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JUDITH LEVINE

Nights of Rage

1970 is an inauspicious year for a young heterosexual feminist to launch an ambitious career of promiscuity.

Photograph by Natalie Shields

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I RUN INTO ADAM on the platform of the IRT subway in Chelsea. I know him distantly. He is a former counselor at camp and my best friend's sister's boyfriend's brother. I've heard he graduated from Harvard and became a social worker or teacher—something compassionate and politically laudable. Bearded and lean, smiling warmly, he is wearing a peace symbol on his jacket. I've got one pinned to my lapel too. He's a member of my tribe.

Of course he remembers me, he says. I was such a cool kid.

Actually, I'm still a kid, 17, a high school senior, newly separated from my first lover, Salvatore.

He invites me to his apartment for a glass of wine. I know what this means. It is 1970.

The elevator is so narrow that two passengers can barely help but touch each other. At his door, Adam turns a key in the barrel lock and another in the deadbolt; a third key disengages a bar that slides up through a slot to let the door open. The apartment is painted white, with books on every surface. A canoe paddle hangs on one wall. Over the bed, which takes up most of the room, a large silkscreened Che Guevara gazes into the revolutionary future.

Adam puts a record on the stereo—jazz. He repeats that I was a cool kid. "And now —trailing his finger across my collarbone, newly prominent thanks to a five-pound weight loss—"you've become a beautiful woman." He goes to the kitchen and I sit in the only armchair. Did Sal ever refer to me as a woman, or beautiful? He called me "my pretty," in a jokily leering tone, somewhere between W.C. Fields and the Wicked Witch of the West. Did Sal own any jazz records?

Adam returns with two glasses of wine in his large sinewy hands. Sal's hands were the same size as mine. Until this moment, I found that endearing.

I sip my wine, impersonating a sophisticate. Adam leans back on the bed pillows. "C'mere," he says, patting the place beside him.

"I'm OK."

"Come," he coaxes, as if I were a child or a pet.

I perch on the edge of the bed. He slides down beside me, takes my glass and places it on the floor. Then he holds my head in his hands and kisses me. I close my eyes to avoid his.

And then I am on my back with Adam's big body leaning over mine, his leg swung over me. He is kissing me more firmly while his finger sweeps across my breast. I look over the top of his curly head at Che, whose eyes are dreamy but confident.

Now Adam's mouth is on my breast, over my bra. Is this fear spreading from my stomach to my chest? Or am I turned on? Now his hand is unhooking the bra. Now the tongue is circling the nipple and the fingers are moving into my pants, into my body. He proceeds onward. I clench.

"Relax," he purrs.

His fly is unzipped. When did that happen? He is kissing my mouth. Technically speaking, he's a good kisser. I concentrate on this and try to relax, as instructed.

His pants are on the floor and mine are halfway down my legs. Did he do this or did I? He presses himself against my crotch. I squirm. Does he think I'm encouraging him? He moves more vigorously. Sal's and my lovemaking, languid and aimless, floats before me like a childhood idyll. Adam's parts are making contact with my parts, one businesslike step after another.

This is sex is the adult world, I think. Boy meets girl. Boy fucks girl. Girl fucks boy. Boy gets what he wants. Girl—no, Liberated Woman—gets what she wants. *I wanted this*, I remind myself.

NINETEEN-SEVENTY is an inauspicious year for a young heterosexual feminist to launch an ambitious career of promiscuity.

The sexual revolution is cresting. Men have been riding it like the perfect wave, with women newly eager yet still reliably abject. Now, however, the women's movement is riling that perfect wave with confounding currents: both extolling the vast

potential of female sexuality (multiple orgasms!) and demanding that men fulfill it, now. To many men feminism is a betrayal, a threat, or a joke; to others it is a challenge. They are excited and wary, aggressive and cowed, all at once.

And women? We're swimming in the same maelstrom—also excited and wary. On the far shore lies the promise of pleasure like we've never known. At the same time we have named the vast, violent oppressive male conspiracy known as the Patriarchy, in which every male person collaborates.

Love is not a requisite for intimate pleasure. But trust is. It goes without saying—though it did not then—that sexual pleasure is hard to come by when one partner suspects that the person she is sleeping with is the enemy.

WHEN I MET SAL A YEAR EARLIER, at a party with an orange fondue pot on the table and the Beatles' White Album on the turntable, I had been a feminist for as long as I could remember. I called myself a woman before I had full-grown breasts, because according to feminism *girl* was a belittling term even if you were one. (In 1973 *Doonesbury*'s Joanie Caucus gives birth to "a baby woman.") I'd notated every page of *The Second Sex*, including the boring parts about existentialism. I'd luxuriated in the literature of female sexual disappointment, acid in Sylvia Plath, dank in Doris Lessing.

Still, I was a note off key and a beat behind. While my older sisters in the movement were disrupting the Miss America Pageant, I was defying the patriarchy by organizing against the Wellington C. Mepham High School dress code, which required girls to wear dresses or skirts, of a modest length. The rule was enforced by the ritual of kneeling before the (male) assistant principal to determine if your hem hit the floor; if it didn't you were sent home to change. Our nonviolent civil disobedience consisted of arriving in homeroom in pants. The administration could not send two hundred girls home. The code was vanquished in a stroke. To celebrate, the next day I wore a tight miniskirt to school.

I considered myself militantly unsentimental in love. In summer camp years earlier, a sophisticated 13-year-old named Annie had told me she never had an orgasm during sex because she didn't want her boyfriend to see her lose control. I retained this anecdote as proto-feminist wisdom: *Never lose control to a man.*

But I was also a child of the Fifties, schooled by AM radio to identify teen love as bodily agony, from the longing to have it to the anguish of losing it, and by girls' magazines to wait for boys to make the moves, parcel out the rapture, and inflict the pain. I imagined myself crying lonely teardrops, wondering if he'd love me tomorrow, or perishing in a car crash, climbing from the flames to merge with my love in eternal, voluptuous virginity.

By 1969 my musical models of erotic romance included the blood-soaked English ballads sung by Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell's petit-point portraits of bohemian serial monogamy. Sal, a future rock critic and the son of a black Mexican trumpeter and a New York Jewish beatnik, expanded the soundtrack of my fantasies with weekly trips to the Fillmore East. On our first date we heard the blues, music whose "sexuality and rebelliousness were undiluted," as the critic Ellen Willis wrote, and that "was about people, not teen-agers." As B.B. King caressed his guitar Lucille like a worshipful lover, in the rear balcony Sal teasingly played air guitar on the palm of my hand. During the second act—the cross-eyed albino Johnny Winter, white hair rinsed in the colors of the Joshua Light Show—Sal's finger found an inch-long opening in the inseam of my jeans halfway down my thigh and, through it, gingerly began my initiation into grown-up sex.

Sal's apartment was deep in Hasidic Brooklyn, so we hung out in the Lower East Side. We subsisted on barley soup from B&H and egg creams from Gem's Spa. After the late show at the Fillmore, we devoured blintzes served by the sadistic waiters at Ratner's, open 24 hours.

On our first date, after the Fillmore, Sal and I fell asleep together on someone's couch on St. Mark's Place. The second weekend he took me to Brooklyn. There was not much in the apartment but a mattress, a thousand record albums, and stacks of yellowing copies of the newsweeklies ubiquitous in the streets of the East Village, its theaters, restaurants, thrift stores, and newsstands. These rags complemented and updated my sex education, which until then consisted of high-toned dirt like *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* plus whatever porn I could get my eyes on, from *Playboy* to my friends' fathers' stashes of nurse fetishism.

The gaze of the underground press was decidedly male, its political coverage hyper-macho. The most explicitly leftist of the papers, the *Rat*, featured instructions for bomb-making and plane-hijacking, adulatory profiles of bandolier-sporting self-styled freedom fighters, and frontline feeds from a perpetual, petty guerrilla war between "freaks" and "pigs" alleged to be going on in the streets of Manhattan.

But sex, along with drugs, was the main subject of New York's underground press, the tone suffused with wink-wink smarminess cloaked in sexual revolutionary nonchalance. *Screw* was Al Goldstein's personal drool on newsprint, his main contribution to journalism being reviews of porn flicks, rated with stiff or limp dicks. In the *East Village Other* and *Rat* it seemed that every female character in every comic had big tits and wrists tied with a rope. Male-penned participatory journalism about strippers, prostitutes, and porn stars filled the pages, along with classified ads for strippers, prostitutes, and "chicks" to do nude "modeling," no experience required.

Still, it would be wrong to characterize the editorial content of these papers as wholly objectifying. Rather, it was a play of voyeurism and exhibitionism, with neither sex monopolizing either role. Not every ad sought women for sex; some were placed by women either offering or seeking sex. And women readily responded to the ads, at least according to one of those male-penned stories, whose writer placed an ad and reported getting eager, explicit phone calls and offers from both women and men.

If *Screw* and *EVO* represented a pure version of the male-dominated white youth culture, the *Rat* had a few female editors and contributors who managed on occasion to shoehorn in a serious piece about abortion rights, street harassment, or pay for housework. These articles may have provided the only exposure that many male white lefties and hippies had to feminism, but the writers rarely criticized the rest of the paper's content. Intentionally or not, the *Rat* embodied the possibility that women's liberation could coexist with the sexual revolution.

Scattered around Sal's bedroom amid the rolling papers and record covers, the East Village newspapers might have been off-gassing this late-Sixties admixture of values and politics. The vapor seeped into my fantasies and my self-presentation. I walked Brooklyn's streets in thin Mexican blouses or white T-shirts without a bra, titillated by showing my pretty breasts yet incensed at any man who ogled them or expressed his appreciation.

On his mattress on the floor, Sal rolled the joints and guided me without pressure into almost every sex act. Ravenous for touch, I was also touchingly naïve. In fact, I thought he'd invented cunnilingus—he was a genius of love. But I didn't know how to have an orgasm or even that I was supposed to have one, and, in spite of Sal's long and tender ministrations, I never did. Sunday evenings, having spent most of the weekend smoking pot and making love, I'd return to my parents' house in Long Island to suffer a week of keening desire, high-pitched and constant as a tinnitus of the cells. I called this frustration love.

I was in love, but each time we reached the threshold of intercourse, I withdrew. I was terrified of getting pregnant. Abortion was illegal, and Sal's reassurance—"I'll marry you"—did not reassure. But my fear, not fully articulated, was less rational. Everything I'd read, from *Tropic of Cancer* to the *Playboy* Letters, told the same story: A man puts his penis inside a woman and she is instantaneously, uncontrollably overcome. She is his; he owns her. I worried that going all the way would tie me forever to Sal. It was another Fifties-Sixties hybrid, this anxiety: the romantic ideal of intercourse as the merging of two souls, the Freudian myth of the vaginal orgasm, and the teenage feminist's crude notion of autonomy—my camp friend Annie's edict, *Never lose control to a man.*

So we made love, we listened to music, we smoked pot, and after a few months I drifted. And then I broke up with Sal. I harbored one misgiving—*would I ever find another man who'd do that thing with his mouth?*—and could offer no explanation, to him or to myself. Maybe I'd grown bored with his stoner's humor and disinterest in politics. Maybe I was impatient with his vacillation between purpose and slacking, college and crummy job—rocking side to side like a moored boat on the beam, never motoring forward. Or maybe this is simply the nature of teenage love: it ends.

I EMERGE FROM THE COCOON I shared with Sal into a glaring light. All around me feminists are walking out on men, stalking out of left-wing organizations and publications, refusing to do the typing and make the coffee, sick of enduring sexual harassment and intellectual condescension. "Smash monogamy" communes, which ordain nightly bed-switching, are losing their appeal for many women. A friend who lived in one later told me she never knew where she'd left her underpants.

On the left a breaking point comes in January 1969 at the counter-inaugural actions in Washington organized by the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam, or Mobe. The events are slated to include a protest organized by women's liberation, but women are edited out of both the publicity and the proceedings. A Washington feminist mounts the stage and begins to speak. She is drowned out by men's laughter and catcalls: "Take it off!" "Take her off the stage and fuck her!" The moderator, the prominent pacifist Dave Dellinger, pleads with the woman, for her own safety, to leave the stage; it doesn't occur to him to tell the guys to stop. Another woman takes the mic to announce that women will no longer take part in a so-called revolution that won't abolish male privilege.

In February the Redstockings storm the New York State Assembly's hearings on abortion, where fifteen "experts"—fourteen men and a nun—have been invited to testify. "Now listen to the real experts!" the women shout. The legislators cannot shut them up. "Won't you act like ladies?" one pleads. The next month the Redstockings convene their own hearings, a speakout on abortion at a church in the Village, where women tell their own stories of back-alley butcheries, hospital board tribunals, and sequestration in homes for unwed mothers. Two women rise to denounce the rest for their hostility to men. The audience jeers. A panelist interjects in a trembling voice: "Yes, the more I talk here, the more I realize I *am* hostile to men." She'd applied to eleven hospitals for a "therapeutic" abortion. The tenth offered her a deal: they'd terminate the pregnancy if she'd agree to sterilization. She was 20 at the time. The more I listen to these tales of female terror, humiliation, and injury and male moralism, opportunism, and arrogance, the more I understand that I, too, am hostile to men.

At the *Rat,* contributor to my scrambled sentimental education, the friction between sexual revolutionary and feminist values finally ignites a conflagration. On the way to a fundraiser at the Fillmore in January 1970, staffers Sharon Krebs and Jane Alpert pick up the latest issue of the paper, to discover that at the last minute the men have turned it into a special Sex and Porn issue. The designation strikes them as a sick joke: Isn't every issue the Sex and Porn issue? What sends them over the edge, though, is the headline given the issue's only feminist piece, on clitoral orgasm: "Clit Flit Big Hit."

The next morning, the pair march into the office to demand the paper be ceded to them for an all-women's issue. The guy who's filling in while the editor-owner is on leave listens passively. Maybe he's tired or hung over (*why hasn't anyone made the*

coffee?). Maybe he thinks a woman's issue is a good idea. Anyway, he offers them his chair and his blessings. The men never get the *Rat*—renamed *Women's LibeRATion*—back.

Women's LibeRATion survives only a few months. But it has a lasting effect. In the first issue it publishes the 3,500-word screed "Goodbye to All That," by the writer Robin Morgan. "We have met the enemy and he's our friend. And dangerous," writes Morgan. "The 'good guys' who think they know what 'Women's Lib,' as they so chummily call it, is all about—who then proceed to degrade and destroy women by almost everything they say and do."

Morgan renounces "the so-called Sexual Revolution, which has functioned toward women's freedom as did the Reconstruction toward former slaves—reinstituting oppression by another name." She denounces every radical movement from the Black Panther Party to the fledgling ecology movement, and every avowed leftist and cultural revolutionary from Abbie Hoffman to Norman Mailer to the guy who owns the Electric Circus, a club on St. Marks Place. She gives no berth to women who can't bring themselves to disavow them too. The manifesto passes from hand to hand and feminist publication to feminist publication, becoming the *J'Accuse* of separatist feminism.

The charges Morgan enumerates are not new. They've been aired and analyzed in consciousness-raising groups, speakouts, and hundreds of small women's publications, from *Maine Women's Newsletter* to *Black Maria, The Feminist Voice* to *The Furies*. By now the white women's movement has refined a murky malaise—Betty Friedan described "the problem with no name" in 1963—into a clear definition of what, and who, is the problem. Writ large it is the Patriarchy, a system of male values and prerogatives enforced by the law, war, medicine, business, history, advertising—every human institution. In daily life—housework, childcare, dating, marriage, sex—the problem is men.

From circumstantial evidence a theory and a strategy emerge: the Pro-Woman Line. Under the Pro-Woman Line a woman who appears to be collaborating in her own oppression—say, by competing in beauty contests or staying married to an abuser—is never to blame. "Women are messed over, not messed up," pronounces Carol Hanisch, a founder of New York Radical Women and coiner of the slogan "The

personal is political." In any dispute between a woman and a man, the woman is right and the man is a pig. Every female move, whether riposte or parry, is self-defense.

"Sexism is *not* the fault of women. Kill your fathers, not your mothers," Morgan writes in "Goodbye to All That." She tips her hat to Valerie Solanas, sole member of the Society to Cut Up Men (SCUM) and author in 1967 of the *SCUM Manifesto*. "Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex," begins this tour de force of vicious, hilarious man-hating. The manifesto turns out to be more than rhetoric. A year after its release, in apparent retaliation for the rejection of a play script, Solanas perforates Andy Warhol's torso with bullets, nearly killing him.

With civility and servility (not to mention the sanctity of human life) off the table, seduction is next to fall. Beauty is declared a form of capitulation. "[I]f your appearance is pleasure, you are sunk, for no one will ever look beyond [it]," writes Dana Densmore in "On the Temptation to be a Beautiful Object," in 1970. "In fact, if you are beautiful or if you have made yourself beautiful, you had BETTER leave it at that." Densmore is the co-founder of the Boston "female liberation" group Cell 16, which publishes a journal with the merciless title *No More Fun & Games*.

Not yet 18, I've experienced neither enough fun to feel sated nor enough injury in sexist game playing to compile my own bill of indictment. I'm still trying to make myself beautiful in ways a Liberated Woman is supposed to forswear. Since my breakup with Sal I've been on the Atkins diet, eating little more than cold-cut turkey and half-sticks of sugarless gum. And it's working: A man has called me beautiful. First I'll get thin, I decide. Then I promise to bury the razor, the mascara, and the calorie counter and climb on the bus to the next beauty pageant protest.

I MOVE TO DISENGAGE my body from under Adam's. He props his head in his hand. "Something wrong?" he asks.

I'd like to know too. I grab at the most convenient explanation for my discomfort. "Um, I should tell you something. I'm . . ."

He waits while I hesitate, then prods. "You're not on the Pill?" he asks. "That's okay. I can use a cond—"

"Actually, I'm not on the Pill." I reach for my glass, stalling. "Or anything. I'm—"

It doesn't take him long to get it. "No." He laughs, a sort of snort. "You're not a virgin?" His hard-on has subsided.

I rush to defend myself. "I mean, it's not that I never—"

He holds up his hand, gesturing *Stop* and settles himself on the bed, a small distance from me. He looks philosophically into his glass. Then he takes my chin and turns it toward him, his eyes drilling into my face. He does not look angry. Irritated is more like it—a parsimonious emotion. A small fear luffs in my chest. It is the fear of a bright student facing a favorite teacher after earning a poor grade. I'm a disappointment. He shakes his head, chuckling to himself. I turn my head to disengage my chin from his grasp and his gaze.

Our conversation turns to interrogation. What did I think I was doing when I flirted with him on the subway platform? Adam asks. When I took his hand? When I came to his apartment? When I sat next to him on the bed? Each time his tone turns sharp, he smooths it out, performing patience. What did I have in mind when I lay down and kissed him? After each question he pauses for an answer, but I have none.

"I'm just curious," he says, not sounding terribly curious. "What were you thinking?"

What *was* I thinking? I move my forefinger over the bedcover, trying to divine the answer in the creases Adam and I have made.

"What are you?" he prods, no longer tempering the sharpness in his voice. "Some kind of cocktease?"

IT WAS AN ERROR OF TIMING, neglecting to lose my virginity with Sal. Having failed to give the job to the obvious candidate, I'm at pains to find another. Will the guy I elect exaggerate the significance and expect undying commitment? Or will he refuse to participate in fear that I'll expect too much of him? Meanwhile, my mother, the administrator of a birth control clinic, is nagging me to come in and get a diaphragm. I emphatically do not want to explain to my mother why I don't need a diaphragm. It's embarrassing to be a virgin slut.

Beyond an inconvenience, virginity is a liability. Within a couple of months it has soured two potential assignations. A neighbor I've been flirting with takes me to Coney Island, where we peel off our swimsuits and kiss under the boardwalk, like in the song. But when he asks about contraception and I deliver the news, he kicks the dingy sand, hard. Another man, who rides a motorcycle and wears a Harley Davidson jacket but is actually a Jewish physics major at MIT, is similarly, aggressively miffed. "I thought I was dealing with a woman, not a child," he spits, zipping up his jeans.

And now virginity has ruined a third opportunity, with a man I have allowed myself, in the space of two hours, to envision as my next boyfriend.

Adam gets up from the bed and walks to the table to pour a glass of wine. Unsure of what to do or say, comparing his exquisite muscled buttocks with my own flawed naked body, I slide under the covers. The sex is over, I realize with relief and regret.

Then an odd thing happens. Adam pulls back the blankets, peruses my body, and smiles coolly. "That's all right," he coos. "We can have a good time anyway." His eyebrows rise in inquiry. "Yes?"

"Sure," I say, not sure at all.

He lays his body on my entire body from shoulder to ankle, his hands sliding over my wrists to pin me to the bed, his chest against my breasts and his cock against my pelvis. His grasp is firm but not painful, his movements vehement but not obviously brutal. He makes no effort to enter me but rubs his penis against me faster and faster, pressing harder and harder. He releases my wrists to grasp my hips, and I place a hand tentatively on his hot, slick back.

Over his shoulder I glimpse the canoe paddle that signaled familiarity and friendliness. Feelings scrape against each other inside me like scrap metal in a smelter. They anneal into something heavy and dull as an ingot: resignation: *This is how sex is done out here in the world,* I tell myself. *Get used to it.*

There isn't a micrometer of space between our skins, but I am alone.

When Adam finishes, he wipes my belly with a tissue. The phone rings and he stretches the phone cord into the kitchen, leaving me to dress, negotiate the triple lock, and let myself out. I hurry down the corridor, past mezuzahs on doorjambs, umbrellas beside doors, and the cozy aromas of supper behind them. With each whack of my heels on the marble stairs Adam's challenge echoes: *What am I, a cocktease*?

By the time the building door closes behind me, an answer comes: *Maybe I am.*

A FRIEND GIVES ME THE NUMBER of a gynecologist in Queens, the sort of kindly older gentleman, like Dr. Swain in *Peyton Place,* who lends a girl a hand when she has a shameful problem. "So, dear, what brings you here?" the doctor inquires, ushering me into a down-at-heels examining room. I tell him my boyfriend and I are finding my hymen a little tough and . . .

"We can take care of that!" he exclaims, his manner suddenly jaunty, as if he has a regular but flagging business in cherry busting.

So I put my feet in the stirrups and feel a cool instrument pressing into me. Thanks to all the digital spelunking that's gone on in that little cavern, the rupture goes off without a hitch. While we're at it, he fits me for a diaphragm.

"Have fun!" the doctor says as I leave the office, carrying the pink plastic oyster shell and tube of contraceptive jelly in a paper bag. Do I remember a wink with this valediction? Was it good for him too?

The loss of my virginity has an effect precisely contrary to expectation. What used to be sex becomes foreplay, prelude to the main event. As a certifiable adult woman, I'm less gratified than I was as a girl. "The orgasm cannot be taken as the sole criterion for determining the degree of satisfaction which a female may derive from sexual activity," wrote Kinsey. But I still want to come.

When I started sleeping with Sal, I was under the impression that orgasms arrived with intercourse. In 1953 Alfred Kinsey had publicized his findings that most women don't have vaginal orgasms; indeed, he commented that the notion of orgasm by fucking was no more than an artifact of men's "conceit as to the importance of the male genitalia." A decade later, Masters & Johnson confirmed that orgasms happen in the female erectile tissue—that is, the clitoris—which has to be stimulated to feel an "orgasm" in the vagina (no Virginia, there is no G-spot).

I hadn't read any of this. In fact, the novels and porn that were my principle sources of sex education laid out the sequence of events clearly: 1. Passion. 2. Penetration. 3. Orgasm, simultaneous. Climax does not occur before the penis goes into the vagina or after it comes out. *Pace* Kinsey and Masters & Johnson, Freud's was still the prevailing popular theory: A clitoral orgasm is what little girls have; adult women "transfer" their erotic satisfaction to the site of heterosexual intercourse. Failure to do so spells immaturity and neurosis. The neurotic symptom—my neurotic symptom—is frigidity.

The first therapist I consult to cure my affliction proposes that I'm suffering a deficit of paternal affection, which he addresses by taking me onto his lap and stroking my hair. The next, also a psychoanalyst, thinks the issue is hostility. A few sessions into my treatment, he begins by commenting, in his usual placid tone, that I hate men. Placidly, I venture that he's right. He elaborates: In fact I hate men so much that he cannot work with me. He walks to the door and holds it open. It takes me a moment to understand he is ejecting me.

After that, I find a hypnotist who diagnoses me as phobic and prescribes a course of desensitization: putting me in a state of deep relaxation, during which I visualize sex with a man, thus associating the acts of sex with a lack of control. I'm instructed to induce the same state at home and masturbate to orgasm. There's just one glitch: I resist hypnosis; I am not "suggestible." It strikes me that my inability to succumb to hypnosis might be related to my inability to succumb to orgasm.

I get a referral to a woman who practices bioenergetics, a methodology created by Alexander Lowen, a disciple of Wilhelm Reich. Where Freud saw physical manifestations like tics, narcolepsy, or frigidity as symptoms of unarticulated neurosis, Reich understood the dynamic the other way around, from body to psyche: "There is only one thing wrong with my neurotic patients," he wrote—"*the lack of full and repeated sexual satisfaction.*" Regardless of gender, psychological troubles for Reich evidenced a blockage of the free-floating erotic and emotional energy he called *orgone*. From that theory came bioenergetics—physical exercises to locate the body's blocks, and panting, shouting, moaning, kicking, and so on, to get the orgone flowing.

The sessions, conducted at the front of her loft, begin with a few minutes of talking, the therapist in a comfy armchair and me holding myself upright in a captain's chair whose leather seat is separating from the frame, pitching me forward. Adding to the awkwardness: I'm in my underwear—because a bioenergetic therapist must see the patient's body. Also—because it's winter and the loft is a wind tunnel—socks.

After chatting, the therapist has me assume various stress postures, such as standing squats that strain my thighs to trembling, while I yell or breathe or attempt to cry. With the socks and the squatting, I resemble a man in an old porno film with a plot involving sumo wrestling. The scene is even kinkier because a fully clothed woman is standing beside me, inspecting my body closely with her eyes.

This process is supposed to unloose my orgone. But mainly I feel silly and fat. I quit before the weather turns warm enough to shed the socks.

FEMINISM RESCUES ME. In 1970 my consciousness-raising group discusses orgasm. It is comforting, if not encouraging, to learn that several other women have never had an orgasm either. We read Anne Koedt's "Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," which has already had immense influence, for good reason. In measured prose with faultless logic Koedt deploys empirical sexology, including Kinsey and Masters and Johnson, to demolish Freud and strafe a number of hipper post-Freudians, including some women and my erstwhile man Al Lowen. She surveys the social, political, and biological territories of women's sexuality and maps the roads connecting them.

"Rather than tracing female frigidity to the false assumptions about women's anatomy, our 'experts' have declared frigidity a psychological problem . . . diagnosed generally as a failure to adjust to their role as women," she writes. She unseats the insensate vagina and crowns the clitoris supreme.

That year a Boston discussion group on women's health and sexuality publishes *Women and Their Bodies,* the hand-typed, stapled-together first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves,* the founding document of the women's self-help health movement. The chapter on sexuality is an early exemplar of what came to be called "pro-sex" feminism. It manages to be both randy and clinical, and at a time when every thought and feeling is assayed for signs of sexist brainwashing, broadly tolerant, printing fantasies that elsewhere are condemned as unfeminist.

Putting Koedt's polemic into bodily practice, *OBOS* offers extensive explications of women's reproductive and sexual anatomy, photographs and diagrams (clitoris and public hair prominent), and detailed sections on masturbation, arousal, and orgasm. Eschewing experts (the writers discourage physician-assisted hymen-stretching) the manual exhorts readers to get to know their bodies: examine their genitals in a mirror, find their clitorises, smell and taste their own secretions, and masturbate. A panoply of techniques is helpfully included.

I read, I look, I smell, I taste. I jerk off. I jerk off another way, and another way. I fantasize, sometimes imagining myself in those nude modeling sessions, sometimes as the woman in those *Playboy* Letters. And, hallelujah! I come. A diligent student, I practice frequently.

But my achievement is destined to be complicated. Or, rather, political. Because in 1970, among feminists, everything is political—everything. Soon a crowd-sourced set of arousal-inducing methods is taken up as a political platform, and the clitoris is drafted as a partisan. It is no longer enough to make friends with your clit and let your vagina down gently. A girl must choose teams, and Team Clitoris is like a women's softball team: Boys are neither necessary nor necessarily welcome. "[T]he establishment of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual *institution,*" writes Koedt. "For it would indicate that sexual pleasure is obtainable from either men or women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option."

OBOS puts forth some options for straight women who find themselves in bed with uncooperative men. "Some of us" will seek out "the right male lovers," it notes, uncharacteristically providing no instructions. And "some of us may just decide to chuck the whole thing and express our love and sexuality with each other."

Lesbianism is more than a species of desire, though. It is a statement of solidarity—*the* statement of solidarity. Keeping faith with the Pro-Woman Line is a half-measure; best be a fully committed Woman-Identified Woman, not just standing up for your sisters but also going down on them. Sexual attraction is aspirational. Sign on as a "political lesbian" and, it is promised, desire will ensue. "Many women will for a while continue to think they dig men. But as they become accustomed to female society and as they become absorbed in their projects, they will eventually come to see the utter uselessness and banality of the male," writes Solanas in the *SCUM Manifesto*. Declares Ti-Grace Atkinson, a writer and founder of The Feminists, "Feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice." Overnight, the adage is a movement slogan.

With men losing relevance and women gaining cachet, it follows that a girl's got to be crazy to be straight. Indeed, in a mimeographed handout simply called "Radical Feminism," Atkinson defines heterosexual love as a "psycho-pathological condition . . . a euphoric state of fantasy in which the victim transforms her oppressor into her redeemer."

And if heterosexual love is perverse in women, in men the perversion of love into violence—that is, rape—is socially normal. "The purpose [of rape] is to ensure, as a final measure, the acceptance by women of the inevitability of male domination," write Barbara Mehrhof and Pam Kearon in "Rape: An Act of Terror," a six-page beta test of the argument that will culminate in Susan Brownmiller's magnum opus, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, and degenerate into the grim polemics of Andrea Dworkin. But don't mistake your lover for the exception, Mehrhof and Kearon warn. "There is no sign that designates a rapist since each male is potentially one. . . . For the individual male, the possibility of rape remains a prerogative of his in-group; its perpetration rekindles his faith in maleness and his own personal worth."

Feminists appropriate the H-word with pride. "I think we ought to decide that man-hating is not only respectable but honorable," writes the future sci-fi author Joanna Russ in "The New Misandry." "While every woman is not Valerie Solanas, Solanas is

Everywoman—this means nobody can escape the general situation," Russ writes. "True, the enemy isn't shooting at Yossarian in particular. But they're still shooting at him." Only a few women dodge the bullets: "There are two kinds of women who never hate men: the very lucky and the very blind."

I'm drinking all this in. It makes eminent intellectual sense: Men are pitiful, rape structural, man-hating inevitable. It makes emotional sense too. After all, when I'm with women, I'm happy. Our movement elates me. Each new piece of analysis, each meeting or conversation guides the way to higher consciousness, like the blue lights beside an airplane runway. Meanwhile, beyond the initial bliss of infatuation, I'm usually miserable over some man. I can think of no better solution than ditching men and joining up, body and soul, with women.

But it is one thing to know something and quite another to feel it, and there's a great distance between what you think you should desire and what you desire. With women I see the light; the light burns with rage at men. But in the dark with a man, another desire burns. The inescapable fact is that I still want men and want them to want me; I still wish to love and be loved by a man. With time and the help of consciousness-raising and a growing pile of users' manuals like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, I am getting to know my body and liking sex more and more. But it will be years before I have an orgasm in the same room with another person, as one CR group member puts it.

I continue to conduct my sex life according to the folkways and wisdom of the sexual revolution: If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with. When I fail to be swept into sexual ecstasy, the rumor of frigidity whispers icily into my ear. The women's movement, meanwhile, has given me permission both to please myself and to reject men. I whipsaw between self-abnegation and self-righteousness. The feminism that is the key to my sexual liberation also erects a barricade between my beliefs and my happiness.

AFTER ADAM THERE ARE MORE GUYS—one- or two-night stands mostly—and a few girls (I try). Then a year out of college I start seeing Etienne. He is soft-spoken but confident, funny without sarcasm, neither masculine nor feminine. He writes

with a fountain pen and wears plain white or blue button-down shirts winter and summer. His apartment is furnished with a comical number of tables and not much else. After work—he copyedits science journals and I'm an offset stripper at a print shop—we share a beer and a bag of Fritos on his stoop, after which he makes me a perfect omelet or a salad, and we go to bed.

Etienne's feet are elegant, his chest so skinny I can see his heart beating through it. That's how I remember him anyway: transparent and vulnerable. We are fortuitously compatible, he is generous, and I have profited from time and practice. And night after night, with my hand on his poignant heart, I slide over the edge into orgasm, as easily as an omelet from a pan.

Etienne and I do not live happily ever after, however. One evening at my apartment, we are discussing Cuba. Who knows what either of us says, but soon I am shouting at him. "If you think that about Cuba, get out of my house and never come back!" It's not the first time I've shouted this way. He sighs, picks up his backpack, and descends the stairs without a word. The minute I hear the door shut I run after him, but he is halfway down the block and does not turn around.

The narcissism of small differences, Freud called it. I later understand that mine was a phobia of any difference, small or great, the psychological legacy of being raised by communists. Sad to say, though, in the early Seventies, because my lovers were men, feminism made the small differences greater. It's bad enough to have the wrong position on Cuba, but if you're male *and* incorrect on Cuba, well . . .

I embark on my last course of psychotherapy. At about 30, my presenting symptom is no longer frigidity. Instead, I am troubled by love. I cannot love a man, at least not for long; my record is three months.

I already know why. So I walk into the therapist's office, sit on her orange couch, and launch into a feminist rant. The system has given men all the cards and they play the cards to their advantage, against women, I say. The system makes men thick and selfish, unloving and unlovable. In other words, my romantic failure is the patriarchy's fault.

The therapist listens. After a long time, I pause. She inquires: "What does this have to do with you?"

What does this have to do with me? It's the stupidest question I've ever heard.

Sometime in the following months and years I allow myself to get what she means. The personal is not always political. And even when it is political, it is still personal. Ideology cannot reshape desire—despite all efforts, feminism remained my practice and lesbianism no more than a theory—but it can misshape love so drastically that love cannot survive.

ONLY TWO KINDS OF WOMAN NEVER HATE MEN, Joanna Russ said: the lucky and the blind. With Sal I was dumb-lucky. At 17, the itch itched and he happened by to scratch it. In bed, Sal was pleased to please me; out of bed, he loved me in an uncomplicated way. I often think he inoculated me against the severest sexual antagonism.

With Adam, was I blind? First, the end of the story:

When he dabbed his semen off me with a tissue, I interpreted it as a gesture of courtesy, not an attempt to destroy the evidence of a crime.

And though I left his apartment in a hurry, a few days later I called him. I apologized, making it a joke. I asked if we might go out again. He said he would call me, but of course he never did.

I have turned the events of that afternoon over in my mind many times, and many times I have changed my mind about them. In 1970—before Mehrhof and Kearon, before Brownmiller—it did not occur to me that Adam assaulted me. Later that decade, when the women's anti-violence movement broadened the definition of rape to include incidents in which the woman does not actively resist, I was convinced that he did. In 1988, a *Ms*. investigation counted "victims" who did not feel victimized among the 27 percent of female students reportedly raped on college campuses, and I reconsidered my experience again. If I didn't feel coerced, was I? Or was I in denial? In the mid-1990s, finding myself in front of Adam's old building in Chelsea, I managed to work up a mild episode of PTSD. But then I had just returned from traveling the country for *Glamour* talking to rape crisis center workers, who at

that moment were big into the theory that you could be traumatized by sexual abuse you didn't experience as traumatic, or even remember years later. My own PTSD never recurred.

RAPE, LIKE EVERY OTHER ASPECT OF SEX OR POWER, is historical. Trying to fix it in place with the presence or absence of consent—defining rape as a sex act "against our will"—begs the question, because the definition of consent is also historical. I changed my mind about Adam not just because I changed as a person, but also because history, led by feminism, was changing the terms. It was not a process, for feminism or for me, of distillation and clarification, but more an accretion of competing, complicating hypotheses.

Whatever generational conflict #MeToo stirred may reveal a misconception of sexual victimization as a permanent, unchangeable object, whose existence is illuminated through introspection and conversation, politics, art, and law. If a person is compliant or complacent about a sexual outrage against her, if a victim does not feel victimized, it is because she is not yet woke. But either the claim that sexual harassment isn't all that bad because we oldsters weathered it and survived, or the rejoinder that you oldsters put up with something you shouldn't have put up with and now you're defending your false consciousness, leaves out a third possibility: that the *feeling* of consent changes with history. Were I a 17-year-old girl today, Adam's behavior might feel different than it did to the girl I was—so I would have named it differently.

As the girl I was became the woman I am, I wandered between minimizing and exaggerating the importance of those few hours with Adam. In my peregrinations, I unearthed one appropriate emotion: anger. Still, I am not sorry I did not report him to the police. I would not report him now. Unlike many other feminists, I do not look to the criminal legal system for sexual justice; I have no illusion that our penal institutions will ever help transform a sexist culture into one of loving equals.

This much I believe: If Adam was a sexist—like almost every man in 1970—he was no rapist. He was a guy trying to get in the pants of a girl who seemed to want her pants gotten into. What happened between us fell somewhere between consent

and coercion. I am reconciled to ambiguity, living in history.

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