

# MUSTACHE

**By Dennis Pahl**

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** When a man shaves off his mustache the result is like a planetary shift and the consequences of his trivial action reshape reality and play out to an absurd conclusion. It's a technique employed most famously by Kafka in *The Metamorphosis* (Gregor Samsa woke up one morning to find he had turned into a giant beetle.) and later by Jerzy Kozinsky in his beguiling novella *Chance*. It's a literary balancing act because if for one moment the reader loses faith in the illusion; the whole story comes crashing down. No such problem here. Pahl pulls all the right strings and with his swift authoritative prose delivers an entertaining and satisfying existential farce that is a credit to its genre.

One day in August, in the middle of a heat wave, which was tending to make everyone a little dizzy, Steiner got up early, looked into the bathroom mirror, and, realizing he'd grown tired of gazing at the same face everyday, decided to cut off his mustache. That would change things, he thought. Besides, the mustache was getting on his nerves. It

was always itching in hot weather. Worse than that, he found himself touching it habitually, as if he couldn't stop grooming it whenever his hands were free. Enough was enough, he told himself. So he cut it off. It was a simple act. And harmless, as far as he could tell.

But that morning something strange happened. Before going off to work, Steiner came into the bedroom to say goodbye to his wife, who was still lying in bed, half-asleep, her dark hair spread out on the pillow. He calmly bent down to kiss her, but as she turned to him with her usual sleepy-eyed smile, she looked up and saw his face—and screamed. She jumped back to the head of the bed, instinctively clutching the sheet to her body.

“Who are you?” she asked, trembling. “What are you doing here?”

Steiner, shocked at his wife's reaction, took a step back and almost tumbled.

“How did you get in here?” Her voice turned to a whisper. “I'll call the police if you don't leave this minute.”

He wondered if his wife were still in the middle of a nightmare. On the other hand, maybe she was recalling something offensive he'd done or said the day before, about which she'd been angry ever since. She could have been still fuming over one of his comments about last night's dinner, or annoyed he never listened carefully to what she was saying. She could have been upset about one thing or another. But why would she want to call the police?

Steiner, mystified, left the apartment, thinking he'd deal with his domestic problems later. His wife must have been in one of her moods. When he got to his office building he put the whole incident out of his mind. Coming out of the elevator on the fourth floor he walked down the hall and waved to Gloria, the receptionist at the front

desk, with whom he'd always exchanged a few friendly words each morning. But today she acted differently. She looked at him curiously and asked what she could do for him.

“Oh, nothing. Thanks. I'm fine,” he said, thinking she wanted only to be helpful. He continued to walk past her desk.

“Excuse me, sir. You cannot go in without an appointment.”

“Appointment? Oh, I see. Very funny...”

“I'm sorry, sir,” she said, stopping him. “How can I help you?”

Just then, his business colleague Kransky showed up. Instead of greeting Steiner, however, he looked at him strangely and asked Gloria if there was a problem. Steiner looked back at both of them, confused. He couldn't understand what they were up to. It must be some sort of joke, he thought. An April fool's day prank in August. Yet maybe it was something else entirely. Was it a sign of something having gone terribly wrong with his job? Was their odd behavior a way of distancing themselves from him, from somebody whom the higher-ups in the firm had suddenly found unworthy?

Steiner, coming to his senses, then thought there was no reason to be paranoid. He wasn't, it was true, being too productive lately. But that was just a dry spell he was going through. He'd always been a valued employee, so what reason was there to worry? Then it dawned on him what it could be. He smiled to himself and saw it was probably all a big misunderstanding because of what, in his foolishly impulsive way, he'd done that morning when he decided to change his appearance. “Of course,” he mused. “It's my new look. People see you one way for so long and then you go ahead and alter something about yourself and they have a new impression, even a new attitude about you.

They are just not used to the new me.” He now relaxed, feeling relieved to have discovered the source of his concern.

“Oh, I see,” he said to Kransky, now hoping to clear up the misunderstanding. “You didn’t notice. I got rid of my mustache. It’s me, Steiner. Look.” Steiner stood up straight, turned in profile, then turned again, face forward, and, smiling broadly he put his forefinger above his lips to give the likeness of the mustache that used to be there. “You probably didn’t recognize me. Ha, ha.”

But neither the receptionist nor Kransky saw anything humorous in this. They simply regarded him as a stranger, one possibly with bad intentions, who had intruded into their place of business. Kransky raised an eyebrow at Gloria, and then signaled that she should call security at once. Steiner, noticing her getting on the phone, understood they meant business and, not wishing to make a scene, thought it wise just to go away, perhaps take the whole day off. So he headed toward the elevator, baffled, not saying a word or nodding goodbye to anyone.

If it was some kind of practical joke they were playing, it was not funny anymore. When Steiner got out of the elevator and stepped into the lobby he paused before one of the mirrors there and looked intently at himself. Except for the mustache, everything about him was intact. There was Steiner, good old Steiner, with the same old hazel eyes, the same old delicately narrow nose, the same old chin... Only the expression on his face seemed a little more worried than usual. Otherwise there was nothing really new about him.

When he turned around he saw another one of his colleagues, Solomon, who was walking through the lobby in his direction. Steiner purposely tried to put himself face to

face with Solomon, but the latter didn't even acknowledge him and walked right past him, to the elevator, as if Steiner were a ghost. What accounted for this attitude toward him, a devoted worker? He wondered if he was about to lose his job, his livelihood, all because some higher-ups wished to downsize, perhaps selfishly to enrich themselves further, reaping more of the company's profits. He'd always suspected that loyalty didn't count for anything at this firm and now he had his proof.

As he made his way through the hot city streets, and finally into the park, he thought it possible that Kransky, who, as he always imagined, was secretly jealous of him, decided to malign him somehow. That might explain everything he had witnessed at the office this morning. He tried hard to shift away from such thoughts, but they kept surfacing in his brain, until he became mentally exhausted. He sat down on a bench, under a shady tree, and fell asleep and had a dream.

He dreamt he was in the office of a psychotherapist he'd known years ago, somebody he had once thought of visiting regularly to discuss his life and to sort out whatever conflicts, real or imagined, he was having. In the dream the therapist, a Chinese man with wire-rimmed glasses, sat in a corner of the room. Because he spoke so low and with such a thick accent, Steiner had to strain to hear whatever came out of the man's mouth and sometimes had to guess what he was saying. Or he would pretend to understand so as to avoid any awkwardness about asking the man to repeat, in a louder voice, almost everything he said.

As far as he could tell, the therapist, named Dr. Liu, was asking Steiner why he felt he was living the wrong life and if he thought there was a better one. Steiner was at first confused, not sure if the therapist asked whether he was living the wrong “life” or living

with the wrong “wife.” When he asked for clarification, Steiner still could not make out with certainty Dr. Liu’s words. So, covering his bases, Steiner answered that he was satisfied with both his wife and his life and had no expectation of doing anything differently. Then, in a sudden spurt of candor, he questioned if he should even be talking to a therapist in the first place, at which point Dr. Liu told him he was living in denial and it would do no good at all to pretend to be satisfied when he was obviously deeply troubled.

“I don’t think I’m deeply troubled,” said Steiner. “Besides, this is only a dream. So why are you laying all this on me?”

“Even if it is only a dream,” Dr. Liu explained, “it is made of the stuff of your inner consciousness, what’s deep down inside you, and there is no escape from that, no matter where you go or how much you try to change yourself on the outside.”

Steiner had a vague idea of what the man was saying but at the same time knew he was not trying to run away from himself. He only decided to cut off his mustache, that’s all. Why should there be any deep meaning in that? Sure, he wanted to have a new look, but also it was a matter of hygiene. He felt cleaner when he shaved his whole face and moreover discerned a kind of smoothness above his upper lip he hadn’t felt for years. Sometimes things go no deeper than that. No more than skin deep. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

“A cigar is never just a cigar,” the therapist replied, answering Steiner’s thoughts.

At that point Steiner, coughing, woke up from his dream, noticing that there was a man, an African-American man, sitting next to him on the bench, a pencil in his hand,

turning the pages of a notebook and puffing on a cigar, the smoke drifting toward Steiner’s face. Steiner, clearing his throat, looked over at him and their eyes met.

“Sorry about the smoke. Didn’t mean to disturb you,” the man said, waving the smoke away with his hands and turning his head to take another puff on his cigar.

“That’s alright. No problem,” said Steiner. He felt drowsy and thought this encounter could be a continuation, just another part, of his dream. He saw the man on the bench, seeming to be in his thirties, slim, without a hair on his head or face, except for his eyebrows and a thick, well-groomed mustache.

“What are you reading?” asked Steiner. It was unlike him to talk to strangers in the park, or anywhere else for that matter, but today he was not quite himself.

“Poems.”

“Is that so?” Steiner asked.

“Yes. I write.” He paused. “I also teach literature at a yeshiva.”

“Really?”

“For three years now. Mostly part-time.”

“Hmm.... Interesting.” Steiner peered at the notebook.

“It’s a series of poems,” the man said. “About the African-American slave cemetery in lower Manhattan, not far from Wall Street. The wall, you know, was originally built by slaves in order to prevent the British and the Indians from getting close to Dutch property.”

“Things haven’t changed too much, have they?” Steiner said. “Only the players. One group is always enslaving another, always taking advantage... Sometimes I feel enslaved myself—at my job. But mostly underappreciated.”

“You don’t know what slavery is,” the man said. “As for the other, you mean you don’t get the recognition you deserve?”

“Recognition? They literally don’t acknowledge my existence,” Steiner said. “I’m just a nobody for them. I’m practically invisible.”

“A nobody? Try being a black poet in America. Then you’ll understand what it means to be invisible.”

“You’re right. I guess I shouldn’t complain.”

“Go ahead. Complain all you want. I’ll just sit here and smoke my cigar, if you don’t mind.”

Steiner sat with the man for a while and told him his experience that morning and said that he traced back all his bad luck to cutting off his mustache.

“It was probably a fatal error. I’m not superstitious, but ever since I cut it off, things haven’t been the same.” Steiner looked almost enviously at the man’s mustache.

“If I had any luck, I’d never attribute it to facial hair,” the man said, patting down his mustache.

Steiner admitted that the man had a point. After talking some more, about how long the heat wave would last, they shook hands and wished each other well. Of course Steiner couldn’t continue to blame his disappointing day on his decision to cut off his mustache. It was too ridiculous an idea. But he needed to have some explanation, and he searched his mind as diligently as he could, only to come up with nothing.

An hour later he wandered out of the park and crossed a few avenues. On the corner of one street he saw a sign, posted on a door, advertising tealeaf readings by Gabriela. “Why not?” he told himself. He had nothing to lose. So he went in, climbed

up a staircase, and knocked on the door, where a young woman greeted him warmly. It would be good, he thought, to escape the scorching heat in an air-conditioned room and enjoy a nice cup of tea.

She asked if he ever had a reading before.

“No,” he said. “I don’t actually believe in this stuff.”

“Is that right? Then why are you here?”

“Curiosity.”

“Are you having a bad day?”

“I guess you can say that.”

He sat at a table, sipping green tea and watching the woman spread Tarot cards in front of her. She picked up one of the cards, looked carefully at it, and asked Steiner if he’d been through some changes lately.

“How did you know? You got that from the cards?”

“Yes. But I also feel things? I noticed your aura, for example.”

Steiner searched around him to see if he could discern his aura and wondered what color it was and if he could have seen it with 3-D glasses. He had a pair at home.

“No, 3-D glasses aren’t necessary,” she said. “You either have special gifts or you don’t.”

“I don’t have any gifts, not that I know of. As far as any changes, there have been a few. This morning I went into the bathroom and cut off my mustache.”

“I meant, more substantial changes—in your home-life for example, or at your work. You don’t have to provide details. I’m beginning to sense strongly that you’ve

been through a lot. You’ve had difficulties. Hardships. You probably know what I’m talking about.”

Steiner nodded his head in agreement.

“Still,” she went on, “you have great energy inside you. You have the capacity to reclaim anything you might have lost. It’s all up to you. Everything depends on how much you want it. That’s what I’m seeing.”

“You see that in the cards?”

“No, I see it here,” she said, pointing to her solar plexus.

“Then what are the cards for? And what about the tea leaves?” Steiner asked.

“That’s all for show, frankly. I don’t need any of that. I see things, I sense things the moment a client comes in.” Steiner began cautiously to get up from the table, and when he made some movements toward leaving, the young woman ran to block his way.

“Please,” she said, standing by the door.

“Please what?”

“Please...that will be twenty dollars.”

“What? Twenty? I thought the sign outside said ten dollars.”

“That was yesterday’s special,” the young woman said. “On Monday everything is half off. Today it’s the regular price.”

Steiner reluctantly paid the fee, thanked the woman, and left. He decided to return home, where he knew his wife would be waiting for him. He only hoped she had, over the course of the day, come to her senses after this morning’s episode, after he had woken her up perhaps too abruptly and, as it seemed, in the middle of a nightmare. He had called her earlier in the day but she hung up the phone, claiming she had no idea who was

talking to her. She didn't recognize his voice and had stated very firmly that she didn't appreciate prank calls.

When Steiner entered the door of his fifth floor apartment he found nobody home. The place was horribly hot and there was no sign that the air conditioner had recently been on. Removing his tie and sports jacket, he went into the bedroom. It was a mess, looking as though it had been ransacked. The dresser was nearly empty of his wife's things, the closets were open, and a large suitcase was missing. There was no note left anywhere explaining why she had left, but for Steiner it was obvious his wife was still under the same impression she'd been under that morning, when she had treated him like a stranger, like a home invader who'd come to rob her or to do something worse. He opened up one of the middle drawers and pulled out a photo album and riffled through it. Then he took it to the bathroom mirror and looked at the pictures of himself, comparing them with the face he saw in the mirror. “The same,” he thought. He shook his head in disbelief.

On the way out, locking up his apartment, he ran into the porter, who was mopping the floor. He'd known Kenny, the porter, since he had moved into the building. Steiner greeted him with a smile and was naturally surprised when the porter asked if he was a friend of Steiner's visiting for the week.

“What did you say? Friend? Visiting?”

“Yeh...are you his friend?” he asked, holding onto his mop.

“Kenny, don't you recognize me?”

“No.”

“It’s me, Steiner. Just without my mustache.” He opened his wallet and showed him a fairly recent picture of himself. “Look,” he said. “I’m the same person.”

The porter chuckled, as if the strange man before him, one of Steiner’s visitors as he thought, was joking with him. Steiner, frustrated, then pulled out an older picture of himself, showing him before he’d grown a mustache. “Here you go. You see the resemblance now?” Already he was rummaging through his mind as to what neighbor’s door he could knock on to get confirmation that he was who he claimed he was. But he knew none of the neighbors would be home at his hour. The porter, having leaned his mop up against the wall, was now studying the picture.

“No, that’s not you...” he said, shaking his head.

“Of course it’s me. Only a bit younger. You can’t see that?”

The porter showed a half-smile and gazed at Steiner skeptically. “What are you doing with Mr. Steiner’s wallet, anyway?”

Steiner stared back at the porter, turned, and hurried down the stairs. He stopped in the courtyard, bewildered, and then began walking aimlessly down the block. He passed other apartment buildings and a row of stores. On the other side of the street he saw a local realtor he knew. Why not try his luck one more time? Someone had to recognize him. This was the realtor who, over three years ago, had helped him find an apartment right after Steiner had gotten married. The two of them had been friendly ever since.

“Hey, Bob...how are you?” Steiner asked. He was making believe he was rubbing his nose so as not to show his whole face, trying to hide the area where he had cut off his mustache.

“Do I know you?” Bob smiled cordially.

Steiner’s own smile froze on his lips. He stood in front of his friend, looking him straight in the face, and realizing Bob had no idea who he was. Steiner was demoralized.

He just said, “Sorry...I must have mistaken you for someone else,” then stepped aside and went down the street, back to the subway station.

Standing in the crowded subway car, holding onto a metal pole, he looked at the passengers on either side of him, all of them unknown to him just as much as he was unknown to them. He almost felt home among strangers. He was dead tired and practically fell asleep standing up, just as he came to the station he wanted, near the park. He was hoping to find some peace amid the grassy hills and leafy trees of the park, but he also wished to go back to the bench where the man he had met earlier had been reading his poems. When he got there, however, no one was sitting on the bench. There was just an ice cream vendor nearby.

Steiner asked the vendor if he had noticed a black man on the bench in the late morning, a guy who was smoking a cigar and reading. Steiner knew that nobody sits on a bench all day long, but he was desperate and looking for answers. He had no idea what he would have asked the man on the bench, had the man been there. Nor did he know how the man would be of any help to him.

“No, I don’t remember anyone like that and I’ve been at this location most of the day.”

“Really?” Steiner didn’t remember the ice cream vendor having been there before, but took him at his word.

“Hey, there are so many people who come and go, it’s impossible to keep track. Sorry about that, bud. Would you care for a popsicle?” The vendor wiped his brow.

“No, thanks,” said Steiner, who was no longer thinking straight.

The vendor, not busy, seemed suddenly sympathetic. He asked Steiner, as if to humor him, “So what about the guy on the bench? Anything else you can tell me?”

Steiner seemed to be out of breath, and was quite beside himself. He thought for a second.

“He had a mustache.”

**(end)**

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I once saw the French movie ‘La Moustache’ in which a man shaves off his mustache, only to realize, much to his dismay, that no one notices. That is, people continue to view him same as before. I wanted, in my story, to follow the basic idea and take it further, that is, to take the absurdity to its logical conclusion: when the man cuts off his mustache, he unexpectedly alters his life completely and no one recognizes him at all.*

*My interest, in most of my writing, is to explore the strangeness of ordinary experiences, to illustrate how one small step can have existential implications: in this instance, how a simple desire for change can lead to bizarre consequences. The story is about alienation, both psychological and social. It is also about the desire, however futile, for meaningful human contact. My poet-friend David Mills, who has written about the African-American slave cemetery in New York, inspired one character. Anyone who sees a video of him will*

*understand immediately why he is a big inspiration. My other influences are Kafka and the Russian absurdist Daniil Karmis.*

**BIO:** Dennis Pahl is a professor of English at Long Island University. His fiction has appeared in *Confrontation*, *New Feral Press*, *Vestal Review*, *Epiphany Magazine* and *Leopardskin & Limes*. One of his stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize and he was awarded ‘Honorable Mention’ in a *Glimmer Train* short fiction contest. Three of his stories were made into short films. The last production, ‘The Museum of Lost Things’ won ‘Best Story’ at the 2018 Long Island International Film Expo and was nominated for ‘Best Comedy’ at the 2018 Madrid International Film Festival.