

Hairy Ordeal

Dealing with a hereditary coat of cro-Magnon, Rorschach-like fur

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Diversions Contributor

I am a hairy man from hairy stock.

I woke from the nearly comatose sleep of childhood and descended the stairs of my childhood home. I approached the kitchen table where my father sat disemboweling the morning newspaper. A series of guttural whole notes strummed the muscles of his throat. His face was like old Nantucket skrimshaw, yellow and intricately incised. His body was covered with white hair the texture of Halloween straw. It covered whatever surface on him could accommodate its outrageous growth.

I waited for him to look up from the sacred fatherly chore of approving or disapproving the daily news.

During the night, I'd changed. Gone from the naked cipher that cut lake water clean and curled at night in race car blankets, the sun's fever still rising off uncompromised skin.

During the night my genetic due found its purchase.

First, with textbook precision, tangled hair disclosed my glands to me. But that conquest was bureaucratic. Then the pelt thickened and chose new, entirely abstract and ornamental paths.

A mushroom cloud whose blossom obscured my breasts and its fall-out crept in waves between my ribs and shoulder to shoulder. On my back grew a confusing Rorschach resembling a fruit bat with tetter perching atop a bust of Voltaire. The hair gushed, then trickled, past my belt line to form more unmentionable patterns.

In other words, seemingly overnight, heredity had had its way with me.

I stood before my father a mirror image through the vaselined lens and cool blue light of a dream.

He grunted and snapped at the news for some time, finally folding up the newspaper neatly, setting it aside and looking me up and down. There I was, 10 years old and Crick and Watson's double helix already dragging me down. The hair hung from me like great sheets of seaweed.

"There now, son," my father said, thumping the kitchen table solidly. "You're just like me."

Wind came in from the screen door. My hair rustled and the domino effect of hair on hair made it feel as though thousands of beetles swarmed on my skin.

"And don't worry," he looked around as if this were a conspiracy. He winked. "You'll grow into it."

I had this dream often. But my father died and the model of this hirsute nightmare died with him.

Still in my early 20's, the croppings of hair were manageable, if unpredictable. Perhaps I'd make it to sedentary old age before the house caught fire. For now, the little blazes — an extra coarse silver corkscrew that spiraled out from my left breast; the dark, sporty slashes of hair that creased my sides — were amusing.

In short, I could pass through a world of bodily hairlessness without giving myself away. I could even strip away my shirt if the day were slightly overcast or if the room were particularly dim.

The countermeasure to which I supposedly belonged fetishist hairlessness from the neck down in males. Smooth chests. Naked sinew in high contrast black and white rippling around some lithe annoyance in



David Badders-DN

perfume and cologne ads.

My father and his father dealt their coup de grace when I reached the age of 28. The coarse hair, in unruly bunches, besieged my shoulders and succeeded in secret missions all along my back. Where hair had already won the day, it was substantially bolstered with reinforcements, in case I was bombarded with radiation.

By the age of 30, the hair on my head was nearly gone, a recession that took as its distressing path the middle front of my head leaving me bozo-like tufts of hair on either side.

I took to watching washed-out Super 8 films of East Coast beaches during the 1950s. Raunchy Italian boys leered around wet cigarette butts and flaunted their full, black coats of fur. I even developed certain romantic associations with the doomed old fat men asleep in the hazy sunlight, lying on impossibly bowed lawn chairs, the white hair on their shoulders blowing visibly in the sea breeze like eel grass.

Late in the 1980s I happened upon the old radical poet, Robert Bly, on television, being interviewed by the estimable Bill Moyers. Bly, who had championed draft resistance during the Vietnam War and refused the National Book Award, was up to something new. It seemed men, in the wake of feminism and hyper-corporate dehumanization, had lost their souls, their obscured warriorselves, their inner wild men.

He was packing halls around the country with malaise-stricken lawyers, doctors, ministers, firefighters and ex-astronauts wanting to be "real men."

As he sat across from Moyers and the camera backed away to reveal him wholesale, I noticed the man bore a striking resemblance to the figures of my childhood nightmares, a cross between my father and myself. He was a hairy man and he was balding. As an added bonus, he was potbellied. I saw in him the anti-Calvin Cline,

pitching the credo of the hairy man. To think I had spent summers with my shirt on, whole summers afraid of baring myself to my hairless peers. Bly made hairlessness a form of denial. He gathered up the hairy men into a wild tribe, shirtless and cavorting through the nether woods of the great North. The men burned sage and recapitulated the rituals of myth and tradition.

I sold my record collection and headed north, far north, past Minneapolis, for the Wild Man Retreat. I followed the course of BMWs, Saabs and Subarus, of Buicks and Oldsmobiles, through stands of white pine, rock elm and balsam poplar. At the gas stations along the way I saw my comrades pumping fuel shirtless, their body hair dangling, circling, spiraling, clumping, tendrilling, cross-hatching, wisping, knotting and looping. Each body was some new chiaroscuro—woven images of senseless, cro-Magnon fur.

That night I inhaled the sage and boiled away my inhibitions in a sweat lodge. We ran through the woods in the cool blue moonlight and I nestled into the pack, all bristled backs, sides and haunches welded together, heads low and bouncing, a rosary of shining eyes. I could tell I would snatch something great from this night. Something to be hung on wood hooks, to be trapped with leaf cover, something to be best in fire, charred with smoke rising off its shanks. A doctor from Minneapolis was barking furiously, tearing at tree bark with his new-found claws. I heard every kind of noise, including the noise of my father disemboweling the morning paper. Some noises were animal, but others came from conclaves of crying men, crying because they had just remembered the feel, the shape, and the military academy advertisements of old Boy's Life magazines.

I sat shaking in a bar in Minneapolis the day after. I'd spent the night in fever dreams. I had a few beers and eyed everyone in the joint. An old man sat at the bar. He looked

like one of those cartoon boozers on bar napkins from the swinger clubs of the 60s, minus the water bottle on the head and the inebriated x's for eyes. His face was long and skin that at one time must have been divided equally over his head had settled in houndish pouches around his chin and jaw.

He smoked a dead cigarette and took deep, hissing breaths as he drank.

He must have seen me looking at him, because he scooted down next to me and jumped into a story without introductions.

"I had this little dog and screw his little dog life if he didn't give my butt so big a pain it made my throat hurt. I named him Chandler, after the guy who wrote them detective books. Ate those up back when my eyes worked better'n a jigger of spit.

"Little brown dog, like a meatloaf with legs. I thought, train him not to be such a pain in the butt all the time. There are dog books, ain't there dog books? I get some, y'know. 'Train Your Dog to Drool Pearls and Bet the Horses.' I read them all and I can't really find anything I wanna teach him. Who cares if he plays dead or shakes your hand? I want a dog can play dead, I'll buy a dead dog, okay? Then I think, biggest pain of all is taking the little meatloaf for a walk so he can crap or pee on a hydrant. Middle of the night, nine in the morning."

He lit the dead cigarette but nothing much came of it.

"I'm thinking, time to give this dog a little civilization. Who gets up at nine in the morning? The pope gets up at nine in the morning. I'll teach him to use a toilet. Not sit on it like you or me, but stand on the seat on all fours and take a wizz, whatever. Chandler? Well, he's not giving it his all at first. But I give him a few whacks on the nose with the funny papers and some doggie snacks and finally he's tryin' it out, standin' on the seat, little shaky, but he's gettin' it.

"Month later, maybe two, I get up in the middle of the night to relieve myself and there's Chandler standin' on the seat, his legs shaking and his eyes real big and scared, but he's doin' it. He gets a little on the seat maybe, but who cares? He's wizzin' in the pot. I wanna call the Daily Planet, sure. Got a dog who's usin' the john. Page One. Pretty soon he's an expert. Do it on two legs, big pooch grin on his face. Cocky, real cocky."

He took a big, ugly sigh. Nearly a sob.

"He's some kinda ballet dancer. But things get weird for me, like I start gettin' embarrassed walkin' in on him. Sometimes he's got this look on his face, standin' there peenin'. Too familiar, like he wants his privacy or something. I say, sorry, and close the damn door like he's Joe takin' a dump at work. Excuse me, Chan, sheesh, learn to shut the door."

"A month later and I'm thinkin' I wanna buy him some pants or something, little doggie trousers. No way, but I'm thinkin' it just the same."

"Well, if I can train him, I can untrain him, huh? I start whacking the mutt on the nose he even looks at the john and hauling him outside next to trees and hydrants. But he holds it. I keep the bathroom door shut but he uses the kitchen sink then, any hole he can straddle. Sometimes I don't find his mess for a week. And he's gettin' savage, bitin' my hand and such like. Now, I love this dog. What I didn't say, right? Whole story and I didn't even tell you that. I'm a schmuck. I got a dog uses the john. I trained him. And I can't

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