

"SHAVED"

My hair had grown longer than I am used to anymore and, being on a restrictive custody level where we cannot go to the prison barber shop, I opted to use my shaving razor to shave my head. The bald look is far from flattering for me but, more often than not in here, one must choose efficiency and relative comfort over vanity.

So, I soaped up my head and began running the razor over my scalp in what has become a somewhat familiar ritual over the past two decades in this place. As I watched those first clumps of hair fall into the stainless steel sink, my mind took me back to the very first time in my life in which I had ever had my head shaved. That time it wasn't by choice...

It was 1995 when the prison bus on which I rode pulled up to the Middleton Transfer Facility in Abilene, Texas. The bus doors were thrown open and the 50 or so inmates who had spent the bulk of the day handcuffed and crammed onto that bus as it traveled the state rounding up convicts from various county jails and other prison farms were pushed and prodded outside and onto a concrete slab. There we were surrounded by a group of hostile and aggressive guards. Amidst a chaotic cacaphony of screamed and even conflicting orders such as "Tell me your name, boy!" and "Shut the fuck up!" or "Get your ass in line!" and "Stand still, mother fucker!", we were herded and pushed around until we were lined up in pairs alongside the bus. The guards paced up and down the line of docile, tired inmates yelling things like "Shut your mouths!" or "The fuck you looking at, boy?!" Some would single out specific people for harassment with comments like, "Look at this one. He thinks he's a gangsta, don't he?" or, in my case, "Damn, boy, what kinda faggot haircut is that? You can kiss that shit goodbye."

See, in my pre-prison incarnation, I was a skateboarder or a "skater". In the 1990s, there was a hairstyle particularly favored by skaters in which one's hair would be grown to around chin length on the top of the head while sides and the back would be buzzed very short. The long hair on top would be worn in a tiny pony-tail or left to hang and frame the face. Over the year I had spent in the county jail, I had cultivated that style quite well and now that chin-length blonde hair framing my younger-than-19-years-old-looking face had drawn the attention of these antagonistic guards. We had already been told that looking around would "get your ass kicked", so I stood staring straight ahead, trying not to show any reaction in my facial features as a handful of these guards grouped up beside me and began commenting on "how pretty" I was, how they couldn't wait to see how I was going to like "getting fucked" in

the prison population, and other tidbits of redneck wit and wisdom intended to get a rise out of me. Determined not to give them the excuse to bring their verbal harassment to a more violent physical level, I managed not to react and finally they grew bored and moved on to antagonize someone else. Not yet aware that much worse was yet to come, I breathed a sigh of relief...

After our handcuffs were removed, still outside, we were told to strip naked. Our clothes were thrown into a large pile and guards then walked down the line of inmates collecting our shoes and what little property we had brought from our respective county jails and prison units. We were then shuffled into a side door that opened into what looked like a squat warehouse-type building. I entered a holding area with large, kennel-style cages to the right and a bare wall to the left. The guards forced the still naked inmates to stand with our toes to that wall, shoulder-to-shoulder, ten in a row. We were told to stare straight forward and "shut the fuck up" as another line of ten inmates was told to line up behind us "nuts to butts" until we were lined up in rows of ten-by-five naked men.

At that point, a particularly nasty guard whom I would come to know all too well during my time on the Middleton facility began to shoulder his way amongst the group of inmates to single out ones he claimed he had seen looking around or talking. He stood about 5'4" so had to look up to holler at the side of his target's face : "What the fuck you lookin at, mother fucker?! Can't you follow orders?! You need your ass kicked?! You got somethin to say, boy?!" and so forth. Soon, he had made his way to my back as I faced the wall trying to be invisible. I jumped a little when I felt his hot, fetid breath on my shoulder as he stage-whispered in a nasty voice, "With a hairdo like that, I bet you love being with all these naked dudes, huh? You hear me talkin to you? Yeah, you better NOT look at me..."

Finally, he moved on to his next victim. Soon, he got the reaction he had been fishing for. He pushed up against an inmate on the back row and the inmate rolled his shoulder to shrug him away. Instantly, a group of guards swarmed the naked convict, slammed him hard to the concrete floor, cuffed his hands behind his back, and drug him around the corner to whereabouts unknown. This was obviously meant to be an example to the rest of us. The short, nasty guard sardonically asked if anyone else needed space and we were left to stand in tense silence for a long period of time as he continued walking amongst us, clearly hoping for another "altercation".

Soon, a sargeant took his place and began to give a well-rehearsed speech
to our

to our naked backs to the effect that if we obeyed the rules and carried ourselves "like convicts", we would have no grief on "his" unit ; but, if we "got out of line," we would pay for it, etc. etc. As he gave his sermon, a trustee brought in a pile of old boxer shorts. After the sargeant asked the clearly rhetorical question as to whether any of us had questions, we were told to walk "counter-clockwise" around the pile of boxers, grab the first pair we could, and to file into one of the kennels.

It quickly became clear that this was yet another exercise in demeaning, bullying, and dehumanizing us. Several guards stood near the pile of shorts, waiting eagerly to pounce on any inmate, many of whom had no idea of the difference in "clockwise" and "counter-clockwise", to walk in the wrong direction or to pause at the pile of boxers in a futile attempt to find a pair that fit. Either would result in the guards surrounding the inmate, pushing him toward the wall and making him place his nose to it as they crowded around him and yelled at him for being "too stupid" to follow orders or just cursed him in general. Fortunately for me, I knew what "counter-clockwise" meant and was small enough that all of the boxers fit me. (They were all smaller-sized, intended to embarrass the larger inmates when they had to squeeze into them.) The guards jeered at me, commenting again on my haircut for the most part, but I quickly rounded the shorts, grabbed a pair, and hustled into the cage where I took my place on a steel bench next to the other inmates. Although we were forced to sit shoulder-to-shoulder, crowded seven or eight deep onto benches designed to seat half as many, it was quite cold in that cage. A couple of guards stood outside, watching closely for anyone who dared to violate the directive not to talk.

What felt like hours later, they began to call us out by name, four at a time, and pointed us to a counter where several guards were seated to inventory our property, arbitrarily deciding what we would or would not be allowed to keep. As the female guard asked me a few basic intake questions, she became aware of my New Mexican accent. Having already made her own comments about my "punk rock hairdo" and not getting a rise from me, she decided to focus on my accent and resorted to racist comments in an attempt to further demean me. "It says here you're white. Why you talk like a Mexican? You a wanna-be Mexican or what?"

She turned and said something to a gray-headed sargeant who was standing nearby and he stepped up to the counter beside her. He looked at my intake file for a moment and shocked me when he looked up at me and, in a genuinely kindly manner said, "You have a life sentence? You're just a kid. that's a long, hard

row to hoe. Take care of yourself, son." before handing my shoes and property over to me and walking away. There is not much more disconcerting than a display of sympathy or kindness when one has come to expect nothing but cruelty. While I had borne the ridicule and harassment of the other guards, this unexpected show of humanity came perilously close to bringing me to tears.

I didn't have long to dwell upon this heartwrenching kindness, however, before the female guard pointed me to the barbers' chairs lining the wall across from that counter, "Over there, pretty boy."

An inmate barber stood next to each chair. As I approached one, he told me to set my property and shoes aside and I climbed up into the chair. Never saying a word, the trustee threw a cape over my shoulders, then turned on the clippers he held in his hand. I held my breath as I felt the blade touch the base of my neck, the cold metal sending a chill down my back. I tilted my head forward and looked into my lap as I felt the clippers move up in one long stroke, reaching the center of my head before the dull blade snagged in my hair. As the trustee pulled it loose, I watched locks of my blonde hair fall onto the black cape in my lap and knew that those were pieces of me falling away. The dull blade felt like it pulled out more hair than it cut and the metal nicked my scalp in several spots, drawing blood, but the real pain was in my soul. Having my head forcibly shaved was the most physical manifestation of having had my personal identity and freedom of choice taken away that I had yet experienced. I only sat in that chair for about three minutes, but it felt like a lifetime watching my hair fall in clumps into my lap and onto that dirty prison floor.

I walked away in a state of shock, directed to a line of shower nozzles that were separated from the barber chairs by a waist-high wall. I was handed a small bar of lye soap and a razor and, although I couldn't yet grow any facial hair to speak of, I was told to shower and shave. I stepped into an ice-cold spray of water that hit like a physical blow in that already cold air and with my newly shorn scalp. I rubbed the soap onto my head, wincing at the sting of the lye on the fresh cuts, and watched as the remnants of my hair and rivulets of my blood ran away into the drain. A guard began screaming at us to hurry. "Why the fuck aren't you shaving, inmate?!", he screamed at me when he realized I wasn't using the razor I'd been given. I began to point out that I had no facial hair but was again reminded that this entire process was about nothing else but breaking us down when he answered, "Don't give me shit! Just shave like I said!"

So, without even removing the plastic guard from the blades, I ran the

razor over my face and lip, eliciting a "That's better." from this obvious MENSA member. I stepped out of the shower area and grabbed my shoes and property. Another trustee handed me a towel and a random-sized white uniform. I was then directed to another row of steel benches where a large group of my fellow incoming inmates were already seated awaiting housing assignments.

As I sat there, rubbing my hands over my alien-feeling bald scalp, and looking around at the other newly-shorn men around me, I marveled at how quickly and efficiently we had all had all visible aspects of our personal identities stripped away from us. There we were, all bald and wearing identical unisex uniforms, reduced from men to ghosts who could hardly recognize ourselves much less one another in a matter of minutes.

I would soon learn that a freshly-shaved head identified one as a "new boot" when he entered general population on these intake facilities, making him a target for harassment by the guards and some inmates as well. I also learned that the act of making the inmates keep their faces cleanly shaven was a psychologically belittling act intended to create the effect that a mustache, which the guards could wear and inmates could not, was a symbol of both authority and masculinity. Thus, forcing the inmate to shave could make him feel like he was less of a man than a mustached guard. Upon spotting a 5 o'clock shadow on an inmate's face, guards would commonly say something like, "You'd better get that man off your face. (Recently, the Supreme Court determined that inmates in Texas can wear beards for religious reasons and many of the old-school guards were genuinely angry over the decision.)"

Remembering how traumatic, depressing, and humiliating it was to have my head shaved that first time, it makes me laugh now that I often willingly shave my own. I've come to value comfort and ease over vanity, I suppose. More importantly, I've learned that, while personal choices like hairstyles and clothing may reflect certain characteristics of one's personality, they hold nothing at all of what truly identifies and separates a person from others. That is only found in things that cannot be taken away from a person. It is in one's values, one's morals, the virtues he or she chooses to live by, what he or she stands for...

It has been twenty-two long years since I have been able to choose my own clothing or even my own hairstyle and, after so long in Texas, I have long since lost my New Mexican accent. If I saw 19-year old me today, I don't know that I would even recognize myself. Yet, I know who I am. More so than even when I was able to make all those choices. Time and hardships have shaved away all of the ego and bullshit, leaving behind a simple man who both knows and likes who he is today.