

Summer of Love

By Ron Grossi

In 1967, with the news full of body counts from Vietnam and Sgt. Pepper playing on the radio, I got a call from my friend Larry saying “We gotta go see what’s happening in San Francisco.” It was the Summer of Love.

As a new dad, I was on burp and diaper duty, but when Christine’s mom came to join her in the baby trance, I took the opportunity to abandon my post and slip away from LA for the weekend. We left Friday night, driving under a full moon through the farmlands of the San Joaquin valley. Passing the turnoff for Yosemite we reminisced about the summer we’d first met. We had gone camping with ten other guys and twenty cases of beer. One afternoon, filled with adolescent bravado, we scrambled a couple hundred feet up the steep side of a rocky dome in Tuolumne Meadows. At one point Larry got to the end of a narrow ledge and looking down froze in panic. All he could do was stare at the granite six inches in front of his face. I was nervous about the height too but when he called out, focusing on his fear distracted me from mine. I started giving him directions. “Reach up a little to your right – there’s a good handhold there. OK, now feel around with your right foot for the big crack in the rock. “

When we finished the climb, the sun was setting through huge storm clouds over the mountains to the west. Larry walked right to the edge and lifted his arms, head back in saintly transcendence. We took the easy way down.

That night, after everyone else had gone to sleep, we stared at the fire and started talking about fear, and then about loneliness. I had never had a conversation like that with anyone. We became close friends in our senior year of high school as we discovered in each other possibilities for ourselves. Our families were very different: mine filled with nurture and confinement, his with freedom and neglect. We took the best parts of each, built a life raft of hope and sailed off to college together. We both majored in psychology, roomed together for a semester, and fell in love with the same girl.

Around women, I watched with amazement at the ways Larry conjured up illusions of danger and delight. Combined with his blue eyes and intriguing smile he could, as the blues song said “make the little girlies talk out of their heads.” He was aware of his effect, and one legendary evening, managed to kiss every girl at a college party.

But Larry loved men even more than women, and five years after the Summer of Love he would return to San Francisco and appear in Time magazine, placard held defiantly high in the first Gay Freedom Day parade.

But now, continuing our long drive, we turned west and climbed the Altamont pass as the moon was setting. We were talked out and fading, but the city lights were a shot of adrenaline as we crossed the Bay Bridge. It was still dark, so we pulled over on a street near the Panhandle and curled up in our sleeping bags. In the morning, we found a small coffee shop with a sign on the door that said “Open Minded.” Inside, we joined a dreamy looking group lounging around a long low wooden table. Larry gave his Mephisto smile to an angelic wavy-haired girl with eyes from a Keane painting and asked where she was from.

She pointed to a painting on the wall, a nighttime landscape with twin moons in a dark red sky. “We’re from the planet Alturis. It’s much hotter there, so we tend our crops at night by moonlight. At dawn, we go down into the caverns to chant and dream together. And you?”

Larry, loving it, leaned in close and murmured “We’re archeologists from the future. We’re traveling back in time to find the source of the great explosion of consciousness, the one that created the new age.”

Angel girl smiled, reached into a fringed leather bag and took out a pewter box. She offered Larry a tiny blue pill saying “Here, this might help.”

When she handed me one, I hesitated. Larry winked and said “Aw, come on.”

Magically renewed, we went outside and flew with arms extended through the fog into cathedrals of trees in Golden Gate Park. Hours later, lost and exhausted fuel, we crashed in a green grass meadow. Feeling the heat of the day, we closed our eyes and descended into the caverns. Waking to the sound of ankle bells carried on the breeze, we lay on our bellies and squinted into the late afternoon sun, watching dancers in the distance sway and dissolve into one another. That night we joined newfound friends in candlelit Victorian rooms scented with

pot and patchouli, and shared buoyant visions of the future, leaving the economics to be puzzled out later.

On Sunday, we took the coast road home. Larry was leaving for the Peace Corps in three days. When I started talking about giving up freedom for family, Larry, seeing my life filled with love and promise, cut me off. "Freedom from what Ron?" Late in the day we turned east, the road winding through golden, dry grass hills into lush Los Angeles, a vast urban forest gorging on Sierra snow melt and smog filtered sunlight.

I got a letter six months later. Larry had learned Farsi and was teaching in a remote desert village in Iran. There would be other letters and other trips - long flights across the Pacific after he immigrated to Australia. Then in the summer of 2013 I got an excited call from Sydney. "Ron, I can't believe it. Simon and I can finally get married. We're coming to San Francisco!"

Four months later, at Christmastime, Christine and I stood as witnesses to Larry and Simon's wedding at the top of the grand staircase in San Francisco's City Hall.

They went to Yosemite for their honeymoon.