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### Sebastian Kim

**On Chris Hemsworth**  
T-shirt, \$168, and belt, \$245, by **John Varvatos**. Jeans, \$345, by **3x1**. Bracelet by **George Frost**. Watch by **Montblanc**. Grooming by Johnny Hernandez for Fierro Agency. Contributing stylist: Michael Nash at The Wall Group. Prop stylist: Juliet Jernigan at CLM. Produced by Steve Bauerfeind for Bauerfeind Productions-West.

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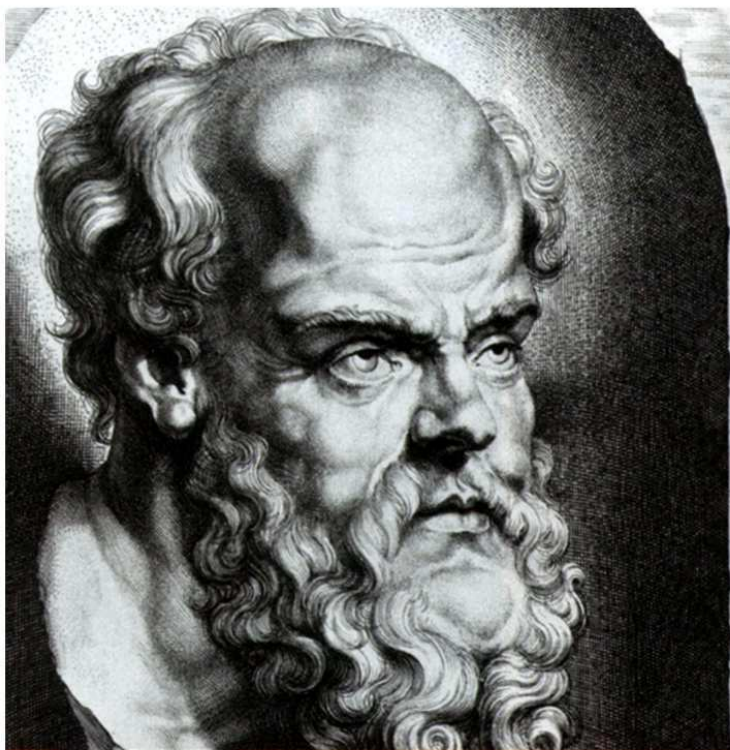
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# The Great

# Anti-Baldness

• The Bad-Hair Club for Men: from left, Socrates, Bozo the Clown, Gollum, and Larry David. The author's situation wasn't quite so dire—yet.



**I'VE NEVER THOUGHT** of myself as vain. That's because I've never had anything to be vain about. I was an uncoordinated, awkward, plain, soft kid who was smart enough to figure out that my corporeal being wasn't worth investing in. Much of my clothing is not from the past decade but from the one before it. I don't use any hair product, a category that for me includes not just pomade and wax but also combs and brushes.

So when a friend too joyously pointed out that I was losing my thick dark hair, I didn't much care. In fact, I was glad it thinned out enough so it stayed down instead of sticking up in embarrassing ways. I was already living with Cassandra, who would become my lovely wife a couple of years later. I could lose my hair, my nose, and my cheekbones and it wouldn't affect my life at all.

What I soon realized, though, was that I wasn't just balding. I was balding in a particularly bad way: from the front, in a backward march to the top of my head. Balding from the crown, if you're of average height or taller, is mostly invisible. A fade from the temples has a certain cool villainy. The back fringe isn't great, but at least it has a monkish, academic, Larry

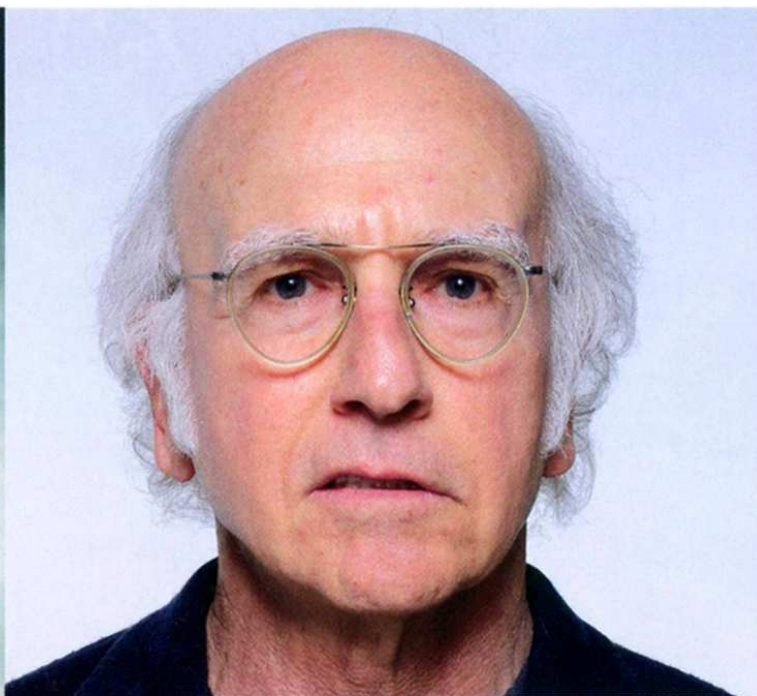
David appeal. But the front-to-back pattern is a Greek-mythology horror show: half-bald, half-haired, a look of equal parts pathos and comedy, the aesthetic of pederasts and clown wigs.

I tried minoxidil, which seemed to slow the loss. For a time I experimented with the shaved look, but Cassandra said the bald me looked less like a military badass and more like a Jewish accountant. So I grew my hair back, pushing it down and to the sides to cover the baldness up front. I was starting to resemble Gollum, but with a clump of hair holding on to the very front of my hairline. One day, the woman who cuts my hair blurted out that I should get hair-transplant surgery. This blurring continued for the next two years.

Most people have an inner compass they consult when making big decisions. I do not. I focus-group. I focus-grouped my baby's name, job decisions, and the beginning of this article. So I started to tell people that I was considering hair surgery. And I found that, nearly universally, men were cool with it. A few guys confessed to having had the surgery themselves; others wanted details because they were thinking about it. The normal-haired were equally nonjudgmental. Even my dad—whom I was the most nervous to confess to, since he's even less vain than I am and, at 74, has a full head of barely gray hair—was fine with it. In fact, too fine.

"I had it in the back of my mind to talk to you about it," he said. "I don't think it's stupid at all." Since part of my living comes from selling movie and sitcom scripts, he thought it was almost necessary. "This isn't a group of philosophers discussing Descartes. This is a low-intellectual industry. You have to look the part." I felt much better about my hair decision and much, much worse about my career.

THESE PAGES, FROM LEFT: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES (2); NEW LINE CINEMA/ THE KOBAL COLLECTION; JEFF VESPA/GETTY IMAGES. "COMB" SYMBOL DESIGNED BY



“Hair plugs.” Sounds disgusting, right? But call it transplant surgery and it starts to seem a little more palatable, or at least like something you could do in secret while supposedly taking the morning off to wait for the cable guy. **JOEL STEIN** goes under the knife and finds that today’s versions of your weird uncle’s creepy plugs are a lot less creepy than ever—in fact, they’re worth every dime

# Experiment

Women, though, were nearly uniformly hostile to the idea. “Are you fucking kidding me?” my mom yelled. “Are you that vain? Oy yi yi. Of course this wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t move to L.A. L.A. has crazy values. Crazy, crazy. I don’t want you to become one of these shallow L.A. people.”

Almost every woman I polled thought hair surgery was vain, dishonest, girlie, and unappealing. The one exception was Cassandra. She thought I should go for it. Mostly so I’d shut up about my hair, but also because she thought I’d look better.

Ours is a marriage based on honesty and shallowness.

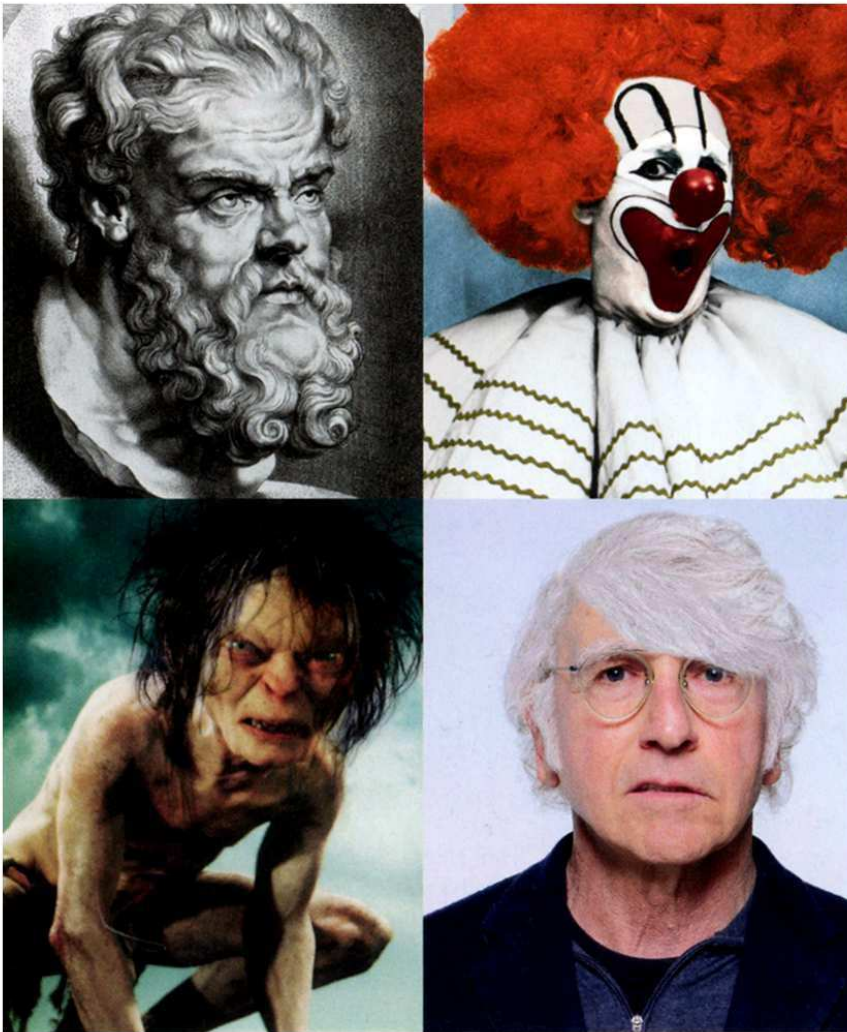
**I DECIDED TO GET** a consultation at Bosley, America’s biggest surgical “hair restoration” company, with seventy-one locations nationwide. Instead of wasting money on infomercial production values, Bosley apparently sinks it all into swanky offices. After I stepped off the elevator onto the penthouse floor of the company’s Beverly Hills location, a very attractive woman led me past a bust of Dr. L. Lee Bosley and into

an office that looked less like a place to talk about cutting into my head and more about upgrading me to a suite based on my high-stakes gambling. When I told her I was worried that having surgery would make me vain, she said, “It’s not vanity. It’s identity,” which made sense for about twelve seconds. Then she started talking about my “tuft,” which made a lot more sense. “Usually, the tuft stays,” she said, touching the small circle of hair, just above my forehead, that was holding strong while every hair around it was disappearing. Whether it was vanity or identity, I did not want a tuft.

Her next move was the equivalent of a vacuum salesman throwing dirt on my carpet: She ran a microscope camera through my scalp, displaying the image on a giant monitor. The hair on the back of my head was an army of thick, sturdy soldiers in perfect formation, while the front looked like the Iraqi army scattered after a firefight with rebels. The good news, she said, is that all that thick surplus hair in the back that made my balding pattern so weirdly uneven also meant I was an excellent candidate for

surgery. She explained the procedure: The doctor would simply uproot hair from the “donor” part and replant it in the bald spots. It takes half a day, and I’d be able to watch TV during the surgery.

Having concluded her very effective pitch, the saleswoman called in Edwin Suddleson, M.D., to examine me. Dr. Suddleson is a charming, laid-back surgeon who operated on cancer patients for twelve years before tiring of the sadness and long hours. He recommended moving 1,600 grafts of skin with varying numbers of hairs attached from the back of my head to the deforested patch in my front. This would be much less dense than healthy hair, but by spacing the grafts out in the front, Dr. Suddleson said, he’d create the illusion of normal thickness. And he’d place these crucial transplanted hairs behind my hairline so it wouldn’t look weird, since even non-balding men don’t retain their original hairline. (This is why some guys who get a hair transplant when they’re young wind up having that weird fake-looking hairline when their hair recedes and the transplanted sprouts stubbornly stay put.)



Hair surgeons charge by the hair, more or less. Which seemed weirdly specific and unmedical. But the really upsetting thing was that it costs way more than I'd expected. Though there's some kind of bulk-discount sliding scale, my 1,600 grafts would cost \$11,000. And, Dr. Suddleson said, depending on how much of a perfectionist I am and how much more of my current hair falls out, I'm probably going to want *another* \$11,000 operation in about two years. (About 30 percent of his patients come back for round two.) This was indeed vanity. A level of vanity that said I cared about my hair as much as a new car.

When I got home, I showed Cassandra the close-up photos of my scalp, and she looked pretty grossed out. "Whoa! That is scary. It's worse than I thought," she said. This was an even better sales technique than the microscope camera. I scheduled the operation.

The night before the surgery, I told my friend Claire about it. She said she needed to meet with me immediately and stage a plastic-surgery intervention. "Hair plugs are shorthand for 'not cool,'" she pleaded. "You're going to get pelted by food in the cafeteria!" And then she made it clear why most women object to this whole idea:

"One of the joys of being born with a dick is that aging boosts your position in society, as opposed to those of us with a vagina, who have to fight for relevance once our outsides betray us. I think that's why women find things like this so unattractive. We want you to embrace your power instead of succumbing."

She was totally right. And since I had less than twelve hours until my surgery, I decided to embrace my own power by totally freaking out. I had that fight-or-flight adrenaline spike that reduces your peripheral vision and makes everything super-focused. I didn't want to be known as a guy with bad plugs. My freak-out was so intense and annoying that Cassandra suggested I call and postpone.

Before I did that, though, I Googled "celebrity hair transplant." I saw old photos of Joel McHale and newer photos of Joel McHale. I'm not saying that Joel McHale had a hair transplant, but millions of people who use the Internet sure as hell are. And Cassandra has a crush on Joel McHale. Not Old Joel McHale. New Joel McHale. I calmed down. No one, I realized, was actually going to think of me as Hair-Plug Guy.

One of the joys of being born with a dick is that you can do whatever the hell you want and no one really cares.

**WHEN I ARRIVED AT** the Bosley offices at 7 A.M., I told Dr. Suddleson about my meltdown the night before. "Was the phone in your hand?" he said, smiling. I was obviously not the first patient to tell him this story. Then he combed the front of my hair forward so it looked like long, dark lines of hair separated by streaks of scalp. "Well, you can't go on living like this."

A half hour later, I was in a hospital gown, with my tuft tied into little tiny tufts with rubber bands, creating the first hairstyle more nauseating than the rattail. I went to have my surgery in a beautiful corner office, looking down at a McLaren dealership, picking out DVDs to watch, drinking herbal tea. I was feeling very L.A. and, despite what my mom said, very good about it. To numb my skull, a nurse named Jennifer gave me about a dozen injections in a straight line across the back of my head. As she worked, she applied a vibrator to distract me from the pain of each shot, emasculating me even more. I barely felt the needle.

Dr. Suddleson asked me what kind of music I liked, and we settled on classical. Soon the only other sound in the room was the crisp, crunching sound of someone cutting my scalp. "Now you know how Custer felt," Dr. Suddleson said. In less than fifteen minutes, he had stitched up the wound, connecting the two pieces of skin and making the missing inch of scalp disappear. I saw no blood.

Three people wearing scrubs and shower caps filed into the room. They looked like they'd just punched in for a shift at the Foxconn factory. While I worked on my laptop, they used scalpels and microscopes to slice the scalped strip of hair into individual grafts.

**A half hour later, I was in a hospital gown, with my tuft tied into little tiny tufts with rubber bands, creating the first hairstyle more nauseating than the rattail.**

About 200 of the grafts had just one hair, which Dr. Suddleson would carefully implant right along my hairline, since that's where the hair is naturally thinnest. But most grafts shoot out two to four hairs. So the remaining 1,400 would be placed behind my hairline, where they could sprout in different directions. Dr. Suddleson



• The author, at left, before his hair transplant. Fifteen months post-op, that's him on the right, too.

was precise: He had harvested exactly 1,617 grafts. And he was going to transplant the extra seventeen for free.

Jennifer and her vibrator numbed up the front of my head. Then Dr. Suddleson returned, scalpel in hand. He sliced 1,617 slits in different angles into my head, rapid fire, taking less than twenty minutes (an assistant counted by ten aloud), chatting the whole time.

After he left, the Foxconn employees approached my head from both sides, using jeweler's forceps to place the individual grafts into the holes the doctor had made. As they worked, I watched three episodes of *The Wire* on my laptop, focusing less on the corruption in Baltimore and more on which actors might have had hair surgery.

At 2:30 P.M., Dr. Suddleson and the vibrator nurse placed a baseball cap loosely on my head, handed me a leather case full of recovery materials, told me to treat my scalp gently for the next week as the hairs took root, and sent me home. Inside the case were bottles of Vicodin, Motrin, Ambien, and antibiotics; a spray bottle of blue copper peptide; and gauze saturated with the same stuff, which I was supposed to apply to my head nearly constantly over the next seven days to speed my recovery. The peptide was also in the shampoo they gave me, which I carefully patted into my hair and rinsed in the shower with low-pressure water for the next seven days.

I never took the Vicodin. Or the Ambien or even the Motrin. I felt the incision in the back of my head when I went to sleep, but other than that, it was almost like nothing had happened. I wore the baseball cap everywhere, because there were 1,617 disgusting scabs on my scalp, but the few times I did take it off, no one seemed to notice. If people aren't noticing a thousand scabs, I started to realize, they might not have noticed my balding, either.

A week later, I returned to Bosley, and Dr. Suddleson ran his hand violently through my hair, causing a rainstorm of red scabs, like a horror version of Ally

Sheedy in *The Breakfast Club*. He said that the hairs had taken root and I didn't have to worry about being gentle anymore. He removed the stitches from the back of my head, and that night I felt nothing when I lay my head on the pillow. It was, by far, the easiest medical procedure I have ever been through.

The major downside was that I wouldn't see any meaningful results for six months, and full results for more than a year, since my transplanted hairs would die and the new roots would be dormant for at least three months. I would have to wait for my Chia Pet head to grow.

AND FOR THOSE first six months, I felt wholly unchanged. But a few weeks later, Cassandra was pretty sure she saw improvement. My dad said the same thing. Someone I hadn't seen in a while complimented my "haircut." By month eight, I was shocked when Cassandra declared me "cured." Though we didn't have sex more often, I'm pretty sure she looked at me more when we did.

Finally, by month nine, I could see it, too. The front of my head looked not lush but decidedly unshiny. It was kind of like magic—just from sitting in a chair for a

few hours, I suddenly had my hair back. I became a hair-surgery evangelist, my enthusiasm and results accidentally persuading Claire's husband to look into it himself. My mom suddenly denied ever being against the procedure: "It filled in really beautifully. It looks natural." She even admitted that I didn't look "too L.A."

I went to see Dr. Suddleson, who seemed very pleased with his work, about 80 percent of which he said had grown in. The hair, he said, comes in a tiny bit kinky at first and takes eighteen months to flatten out. He said I should wait that long before deciding to get a second procedure, which would give me about half the improvement of the first one. He was pretty sure I'd be back.

I am, too. It's not that people treat me any differently, but I feel better anyway. I finally understand what women mean when they say they're wearing makeup or getting a boob job for themselves and not for male attention. It's like the zits in high school that other people won't notice: You're still walking around with anxiety that they might. I have the relief of once again not thinking about my hair. I am, once again, a guy who doesn't think of himself as vain. ❌

JOEL STEIN's first book, *Man Made: A Stupid Quest for Masculinity*, was not a New York Times best-seller.

## The Creepy Past, Robotic Present, and Sci-Fi Future of Pulling Your Hair Out (and Putting It Back Somewhere Else)



### Then

Nearly a half century of modern medicine treated pates like putty, implanting hair plugs the width of pencil erasers in the wrong directions, twisting hair-bearing flaps of scalp around to the front, or literally cutting out the bald spots and sewing together what was left.



### Now

Surgeons transplant naturally occurring groups of hair, gland, and skin from the back of the head into places they would naturally occur if it weren't for nature's cruelty. This was mainstream by the turn of the millennium; now robots have begun to help out with the extractions.



### Next

In a dream of post-Dolly-the-sheep hair restoration, stem cells from a few hair follicles (maybe even those belonging to someone more gifted—Tom Selleck, say) could be multiplied in a petri dish and then implanted or even injected into a thirsty scalp.—SORAYA KING