Ain’t No Such Thing as a Bald Headed Rock Star

One of my many fantasies in life was to be a rock star (as recounted in Chapter 4). And, as you know, the key reason I had no hope whatsoever of being a rock star is a breathtaking lack of any discernable talent for the guitar…or for singing. The only thing I had going for me was a full head of black hair, and as one long forgotten girlfriend told me when I was a junior in high school, a faint and distant resemblance to Ricky Nelson.

Even that started to go wrong during my freshman year in college. I began to find a few black hairs in the tub after washing my hair. I wondered if… Certainly not me! Couldn’t be! I had a widow’s peak, just like Ricky and Elvis…. I was destined to be a rock star or a network newsman. Hair was a prerequisite. I simply couldn’t be losing my hair.

My grandfather (on my mother’s side) was bald. As were all my uncles on mom’s side of the family. Cue ball bald. With just that little horseshoe fringe around the sides. I’d read somewhere, probably in Reader’s Digest, that baldness is hereditary. If your relatives on your mother’s side of the family are bald, chances are fabulous that you will, indeed, be just as bald as they are. The good news, you’ll save money on haircuts.

One summer evening, after a long day at my summer job at the paper mill, I’d taken a shower, washed my hair, and was watching TV. Mom came into the living room and said, “There are a lot of black hairs in the tub. Do you think you’re starting to lose your hair? My Dad started to lose his hair when he was about your age. I’ll bet you wind up looking just like Papa.”

She actually sounded cheerful!

My stomach tightened. Even Mom had noticed the hair in the tub! Crap…it can’t be true! I can’t be losing my hair!

I went into the bathroom and looked carefully into the mirror. Nope. I looked just the same. No visible sign of a bald spot. The widow’s peak was still there.

False alarm, I thought. But…the hair in the shower was black. Who had showered before me? Dad? No, he took a shower in the basement. My brother John? His hair was brown. Mom? My grandmother? Crap…the evidence was irrefutable. The long black hairs were mine! Aargh!!!

I started paying attention to all the great rock stars; Mick and Keith, Bill and Charlie of the Stones; Paul, Ringo, and George. They all had their hair, and showed no sign of losing it. What the heck was their secret? These guys decided to make a career of rock ‘n roll, and their hair stayed in. I, on the other hand, was destined to be a rock star. And now this?
The only rock singer I knew facing baldness was Mike Love of the Beach Boys. He had
taken to wearing a cap, and growing a beard- a dead giveaway that he had SOMETHING
TO HIDE. Ol’ Mike was no dummy. All the other Beach Boys had proper heads of Rock
Star Hair. He knew if he was to have an equal shot at all those groupies, he was going to
have to hide the fact that he was BALD.

Wonder if he wore that hat to bed? Rats. Talk about a funk.

I started to pay attention to all the anchors and reporters on the TV news. I decided if the
music business didn’t work out long term, if I only had a few hit records, and had to do
something else, I’d be an anchorman on TV news. After all, I had established myself as
one of the stars of Chillicothe radio. So it was natural that I could transfer that talent to
 television.

My funk deepened as I studied all the network anchors. Huntley, Brinkley, Cronkite. All
had hair. So did the reporters. Hell, even the local news guys on Columbus, Ohio TV had
hair. Not a bald guy in sight.

WHY ME? Why not John, my brother? He wasn’t interested in being a rock star, or a TV
personality. In fact, based on John’s favorite thing to do, he was probably hoping to be a
Professional TV Watcher. He was addicted to the Little Rascals and Laurel and Hardy.
The Old Man practically had to drag him outside on weekends to get him away from the
Saturday cartoons.

But as John got older, his hair was full and intact. What rotten luck. He was blessed with
the head of hair that I needed!

By the third year of college (Ohio State College of Commerce) it was apparent the hair
loss was real. Even though I still wore my hair long and styled like Elvis and Ricky, you
could see daylight through the top of my coiffure. One day, as we were walking across
campus, my roommate said, “Ed you’re losing your hair. I can see right through it.
You’re gonna be bald as an egg in a few years!”

Bill was going to be an engineer. Wore a slide rule on his belt. His pocket protector
bristled with pencils and pens. He had a flattop, shaved close on the sides. Oh, a full head
of hair, all right. He just didn’t appreciate it. Got it cut every two weeks.

Bill liked Sinatra and the big bands. He thought Elvis was a no talent hillbilly, and that
Ricky was just lucky to be born into show business. “Why don’t you get a decent
haircut?” he’d say. “What makes you think you look like Elvis? At least, Elvis doesn’t
have zits.”

Thanks for really making me crazy, Bill. Just what a guy needs in a time of deep
depression. A verbal, but solid, kick in the butt.
I developed a certain fascination looking for people my age who were losing their hair, and the ways they tried to disguise the inevitable truth.

There is simply no way to hide the fact that you’re going bald. No matter how you arrange what’s left of your hair, your scalp is gonna shine through. And, barring the use of an industrial strength hair spray, the slightest hint of a soft summer breeze will destroy your carefully arranged work of hirsute art.

The comb-over is the absolute worst. You’ve seen it. The perpetrator of this horrific hairstyle starts just above one ear, and combs all his hair over the top of his head. Or, maybe he starts at the back of his neck and combs everything forward, welding it securely in place with a fifth of hair spray.

A former government official from Quebec comes to mind. He appeared to have a comb-over made up of one long ear hair. Once, as he was being interviewed on TV, a strong wind blew his comb-over loose, and a foot-long mass of hair stuck straight out from the side of his head. That piece of televised embarrassment is probably immortalized on the Internet somewhere.

I never tried the comb-over. No matter how hard I wanted to cover the bald spots. Even as they continued to grow both front and back, and as my widow’s peak became a distant memory.

By the time I turned thirty, I was seriously considering a toupee. I started reading the ads. Completely undetectable. Swim in it. Look years younger. Feel like a man again. Be all you can be. No, wait. That’s the Army slogan.

None of the ads ever mentioned price. To get all the poop on the toop, you had to fill out the little coupon and mail it in. But, those guys in the pictures did look pretty convincing. Were those really toupees? Or did they photograph guys with real hair for those shots? And what about the big breasted blondes in bikinis? In those ads, they were always in doe-eyed admiration of their fully coiffed men.

Larry, a co-worker, was at a state of hair loss even beyond mine. One day, he showed up for work looking just great. But what was it? New suit? Plastic surgery? Wait! Hair. Larry had hair. He was no longer bald.

What the heck? Was it a toop? Or surgery? Maybe those hair-restorers worked after all. I wanted to ask Larry about his new hair. But what if Larry was really sensitive? Maybe he thought no one noticed his new hair. Did he think we had all come down with amnesia? Did he think no one remembered he hadn’t always had hair?

Finally, when I ran into Larry in the rest room, I couldn’t stand it any longer. “You look great,” I told him. ”Years younger.”

Then I asked, “Is that a toupee?”
Larry nodded sheepishly. “Yes,” he said. “I just got tired of looking the way I did. I wanted my hair back. So, I broke down and bought one. Actually, I had to buy two. After you wear one for a day or so, it gets oily and you have to shampoo it. It takes a while to wash and style it. They sell you a little headstand to style it on. Then it has to dry.”

Sounded like a lot of work to me. Wash that stupid thing? Every other day?

“So,” I continued, curious to know more, “do you wear it all the time? Can you really swim in it?”

“Well, that’s what the advertisements say, but I think they’re too expensive to risk ruining in that pool water. Besides, swimming is probably overrated as a sport.” He smiled and started to walk out.

I wasn’t through yet. He really did look younger! This was maybe my chance to get my “Ricky Nelson” look back!

“Where did you go to get it?” I asked. “I’ve been thinking about doing something myself.”

Larry came back into the bathroom. “I bought this from Mr. Topper. It’s a styling salon in Indianapolis. Check ‘em out. And, if you do, mention I sent you. I get two free bottles of toop shampoo for each referral.”

I told him I’d do that.

“So Larry,” I said. “Do you wear it all the time? Do you wear it to bed?”

Larry got a slight frown on his face. “That’s probably the biggest drawback. I guess you could wear it to bed, but it would get wrinkled and smushed. So I take it off when I go to bed.”

He hesitated, then grinned. “That’s always a shock to your new girl friend. There she is, waiting for you in bed, and then you whip your hair off and put it on that little headstand just before jumping in the sack. That can be a downer, in more ways than one.”

He started out of the bathroom again, stopped and turned. ”And that wig stand by the bed, it’s kind of like having a little faceless man stare at you all night. Kind’a gives your date the willies.”

Several years later, after the Company transferred us to Atlanta, there was a guy in the office with about the same degree of hair loss as me. Larry was blond, fairly athletic, and as self-conscious about his receding hairline as I was. We would idly discuss the idea of “hair replacement,” (a more dignified way to put it).
When I started losing my hair, all the young girls in department stores began calling me “sir” as I paid for whatever I was buying. That bothered me. Sir? Me? My dad was sir, or mister. Hell, I was the same age as Ricky. And they looked at me like I was Ozzie.

One warm sunny Friday, over lunch, and a couple of martinis, we decided to go to Cosmopolitan Toppers, a salon that advertised in the Yellow Pages. They had a quarter page ad that promised, “completely undetectable, natural looking hair replacement.” Look Years Younger!” That last line did it for me.

Lunch was somewhere up on Peachtree. We had two martinis each before lunch, then a third with lunch. Our boss was on the golf course with customers. Larry and I were on our own Mission. It was time for us to become Handsome Young Studs again with a full head of hair ready to blow casually in the wind. We were about to break the bonds of Male Pattern Baldness!

We were feeling no pain as we drove to Cosmopolitan Toppers. It was on a side street, on the north end of Sandy Springs, in a one story concrete block building with one of those trailer mounted signs outside. Blinking lights spelled out, “Cosmopolitan Toppers, Hair Replacement for Gentlemen.” We were almost giddy as we parked Larry’s Cougar convertible and started inside.

The concrete block exterior hid the chrome and glass splendor of the salon inside. This is what Graceland must be like, I thought. Black leather chairs. A red shag rug in the waiting room. Pictures of men, absolutely beautiful men, with full heads of luxuriant hair. And each guy fawned over by a drop dead, knockout blond. Were those guys wearing wigs? That is, Cosmopolitan Toppers? They must be! Surely, the guys that run this place wouldn’t practice false advertising! Clearly, we were in the right place.

“Hi, I’m Stan. Can I help you?” We turned to find a young man in black leather coveralls, wearing what appeared to be ballet slippers. His shoulders and back were tanned and muscled under the coverall straps. His thick black hair was fashionably long. A wig? Probably not, I thought. He’s probably no more than twenty-four.

Larry and I looked at one another, uncertain as to how to start the process. “Uh, we were thinking about checking out your hair replacement. We saw your ad in the Yellow Pages.” Damn. I didn’t realize how hard it was to acknowledge to another human being (especially one with great hair) that I was self conscious about going bald. Must be true, I thought. Thinning hair must eat away at your self-esteem.

“Certainly, sir.”

Crap; I’m sir to him too?

“Why don’t each of you take a chair in the salon”.
We took off our jackets and sat in one of the black and chrome salon chairs, facing a mirror that covered the entire wall. Hundreds of bulbs surrounded the mirror, just like in the movies when the stars are getting made up. Stan fussed with our hair, combing it to yield as much of our bare scalp as possible. He put a black one on me, and a blond one on Larry, and worked to comb and weave our own hair into the Toppers. I watched in awe. This was amazing. I looked 10 years younger. Hell, that was Ricky Nelson looking back at me. I was, at that instant, reborn. My youth and self-confidence had been handed back to me. Where was my guitar? Get me to Lazarus. Watch those young clerks fawn over this coiffed God.

I glanced over at Larry, who was smiling into the mirror. His head was tilted up slightly, his jaw firm. A smile played around his lips. We looked at one another in the mirror. Our eyes met. we nodded in agreement. Yep, we were gorgeous. No other word for it.

“By golly, Stan,” I said. “This looks great. I’ll take it!”

Larry nodded in agreement, turned to Stan, and said, “I’ll take mine too. This does seem to make me look a little less old.” Larry was an engineer, and tended to reason things out a tad better than me.

Stan was leaning against the beauty table directly behind our chairs. We were facing the mirror, and talked to Stan’s image as he stood behind us.

“A good decision, sirs. You both look great. Younger. More virile. However, I recommend you buy two each. After a day or two, you’ll need to wash, style and dry them. You’ll need the second to make sure you always look your best. I’ll throw in the Styrofoam styling heads for nothing. And, of course you’ll need a month’s supply of shampoos, sprays, brushes and combs. Let me get you a price.”

He walked out to the front. Larry and I were still in awe of the youthful, handsome Men of the World looking back at us from the mirror. Wonder if I ought to wear mine home, I thought. Won’t Agnes and the kids be surprised!

Stan came back in. ”Well, gentlemen, here’s the total. Two Cosmopolitan Toppers each. One free styling head each. The recommended assortment of hair care products for the pieces. And, a complete book of instructions on the care and feeding of your new Toppers. For each of you- $1,486.70.

One Thousand Four Hundred Eighty Six dollars? And Seventy Cents? Good Lord! That was almost two months of house payments. The ’68 English Ford I drove to work only cost a little over $400 dollars. Agnes would brain me if I spent that kind of money.

I looked again at my reflection in the mirror. Damn! I am a dead ringer for ol’ Ricky, if I squint my eyes and make things a little blurry.

I looked over at Larry again. He had a thoughtful look on his face
$1,486.70. That’s a lot of money. But I kind of look like Ricky Nelson….

Crap! I’m working for the money; I’m smart. I can figure a way to handle it. Besides, Agnes will be thrilled.

I turned to Stan. “You got a deal. I’ll take it.”

Larry nodded briskly and said, “Me too. I’m going to do it.”

We looked at one another and grinned. We were going to be beautiful. And young. Heck, guys with hair got all the best promotions, I told myself.

Stan shook his stylishly coiffed head in acknowledgement and said, “Gentlemen, that is indeed wonderful. Now, let me remove the hairpieces so that I can shave the top of each of your heads.”

Wait a minute, I thought to myself, shave my head? I glanced at Larry. He had the same reaction.

“Uh Stan, why do you need to shave our heads?”

Larry looked at Stan. "Yeah, what’s that for?”

“Well, sirs (sir again?), the tape has to stick directly to your scalp. I have to get all the hair out of the way of the tape to assure a good fit.”

I thought quickly, I didn’t want my head shaved! Hell, I didn’t want to wear the thing while I did yard work in the hot Atlanta sun. It would be hotter than a wool cap. And I wouldn’t wear it on weekends if I were reading out on the deck. I could see that Larry was having second thoughts as well. He had that thoughtful engineer look on his face.

“Stan, I think I’m going to take the weekend and think about this,” I said, trying to look serious and carefully thoughtful.

Larry shook his head in agreement. “Let me get back to you as well, Stan. I have to think about the rather permanent commitment I’d be making to my hair.”

Stan looked a little crestfallen, as crestfallen as a 24-year old stud with all his hair can manage, anyway.

That was the summer of 1973. I’m still thinking.

We had another guy in the office who surprised us all one day. Wilbur was in his mid 50’s, a big man, six foot three, probably 60 pounds over weight. With a close-cropped fringe of white hair around the side of his head, he had been bald for as long as I’d known him.
One day, he showed up at work in a brown Beatle wig. The most ridiculous looking wig I’d ever seen, especially on that big man. Not even real hair. Probably nylon, or some animal hair. Was he serious? Or was this a joke?

He went about his business, met with several of us, and nothing was said about the wig. None of us wanted to hurt his feelings, so we pretended everything was normal.

The next day Wilbur was back in with his wig, but something was different. What was it? I had to ask him.

I went into the tiny office he had next to my equally small office. I pulled up one of the two straight back chairs and said, “Wilbur, I can’t help notice you’ve invested in a….hairpiece. What brought that on?”

Wilbur’s face reddened slightly and he smiled. ”Ed, I been bald as an egg since I was 23. My wife got after me to try a hairpiece. I found this one at a costume store last week, and thought I’d see what it’s like to have hair again. I gotta tell you…it’s pretty nice. I must look pretty good, too. Lots of people keep looking at me!”

Wilbur, ol buddy, I bet they do.

“But Wilbur,” I said, “something about your ‘hair’ is different today. I can’t put my finger on it. What is it?”

Wilbur looked at me. ”Them Beatles let their hair grow down over their ears, and that’s how the wig was made. I couldn’t stand that mess all over my ears. So I got the wife’s pinking shears and cut ear holes in my wig. Feels a world better!”

That was it! Sure enough, there were two oddly shaped and irregular holes for Wilbur’s ears to stick out. I did my best to keep a straight face as I left his office.

Wilbur wore his hair for several months. One day, several of us from the office had to fly to Charleston, West Virginia for a meeting. It was a hot, steamy day in the Kanawha River Valley. After the meeting we all piled into the rental car for the trip back to the airport to fly back to Atlanta. We were in suits and ties, wrestling with luggage and briefcases. The plane was a small commuter craft, built to hold probably 20 passengers. It wasn’t possible to stand upright in the plane. As we boarded, we had to duck our heads and squirm down the narrow isle to any available seat. The ground support air system was fighting a losing battle against the oppressive heat inside the small cabin. Wilbur managed to fit his height and girth into a seat. I took the seat directly behind him, and struggled to get out of my suit coat. Wilbur was huffing and puffing after the effort to get himself and his luggage stowed under his seat. The back of his suit coat was drenched with perspiration.
As he straightened up, he grabbed the top of his wig, yanked it off with a loud sigh, and mopped the top of his head with his handkerchief. He leaned back in his seat and sighed, “Godamighty! That things hot.” He made the trip to Atlanta with his hair tucked into the seat pocket.

That was the last time any of us saw Wilbur’s wig.