



# I AM NOT MY HAIR

INTERIOR DESIGNER **SHEILA BRIDGES** SEEMED TO HAVE HAD IT ALL: A-LIST CLIENTS, FEATURES IN GLOSSY MAGAZINES, A HIT TELEVISION SHOW, LUCRATIVE ENDORSEMENTS, AN EXQUISITE HARLEM APARTMENT AND A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY HOME. IN AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM *THE BALD MERMAID*, THE TASTEMAKER'S FORTHCOMING MEMOIR, BRIDGES SPEAKS ABOUT HOW LOSING HER SIGNATURE CURLY HAIR TO ALOPECIA AREATA, AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE, ULTIMATELY LED HER ON AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY OF PEACE AND PERSONAL POWER

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"I spent many hours blow-drying and curling my hair, hoping it would resemble movie star Farrah Fawcett's," says Bridges about her high school look (opposite page). Here the author, wearing a Tracy Reese dress, stands in her Harlem living room. This was her first photograph without her hair.

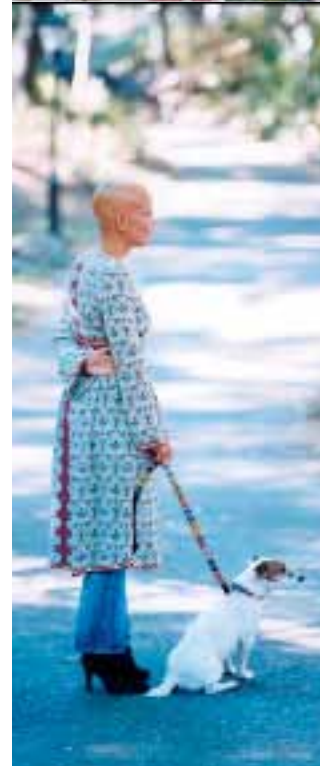
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Interior designer Sheila Bridges decorated homes for the wealthy and powerful, and on her popular television show she dispensed useful tips for all of us. She was a fixture in columns and publications that chronicled *New York's Black*, famous and fabulous set. And then it seemed as if she had disappeared. She didn't. At the height of her very promising public career, the very private trendsetter was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease that caused her to lose her hair. Here, in an exclusive excerpt from Bridges's piercingly honest memoir, **The Bald Mermaid** (Pointed Leaf Press, \$35), the Philadelphia native, 48, must face giving up the enviable mane that had come to define, and soon, confine her.

When I first started crying it was definitely still July, because I had just celebrated my birthday. At some point, Tuesday became Wednesday—or was it Wednesday that became Thursday? What I do remember is I bought myself a red-velvet cupcake to eat and a blue Gillette razor to shave my head.

I had given up on all the doctors, the acupuncture and herbs, the prescribed lotions and over-the-counter potions that supposedly would bring about the rebirth of my hair. I didn't want to wear a toupee, a wig or a weave. Marred by all-consuming hair thoughts, I was tired of explaining and sick of pretending. It had reached the point where the locks I was losing were calling all the shots. So, instead of trying to hide or deny my hair loss, I decided I would literally face it head on. I couldn't stress about my hair falling out if I didn't have any—right?

What I hadn't anticipated was the seemingly simple act of swiping a sharp little metal blade across my scalp to wipe it clean would land me in bed, depressed, confused and swallowed up



Scenes from a life: Young Sheila Bridges; the author's Harlem home office; the former television host appeared in a brochure for the Fine Living Network; a T-shirt for inquiring minds; Bridges and Dolby after Bridges's father's death from Alzheimer's in December 2012.



in a powerful range of emotions. Apparently, it was an aberrant choice and I had left myself woefully unprepared for the negative reactions it elicited in others, and for the profound impact it would have on my life.

While I know for sure it was still July when I bought that razor, it quickly blurred into August. I suspect it was still hot and sunny outside, but I couldn't be sure since I had drawn my Roman shades tight, turned off my phone and set the thermostat at 65 degrees to drown out the world and freeze away the pain. The only thing I could be sure of was I didn't have anywhere to go because grief was my full-time job now.

Grief had replaced my lucrative career, the one in front of the TV cameras that kept me in the pages of all the glossy magazines. Deep down I had

hated that job, but I wasn't sure how much I liked this new one, either. It certainly offered better hours and less of a commute. But it paid a whole lot less for a lot more work. Grief required that I lie in bed all day, every day, until further notice.

Like everything else in my life, I took my new job very seriously, which meant I would lie there until the Universe instructed me to do otherwise. I had no one to see, nothing to do. Just grieve.

At first I mourned the physical loss of my hair, the so-called crowning glory that made me a woman in the eyes of conventional society. Then I started to reflect on what this loss truly represented. It was my hair that made me feminine and dignified, beautiful and whole. Picturing the Goliath-like enormity of what lay

ahead, I became inconsolable. What was I going to do now? How could the Technicolor clarity with which I had always perceived and planned my life have so quickly turned into such a disorienting black-and-white blur?

I stayed barricaded in my bedroom, with my black wool, ribbed-knit ski hat pulled low to protect my new baldness from the nor'easter raging in my heart. Though I was determined to move beyond grief, somehow I became more panic-stricken with every step I took. If only I could pinpoint when I had lost my equilibrium, maybe I could go back, retrace my steps and regain some balance.

Once in a while I was allowed to take a break from grief to do something important like pray or take a pee. But mostly I stayed huddled under my plaid wool blanket and goose-down duvet, hoping to make things right with the Universe. My impeccably laundered white sheets with the blue embroidery were normally crisp and clean, stretched across the bed with military precision. Now they were clammy and cold, soaked with tears and soiled with my own snot and shame. I had stopped reaching for the box of Kleenex on my nightstand and started wiping my wet eyes and blowing my runny nose on the 3,000-thread-count Egyptian cotton instead.

I simply was not ready to face the world without hair. I was humiliated by my own appearance, paralyzed by self-consciousness, too embarrassed to walk outside without a scarf or hat. How was I—once America's Best Interior Designer, now totally bald—going to get along in a world that placed such tremendous value on a woman's appearance in general and her hair in particular?

It was there in my bed, lying uncomfortably in the arms of solitude, that I first became convinced the Universe was mad at me. I was being punished for something, and whatever it was, she was way beyond pissed off. But the more I tried to make sense of our misunderstanding, the more confused I became. My confusion turned into frustration and that's when I started to cry. The more I tried to stop crying, the faster the tears fell and the more furious the Universe became. If I was ever going to be okay, I

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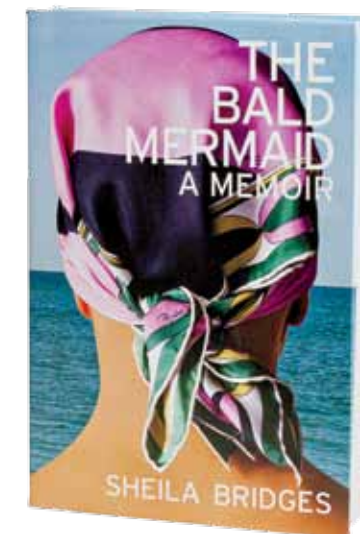
knew I had to make peace with her. I kept asking what I had done wrong. Each time, there was no answer; she just hit back harder. Her first blow caught me by surprise, knocking the wind out of me and dislodging the chip from my shoulder. I staggered to my feet, tried to call a time-out and ask what I'd done, but she hit me again, this time crushing my pride, dislocating my ego, and shoving it to the back of my skull. I realized when I got back up that she had cracked my impenetrable veneer, exposing all my fears and flaws like the knotty grain in a piece of raw, unfinished wood. I had always kept my own vulnerability at arm's length; now it was a disturbingly intimate companion.

Whatever I had done wrong, I wanted my hair back. Maybe Miss Universe was willing to barter: Could we make an exchange so she could return my femininity? I offered to return everything she had ever given me—the nice homes, the cars, the money, the lifestyle. She told me she didn't want any of it. I stopped asking questions and just lay there, day into night, night into day, wrapped in my sheets and blanket, my aching body twisted like a soft pretzel.

I continued to drift in and out of sleep, keeping one eye open just in case Miss Universe decided to come back for another round. Dolby stood by with his tail pointed, sturdy, vigilant, ever protective, his scruff rising above the rest of his smooth white coat like a miniature Mohawk. He lowered his head and growled, curling his upper lip to reveal the tips of his yellowing teeth. I surmised that despite her disdain, the Universe was thoughtful enough to grant me a brief pardon, allowing me to temporarily disengage from life until I learned to trust my sadness. So from my eighth-floor bunker, holed up with grief, impregnated with my own tormented thoughts, guarded by my loyal companion Dolby, I lay in my bed and cried. And when I was finished, I rolled over onto my right side so I could weep. I wept and then wept some more. And while I wept, Miss Universe sat comfortably on the love seat across from my bed with her legs propped up on my powder blue ottoman, quietly watching with the hint of a smirk, as I suffered my emotional miscarriage.

Preorder *The Bald Mermaid* on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and discover how Sheila Bridges gets her groove back. □

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TRACEY WOODS