SAVE WATER: CUT DRY

After two decades of constant hair upheaval—somehow always landing back at square one—**Keziah Weir** tries the dry cut. Will a change in technique be the key to that elusive perfect style?

The best photograph I have of myself was taken sometime during my short-lived ballet career, which lasted from the ages of four to six. Against the soft glow of the dance studio, I'm wearing a pink leotard, arms raised in fifth position around a face not yet conditioned to be camera-shy, smile framed by the same hairstyle I've returned to most over the intervening decades: long, brown, and blunt-cut with straight-across bangs. Fifteen years later, I'd sport a strikingly similar look—ballet-pink dress and the same cut, which by that age I fancied Jane Birkin–esque—at my college graduation. It is, quite simply, a look that works for me, both because I have fine, stick-straight hair and what Tyra Banks would call a five-finger forehead, and because "effortless" is in line with my grooming resources and abilities: Bangs can be trimmed at home; layer-free lengths grow out with relative grace.

And yet, I cannot resist the endorphin rush of an impulse haircut. Though I loathe change in my personal life (relationships—even bad ones—often end only in the event of a cross-country move) and am deeply comforted by routine (quit my steady job for the sake of self-discovery? Not I!), when it comes to lopping off 18 months' worth of impatiently grown-out length on a whim, I am fearless. Sure, the stakes aren't sky-high. As I've often announced, "It's just hair!" (Of course, it's not "just" hair. Of course, I'm searching for some aesthetic manifestation of the self I'd like to project. But whatever, it grows back.)

But when a coach calls a season a "building year," it's rarely an indication that the team is doing well. Having spent *years* growing out major deviations—the 2005 layers that looked like cheap extensions; 2010's finicky pixie; the DIY lob of 2013—I'm tired of looking perpetually in-between.

So, jonesing for a fix this past spring, I tried a new approach. Parked in a chair at the garden-level James Corbett Studio in Manhattan's Flatiron district, I pleaded for moderation: I'm in the mood for a new look, I said, but my favorite thing about my extralong hair is, well, its extralongness—so can you give me a big change...without changing much at all? I had reason to believe that Terri Fellows, the hairstylist on the receiving end of this request, had a decent shot at achieving it. Not only had ELLE's own beauty director whispered reverently to me, "She gave me the *most amazing haircut*," but Fellows herself is a member of the brunette-with-bangs club. She also possesses a certain jazzy smoothness—think *The West Wing*'s C. J. Cregg, if C. J. were a downtown hairstylist—that gives the impression of deep competence.

But there's another reason I sought out Fellows: She's among the anointed minority who practice what's known as the dry cut, a technique that does what it says on the box. According to believers, a dry cut can have (subtly) miraculous results. Perhaps C. J.—or Terri—could deliver a version of my standard, snoozy cut that would feel new and different, without requiring my usual months of hair rehab.

THE DRY-CUT METHOD was popularized and perfected by the late, great John Sahag—born in Lebanon, raised in Australia, and trained in Paris in the heyday of '70s fashion—who shaped some of the most memorable coifs of the '80s and '90s, from Brooke Shields's voluminous "me and my Calvins" waves to Demi Moore's *Ghost*-era pixie. "The mad professor of hair," as he was once dubbed by master stylist and fellow dry-cut enthusiast Edward Tricomi, Sahag had a penchant for leather pants, partially buttoned black shirts, and a rocker's shag. In an undated interview on YouTube, he slouches in a salon chair, cigarette in hand, explaining how he developed the dry method after learning to cut the traditional way. "You'd wet it; you'd cut it. You're trying to guess, at best, how it's going to finish," he says, using his hands for emphasis as though describing an elegant martial arts move. "What I would do is blow it out dry, and go in there and finish off.... I thought, Well, why not do the whole thing dry?"

Dry-cut converts say the technique gives an immediate precision that regular wet cutting can't duplicate. As anyone who's ever gotten a haircut the old-fashioned way knows, after it's wet, hair clumps together and is cut in sections; then it's blow-dried and the stylist goes in and cleans it up. But when hair is dry from the start, individual strands can be singled out to remove bulk while adding volume and movement. Throughout the '80s and '90s, as his colleagues continued to focus on what happens

Sabine Mamat/Folio-Id/Trunk Archive

Sahag works his magic in 1985

after the cut—hot tools, mousse, hair spray—to attain volume and style, Sahag preached that style should be imparted in the cut itself. For this, he occupies an almost mythical place in the hair pantheon. Hairstylist Gabriel Saba, who joined Sahag in the '80s and still works out of Manhattan's legacy-sustaining John Sahag Workshop, seems almost completely serious when he says of the dry cut: "Of the Seven Wonders of the World, this is the eighth."

AFTER I'VE BEEN SHAMPOOED, Fellows dries and straightens my hair until it falls down my back in a glorious sheet. Only then does she pull out the scissors, eliciting in me a familiar shiver of panic. (Changing haircuts is not unlike changing apartments—the moment you're about to make the switch, your current setup suddenly seems fantastic.) Soon, though, I'm distracted by a less familiar sensation: that of great, bone-dry hunks of hair being confidently snipped off, then watching them flutter—not drop, as wet strands do—to the floor.

Though Fellows spent her first year in the business apprenticing under Sahag, she also spent years trimming the conventional way at tony Manhattan salons. But after cutting her teeth, as it were, on Sahag's method, she found the standard sectioning and rearranging that occurs during a wet technique counterintuitive. With dry cutting, "you look at the piece; you pick it straight up; you cut it," Fellows says. "There's no directing it forward; there's no directing it backward." And while a dry chop works particularly well on hair like mine—fine, straight strands that make a less-than-perfect cut glaringly obvious—part of its beauty is that "it works on every single texture," she says. Rather than flat ironing her curliest-haired clients, Fellows will "frizz them out and cut it like a hedge."

In fact, while Sahag can certainly be credited for bringing the technique to *all* hair types, curly-hair experts have long relied on dry cutting to ensure a reliable result. Christin Brown, a co-owner and "certified curl specialist" at the natural hair movement–endorsing LunaBella Makeup & Hair salon in Santa Barbara, California, learned from the start to cut dry hair "curl by curl," to avoid what she calls the Roseanne Roseannadanna triangle—a common fate if curly hair is cut while heat-straightened or wet. "I'm able to customize it depending on personality, face shape, how much of a badass somebody wants to be," Brown says. One of her recent clients, *Black-ish* star Yara Shahidi, deemed Brown's take on her shoulder-length spirals "out of this world" when she debuted the look on Instagram.

As Fellows snips and tapers, my Summer of Love locks give way to a long, modernized take on Jane Fonda's *Klute* shag—no coincidence, given Fellows's (and Sahag's) abiding love for a certain '70s rock aesthetic. Once salon owner James Corbett administers a chestnut gloss and Fellows makes her final adjustments, I survey the results. My hair is just a few shades darker and a few inches shorter, but the overall vibe feels as markedly different as if I'd undergone a full-tilt makeover. My formerly uniform strands have been shaped into layers that encourage exuberant, head-shaking dancing. This is not the haircut of my five-year-old self. Looking in the mirror, I feel undeniably, well, *hot*.

If a dry cut can be this miraculous, why isn't everyone doing it? While the process is growing in popularity (many larger salons have specialists—just ask), it's still far from the norm. To both Saba's and Fellows's minds, it's a time issue: Dry cutting relies on a stylist's innate understanding of the way hair behaves—Sahag's 2005 *New York Times* obituary describes his style as cutting hair "seemingly on blind intuition"—rather than the strict, mathematical guidelines first decreed by Vidal Sassoon in the '60s, which many contemporary stylists still use adaptations of today. Accordingly, dry-cut training is long and arduous. At Sahag's Workshop, it can take two and a half years of apprenticeship to be deemed qualified to work on the floor. On top of that, Saba notes that a wet cut can be done in 15 minutes and then blown out, while a traditional dry cut, which deals in much smaller sections and requires intense precision, can take an hour for the cut alone. That's fewer services per hour for the salon, and time is money. Some dry cutters are speedy: Jon Reyman of Manhattan's Spoke & Weal salon has developed an insider-beloved cut that takes a mere 15 minutes, but he's been fine-tuning his technique for more than 18 years.

Wet cutters maintain that despite the expedience of their technique, they're not losing the precision of the dry cut. They just do the piece-by-piece detail work at the end, after hair is dry. But dry cutters make a strong argument that, ultimately, their technique carries the least risk of customers leaving with a style that doesn't perform. At every stage of the cut, the hair is in its most common state; by the end, it is what it is, without the need for intense styling. To use millennial lingo, it's a more "transparent" process. "Even a bad haircut can be manipulated into 10 different styles by a professional," Sahag once said. "With a good haircut, people hardly need to blow it dry." My own chop proves this point the first time I let it lazy-girl air-dry: My pin-straight strands develop a wave I'd previously thought impossible without the application of industrial-strength product. And, as promised, the grow-out is even better. Saba jokes that when one of his clients recently asked whether she needed a trim, he responded, "Well, my bank account says you do, but...."

Catching a glimpse of my reflection in the days and weeks following the cut, a new self-descriptor comes to mind: *cool.* If there ever were a haircut to encourage stasis, I think, this is it. Then, two months in, after a near-manic perusal of the CVS hair aisle, I dye it jet-black. But hey, at least I'm sticking with the cut.

EASY BREEZY

Want to give your strands a boost? Try these expert-approved tricks for instant weightless volume

ORIBE SUPERFINE HAIR SPRAY
$33, oribe.com
For a tousled look, Fellows advises: "Spray from root to end, wait a few seconds, and then gently shake" the root with spread fingers.

AVEDA DRY REMEDY DAILY MOISTURIZING OIL
$29, aveda.com
For coarse textures, oils "shrink your hair down to soften it up," says Reyman, who swears by this fast-absorbing blend.

DEVACURL ONE CONDITION DELIGHT
$22, devacurl.com
Brown says that this conditioner "melts tangles, takes out knots, and makes it easy to glide through any hair texture"—even thick, tight curls.

TELA BEAUTY ORGANICS HEALER
$36, telabeauty organics.com
This USDA-approved organic finishing cream creates "great shine and texture" without making it look oily, Fellows says.

John Sahag Workshop Launch, 1985/courtesy of Helen Oppenheim Hair Fashion Photo Archives