

## FOLLICULAR FOLLIES by Max Blagg

For some reason, *men of all sexual inclinations are shaving themselves smooth as a baby's arse.*

*Although baldness remains a source of rage and shame to most men, whose hair plugs and transplants never look quite right, it now appears that body hair, especially in the rarefied but highly influential world of fashion, is, like, totally out. Gone.*

Not a whisper of a whisker – even the legs either waxed or shaved.



► At the fall shows it is reliably reported that all the young ephebes posing in the new clothes were strutting around either completely hairless or trimmed down to a quarter of an inch maximum. From whence are these edicts issued? Is it the stylist who makes the call or did the tall and skinny Karl L decree that each lad should be smooth as mummy's tit? Or is it tied into Marc's new addiction, his buffed and rippling body embellished

with 28 tattoos but not a single hair? (That's a theory to pursue: that shaving is required to expose all those tattoos.) Another fashionable suspect is Thom Browne, whose suits make men look like boys, and boys don't have hairy legs. So, we can halt the trouser well above the ankle. And John Galliano – how smooth the triceps on that formerly fey pirate, how the well-oiled body glistens in the catwalk light! I'd love to see him wrestle Marc Jacobs, Greco-Roman or freestyle. The new gladiators! Is their "healthy body in a demented mind" approach trickling down from the beauties who model their clothes to the corpulent and hirsute citizenry? This autumn's new crop of print ads exude a cleanliness bordering on the prim. There's not a spot of dirt anywhere. It's becoming a bit too well-scrubbed, sharp-edged, ripped, toned, inhumanly perfect. This whole clean-shaven thing has a fascist edge to it. Those immaculately sheared, leg-waxed, short-haired models goose-stepping along the catwalks throw a dark brown shade. Has somebody been watching Salo again?

And it's not just fashion. The recent Olympics were an endless parade of glossy beauties who could have stepped off a Grecian urn, perfect specimens of *homo erectus*. Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt and all these other smooth-skinned athletes in Beijing, flying like the wind, no resistance whatsoever to their rapid progress through space in record time. At night they return to the Olympic village, to feast upon each others' perfect bodies, coiled like mating snakes under those polluted Chinese skies, while we overweight, crisp-eating punters gaze at them on the telly, sagging deep into our couches at these visions of hairless physical perfection, wreathed in golden amulets.

Athletes with perfect bodies look good with no hair (and besides, most of the Chinese gymnasts are not old enough to have body hair), but still there is a lingering whiff of NAMBLA-style infantilisation in this total depilation. It calls to mind the case of Alfred Chester, an eccentric American writer who lived for a while in Tangier in the 1960s. Like many of Tangier's European community at the time, Chester was a passive homosexual, and due to a rare medical condition (some kind of extreme alopecia), he was completely devoid of facial, head or body hair. Without his wig he resembled nothing so much as a man-sized baby and, apparently, this condition made him irresistible to a large part of the local male population, to whom sodomy was second nature. They used to line up outside his house in the medina in the hope of taking a crack at the enormous infant. Baby love – it's an ill thing.

Maybe we are simply emulating past depilators, like the Trojans who plucked out all their body hair before combat (one warrior on one, they'd stay up all night doing it, and this before an important battle!), or the Egyptian priest class who ritualistically removed all body hair by plucking. This included hair on the head, eyebrows and beard. But that hasn't trickled down. There isn't a single Egyptian waxing parlor in all New York, to my knowledge. Certainly none of the Korean girls who attend to my appendages speak Arabic. In ancient Greece, long hair was a symbol of wealth and power, while a shaven head was more appropriate for a slave. The gradual disappearance of the comb-over and other shameful hair-related conceits has made the shaven head respectable today, but it wasn't until the skinheads in the 1960s that chrome domes were regarded as anything but humiliating, especially for women. Remember all those pretty French girls getting shaved and gobbed on in front of cheering crowds at the Liberation, as punishment for consorting with the Krauts? Of course that was the French who had failed to resist covering their tracks, but that's another, hairier story.

Where was I?

In the interest of journalistic integrity, which I sometimes find lacking in myself, I decided to strop my razor and depilate my own privates. The last time I did this was for a particularly

horrifying case of crabs contracted while at Butlins holiday camp in Skegness, Lincs, during my misspent youth. That operation was performed with my dad's rather blunt Gillette, which left not a few snicks and nicks in the rugaceous skin of my sack. I remember as if it were yesterday, my mum pounding on the bathroom door, demanding to know what I was up to, the telltale hairs in the tub, the awful smell of the Lindane that destroyed the tiny Klingons, purchased in red-faced shame from Boots. And the finger pointing later in the school showers after soccer. I felt like a fallen Frenchwoman.

Meanwhile, back in my own Moorish-tiled shower stall, musing on these shaggy tales, I have managed to remove most of the downstairs hair without too much trauma, though even the trespass of my own hand holding a blade in the vicinity of my gonads causes a swoony sensation. Some people do it with a straight razor, but I am far too attached to my attachments to go that route. But the time it takes! After a quick scissoring, soap up the scrote and stroke firmly with the razor, and eventually a boyishly smooth area is cleared, where once was bramble and fern. The rear end and the back, though, leave that to the professionals. I'm using my sable shaving brush for this, which is like cleaning the toilet with the dish scrubber. Some sex partners apparently shave each other as a kind of foreplay. Sounds hot, but dangerous. I was nervous when I was shaving, so God knows what it would be like to have someone else wield the blade. Unless it was a young, certified nurse. In uniform. One of the few benefits of shaving is that it does make the tackle look larger, and every poor deluded youth wants to look in the mirror and see an elephant's trunk swinging there.

And another thing: I'm still not gay, despite all the allegations, but walking around like this with no genital fuzz feels clean and kind of sexy and somehow gayish. Is this what gay feels like? Light and yet weighty? Maybe that's what the footballers are doing, quietly getting in touch with their homer side as they parade around the dressing room. "Pansy Potter jocks trimming and flaunting their tackle," as my editor at Ten remarked, having viewed a few spy-cam videos of Premier League teams lathering up and scrubbing down after the game. And the cyclists, flying across France like the wicked witch with absolutely no wind resistance, a microscopic leather seat halfway up their arse as their rain-slick legs pump like pistons – what are they thinking?

But for those among us less athletic, hair is not necessarily the enemy. I like a nice short back and sides as much as the next military man, but this depilation of the entire body just doesn't seem right. Besides, one day after my pubic shave, I am starting to itch as the tender shoots of stubble push their way through the dermis. By the second day it feels like there's a hedgehog in my drawers. Which means I will have to shave again, soon. I could have waxed, or even had my follicles reduced to ash by laser. Many porn stars do it, but that's so we can see every detail of the pink; in fact, it's all pink all the time, which is not necessarily that alluring, especially when the extreme close-up gives you a graphic detail of the razor burn or a waxing that was a bit too hot.

Maybe this Barbie- and Ken-doll smoothness is a backlash against the messy realism of recent years, the stumblebum junkie scruff of Amy and Pete, a return to clean, bruise-free arms, sleeves rolled up to show a tan rather than a train track. A well-scrubbed future rather than a crackhead past. Then again, these designers with a D, from whom all worldly clothing-related ideas trickle down, these artistes with an e, who can ever know what is in their minds? Alexander McQueen apparently based his latest collection on an ancient elm tree he noticed in his garden when he happened to look up from his well-thumbed copy of *The Golden Bough*. Marc Jacobs's most recent tattoo says "Bros not hos". It must mean something, but what? The hair is gone, but the zeitgeist, it's all over the place. ◀