

## THE UNKINDEST CUT by Max Blagg

The penis, even if you're not gay, *presents a pleasing aesthetic shape*, teetering on the brink of absurdity, like a recumbent snail able to transform into a narwhal's horn, a slumbering lizard ready to leap to attention at the "*touch of a velvet hand*". Or something.

I'd been looking down at mine for 45 years, this drooping, hooded innocent responding always to my brain's reptilian commands.

Now Dr X stretched the foreskin in his rubber-clad hand. "*I don't usually recommend surgery if it can be avoided,*" the lying bastard said, "*but this has got to go.*" He released the flap and it twanged back into its customary huddle atop my glans. My skin crawled, horrified by his diagnosis. *How had this nightmare come to pass?*

► First, this bulletin from the Department of Oversharing: technically speaking, repetitive scar tissue was causing continuous shrinkage of the prepuce. Any frantic thrusting might produce another painful little split in the skin. And each time this happened the skin would shrink to close it up when the cut healed. The hat was too small for the head, was turning into a noose that threatened to choke the innocent glans. The flap I'd sported through my misspent youth, elastic, tactile, stretchy, the hood that enfolds the woody, the helmet worn by 95% of English males. "Oh, the places he had been, the sweet smelling caverns he had fearlessly spelunked. Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight / the tender glans alone must ride / bareheaded into battle."

The doctor gave me a puzzled look.

"*Is there any alternative, doctor?*"

There was one, the doctor mused (though his secretary had doubtless informed him that my insurance would cover the operation): "*A kind of split infinitive, if you will, or in tailoring terms, converting a crew neck into a v-neck; a short slice down the underside rather than taking the whole thing off. Alas, it's skin, not wool, and one harsh hammering might continue the split, peel it down to the base... so let's err on the side of safety and take the whole thing off,*" he said, twirling an imaginary cane.

This affected Hippocratic attitude inclined me to ask, "*Can your mother sew?*" but for some reason, possibly that unremovable, working-class obedience gene, I tugged my forelock and went along with his diagnosis. It was only afterwards that I realised I had been insane to give my consent. What's a few little nicks and scars compared with the total absence of the beloved hood? But my male friends were too queasy to talk about it and the women I knew simply saw it as a cosmetic improvement. Wrestling the hood is an acquired taste and most American women don't seem interested in acquiring it. So I prepared to get clipped.

One week later, I walked, very slowly, into the Cardinal Francis ("Nelly") Spellman wing of St Vincent's Hospital in downtown Manhattan. (Ecclesiastical aside: dismayed by

Spellman's theatrical chasubles, the Pope himself had ordered his train to be cut from 10ft to 2ft long.) A tenuous connection, I was grasping at straws.

In the pre-op lounge I glanced down the list of other surgeries to be performed that morning: "*resection prostate*", "*stone removal*" and "*catheter implantation*". This little bris was nothing in comparison. A nurse showed me to a room with a locker for my street clothes. Stripped down, I felt a distinct absence of "pluck", whatever the fuck pluck is. Show me the man who doesn't feel a tiny bit vulnerable, sitting trouserless on a vinyl examination table, barefoot and wearing a hair-net and paper slippers.

"*It's not Kosovo,*" was my mantra for the day, "*and it's not a tumor the size of a grapefruit. Or a cricket ball.*" (Medical aside: Jewish doctors apparently compare their tumors to food, while Christian quacks use sports-related items as a yardstick, from golf-ball-sized growths to that goiter the size of a football.)

A young man, a boy really, a Ganymede in Prada-style surgical scrubs, walked into my cubicle. He introduced himself as Dr Y. "*I'll be assisting Dr X,*" he said cheerfully.

"*Oh, and how long have you been a doctor, doctor?*"

"*This is my fourth year, but first in urology.*" His cheerful mood was singularly uninfected. He handed me some forms to sign. "*And whatever you do, don't get an erection for the next couple of weeks...*"

Was the beardless lad trying to establish a jocular mood? Or had my toga slipped? I said nothing as he escorted me down a long corridor, past various operating rooms, all of them in use. In Theatre Seven, Dr X was waiting, smiling confidently. His hair-net gave him a sinister look. I mounted the table and lay on my back. The attending nurse, a princely vision in her mask, clipped an instrument to my finger. My vital signs pulsed on the screen of a monitor.

"*Why didn't you have the general anaesthetic?*" the doctor asked as he prepped my privates, encircling the base with a series of painful pricks.

"*Somebody told me it kills a lot of brain cells and I don't have any more to spare.*"

"*That's bullshit. I wouldn't let anyone do this to me while I was awake!*"

My testicles retracted into my body at this terrifying remark, leaving the hood to its ghastly fate.

A thin green sheet separated me from the two doctors and the nurse as they set to work. They were invisible but entirely audible. Their corny repartee made a forceful argument for full anaesthesia, with lines like, "*Where did I put that saw?*" and "*Damn, this scalpel is blunt,*" and a detailed discussion of sewing techniques.

Then Dr X launched into a story about a man who had come to see him for foreskin-replacement surgery. He'd had it done twice by a plastic surgeon in Arizona. The process entailed attaching the penis to the scrotum for six weeks, then harvesting skin from there to fashion a new flap. "*But the scrotal skin obviously has a different texture – this guy's penis...*" he paused for effect, or perhaps to make another cut, "*it looked like a puppy, or maybe a cocker spaniel, hadeha, had been chewing on his johnson for half an hour!*" Dr Y and the nurse both laughed appreciatively. The words bounced around my cranium – "*harvesting*", "*scrotum*" – I should have asked for more Percocet.

The badinage continued to unroll...

"*Let me show you a trick, my esteemed colleague...*"

In my mind an image of two amateur magicians practising maybe that "saw the lady in half" trick. They hadn't quite perfected it. A little while later, Dr X called the nurse over to the table for her opinion of his sewing skills. "*I know I shouldn't say this,*" she said, "*but, good enough to eat!*" The doctors chuckled, the nurse cackled, the minutes crawled by.

Finally, the nurse peeked around the curtain and informed me the operation was over. I didn't feel any different. I asked the doctor if I might have the skin for my reliquary, but no, there were another few hundred dollars to be made on pathology tests. No wonder some people think there is a conspiracy, that certain luggage companies have indeed been working for years on developing expandable suitcases made from this material.

The post-op area was filled with friendly nurses and patients nodding on their OxyContin, wandering around in their bloody smocks. Compared with their various surgical interventions, my own experience felt quite slight, but a personal slight nevertheless. The temple of the body had been violated. After an hour among the more severely wounded, I was declared ambulatory. I limped out onto Seventh Avenue. The holiday crowds surged by, ignorant of my physical changes, the challenges that lay ahead.

The next day, I removed the dressing, documenting the process with Polaroids worthy of Nan Goldin. If it had at first reminded me of that First World War portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire home from the trenches, his head wrapped in bloody gauze, now the empurpled dome resembled some scientific transplant. It hung from my body like a skinned rabbit or a miniature Frankenstein. Thirty stitches encircled its circumference, a spiky necklace, like some medieval cock ring. But the colourfully bruised membrum was huge! These were the proportions I'd wanted all my life, but alas, they wouldn't last.

The next day, I felt the pang of *Amputee's Remorse™*, not to mention a touch of *Phantom Foreskin™*, a variant on the phenomenon known in medical circles as "phantom limb", whereby the amputee is convinced that he still has the limb that had been lopped, along with all its aches and pains. I wanted to snap it again, to pull it way out and let it catapult back, but those finger-licking days were behind me now. The glans was hardening even as I gazed.

I wasn't aware, at the time, of a groundswell of anti-clipping opponents more rabid than PETA. Out there, on the invisible singing wires of the internet, a well-informed mob is clamouring for foreskin restoration. Thousands of men have tried to restore their missing parts by stretching the skin back, using all manner of unusual implements. To me, the cut foreskin is like a favourite cashmere sweater that you accidentally shrink and feel convinced you can stretch back to your size. Never happen. The skin's gone, like the delicate woollen fibres went in that deluge of boiling water. You can always buy another sweater, but you can't reclaim 12 square inches of nerve-laden tissue.

What did I gain from this unwilling donation of a part of my body to science, apart from a 100% reduction in smegma, that creamy sebaceous matter that accumulates under the foreskin and reeks to high heaven? (Commonly known simply as "cheese", this substance is responsible for discouraging many a partner from the prompt application of fellatio.) And what had I lost? A certain sensitivity perhaps? I could now win money in low dives by piercing the head with a needle and showing no sign of discomfort.

Okay, so it's not the delicate instrument it once was. Circumcision turns what was an inside part into an outside part of your body. What was moist is now dry. But, in the end, your end will forget about it. Once you've been circumcised, your foreskin cannot grow again. One small advantage is that your penis will at least appear larger, like an object in a rearview mirror. No longer will you be sporting that dunce-like cap. Now the dome looms, the shiny glans states its case. Clean, whistling, ready to go 10 rounds and feel no pain. A regular Ricky Hatton without a hat on. The bell rings for the next round. ◀

