

Michael Milburn

Head Case

I

My son Dev phoned from college the other day to say that his hair had begun to fall out. He asked when my own hair loss had begun, and whether I'd been mistaken in telling him that the baldness gene was inherited from one's mother. Dev has always taken solace in the fact that his maternal grandfather possessed a full head of hair until his death at eighty. He has treated my accelerating condition with gentle sympathy, advising me on how to comb my remaining strands so as to conceal or at least not call attention to the sparseness. As he described the quarter-sized bare patch on the back of his head, he sounded both indignant and betrayed.

I assured him that the maternal gene rule was sound and that his bald spot was probably caused by stress. I doubted that it even existed. My own preoccupation with hair loss had begun in my freshman year of college, and I knew that one could worry the tiniest gleam of scalp into a portent of imminent baldness. In my case, that portent is still coming true, but I'm confident that Dev will enjoy lush growth well into middle age, with nothing more serious to worry about than how to make his curls lie down on his head, when to wear a hat to tame or shape his waves, and whether to minimize washings so that his hair won't ruffle outward like feathers.

At his age, I had already spent years tending to my own intractable hair, and would still be doing so today so if my genes hadn't made anything more than a quick swipe of the comb unnecessary. Dev doesn't confide in me about much, saving most of his emotional, romantic, and academic distresses for his mother, but he knows that on the subject of hair I offer the benefits of both experience and empathy. I can't remember a time when I haven't been obsessed with what's going on on top of my head.

When I was eleven, my mother began cutting my hair herself, not to save money or because she was skilled at it—she wasn't—but because my father considered the job too important to leave to a stranger. Like many parents in the 1960s, he associated long hair with

depravity. This view was understandable in that era of sex, drugs, and Woodstock, but the intensity of his opposition has always baffled me. When Dev was growing up during the height of post-punk fashion, his phases of bleaching his hair or wearing it in a Mohawk never particularly alarmed me. If his chosen style flattered him I was pleased, and if it didn't I knew he'd tire of it soon enough. Mainly, I empathized with his passage through those teen years when one feels pressured both to stand out and to fit in.

I had certainly felt that way at his age, and had hated not being allowed to follow the latest trend. I not only had to cope with my mother chopping away beyond our agreed-upon length until I fled her bathroom in tears, and my father ordering a trim a few weeks later, but I was turning out to have exactly the wrong kind of hair for my times: thick, immobile, susceptible to the pressure of hats and pillows, and insisting on sprouting outward as soon as it reached a modest length. The Irish woman who looked after my sister and me loved to tousle my hair and gush, "look at these beautiful curls," but I knew that those eruptions would never earn the admiration of my peers.

On my thirteenth birthday I spent my gift money on a pair of professional thinning shears, thinking that the way to convert my hair from a thicket of waves and curls into the straight, swinging tresses worn by my rock and roll heroes was to keep thinning it until it cooperated. The style of the day was long, limp—what my mother contemptuously called "lank"—hair, parted only enough to reveal the eyes. My models were James Taylor, Jackson Browne, and, later, Peggy Lipton, the impassive blond actress on the t.v. show "Mod Squad." By the time I went off to boarding school in 1971, the cool thing for a boy was to look like a girl.

The most popular boys at my school had straight hair that rested on their shoulders like curtains brushing the floor, or jounced in ponytails behind their hockey, lacrosse, or football helmets. One unfortunate white kid in my class had such tight curls that his hair went from crew-cut to Afro in a month. Watching him walk into chapel on parents week-end, my father asked in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "What's that?" My hair was almost that bad, determined to grow out rather than down. I had to pull it straight to make it touch my collar, and when I tried to grab it back into a ponytail, my head looked like a golf ball with the cover ripped off and the rubber bands springing free.

Still, I *had* to have long hair; it was socially mandatory unless one was a math prodigy with one's own set of unfashionable crew-cut friends. Away at school and free of my parents' oversight, I felt blessed to have months to let my hair grow between visits home, and even more months if I could get through a vacation without them forcing me to get it cut. I knew that my

mother would sigh and plead and try to insist, but doubted that she'd force me into the bathroom and onto the toilet seat for one of her traumatizing hack jobs.

Instead, my father tried to humiliate me into getting a haircut. He mocked the way my hair surged out from my head like ice heaves, and said I looked like a girl, rechristening me Alice. I wished I did look like a girl, or like the rock star Alice Cooper with his dangling black strands. According to a rumor at school, Cooper (born Vincent Furnier) had once played the role of Eddie Haskell, the clean-cut friend of Wally Cleaver on the t.v. show "Leave it to Beaver." That transformation from All-American boy to Goth prince was just what I aspired to. Cooper's hit song during my freshman year of boarding school became my personal anthem: "No More Mr. Nice Guy."

My hair only reached a satisfying length when it curled over the tops of my ears and the outside of my shirt collar. Unfortunately, it wouldn't do this unless I pawed it into place with oily palms. I envied boys who constantly needed to flick their hair back or tuck it behind their ears. Sometimes in my dorm room I'd pull a lock of my bangs down over my eyes and peer through it, fantasizing about what it would be like to have hair that did that on its own. When I let go, the lock would spring back into an untamable, side-skewing curl.

My hair obeyed every force except gravity. After a shampoo, it erupted in wavelets or electrostatic spasms depending on when, where, how, and how long it had dried. Weather influenced its behavior, as did how I slept on it, the greatest torment of all. I spent more time struggling with my bedhead than with any other aspect of my appearance—that is, until I discovered that the overnight hours were also my best opportunity for sculpting. I might never make my hair lank and flickable (though my hopes for the thinning shears persisted into my twenties), but I could, by wetting it before I went to bed, parting it the wrong way, and sleeping in a tight ski cap, ensure that when I woke up it would be gloriously, if rigidly, straight.

I hit upon this method one winter after observing that if I wore a hat for an extended period, my hair looked really good when I removed it (good to me, at least—my curl-coveting Irish nanny would have sighed that my best feature had been effaced). Even today, with barely enough hair left on top of my head to comb, I wear a baseball cap to protect my scalp from the summer sun, and when I take it off the tamped down look delights me.

I suspected a classmate of using the same nocturnal strategy. His coarse blond hair angled down in two corrugated slabs from the part in the middle of his head. I felt certain that his hair, if left alone and slept on unattended, would bulge outward as wildly as mine. In fact, one of the few black students in our class had his hair straightened with a professional "process" that looked

just like the blond boy's homemade one. So great was the pressure for boys to have long straight hair that nearly all of my classmates grew theirs out, even when the results were aesthetically disastrous.

The boy that my father had mocked in chapel was nicknamed "Bush" for his bouffant style. His puffy, untended hair made him instantly recognizable on campus and gained him some respect for adhering to the era's ethos of individuality and eccentricity. I just saw him as ridiculous. He wasn't black cool like the black students with voluminous Afros, or white cool like the preppy kids with shoulder-length straight hair. He looked more like a circus clown, and served as a caution of what could go wrong when the urge to be fashionable collided with the misfortune of having been born with bad hair.

My longest stretch between haircuts occurred during my senior year. Two photographs from that period document the only times when my hair, to my eyes, looked perfect. In one, taken after I had removed my helmet following a football game, it's impeccably straight, covering my collar and seeming as if it might even consent to be brushed away from my eyes and tucked behind an ear. I suspect that some sort of headgear was involved in the second photograph, too. Here, my hair lies flat over my ears and collar, and for once looks a bit mussed without having exploded into its usual finger-in-a-light-socket chaos. But this picture's main appeal is that I think I look like Jim Morrison of The Doors, though so far no one else has perceived the resemblance.

Toward the end of high school, I began to make peace with my hair's recalcitrance. If I could ignore it, maybe others could too. When a female classmate confided that I had been "discovered" by girls during senior year, I was thrilled to have attracted interest in spite of my handicap. Equally encouraging was the fact that the fashion had begun to swing away from long hair. No longer would I have to choose between being uncool and looking like a hung-over clown. Cut short, my hair behaved quite nicely. I continued to long for ponytailable straightness, but concluded from the popularity of musicians with hair similar to mine—Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia—that curls possessed their own appeal, and might even be considered, as my Irish caretaker had exclaimed, beautiful.

II

No sooner had I settled in to enjoy my stylish short hair than it began to exhibit reduction plans of its own. I don't remember any time elapsing between my first substantial haircut in years

and the discovery of my first bald spot—not even a week when I could strut around thinking that I finally looked presentable. The summer after my sophomore year of college, as I prepared for a year abroad, my sister joked that she should take a good look at me while I had any hair left. Her comment followed months of me agonizing over the fact that my forehead had begun to expand upward.

The locus of my concern was two inlets above my temples. According to my daily mirror check, they were receding so quickly that I would be bald not just in my twenties, but (a couple of my classmates had this horrifying problem) while still in college. Since hair had everything to do with attracting girls, I made a quick pact with God. I reasoned that by age thirty-five I'd either have a wife who loved me for my inner self, or I'd be seeking to attract women too old to be picky about their boyfriend's hirsuteness. So I told God that if he postponed my baldness until then I would relinquish my hair gladly.

To my surprise, he complied. My sister's first comment after I returned from Europe was that my hair hadn't vanished after all. The two inlets had retreated a modest distance and halted, and while my hair thinned gradually and evenly over the next decade, my appearance did not change noticeably. It wasn't until I was in my early forties that the bald spot in back began expanding to quarter and then hockey puck size. And only in the past few years has the top thinned to the point where a strait of bare scalp threatens to break open across the middle of my head. Interestingly, though, my wispy widow's peak and the original incursions on either side remain faintly distinguishable, as if God were striving to exceed his original promise.

Today, at fifty-six, I envy men like my friend Don, whose gray thatch shows no signs of betraying him as he approaches sixty. Like the female speaker in Randall Jarrell's poem "Next Day," I mourn that younger members of the opposite sex no longer "see me." Glimpsing myself in a mirror (something I rarely do intentionally any more), I'm incredulous at how my once abundant hair has deserted me. I don't miss the burden of vanity, however, and having endured one girlfriend who badgered me unsuccessfully to try Rogaine, I'm happy to have found a woman who's comfortable with—or willing to overlook—my looks. I even admire my skull's handling of its new circumstances. I'm not one of those men—the actors William Hurt, Ed Harris, and Patrick Stewart come to mind—whose cranial and facial structures make them as handsome without hair as with it, but I wear my baldness tolerably well. It's neither the first thing others notice about me nor a cause for cringing, titters, or averted looks.

Still, mine is the most delicate stage of hair loss, when recession turns from mild to severe, with increasing swaths of bare acreage. I estimate that only a couple of years remain

before my lifelong habit of combing my hair left to right will result in the dreaded comb-over look. In moments of discouragement, I think that shaving my head would be preferable, but aesthetic considerations stay my hand. Certain skulls look good bare, but to me a bumpy shaved head is the worst look a man can have. As I touch around my frontal lobe, fingering back along a central ridge as prominent as the one that delivers climbers to the Everest summit, I conclude that I lack the cranial symmetry to take it all off up there.

Besides, I haven't admitted defeat in this battle, though on days when I'm masochistic enough to angle two mirrors to reflect the top of my head, my fate is hard to deny. I'm just not ready to think of myself as a bald man, or even as one of those tufty types with hair only on the sides. I have yet to fail the most conclusive test, that of being identified to strangers as "the bald guy over there." I hope never to hear myself described in this way, but am perpetually alert for it and for reassurance of the most sycophantic kind. As long as the woman who cuts my hair protests "You're not bald" when I vent my insecurity during our ever briefer sessions, my self-esteem—and her tip—are secure.

Why is baldness so distressing to men? Unlike weight gain, that other change to our appearance that distinguishes us unflatteringly from our youthful selves, baldness is neither reversible nor our fault. Yet young men (my son is a good example) dread it more than any other symptom of age; this most masculine of conditions confers the most unmanly of stigmas. Men don't think this about other men, but assume that women place hirsuteness near the top of their lists of manly qualities. We're repeatedly confirmed in our fear that baldness is a major handicap in the sexual sweepstakes. On the t.v. show *Seinfeld*, when George lists his disadvantages as a boyfriend, the audience laughs at his triple misfortune: he's short, fat, and bald. But shortness and baldness are hereditary, whereas fatness can be a symptom of self-indulgence. By conflating these attributes, the show reinforces the image of baldness as a character flaw.

For a man of my age, hair loss is no longer reasonable grounds for romantic rejection or even self-consciousness. Still, I hate my condition, which I see as just another setback to my lifelong desire to be cool. In this respect, I remain a child of the 60s, whose hit musical, "Hair," opened the year my mother first took her shears to my curls. The title song sums up my expansionist philosophy:

Gimme a head with hair, long beautiful hair
Shining, gleaming, steaming, flaxen, waxen
Give me down to there, hair!

Shoulder length, longer (hair!)

Here baby, there mama, Everywhere daddy daddy

Hair! (hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair)

Flow it, Show it;

Long as God can grow it, My Hair!