

# Loving Bald Men

by Rebecca McClanahan

Months since my nephew slid otter-slick into the doctor's hands, I anoint his head with baby oil, brailling his fate: Is baldness in his future? The first time I touched a bald man's head I was a grown woman, and I read in the elegant bones of his skull *my* future for the next few hours at least. Who could refuse such a landscape? Bare of tuft or leaf or feather, sleek mountain summit, undisguised, evident, in a word: *bold*, as in *bald*, both arising out of *shining, white*. My knight, this night of shining, my bald eagle hovering above me, tell me there are more like you out there, more blank pates on which to write a happy ending, seal it with a lipsticked pout. More men like Gandhi and Dwight and Yul, and all those young men I pass on the street, their scalps receding, retreating, who knows all the reasons hair starts refusing to put its best foot forward. I know that's a mixed metaphor, but thinking about bald men mixes me up: army recruits, athletes in spring training, Sumo wrestlers, Olympic swimmers skimmed hairless for the crown, and even those bands of lonely boys aspiring to evil in the name of good. We all want to be part of something larger, which may be why a whole neighborhood of men--I forget just where but what matters is why--shaved their heads in solidarity, to welcome home a boy bald as a plucked chicken from his cancerous year away. I clipped the photo and saved it all these years for its power to break my heart in all the right places. There he sits on the brownstone stoop in the center of a shining host. How can you not love men like that?

Even if later they begin the comb-overs and side-winding, ointments and creams, weaves and implants, yes even the toupees. I hate toupees,

but love the need beneath, searching the web (baldmen.com) just to read *male pattern baldness*, so virile a phrase, with its rumors of testosterone abundance. Imagine the stunning migrations: all that power has to land somewhere. Even as a child I doubted the Samson moral. If bald means weak, how to explain Mr. Clean, Popeye, cartoon genies swirling from bottles, Barnum and Bailey's muscled men? I married my first husband chiefly for the promise in his high, bare forehead, and almost refused my lushly-tressed second, but twenty-five years later I'm glad I waited it out.

"You're getting there," I say, standing on tiptoe to kiss the halo of scalp making its first appearance. Blessed be haloed short men who allow short women a peek without straining. Oh, lucky tall girls, who don't have to ride escalators or lean over balconies to glimpse sweat pearls clustering on the heads of tennis players, freckles sprinkled on bald golfers, surfers, on uncles like mine or yours whose history of farming is mapped across their scalps, like my aunt's second husband, a widower who showed up years after she'd buried her first. Half a century since their high school prom, he knocks on her door, lifts his hat, touches the worn tread beneath, apologizes--for what? Time? Heredity? Survival? She fingers her own sparse threads, invites him in for coffee.

Thus begins a real life story I call forth as I sit beside my husband, caressing with one hand his bare temple (oh holy name) and with the other my own meager strands, what's left of youthful glory. The fault, dear Samson, was not in your scalp but in the woman whose name means She-Who-Makes-Weak. If she'd listened with her heart as you lay, your head in her lap, the thick locks tangling, she might have hushed the fear you whispered...*that I shall be as any other man.* "Enjoy to be bald," types the Frenchman, and hundreds of messages blink across the web site's world map--in Asia, Africa, Australia, from the Bald by Choice Men's Club, the Bald Guys Motorcycle Club, the Christian Chromedomes, from the

maker of specialty nightcaps warming dreams from Anchorage to Moscow, from the stylist offering Wild Bill Haircuts to bald and hairy people alike, yes even to women and children, to survivors of camps and chemo, the ones whose eyes shine out large and dark, to all those weary of turbans and baseball caps, to the last beautiful eunuchs, celibate priests, mourners shaved down to ashes and sackcloth, saffron-robed monks who give themselves over, friars with their limited fringe.