

I care about my hair, maybe a little too much. I used to hate getting haircuts. My parents dragged me to the barber when I was small. I habitually cried afterwards — in the car after dad took me to the local town barber, and in the mall, babbling to my mother about my barber who “just wouldn’t stop cutting.”

My mother has hair deep brown and thick like a carpet. Old pictures show a mane that once hung to her waist. Mom’s hair is like her – strong, long, and hard to make do what you want.

My father’s hair is wispy. It takes a careful eye to notice its deep brown shade, not black. In college it hung past the shoulders, but has been cut high and tight for decades. My father, like his hair is wistful, easily distracted, and occasionally messy.

My hair has the thickness of my mother’s and the deeper color of my father’s. Shyness overpowered me through my first few cuts. I was too frightened to tell the big, scary barber with scissors what I wanted and stubbornly refused to disclose my preferences to my parents despite their pestering. As a only child I had no model to follow; the attention stifled me. Pressured with such earth-shattering decisions about hairstyle, I froze.

I finally tasted the sweet victory of indecision as I left elementary school. Popular style in school worked in my favor — cool boys let their hair grow into an indiscriminate mop. For a glorious year plus, I didn’t get my hair cut at all, and my parents couldn’t do anything about it.

It grew outwards first, bushy and thick like my mother’s hair, then began to droop around my skull and curl up around the bottom. When I wore a baseball cap the curls formed a bushy horseshoe in the rear from ear to ear. My hair was so tangled, knotty, and greasy, my parents intervened to show me the proper way to wash.

Eventually I gave in, when only my earlobes were still showing, and got my mop trimmed. The long-hair fad over, I returned to a cruel crew cut that drew a horizon across my forehead and sometimes brushed forcefully to the side to imitate my father on more formal occasions. I got braces and lost all confidence, surrendering to dorkiness.

By high school my confidence was at an all-time low. Braces on two years longer than my tyrannical orthodontist promised, I walked the halls of high school head down, a victim of chronic bedhead syndrome. The 7:30 a.m. start had made me, historically unpleasant to be around before 11:00, not care one bit about my hair.

Then, finally, I evolved. An escape catalyzed the transformation. It started at a summer program the before junior year of high school at Davidson College (my parents forced me to go). I begrudgingly went to take classes and live for a month in the scorching North Carolina climate. I got an unexpected first taste at romance, but it wasn't just my first crush followed through on or my first kiss that made the difference. Away from home I thought for myself, and away from the analytical tools of two psychologist parents, I started to become my own person, actually capable of making decisions.

My long-neglected hair became one of those decisions, and I realized I had the power to shape it. I spent the rest of the summer and fall of my junior year incessantly and angstily running my hand through my hair, training the front to go up and stage left.

This sudden swoop of personality accompanied a readiness to move up and away from my hometown after high school. I turned sixteen, used my own car, spent as little time as possible at home, and drove myself to get haircuts. I left my white-bread hometown and explored the neighboring small city, Danbury, for a good haircut.

I found Mohammed, a short man with skin the color of wet sand and oddly bald for a barber. His shop in downtown Danbury didn't have a real name – the sign just read, “Barber Shop.” I remain the only white person I have ever seen set foot in the establishment. Damn did Mohammed give a good haircut. He was masterful with the razor, cutting my sides in sharp lines and introducing me to hair gel. The atmosphere at the barber shop was intoxicating. Patrons came in and out rapidly, some just for company instead of clippers.

The refuge of Mohammed's shop was freedom from a frustrating home. I remain unsure whether my unwillingness to spend a lot of time at home was a cause of my parents' deteriorating relationship or a symptom of it. My mom started dyeing her hair, fearing gray strands that poked their rude heads straight up from the part down the center of her head. My

father's hair, still remarkably brown despite its owner nearing sixty, began to show gray flecks.

I continued making the pilgrimage to Mohammed as high school wound down, and he soon knew my impossibly thick hair well. Not his typical customer, I had to push him to ask for more style. *Shorter on the sides, longer on top, yeah, fade the buzz like that.*

My hair was messy and long from a senior winter full of questioning, doubt, and deception when my parents, sitting on the perpendicular leg of our beige sectional, finally told me they were splitting up. The commute to see Mohammed shortened when my parents took up separate residences in Danbury. Soon after, I left for college, returning to Davidson College as an undergraduate. I waited months for a haircut out of fear of betraying Mohammed.

Danbury wasn't home any longer, I discovered upon my return for winter break. I split time between two condos and learned the divorce had been finalized two months earlier. I hadn't been told. Tired of anger, I instead accepted my parents' existence as complete people with flaws, passions, and troubles like mine. It was time for something new.

My hair's rapid growth astounded Mohammed when I went back into the shop over that break. I asked him to cut a part. He wet my hair and combed an alley from the spiral on the top right of my head to the top corner of my face. The razor carved a horizontal straight line you could see from twenty yards away. Below it was buzzed, above was trimmed.

I haven't been back since Mohammed cut that hard part. At Davidson, my hair is a barometer of my mood. When I'm stressed, it grows long, thick, and messy on top. On my tall, thin frame it looks like the used eraser tip of a whiteboard marker. When I have time the sides are buzzed close, tight around the ears, and the top flops over, in a style I will defend as not totally "hipster," but instead "low-key hipster." I get it cut at Raefords, an undeniably wonderful local shop that still feels like a watered down version of Mohammed's.

Stumbling through young adulthood without a home shop, my hair and identity remain malleable. My quest to tame my unruly and fast-growing hair has wandered. I've tried barbers in North Carolina. I've tried others in Chicago, where my mom has a new job and a modern,

short haircut. I've tried barbers in New York, where my dad, hair thinning, has bounced between three homes. None of them cut it quite right.