The Summer of 69

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

It was the summer of 1969 and it was all about hair. There was a hit song “Hair” by the Cowsills, over in New York the musical “Hair” was setting Broadway alight, and her in California the hair was As they say in the song) as long as you could grow it. It was the time of what is now called “the Hippie counter-culture”. It was anti-war, pro-civil rights and all about “understanding sexuality” – meaning having as much sex as you could. But it as also about rebelling against authority and modes of behavior that were seen as repressive of self-expression.

If it was a war – and to some, it was – then the lines were drawn by generations. The was the older generation who stood for conformity and the younger generation who stood for change. Plenty of people who were my age in 1969 needed to make the decision about which side of the lines we would stand.

My parents stood with the establishment. My father fought in World War 2. He had responded to the call, and he stood by his nation, with all its imperfections. He knew nothing of the terms racist, or sexist, or the military industrial complex. For him the Government were doing it right simply because they were voted in. That was what he fought for – democracy - the right to elect a government.

I elected to grow my hair as long as I could.

I told him that was what I was about too. The right to choose. I might live my life differently from him, but he should be defending my right to choose how to live. He never really saw it that way.

We lived in what might be called a conservative neighborhood on the East side of Manhattan. It was middle class, but many had moved out as wealth was moving out to the suburbs in the 60s. The surrounding area was being degraded but the local businesses only seemed to be hiring “clean-cut” guys. That was not me.

I spent time down in Greenwich Village where all the hippies and beatniks hung out. There was work there if you were musical or artistic, but I was no that. So out of high school I was getting desperate to find work. My father said that he would pay me to cut my hair, but I was not having that. So my mother said that maybe I could take work in her beauty salon.

“That’s a great idea,” my father said. “But only if he dresses like a girl. A beauty salon is a woman’s place. If you work there, you work as a woman.”

Eventually I had no choice as I saw it, because I was not about to cut my hair. In May 1969 I went to work at my mother’s salon, putting on a dress as my father insisted, with a smock over the top. After work I could change into my man clothes and hang around the neghborhood or head down to the village.

Greenwich Village was the center of the Hippie movement in New York and probably the whole East Coast. To call it a movement might be going too far, because we were not about organizing, but more being spontaneous. We wanted impendence from social structures and strictures. Authority was not for us. We were for individual rights, free will, non-conforming. We were against war, violence and prejudice. We wanted to love people and help people, and experience the highs of life – joy, mysticism and drugs. Not that I got much of that. I had to work.

My mother said that my hair was an advertisement while I worked at the salon. I would have to look after it, and for practical purposes I should where it up while I was cleaning up, or washing peoples’s hair which is what I soon graduated to. I could paint nails, and there were other jobs that I was ready for. I looked after the appearance of others and I learned to look after my own appearance too.

It was not my intention to look less male than I was, but I suppose that was the result. Dressed as a male hippie I wanted to look a little disheveled, only because that is natural, and hippies strive to be natural. But if I came straight from the salon my hair would always look more like a girl’s.

Certainly, hippie culture allowed for men and women to wear what we called “unisex” clothes, generally in bright colors. People could be confused, and maybe they were, in particular if they approached me from behind. But something like that would be treated with laughter between us. 1969 was also the year when the book “Everything you Always Wanted to know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask” came out. Hippies were supposed to be open to any kind of sexual experience, but up to that point I did not have any.

On 22 June 1969 Judy Garland died while on tour in England, and her body was brought back for her funeral in Manhattan on 27 June. It really meant nothing to me or hippies. It was not our bag, but thousands turned out to celebrate her life, and a large number of those turned out to be homosexuals. They call her now “a gay icon”, maybe even the first, but I don’t know why she was that. Anyway, it seemed like nobody had heard the word “gay” before it appeared on the banner “the Gay Liberation Movement” at the funeral.

What followed became known as “The Stonewall Riots”. It was just a series of protests, but the authorities over reacted and it turned very nasty. Over six nights the police raided gay clubs and bars, and hippies were out to support them, by way of non-violent protest. I got roped in somehow, and that was when I first learned the word “transgender”.

I suppose that somebody had come to the view that I might be transgender. I remember that I denied it and the response was – “Be cool, you can be anything you want to be. Free love, no guilt, remember? You can even lie, but just don’t lie to yourself.”

The other phrase that we used all the time was - "If it feels good, do it!" People were supposed to be experimenting with love in all its forms. Maybe I should stop pursuing love with women which is the way I thought it was going to be. Maybe I should be looking to try to experience love with a man.

It seemed like that man was going to be Mark Goddard. He told me that he was not gay, but that some gay men were attractive to him. He said that he found me to be attractive too, especially my hair, which he said was like a girl’s hair.

He said that he had engaged with sex with men, but it seemed like he was on top, if you know what I mean. But he called it love. He was always talking about free love.

“Free love makes the whole love, marriage, sex, baby package obsolete,” he would say. “Love is no longer limited to one person. You can love anyone you chose. In fact love is something you share with everyone, not just your sex partners. Love exists to be shared freely. The more you share, the more you get! So why reserve your love for a select few?”

He said that we should get together as a threesome with Mirabelle Jones who I had a big crush on. She never even noticed me but she adored Mark. I only agreed because I wanted to have sex with Mirabelle, but I never got there. Mark had sex with both of us, and I suppose that night, in the middle of Stonewall, changed me forever.

It was that night, or the week after when Mark came looking for me to repeat the threesome and he was told that I was working at the salon down the street. He stepped in and he saw me, in my dress and smock with my hair up and a little bit of makeup on. I was horrified. He said that he was not surprised.

He waited for me to finish. I told him that I could get changed but he said that I should leave with him wearing that dress. I just did what he wanted.

He said that Mirabelle was too “up tight” and “square” but that he and I were true free spirits, iving our lives and not constrained by social constructs like gender. But despite those words he said that he preferred me to wear dresses rather that ragged pants.

We ended up hanging out together for months. It was like my ass belonged to him. He certainly treated it as his own, but I did not fight it. I had somebody who seemed to understand me and who wanted to care for me. That was what I wanted.

In August of 1969 Mark told me that we were headed up state to go to a music festival. I guess you know what I am talking about. A whole bunch of us headed up to Bethel, NY and set up camp on land belonging to a guy called Max Yasgur, and Woodstock just happened. It was supposed to be as many as 200,000 people, but over a million tried to get in. We were some of the first and we experienced the whole thing. Janis Joplin, The Who, Canned Heat, the Grateful Dead, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, and Jimi Hendrix. It was wild.

Mark introduced me to everyone as “Sunbeam” his girlfriend. I spent the whole three days plus a da either side, presenting as a woman. I met thousands of people, and I was propositioned by men. I think that Mark understood that it was simply not possible to go with anybody else because of my secret. The same did not apply to Mark. He could have any woman and he had a few. I could only have one man and it was him.

I suppose that I should have felt jealous and betrayed, but that is not the hippie creed. Jealousy is wrong. Love is to be shared.

After it all he said that I should have been proud to go naked as “a different kind of woman” but I think he knew that was bullshit. I was never that kind of person.

When we went back to New York City we had a bit of a scene, I guess. I said that I had been a normal guy and now I was a guy who was living as a girl with him, having moved out of my parents house while continuing to work at the salon. I think that he could understand the way I felt. What he had done was definitely not cool.

He got the hormones for me. I was not sure what they were about but it was not long before they started to have an effect on me.

But by then the summer of 69 was over. I was already changed beyond any capacity to go back. I just kept on going.

I lived with Mark for almost two years and became a qualified hairdresser in that time. But after my surgery we drifted apart, and I found a new man – a wealthy widower who has brought out in me the person I think I was destined to be. I am not a hippie anymore. I enjoy material things too much. I guess I am not that different from most women in that regard.

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But for me the summer of 1969 will always be the 6 months of my life that shaped the person I am today – a woman, in every sense.

The End

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Author’s Note: This one owes something to a comment made on Fictionmania Message Board by somebody named “Axanar” who wrote – “It's more of a scene than a story, but ... It strikes me there are potential stories here set in the past, like in the 60's when older women and men disapproved of long "hippie" hair on young men (and even women). You could set up a scenario where a son of a beautician, in college, has to find summer employment. The local businesses want young guys with short military style cuts. His mom offers him the chance to keep his long hair but have it restyled and work as a shampoo girl, in skirted uniform (60's, remember) in her salon.”