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**How I Slowly Learned to
Not Hate Having No Hair
(And You Can Too)**

STUART HERITAGE



Profile Books

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

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I 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 856 9

eISBN 978 1 80081 858 3



‘This is all very well and good,
but I’m still bald’

Larry David, winning an Emmy in 1993

How I went bald

Before we begin, let me acknowledge the elephant in the room. You are taking a risk by reading this book.

The overwhelming likelihood is that you are either bald or balding, and therefore probably (naturally!) quite sensitive about the fact that you are bald or balding. You might be worried that you have invested in a pisstake, that this entire endeavour has been conceived as a horrible joke at your expense. The worst-case scenario is that someone bought it for you as a joke, because the book is called *Bald* and you're bald, and now you don't have any idea what you're in for.

I get it. I wouldn't trust this book either. If we have learned anything from being bald, it's

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to be defensive and wary about anything that looks like it might poke fun at our most visible vulnerability. Because that stuff happens fucking *everywhere*. Films and TV shows mock bald people with such deadening regularity that you barely even notice it any more. You can buy books of bald jokes, novelty toothless combs, red Donald Trump caps reading 'Make my hair grow again'. I just looked on Etsy, and found a mug available to purchase that reads SHINY-HEADED TWAT. To be a bald man in the twenty-first century is still, disappointingly, to be a bit of a punching bag.

But look at me. I am bald. I live this nightmare every single day. I understand what it's like. And perhaps the best way to convince you of my intentions is by talking about myself a little. Because, however you happened to lose your hair, I can guarantee that I lost mine with a million per cent less dignity. Gather around, everyone. Come hear my terrible story of woe.

Our story begins in South Korea, where I lived and worked as an English teacher in the early 2000s. Back then I had a wonderful head

of thick blond hair. South Korea was, and still is, a deeply homogenous country, so my hair automatically made me stick out. And, aside from one time when an extravagantly drunk man screamed at me for an entire thirty-minute subway ride just because I was the same race as George W. Bush (which, I mean, I totally get), this brought me nothing but good things.

If I travelled on public transport, locals would sit down next to me and start talking. More than once I was stopped in the street so I could pose for pictures with strangers, purely because I looked like such a yellow-haired novelty. At the school where I worked, one of my students' mothers engaged me in such a cartoonish, hair-twirling 'coo-eee' discussion that it still counts as the only time I have ever been fully convinced that someone was flirting with me. One morning, on my way to work, a stranger literally and unironically shouted the words 'Hey, cool guy!' at me. It was amazing. Being an average-looking blond boy in a country with very few average-looking blond boys was like being given the freedom of the city.

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However, it was in South Korea that I first got an inkling this freedom might not last forever. Because in Korea, in a gym changing-room mirror, I first clapped eyes on it: a narrow, inch-long, barely perceptible strip of slightly thinning hair just above my right eyebrow. Once seen, this strip quickly became the only thing that I would ever notice about myself. To make matters worse, I was also aware that South Korea is not a country that readily accepts the bald.

Male pattern baldness is vanishingly rare there, you see, with only about a fifth of men ever experiencing any form of hair loss (for comparison, the rate is approximately double for British men). And this has skewed the national perception of the bald somewhat. Surveys have demonstrated that Koreans view those without hair as being less confident, less potent, less attractive and more dull than their more hirsute counterparts. This is something I saw for myself.

I won't name him, but one of my fellow teachers was an American boy. He was the

same age as me, tall and confident and handsome in that slightly ridiculous corn-fed way that many Americans seem to be. But he had started to lose his hair in earnest in his early twenties and, as far as his new host country was concerned, this negated almost everything else about him. Every now and again, we would be invited to our principal's home for dinner and, without fail, each of these evenings would end with her husband getting drunk and trying to push several bottles of Regaine foam – always expired, always by several years – onto my friend in what I assume was a warped act of kindness.

In that country, at that time, baldness had robbed my American friend of his entire identity, and now the same was threatening to happen to me. It was terrifying. Who would flirt with me if I was bald? Who would shout bafflingly encouraging heckles at me in the street if I lost my wonderful golden hair?

And so, over the years, I became slightly obsessed with the state of my hair. Whenever my forehead incrementally grew, or when

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the top got almost imperceptibly thinner, I made a small but panicky mental note. I left Korea and came home, and bought weird little bottles of serums from Boots that I would diligently drip onto my head at regular intervals throughout the day. I read somewhere that Christopher Walken credited his thick hair to a daily regimen of tugging hard on it, in the manner of someone having a full stress-related breakdown. Naturally I started doing that too.

Obviously, because otherwise I wouldn't be here, this all turned out to be pointless. By the age of thirty, although it might have looked very much like I had a full head of hair, evidence of thinning had become so apparent that I decided to adopt a side parting as a precautionary measure. And, look, yes, I know I'm preaching to the converted here – I know that every bald man reading this just stood up and shouted 'BUT THE SIDE PARTING IS A GATEWAY DRUG THAT LEADS TO A FULL COMBOVER!' at the sky like they were furious at an absentee God – but I was young. I didn't know any better. Also, I'm not

ready to talk about the combover yet. Let's just move on.

By thirty-two, it was becoming harder and harder to hide my thinning crown. My hair became more elaborately messy, like a pains-taking abstract installation called *Thatching the Impossible*.

As the years wore on, I became violently aware that standing directly underneath an overhead light was basically the same as getting an embarrassingly public X-ray, the beams bursting through my few remaining hairs and bouncing back off my scalp like a lighthouse designed to repel people. By thirty-four I had become a nervous wreck, my hair less a traditional haircut and more an ornate but useless flap. And this, I am ashamed to say, is when I caved.

What I am about to reveal is arguably the most humiliating moment of my life. It's a secret I have managed to keep from literally every single person on earth, except for my wife, such is the surge of shame it brings. When I talk about a loss of dignity, this is what

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I mean. But now is the time. Sunlight is the best disinfectant. So – deep breath – let’s discuss the Regaine years.

For the uninitiated, Regaine is a product – sold and marketed under the name Rogaine elsewhere in the world – containing a 5 per cent formulation of Minoxidil, an antihypertensive vasodilator. Minoxidil was developed in the 1950s as a form of ulcer treatment. But although it failed to cure any ulcers, researchers realised that they had accidentally created a powerful vasodilator; a new way to alter the size of your blood vessels. If you had high blood pressure in the early 1980s – which, based on all available archive footage, is true of every single person who was alive during the early 1980s – chances are you were prescribed Minoxidil for it.

But a strange thing happened. During studies into the drug’s effectiveness, a weird new side-effect revealed itself. People who took Minoxidil would often report a burst of unexpected hair growth. And so Minoxidil’s creators were struck by the business idea of the century – forget these blood pressure idiots, let’s sell

our product as hair-loss medication for profit and make ourselves a goddamned fortune.

Now, Minoxidil wasn't exactly a silver bullet that could eliminate baldness altogether – in 1988, the US Food and Drug Administration noted that just 39 per cent of men who used it would experience 'moderate to dense hair growth on the crown of the head' – but the balding community fell head over heels for it regardless. The product was sold, in one form, as a can of aerosol foam. If you applied the foam to your scalp twice a day, every day, the marketing literature suggested that you would see a difference in your hairline.

But let's explore what this actually means. First, it is both annoying and impractical to have to slather your scalp in foam twice a day. Second, the literature defines 'seeing a difference' not as 'getting to grow back your hair' but simply '*not getting any more bald*'. It's not a cure for baldness. It's a brake which, when applied, might only sometimes work. Which, I'm sure you'll agree, isn't exactly the most reassuring of qualities to have in a brake.

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And then there's the cost. To continue this agonised metaphor, the thing about brakes is that you can't keep your foot on them forever. Regaine's problem was that the day you stop diligently applying Regaine to your head every morning and evening is the day that all your hair dies. The product's only function is to keep your hair in a state of stasis for an unnaturally long time. It's cryosleep. You might still have hair, but it isn't real hair. It's zombie hair.

The cost of maintaining this illusion is not insignificant, either. In 2024, a year's supply of Regaine will cost you £180. Say you're thirty-five when you start taking it, and you plan to enjoy a precisely average British man's life expectancy. This means you will spend over £7,000 just to have a 39 per cent chance of keeping your remaining hair in suspended animation. You would have to be both tremendously stupid and tremendously needy to ever think that Regaine would be an acceptable and sustainable solution to baldness.

Anyway, so when I was thirty-five I thought

that Regaine would be an acceptable and sustainable solution to my baldness.

And that's a horrible admission to have to make. Because it's just so vain, isn't it? It's prissy. It demonstrates an inability to live your life as it has been dealt to you, and that isn't very manly. Men are brought up learning that making any sort of special effort is intrinsically unmasculine, which isn't very good for anyone. There was a study a few years back that suggested one of the reasons men didn't take recyclable bags to the shops with them was because they were scared it might make them look gay. Which is insane. Imagine living in this sort of society. If a Bag for Life constitutes an unforgivable act of femininity to a certain breed of man, imagine how you'd be treated if those men found out that you had spent thousands of pounds on a special foam to make your hair look nice. You'd be run out of Man Town, wouldn't you?

It's also a horrible admission because much of the discourse surrounding baldness (usually coming from people who aren't remotely bald) revolves around the sticking plaster theory.

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At the first sign of hair loss, they say, the best course of action is to just rip off the plaster by shaving your head right there and then.

But Regaine is the precise scientific opposite of ripping off the plaster. It is leaving the plaster on. It is noticing that the plaster has started to curl up at the corners, and supergluing it back on. It is watching the plaster literally fuse to your skin, even though you know that the flesh underneath is wrinkled and necrotising. In short, I started using Regaine out of nothing but shame and cowardice.

The first thing I learned from my Regaine era is that using Regaine is not fun. The foam isn't exactly subtle. It cakes onto your hair, hardening it like a salt crust. If you happen to have a combover by this point – and by this point you 1 million per cent will have a combover – then the strands of hair will clump together across the top of your head like gummy nylon strips. Eventually, once it reaches a point of terminal brittleness, you can rub a hand through your hair and it will fluff out to a comical degree. There is no comfortable middle ground to be found here.

I have precisely one photo of my hair looking normal during the Regaine Years, and I don't show people because I'm holding a bow and arrow in it, which is a whole other bundle of red flags in itself. In all the other pictures, I simultaneously look incredibly bald and incredibly desperate to try and prevent baldness. I have photos where my hair looks completely transparent. I have photos where the hair on my crown is an entirely different colour to the rest of my hair, which makes me look like I have actively spent money on the world's shit-test wig. I have photos where my zombie hair appears to be swirling around the top of my head without actually making any contact with my skin whatsoever. It is bizarre.

By the end of the Regaine years, I was dejected. If Regaine had managed to hold back the tide of my encroaching baldness at all, then it also succeeded in making me look absolutely terrible. Worse, I was caught in a negative feedback loop of misplaced vanity and shame. There came a point where, rather than putting the Regaine packaging in the bin where anyone

could see it, I started shoving it to the back of my wardrobe whenever I was done with it, like some sort of berserk hoarder. I uncovered nine months' worth of spent Regaine tubs under some jumpers the other week, and all the old feelings came hurtling back.

Eventually I felt so bad about the whole thing, both how I looked and how I felt, that I decided to stop. Not to sound too Goopy about this, but freeing myself from the tyranny of Minoxidil felt like a moment of extreme personal liberation. No longer would I be a slave to the foam! No longer would I have to shackle myself to the wheel of Big Pharma! I would take that £7,000 and use it for something more self-defining, like (if my current bank balance is any indication) just sort of spunking it away on the second-cheapest brand of everything at Sainsbury's. I did it. I beat you, Minoxidil! I beat you!

As expected, my zombie hair succumbed to nature and fell out almost instantly after I'd given up using Regaine, but at least I could find comfort in the knowledge that what little of

it remained was mine. This happened in 2021. And now here we are. I'm bald, just like you.

In other words, I get it. I spat and clawed and fought to keep my hair to the bitter end, but it didn't work. As a result, the person talking to you today happens to be extremely bald, and this is why you should believe me. I understand what it's like to be bald.

It's shit, isn't it?

Hey Stu, why do you sound so angry?

For the most part, I like to think of myself as rational and detached. Present me with any form of compelling, fact-based argument and I'll usually fall into line pretty quickly. This is because it is pointless to argue with the truth.

That said, I am willing to make one exception. Because this is the truth about baldness:

ONE: Scalp hair serves almost no biological purpose whatsoever.

TWO: Going bald does not cause physical pain.

THREE: No human being has ever died directly from male pattern baldness.

FOUR: Two-thirds of men will have experienced some amount of hair loss by the age of sixty, which means it is actually much rarer to keep your hair than to lose it.

This is the truth. And to the truth I say this: shut the fuck up you massive fucking dickhead.

Truth counts for nothing when it comes to baldness, because baldness *stinks*. Being bald stinks. Going bald stinks. Knowing that you might one day go bald stinks. The whole thing, from start to finish, whichever way you look at it, stinks all the way to high heaven. It is awful. If you happen to be going through it at the moment, I truly feel for you.

You probably don't need to be told why baldness sucks so much. Like me, you're probably living right at the sharp end of it. But on the off-chance that you happen to be a fully-haired marauder flicking through this book just to

piggyback on the misery of others, let's try to break it down.

I recently got word of a study that itemises all the ways in which hair loss impacts people, and it's heartbreaking. Bald or balding men, it says, no longer enjoy being photographed. Their social life has suffered. They avoid mirrors. Their dating life has crumbled beyond all recognition. They'd rather save for hair-loss treatments than a pension or a mortgage. In some extreme cases, they claim to have lost their job, or been broken up with, or even experienced panic attacks, just because they happened to be losing their hair.

There's evidence that this insecurity is somewhat justified, too. In the year 2000, a German study sent out a fleet of CVs to prospective employers, all with photos attached. In some, the would-be jobseekers had full heads of hair. In others, their appearance had been Photoshopped to make them look bald. With crushing inevitability, despite their identical professional experiences, the fully-haired candidates were picked for interview far more

often than their bald counterparts.

The same goes for love. In 2021, Canadian researchers sat a group of women down and asked them to describe the personalities and traits of several men, some of whom had hair and some of whom did not. Again, the bald men were generally judged to be less successful and friendly than those with hair. It's little wonder that, in a 2022 survey of bald and balding men, three-quarters of respondents claimed to have experienced less luck than their hairier friends when it came to dating.

This obviously has an effect on how it makes us feel. I'll stop bludgeoning you over the head with studies about how hard we have it in a moment but, in 2005, a pan-European research paper did a pretty excellent job of demonstrating how terrible baldness can make a man feel. Of the respondents, 62 per cent said that losing their hair had affected their self-esteem, while 43 per cent were concerned about their loss of attractiveness, 22 per cent were worried about the effect it would have on their social life and 21 per cent reported feelings of depression.

Which makes sense, because baldness is a horrible thing to have to endure. Hair might be biologically useless, but it's still a sign of youth and vigour in a society that prizes youth and vigour over almost everything.

Someone with hair can, if they wish, change their entire personality in an instant. In the space of a few minutes, armed with nothing but a brush and some scissors, they can completely alter the information that they put out into the world about themselves. Are they serious? Sensitive? Really into perms? Hair can tell people that *instantly*.

This does not apply to the bald. Once you become bald, you only have one personality open to you, and that is 'man with scalp'. If baldness is a sign of anything, it is a sign that you have become less capable of change. It demonstrates that everything will be the same for us, every single day, until we die. Unless of course we go crazy and start experimenting with beards . . . But more on that later. Anyway, no wonder our self-confidence is shot.

Listen, nobody chooses to be bald. Nobody

wakes up in the morning praying that a genetic abnormality will rob them of their hair. Nobody wants to know, deep in their heart, that the first thought that will cross the mind of every single person they will ever meet for the rest of their life is 'Oh, bald.' Nobody wants to look in the mirror and be confronted with an absence. Nobody gains any comfort from having a slightly better idea of what their skeleton looks like.

And all this fuss is just about hair. Stupid *hair*. The planet is brimming with catastrophes far more serious than hair. If a genie suddenly appeared and offered us the choice between baldness or illness, or baldness or the loss of a loved one, or baldness or any number of the infinite real-world horrors that we experience on a daily basis, only the most aggressively vain psychopath would ever choose to get their hair back.

The truth of it is that baldness is really just an inconvenience. Apart from the small voice in my head constantly reminding me that I will never experience a single moment of perfect

happiness again because I haven't got any hair, the worst tangible thing to come of my baldness is the fact that my local hairdresser is down by about forty quid a year. So, baldness isn't *important*. But that doesn't mean that it isn't *shit*.

The haired will never fully grasp the agony of male pattern baldness. They will have never watched, paralysed with powerless horror, as all their beautiful hair receded from view, to be replaced by acres and acres of objectively crap scalp. They have never walked into a wedding reception in a marquee and immediately compiled a mental list of all the sources of mood lighting, in case they accidentally stray too close to a purple bulb and get snapped looking a bit like Thanos. But we understand. God, do we understand.

Going back to that very first study, it turns out that one of the biggest impacts that baldness can have on people is loneliness. Almost a quarter of people who took part felt as if they had nobody to talk to about their hair loss. There's still a big taboo when it comes

to conversations about baldness. And, again, that's because we're men. We've been conditioned to stomp our feelings down into an indistinct mush lest someone accidentally mistakes us for a child or a woman. Going bald might make us feel bad, but we're not expected to actually tell anyone that it does, because that isn't what men do.

Well, that ends today. We have found each other now, and together we can try to reframe our perception of what baldness is. It's easy for a bald man to look at himself and only see compromise; a person whose greatest achievement from this point onwards will be the ability to comfortably live with his flaws. But maybe it doesn't need to be that way. There have to be some advantages to being bald. Right?

Anyone?

How to escape a sinking car

An old episode of *Mythbusters* often plays over and over in my head. The point of the episode was to discover the best time to try and escape from a car after you have accidentally plunged it off a bridge into a large body of water.

Chances are that, when you have accidentally plunged your car off a bridge into a large body of water, you will hope for one of two outcomes. First, you'll hope that the car's windows and walls will provide a perfect seal against the surrounding water, buying you enough breathing time to formulate a proper plan. This will not be the case. As soon as your car is roughly half submerged in the river or lake, it will start filling with icy-cold water straight away. It'll pour in from gaps you didn't

even know existed, filling your car so quickly that you will almost certainly start losing your mind with panic.

Second, you'll hope to open the door and swim to safety. But guess what? This will not be the case either. The pressure of the water outside will be so enormous that the door will be stuck fast. You don't stand a ghost of a chance of even budging it. So you find yourself in a pretty terrible situation. You're trapped in a car that is sinking to the bottom of a lake, and it is filling up with water so quickly that you'll soon run out of air to breathe. Help will never arrive in time. You're screwed, right?

Well, actually no. Because, if you ever find yourself in this exact situation, you will need just two things: calm and patience. It might seem hopeless, but there is a way to make the door open. The catch is that it won't happen until long after you've run out of air. Once the water has risen up over your nose and mouth, you just have to sit there – no matter how dark it is, no matter how hard you're panicking – holding your breath until the car

has completely filled with water. Once that happens, the pressure inside the car will reach equilibrium with the pressure outside the car, and the door will open with perfect ease. Now you can finally swim to the surface. And this is how you survive.

Isn't that the perfect lesson? Isn't that something we all need to hear sometimes? If you're going through a rough time, just take a breath. Wait it out. Things will get better. This too shall pass. If you can find the strength of spirit within yourself to calmly endure the worst that life throws at you, you will be mightily rewarded for your effort.

Got that? Good. Now, watch in admiration as I somehow manage to make this about me being bald.

As we have already established, being bald sucks. But if there is one thing I can say with certainty – so much certainty that it can melt rock and bend gravity – it is this: as bad as being bald is, *going* bald is so much worse.

You will know this yourself, of course. Unless you happen to be among the genre of

bald men who ripped their plaster off, shaving their entire head down to the skin at the very first sign of baldness, you will understand the terror of watching your hair gradually abandon your head. It is the terror of being party to a force you cannot control.

As a species, especially in the comparatively affluent West, we are able to maintain the illusion that nothing is beyond our grasp. There is always something – time, dedication, money, YouTube tutorials – that can help us achieve anything we want from life. This doesn't quite hold true for absolutely everything, because nobody in history has successfully thrown money at death. Still, for the most part it holds up.

But this all goes out of the window when you start going bald. Male pattern baldness is a flaw of genetics, and you cannot change your own genes. You're not Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. When you start going bald, your head is doomed to keep going bald until you have reached a state of total baldness. All you can do is strap in and endure the ride.

And what a rubbish ride it is. In fact, emotionally, the journey of losing your hair roughly correlates with the Kübler-Ross model of processing grief. You'll know it, of course. The five stages. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. DABDA. It fits, right? It certainly does with my experience, at least.

The biggest one for me was Denial. When it comes to actual grief – actual human bereavement of someone you love – this is the sneakiest stage. My mum died a few years ago. When it happened, my family collectively tried to get Denial out of the way as quickly as possible. 'Yup, definitely dead,' we said of Mum, relieved that we could skip the queue to Anger, which is really more our speed as a family anyway.

But that isn't what Denial is. You're not denying that the person is dead. You're denying how much the death has affected you. You're kidding yourself that you'll be fine, when in reality grief is going to creep up on you and dump you on your arse when you least expect it. You're denying that you'll go a bit mad. And of course you're going to go a bit mad.