

# Bush

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In the novel *Innocent*, Scott Turow's best-selling sequel to his debut, *Presumed Innocent*, the protagonist, Rusty Sabich, just turned 60, is having an affair with a young lawyer who has clerked for him. "Physically," he describes her, "she is glorious, a power Anna enjoys and works hard to hold on to—manicures and pedicures, hair appointments, facials, 'routine maintenance,' as she calls it. Her breasts are perfect, large, beautifully belled, with a broad, dark aureole and long nipples. And I am fascinated by her female parts, where her youth somehow seems centered. She's waxed there, 'a full Brazilian,' is her term. It's a first for me, and the smooth feel provokes my lust like a lightning bolt."

A "full Brazilian" isn't just Anna's term. As most women know, it's the latest fashion in depilation, the removal by wax of all the hair around your genital area, in a procedure that causes intense pain and can lead to staph infections. According to one legend of the term's origin, sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers in Brazil discovered females whose genitalia "were so exposed, so healthy and so *hairless*, that looking upon them we felt no shame."

Why didn't the explorers feel shame? I have been thinking about this subject in more than a casually political way since a close friend and his 20-month-old daughter, Cissy, spent a long weekend with my fiancé and me. I reared two sons; my image of a baby includes a little rubbery penis that arcs pee onto the far wall while you're trying to diaper. Cissy is not quite two. Her mound of Venus and the crevice that passes from it through her legs form a lovely creased pillow that I was able to contemplate in a way that had heretofore eluded me. My looking on it, my fiancé's looking on it, evoked no shame: we were looking at a baby. Our feelings were of nurture and not of desire.

And that's what a full Brazilian aims at—a look, and a feel, reminiscent of a girl baby. You can't recapture that precious plumpness, and the soft structures tucked inside the cleft have grown complicated. But insofar as the heterosexual gaze involves lust—and insofar as that lust, experienced outside whatever norms you accept, provokes shame—it's reasonable to assert that a male gaze devoid of shame is a male gaze devoid of lust. It would be gross naiveté to impute purity to the Portuguese who raped and pillaged their way through South America; clearly those men forced themselves on native women without conscience or remorse. Moreover, it's possible that calling a certain wax job “Brazilian” has given it an edge of so-called spiciness that reeks of European attitudes toward dark exoticism. But the original pronouncement still carries weight: these were Catholic men, reared in a culture where shame meant something, describing the sight of women who were hairless below the navel, and that hairlessness momentarily arrested shameful impulses. They felt, or claimed to feel, the way my fiancé and our young friend feel when they are looking at Cissy.

But what about Rusty Sabich? Let's go back to Anna and those “female parts” on which her youth “somehow seems centered.” (And where might her “male parts” lie? Just asking.) I'd venture that the mysterious “somehow” question is answered by the next couple of lines. The very hairlessness, the little-girlishness, of Anna's *mons veneris* is what turns Rusty on. Rusty feels no shame at being hit by a “lightning bolt” of lust on viewing Anna's depilated genitalia because he is without a sense of shame. His shamelessness, in fact, is part of the point—he may have reached three score years, but he still gets off on breaking a taboo.

That taboo, of course, is being broken at this very moment in thousands of bedrooms across America. Or is it a taboo? Other cultures not only condone sex between adult men and young girls (menarche sometimes being a token requirement), but frame depilation as a religious act of cleansing. In Islam, the practice of *fitrah* includes removing underarm and pubic hair; plenty of women's bodies hidden under burqas have undergone extreme waxing. In the West, fashion inflicts risk and pain in any number of ways, from breast augmentation to four-inch heels. Look at Anna's other choices—the mani-pedi, the hair styling. I'm not getting exercised over those. Men are waxing their chests these days. Maybe it's just a trend.

And yet. In Turow's novel, Anna herself gets some of the narration. Not

once does she mention her concern over personal care. Never does she weigh in on why she undergoes genital waxing, whether it delights her sexually or whether she does it only to please a man like Rusty. She seems neither insecure about her sexuality nor eager to project a fashionable look or feel when unclothed. Her only remark on body hair comes from her observation of another lover-in-waiting, who has “a cute little flavor saver under his lip.” I had to look that one up at [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com), which explains that a flavor saver is a patch of hair under the lips that “allows one to relive eating a chick’s pussy by ‘saving the flavor’ in the hair.” Now, I am not certain that a woman would refer to a bit of facial hair that way, but since a Brazilian wax leaves the depilated skin extraordinarily tender, facial hair on the man performing cunnilingus can, by most accounts, be quite irritating for the woman.

In other words, the full Brazilian is not a physical or character attribute that truly belongs to Anna. It exists in the novel because it titillates Rusty, and Rusty’s vigorous desires are meant to accord with the reader’s own. As a female reader, I’m accustomed to reading like a man. Imaginatively, I can empathize with Rusty’s loving Anna’s large “belled” breasts, just as I can get behind another protagonist’s fondness for his lover’s petite uplifted nipples. Interesting either way. But placing myself in Rusty’s sensibility while the full Brazilian gives him a swift hard-on—especially when no rationale for the Brazilian exists outside Rusty’s fantasy life—horrifies me. I want to keep baby Cissy (and ten-year-old Cissy, and teenaged Cissy) away from the eyes of such a man.

Pubic hair was my first sign of puberty. Other girls’ breasts grew large first; still others got their periods before their body hair kicked in. But for me it was the pubes—dark, curly, lush even, while my chest was still flat and my hips still narrow. “Oh my,” my mother said when I showed her the little triangle that had sprung up, it seemed, overnight. “You’ll have to wash more, down there.” I had never seen my mother’s own pubic hair, though I had caught glimpses of the large, sagging women who actually showered nude in the ladies’ locker room at the public swimming pool; I had seen how the soap foamed up in the hair “down there,” and it frightened me.

As I moved through adolescence, the hair on my body generally thickened and coarsened, even as the hair on my head thinned. I was a WASP, Twiggy-thin (thus, no doubt, the loss of hair from my scalp), with none of the

heavy-body-hair genes I associated with Mediterranean ancestry. Every strand of it embarrassed me. To make things worse, my sister and I were allowed to shave only to the point where our miniskirts fell. We called it the timberline. In my summer bikini, I looked down to see curly hair peek beneath the leg band, and thick leg hair trail down the insides of my thighs.

In fact—I see now, looking over old photos from one summer after the next, the gawky bikini-clad girl grinning at the camera—the hair must have been hardly noticeable, because it is imperceptible in the snapshots. But at the time, my gross sexuality mortified me. As soon as I left home for college and could shave all the way up my legs and into the inner crease where thigh joined torso, I felt a huge burst of confidence. Had someone offered to relieve me of the bush of hair that had marked me for almost eight years, I would have suffered whatever pain was required.

No one offered. Enter the feminist awakening of the 1970s, when women were encouraged to let all their hair grow—on their heads, under their arms, on their legs, and naturally on their “female parts.” My first boyfriend at college encouraged me to join this hirsute movement, only to back away when my legs became, as he put it, furry. His recoiling was, I suspect, part and parcel of the general aversion hippies were challenging—the notion, that is, that body hair (male or female) makes us more like other animals. In James Dickey’s *Deliverance*, which came out in 1970, Ed, the hirsute protagonist, is repeatedly called an “ape,” and the metaphysical tension between human reason and nature’s violence forms the heart of the book. That glabrousness is next to cleanliness and hence to godliness is not a new concept, nor is it necessarily sexist. Yet the position of earth-woman feminists and their supporters ran up not just against ideas of tidiness or human exceptionality, but against heterosexual male resistance. So long as men could not bring themselves to desire “natural” women, the sexual liberation espoused by the movement was doomed to founder.

Perhaps not completely coincidentally, the object of Ed’s desire in *Deliverance* is the nubile model for Kitt’n Britches, “healthy and a little tomboyish,” whose “bare back had a helpless, undeveloped look about it, and this seemed to me more womanly and endearing than anything else about her.” Roman Polanski’s arrest for the rape of a 13-year-old girl took place in 1977 amid widespread acceptance of the ripe sexuality of underage girls. We had the Pill; we rejected marriage; we wanted to get laid while we were young. Thus, many

women doubled down on the usual expectations of looking young in order to get laid. More to the point of pubic waxing, “getting laid” meant getting pleasure from a man, not just providing it. *The Joy of Sex* celebrated cunnilingus (with illustrations including pubic hair); Masters & Johnson suggested that it should be the major element in sexual activities involving women.

And this activity frightened men. There we were—and are—to contend with: the two sets of genital lips, the rim around the vagina, the sneaky little clitoris, and the smell—my god, the smell. Captured in the pubic hair. Made more frightening by the prospect of getting a pubic strand in the mouth, or caught in the throat. Consider the expressions used for performing oral sex on a woman: muff diving, drinking from the furry cup, tipping the velvet, carpet munching. In *The Sopranos*, syndicate heavyweight Uncle Junior finds himself labeled a carpet muncher after it’s learned that he has performed cunnilingus on his postmenopausal girlfriend. His response is to have the woman’s face sprayed with acid. Message? Macho men don’t munch carpet. They don’t go down.

But we want them to go down. Asking for and expecting oral sex is a statement of feminist sexuality. Google “full Brazilian” or investigate any of the websites devoted to the glorious experience of waxing oneself bare, and you will find plenty of language devoted to the relief men experience on finding the waxed woman so “clean,” so “inviting.” Quote after quote testifies to a boyfriend’s request that the woman have the procedure, and to the consequent sexual pleasure the woman experiences. The chthonic depths of women’s sexual parts are initially frightening—ask any adolescent boy, if you can get one to talk—and hence disgusting. Anything we can do to ease the transition from men’s taking pleasure to their giving it, we want to do.

Meanwhile, adolescent girls are experiencing, at an increasingly young age, the equally frightening (and potentially disgusting) terrain of male orgasm and ejaculation into their mouths. But sex studies have shown, for reasons that researchers debate, that girls tend to achieve—and to seek—orgasm later than boys. And those girls would be asking the boys not simply to take their genitals into the mouth, but to explore, to discover, to be proactive in the lovemaking. For me, it was astonishing that a fleeting boyfriend just after college would lift my hips toward him and put his mouth on me—and one aspect of the astonishment was his ability to negotiate the hair. One might even conjecture—mightn’t one?—that the experience of “Chad,” quoted in *Salon*

as saying of his girlfriend's Brazilian, "It was like, oh my God, an unbelievably primal welling of emotion . . . the whole little girl eroticism of it," is not really pedophilic. It's just suggestive of his desire to experience her orally as he was first experienced, as a young, fresh lover.

No. Against that phrase "little girl eroticism," the conjecture doesn't work. It tries to excuse a phenomenon that cannot, really, be excused.

Did I mention pain? For those not in the know, a few details before you turn the page. The full Brazilian uses a combination of hot beeswax and liquid rosin to remove every bit of hair from the buttocks and adjacent to the anus, perineum, and vulva (labia majora and mons pubis). Folliculitis, a staph infection of the hair follicles, is one risk of the procedure, and can require incision and drainage. After a searing hour in which hair is ripped out of the most sensitive membranes of their bodies, most women experience lingering discomfort for five days or less . . . but then, the procedure needs to be repeated, for maximal benefit, three weeks later.

Advertisements for full Brazilians tout a claim that pubic hair is "completely unnecessary." This argument, of course, has won the day with leg and underarm hair. Maybe there was a time we needed the hair on the legs for warmth, but now we have pants; maybe we needed the stuff under the arms to catch pheromones, but now we have Wild Musk by Coty. Even the hip publication *Cosmogirl*, however, puts the lie to this claim: "You should know," the magazine's advice columnist writes, "that pubic hair is there for a few good health reasons. It provides a cushion that helps prevent your labia (the fleshy skin or 'lips' around your vagina) from getting chafed, which can happen when you wear tight clothes or ride a bike. The hairs also act sort of like a spider web, trapping harmful bacteria so they can't get into your vagina and cause infections like vaginosis. Plus, urinary tract infections are often caused by bacteria from the anus—and if you have no pubes, there's a clear pathway for that bacteria to travel to your urethra (where you urinate from) and infect it." In other words, far from being "cleaner," a full Brazilian is apt to spread the dirty stuff around.

But clean, too, can be a metaphor—for virginal, untouched, not fouled by all those excretions that embarrassed us as we progressed through adolescence. *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, among other publications, links full waxing to the boom in vaginal and labial surgery. You can tighten the vagina, reinstall the hymen, plump the labia—all, surely, not in search of a fresh blush of youth for the

world to see, nor for your own pleasure, but for your man's experience of you. So now an act tied to cunnilingus—a pleasure for which feminists practically lobbied a generation ago—has to do with sex as female performance, rather than female pleasure.

Ironically, the literal performance of sex in the movies has begun to require pubic hair, for two reasons. One is that MPAA ratings consider hair covering the genitalia to be more or less equivalent to clothing, so that a flash of an unwaxed nude woman below the waist can nab the film a less restrictive rating than the same flash with the flesh exposed. Another is authenticity: filmmakers recognize that a full frontal shot of a woman in a film set, say, during the 1960s would not feature a full Brazilian. Since Kate Winslet, for instance, who starred in *The Reader*, had a “landing strip” (a tiny line of hair running vertically while the rest is waxed—and how is it that Kate Winslet's wax job is public knowledge?), she wore a merkin for the movie. A merkin, for those out of touch with medieval fashions, is a pubic wig, once popular among prostitutes who had shaved their pubic hair to discourage lice, but who needed to look sexy (and occasionally to hide signs of syphilis).

A full wax is now *de rigueur* for prostitutes and porn stars—whether because of MPAA ratings or “little girl eroticism” is anyone's guess. If viewers (unlike, presumably, Rusty Sabich) are “shamed” at all by their gaze in the twenty-first century—that is, if the exposure of a sexually desirable woman arouses the gazer's unsanctioned lust—they are *more* shamed by glabrous genitalia than by the hirsute mons. We are the Portuguese explorers' opposites—or at least the opposite of the figures they drew of themselves. Hairless adult women reminded those shame-inclined figures of children, whereas women with pubic hair (like prostitutes) turned them on. Hairless adult women put us in mind of YouPorn, whereas women with pubic hair get an R rating at worst.

Another movie reference. In Billy Bob Thornton's *Slingblade* (1996), a mental patient, the symbolically named Charles Bushman, recounts:

She had on a leather skirt and had a lot of hair on her arms. I like that a lot. That means a big bush. I like a big bush. She says, “Are you dating?” you know, so I said, “Sure.” She gets in and we pull off to a remote location that was comfortable for both she and I. She says, “How much do you wanna spend?” I said, “Whatever it will take to see that bush of yours because I know it's a

big one.” She says, “Twenty five dollars.” That’s not chicken feed to a working man so I produce the \$25, she puts it in her shoe, pulls up her skirt and there before me lay this thin, crooked, uncircumcised penis.

Bushman murders the man, but the point here is more subtle. He’s a pervert—and we know he’s a pervert even before he murders—because he’s attracted to a “woman” with plentiful body hair. It would be nice to think that the attraction itself is lustily heterosexual and the violent response to the transvestite homophobic. But Bushman’s compulsive reiteration of the story suggests that his main horror is the way in which his desire for the “big bush” has failed to mask his desire for a man (he’s angered not simply by the penis but by its being “thin” and “crooked”), and his description of the murder inscribes not only homophobia but also misogyny and self-hatred. Whatever triumphs may have lain in feminists’ claim to their own body hair, or in later attempts to separate femininity from choices about depilation, Charles Bushman’s initial transaction posits the hairy prostitute as a creature of uncertain sex, and as a target not of healthy lust, but of perverse and therefore dangerous desire.

Must the hirsute woman, then, remain at odds with mainstream notions of female identity? Perhaps not, in the very long run. I’ve passed menopause now. Along with my peers, I’ve noticed I don’t “need” to shave my legs nearly as often as before. My arm hair has thinned to blond wisps, and I forget I have hair under my arms at all. In my latest confab about pubic hair, one friend said, “I don’t know why I worry about waxing it. I’m losing it all anyway!”

In other words: *Do you want to be hairless? Try getting old.* Just as pheromone-releasing sweat decreases in our second half-centuries, so does the hair designed, in part, to catch hold of it. A woman with dark, luxurious pubic hair is not a little girl, but neither is she over the hill. As fashions change, maybe we’ll see the return of the merkin—not for period-piece movies, but as a trick for feeling youthful. Next, extensions for your thinning bush. Rogaine for the mons. We will find new ways to inflict discomfort and pain on ourselves, to risk infection, to lay the sacrifice of the body with which we were born on the altar of loveliness. And then, like the shaved and tweezered and waxed and sculpted mortals who have gone before us, we will leave it all behind.