hired additional help. He was a man with

a golden touch, a modern Midas. He operated by instinct. He realized the potential of entertainment, and he monetized on it. He installed a large TV, and showing sports became a fixation. Basketball and the local team, the Knicks, would be showcased depending on the season. Baseball was not a crowd's favorite and would not kindle much, if any, interest. Same about American football.

On the other hand, soccer, wrestling, and boxing were always crowd-pleasing spectacles. Saturday afternoons reigned at the top of sporting mania. Overnight, he became enamored with wrestling, a common tendency among the immigrant communities. Wrestling on Spanish-language stations would get first dibs. There was a list of good and bad characters. One would find Bobo Brazil, Mr. Universe, Sammartino, and Mil Mascaras on the former. On the latter, at the top of the list, would be Bull Dog. Any match featuring any of the above names brought the crowd's passion to a fever pitch. Although later, people would discover that some of these performances were staged, it did not matter. *Bòs Sius* liked wrestling so much that every now and then, he would have a drawing for a few free tickets- courtesy of the house- to watch wrestling live at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. Once satiated with watching wrestling on the tube, he would latch on to ABC-TV's *Wide World of Sports* with the blustering announcement of "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

No one exemplified that era better than the duo of Muhammad Ali and the sports announcer Howard Cosell, and no event propelled a large-scale audience better than a match featuring Muhammad Ali. He was legendary for the passion that he provoked. He was widely adulated by Blacks as a hero for his open criticism of racism in society. Many others became irritated by his highly pointed comments and coined the term "loudmouth" for him. Nonetheless, he was a master entertainer on and off the ring. He had the gift of the gab and made several famous, bombastic, comical, yet genial quips. Either way, *bòs Sius* would telegraph the event all week to ensure an audience. That same exuberance would become handy for a soccer game involving Brazil. That would be a guaranteed standing room only.

The atmosphere at the barbershop would mimic that of a stadium, a real assembly of rabid fans with all the trash talk and occasional bets, strictly under his supervision and control. Never a man nurturing pure altruistic leanings, any event that would gather a crowd was an opportunity to reap financial benefit. He would make prior arrangements with a local bakery to provide sugary refreshments and hot patties. As a rule, any consumer of such a product responded favorably to the suggested contribution. *Bòs Sius* always minted a nice profit at those events. He became an aficionado of technology and made sure he had the latest gadgets for entertainment, be it stereo equipment, speakers, TV, etc. To even please a growing clientele, he enlarged the place, and there was an adjacent room with several tables for all types of games being played: poker, cards, and dominoes. Attendants were directing traffic, and he would get his cut of any betting money changing hands. To fend off any unpleasant visit, he made sure he paid his annual contribution to the police officers union (PBA) plus a monthly cash contribution. In case of any disturbance, he would have the ready and willing backup of the local precinct. As he saw it, he had a business to protect, and running it came with a cost. He was all for it if it meant finding a way to uncork success that kept giving. His persona was complex all the same.

He was, in a nutshell, a microcosm of his milieu. Superstitious to the hilt and mistrustful of others. He became transactional in his dealings. When a young accountant approached him to present a structured plan to pay taxes, obtain a health insurance policy and a retirement plan, he demurred, sucked his teeth, and claimed, "What exactly am I getting out of this? I need to enjoy the now. He will probably make money off me, and I can't let this happen." He would just as soon

listen to other self-employed individuals like cab drivers who would advise him “to keep all of his money and pay as little in taxes as possible, the way we do it home.” Enjoy the now meant no provision for rainy days, the underlying assumption being that good times would keep rolling.

The high traffic of his place attracted the attention of others. The Democratic district leader of his area saw it as an opportunity to recruit and influence voters. During election time, he would drop flyers and, accompanied by a Haitian translator, make a pitch for the Party’s anointed team. Others didn’t know it, but he was getting his cut of the money made available for retail politicking. He made deals right and left so long as he could make an extra dollar. With his pocket flush with cash, he would indulge. He fathered four children with three mothers and frequently traveled to the motherland for all sorts of monkey business. On his return, he would regale his customers with stories about his escapades. To his close friends, he would describe the obligatory mystical services he held for his “protection from evil spirit.” He would remain mum about a dirty business he engaged in, meeting his handler’s boss to give some detailed information about some clients openly opposing the regime. As much talking as he did about others behind their backs, many to their detriment, he was a goat, like the butt of jokes. People would laugh and make fun of the very obvious: *bòs Sius* was a hillbilly, and his sartorial appearance left a lot to be desired. His ill-fitting and garish clothes were pathetic. His choice of jewelry and shoes reeks of aversion to elegance. One would be hard-pressed to imagine him in a bespoke outfit. Many would describe him as “a necessary evil.” He provided a place where guys would let off steam and listen to the raunchiest pitter-patter. Of course, a barbershop wouldn’t be one without all the menfolk chatter.

Men talking about their sexual prowess, real or imagined, at a barbershop is par for the course. Jokes, lies masquerading as true stories, half-truths, gossip, spicy personal tales, political discussions, and partisan disputes about sports teams ran the gamut of themes of passionate exchanges. A sounding board, a place of entertainment, and a straightforward Kreyol-speaking place to just get a haircut were all mixed into one bag. His success was not unnoticed. Prying eyes were ubiquitous. In those days, a Haitian barbershop was a site of spying by the government back home, eager to keep tabs on members of the opposition. *Bòs Sius* was a willing participant in this scheme for a monthly sum of money. He would make a note about any customer who was a loud critic of the government and report it to his handler. “A dollar is a dollar,” he thought. “The sweet smell of success makes me giddy.” This was a quote from him to one of his mistresses.

His uninterrupted years of success faced a jolt when he got in the crosshairs of the IRS after five years of virtually no income tax filing. Tipped by an informer, an undercover agent carefully cased the establishment and paid attention to the volume of the transactions for a week. After a bruising audit, *bòs Sius* ended up being in hock for over fifty thousand dollars after adding penalties and interests. That was bad enough, but 2 months later, he became sick with acute appendicitis and went to the local Brookdale Hospital. He had no health insurance, and his final tally was ten thousand dollars. This was a time when the minimum wage was barely over two dollars fifty an hour. It never occurred to him that the prescient young accountant who came to him a few years back would have saved him money and his unfortunate but self-induced ordeals had he followed his advice. Part of his reluctance was that the fellow looked like him, and he suffered from the Jekyll and Hyde schizoid mindset so common among so many of his brethren that makes them doubt their brother automatically.

Out of necessity, he did seek an accountant’s service, but he made sure he chose someone of a different nationality, again due to his distrust of his brother man. Yet he relied on his brethren to help him with his mystical needs. In as much as his milieu prevailed on him, he was a trailblazer and left his imprint. True that he pushed the envelope with his less than stellar attention to scruples,

yet he was an amiable man, greeting his customers with a “soul brother handshake” or a bear hug followed by his usual guffaw and ready to start a session of jokes, for which he was gifted. He had simple tastes, but his limited schooling became an albatross around his neck. His inherent talent was akin to a rough-hewn diamond. He provided a social center, and one can imagine how far he would have gone had he had more formal training to allow him to envision going further in entertainment.

It was a sad optic when, thirteen years after opening his business and after years of practicing unsafe intercourse with all comers of the opposite sex, he went from a bubbly fella to a careworn individual in the throes of an illness. It was sadder to observe him slowing down because he had frequent runs and would interrupt taking care of a customer to go the john. It was saddest to witness his rapid deterioration from chubby to emaciated. It became a tragedy and a source of communal concern that, despite chronic diarrhea and fever, it took him forever to seek care from a physician. Instead, he made numerous visits to shamans and tried several potions without any improvement. Rather than accept the diagnosis of HIV, he steadfastly clung to a doofus of a proposition advanced by a charlatan who told him that “envious people who resent your financial success have cast a spell on you that presents under the form of that disease, but you don’t have it.” He was firm in his belief that this was the case, and he refused help when he went into renal failure. He sided with superstition over science in a life-and-death decision. He paid with his life for that choice not long after. Unfortunately, he was one of many with that lethal fate due to a distorted act of faith, steeped in one’s core beliefs, passed on from generation to generation, about a world of shadows, bereft of brightness, filled with gloom, devoid of hope. A belief, despite the evidence to the contrary, that maroons help even when available or spurns it even when readily offered.

Bòs Sius, for all of his flaws, was a model worker. His business instinct was sound, albeit not impeccable. His value judgment was venal and unprincipled. He sought a sentry’s narrowmindedness when faced with the greatest challenge, whereas a guardian angel’s wisdom would have been the wisest choice.