

How it feels to...

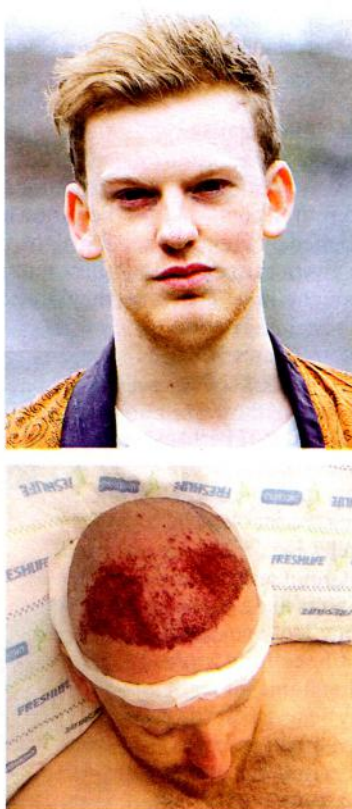
...have a hair transplant

When *Jonnie Bayfield* lost his locks, his self-confidence dropped out too, which is why he found himself in a Turkish clinic having needles inserted into his scalp

Only when I got back to the hotel room in Istanbul did I realise what I had just done to myself. My girlfriend looked up at me from the bed as though a monster had been given the key card. My whole head was bloody and bandaged, swollen and seeping; a line of red dripped down the dip of my spine; my forehead was numb and ballooned. Freshly transplanted hairs poked from my raw scalp like scorched twigs in a battlefield trench. That night, I slept sitting up, head pounding. Looking at myself in the bathroom mirror — which was presumably haunted by the same look of horror in a long line of mangled, hairless men — I finally understood that this is what it took to get back what I had lost.

If Samson, the biblical strongman, lost only his strength when he lost his hair, then he should quit complaining. I was 21 when I started losing mine, and with it went not only my meagre strength, but also my confidence, libido, charisma, courage, career, sex appeal, lightness, optimism and youth. Back then, in 2013, I was a catch. Not only did I have a jawline that could slice bread, but I also had a head of hair that could mop floors better than the prime minister's. I was an actor and comedian, working regularly and with a bright future ahead. I had prospects, they would say — right until the moment I looked in the mirror and saw that my dense quiff was teasingly deteriorating before my eyes.

The TV roles dried up as my stage persona was derailed by crippling self-consciousness. As I withered and thinned up top, the rest of my body was yoyoing,



By the second round of injections, I would have readily confessed to crimes I hadn't committed

through depression and the typical pattern of self-destruction that keeps young men chain-smoking roll-ups and eating whole Viennettas in the dark.

Soon enough, shampoo became an existential threat. I became a pathetic Macbeth, lathered hands outstretched, counting each hair of betrayal trapped in the foam. Hair is foul, and foul is hair. Was I losing my mind? It certainly felt like it. Desperation always ends in blind faith, and so then came the miracle cures: overpriced steroid creams and minoxidil and finasteride, the ugly sisters of balding. When those tanked, I turned to pepper shakers of pigmented hair dust that I would rattle onto my scalp as though I was some kind of carrot cake. Next came new-age vitamins, and spoonfuls of powdered African bush root with rinses of Indian lime juice in castor oil. I was a man desperate and adrift.

Eventually I found myself at a hair transplant clinic in London. I was taken to see a "treatment adviser", who sold transplants like used cars, but had the price list of a funeral director. He quoted me £7,000 for a "homegrown" procedure, and so simply to piss him and his big, shiny wristwatch off, I booked myself in on a £1,400 all-in package deal at the Smile Hair Clinic in Istanbul.

The Turkish transplant industry is already worth more than £700m a year. Over the past five years it has exploded, delivering more than 1,500 operations a month, predominantly for European men.

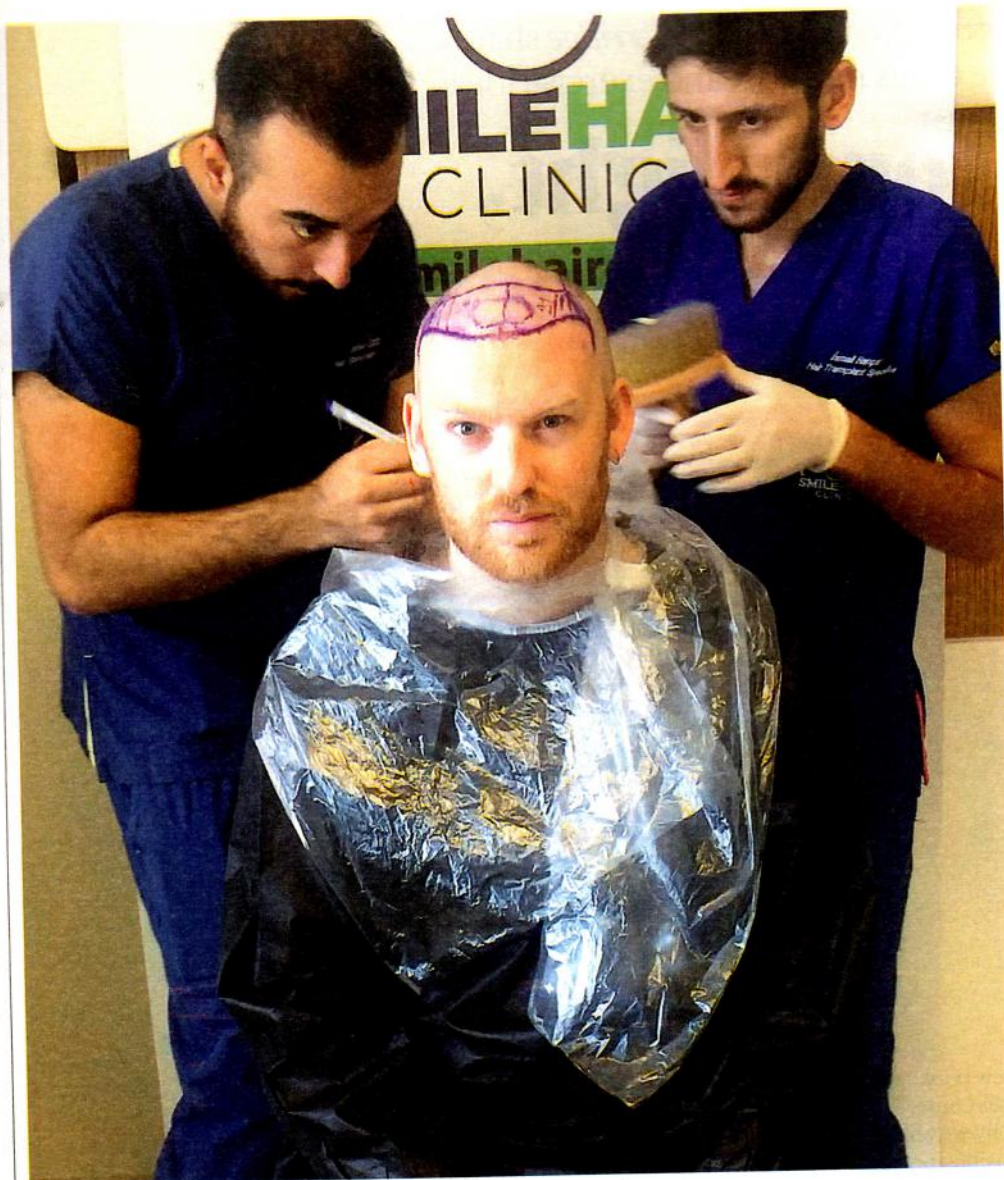
The system runs like a well-oiled machine. At the airport, as muezzins put out calls to prayer, I was bundled into a minivan alongside five other follicularly

THROUGH THICK
AND THIN

40%

of men will experience
noticeable hair loss by
the age of 35

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF HAIR
RESTORATION SURGERY



challenged men. As if things couldn't get any more disorientating, the guys sitting opposite me were a pair of middle-aged Spanish magicians. They didn't appear to be eaten up by humiliation and societal shame like the rest of us "youngsters". Instead, they treated the whole thing like a stag weekend. "I can't wait to use a hairdryer again!" one beamed, between cup-and-ball tricks, before we rolled up to a strikingly modern hospital-like compound.

Naturally, I assumed we had taken a wrong turn. For my measly money, I was expecting to be welcomed into the arms of a blood-stained barber surgeon with a jar of horsehair in one hand and a tube of wood glue in the other. Instead, we were ushered into a professional-looking health suite, handed a frothed coffee and seated in chairs that belonged upside down in Tate Modern. The

lead doctor took us briskly through a short induction, explaining each of the stages of the three- to six-hour operation, depending on "need". What caught my eye, however, was a line in the accompanying brochure. "We cannot work magic and make new hair," it read. "A transplant can only offer the *illusion of density*."

Future novel title secured, I was ushered into a private operating room, where all eight of the technicians — most of whom were, absurdly, also sporting fresh heads of transplanted hair — surveyed me. With my new hairline painstakingly deliberated and decided upon, they marked up my scalp in purple pen and then shaved it like a convict's.

I watched as the clumps of my remaining hair fell away. With each one, I made a choice to let it all go. A half-decade of panic, fear and self-hate drifted to the ground and

TO BALDLY GO
Jonnie undergoing treatment at the Smile Hair Clinic. Opposite, before he lost his hair and, below, after the operation

was swept out of sight. I settled onto the bed and, within an hour, hundreds of micro-lesions had been sliced into my scalp, though not before I had endured the most painful part of the entire procedure. A series of anaesthetic injections bookended each section of the operation, and with each needle came a fresh hell. It was like something out of *A Clockwork Orange*. By the second round, I would have readily confessed to crimes I hadn't committed.

Essentially, the transplant itself involves ripping hair from the back of the head and sticking it into the front — primary school art-class stuff. Or so I had assumed, until I saw them implant each extracted hair follicle into the micro-lesion by hand. It is artisanal work, with technicians working away like insects, routinely spritzing my bloody head with water as though tending a tropical orchid.

What I mostly considered, as I tried to lie still and ignore their busy hands above me, was how drastic it all was. How my own failings, insecurity and lack of resilience to a society obsessed with physical appearance had led me to endure this pseudo-torture, this act of self-mutilation on the far side of the continent.

Back home, two months later, the new hairs are beginning to take root, though I still look more like a mangy fox in a nuclear exclusion zone than someone off *Love Island*. Naturally, stigma and shame are still part of the process. For the most part, I haven't told anyone about the procedure, so consider this my "coming out". Though, when I first saw my parents, after about a month, they barely noticed. My father just assumed I'd had a particularly severe haircut.

It takes six months before you can assess the results, and two years before it's a done deal. Would I recommend a hair transplant? Ask me in two years. In the meantime, it's not often that we get the chance to take control of that which threatens to ruin us. For me, it was satisfying to take a stand, instead of flapping in the breeze like a white flag of self-pity and loathing. I owed myself a bit of kindness. Although, when all's said and shampooed, the real shame is that such moments of self-discovery seem limited to the relationship we have with our own physical appearance, not the urgent mess that lurks just under the skin ■