

The Vidal Sassoon Story

I lived in central London during Thatcher's reign – in the crazy, decadent 1980s. I was a career musician trying to 'make it' in a British scene that involved brands, designers, cliques and culture – stuff a local boy from North Carolina knew absolutely nothing about. It never occurred to me to be stylish because it wasn't important in my hometown - but I quickly learned on High Street Kensington, it mattered.

Not long after I arrived in England I decided I needed to at least try to have a 'look' of some kind. I began to notice the style of punks, buskers and street artists in my neighborhood – but frankly they were all so depressing. Everything was tough – black leather, spiky studs, shit stomping boots, insane body piercings and angry tattoos - it just wasn't me. Even the session musicians looked like they were suiting up for war, while I was still wearing open white disco jackets and rubber pants from the 70s which I still enjoy now for different reasons.

More precisely, I was a Southern fried Eurotrash knockoff, with a suitcase of clothing styles dismissed from trendy Bond Street ten years ago. I was keenly aware of my lackluster wardrobe when a bouncer booted me before even *joining* the club queue, thus depriving me of that same humiliation a half hour later at the door in front of everybody. He said he was doing me a favor, maybe he was.

During the High Street evening rush, dozens of obnoxious 'card sharks' would circle subway exits to push flyers into the hands of annoyed commuters. I was in no such rush, however and happily accepted all that were offered. Why did I seek what others avoided? So many times I have asked myself this very question.

I collected these cards mainly because they featured racy ads for brothels, prostitutes and strip clubs all over the London – and these became my passion. Most were standard flyer size, so my entire collection of tiny sleazy women fit perfectly in a Nike shoebox – or as I liked to call it “the spank box”.

That's a lie, I never called it that. But you must remember this was the mid 1980s back when color pornography actually cost money. Yesteryear erotica was basically a male glamour magazine filled with ads and articles and perhaps two dozen softcore photos. These catalogs were hard to steal and risky to store, especially with horny teenage roommates around. Once I discovered the smut paparazzi program, I took things in my own hands (literally!) and said “YES!” to daily, personally delivered porn - twenty years before the web did that exact same thing for everyone else for free!

While skipping through this obscene gauntlet one day, I took a discount card from the Vidal Sassoon Academy asking for 'volunteer models' to get their hair done for a special rate. I held onto it because I thought a hot shot like Vidal Sassoon could help my image problem - but who could afford The Master?

But let's be honest. The real reason is because the hungry fashion model that gave me that pathetic flyer opened my eyes to all kinds of romantic possibilities. I would be the focus of her attention for an hour or more because we were cooperating on the same school project – me! How else could you talk to a beautiful girl like that without rejection? Brilliant!

It wasn't long before I was in front of a modest brick building between Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey. I mingled into the young students huddled around the front steps, a gaggle of awkward, smoking women all perfectly made-up with lovely figures hidden under white lab coats. It seemed totally worth the risk to be their guinea pig for a couple hours if I ended up dating one of these beauties! Plus, I was going to meet Vidal Sassoon, a man whose overpriced hair products had been sponsoring bad American television for years! All for a special rate! Fantastic!

(Thus was the deductive reasoning of a self-absorbed American twenty-something musician, talk about a perfect storm of obnoxious!)

Of course, the reality of the situation was far different.

At first, it was like a room of sexy scientists, all gathered around discussing what to do with my hair. I was not consulted during this evaluation stage, but finally I was assigned a style, a chair and a student, "Sinderella".

Unfortunately, "Sin" was not typical of the comely maidens on the front steps but more the surly misfits by the back entrance. Short, round and smelling of a hangover, Sin had more tattoos than skin and a worrisome piercing on her throat. Her Scottish accent was less of a sweet lilt and more of a harsh screech, like a barn owl with head trauma. To be fair she was none too pleased to see my lame ass either, she gave me the look of a janitor about to start the nightshift at an adult theater.

Somehow we got through a rather violent shampoo and rinse without any meaningful conversation, but by the time I was back on the block the fashion posse had reformed with my hair in the spotlight. It was at this point I was told we were going for 'a clean, Swiss look' as our mirror was fogged with hairspray.

I thought this odd, and now I could not see what was happening. No one else had their mirrors fogged, why was mine? I asked and was told, "Cause you talk too much 'governor, I can't concentrate.'" Fine.

Now this was thirty years ago and I'm not going to pretend to remember every detail, but I do remember at some point a giant condom with holes being pulled over my head. I could feel clumsy hands painstakingly pulling random hairs through the rubber cap using tweezers, to what end I had no idea.

What I do know was after about an hour of washing and twisting my hair up into tin foil bits, then smearing on a goeey gel that burned for no reason, I had enough. I threatened to just leave right then, but somehow that was bargained down to 'another 15 minutes and you'll be a new man!'

Forty-five horrible minutes later I stared into the now crystal-clear mirror before me. What stared back at me, was a crying adult Muppet with a candy cane mohawk. I was upset, I was young, I was a drama queen. I was pissed.

"Where is Vidal?" I spat, as if I knew him personally. "I want to see Vidal Sassoon – RIGHT NOW!"

At first they lied and said he was in Greece, but some airhead in the back offered "No he's not, he's on the third floor in his office, just saw him!"

Everybody looked at her like she had just farted in front of the Pope, but I had locked down into an entitled pout, crossing my arms and hooking my legs around the barber's chair.

“I ain’t going nowhere until I see Vidal Sassoon and HE approves this helmet of shame,” I announced and threw myself deeper into the chair.

Apparently, I wasn’t the first unsatisfied customer to throw a temper tantrum, so the crowd soon disbursed and I was ignored and alone. Eventually a student came by and mentioned that it might be 7pm or 8pm before Mr. Sassoon could come by, meaning a five hour wait if he was being honest.

After about two hours I calmed down and caved. But as I tried to leave the front of house staff stopped me – I had forgotten to pay.

My blood was reignited and I was just about to launch into another hissy fit, but then I saw the bill and was stunned into silence – it was almost £200! (Equivalent to about \$315 in today’s money) All of a sudden, I was on the defensive and declared I simply wasn’t paying for this.

They declared I simply wasn’t leaving until I did, and then pointed out this was a special rate, a half price offer – how dare I resist! After another heated exchange I went back to the sulking chair and considered the situation. About 15 minutes later there was a bit of excitement in the salon, Mr. Vidal Sassoon was in the building!

From afar I watched as Cinderella explained the situation, pointing at me and gesturing. The master looked bored and annoyed but eventually ambled over to my execution chair. Despite everything, I was still a little star struck and I awaited his verdict.

He literally did not break stride when he offhandedly flicked a bit of my Dairy Queen hairdo and mumbled, “It’s fine.”

That was it, my moment with the master. I watched gob smacked and shocked – I was going to be a living Pez dispenser until I could find some way to fix this ‘fine’ hairstyle.

My daydream was interrupted by Sin, yelling in my face that now that I’d been blessed, it was time to get up, pay up and get the fuck²³⁴ out of there.

The trouble was I couldn’t. I really didn’t have the money. I had brought maybe £ 50 but spending even that meant beans on toast for a week. I looked up at the room of annoyed, beautiful women and I began to cry again, having also caught a glimpse of the punk cartoon I had become.

Over the next hour there were threats of suing me, calling the cops, beating me up and even shaving my head but eventually the energy in the room dissipated. As darkness fell, the salon emptied as students waved off for the night. At some point, with no one at the door, I quietly slipped out and went home.

When I got back to the flat I was so relieved I forgot about my hair. My room mates did not and burst out laughing for at least a half hour. By the next morning I had washed out some of the mess leaving what looked like a bird’s nest with a few bits of dead chicks. I bought a burgular cap to hide it all and ultimately got a crew cut as a fix, but I still cringe at the memory.

I avoided the Sassoon Academy the rest of my time in London but I continued to collect sexy cards and flyers until Chernobyl in April of 1986 – but that’s another story.

