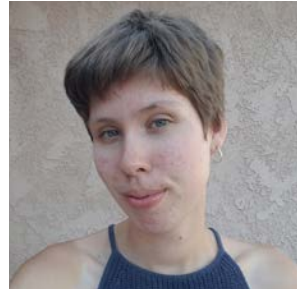


# Cut Off

ILSA BAUER




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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I had written a fair amount of research papers but had never before taken a stab at a personal narrative until UWP 101. The task for this piece was to write about a firsthand experience that commented on some greater social or political issue. I struggled at first to come up with a subject to fit the brief as I am a white girl and haven't faced much adversity. I realized that my essay could be about a lighter moment in time instead of an ongoing inequity or pain. I settled on writing about cutting my hair short. Meant to be a fun, casual read, "Cut Off" is a two-for-one special. You can chuckle at the struggle of a high schooler and gain a little insight into a topic you may have never considered.*

*EDITOR'S COMMENT: At the end of the fourth paragraph in "Cut Off," Ilsa Bauer recalls the moment when she realized that a short haircut can be damn stylish: "Proud of my revelation, I set out to achieve it." Next paragraph: "My hopes were promptly butchered by Lily, a hairdresser recommended by my grandma who had cut hair for decades." This sharp turn may be my favorite moment of the essay (I'd gladly read a sequel about Lily the Butcher).*

*Read "Cut Off" and you'll likely have a different favorite, for Ilsa's insightful and exquisitely humorous prose offers a series of highlights, from "The utilitarian ponytail was my go-to" to phrases such as "Annie Lennox's orange buzzed badassery." Note too Ilsa's ear for rhythm and sentence variety, including the well-placed one-word sentence: "Great." "Cut Off" would be a deep pleasure even if it were merely anecdotal, but this autobiographical essay—a "Bildungssessay," if I may—has a lot*

*to say about absurd and potentially harmful social norms, particularly where gender is concerned.*

—Greg Miller, *University Writing Program*

Since childhood, my hair has been a source of fascination – for others. Petting my thick mane, stylists remarked how lucky I was to have “so much beautiful hair.” They marveled at my “natural highlights,” chunks of sunned locks, or as my mother called them, “amber waves of grain.” Their sentimentality for long hair was lost on me. I skipped all the poetry, and rarely wore my “glorious” hair down. The utilitarian ponytail was my go-to. The type of ponytail, high or low, did not matter. As long as it was tight and got my hair out of my face, I was content. However, the ponytail was not my best look. My face looked like an egg when viewed head-on. I might as well have been bald – which is why I was shocked to meet resistance when I expressed the desire for the big chop.

It was high time that I harnessed hair’s inherent power of self-expression. It communicates even if you’re stuck in frumpy school uniforms or bland office clothes. Unlike clothing, hair is a part of you. It can be cut, dyed, styled, or removed entirely – none of which I had explored. I was going into high school, so I wanted to leave my hair in the past with the ill-fitting emo band tees, faded skinny jeans, and tackily patterned Vans of middle school. The only foreseeable way to start fresh was to build from the scalp out.

I told my mom and grandma that I wanted a buzz cut. That one sentence put my grandmother one step closer to six feet under. With panic in her eyes, my mom hurled a flurry of reasons why I couldn’t. “It won’t grow out right. You don’t have the face for it. You’ll look like a hedgehog...You’ll look like a boy.” She made it sound like no woman had ever willingly forgone hair, forgetting the Grace Jones, Sinéad O’Connors, and Annie Lennox-es of the world. Buzz cuts are a form of rebellion, they’re punk, they’re powerful. If buzz cuts are a boy’s club, did that mean I couldn’t

embody those traits? *Mad Max: Fury Road* had just come out and Charlize Theron's kick-ass buzz was burned into my mind. Why couldn't this suburban teen embrace her post-apocalyptic Emperor? I could hardly be "metal" sporting the cascading spiral locks of a blonde pre-raphaelite woman. I ultimately conceded and left the buzz to military recruits and delinquents all while picturing Annie Lennox's orange buzzed badassery.

It would be a couple of years until I got the haircut itch again. I took time to reflect and realized that my hype for a buzz cut had been a case of the teen extremes. I had wanted to transform as fast and radically as possible to fill the need for change. Knowledge of Britney Spears' psychotic shave also made me rethink the buzz. Besides, a buzz simply wouldn't do with my moon-pie face and volleyball head. The remedy to the itch was simple: a pixie cut. It would frame my face and counteract its roundness. Short hair didn't have to mean "boy". The pixie embodies the class and cutting-edge quality of icons like Audrey Hepburn, Twiggy, and Linda Evangelista – markedly more feminine than a desert-dwelling gladiatrix. Proud of my revelation, I set out to achieve it.

My hopes were promptly butchered by Lily, a hairdresser recommended by my grandma who had cut hair for decades. Misguidedly, I put my hair in her hands. I communicated that I wanted a pixie and told her to go as short as she could. She was only capable of chin-length before succumbing to a fit of hair hysteria saying, "No no! No shorter, hon. You need to keep some of this beautiful hair! You don't want to look like a man!" Here I was thinking I was heading in a more feminine direction, yet I had somehow arrived at the threshold of manhood. I shrugged and told her I didn't mind, quietly urging her to finish the deed. She never did. Instead, she insisted that the short (but not short enough) cut she had achieved looked amazing. Being too cowardly to argue, I agreed.

Upon arrival to class the next morning, my unfortunate pageboy cut was met by my friends' wide eyes. They likened me to Hillary Clinton immediately. Great. I had gone from a

promising young man to an old political lady. A friend told me, “That looks like my grandma’s haircut. Super cute though!”. Cute for a sixty-five-year-old maybe. It had never really dawned on me that the elderly and middle-aged make up the preponderance of short-haired women. I can only chalk this phenomenon up to the inherent youthfulness of the cut. Short hair signifies that these older women are hip and fresh like the young’uns. Women with these cuts wouldn’t be caught looking like craggy Appalachian witches with a gray braid trailing down their backs. I had a time paradox on my head. I was perceived as having “middle-aged hair” by my peers while the older folks thought I had a youthful cut. Despite the haircut’s shortcomings, I felt somewhat liberated. This was the shortest I had ever been up until that point, and it served as confirmation that short hair was the move. It did suit me, just not in its current form.

My Clinton impression was short-lived. After a quick and final chop from a non-Lily stylist, I finally had my pixie. It shouldn’t have worked as well as it did since my 5’10” body doesn’t correlate with the tiny woodland fairy moniker. Although it miscommunicated my stature, it did proclaim my spunky and slightly tomboyish personality. I was the most confident I had ever been. I thought I was expressing my most accurate self. That would’ve been true – if I was a lesbian.

Questions of my sexuality trickled in slowly in the weeks following the pixie. Questions from extended family changed markedly from, “So, do you have a boyfriend yet?” to “Have you been eyeing any guys...or *girls*?” My friends weren’t as subtle. “Hey, are you a lesbian?”, my friend of four years asked. I was baffled. These were people that I had gossiped about boys with and confided in about my male crushes, people that knew that, generally, I was too busy or apathetic to think about dating. This false perception could have sprung from a couple of notions: a) short hair equals butch lesbian or b) no guy would be attracted to short hair so I must be trying to appeal to women. Nothing else about my demeanor would’ve been an indicator of homosexuality.

The cut apparently said it all.

The pixie left my head lighter and my mind clearer. It hadn't occurred to me that short hair had such vast connotations to the general public. My short hair could be seen as a signifier of old age, manliness, lesbianism, and even mental illness – all things I do not identify with. The only associations I had were cool women, no other qualifier. Cutting my hair, as relieving as it was, implicitly saddled me with stereotypes. I was shouting without verbally saying anything. I could now understand why so many girls cling to their hair. They are maintaining their perceived femininity, sanity, and “attractiveness” – none of which should be innately tied to hair. Hair is the mark of an individual and should be treated as such. People should feel free to experiment without being branded with a label that may or may not fit. Prying comments and generalized assumptions should be cut off. Acceptance should grow instead.