

# The Accidental Feminists

by Patricia Mahon



I was born on a Monday while my father was golfing. He always took great pride in telling me that. My dad was a salesman --- self-made and self-willed. My mother was a resourceful home-economist and clandestine industrialist. I can still see the two of them dancing to *Que Sera Sera* across the linoleum floor of our newly built suburban track home. They waltzed through moon landings, Camelot, free love, and the breaking of the genetic code. From my staircase view between the balusters, I witnessed the heel

turn of the gender gap and the 'hug and sway' of a cultural revolution.

"What do you want to be when you grow up Patricia?" It was the \$64,000 question of my childhood. I always had the urge to reply 'How the hell should I know, I'm six years old,' but I restrained myself and smiled the way little girls were expected to. I do recall marveling at this curious notion that I could 'be' whatever I wanted to be. How was that possible? I couldn't control what I ate, or wore, or even what time I went to bed. My mother and I were locked in a persistent struggle over puffy sleeves, floral overalls, and patent leather shoes. How could I possibly dictate my future?

I realize now that being asked this question in the late 1960's put me on the cutting edge of social change. In 1968, there were 28.7 million women in the work force and the majority were secretaries, stenographers, and typists. Most clerical workers, waitresses, household staff and cooks were also women. But young females were entering the corporate work force in droves. They were getting college degrees and enrolling in graduate school at the fastest pace in history and their expectations for the future were changing. Suddenly women were able to strive for careers in business and management as never before.

So, I was a little girl at a time of dramatic transformation perfectly captured in the small talk of mothers lunching at Macy's or on line at the bakery. Alas, my father treated me no differently than my brothers. A small business owner, he saw no gender lines. Women ran his office and my mother ran his books. I recall him telling me over and over again that there was nothing I couldn't do, if I set my mind to it. His other famous speech was to 'find a slot in life.' This was important to him. You may not always get what you want --- and you may not always want what you get --- but my father felt it critical that you stake your claim in the world and commit to it.

This notion of self-determination was reiterated by my Irish grandfather whom I recall sitting on the beach of The Warren Hotel in Spring Lake, New Jersey with a "highball" declaring that this was the greatest country in the world. He had no knowledge or care that the drinks being brought by the hotel staff actually cost my dad money. And for his part, my father perpetuated this notion of America as the land of plenty and never told "Pop" that the drinks weren't free.

My mother was a homemaker. All of my friends' mothers were homemakers. They were wonderful women, but I could not envision myself making a home and putting up with kids like us. So, I dreamed about being a diamond dealer like my father's friend Red Haberman or selling Boar's Head meats like Neal Darragh his other pal who had the greatest black and red truck I had ever seen --- complete with a giant boar's head painted on the side.

I did have a brief '*I want to be a stewardess*' moment that my American grandmother made me promise never to express again. "*You tell me you want to be the pilot!*" she said with her eyes open extraordinarily wide and her hands firmly squeezing my shoulders. The prospect of becoming a business tycoon, an international spy, and even an astronaut also came to mind. There seemed absolutely no reason that I could not go where no girl had gone before.

And then there was the year that I wanted to be a nun. Outside of the vow of poverty, the dress, the veil and the tunic -- I felt I could do that. The notion of sitting around tidy wooden tables, eating Entenmann's Coffee Cake was wildly appealing. The nuns at my grammar school painted a peaceful and promising picture of humanity. It was so different from the exasperating play-ground at St. Margaret's School where I was routinely ostracized for not liking the Bay City Rollers. "See I told you she was a freak," Diane Kavanagh declared as she bounced away with her parochial school pleats swaying across her knees. I had no time for a foreign band in funny pants and knee socks. I had to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

My cognitive and intellectual development was forged on rainy summer afternoons during marathon sessions of Candyland™ and Kerplunk™ sitting Indian style on the garage floor. And, as I rode my banana seat bike up and down Sandra Lane, a quiet street, tucked into a little cul de sac of suburban New York, I found myself at the sociopolitical crossroads of America. I was 'The Mod Squad' and sugar free soda. I was *Five Easy Pieces*, *60 Minutes*, Fleetwood Mac and Aretha Franklin. I was willful and defiant, unladylike and nonconformist and in every respect a child of my era.

I wasn't mindful of all that was happening in the world at that time, but I knew there was a terrible war. I remember my grandmother's neighbor on Long Island and the ominous morning that three men with a folded flag climbed their front steps. Their oldest son had just left for Vietnam. His name was John. It was small arms fire. He was 20, and I can still see his picture on their living room wall to the left of the china cabinet. I never looked at that house the same way again. Years later, I still thought about John as I peered across the hedge. What did he want to be, when he grow up?

The truth is that life takes us her own way. Robert Burns' famously wrote to a mouse:

*The best laid schemes of mice and men  
Go often askew,  
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,  
For promised joy!*

*Still you are blessed, compared with me!  
The present only touches you.*

The poem is a famous apology to a mouse who's nest the writer disturbs while ploughing a field. Burns ultimately believes the mouse has the easier life. It lives in the present, while humans are a continuum of all things past. We are a derivative of our collective consciousness, intended or unintended. The mouse never had to suffer through the days before the pocket calculator and the smart phone. It did not grapple with shoulder pads and disco. It was oblivious to, The Cold War, Jonestown, Charles Manson and The Son of Sam. And, in the midst of the tumult and mayhem of the field, the mouse was never asked what it wanted to be.

I now risk sounding like my six-year old self asking my grandmother what it like before there were automobiles. When she arrived in New York from Ireland, she was not checking Car Fax for the best deal on a Tesla or waiting for a freshly vacuumed Uber-ride to the Boarding House. She was just trying to slip seamlessly into the domestic life of a Greenhorn. She was thankful not to be noticed and relieved not to stand-out. At nineteen, I was still deciding on my college major, while she was all-in on a trans-Atlantic steamship --- hoping the world was brighter on the other side.

When I look at human existence through her eyes and the pure weight of those transformational choices often made when our backs are to the wall, I realize they are the ones that matter most. My grandmother, mother, aunts and all the women in my younger life didn't have the luxury of endless options and gender neutral aspirations. They were the pragmatic humanists and accidental feminists that believed "whatever will be, will be" as they methodically cleared away the conventions, restrictions, limitations, and heavy clutter of the past. From *The Feminine Mystique* to *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* ... such were the *Days of Our Lives*. We've come a long way baby, have we not?