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WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE?

THE ADVENTURES OF A
MILDLY PERVERTED YOUNG WRITER

JONATHAN AMES

What's Not to Love?

The Adventures of a Mildly
Perverted Young Writer

Jonathan Ames



Vintage Books

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Acclaim for Jonathan Ames and What's Not to Love?

"Ames is a wonder." —*New York Post*

"[Ames] wants to write about the soul but his body keeps getting in the way. There's something endearing, even remarkable, about his manner of following up tasteless admissions with scenes of genuine and tender affection. This debased curiosity of his . . . keeps the reader giddily off-balance." —*Bookforum*

"Jonathan Ames has lived the life I wish I could have lived, if I hadn't been afraid of sexually transmitted diseases."

—Todd Solondz

"A mixture of unbridled libido and hopeless romanticism. . . . [*What's Not to Love?*] soar[s] with Ames' original wit and generous spirit." —*Entertainment Weekly*

"Jonathan Ames has displayed an unusual ability to take crack-smoking, balding and Oedipal fixation and whip them up into an elegant, comic meringue. . . . His lapidary prose style rapidly seduces the reader into taking his pleasures with him. . . . There is also a light beauty to the ephemeral a beauty Ames conjures up in countless joyous scatological and ejaculatory moments."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"If you haven't had the treat of watching Jonathan Ames' hilarious, sui generis live performance pieces, reading his new book *What's Not to Love?* is the next best thing. . . . The self-deprecating Ames is a cheerfully gracious neurotic, which makes laughing at his humor feel easy, uncomplicated and unexpectedly joyful."

—*Salon*

"This is a Farrelly brothers' movie for people who would never see a Farrelly brothers' movie." —*The Seattle Times*

"Like any good (albeit shticky) performer—Allen, Seinfeld, and a thousand Catskills comedians before them—Ames openly provokes the reader to have fun at his own expense."

—*The Village Voice*

"Mildly perverted and wildly amusing." —*Vanity Fair*

"Shy exhibitionist Jonathan Ames has all the qualities it takes to be a great writer: he's fearless, neurotic, worldly, tortured, a unique stylist, excruciatingly honest, slightly creepy, polite (yet attuned to the sham of etiquette), a killer comedian with a healthy dose of self-loathing, tender, and—most important of all—mordantly obsessed with his own penis." —Bret Easton Ellis

"The individual episodes, chapters, rhapsodies—call them what you will—in *What's Not to Love?* are so beguiling, so insouciant, so seemingly breathed onto the page, that it's impossible to miss the fact that the memoir, book, collection—call it what you will—as a whole has the formal elegance and perfect wholeness of one of Ames' two extraordinary novels." —Jonathan Lethem

"If you enjoy reading about the joys of producing an erection while holding in gas, this is the book for you." —*Library Journal*

"A lively, funny, and utterly frank account of a young man's journey, fraught with personal discoveries. An extraordinary guidebook!" —George Plimpton

Jonathan Ames

What's Not to Love?

Jonathan Ames is the author of two novels, *The Extra Man* and *I Pass Like Night*. He is a former columnist for the *New York Press* and is the winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in New York City, where he performs frequently as a storyteller in theaters and nightclubs. His one-man show, *Oedipussy*, debuted off-off-Broadway in 1999. Ames has had one amateur boxing match, losing and fighting under the nickname "The Herring Wonder." Further information about Jonathan Ames is available on his web site at www.jonathanames.com.

Also by Jonathan Ames

I Pass Like Night

The Extra Man

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PROLOGUE

Dear Kind Reader,

If you are standing in a bookstore glancing at this, I'm sorry that the first thing you have to come across is an introduction—a writer's equivalent of a throat-clearing, and not a very good selling point. But I thought you should know that this book, in a serialized, Dickens-like fashion, first appeared in a newspaper, a weekly Manhattan journal called the *New York Press*. I've been working for this paper for the last three years, and initially I wrote a story about every six weeks on such compelling topics—to give but two examples—as my traumatically delayed puberty and an unfortunate encounter with crabs. And I'm not referring, I'm afraid, to tasty Maryland crabs.

This kind of crusading reportage went on for about a year, and then in October of 1997, I began to contribute more regularly, penning a bi-weekly column, a chronicle of my adventures, called "City Slicker." At first, I had thought of calling the column "The Onanist." The idea was, of course, to attract attention, but ultimately I didn't want to pigeonhole myself.

So every two weeks—under deadline—I have to come up with an adventure to fill "City Slicker" and this is not always easy. Thus, I often look for escapades from my past to meet my quota of columns. And so what has emerged from all the writing I've done for the paper over three years is a sort of life story (for that phrase I admit to stealing liberally from Graham Greene's autobiography, *Sort of Life*)—a story that I have taken and placed in the book you are holding at this very moment.

And now I must apologize for all this literary name-dropping. It's terrible the way I try to create lofty parallels between myself and great writers—Greene, Dickens. And, furthermore, if you turn back to the contents page, you'll see that I dare to make references to the Bible, Sophocles, Dante, Milton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Mann, Jackie Mason, Edmund Rostand, Isaac Bashevis Singer, J. M. Synge, and J.R.R. Tolkien. So this is all an outrage and I should be properly lashed. If you like, you can contact me care of the publisher and we'll try to arrange a public flogging, perhaps at a Barnes & Noble or the 92nd Street Y.

In any event, if you're standing in a bookstore reading this introduction and you don't feel the need to press on, I mildly—I don't want to be too much of a huckster or self-promoter—urge you to turn to the official first page. It's probably more amusing, and perhaps even enticing enough to get you to continue reading. At least I hope so.

With only good intentions,

Jonathan Ames
New York City

Troubles

Pubertas Agonistes

I STARTED PUBERTY VERY LATE. I was nearly sixteen. And for complicated reasons this late arrival of my puberty caused me to stop playing competitive tennis. But before my puberty problem, I had trouble with my lower back and with my left testicle.

The back was the first thing to go—in the third grade, at an introductory Cub Scout picnic. I had gone to this picnic against my better judgment. I must have heard some rumors about the Cub Scouts and I was afraid that I would have to build things at the picnic and use tools, and I already knew by the third grade that I wasn't mechanically inclined. I put up as much resistance as an eight-year-old could—there may have been some tears—but my father insisted that we go. And as it turned out there were no tools at the picnic, only game-playing. I started having a pleasant tennis ball catch with another boy, and after several tosses the ball sailed over my head. I went to retrieve it, and though I thought I was all right, I must have still been nervous about joining the Cub Scouts, because when I bent over to pick up the ball, I experienced terrible spasms in my lower back. It was crippling, the muscles clenched like fingers into fists, and I folded up and fell to the ground. My father had to carry me out of the picnic past all the other boys and their fathers. I remember him laying me in the backseat of the car.

This was upsetting for my dad: He was a former Boy Scout. He had hoped that I would become an Eagle Scout one day, a goal he had been unable to achieve himself because he couldn't really swim, and one of the Eagle Scout tasks has to do with treading water for many hours in an icy lake in your blue uniform, or something like that. My father could doggy-paddle, but he couldn't risk putting his head underwater because of a Depression-era mastoid operation in his ear that had left a large hole. So, like my father, I never became an Eagle Scout. I never even went back to the minor leagues of the Boy Scouts—the Cub Scouts. That picnic ended my scouting career.

A few days after the picnic, and after several more episodes of painful, constricting back spasms, my mother took me to an orthopedist, who had unusually hairy fingers and a stern manner. He tapped me all over and massaged me roughly with his unattractive digits, seeking a diagnosis. I'm not sure he came up with one, but he prescribed that I wear a corset, saying that my back needed to be held in, and the way he said it made me feel as if I was being punished for some weakness of my character, rather than just a weakness in my lower back. And what an unusual, outdated prescription—how many other boys, I wonder, in 1972, were advised by physicians to be corseted?

So my mother, thinking that you always obey doctors, took me to a hospital pharmacy that had prosthetic devices and other gadgets—special toilet seats, harnesses, organ trusses—and I was fitted and measured for my corset by a small, bald pharmacist who used the same kind of measuring tape as a tailor.

My corset was white with silver buckles and had metal rods to keep my back from disassembling. I wore it for a year and was deeply humiliated. Only once did that corset give me any pleasure. I was with all the children on my street watching a Ping-Pong game in the garage of a neighbor. One of the players, an older boy, had perceived that I had interfered with one of his shots (this was untrue—I was losing badly and wanted someone to blame), and he started chasing me. I raced up my neighbor's driveway and across their lawn. I was wearing a heavy sweatshirt to cover the bulk of my corset, so my pursuer didn't know about my condition. He was right behind me, but even with the corset, I was able to scoot quickly. The other kids came running, too. The enraged boy was fat and had white-blond hair. He still held his paddle. He was going to try and smack me with it. He ran well despite his weight. Like in a dream, where you can't run, my legs did begin to feel heavy, and I felt the nausea that comes before the inevitable submission to a beating.

So when he caught up to me at the end of my neighbor's lawn, he hit me as hard as he could with his

Ping-Pong paddle right in my lower back. It was going to be the first of several blows, but I didn't feel a thing and I heard a snapping of wood and I turned around just in time to see the circular part of the paddle fly in the air like a Frisbee and then land at the feet of the other children, our audience. The blond boy had unwittingly smashed his little racquet against my hidden metal rods, my secret armor, and it had severed the dislike head, which in a strange act of physics had ricocheted dramatically upward and, as I said, come down to earth at the feet of our amazed peers. So my attacker stood there holding the handle of his decapitated paddle, and he was stunned, defeated. Everyone laughed at him. It was a moment of triumph.

But that was the only victory my corset gave me, and in the middle of this time of wearing my corrective garment, I had another problem: My left testicle ascended and wouldn't come down. I was taken to another doctor and he told my mother that this wasn't uncommon in young boys and was usually a temporary condition. So luckily for me, he didn't recommend some kind of organ truss to pull the testicle down, which would have complimented my white waist-cincher, but the doctor did say that if my testicle didn't return home by the time I started puberty, then surgery might be necessary. And I was mature enough to know that surgery in the area of one's penis was not a desired event.

I'm not sure why my testicle went into hiding, but, like my back problem, I think it was fear-related: I found the third grade to be very stressful academically. There was an enormous quota of dittoes to be filled out each day, and three days a week, in the afternoons, I was starting to go to Hebrew school; so this overload of education had me quite nervous. My mother, a schoolteacher herself, expected me to be a perfect student, and I was terribly afraid that I couldn't be. In fact, I pleaded with her to let me drop out of everything (it was all too difficult; for the first few weeks of third grade I cried every night and pounded my feet into my bed), but she wouldn't let me quit—how could she?—and I started learning then that we spend most of our lives doing what we don't want to do. And so like a scared soldier in a bunker whose testicles are known to elevate during heavy shelling (to protect them, and then they descend during peacetime, which accounts for postwar baby booms) my testicle elevated during this fearful period of my life. Why only one went up, and not two, is a mild flaw in my theory, but let me press on.

So I was missing a testicle and wearing a corset. I was eight years old.

Then my health, on its own, improved. By the time I was nine and a half, all my problems cleared up. The testicle ended its strike and returned to work and the corset was banished to my underwear drawer, where it stayed for several years, a terrible sight, a terrible reminder.

I began to play a lot of sports, and I excelled at soccer and tennis. I was quite happy for almost two years. I had nothing to worry about. But then when I was eleven something unexpected occurred: My best friend started puberty. I saw him naked when we were changing to go swimming. I was shocked. His enlarged penis and thatch of pubic hair looked vulgar to my eyes, and yet I wanted the same thing to happen to me. I didn't say anything to him about his hairy penis; I pretended not to have noticed, but I was secretly hurt that he hadn't mentioned his transformation. It seemed like the kind of thing that a best friend should confide in you about. So I didn't really enjoy our afternoon swim, the whole thing had me feeling conflicted, and that evening, looking for parental counsel, I asked my mother when I would get hair and have a big penis.

"One day," she said, "some fluid, not urine, will come out of your penis. At night. And after that happens you'll get pubic hair and your penis will get bigger."

Some fluid. *Not urine*. This was very mysterious. I thought it must be a once-in-a-lifetime secretion that marked one's passage into adulthood, something akin to a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, which was the scientific equivalent I came up with—back then one was always seeing school slow-motion films of such metamorphoses. So I was naive and unusually innocent; I never figured out until well after the fact that my mother had been referring to a wet dream.

Thus, I waited for this unknown, unnamed fluid for the next four and a half years, while all the girls and boys around me began to change and grow. As a result, I developed an acute awareness and fascination for that surest and most visible sign of puberty—armpit hair. I was always noting with some jealousy the armpit hairs of my peers in the gym locker room; and I was forever inspecting my own armpits in the mirror at home. I'd shine a flashlight on them, hoping to spot the most meager follicle. But my pits were barren; no hairs flourished. Then one time on the school bus, in the spring of sixth grade, I saw a *girl's* lovely blond armpit hairs when she grabbed hold of the pole near the driver. I was mesmerized, enchanted. My little penis turned immediately to stone. This girl was becoming a woman before my eyes—*she had hair!* Beautiful, gold-blond armpit hair. It was glorious. I desired her and envied her and I never forgot her. Fourteen years later, while visiting the Greek island of Santorini, I saw an attractive German woman's blond armpit hair and I was transported back in time—like Proust with his madeleine—to that vision of blond armpit hair on the school bus, and my reaction in Greece all those years later, was exactly the same: I was enchanted and my penis turned to stone.

One summer during my teenage years, when I was waiting for my Godotish puberty, I went away to a Jewish Camp in Upstate New York. I was in the Levi division (Levi was the name of one of the original Hebrew tribes before it became a pair of jeans) of newly christened teenagers, and to my horror I discovered that I was the only boy who still had a small, undeveloped penis and no pubic hair. So I had to hide myself the whole summer. I would quickly change my clothes with my back to my tentmates, and I only showered early in the morning when no one else was around. It was nerve-racking. But one person did see my naked form—the head counselor of Levi, who was the best-looking counselor in the whole camp with his curly blond hair and perfect physique, and who decided one night that he should assist me in putting calamine lotion on my body for a very bad case of poison ivy I had contracted. To do this, he took me up to the shower room when no one was there. He had me strip down to my underwear and he began to coat me with the pink lotion. Then he inquired as to whether or not I had the rash in my groin area. I admitted that I did, so he knelt in front of me and began to pull down my underwear. I was extremely embarrassed and before my secret, tiny penis was revealed, I made an apology—I whispered, "I'm very small."

I wasn't worried about being sexually abused; it was the 1970s and sexual abuse hadn't been invented yet. I was simply concerned about someone finding out that I hadn't started puberty. So down came my underwear and the counselor put the lotion on my small penis, and he said, "Don't worry, you have plenty of time." This was very sweet and kind of him, though I felt a little funny when he quickly pulled up my underwear when he heard the door to the shower room open up. I intuited that what had occurred was perhaps not proper. And sure enough, this very nice, handsome counselor left the camp several years later under ominous circumstances. I still do wonder what became of him. For me, my encounter with him was actually quite tender. Before the judge, if I was ever called, I would say, "He was very reassuring."

And that counselor was right. I did have plenty of time. I turned fourteen, then fifteen, but still no armpit hair or fluid. I was starting to lose my mind over this. Then in the spring of my freshman year of high school, this puberty situation got really out of control when I made the tennis team. It was late March when I was selected for the squad—it was an honor to have been chosen as a freshman—because it was still cold out, our practices were held at an indoor racquet club before school started. At the end of the first practice, our coach, who was short and dark and bore a slight resemblance to my father, announced that every day after we were done playing we were to go for a jog around the parking lot and then come in and shower. Showering was mandatory, he said, because we couldn't go to school smelling of sweat. "It's not healthy," he explained.

I didn't know how I was going to escape exposure and humiliation. I hadn't been seen naked for years, except by the understanding counselor at camp. I was practically of normal height for my age

but that was the only normal thing about me. My lack of puberty was my most guarded secret. ~~regretted having tried out for the team. I hadn't considered the showering. There had been no showering during try-outs, and in the fall when I was on the freshman soccer team, none of us had showered.~~

I thought my only chance, after we finished that first practice, was to be the fastest runner. So when we took off for our jog, I dashed ahead of the pack, raced around the lot, sped into the locker room, stripped down to my underwear, and headed for the showers. But before I could get anywhere, some of the other boys, who had also run fast, began to straggle in. It was impossible to go through with it. The shower area didn't have private booths; it was just a large tiled room with spigots coming out of the walls.

I sat down on the bench and began to dress. I watched enviously as the other boys marched around carefree with their large penises. They took towels out of the towel bin and didn't even bother to put them around their waists. Each boy's penis and surrounding pubic hair seemed to be as distinctive as his face and hairdo. Some of the boys were eighteen years old—they were practically men. It was unfair. I was a cherub compared to them. My penis was indistinguishable from that of a five-year-old's. I could still do the trick of pushing it in so that it disappeared momentarily, went to Connecticut or someplace and then came back to me in New Jersey.

So that first day, I didn't shower. I got dressed and headed out of the locker room just as the coach was coming in. He looked at me accusingly and said, "Showered already?" I lied immediately. "Yes, Coach," I said, and he let it pass, though I knew he was suspicious.

I was nerve-racked for the next twenty-four hours, and at the end of the second practice, I again sprinted ahead of everyone in our tour of the parking lot, running even faster than the day before, and my teammates all thought I was trying to be the coach's pet. But I was running for my life. A sophomore on the team tried to keep up with me, the bastard, but I left him behind. I made it to the locker room and had about a minute to take a shower. I got down to my underwear but could go no further. I was too afraid. Then a few of my teammates came in. I tried to summon the courage to reveal myself, but I couldn't. So I sat on the bench and got dressed and I felt surrounded by the hairy penises of my teammates; it was dizzying, things felt out of focus, all those penises, it was like being in Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

I staggered out to the lobby to wait for a ride to school from one of the hairy seniors. As I stood there the coach came up to me. He looked at my hair and said, "You didn't shower, did you?" It was incredible; it was only the second day of practice and he was already honing in on the most vulnerable aspect of my life.

"I don't want to get a wet head," I said. "I have a little cold, and if I go out with a wet head, it might get worse. I washed a little in the sink." I was always being warned by my great-aunt Pearl, who often stayed with my family, about the dangers of a wet head, that a wet head could lead to serious illness.

"All right," the coach said, "but tomorrow you better shower."

Why did he care? Why couldn't he leave me alone? The next day after practice I just sat on the locker-room bench in my underwear, my barrier to humiliation, and I was practically catatonic with indecision. Should I just do it? Let them see me and laugh at me? Then the coach came and stood before me. He was nude. A towel was draped over his shoulder. His penis looked like a purple old man hiding in a black marsh. It looked like a poisonous mushroom, a chanterelle from hell. It looked like my father's penis. My father's penis, which I was always seeing in the bathroom and I would try not to look at it, but it would look at me no matter where I was, like the Mona Lisa.

But the coach, despite his unattractive penis, wasn't a bad man and he had an inkling of the problem I was having. He may have even thought he was helping me, as my coach, to conquer something. He probably figured I was only suffering from shyness. If he had known how small I was, he might have

left me alone.

~~“So you’re going to take a shower,” he said cheerfully, yet forcefully, trying to manipulate me.~~ “There’s nothing to be worried about. It’s healthy to take a shower after exercising. But you better hurry up, you’re running late.”

He walked off to the tiled room, sure that I would follow him. I regarded his unbecoming low back hair, and then dressed as fast as I could and escaped out to the lobby to the pay phone. I called my mother in a panic to come save me. I was almost crying. I said, “Mom, come get me right away. Please!” Luckily, she hadn’t left early to go teach at her high school, and I begged her to meet me at the gas station, which was down the street from the tennis club. I didn’t want the coach to find me.

When she pulled up in her car, I felt tremendous love for her. We were very close back then and always had been. I was an immature boy, not just physically, and my mother had encouraged this. Behind my father’s back she had continued buying me G.I. Joe dolls, though by the time I was fifteen I would only play with them in my closet so that my father couldn’t see me. I would have them hooked on to the hangers with their special gripping hands, and when I wasn’t playing with them, I just liked seeing them hiding in the closet when I would get dressed in the morning. I felt less alone and I must have identified with them—they were masculine but had no genitals.

So my father didn’t know about the G.I. Joes, but he was quite aware of my close relationship with my mother. Long before I knew what it meant, he often called me Oedipus. He would summon me to the dinner table by shouting, “Oedipus! Oedipus!” He also said it whenever he saw my mother giving me a kiss. And when that would happen, my sister, three years older than me, would join my father in calling me Oedipus, and she would also make a heart shape with her hands.

My father’s other frequent nickname for me was Dick Tracy because of my large, bent nose. My penis was small but my nose was big. So there was a certain parallel to my father’s nicknames for me—Oedipus and Dick Tracy—two mystery-solvers.

And my father was right. It was all very Oedipal. For years my mother and I had played this game where she would ask, “Who loves you?” It became a game because she asked me so often. I’d answer by naming one of my grandparents or my father or my sister. Then she’d ask again, “Who loves you?” and I’d name another person, but she’d keep asking, “Who loves you?” And the more relatives or friends of the family that I could think of, the more suspenseful it became. But then finally I’d always submit and shout, “You do!” And this shout not only affirmed that she loved me, but that I was crazy about her. And when I was with my mother in that car, being saved from my tennis coach and my teammates, I loved her very much. I told her what was going on.

“The other boys won’t notice,” she said.

“They’ll notice! I’m the only one who hasn’t started puberty. They’ll kill me!”

My mother wanted me to talk to my father, but I wouldn’t do that. I hadn’t let him see me naked for a long time. I must have sensed intuitively the other side of the Oedipal dynamic—that if my father knew I wasn’t a threat, i.e., a mature male, he could easily do away with me. He was a member of the NRA.

So I wanted to quit the tennis team immediately, but my mother wouldn’t let me. Still, she was sweet to me; she reassured me that someday soon I would develop. You have plenty of time, she said. I had heard it before, but I was running out of time—I needed to start puberty by the next practice.

It didn’t happen. The next day, the coach was going from court to court observing us. I was on line for a backhand drill and he stood next to me and said in a snide way, “Think you’ll shower today?” I didn’t say anything to him. I was too embarrassed, and he walked away from me. And then a few minutes later during a volley drill, as I made my approach to the net, I fainted. I remember seeing the net cord and rotating my hand for the proper grip on the racquet, and then there was the cement of the court rising up to slap me, but there was also the feeling of relief, of going to sleep. I’m sure that

coach, for a moment, saw an opening as I lay passed out. “Let’s strip down Ames and see what he got!”

But he restrained himself and my mother was called and I was taken to a doctor. I had mononucleosis. I had never kissed a girl, I was still in love with my G.I. Joes, and yet I had come down with the kissing disease. I must have picked it up from a water fountain or an improperly washed utensil in the cafeteria, or a wet head had done the trick. In any event, it was the best thing that could have happened to me—I missed the rest of the tennis season, and I never played competitive again.

That summer, a few months removed from my trauma on the tennis team, I began to experiment instinctively with masturbation. I still hadn’t started puberty, but each night I strummed myself for a few minutes before falling asleep. I found it soothing, and I say *strum*, because I’ve never been one to jerk on my penis, unlike most men, who employ that rapid up-and-down yanking, which when I’ve witnessed other men masturbating—in parks or public rest rooms, those sorts of locales—I’ve always found to be somewhat violent and unattractive.

Anyway, one night as I strummed in the motion and rhythm peculiar to me, my penis seemed larger than it ever had been before, and then a dribble of clear substance came out with a noticeably pleasurable feeling. I had heard about orgasms by this time, but it was only at that moment that I made the connection between “coming” and the fluid I had been waiting so long for (which I had just about given up on). I immediately went running to my mother.

My father was out of town, which he often was as a salesman, and my sister had already left home on her long journey to becoming a psychiatrist, having sensed early on, I imagine, what was going on in the old Oedipal household. So it was around ten o’clock at night and I sprinted down the hall to my parents’ bedroom completely nude. I burst in upon my mother, who was propped up in bed reading. She shouted at her with joy, “Mom, it’s happened! The fluid came out! I think I’m starting puberty! My penis seems bigger!”

I got onto the bed next to her. She didn’t say a thing to me. She kept on reading her book, she wouldn’t look at me, but I could see that she was smiling. I figured that she was happy for me. I knew that I was happy. In fact, I was delirious, which seems to be the only explanation for my unusual behavior. In my delirious, exuberant state it felt perfectly natural to share this with my mother, who looked beautiful and kind sitting there. Her long blond hair, normally fastened in a bun, was loose and lay over her shoulders. I felt like snuggling next to her. In my mind, she had been waiting four and a half years with me for my pubescence, ever since I first asked her when I would change. She had been my sole confidante. She was the only person who knew my secret about how tiny I was, and she was the only one who knew what I had gone through on the tennis team.

And as I lay beside her on the bed, I admired my penis. I felt like all my problems were over. I decided to masturbate again. I wanted to show her how I could do it. “Watch, Mom,” I said. “It gets big.” I wanted to impress her. She was still smiling, but still not looking at me, which I thought was strange—she was always attentive to my accomplishments. And then when I touched myself, she said, “Maybe you should do that in your room.”

She didn’t say it with disgust or anger, her tone was gentle, but suddenly I felt shame. I knew that it wasn’t normal to show your mother your first official erection. I slid off her bed and I ran to her bedroom door, cupping my penis in my hands, holding myself like Adam, guilty with knowledge. I scurried down the hall, wondering if she might tell my father. I was embarrassed, but I also wanted to try masturbating again. I had started puberty! My troubles were over. New ones were beginning, but I didn’t know it yet. I opened the door to my room. I was leaving my mother behind, and she may have sensed this, felt the umbilical-Oedipal cord snapping, and she tried to bring me back. She played the game, but it was too late. She’d had her chance. She called out, “Who loves you?”

Hair Piece

IN JANUARY OF 1995, during a fit of depression, while living at home with my parents in New Jersey, I took my father's tiny electric beard trimmer and shaved my head. Because of the trimmer's size and the dullness of its single blade, the whole scalping process took almost forty minutes. That would seem to be the act of a rebellious teenager, but at the time I was thirty-one years old.

I was depressed for a number of reasons (I was broke and in debt and living at home, after all), but one of the chief causes of my depression, before I attacked my hair, was that I was going bald in a very strange manner. I had hair on the sides, on the point, on the back, and I had a hairline in place on my forehead, but behind the hairline was a large bald spot. I didn't have my bald spot in the back of my head, but at the front! I combed the hairline, which I called the hedge or the fringe, back over the bald spot, but you could see right through the hedge/fringe to the empty lot behind, and if a strong wind came along, the fringe/hedge was knocked over and my spot was exposed. (Please see diagram/map on the next page, and author photograph on cover.)

I'd always had a nice head of hair, but as my hair thinned, I felt that I was sallying forth into the world with a faulty helmet. I was

LEGEND Fringe : ||||| Strong: x x x x x x x Weak: o o o o o o Very Weak:

defenseless, vulnerable, laughable. A friend of mine suggested that I had mange. It was all too much. At the nadir, I wrote in my journal: "I feel very bad today and very bald." So then I shaved my whole head to match the bald spot.

The result was disastrous. I am pale and have white eyebrows, and so by shaving my hair and removing all color from my visage, the effect was as if I had erased my head. I was now an invisible man.

This wasn't too bad because I started commuting to New York to teach grammar at a business college, and since the students hated the subject, it was good that I was invisible. All they could see was a jacket and tie that had a voice emanating from the neck hole. I maintained my invisible-man status by shaving my head weekly with a pair of barber's clippers.

The grammar job was my ticket out of my parents' house in New Jersey and I moved to Brooklyn. On my own again, my depression lifted and after a few months, I decided to regrow my hair. I'd often had dreams that my hair was back, looking lustrous and beautiful, and I missed it terribly, like an amputee dreaming of a limb.

Unfortunately, my hair looked terrible as it came in. The hedge/ fringe wasn't long enough yet to comb back over the bald spot, so I looked like I had a monk's tonsure, except that it was at the front of my head.

During this time of painful regrowth, the late spring of '95, I was doing research into WASP culture and had managed to get invited to a grand party at a Newport mansion. I put on my blue blazer and drove up to Rhode Island. I was having a good time at the party, but then a drunk older gentleman, a white-haired yachtsman, asked me a question, and he was quite sincere and concerned. "Have you had brain surgery?" he asked.

"My God, no," I said. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you had an operation in that SPOT." And he pointed his swollen, ancient mariner's finger right at my brow, my forward-placed tonsure.

The next day, I reshaved my head and it stayed that way for two years. Then this July (1997), I moved from Brooklyn to the East Village and I couldn't stand seeing how many men had shaved heads. I didn't want to be a soldier in a trendy, bald army, so I decided to be brave and regrow my hair.

I wore a hat all through July, and then in mid-August I saw an ad in my very own paper, *New York Press*, that intrigued me. Hair Club for Men wanted men with thinning hair to send in photos. If they chose you for a commercial, the reward was five hundred dollars. I needed the money, and so my father took several pictures of my head from different angles and I mailed them in. I also included a cover letter, stating that I thought I would make an excellent poster boy for balding.

Several weeks went by and I didn't hear from them and I forgot about the whole thing. In the meantime, I was busy regrowing my hair. I had done some research on the subject and I was taking certain actions. I was trying to quit coffee since it robbed my body of hair-related vitamins, and I was avoiding masturbation because I read a book on Eastern practices of semen-retention, which told me that masturbation dried up my spinal fluid and made my hair fall out. I've now come to see my bald spot and the bald spots of other men as the mark of Cain for excessive self-abuse.

I also purchased rosemary oil, which is very good for scalp health, and a rubber scalp invigorator. And I started eating lots of sea vegetables because I read that people in Asian cultures had very good hair and that their diet was rich in seaweed.

So now every time I relapse on coffee or masturbation, which I do with appalling frequency—coffee is so difficult to give up—I quickly run into the kitchen and fetch from the cupboard some dried seaweed. Most convenient, in a vacuum-sealed bag, is dried dulse, which is salty and tough, but I eat it to apologize to my hair and to try to convince it not to fall out. It's a mad game of tug-of-war (sea vegetables vs. onanism and caffeine), but I think the seaweed is winning—my hair looks pretty good.

Then the other day, I was poring over my enormous credit-card bills and I remembered the photos I had sent to Hair Club for Men. I called them up to find out what was going on. I needed that five hundred dollars. I spoke to several operators, and then I was put right through to Shari Sperling, the daughter of Sy Sperling, the founder of the company. I was excited to have made it to the top, and she was wonderfully friendly and vivacious over the phone. I asked about my pictures, she said she remembered them, and I asked if I was in the running for the commercial. I also mentioned that I was a writer for the *New York Press*, hoping that she would take me more seriously. After all, I wasn't just another desperate man with thinning hair—I was a *journalist* with thinning hair.

"Did you write an article about having crabs and venereal diseases?" she asked, referring to my essay in the *Press*, "A W on My P."

I wasn't counting on her actually having read me, so I wasn't sure if her familiarity with my work was good *or* bad for my credibility. But I pretended that it was good. "Yes, that crab-piece was some of my best work," I said.

"I love your stuff," she said.

"Well, thank you," I said, flattered, but then I pressed on with the more important issue at hand. "So what do you think of my pictures? Can you use me?"

She said that my hair was too short for what they were looking for. I told her that it had grown a little some and that my fringe certainly would be a good selling point, that other men with fringe problems would identify, which I thought was a compelling argument and sure to get me in position for the much-needed five hundred dollars.

"I know that fringe thing can be bad," she said sympathetically. "We had one guy in here with a fringe and it looked like armpit hair at the front of his head. That's why I feel good about what we do for people. We make them look better, feel better."

I took some offense at this armpit remark, but I didn't let on. I tried to convince her to use me for the commercial, but it was to no avail, though she was very sweet about it. So since I had her on the phone, I asked her how Hair Club for Men did what it did. For years, I had seen the ads where they stated with pride that they used *real* hair. I had always wondered where they got this hair. I figured that they took it from your chest or your legs or the back of your head or, even better, your lower back.

which is such an unattractive place to have hair—I even repulse myself when I scratch that area and find my little nest of down in that unusual spot. I feel terrible for the poor women who have to grow me there during our sexual congresses. Anyway, I wasn't sure where exactly Hair Club got its hair. So I asked, "Where do you get that *real* hair? From the back of the man's head?"

"Asia," she said.

"What do you mean Asia?"

"People sell their hair over there. It's the strongest hair in the world. We deal with hair brokers."

"That's interesting. I've read that people in Asia have good hair, but it's a bit strange that they sell it."

"Don't think it's just an Asian thing," she said, worried perhaps that I was going to accuse her of Third World cheap-labor exploitation. "American women sell their hair to wig-makers all the time. This last statement produced in me a vision of attractive Midwestern women going around with closely cropped heads. I thought of the Midwest, I guess, because that to me is America, and Sha Sperling had said *American women*.

"What do you do with the hair once you get it?" I asked.

"We dye it and put it through processes to change the texture and then it's attached to your own hair with a nontoxic skin-compatible fusion. A fringe is good to have, by the way, if you become a client because you can attach hair to it."

"I'm glad my fringe is good for something," I said, though I had no intention of joining the Club since they didn't want to use me in their ad campaign. Shortly thereafter we rang off and I was a little disturbed by the thought of poor people in Asia continually growing and shaving off their hair. But then I realized it was not unlike what I had been doing for the last few years. And at least they were getting paid for it, and it was probably a good part-time seasonal job—grow it in the winter, shave it in the summer. It was practically agricultural.

Then I thought how I was doing all the right things for my hair: I was living like the people of Asia—I was retaining my semen (well, at least making an effort) and I was eating sea vegetables. Then it occurred to me that if I moved to Asia, I might get *all* my hair back. The total cure for balding was to live in the Orient. I could support myself by teaching grammar again. And then when my hair was the strongest in the world, I could have my revenge for not being used in the commercial. I'd shave off my beautiful hair and sell it to Hair Club for Men, and I'd get a lot more than the five hundred dollars I had originally been hoping for.

The Playboys of Northern New Jersey

MY FIRST SEXUAL EXPERIENCE with a woman was rather old-fashioned: It was with a prostitute. I was sixteen years old and I was living where I had always lived—in the tranquil and decent and middle-class suburbs of northern New Jersey. It was February of 1981 and a friend of mine, who was seventeen and thus had a driver's license, was working for a florist as a deliveryman. For some reason, his last delivery on this particular Saturday night was all the way to Brooklyn—to a funeral home. He called me up and suggested that I come with him. After we dropped off the flowers, we could go to Manhattan and drink; he had the store's station wagon and his bosses would never know what time he brought it back.

I hesitated. Brooklyn, in my mind, was very far away and was where Jews, like my parents, used to live before fleeing for New Jersey or Long Island—so who would ever go back to Brooklyn? It must be a dangerous place now, I thought; a place that if there was such a thing as a Jewish tourist map would be circled in red, and a red circle in the map's legend would mean: *There Used to Be Beautiful Jewish Neighborhoods Here*—which was a sad refrain I had heard all my childhood while being driven through such environs as Paterson, upper Manhattan, the Bronx, and, of course, Brooklyn.

“Don't be a wimp,” said my friend over the phone. His name was Werner.

I didn't want him to think I was a coward, so I said, “All right, I'll go,” and he came to pick me up. My parents were out of town—I could come home as late as I wanted.

I had known Werner for a very long time. He was always tall and thin for his age; his drawn-out cheeks gave him a malnourished appearance, but he was good-looking nonetheless, with blue eyes and sandy blond hair. I considered him to be a good friend but not a great friend. Our association seemed to peak around the first grade, and after that our closeness was sporadic. My parents, though, were always proud of my friendship with Werner. They saw it as a sign of their liberalness and capacity for forgiveness that they let me play with a boy of such obvious German descent—Werner's father had been an innocent, teenaged foot soldier in the Third Reich, but was a very nice man. And I think Werner's parents saw it as a sign of their assimilation that their son should have a little Jewish friend. So everyone was happy.

At the height of our friendship, in the first grade, Werner and I played this game one time that we called the Playboy Club. Neither of us had ever seen a *Playboy* magazine, but we had heard from Werner's older brother, who was in middle school, about this club where men drank and had the most amazing experiences. These experiences weren't elaborated on by Werner's brother, but we perceived that they were *sexy*. We weren't entirely sure what *sexy* meant, but it was an exciting word. So Werner and I went down into his family's paneled basement and sat at his father's bar. We poured Coca-Cola into shot glasses and we ate pretzels and listened to the radio. We thought we were doing everything that one should do in a Playboy Club and we waited for something *sexy* to happen.

So we sat there for some time, waiting, and I remember thinking that the game was rather disappointing. And Werner didn't say anything, but I knew he was thinking the same thing, but we both didn't want to admit that we had come up with a bad game and that we didn't know why, that we didn't know what was missing. When we finally gave up and got down from the bar, we engaged in some seven-year-old wrestling and rolling on top of one another to relieve our frustrations, though it was unclear to us why we were frustrated.

Then almost ten years later, we were still frustrated, but now we had more of an idea why, and that's how we came to be driving across the Brooklyn Bridge together, hoping to find a funeral home in Bay Ridge. We wanted alcohol, but behind the desire to drink was the desire for sex, love, a kiss. I was completely inexperienced with girls, Werner a little less so, but we had both heard and were learning that the way to meet women was through drinking.

So as we drove through Brooklyn, I thought for sure we would get lost, but Werner, being German and capable, was able to read the map and locate the final resting place of our flowers' recipient. It was a small Italian funeral home with a low ceiling, and there was a bald man in a black suit sitting by the closed, shiny coffin. It was cold inside the home; it was a freezing February night, and the man had an ancient, orange-glowing electric heater for company. He appeared to be some kind of professional coffin-guarder (he didn't even have a newspaper), and he took the flowers from Werner and put them with several other bouquets by some stacked chairs in the corner.

Our morose delivery accomplished, we were eager for our adventure and Werner navigated us back to Manhattan, where we asked somebody on the street how to get to Greenwich Village. We figured that's where the good drinking was. We made our way to Thompson Street and West Third and went to a bar called Googie's, which I believe still exists. Inside was a hardy crowd seeking the warmth of company and alcohol, and luckily for us, the bartender didn't ask for any proof of age.

Werner almost did expose our youth, though, by ordering a pitcher of Alabama Slammers, but we got away with it. We sat at a little table and the drink was a grotesque, red-colored, sweet-tasting concoction, and I became completely intoxicated. We thought of approaching two single women, but we lacked courage.

Then midway through our second pitcher, I stood up to proclaim something and I knocked over our table and I fell down and the pitcher came down with me and made a blood-colored pool on the floor. "I've been wounded," I shouted. I was hoisted up by the back of my coat and thrown out the door by the bartender, just like in the movies. Werner followed after me, laughing, and we weaved in the cold to the car.

For some reason, I didn't vomit. We did jumping jacks to sober up and then we drove off. We tried to find the Lincoln Tunnel, and as we came down a street, in the Thirties, near Tenth Avenue, we saw what looked like a hallucination, about half a dozen women standing on a street corner. Steam came out of their painted mouths and they were in miniskirts and stockings and fur coats. They beckoned to us and we smiled. They wanted us.

"Oh, my God, whores," said Werner, excited.

"They look sexy," I said.

He pulled the floral wagon to the side of the road and rolled down his window. He entered into rapid negotiations with a dyed blonde—"A blowjob is ten dollars, sweetie," she said, "Okay," he said, "Put me into that lot," she said, pointing, "Okay," he said—and he backed up a hundred feet and then turned into this abandoned lot. He drove into the dark, far corner and we turned around and watched the blonde whore come to us on her high heels, like a woman on stilts, it seemed. As she got close to the car, she said, "Get out."

"Can't I sit in the back?" I asked. It wasn't that I wanted to watch, but I was a little scared to start in a dark lot in the freezing cold.

"Don't be fucking crazy," he said, and then he softened his tone. "You can go after me."

"I don't want to," I said, with some disgust. I was taking the moral upper hand because it wasn't pleasing to my ego to be second, but more important, I was covering up my fear. I was intimidated—I had never kissed a girl, so I was hardly ready for a blowjob.

I got out of the car and held the door open for the blonde. "Thank you," she said. She had nice manners.

I went and stood next to an old metal trailer—a truck with a body but no head. I thought I would be safe in its shadows, and it all felt romantically dangerous since I was still quite drunk. I shivered from the cold and I leaned against the truck and tried to see what was happening in the station wagon, which was about ten yards away, but there wasn't much to see, only Werner's hands on the steering wheel and his thin face staring straight ahead, looking at nothing. The blonde had disappeared. Then I glanced

the street corner and saw that a big black woman was approaching me. She was all hips and red lips.

“You want a blowjob, baby?”

“Okay,” I said quietly. One doesn’t think to say no in these situations—at least I don’t.

“You have ten dollars?”

“Yes.”

“You pay before we play.” I took out my wallet. I had exactly ten dollars left. It seemed like kismet.

I handed her the money and she put it in her purse. Then she squatted down in front of me like a baseball catcher. She had me open up my winter coat so that she could get at my fly. She took out my penis and it was rather small because of the freezing temperatures, and because I was afraid—she was the first woman besides my mother and sister who had ever seen my penis.

“I’m kind of cold,” I said, explaining my small stature.

“That’s all right, I’m gonna warm you up,” she said, and then she put her mouth on it. Oh, Lord, I loved it. No one had ever touched me so nicely. I closed my eyes.

Prostitutes didn’t use condoms back then, and I responded to the warmth and heat of her mouth, and I came rather quickly. I opened my eyes and she stood up.

“Okay, baby,” she said, and she turned and walked away, done with me.

I felt giddy and happy. Doubly drunk. Drunk now on sex, on life. “Thank you,” I said, calling after her, and then I added, since I was smitten and drunk, “I like you.” And it was true. I did like her. I felt even that I loved her. And I thought she must like me after doing what she did. But she didn’t turn around. She kept walking. I figured she couldn’t hear me. Then the car door slammed. Werner, a blonde, walked across the lot. I ran over to the station wagon.

“I got a blowjob,” I said with pride.

“Me too,” said Werner, but he was quiet, sullen, hurt by it somehow.

He raced backward out of the lot and onto the street. I looked for my new girlfriend with the other girls on the corner. Then we pulled up to the corner, stopped by the red light. I saw her; she was drinking tea out of a Styrofoam cup. Several of them were drinking tea—I could see the strings of the tea bags and the steam coming off the tops of the cups.

I was happy to spot her. I rolled down my window. She looked at me. I waved to her and she approached the car.

“I don’t think you heard me before,” I said. “I really like you.” I was innocent, stupid, a fool. What did I hope for by saying such a thing? But I wanted to express my affection. I was sixteen and had never kissed a girl.

She threw her tea in my face and turned her back to me. The other whores laughed. Werner laughed too. The tea wasn’t scalding, just hot. The light changed and we drove off. I didn’t say anything. Werner held in the rest of his laughter. I dried my face with my shirt. I regretted my ten dollars. We found the tunnel.

I didn’t know if she thought I was taunting her or if she was simply teaching me what I needed to learn. And I didn’t know if they drank tea to stay warm or to wash the taste of sperm out of their mouths.

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