The Chop

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I was an eccentric kid growing up; I still am, but it’s a little muted now. My individuality thrived in elementary school. I wore whatever I wanted, as kids should. By about fourth grade, I started shopping in the boys’ section of Target to perfect the new masculine fad. I did this to outdo Kayla Phillips, a classmate of mine who seemed to embody the “tomboy” lifestyle. This imaginary competition manifested itself in my brain, until I thought the only way to “win” was to cut my hair to mimic a crew cut. So, the summer before the fifth grade, I went through with it. I was happy. I enjoyed convincing people that I was not female; I was called “pal” and “kid” often.

However, this bliss was short-lived. When I returned to school in September, instead of being met with coos over how great I looked, there was a newfound target on my back. I became the victim of ridiculous name calling. Yes, “fat” and “ugly” were a few of the names thrown around, but it was “faggot” that started the train of insensitivity. Because I had unknowingly gotten a haircut that fifth graders associated with gay women, my classmates decided to insult me with an offensive slur normally directed towards gay men. I felt self-conscious about feeling misidentified, uncomfortable with the overwhelming homophobia I was being exposed to at a young age, and the worst part was that at first, I wasn’t completely aware of it. Only after I told my cousins what was happening to me at school did I discover that “faggot” was more than just a harmless insult.

In the beginning of his essay “Girl,” Alexander Chee describes what seems to be the opposite experience, explaining how his experience in drag taught him how to see his own beauty. Normally, he struggled with being biracial, gay, and femme, but the makeup, wig, and skirt give him a sense of confidence that nobody dared to challenge. However, toward the end of the essay, he realizes that his confidence was built on the satisfaction of others. He writes, “I can’t skip what I need to do to love this face by making it over. I can’t chase after the power I felt that night, the fleeting sense of finally belonging to the status quo, by making myself into something that looks like the something they want” (3). Although
drag momentarily alleviated his anxieties, Chee determined that he wanted the world to learn to love him and not his mask.

It’s not that easy, however, to stop relying on these sorts of masks and to instead embrace the idiosyncrasies that we want and that reveal who we really are. I switched schools after the fifth grade. It was not directly related to the bullying, but I now believe that staying with the public school system would have wrecked me. I went into my new school in the sixth grade expecting a whole new world, a world where my individuality and short hair would be more cherished, but I was instead met with the same sort of ignorance. The only difference is that this time it was masked by politeness. I was constantly being asked, “Are you going to grow your hair out?” So I wore headbands and skirts to solidify my femininity. By the eighth grade, my hair was the longest it had ever been, and I could hardly recognize myself. I had stopped listening to myself. I was scared of the person I wanted to be. She was too bold, too masculine, too strange.

I shaved my head the summer before senior year. Maybe I just have a thing for grand finales. Perhaps I’m attracted to showing off who I am before anyone has a chance to speak. It’s as if I’m back in fifth grade. Except this time, I have an opportunity to rewrite what happened. I have the chance to confront and embrace the person I want to be. But I still put on a mask when I see my family. I try to dress my most feminine when they visit. I fear that any laziness on my part will throw my relatives into a frenzy of questions about my identity. Before, I was able to move undetected. Makeup or no makeup, I still looked like a woman. Dress or no dress, I still looked like a woman. Now, those things are required if I am to maintain my “womanly” image. It’s as if my hair is the only thing that convinces anyone of my sex. I have now become the other that they cannot reach out and touch.

My parents took the haircut personally. Whatever possessed them to support me in the fifth grade disappeared. It wasn’t supposed to be an attack on them; it was supposed to be an attack on those with antiquated beliefs. But they ended up falling into that very category. Chee briefly touches upon the similar influence his mother had on his childhood behavior. He describes a scene in which he is trying on lipstick, and his mother tells him to never do that again. He writes, “She was angry, upset, she felt betrayed by me. There was a line, and I had thought I could go back and forth across it, but it seemed I could not” (2). Parents have a lot of power in that way. Their disapproval can be more upsetting than anyone else’s.
And often, as children, we try to reach out to them with the truth. We try to let them know, however unconventionally, who we are. Whether it’s putting on lipstick or shaving your head, you hope to get a positive response. You hope your parents show you a sort of love that no one else in the world does. But, instead, they sometimes put their foot down and decide that you have pushed your limit. And you realize that it’s difficult to be yourself even around the people closest to you.

I wish I could say that cutting my hair freed me. The cut was refreshing initially, but it has since spoiled. I still want validation from my peers. I still feel disrespected by homophobic heckling on the street. I expected my life to change along with my appearance. I wanted a cathartic, epic experience. While it is revelatory, it’s not for the reason everyone thinks. The buzz cut loses its effect the more I have to explain myself to other people. The more I have to justify my actions, the less it becomes about hair. It becomes a conversation about something unfamiliar, something people are not forcing themselves to confront every day. I am a woman—yes, a woman—who cut her hair out of convenience. I cut my hair because I wanted to, not because I wanted to teach you a lesson on why women deserve autonomy over their bodies. I did it because I’m brave as hell, even if I didn’t realize that was part of it until after my hair was gone.

Maybe this whole time I had it wrong. I thought being happy in my own skin would make the world envy my confidence. Only now do I realize that I can’t simply wait for others to learn; I must teach the world to love me and not my mask. When it comes to love, we assume we won’t have to explain ourselves. We assume that once we decide who we are that we won’t face judgment—that the world won’t see you any differently. It is only hair, after all.

WORKS CITED