

HAIR : A REMINISCENCE

By Susan Merson

AT RISE: A PLUMP 60 ISH
WOMAN DRESSED IN A SILK
SHEATH AND BOUFFANT HAIR
DO, SPIKE HEELS AND MINK
STOLE OVER A PAIR OF
OVERALLS. SHE SWAYS AS SHE
SINGS SOULFULLY.

BETTY

WHEN THE MOON IS IN THE 7THHOUSE
AND JUPITER ALIGNS WITH MARS
THEN PEACE WILL RULE THE PLANETS
AND LUH-HA-HUV-HA –HUV WILL RULE THE STARS

SHE TOSSES AWAY
HER STOLE AND

CONTINUES SINGING
WITH ABANDON.

THIS IS THE DAWNING OF THE AGE OF AQUARIUS,
THE AGE OF AQUARIUS.

AQUARIUS! AQUARIUS!!! This is the dawning of the Age of
Aquarius,

SHE TOSSES OFF HER SHOES
AND TURNS TO THE AUDIENCE

What? You think maybe I'll take the rest off like that Diana Keaton?
Naw. Well, maybe later. She was stuffed underneath some canvas and
in a lot of smoke anyway,. Who knew, you know? I mean I know. I
saw her. That night. In HAIR. That play? You remember?

Oy, I remember it like it was yesterday. I wore this very outfit. I
wanted to look good. Look KOOL , like the kids would say. I mean I
was always a mother who wanted to understand my children—or
child in my case—but Linda had gone already, living in a van

somewhere where it was hot with those mishuganeh boys with the beards like old rebbes. They looked like her zeyde.

I told her. I wasn't afraid. She was insulted. So. So, she didn't call after that for a long time.

But, that night—of HAIR—she was already gone. And Herb was as good as gone. Honestly, to think I would swallow that story that he couldn't drive home from Toledo and he had a discount coupon for a Holiday Inn anyway. What can I say/ the world , it was a changing.

Anyway, I had these tickets and I was a subscriber and I'd had my hair done that day. And it was gorgeous. Mr. Emil has outdone himself. He did me himself which was a real honor and I had these damned tickets and I'd be damned if I was gonna stay home and sulk in my Spraynet.

So, I get into herb's Cadillac, he'd taken the wagon on the road, easier to schlep his samples, and I drive right downtown to the Masonic Temple.

It is bitter cold in February, don't ask. But I have my stole from better days. And I have the caddy and my white leather gloves and I arrive.. and yes, I am a bit overdressed for the crowd –but I take my seat in the theatre

Not embarrassed to be myself, even in those years. And the lights go down and I tell you. I've never seen anything like it.

The children on the stage. The singing—shrying really—and all that hair—but , then, of course—hence the title. And this sweet smell in the audience, smoky and I tell you I listen and I digest and I think and after awhile I just lose myself.

I think. This is new. This is something new. This is not Alfred Drake. Or Gordon McCrae. This is new and something about these unkempt children waiving their arms and flaunting themselves—I mean I recognize them I recognize my Linda.

I see her in front of that movie theatre—the Waverly—just like that girl on the stage and I think ;” Oy vey, babeleh. Where are you now?

Who ya lookin' for? I mean, Mamma's here , baby and here I am in the middle of watching that stage play HAIR and I am weeping like nobody's business.

It is foolish really but then, nobody notices. I mean, they are all doing what they are doing—eyes narrow—saying WOW every time the lights change. You know, appreciating life.

SHE THINKS FOR A MOMENT
AND THEN SOFTLY SINGS

HOW CAN BE PEOPLE BE SO HEARTLESS

HOW CAN BE PEOPLE BE SO CRUEL

EASY TO BE HARD

EASY TO BE...

Well, I feel foolish, It is clear I do not belong here. I feel like some kind of sea creature, drenched in my tears, my mascara a wreck but—my hair solid. Well sprayed. Held beautifully in place by Mr. Emil's

artistry. So, I make my way down the aisle, out of the theatre and I wait for my car in the windy parking lot.

I look up furtively , hoping I would see no one I know. But wouldn't you know it? There he is. There. Mr. Emil, there in the parking lot all alone, waiting for his car. He doesn't see me at first and I step back from view.

I actually don't recognize HIM, at first. A new toupee. He has a habit of changing them for special occasions and I like that about him. Always wanting to look good and always able to respond to the times. As he turns to get into his car his eye catches mine and well... he stops.

It is very moving Dear of him actually. He sees me. Probably recognizes that gorgeous bonnet he had built for me that day. The fall and all. And he pulls over and gets out of the car and he says:" Betty, Nice to see you, darling."

Yes, I say.

You're crying, Betty darling. The tears will freeze.

Yes, I say.

And he says nothing. He simply, parks his car and takes my arm and steers me out of the parking lot and walks me through the cold

February air. He holds my elbow and steers me round and round the block while my eyes leak liquid and he simply says:

Yes, Betty darling. Yes, dear.

And the wind whips my face and freezes the fear back inside and then gradually our teeth start to chatter and we start to laugh and talk and say how cold we are, though both our heads are warm as toast. And we see a little White Tower nearby. We go in and I treat him to cocoa and a burger or two. They're so tiny! And I do. I begin to feel cozy and cared for and I squeeze his hand, just to thank him. And yes—there is a silence and smiles sweetly at me.

Oh S-ss-sssweetheart, darling. It will be fine. Herb will come back and so will Linda. Just when you don't want them anymore. Take it from me, honey. Alone ain't always lonely, huh?

And I think: Maybe you're right. And I say: Maybe you can be my sweetheart", and start to pish again. And he takes my hand and says: "All my girls are my sweethearts. You know that, huh?"

And I shake my head , sure, since I realize that his idea of a sweetheart and mine are a little different. But that is fine, because he is dear. Absolutely dear to me.

And we get through that moment and we both go home to our separate homes and I sleep well for a change and think and think and think about a change, maybe! A career in cosmetology, maybe and the joint is jumping inside my brain but not a hair of my head moves outside—naw—everything is safe and secure underneath Mr. Emil's grand construction. I can think. Make plans and preparations. And I am grateful to him for it. And I know I don't have to stay undercover forever.

Herb comes home a week later. I change the locks and take possession of the Caddy.

BETTY REMOVES THE
BOUFFANT WIG, HANGS
UP THE STOLE, REMOVES
THE DRESS. SHE IS
WEARING OVERALLS AND
HER HAIR IS LOOSE AND
FREE.

Linda calls a few years after that. She is changed by this time.
Really different. Maybe I am, too.

I meet her in a coffee shop downtown. She says she can't stay
long. She looks tired. Really tired and there are actually streaks
of grey in her hair. Herb has been sending her money, she says.
Though he never gave me a penny. That is ok. I am working for
Dottie Schwartz and Emil at the salon by now. Doing nails and
feeling free. My hair is long and curly and I am only fifty.

She is so bedraggled and tired, my child. And I ask how she is
and she can't sit still, like she has ants in her pants. And I tell
her, I say,

“What’s wrong, Linda?”

“Rainbow” , she says.

“Rainbow. What’s wrong? It’s like you got ants in your pants.”

“I’m nervous, ma. I’m just nervous.”

“Oh, “I say. “Don’t be nervous. I’m still your ma, ain’t I?”

And it’s Linda’s turn to cry. Her face just melts right in front of me. Her eyes drip and her nose slides half way down into her mouth.

And I pat her and say: “Yes, Linda, darling. Yes, my baby.”

Just like Mr. Emil did those few years ago for me.

And Linda hugs me and says:” I like your hair.”

“Thanks,” I say, “at least it’s clean.”

And that sets Linda off again and then I start too and I think the whole coffee shop is just gonna float away and then I say to my child.

“Did you ever see HAIR? The musical? I just kept thinking of you standing so forlorn in front of a movie theatre like that girl in the play and it made me so sad when I saw it.”

“I don’t like movies, Ma. I haven’t seen one in years.”

“Oh,” I say, having no other response.

And then I take her grubby red hands and bring her back to the salon and Mr. Emil washes and blow dries her hair, a little highlight here or there, why not? And Dottie plucks her eyebrows and waxes her legs, ripping those follicles out right by the roots. It’s good for her.

And then I do her nails and rub those hands till they are soft and young again and finally, I take another sneak peak into my baby’s eyes and she is still there.

That night, my Linda sleeps in my bed for the first time in..oh, maybe twenty-five years. And her head lay on Herb’s pillow and her hair sweeps the sheets and I can’t keep from patting it, every last curl and highlight, all night long.

SHE SINGS SOFTLY, LIKE A
LULLABY.

WHEN THE MOON IS IN THE 7TH HOUSE

AND JUPITER ALIGNS WITH MARS

THEN PEACE WILL RULE THE PLANETS

AND LOV-HA HUV HA HUV WILL RULE THE STARS...

SHE PICKS UP A HAIR

BRUSH . SETTLES HERSELF

ON A STOOL AND

BRUSHES HER HAIR. SHE

SIGHS.

Oy, Aquarius.

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