



Just A Little Off The Top

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FLYMF December 2004, The Rampant Consumerism Issue, Volume 1 Issue 10

There are things that men are supposed to be afraid of. Commitment is one, although I've always thought that was pretty weak. A prostate exam is another, and I'm with the crowd on this one, as the ratio of large object (doctor's hand) to small space (asshole) is one that doesn't seem to work out in the recipient's favor. Still, while some fears may be universal—I could add impending mortality, global warming, and sharks with rabies—others are unique to certain individuals. Tom Cruise might be terrified of mittens. Nick Holle, Associate Editor of *FLYMF*, trembles at the sight of caterpillars. As for me, my personal kryptonite is going to the barber.

In saying I fear going to the barber I don't mean to imply there's some Peppermint Pole bloodbath in my past. As bad barbershop experiences go, mine don't extend beyond the general sense of failure that comes with that first look in the mirror after every haircut, confirming that's as handsome as you're going to get. It is true that my mom caught my ear with the scissors once while trying to save a couple bucks, but as far as traumatic experiences go that doesn't even register relative to the time my dad tried to extract a "not-so-loose" tooth with a pair of pliers. Still, every time I need to get another haircut I put it off for as long as possible, as can be attested to by the rogue's gallery of old photos that follows me like the chains of Marley and Marley.

The crux of the issue, as far as I can tell, is physical contact. Specifically, the barber has to touch me to cut my hair. In presenting this as an issue I don't mean to frame it as any sort of status commentary, like "the barber's not good enough to touch my head," because that's ridiculous, and frankly, if our 109th Congress does achieve its long hoped-for agenda of establishing standards for physical contact, I'm sure that even the admitted non-hand-washers-after-using-the-toilet of our great nation will rank above Arts and Letters graduate students on the touchability scale.

No, what I mean to say is that while I'm far from exhibiting the Hughesian excesses of wearing tissue boxes on my feet to keep germs away, I do have a healthy regard for my personal space. The entire experience of sitting in the barber's chair—them putting their hands on your face and neck, pushing your head this way and that, heaving their gender-indeterminate

bosom into your face as they clip little bits of hair down onto your eyes and cheekbones, trying to tempt you the whole time into moving so they can blame you for the little bald patch they're secretly dying to shave into your head—all of this, for me, is like staying absolutely still while a spider creeps up your leg. Sure, you could probably do it if you had to. But who the hell would want to?

The touching isn't the only part of the haircut where things go astray. Related is the fact that the most common option these days for getting your hair cut is a salon, which resembles a Thai drinking parlor in that you're not sure if you're \$30 gets you some head under the barber's sheet.

Going into a salon is a true cross-cultural experience: the people there care about their hair. They put things in it. They spend time in front of a mirror with it every morning, playing with it, molding it, to get it to look exactly the way they want. So when you go in there without any idea for what you want your hair to look like beyond "shorter," they feel like you're fucking with them. And to get back at you they make sure to sneak a half-gallon of product into your hair before you can get out of the chair, so that the walk home involves you scurrying from alcove to alcove like a fugitive to prevent people from seeing your lubed-up noggin.

The other option, barber shops, are also problematic, as their concept of hairstyles and "too short" stopped somewhere in the 1950's. Sure, it costs less than your salon visit, and the touchy-feeliness is knocked down a notch. But barber shops demand constant vigilance, as it's the secret oath of every barber to give you a flattop if you stop paying attention long enough. If you're really out if, like if you fall asleep in the chair or something, they might carve their initials into the back of your head, but usually they're just satisfied with giving you the sheared sheep look, and with it the assumption of every minority that you're prejudiced against them and their way of life. After all, the guy with the flattop in movies usually isn't the one who's involved in a loving, interracial relationship. He's the one who beats up the couple in the loving, interracial relationship, then goes gay-bashing for a couple hours before calling it a day.

I imagine the whole haircut preoccupation is only going to get worse when I begin to go bald. ("Begin?!" the chorus shouts. Yes, fuck you, begin. I was born with a receded hairline.) I can just imagine the barber telling me, "Looks like you're starting to lose a little off the top here," to which I would reply, "Where, the spot I look at 20,000 times a day? The spot I bought a tri-folding mirror for specifically so I could track the progress of my receding hairline? I'm starting to lose hair there? Oh, thanks a lot, I hadn't noticed."

Balding all the way to cueball could actually be a positive development, as it would entirely remove having to get a haircut as a source of worry. A more likely scenario is that I'll end up with the ring around the skull, which would probably require more maintenance than my hair does now simply to avoid looking like a mild-mannered Bozo the Clown. In any case, losing my hair to avoid going to the barber seems like a serious cure for a rather benign affliction, much like dying to get over one's dislike of cabbage.

I suppose I'll just have to accept things as they are, come to grips with the fact that most of my life will probably be spent alternating in hairstyle between the white extra in a 1970's blaxpotation flick and *Freaks and Geeks*' Alan, post-lice. If there were an easier way for me to get a haircut, my hair would have such a tidy, well-burnished sheen that people on the street would mistake me for Mark Paul Gossellar, circa 1993. As things stand, the reality leads me to ponder whether the Flowbee is really as bad an idea as it seems to be on television.