

Larry Palmer

The Haircut

IT WAS A WEDNESDAY AROUND 8:30 P.M., A WEEK BEFORE THANKSGIVING, 1958, when I strolled down the third floor corridor of Bancroft Hall towards Ted Bedford's faculty apartment. He was on duty that night—thus the open door. Jef, one of my fellow preps (what ninth graders were called at Phillips Exeter Academy), had invited me and his roommate, Brink, to spend the holiday break with his family in Salem, Massachusetts. It was the first time I had visited Bedford's faculty office, a space sealed off in the back foyer of his family living quarters by a mahogany door exactly like the one I lingered just outside of now, in the dorm hallway, an unsigned permission slip from the Dean of Students in hand.

Bedford sat at his desk, facing away from the hall and poring over some papers as I waited for him to notice me. He turned his head towards me with a glance that asked, "What's up?," his eyebrows becoming question marks as he peered over his glasses. I handed him the slip and asked him to sign it because my adviser was out of town. Bedford pushed his chair away from his desk and spun to face me, his smile so wide it seemed to touch his sideburns. "Well, I got a deal for you. Before I'll sign, you must get a haircut."

Get a haircut? There was nothing in the Exeter rulebook about the length of students' hair, only that coats and ties were required at all classes, chapel, church, and meals. I figured I had left behind this kind of concern about what Mom referred to as my nappy hair when I left St. Louis three months before. Was Ted Bedford, a young history teacher and the junior faculty member in the dorm, making up his own rules? I looked around distractedly for a moment, and considered whether I should bring up the rulebook. I noticed that on the right edge of Bedford's desk, the only space uncluttered by stacks of papers and books, sat a framed picture of his preschool boys—hair neatly trimmed, parted on the side.

I decided it wasn't smart to challenge him on the rules. He had my permission slip in his hand and gave no indication he was going to give it back to me. I knew from previous conversations with Bedford that he was at once the most intimidating, gregarious, and argumentative adult among the three faculty members living in Bancroft. Without much effort, he could have played the role of a lawyer in a movie. I regretted that I hadn't been able to get the signature I needed from my adviser, a bachelor who taught French and barely spoke to me (or anyone else) other than to say "good morning," and who would have signed the slip without question. Instead I was caught wondering how I could explain

to Bedford why my hair was so long; how I could tell him that I was acutely aware of the fact that all the adults at Exeter—from the janitors to the principal to the academy barber to this grinning, twenty-eight-year-old, prematurely balding guy sitting in front of me—were white. How seriously I doubted any of them could possibly understand the complexities of my Negro hair.



In my fourteen years I had never been to a barbershop. Starting when I was about four, every two weeks or so Dad would order me to take a seat in a chair in the kitchen or find a spot in the shade of the backyard, drape one of his old shirts backwards over me like a large bib, and take out his hand-operated clippers from a canvas bag. “Hold still!” he’d bark, grabbing the top of my head with his left hand. With his right he’d place the clippers against the side of my head and squeeze the shiny metal handles, compressing the heavy spring separating them, causing the teeth of the top blade to ratchet back and forth across the stationary teeth of the bottom. The regular rhythm of those moving blades was like the *clip-clop, clip-clop* of the ragman’s horse on the asphalt pavement I always heard just before he turned his wagon—loaded with pots, pans, broken household appliances, and clothing—into the alleyway alongside our house. Any interruption of the flat staccato of these clippers made my neck stiffen, since it usually meant the blades had become entangled in some knot of tight curls that Dad called kinks. “Hold still, this is going to pinch,” he’d grumble quietly, untangling my hair from the blades. He used the thicker of his two combs—the thin barber’s comb was reserved for my younger brother, Barry—to pull out as many kinks as possible before restarting with the trimmer and finishing up the sides. He always paused to unscrew the wing nut holding the cover over the blades to clean them out before proceeding to the hair on top, his “hold still!” the only interruption of the wordless *clip-clop* of the ritual as he’d finish cutting off all but an inch of my hair.

For two weeks after every one of these cuts, I’d apply Vitalis or some type of grease to my sculpted kinks, attempting to comb and brush them into straightness. They wound up growing back problematic as ever. A week before I boarded the train for Exeter on a full scholarship, a few months after my fourteenth birthday, Dad sat me down in his backyard shop for the last time. It didn’t occur to me to ask what to do about haircuts once I left for school, and Dad volunteered no parting advice.



Standing there in Ted Bedford’s foyer beneath a half dozen uncropped inches, trying to avoid his gaze, I raised my left hand and fidgeted with the double knot of my tie before offering him a version of the truth. “I don’t look bad with long hair,” I began. “I brush it every morning”—Bedford burst into laughter before

I could finish—"and after sports." I couldn't tell if he thought my comment was ridiculous, or if he was laughing because he had no hairstyle at all. But then, no longer smiling, Bedford pinched his eyebrows together, the way I imagined he might when singling out one of his students in class, and looked at me. "Come on, Palmer, what's your real story? You're about to spend Thanksgiving with Jef's parents, people you have never met, looking the way you do? You and I both know your parents would be embarrassed if you showed up looking like this!"

My parents *had* always made sure I was appropriately dressed and groomed whenever I ventured into the world beyond our house, even if it was only to take the bus downtown to meet Dad after work to shop for a new pair of shoes. But why did Ted Bedford care about the impression I might make on the parents of one of my dorm mates? Bedford gestured with his left hand for me to sit in the chair at the side of his desk, so I sat down tentatively and waited for Bedford to resume his questions. But he didn't.

I broke the silence. "It's not really practical for me to get a haircut before I go home for Christmas." Bedford's stare said, "why not?"

"Last month, I went downtown to see if I could find a Negro barber," I said. "I asked a Negro airman I saw on Main Street if he knew where I could find one. He told me no Negroes lived in Exeter. The only Negro barber he knew was near his base in Portsmouth. You know that's about fifteen miles away, so I gave up on getting a haircut." Bedford still didn't seem convinced, so I tried another angle.

"Just a few weeks ago, I looked through the window of the first barbershop on Main Street at a barber giving a student a crew cut with electric clippers. Those clippers won't work on my hair." He looked at me quizzically. "At the second shop," I went on, "I saw a barber giving a longhaired Exie a trim with scissors and a comb. That comb would snap into pieces trying to untangle my hair!"

I paused in my monologue, looked down at my hands folded in my lap, and mumbled, "And I've seen enough 'We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone' signs in businesses back home that I didn't even bother to go inside."

I didn't detect any skepticism on Bedford's face as he pushed back in his chair, gliding closer to his desk. As he leaned back further and waited with a sideways glance for more of my monologue, I plunged ahead, pointing out how I thought none of the white men or boys at Exeter would notice my shaggy locks. I pleaded that none of the other boys in the dorms, admiring the side-swept elegance of their own Cary Grant styles or criticizing each other's crew cuts, had ever said a word about my hair.

Setting aside his usual rapid-fire method of talking to finally end his own silence, Bedford said, simply, "The Academy barber cannot refuse to cut your hair." Glancing at the picture on his desk, he continued: "You are going to teach him, or one of the barbers downtown, how to do it. I'm holding your permission slip until you come back with a haircut." And he put my permission

slip in his desk drawer where it couldn't get lost in the clutter.

Dumbfounded by this unexpected "assignment," I stood up and turned around to leave the office, already figuring that Exeter's barber would be my safest way to complete it. But as I wandered back to my room, I found myself mulling over all the things I hadn't felt comfortable communicating to Bedford during our talk.



I didn't tell Bedford how that neatly packaged airman I'd run into downtown reminded me of my brother Mac, who was also in the Air Force. Or how when Mac graduated from Charles Sumner High back in St. Louis, six years before, he'd won a scholarship to attend a historically black college—a scholarship he turned down with the intention of borrowing money to attend a local college of pharmacy that accepted blacks and whites. When Dad had refused to sign the loan papers—the age of majority was twenty-one—Mac stormed out of the house and joined up.

Mac, the Boy Scout with a sash full of merit badges. Mac, the hustler with a part-time job making bicycle deliveries from a nearby drugstore. Mac, the snazzy dresser with a mocking tongue that he directed at me when he was not ignoring me altogether. One day, after my sister Lela insisted that he listen to me read the words on a milk container, Mac reluctantly agreed to help her convince our mother to enroll me in kindergarten a half year early, but the few times I saw Mac after he left home he continued to snub me. Still, I eavesdropped eagerly on his conversations with others and so learned he had tested "off the charts" on an IQ test early in his military service, that he'd been stationed in places like Guam and Alaska, and that what he was doing was "classified." I know it was some ghostly version of Mac, well-dressed and well-trimmed whether he was in uniform or not, who made me realize that the black airman I ran into on that October sidewalk was okay to approach about my own grooming dilemma.

I wondered what Bedford would think if he knew how my mom and dad had argued for months about whether I should be allowed to apply to Exeter. Mom saw a bright educational future for me, but Dad worried about my tiny body—I was not yet five feet and weighed less than a hundred pounds—in a white boys' boarding school over a thousand miles from home.

Dad had refused to attend a meeting with Exeter's principal when he visited St. Louis to meet prospective students and their parents, so Al, my oldest brother, went to the parents' meeting in his place. Willie, my second oldest brother and a public school teacher himself, stayed on the sidelines of the Exeter squabble. But, unlike Mac, he was constantly teaching me something: how to read a light meter and change a camera's settings; how trees fossilized in the Painted Desert in Arizona thousands of years ago; how to deliver a good speech (Willie had won a prize for public speaking while in high school).

When I tested high enough on an IQ test to earn a place in a gifted and

talented class in 1955 as part of the desegregation of the public schools, Willie was enthusiastic and informed my mom that George Hiram, who was to be my teacher, was the smartest person who ever attended Stowe Teachers College, the segregated public teachers college named in honor of Harriet Beecher Stowe, where both Willie and Hiram had earned their credentials. When Dad questioned some of Hiram's methods, Willie leapt to his defense. It was Hiram—who shepherded me through sixth, seventh, and eighth grades—who introduced Exeter and its scholarship program to my mom in February 1957. I don't know what Willie told my parents once he heard about the Exeter possibility, but I assumed that he believed anything Hiram recommended was good for me.

The arguments between my parents continued even after Exeter accepted me and offered me a full scholarship in early 1958. But something happened before the summer of that year—I don't know what—to bring about a truce. Perhaps it was Mom's determination to find a job cleaning houses to provide me with spending money. Or it might have been the school's generous offer to provide me with a clothing allowance the first year—for those jackets and ties I would need—and to pay for my transportation. Whatever happened, Dad finally relented.



The Sunday in 1958 when I left St. Louis, I sat in my coach seat in Union Station quite a while, going over my parents' instructions in my mind. I was to change trains in Cleveland that night and take another train to Boston. Once in Boston (early the next morning) I was to take a taxi to North Station where I would board a third train north, to a small New Hampshire town that I, my parents, and my nine siblings had never seen.

I don't remember how my one suitcase—a large trunk had been shipped earlier—ended up on the overhead rack. I glanced up at it and at my new businessman's hat—a fedora—tucked in beside it. The hat had been my parents' special purchase for my entry into a world of wearing coats and ties on a daily basis. I fiddled with my tie to make sure it was straight and glanced down at my white shirt, my gray slacks, and my checkered sports jacket with handkerchief tucked in the breast pocket. I remembered Mom's general admonition about my appearance whenever I went anywhere: "clothes make the man." I finally understood why the clothes and the hat were so important to my parents as I sat there, about to set out on a life among strangers.

As the train pulled slowly out of the station into the darkness of a tunnel, I wasn't conscious of the fact there had not been any special goodbyes to Al, Willie, or any of my other brothers or sisters. As the engine sped up and we emerged once more into the bright September morning, I could see the bridge over the Mississippi River into Illinois. I tried to imagine the new world I was about to enter, and, as the train hung there above the current, tears began to flow down my cheeks. I looked back at the smokestacks of St. Louis's factories,

reached for my handkerchief, and buried my face in it against the window so that none of the people around me would notice how the confident smile I'd worn during Mom and Dad's farewells had disappeared.

The farthest east I had ever been was about fifteen miles past East St. Louis, to the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site—the remains of an ancient Mississippian city. Dad, formerly a schoolteacher in his native Arkansas, once took my youngest brother Barry and me to visit the large grassy mounds. Even the East Side, with its racetrack and nightclubs where Miles Davis had gotten his start, seemed like a mythical place and was off limits to the youngest members of the Palmer clan. My other forays outside of St. Louis consisted of two trips to Arkansas; a day trip on the train to Hannibal, Missouri—Mark Twain's home—that I had won by selling subscriptions on my paper route; and a family camping trip in the Missouri Ozark Mountains. I was taken aback by the vastness and flatness of the Illinois cornfields stretching to the horizon. Neither my neighborhood—turn of the century houses, early twentieth-century apartments, and commercial establishments along wide boulevards—nor Forest Park, a mile from our house, provided the wide vistas I faced through the train window. Indiana became a string of names—Terre Haute, Greencastle, Indianapolis, Anderson, Muncie—shouted out by the conductor moving through the aisle.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and a book I'd brought along to read drew me out of myself. Reading seized the space in my mind that might have longed for the gray cityscape of my neighborhood or the purple wisteria blooming along our backyard fence. As the train rocked and swayed closer to the country's eastern shore, I erased the recently familiar—Dad using his steel hand-shears to trim the grass borders around the whitewashed trunks of our two maple trees; Willie instructing me on how to capture the beauty of a flower in the Missouri Botanical Garden with his 35 mm camera—to make space for new surroundings, panoramas, and people. My fickle teenage heart had already committed itself to a place where the books I used in my courses would be purchased by the scholarship office, where I would have my own room for the first time in my life, where I would be able to play a sport nearly every day, where all my teachers would be men like Hiram, and where Mom and Dad would not argue about my future in my presence as if I were not in the room.

The transfer in Cleveland, at about 9 P.M., went well; again someone helped me with my suitcase. I took my assigned seat and fell into a rocking sleep. When I awoke the next morning, a different conductor explained that I should get off at Back Bay Station in Boston rather than South Station, which is the last Boston stop. He told me it was an easier taxi ride to North Station, my ultimate destination, from Back Bay. I thanked him as he helped me retrieve my things from the compartment overhead.

My confidence restored after a good night's sleep, I started down the aisle, dragging my suitcase behind me as the train slowed to a stop at Back Bay. It was at this moment I noticed him—my image of *the* prep school boy coming down the aisle of the adjacent car towards me. He was a tall white teenager in a blue blazer, blue button-down shirt, striped tie, and tan raincoat, and he had his

own suitcase in his hand. As we approached each other at the exit door, I said, "Hello," remembering my Dad's admonition never to say hi, "Could you tell me how to get to North Station?"

"Sure, I'm going there," the prep school boy replied. "Would you like to share a cab?"

He introduced himself by name and as a senior at Phillips Academy at Andover, another New England boarding school and Exeter's archrival. He spoke easily and assuredly. His questions were all friendly, let's-get-to-know-each-other type questions: Where are you from? What school are you going to? What year are you? So I asked him the same type of questions as we boarded the same Boston & Maine train. I noticed this older teenager of the prep school world did not wear a hat. I made an entry in my mental notebook: leave new hat in closet at school.

I said good bye to him when he disembarked at the station for Andover and was left to complete the last thirty minutes of my journey alone once more, gazing out the window. The smokestacks of the red brick factory buildings in Lawrence and Haverhill reminded me of the shoe factories near downtown St. Louis, but, as we crossed into New Hampshire, horses and cows and barns with their silos dotted the landscape. At the Exeter stop, I dragged my suitcase off the train without noticing if any other boys climbed down with me. I got into a taxi (after the driver put my suitcase in the trunk) and said, "Take me to Bancroft Hall, please," amazed at how one twenty-four-hour-plus train trip could change so many things.



"You must be Palmer," a smiling, sparkling-eyed man said, in a familiar Midwestern accent, as I entered the dormitory. "I'm Ted Seabrooke," he continued, as he extended his hand. "I saw you get out of your taxi from my office window. Welcome to Bancroft Hall!" I shook his hand hoping my own face reflected his infectious smile. He told me that he knew St. Louis well. Before coming to Exeter, he'd coached wrestling at a high school in Granite City, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River. The ever-present voices of my parents or older siblings that usually whispered to me what I should do or say when I encountered a stranger disappeared from my consciousness. My fourteen-year-old gut told me: listen to Seabrooke.

I managed to transport my suitcase and myself to my room on the fourth floor by taking an elevator that the janitor unlocked for me. I unpacked and mingled with the other new students. Most of us were preps. There were a few tenth graders, known only as "lowers," and a few eleventh grade "uppers," and twelfth grade "seniors." As we introduced ourselves to each other, the first question after "where are you from?" was "are you a scholarship boy?" The dorm reverberated with conversation all morning, right up to lunchtime: *What sport are you going to play? Who do you have for math? Who's your adviser?*

We were doing more than making conversation. We were sizing up each

other's verbal skills in anticipation of our future competitions in the classroom. The verbal jousting continued as I sat down with six other preps for my first meal. I had already met three of them while reconnoitering the dorm. Jon, like me, was a scholarship boy from Salem, Massachusetts. Jef (for Joseph E. Fellows III), whose father had gone to Exeter, was also from Salem. His roommate, Brink (for Van Wyck Brinkerhoff IV), whose father also had gone to Exeter, was from San Antonio, Texas. Brink, Jef, and I were the smallest of our group; we must have looked like little boys playing dress-up in our jackets and ties. Jon, with his strawberry blond crew cut, was the tallest and from afar no doubt looked like a senior eating with the preps. Dick, Bill, and Ben, other preps at the table, all introduced themselves and volunteered where they were from.

Suddenly, in the midst of all the animated conversations around the table, Brink said to someone on his right, "You, Nigger!"

Just as suddenly, a deep New England silence absorbed every decibel of prep chatter. All eyes focused on me, the only Negro in the dining room. I looked past Brink's brown crew cut and noticed Seabrooke smiling at his two teenage daughters at the faculty table in the corner before centering my gaze on Brink's. Speaking without thinking, I said, "Don't use that word." Then continued in an even softer voice, saying, "It hurts my feelings." Brink mumbled a fumbling apology, and the preps' chatter resumed within minutes, albeit at a more subdued level.

Brink's response—the fact that he expressed genuine embarrassment and vulnerability, rather than attempting some elegant verbal twist to remove the social sting of what had just occurred—actually drew me to him. At that moment, responding to Brink, I had to bury my father's fears about this world I had chosen to inhabit. I made an unspoken vow never to tell anyone in my family about this incident. I also vowed never to tell Seabrooke or anyone else at Exeter about Brink's use of the word "nigger" to denigrate a *white boy* in my presence, hoping to preserve the possibilities of a future friendship uncomplicated by racial suspicion.

Exeter seemed a world away from the rest of the country's racial tensions and conflicts: Emmett Till's murder in 1955; armed troops escorting nine Negro teenagers into Central High School in Little Rock in 1957; the bill enacted by the Arkansas legislature in 1958 opposing desegregation of Little Rock Schools. The fact that my parents and all of my older siblings had been born in Arkansas made such events regular topics of Palmer family conversations. Towards the end of these discussions, a parent or older sibling would inevitably extract some moral from a particular news story that young Barry and I should take to heart, lapsing into a sing-song central Arkansas drawl to explain how to deal with whites in general or how to distinguish "okay" white people from those who might try to harm or insult us.

I hadn't heard a single reference to race at Exeter since that first day in September. But here it was, November, and I found myself on the ragged edge of a conversation with this white teacher about my Negro hair, trying to convince him of the importance of my visit to Jef's home with Brink without having to break those promises I'd made under my breath or to explain how much it meant to me that Brink and I had become friends in the first place. I guess if it was a haircut that he wanted, a haircut he would get.



When I got up my nerve the next day to go to the barbershop in the basement of one of the main academic buildings, my confidence was briefly shaken by the age of the barber. The white-haired bespectacled man looked like a retired barber at best. Maybe I should have gone downtown to find a younger man with steadier hands. I pondered this as he smiled kindly, and then he startled me with a question: "How do you want your hair cut?"

My dad had never asked me what I wanted my hair to look like. Staring into this barber's mirror, I imagined myself transformed into a movie star like Harry Belafonte. But my immediate problem brought me back down to earth in a hurry. "Have you ever cut a Negro's hair?" I asked the old man tentatively. "No," he replied gently, focusing his pale eyes on my reflection in the mirror. "What do you think would be the best way for me to begin? Clippers or comb and scissors?" "Clippers," I replied, a bit more confident, "but let me comb it out first." I took out the sturdy Hercules comb I had brought with me, worked out all the kinks I could, and told the barber to leave about three inches on the top and make the sides a bit shorter.

I could see his reflection as he examined various comb-like attachments on the shelf behind him, and when he picked up one of them and attached it to his electric clippers. (Dad did not have any attachments for his hand-helds.) In a moment of truth, the barber flipped them on. I could barely see the teeth of the rapidly moving blades or how they worked, but I imagined the motor replacing Dad's heavy hands. Its noise and the singing of those fast-moving blades reminded me of June bugs—the flying beetles Barry and I used to catch and put into jars back in St. Louis. The buzz of these electric blades was nothing like the slow *clip-clop* of Dad's clippers.

I scrutinized the barber's every move in his large mirror, more astonished than frightened. He used various plastic attachments to cut my sides, stopping occasionally to ask if he had taken off enough. I could never actually see what Dad was doing when sitting bibbed for a trim back home. I noticed my neck was relaxed because, somehow, I knew there was little chance these electric shears would clog in my hair. The barber found the top more of a challenge. Even though he used several different guards, he had some trouble cutting the hair evenly. There were no gaping holes, only little valleys dipping here and there that I could probably obscure through vigorous combing, brushing, and hefty amounts of Vivalis.

Later that night, after dinner, I knocked on Bedford's office door, trying to anticipate what he would say about my haircut. "Come in!" he shouted through the closed, but unlocked door. "Palmer," he began in his usual impassioned manner as I walked towards his desk, "did you see this morning's *Boston Globe*?" Bedford was a walking and talking encyclopedia on what was changing in the world, gleaned from his absorption of both the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times* every day. Before I could answer, he went on to tell me about another French colony gaining its independence from France. I assured him I would read the *Globe* but began to wonder if he understood why I was there. He pushed his chair back from the desk, extracted my permission slip, and without so much as a word about my hair, signed it and laid it in my upturned palm.