

TANGLES AND ALL

Max Orlowski

I was brushing my hair one morning when my comb snagged itself on a knot. It hurt a lot, and it certainly shocked me. I haven't had to deal with knots or tangles for a long while.

I used to have a complicated relationship with my hair. It started with me never taking care of it properly, leaving my hair to get messy with tangles that my mom would have to painfully brush out. Then I started not liking how the hair framed my face; it seemed longer than it was, which wasn't a good look for me. More complications started around early high school, when I began exploring my gender identity. Outward expression had always been difficult for me. I felt this internal need to "look queer" so that people would see I wasn't straight or cisgender. My outward expression was most definitely tied to how I wanted to be perceived by others, and that was what I struggled with the most.

The bob cut was a short-lived phase; I only ever got that haircut once. It was an exciting first step into having short hair. The cut was lighter and far easier to manage than before. Still, when looking into the mirror, while it was enjoyable to play with, I felt as though it didn't fit, and I wasn't sure why. Not to say it looked bad, just not right, and I couldn't figure out what was missing.

I soon after moved on to the shortest hair I was comfortable with. Around this time I had begun considering whether I might be non-binary or somewhere under the umbrella, I opted to get a pixie cut I still remember my brother's initial reaction to this haircut; he told me I looked like a lesbian. I didn't pay him any mind; I was enjoying my newly cut hair. When I saw myself in the mirror, it felt much better than the bob, and I loved how the short hair shaped my face. I felt cute, the haircut was cute, everyone thought it was cute, and it was the hairstyle I stuck with the longest; I even wore that style on my graduation day. Having shorter hair certainly made it easier for me to pass, as my haircut led to me being perceived as a boy on multiple occasions, which was undoubtedly a highlight for me. Even so, I eventually began to miss my long hair.

I started fantasizing about having long hair again, being able to style it with ponytails and braids and such. Being able to run my hands through it, twirling it, and just being able to play with it again. On the other hand, I was afraid that I would be perceived as merely a girl again. I loved being seen as more masculine or androgynous, and I feared that I'd have to give that up in favour of having long hair. I wasn't sure what to do, so while I waited for my brain to decide, I kept my hair short.

It wasn't until spring of 2024 that I finally made the choice. After continuously playing around with my outward expression and doing a little introspection, I started briefly questioning my gender again. After class one day, I decided to have a conversation with one of my friends about this. They gave me a lot to think about and ultimately helped me come to the conclusion that I was genderfluid. This explained why I had been having a lot of trouble with how I appeared to the world. I weighed the pros and cons in my mind, coming to the decision that I would grow my hair out, no longer caring what people thought.

Summer came and went, and by the time August rolled around, I had decided the perfect compromise for my hair. I got one last haircut—what I considered somewhere between a long wolfcut and a shag, but the best part, by far, were my new curtain bangs. The hair around my face was now short and framed it in the way I loved most, while still allowing me to grow my hair. The bangs certainly took some getting used to, and it was especially annoying on windy days, but that haircut was the best decision I ever made.

No matter how I appeared to others, no matter how I was perceived, I knew who I was. It took a lot of introspection to remember this, and I'm glad I did. My hair is now down to my shoulder blades, which is longer than it has been in a while. Even though my hair routine has become slightly more time-consuming, I still enjoy every second of it. I'm not sure how long I plan to grow it out—it certainly won't be forever—but what I do know is that, for now, I will enjoy every moment of brushing through my hair, tangles and all.