

There's nothing worse than a bad haircut. I was staring at one of the worse I had seen anywhere. My bangs tilted across my forehead and the top of my head had short wisps of hair sticking up while my longer hair laid flat on my head. The left side covered half my ear while the right side hung ragged above the ear. The barber beamed. He pumped some hair tonic into his palms and rubbed it into my hair while massaging my scalp. He snapped my smock off with flair perfected over 30 years of administering bad haircuts. He knocked some powder into his thick, callused hands and dusted my neck before spinning me around in the chair so that I could get a 360-degree look at his masterpiece.

"Now that's a fine looking haircut. Don't you think, son?"

I said nothing. I laid \$18 on the counter, \$3 for the tip, and left the shop door ringing behind me as it closed and I escaped 30 years of restless bad haircut spirits as they spun inside the shop in search of peace. My dad used to tell, "Son, nothing makes you feel like a man like a new haircut. Trust me on this" and he would get to work on me with a set of dull clippers. He approached my haircuts like some sort of spontaneous performance art project. He would finish the job and send me to school to be ridiculed and beat up by the kids whose folks didn't think that home haircuts were some point of personal family pride. The torment would last for as long as it took my hair to grow into a respectable length. My hair didn't grow. It strained. It languished. It struggled. It fought to break the hold of its follicles.

When my hair had grown in enough and I was capable of some self respect, it was always time for another haircut and it was open season all over again. Girls would throw handfuls of dirt at me. I was the primary target of every game of dodge ball. One joker even glued my ass to my chair with model airplane glue and laughed like a retard and grabbed his hair crazy and danced in circles when I tried to get up to do a math problem at the chalk board. The bigger kids would give me dead arms and the smaller kids would sneak up behind me and slap the back of my exposed neck that always had a handful of mutant hairs that escaped the treachery of my dad's panicked clippers.

I was a long way from being at the mercy of my dad's fitful haircuts. I was successful. I had things, expensive things. I ate good food. And I made sure that I paid top dollar for my haircuts. My dad was wasting away in some retirement villa in south Florida, performing his own haircuts with safety scissors and a hand held mirror. I liked it like that.

I had left the house early this morning so that I could walk and clear my mind. I had worn my best suit fresh from the cleaners and spent 45 minutes polishing my shoes. I had to give a presentation to a client and I realized that I had enough time to get a quick haircut and cement an impression to these hillbillies from some concern in Virginia that I was a man of action. I was fastidious. I was detail oriented. I was sharp. I was traditional. I believed that any man worth his weight had his hair trimmed every two weeks. Anything less was disgraceful and was a big fuck you to convention. These hillbillies were all about wool suits from Brooks Brothers, wingtips from Florsheim and convention in heaping spoonfuls.

The barbershop looked inviting. It had the bright red and white pole out front and depression era signs that said this guy had been in business for awhile. Even though he wasn't my normal stylist, I was assured by the crisp white coat that he wore and the black comb sticking out of his pocket. I settled myself into his deep red barber chair, confident that he would do a passable job and walked out with a cut only my dad would love.

Now I was late. I needed to be at Bronson and Tex in 25 minutes and that was on the other side of town. I was out of rhythm. I couldn't seem to keep myself in step. My gait was a series of starts and stops and self-conscious panic. My feet were heavy and the effortless ease in which I had approached my adult life was slowly dripping from my hacksawed head.

I put my head down to try and make some time and I noticed that the sun behind me cast a shadow on the ground in front of me as I walked. My silhouette resembled a sharply dressed man in a \$3,000 suit with an oven mitt for a head. I tried to ignore the obvious, that in the span of 15 minutes, I resembled a Romulan and passed through an intersection before turning left on Merrill.

As I came to the middle of Merrill I passed a stoop where a group of youngsters were hanging out. I sensed trouble and thought that I was clear until one on the lower stoop happened to glance up and give me a sideways look like he was trying to figure out what was wrong with the picture. He stopped mid conversation and it seemed to strike him that I was some sort of lunatic because he nudged his friends and called out to me, "Hey chicken hawk, your toupees on crooked, you better hope the wind don't blow too hard or you'll never get a date."

His friends got a kick out of that and they started hollering and yelling all kinds of stuff. I stared straight ahead and tried to tune it out but the noise cut me to my soul until I reached the end of the block.

I figured a taxi would save me some embarrassment and quicken my travel time so I stepped out into the street to flag one and I got the attention of a driver immediately. He slowed to a crawl and I grabbed the handle to the door to get in but something spooked him at the last moment and he hit the gas before I could get the door open. That happened two more times and one cabby actually swerved to try and hit me.

I ditched the taxi idea and put my head down to avoid eye contact with anyone. I had my eyes fixed on the concrete and was watching one foot pass before the other in a strangely hypnotic way. I began to feel confident that I could get through this, make it on time and somehow save face. I felt driven and in charge. The crack of my \$800 Italian loafers on the sidewalk was calming and I checked my watch to gauge my progress. Seventeen minutes to go. I could do this.

When I stopped to coordinate my position, I found myself standing in the middle of a hopscotch game. I paused for a moment and looked at three little girls who were upset that I had interrupted their game. Their petulance dissolved with slow realization and one

girl leaned to her friend and said loud enough for me to hear, “Look at him, he’s so ugly, what’s wrong with him”?

“I don’t know, but if I tell my mom he touched me on my little lady, the police will lock him up and he’ll go away forever”.

The third one said, “Yeah, he scares me, let’s go tell your mom”. They ran away giggling and left me in the middle of their hopscotch game to consider my sorry state.

I had 13 minutes to go and I was still below Brookline Boulevard. I broke into a jog down Ash Avenue. Fuck everyone else. I was the one that made me. I was the one that took the chances and succeeded or failed. I was the one who controlled my life and set my course. I wasn’t the pawn of any motherfucker. Fuck that barber. He was the one who jeopardized his eternal soul every time he sent some sucker out of his shop with a bad haircut. I didn’t need perfect hair. I could finesse any situation based on my charm and skill. No bad haircut was going to fuck with me. I was self-made and I was going to show a bunch of big money hillbillies just how we do things around here.

I sprinted now. The wind felt good in my face and cooled my head and pushed under my wool suit to give me some relief from the heat. I crossed Ardmore and skirted through the alley behind Leonard Court. I dodged some cars on Crescent Park and vaulted some fruit stands at the Farmer’s Market.

Some punk kids threw some apples at me and they all missed except for one the drilled me in the middle of my chest, exploding in a mess of juice and pulp. I wasn’t worried. I made a mental note to place liens on all their family homes. They would go down.

I arrived at the intersection where my office was, just off of Bronson and Tex. I slowed to an easy step to cool off before I walked in to deliver my presentation. I rolled up my sleeves and tied my blazer around my waist to cool off. I wiped the remnants of the apple from my chest and practiced my delivery quickly in my head. This was my moment. My career hinged on how I performed this afternoon and I was feeling charged as if nothing but Samson and a headfull of hair could deter me.

I walked into the lobby and headed for the express elevator. Possession compelled me. Like MacArthur returning to the Philippines I was prepared to fulfill my destiny. Nothing would stop me. As I crossed the mosaic interpretation of the landing of the Spaniards on mainland Mexico, I was approached from behind by two security guards in starched and pressed uniforms. They were vaguely familiar from coming to this same office everyday for the last twelve years.

“Excuse me sir, what is your business here at the Equitable building?” They walked on either side of me and had to skip to keep up with me. I never broke stride. I wasn’t fucking around.

The other spoke up. “Sir, please state your business.”

I slowed up only slightly while noticing that my elevator car had just opened and was receiving passengers. I used one hand to wipe some sticky pulp from my shirt and run my hand through my hair causing my hair to stand up on end with manic attention.

“Gentleman, I’m running late for an important meeting and your presence is only serving to delay me. Now if you peasants will excuse me, I have some money to make and people to ruin”.

I started into a sprint for the elevator and they were instantly on me, employing all sorts of complex holds and restraints. I struggled against their combined weight but it was useless. The fat one had me spread out over the marble representation of Montezuma while the other must have run to phone the police. I took to the only tool I had left. I yelled.

“Listen you fat bastard, I’ll have your job! I’m a very important man! I make careers, I break them, and you just earned a spot on my shit list, you sustenance wage lackey! You’re ruined, you hear me! Ruined. I’ll have you sucking the peanuts out of Bubba’s shit up in Cook County when I get through with you.”

The fat one, who was now sitting on my chest with my arms pinned under his plump knees, called to his friend who was on the phone. “Hey, Tom. You hear this fucking maniac? He thinks he’s important. He goes through the trash and finds a suit and thinks he’s going to come play with the big boys.”

His partner called from over behind the phone, “Fuckin’ A right. This guy looks like grade A wacko. Just fell off the bread truck and lookin to make a score.”

I was exhausted. The fat guy on my chest made it hard for me to breathe and I found it impossible to even protest. I was growing dizzy and the lights on the ceiling began to melt into one another and grow dim. I only heard disembodied voices.

“Yeah he probably just escaped from the state hospital, you better call and have them come pick him up. He seems dangerous.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna call the hospital and them come pick this mongoloid up, he probably killed somebody and at their kidneys...”

I was slipping away from lack of oxygen. The last words I heard were the fat guy’s as he adjusted his weight. I could feel his hot hoagie breath on my face like he was looking close into my face. “Funny how this nut job looks kinda like that Bob Roberts guy that comes in every morning and doesn’t say a fucking thing to anybody. A dead fucking ringer....”

I woke up in four point restraints staring at the roof of an ambulance as it rocked and rolled down some unknown road. I seemed destined for the hospital and at the very least

some rest and relaxation. It would be nice. I needed some decompression time. The food at the place was shit, but they had the most capable barber.