by Randy Shilts

Again, I stood in the hair-care section of Macy's, agonizing over creme rinses. The ultra-natural brands promised to give my hair "beautiful shimmer and natural body" for 12 hours—a statement which, taking into account my unruly locks, meant that within six hours flat, my tresses would resume their Lady MacBeth look. The bunky stud on the label of the "man's" brand, however, didn't guarantee even a half-day of precociousness, so I was about to go herbal when I spotted someone I barely recognized strutting toward me. His head was topped with an insidious thicket of curls. His eyes gleamed with the quizzical. "Notice anything different about me?" It wasn't until he said hello that I realized he was last night's dancing partner at the disco and that neat, organized concoction of waves was only hours old.

"Did you get a permanent?" I asked in my best Perry Mason, cross-examination tone of voice. Smiling proudly, he eagerly of A, "Well, how does it look?"

I gave him what I thought was an entirely appropriate response. "You're a creep."

If that sounds off-beat, I'll bet your sweet hot-comb you've lived your life with straight hair. You probably could never understand how the conversion of yet another straight-haired friend to the cause of artificial curls could be the straw that broke my temper's back. But look around you. You'll probably notice that a lot more people seem to have curly hair these days. No genetic revolution over the past few months has magically changed straight hair to curls. No, the growing number of wavy tresses stems from an increasingly popular unnatural act—the permanent.

"1976: The Year of the Curl," read the sign in every stylish fashion salon's window this spring and in few subcultures is this insidious slogan being taken with more gravity than the gay scene. Permanents are the biggest thing to hit gaydom since Crisco, and unSinkable locks have gone the way of the wet head. As a person who was born with curly hair, I'm plenty peeved.

All through childhood, the naturally curled tot had to tolerate the then-unenlightened attitudes about our unaligned locks. There was always Uncle George with his Yogi Bear laugh who would put us on the head and say, "Put on this Kool-Aid and we'll take you to the pool show." If you spilled your Kool-Aid in silent protest to this affront, good old George would take a breath from his guffaws to add, "Don't worry. We'll just turn you upside down and use you for a mop." And each new torturous put-down would conjure a chorus of chuckles and callous laughter from the heartless, straight-haired (and sometimes balding) adults.

In adolescence things only got worse. You just weren't the cats

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**ADVOCATE**

March 24, 1976
pajamas unless you smoked banana peels and had a Beatle haircut. Smoking banana peels was easy enough, but we denizens of the curly-topped world had to struggle in vain to make our Jimi Hendrix hairdos look like Paul McCartney's. We spent our meager allowances buying out shelves of Straight-Away and Curl-Free. From these expensivebot tles, we could find a two- or maybe three-week respite from the spectre of kinkiness. But one morning, we again would look in the mirror only to see the bends slowly returning as surely as the face of Mr. Hyde came back to Dr. Jekyll.

We then would spend hours kneeling before our mothers' ironing boards as we tried to steam out the dreaded twists. But the effect was transitory and within hours, the curls would return with the predictability of a Hubert Humphrey presidential candidacy. The best we could do was grease down the offending coils, but even this escape was cruelly routed by the Madison Avenue scoundrel on "greasy kid-stuff."

Yes, the '60s were times that tried the souls of the naturally curly. We were people cursed by our chromosomes, outcast by a simple twist of DNA. But things started changing a few years ago. The death of the wet-head heralded the comeback of the natural look. Our spiralling hair became the envy of the straight-heads. Friends finally would compliment our curls. Tricks would spend hours running their fingers through them. Old women at bus stops would ask to touch them. And all this was only fair. We paid our dues through years of torment. Justice started to prevail.

The justice, however, was fleeting as science stuck its big nose into what could have been the era of natural curl. Somewhere in some greedy cosmetic factory's laboratory, a diabolical practitioner of chemistry discovered a new treatment which would revolutionize the so-called permanent. And this discovery is what now makes 1976 more than just the year of the bicentennial. This new treatment gives the permanent a new-found longevity, stretching the pseudo-curl's holding power from three to four weeks to a good two or three months. Ever since that fateful day, permanents have been both economical and practical. Hairdresser friends gleefully report that the permanent business is three or four times the volume it was a year ago and gay people have jumped on the permanent bandwagon like nobody else.

Speaking for the legions of genetically curly people, I can attest that this is altogether revolting. The worst aspect of this vogue is that permanents invariably look better than the real thing. Mother Nature might be great at making butter, but she's a rotten hair stylist. The authentic curls smack of nonuniformity; one side usually kinks tighter than the other. The small ringlets of the front often contradict the looser waves of the back. Not so with the chemically curly. Each manufactured wave can be fashioned with an eye toward coiffured consistency. A curious passersby might look at your natural locks and be very polite when he asks, "Where did you get your hair curled?" But in the back of his mind, he's thinking, "I'll have to avoid that place!"

When you coyly say it's natural, a look of relief spreads over his face as he rushes to the

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Long before I considered the possibilities of real women, I was seduced by the models in the pages of the fashion magazines. They looked haughty, distant, but there they were, cruising each other, draped all over each other, and gazing torridly right into the reader's eyes.

Like all fantasies that give way to reality, however, they lost their charm. I began to see the absurdities beneath the surface of the slick paper. So, in the summer of 1962, I bought what I thought would be my last fashion magazine. I was laughing at the photographs of boy models standing broken-backed in their bizarro "fashions." They were the image of discomfort, dominated by clothing, props for what You'll Be Wearing This Fall.

I remember laughing, but it wasn't easy. My feet hurt from the point-toe shoes with the three-inch heels. Beads of sweat were trying to form beneath my nylons. My bra straps were cutting into my shoulders. My tiny girdle had crept up and was wrapping itself around my groins like a tight elastic band.

Since then, a lot of fabric has passed through the garment district. The flower garden of the latter '60s brought experimentation, costume and functionalism. The women's movement had its effect, too—liberation included freedom from clothing that makes you feel helpless, submissive to your own uncomfortably correct wardrobe. I did what everyone else was doing. My girdle went the way of the thumb screw. I threw away my bra. I stabbed runs in my nylons and put them in the garbage with the always-despised underwear. I began to wear underwear that I walked in. I bought cowboy boots and developed a sock fetish.

This year, 14 years after that last copy of Vogue, there isn't much to laugh at besides presiden¬
tial candidates. I've still got my cowboy boots, but I'm leaning more toward other kinds of foot¬gear, healthier for my now totally organic—yes, they've grown a full size-feet. I'm safe in my flannel and denim, safe in the knowledge that I follow the fashion of my own kind. Safe enough to have another look at what they say we're going to be wearing this season.

Expecting a good, smug laugh, I picked up the spring fashion issue of Vogue, put my Montgomery Ward's imitation Earth Shoes up on my desk and settled down to look at the funny pictures.

Sure enough, I discovered, the old Vogue is still in evidence. Some of the clothes, especially the European imports, are still unrelated to the human form. They're still trying to tell us how to cut our hair. In case you're interested, "the shape is back." Your hair should be short and fit the skull closely (never "formless or frizzed," for heaven's sake).

The makeup dictates are straight from Raggedy Ann. Nothing, not even reality, will ever wipe out the cosmetics industry.

All in all, though, things have changed. The magazine actually has articles on relevant women's issues. The section on spring collec¬tions shows clothing any self-respecting woman could actually enjoy wearing, soft, loose, flowing and comfortable.

The models look more like real women than they did in 1962. Their back's have healed. Some of them have freckles. A few of them are even nude. Best of all, they're still cruising each other and seducing the reader, and they don't look funny doing it anymore.

No matter how you dress, the new Vogue has managed to squeeze something of your ward¬robe between its covers. Scattered among the $350 gowns, the ads for expensive perfumes and fur coats (they're still killing all those little animals), standing out like trees in the desert among the makeup hype and the beauty hints, are jeans, sneakers, $5 sweatsuits and, believe it or not, cowboy boots.

Once, women read fashion magazines to find out what they'd be wearing. Then, in considerable numbers, we just stopped paying attention and dressed the way we liked, buying our clothes from those who made what we wanted to wear. It took the fashion industry a while to catch on.

Now, it seems, they're following us around and taking notes.

—Shelley Singer

[Image: A man in a cowboy hat and boots, with a clip-on microphone.]