

*Essay***SEPTEMBERS . . . 1968-1969*****Francine Garson***

It was the first day of September in 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy had been assassinated earlier in the year, and the Vietnam War was becoming unpopular. Detroit and Newark had already exploded with racial violence, and as Hubert Humphrey was nominated as the Democratic Party's candidate for President, mayhem and brutality erupted on the streets of Chicago. But almost a year would pass before a rock concert in Woodstock and a car crash in Chappaquiddick would seize the headlines. And although the *Summer of Love* had passed in Berkeley and San Francisco, the Sixties had not yet arrived in Farmingdale, New Jersey.

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On the first day of September 1968, I was a fourteen year old girl pondering an important question. *What should I wear on the first day of school?* I peered into my closet on that warm September afternoon. The polka-dotted dress with the zipper down the front? *Too young looking.* The paisley jumper? *Too British Invasion.* The burnt orange miniskirt? *Just too darn tight.* The striped bell bottoms? *Definitely not.* It would be another four months before the school board would consider pants to be appropriate classroom attire for the girls of Farmingdale. So we wore our hip huggers on Saturday afternoons at the roller skating rink and Friday nights at the dances sponsored by the more liberal of the two churches in town.

The unsettling knowledge that on Thursday, September 5, I would walk, as a high school freshman, into a long brick building with hallways identified only by letters, made this particular fashion decision seem crucial. No longer a big fish in my eighth grade pond, I would be entering a high school which drew students from several of the surrounding towns, each of which was bigger than Farmingdale's one square mile. I feared that the outfit that I chose to represent my soon-to-be freshman self would determine which girls would invite me to pajama parties and which boys would ask me to go steady. And unlike the braces still on my teeth or my 11 p.m. curfew, this decision was mine.

I moved from my closet to the tangled mass of clothing heaped on my bed. A neatly stitched navy hemline poked out from beneath a pile of the sleeveless shifts and A-line skirts that I had produced in sewing class last year. As I pulled at what turned out to be a dress, a rainbow of clothing tumbled onto my pink shag rug. Slipping off my summer uniform of rolled up Wrangler shorts and a sleeveless shell, I stepped into the empire-waist dress with its dark blue skirt and madras bodice. Remembering that I had hemmed the dress hoping to make my legs look more Twiggy-like, I climbed onto my desk chair and assessed the lower half of my reflection in my bureau mirror. *Not bad, I thought.*

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I did start high school in that navy and madras combination accessorized with the boxy straw handbag that my aunt had sent me from Florida, along with my recently acquired Dr. Scholl's sandals. I learned to navigate the high school hallways and to sing the school anthem. I tried out for the majorette squad, but dropped my baton as I spun it behind my back during the semi-finals. So, I never did get to wear the blue and gold uniform or the tasseled white boots. I joined the drama club's lighting crew, and Kenny Harrison kissed me backstage during the intermission of our school's production of *The Sound of Music*. I choked on my first cigarette, studied for algebra tests, and decided to grow out my bangs. I had no trouble getting used to the straight white teeth that had been trapped under my braces for three years.

Friday night church dances were replaced by house parties, and the exuberant music of the Monkees and Herman's Hermits was replaced, too. Jimi Hendrix's blistering guitar and Janis Joplin's emotion-filled wail made my heart pound and my body move. In homeroom, I noticed that Mr. Tanner's hair had crept over his ears and in the science lab, Mr. Orlovsky no longer wore a tie. At the annual Christmas concert, a patchwork-skirted Miss Freeman, who seemed to have given up hairspray, introduced the school band. And at nine o'clock on Sunday nights, while my parents watched *Bonanza*, I tried to make sense of the comedy-coated barbs that Tom and Dick Smothers aimed at President Nixon and the Vietnam War.

At the dinner table, my father used terms like *duty*, *Communism*, and *the domino theory*, my mother nodded, and I wondered if Mr. Tinsley, the father of the four boys next door, used those words too. Walter Cronkite seemed worried, the body count grew, and the war raged on.

My freshman year passed, and the summer did come. Joni Mitchell's clear voice and the lush harmonies of Crosby, Stills and Nash poured out of the small stereo system that I had set up in my poster-decorated room. And while I babysat, swam in the town pool, and watched the war on TV, a girl died in Chappaquiddick. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, and the Manson family walked in on Sharon Tate. The Woodstock Festival promised us peace and love.

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On September 4, 1969, my next *first day of school*, I pulled a pair of faded jeans from the bottom of my closet and slid a tie-dyed T-shirt over my head. Grabbing my army green knapsack, I headed outside and glanced at the yellow house next door. Mr. Tinsley, in a suit and a tie, backed his station wagon down the driveway. Fingering the silver-toned peace symbol that hung from my neck, I prayed for his son, Doug.

Lord, bring him home soon.▪