The Gesture of Shaving

The hairy man moved slowly around the kitchen, looking for the jar of instant coffee that usually sat obediently on the bench near the gas stove. He had the same build as my father, and even the same eyes and nose, but he lacked most of the face. Cheeks, chin, and much of the neck was covered in coarse black hair. Watching from the kitchen table, as I scooped up errant pieces of puffed rice floating in milk, I watched this creature—both strange and familiar—with a wary eye. The hairy man had returned from a long trip like this, carrying my father’s suitcases. He even had the nerve to kiss my mother when he entered the house. I noticed with glum surprise that she did not seem to object. Indeed, the hairy man scuffed my own hair playfully—the blond mop on top of my head—just as my father sometimes did; and spoke to me in the same voice. But I merely shrugged and shifted away, squinting at this rather uncanny presence; my eyebrows the shape of a question mark, as I tried to catch my mother’s ever-distracted gaze.

This was during the high era of hairy men: a time of many hirsute pursuits. Men’s shirt collars bristled with a layer of human fur, crawling out the top, as if trying to colonize the neck. Beards and chest hair often grew towards each other, creating an entire
carpet on the top half of a man’s body. Follicles on every surface and in every crevice seemed to burst forth like black, brown, or grey grass; heavily seeded, and boosted by the human mulch below the skin. Male shoulders sprouted wings of keratin, thick enough (in many cases) to comb. Forearms were ensleeved in dark wool, and knuckles sprouted wispy sprigs. Tufts emerged from ears. Soft hairy stalactites grew down from flaring nostrils. From what I could gather as a very young boy—still hairless and voraciously curious about the grownups who presumed to be stewards of my fate—entire forests of hair would grow beneath men’s clothing; filling the spaces under arms, above knees, and even (schoolyard rumor had it) between buttocks. Hairy men were everywhere. In restaurants. Walking in the city square. Grinning from billboards and sinning on TV. Thanks to snatches of conversation and a particularly confusing sexual education class—led by our school librarian, who did not cease blushing for a full hour—I understood that some Big Change lay ahead of me; a bit like becoming a werewolf, but the transformation would be permanent. That evening I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, and tried to picture my body, covered in coarse, animalistic coils. I tried to imagine my face—currently as smooth as a cherub’s buttock—with first the manicured facial hair of the devil, and then the more comforting snow-white beard that I understood God to have—as if the Lord had first emerged from the clouds, and retained some of their cumulus.

Hairy men ruled the world, through the sheer multiplicity of their collective presence. If a specific hairy man was unavailable, another would surely do just as well. Indeed, who knows how they knew what to do, or who they themselves were, when they looked into the mirror and just saw a profusion of protein threads, covering their lives like fibrous creepers? Who knows how their wives or girlfriends recognized them at the end of the work day? These men seemed to be as indistinguishable as coconuts or shrubs. Human thickets, loosely connected by nicotine-stained fingers and an aimless conspiracy of the indistinct. Women and children, not nearly so entangled with the environment, tolerated the hairy men, for the most part; but trembled
when the furry head-spheres opened to reveal an angry pink orifice, like errant flesh found inside a cyst. Profusions of hair matted and caked like neglected doormats. Confusions of wiry threads strung themselves throughout the land like tripwire or dangling cheese slicers, obliging us to step carefully and watch our heads.

Then suddenly, seemingly overnight, the culture changed, and the hairy men began to disappear at a rapid rate; as if an army of invisible lawn mowers had swept through the land, leaving a new occupying army of men-folk: smooth, shiny, and manicured. The newcomers displayed waxy chests and smooth shoulders. Different scents filled the air; less reminiscent of musk, cheese, spices, sebum, and whiskey, and more evocative of spray-canned florals and celery juice. A sudden mushrooming of pastel-neon jazz bistros played host to these new confident strangers, who had so quickly and efficiently chased away the hairy men.

Being a man of fashion, the hairy-man-who-was-perhaps-my-father succumbed to these new atmospheric pressures, and summoned me to the bathroom. Also being a person who liked to minimize missions, he decided to combine his own transformation with a life-lesson, explaining to me — as he filled the sink with warm water — that shaving was a rite of passage for any boy, and signaled the moment of becoming a man. As he lathered up the shaving brush against a large bar of soap, I instinctively felt my own cheeks with my hands, still smoother than a peach; closer perhaps to a nectarine. But I was to watch and absorb this most masculine process: the metamorphosis from bearded to clean-shaven. The lather was swirled around his cheeks, chin and neck, until the hairy-sudsy man looked like a grotesque Santa Claus, making strange expressions to himself in the mirror, as he twisted his lips and jaw this way and that, to give the razor more purchase on his sandpapered skin. As his elbow cocked at strange angles, he even seemed to be blowing kisses to himself in the mirror. At first, I had the strong sense that with each pass of the blade, the man’s face was disappearing altogether; as if he was being diminished with each stroke. But
my eyes slowly adjusted to the process, so that I saw, through the steam in the chilly bathroom, pale skin where tufts of hair bristled only a moment before. Stroke by stroke, and inch by inch, my father returned to the house, as I began to recognize the smooth geometry of his face, now only splattered with bits of white foam, and a tiny speck of blood near his left ear. By the time he rinsed his face, and toweled away any residues of the process, I was utterly convinced this presence was indeed my father, though I did not know how to express my relief, other than to blink more than before. He tussled my hair again, and handed me the shaving brush. “Here. This is yours now, for when you’re ready. It’s made of horsetail.”

As my father hummed to himself in the bedroom, dressing for the day, I tried to follow his motions from memory, lathering up the brush once more, and covering my cheeks, chin, and neck with thick and creamy foam. I then meticulously moved the razor over my face until the suds were gone, nicking my skin only once or twice. Feeling like I had already passed some kind of milestone, I washed the invisible future-stubble down the drain; splashing myself with after-shave to smell like a grown-up. The sensation was of metaphysical precision, as if I had sharpened the line between me and the world. I was a shaved being, saved from anonymity.

That night I dreamed I lay on a stone table, in the middle of a forest. I stared up at the leafy canopy in a malaise, unwilling, or perhaps unable, to stand up. I could feel a thick beard growing faster than the ropes of ivy all around. I felt myself begin to merge with the forest, as the hair from my arms, legs, and face began to surge, extend, and twist around the ferns and tree roots. I was being absorbed by the world, or I was absorbing the world, I could not tell which, as the borders of my body began to blur and unravel. I was a burlap sack full of soil and seeds, sprouting at a demonic speed, meshing with the weeds. The sensation was not entirely unpleasant, and yet — deep within my slumbering psyche — a sense of panic began to grow. Even as part of me knew this was a dream, I feared I would not be able to wake up; and may never inhabit my contoured self again.
tried to pull the long beard from my face, with leaden arms, covered in fibrous tendrils, but this only made it longer, like a freakish carnival trick. And so I called out into the echoing forest for help. I could sense my heroic, clean-shaven father trying to find this part of the forest, machete in hand. Occasionally I could hear him call my name in the distance, but he could not hear or find me.

When I awoke, heart beating like a giant trapped moth, I was relieved to find my body had not really meshed with the sweaty sheets. I shaved three times that morning, and twice that afternoon, despite being at least four years away from puberty.