

April 2007

Legacy Letter

In the fifties, when our phone emitted a short ring, a long, then two more shorts, we knew the call was for us. Four families shared our party line in our small Oregon town, each with its own set of distinguishing rings. And if folks were so inclined, they could eavesdrop on each other's calls. Though my parents would never have listened in, they cautioned me that it wasn't wise, when using the phone, to talk about our neighbors. My mother, a teacher in our town's two room school, was worried about gossip.

Besides, the phone wasn't for idle chatter. Because two households couldn't use the phone simultaneously, we made calls only when necessary. For instance, my mother called my friend's mother, who was a "hair dresser," to make arrangements for her to give me a home permanent or to stay overnight after a football game. She called the hospital when I had appendicitis and the funeral home when my grandmother died. The phone was a luxury we used sparingly.

My mother had a red scar at the base of her neck she'd acquired as a teenager when a friend burned her with a heating iron while marceling her hair. Mother's hair, like mine, was string straight. Only too happy to leave the era of long, straight hair behind, she kept her hair short and made it curly by whatever means possible. After the marcel, it was the perm that added body to her hair every few months. I heard her say many times, "I want it curly, and the shorter, the better."

She was bent on keeping me shorn and curly as well. Sometimes my grandma helped solve the straight hair crisis by setting my hair in rags. After my mother washed my hair in the kitchen sink—it was the pre-shower era—Grandma would weave white strips of cloth through my thick mop which gave it shape for a few hours after it dried. But that didn't last long enough. So I started the home perm routine at an early age, which I hated. I reeked of perm solution for days, and felt ugly with those tight wads of curl. I wanted long hair so badly that when I played dress up, I pinned long pieces of colored cloth to my head so that they hung down my back. My mother, not unaware of my longing, bought me a false ponytail when I had an appendectomy in the sixth grade. It was the biggest boon to my recovery.

By the time I left for college, I'd negotiated my way to fewer permanents but still had short hair. So I was semi curly when I boarded the train in Portland and headed to Graceland College in Iowa in 1963. I alternately looked out the window and slept in my seat for thirty-six hours—my \$60 ticket didn't include a berth—through Wyoming, Kansas, Nebraska. By the time I arrived at the depot in Kansas City, I was extremely homesick. I'd promised my parents I would call them, but when I arrived at my roommate's home, I was a wreck. So my roommate, who I'd met for the first time at the depot, called my mother and said, "Marian's arrived safely, and she's here, but she's too emotional to talk." Though I longed to talk to my mother, I knew I would be wasting my roommate's money, blubbing on the phone. I took those phone rules seriously.

Students arrived at college from all over the country with various hairdo's, but whether we were long or short, most of us without natural curls, practiced the same nightly ritual—setting our hair on big rollers that we didn't remove until morning. It was a bit tricky, situating your head in just the right position on the pillow so that you could

sleep, especially if you used brush rollers that stabbed your scalp with tiny pinpricks. But if you wanted a bubble or bouffant, you endured the discomfort. My best friend that year, Margaret from Oklahoma, had thick brown hair that she ratted into an enviably large bubble each day, then set firm with lavish amounts of hair spray. We usually didn't leave the rats in overnight, as none of us wanted to end up like the teen we'd read about who died from the bites of black widow spiders who'd taken up residence in her huge bubble that she'd neglected to comb out for weeks.

Though I was homesick and ticked the days off my calendar for that first month, I didn't call my parents or my boyfriend back home. My mother and I wrote weekly letters, which, years later, she returned to me as a gift. Even when my boyfriend wrote me a "Dear Marian" letter in the spring of that year, I commiserated with Margaret who was going through a similar dumping and didn't call my parents or the boyfriend. After all, it wasn't really an emergency.

After I graduated from Graceland, I entered the University of Iowa for a Masters in Counseling Education. It was 1967, my hair had continued to grow and rollers had gone by the wayside. Long and straight was the look of things then, when students were blocking the door to the union against ROTC recruiters and walking the campus dressed as shrouds in protest of the war. Though I didn't protest or buy shroud clothes, I changed from a Republican to a Democrat and believed we should get out of Viet Nam. By then, I'd lost a high school friend there, and a college friend had lost her fiancé.

The phone was still a luxury but not so sacred, and I made occasional calls to a guy I was dating from Graceland. One week-end, when I caught a ride to visit him, the car broke down. The pleasant policeman who picked us up and took us to the station so that we could use the phone to make arrangements (no cell phones then), said to me, "If you were *my* daughter, the first thing you would do is cut your hair." He smiled but I knew he was serious. I smiled back, but thought, "If I were your daughter, it's the last thing I would do." But I knew in my next phone call home, I wouldn't tell my mother what he'd said. It would confirm her fears that I was a hippy.

Now, forty years later, I no longer consider the phone a luxury. I use it daily to keep in touch with friends and to set up car and doctor and hair appointments. Yes, I do make hair appointments and get a couple perms a year. Perms in my hair that's much longer than it's supposed to be at my age. My stylist doesn't hassle me. She says, "Some people are just long hair people." If my hair were naturally curly, maybe I'd cut it short. But with straight hair, it's easier to take care of this way. I let it dry naturally and use clips and elastic ties to hold it together. No blow dryers. No hot rollers. No curling irons.

The other day, a student in our office at the U of Iowa, wondered if I was a hippy. Though I thought it was funny, I knew it was a comment I wouldn't pass on to my mother. In this case, I would use the phone sparingly. In this case, I would say that the phone isn't for idle chatter and this isn't an emergency. Besides, you never can tell who might be listening in.

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