

# UP FROM RADICALISM:

## A FEMINIST JOURNAL

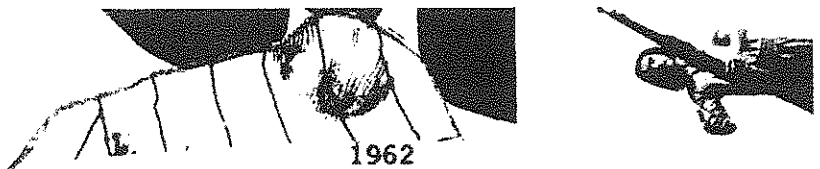
BY ELLEN WILLIS

This journal should really start at the beginning of my life, because that's when the struggle starts. Black kids find out they're Black, little girls find out they're female. By the time I was six or so, I must have discovered the awful truth, because I made a big point of despising boys—on the grounds that they were stupid and unadventurous. But when I playacted with my girl friends, I always wanted a boy's part. And my model was my father, who drew me diagrams of magnets and the digestive system, not my mother, who intruded on my life of the mind by making me dry the dishes. Later on things got more complicated. On one level I was determined to prove that except for a little accident of hormones, I was a perfectly good man: I was going to be a famous writer/actress/scientist. Domestic chores were contemptible (I would have servants, since I couldn't have a wife) and children—who needed them; women were pretty contemptible too, except those happy few of us who were really men.

At the same time, without any feeling of absurdity, I worked obsessively at making myself a desirable object. I followed all the rules—build up their egos, don't be aggressive, don't flaunt your brains, be charming, diet, dance, be with it, wear a girdle, never kiss goodnight on the first date—until I learned that breaking them a little, or better yet appearing to break them, attracted the more imaginative boys. When I finally abandoned the sexual double standard it was less because I realized it was unfair (I always knew that) than because the game had changed—men now wanted experienced women. And if you had to pretend you weren't a virgin, there wasn't much point in being one.

At twenty, I graduated from a prestige college with honors, ready to make my way as a quasi-man among men. And I received my diploma as a woman—I was married. I might as well start there.

**YU GOTTA LONG WAY TO SLIDE, BABY**



1962

I get married against my better judgment. At some point before the wedding there is a mysterious break between my rational and motor faculties. Though I am having more and more doubts, I keep behaving as if nothing is happening inside my head. Finally I make a half-hearted attempt to postpone the date and when that doesn't work I just abdicate and, as I put it to myself, let the current flow. Obviously something in me is anxious to get married, even if I'm not. Afterward I think maybe that's how it works for everybody. After all, I have too much pride to admit how I feel, so who knows what other wives are thinking?

We move to Berkeley and I start graduate school. I'm going mainly because of all those vocational conferences at Barnard that transmitted the message: better take typing and shorthand. Anything but that! I hate studying, but cling to the status of student.

I am still pretty militant about housework—I insist that we split it half and half, with the result that nothing much gets done—but I act very domestic when other people are around. No one is going to think I'm a hen-pecking wife.

In 1963

I can't decide what to do about school or about my marriage, and I get very depressed. Try the psychotherapy clinic at the U.C. health center. But the therapist they assign me is a woman. I know right away I just can't level with another woman; the distrust is too strong. So I talk around my problems, hoping something will happen anyway. Maybe it does—I muster enough decisiveness to quit school. Okay. But what do I do now?

Kennedy is dead. I am very disturbed; I've been caught up in the patriotic idealism myth more than I like to admit, and my husband has applied for a government job overseas. I want some kind of writing job. In college I published a couple of magazine articles and a handbook of advice for freshman girls. After three months of looking—the women in the employment agencies keep telling me to make my hair lie down more—I find a job in San Francisco, writing promotion copy for textbooks at \$75 a week.

1964

I decide I should get involved in the civil rights movement. I have all the Jewish-leftist tropisms, I've marched for integration and against the bomb, but I've never done

## DON'T KNOW WHY THERE'S NO SUNSHINE IN THE SKY

anything serious. I put on a SNCC button and go to CORE meetings. But I never feel very welcome, and I never think of anything illuminating to say.

Free Speech erupts. I am an enthusiastic partisan, but don't join the sit-in. I'm not a student any more; I won't be a hanger-on.

I read Wilhelm Reich, A.S. Neill and Paul Goodman and decide I'm an anarchist. If it is the suppression of sexuality by the authoritarian family that destroys the natural communal impulses of children and perpetuates oppressive institutions, then the system is against the best interests of the rulers as well as the ruled, and what we need is not violent revolution but a mass transformation of consciousness. We have to start on our own, building decentralized people's institutions. I become very interested in communes. Richard Alpert comes to S.F. and lectures on the LSD community at Millbrook. He talks about how the drug dissolves people's ego hangups and helps them live cooperatively, and it's really convincing until he explains how the women at Millbrook are earth-goddesses. He doesn't say who does the community's shitwork, but I have my suspicions.

I am much more taken with the arrangement at the cooperative Sierra Club Lodge, where my husband and I spend a weekend. It's very cheap because every guest does a chore. Diswashing, my choice, is an assembly-line operation, done in 15 minutes. That's the answer to the housework problem—economy of scale.

### 1965

We move again. My husband's name is coming up for his overseas job and he will be training in Washington. I'm uncomfortable about Vietnam, but also poor and anxious to travel.

The only work I can get in D.C. is typing, and we're not in great financial need, so I decide to stay home and write. But my husband hints that if I'm not going to do anything, i.e. make money, I ought to pay more attention to the housework. I decide I'd rather type.

My husband is assigned to an African post. I start wondering what I'll do there. All the references to wives in the agency brochures assume that they are raising children and/or doing charity work and being good hostesses at parties and charming assets to their husbands' careers. Obviously the government expects two bodies for the price of one. Well it's not getting mine. I absolutely intend to make my own independent money. But how? Let's face it, Africa is not the place for a literary career. One afternoon we visit an official who has just come back from

"our" post. I ask if there are jobs available on the English-language newspapers. He says there probably are. "But," he adds, "it's up to the Embassy. If they don't want you to work, you don't work."

We have more fights about housework, especially cooking. I want to eat in restaurants all the time. My husband thinks it's a disgusting extravagance. I insist that we have more than enough money, what are we saving it for? Which doesn't stop me from feeling guilty. (It's his money.) (Good wives cook.) (It isn't as if he never helps me.) (Why am I being nasty and causing trouble over something so trivial?)

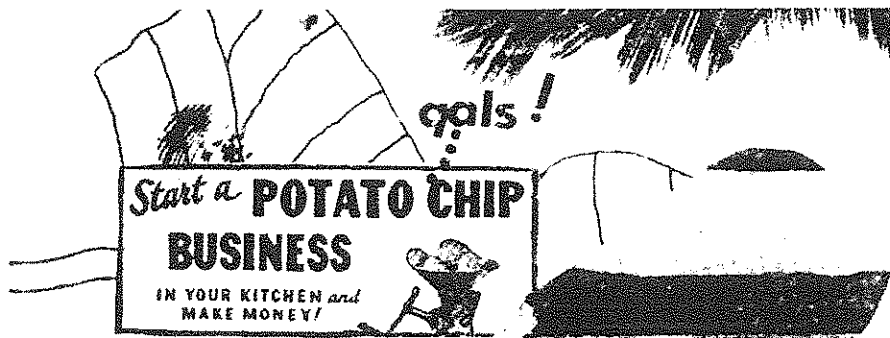
I think I'm looking forward to going overseas and that I've accepted my marriage because . . . life is like that, as they say . . . and I like my husband, which is something. But on some level I feel a confrontation approaching. If I go to Africa it's a commitment, I can't pick up and go home. I get very moody. Write poems about suicide, murder, and mental breakdowns. Fantasize. Become ridiculously infatuated with another man. And finally have this vision of myself as another Carol Kennicott, keeping my hair long, singing radical folk songs to admiring bureaucrats, writing a mediocre novel coyly fictionalizing my situation, my husband beginning to hate me as he realizes. No. Life is not like that. I make the break and move to New York.

### 1966-1967

I register at the Barnard alumnae placement service. The director tells me I won't be able to get anything above the secretarial level. So do the first half-dozen employment agency "counselors" I meet. It gets so bad I actually send away for some graduate school catalogues.

Then in the *Times* help wanted male section, I find an ad for a staff writer on a small magazine. The publisher tells me he wants someone with more experience, but I can have another editorial job. He remarks that his editor gets along better with women. I ask why he doesn't list the staff writer in the help-female section. "It never occurred to me," he says. The pay is terrible, but I get a prestigious title and a pep talk about my potential.

I have my first tentative skirmishes with men. I'm pretty rusty. All those years in the provinces, I'm still quoting poets I read in college. Besides, marriage has given me an illusory sense of power. A married woman can flirt with men, tell them her troubles, presume on their friendship, and by the rules they can't demand that she follow



through. If she wants a man (especially a single man) it is not only acceptable, but almost expected, for her to make the first move. In no other situation does she have so much freedom. Furthermore the status marriage confers insulates her somewhat from rejection and humiliation. Whatever another man might think of her or do to her, at least one man has certified her Class A merchandise. Propped up by marriage, I've been dealing with men from a position of (relative) strength. Now that I'm on my own I begin to see the point, for women, of the European system of institutionalized adultery.

I realize I'm suspicious of men. Something else to feel guilty about. It's so unliberated, the old double-standard hangup, fear of being used, fear of being a conquest—conquest, for Christ's sake—so I'm fucked up, by Dear Abby and a countersexualrevolutionary childhood. The important thing is not to show it. Men don't want neurotic chicks. Don't think, just do whatever you want—only what I want is affected by the vibrations I'm getting, or afraid of getting. What I don't want is for this or that promising guy to think I'm cold, naive, straight, not turned on by him, or conversely desperate, indiscriminating overinvolved, etc. What I really want is to choose the moment myself, but I've learned at least this much; if you're too picky about details you end up with nothing. I remember all this from before I was married. But as a post-adolescent I wasn't expected to be cool about it. Now I'm what men like to call a big girl.

I find I can't keep myself from playing roles. The emotionless decadent, looking for diversion from boredom, is a favorite. Corny, but it works by my criteria: maximum pleasure, minimum anxiety.

I run into B., a classmate of mine years ago. He is a reporter and his first major magazine piece has attracted a lot of attention and three book offers. He is very cocky. His aggressiveness puts me so uptight that I go into my blasé-bohemian rap (if I do sleep with you, it won't matter). He tells me that his real commitment is to a girl from out of town (don't expect anything, baby). Great start.

woo wee!



I soon learn why W., my immediate boss, gets along better with women. No man would put up with his total intolerance of self-assertion. I stay twice as long as any of my male predecessors. I'm afraid of ending up a Time researcher.

One of my duties is to criticize W.'s manuscripts. His prose is clichéd, awkward and wordy, but if I make too many suggestions he sulks and rejects them. After a decent probation I approach him about a writing assignment. He tells me he doesn't have time to teach me to write. Later he agrees to let me do a profile if he can dictate the slant.

Finally I try a minor power play. Our publisher is hungry for new young writers and I've found one—B. I point him out to W. He tells me to keep my friends out of the office because they might steal his ideas. B. convinces me the time has come to go over W.'s head to the publisher, who likes his work. Given W.'s authority complex, I'm pretty sure to lose my job—if our boss has to choose between us, he's not going to choose me. Still, no man would let someone shit on him this way—why should I?

After the big blowup, B. helps me stave off Time Inc. by getting me some free-lance assignments. I am amazed when my stuff is actually accepted, and then chagrined at my defeatism. Why does B. have to tell me 25 times that my writing is good before I'll believe it? Why did I accept W.'s opinion of me, even while I was fighting it?

A friend is hired as editor of a new magazine and asks me to join the staff as an associate editor. When I meet the publisher he tells me he hopes I won't mind answering the phones sometimes; all the girls in the office help out.

Even while I was a government wife, I never stopped identifying with the left. This schizophrenia was possible partly because of the lingering Kennedy mystique, but mostly because my political involvements had always been so tenuous. No organization ever seemed to be doing what I wanted to do, whatever that was. And things are no different now. I try joining a radical group. Its ideas are pretty close to mine but its practice turns out to be telling



Puerto Ricans in the Ave. D housing project how the corporations are oppressing them. One go-round is enough; it doesn't take any black power polemicist to make me feel like a patronizing fool.

I'm becoming disenchanted with quasi-religious utopianism. The hippies aren't making much headway. Sexual freedom, the end of ego games and communal cooperation can't be willed into existence. Psychic liberation is difficult, maybe impossible, even for the dedicated. And most people aren't about to give up their hard-won equilibrium and whatever little they have in the way of money, security or power for—not happiness, but an ideal of happiness that might or might not be attainable.

Anyway, this approach is impossibly parochial in the face of the urgent conflict between U.S. imperial power and the rest of the world, not to mention the black colony at home. Vietnam can't wait for the president of Boeing to drop out of the rat race; kids in the ghetto need all the ego they've got.

I'm into Marxist theory more than ever before. In international terms, it offers the only cogent explanation of what's going on. But there's something essential missing; Marxists don't understand the political and human significance of sex. When they consider sexual problems at all it's only to dismiss them as the affliction of a decadent bourgeoisie, to be swept away by the emerging proletariat. But no proletarian revolution has yet been able to sweep them away.

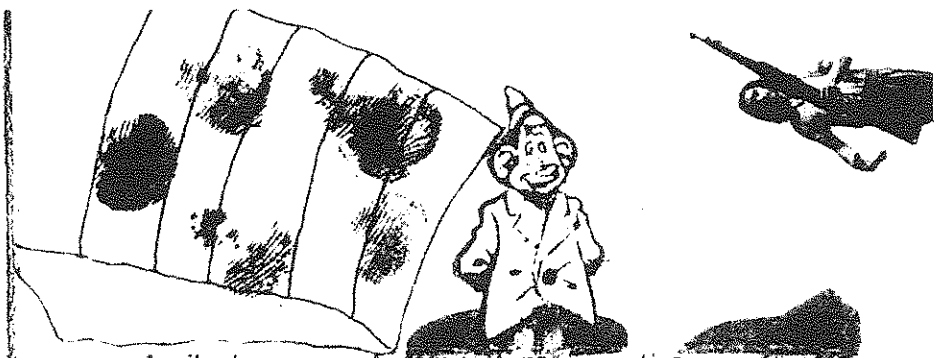
What we need is an analysis that can connect the politics of nations with the politics of our own bodies. A large order. Marcuse's attempt is the best, and he concludes that nothing can be done.

1968

It's getting better—if not for the country, at least for me. I'm reviewing rock and working on a book. My combine with B. has miraculously survived and prospered after a series of passionate and/or hysterical adjustments.

**February:** Ramparts prints a sketchy, rather condescending article on "woman power" which mentions the new radical women's movement, the first I've heard of it.

"I WUNDA... I WUNDA..."



**April:** J., a recent acquaintance, mentions in passing that she belongs to a feminist group, but I don't take it up. Why?

A young girl, a friend of some friends, comes to town to get an abortion and stays with me. Doctor is a well-known, respected abortionist. Charges her \$700, which she has to borrow. I'm disturbed to learn she was given no antibiotics. Next day she starts hurting. Neither of us wants to face trouble, so we wait. But the pain gets worse. I waste an hour calling private doctors, leery of a police hassle at Bellevue. Her fever shoots up and I call an ambulance, panicked that I may have waited too long. The doctor, if you can call him that, lets her have it. While he's examining her and giving her shots and sticking tubes in her and she's yelling, in terrible pain and scared to death, he starts in, "YOU WENT TO A QUACK, RIGHT?" keeping at it until she says yes, and then "That was a stupid thing to do, wasn't it? How much did it cost you?" and on and on. She asks him if she's going to die. The prick won't say no. When he's through I ask how she is. He gives me his nastiest you-East-Village-sluts-are-all-alike look and says "She's very sick," loud enough for her to hear, and strides out of the ward. The nurse reassures me. She's full of penicillin and it's going to be all right.

She spends a week in the hospital. When she's ready to go home one of the doctors gives her a prescription for birth control pills, but the clinic pharmacist won't give her all the pills at once. She has to come back every month. Regulations. I argue: there's no point to this, it's harassment. "Don't be smart, lady," he says.

**August:** Chicago, screwing the Democrats. Under siege, my political confusion disappears. But when the battle's over I get depressed about the we-are-making-the-revolution-now machismo-mongering and we-are-the-people bullshit. We've yet to become the people. Am I the people? Are the Yippies me? I don't know.

**September:** From Chicago, B. and I go west. On our way I read about the women's liberation protest against the Miss America contest. I'm dubious—won't people think they're just ugly, jealous women? But I remember what it's like to be examined and compared at a party. And

I'm proud that women are in the papers for fighting.

J. and husband and kids have moved to San Francisco and we're staying at their place. She gives me a copy of *Notes from the First Year*, a journal published by the New York radical women's group. It disturbs me. Too much "Get off my back, whitey." All our problems aren't caused by men—are they? The tone strikes me as frighteningly bitter, especially about sexual relationships. Either I've been remarkably lucky, or they've been unlucky . . . or maybe I let men who give me a hard time off the hook too easily.

J. and I talk about communes. To me, the communal family, with domestic work shared equally by both sexes, is the only solution to child-rearing without slavery. Having the sole responsibility for a vulnerable, dependent life, never being able to act on impulse, makes women dull and desperate. Why should we have to choose between being fully, freely human and having a share in raising the next generation? J. envisions a sanctuary for radicals and a center for political activity. I think just making a commune work is a difficult enough political project.

I go with J. to a women's meeting. It's somewhat chaotic, a dozen different subjects are discussed, but what impresses me most is just the fact of women getting together and talking. And though I am a stranger, I feel included. There's none of the prickly suspicious aloofness that brings me down whenever I go to a political meeting. No sense that I have to pass some initiation to be accepted. Or that anyone looks at me as raw material to "organize."

I resolve to join the New York group when I get home. *Notes* scares me, but by now I recognize that I'm resisting.

**November:** The women behind *Notes* are nothing like my fantasies of anti-sex fanatics. They seem no different from other women, except friendlier. Most are young; perhaps half are married.

The basic activity of the group is consciousness-raising, the loosely-applied formula for which is sharing of personal experience: generalization: analysis. Ideally, analysis



where did my Popeye go ?

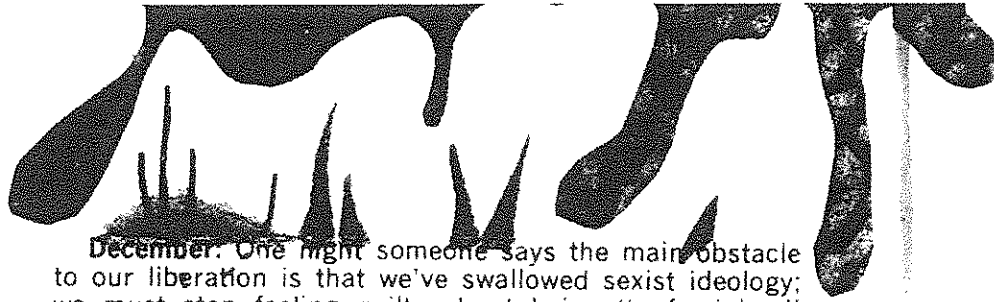
of an issue should give rise to appropriate action; the action then becomes part of the experience to be analyzed. But the movement is growing so fast, it's hard to maintain continuity. Already I feel like a veteran. New women keep coming in, women who are just discovering their oppression, asserting for the first time their independence from husbands and lovers, overwhelmed that here they are listened to, respected. They want to talk about everything, their jobs, their husbands, their childhoods, their abortions, their attitudes toward other women. So we talk. Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's bullshit, but I learn something at every meeting.

For a while I feel that now I understand and love all other women. It's a great high until I realize that it's mostly a defense against the fear and antagonism of a lifetime, a compound of superiority ("Oh, I'd rather be friends with men, they're much more stimulating!" translation: I'm not like them, I've made it out of the ghetto) and sexual competitiveness. Revise: I'm starting to be interested in other women. To feel warmth and sympathy. To recognize a new loyalty. To realize other women are not the enemy. To understand as a gut reality the phenomenon of rulers setting the ruled against each other.

Also: I stop using certain expressions.

1) "Personal," as in don't blame the social system for your personal inadequacies. True, we all have our idiosyncrasies. We each cope with certain situations better than with others. A. is better than I am at the sexual game, I am better at the work game. But the situations themselves are common to all of us. And they all have a common denominator, namely the subordination of women to men. That is politics, not personality.

2) "Extreme case." W. is an extreme case—most bosses aren't like that. A rapist is an extreme case. But oddly enough, we've all run into our share of extreme cases. A lyncher is an extreme case. In all probability some lower class, rightwingnut. Decent people don't approve of lynching. But their racism produces the lynchers. And sexism produces martinets, rapists and wife-beaters.



December. One might say the main obstacle to our liberation is that we've swallowed sexist ideology; we must stop feeling guilty about being "unfeminine," refuse to play our traditional roles. This touches off an emotional argument. It's not a matter of brainwashing, the opposition insists. There are consequences for stepping out of our roles. If you refuse to be a domestic servant and your man calls you bitchy and unloving, the whole culture backs him up. It won't help to find another man. Most men won't accept our individual attempts at self-liberation—why should they? They are organized, we aren't. Names do hurt us: they're warnings. If we step out of line too often, the penalties are loneliness, sexual deprivation and in most cases the economic and spiritual dead end of menial jobs. Unless we can manage to please a man, even the one significant human activity reserved for women—bringing up children—is available to us only at an exorbitant cost.

drip

So if women are "brainwashed" it's because facing their powerlessness is too painful. If we can't change things, it doesn't help to stew about them. And we can only change things together. As we build a movement, as we organize to attack the institutions that keep us down, our psychic defenses will go too. Guilt is fear.

Fear . . . . What about my fear of sexual exploitation? Isn't it just a residue of traditional morality propaganda? Isn't it my father's disapproval I'm unconsciously worried about? That's what I've always assumed, but as soon as I say it I know it's not true. *I'm afraid of something real.* But what? How does it work?

We talk. And again, there's the exhilaration of finding out it's not just me. Everyone understands exactly what I mean. All of us bohemian-radical-freaks who consort with men who espouse the sexual revolution agree that something is not quite kosher about the sexual revolution. Notes hinted the same thing, and because I wasn't ready to assimilate it, I got angry. *If you can't change things, it doesn't help to stew . . . .*

There can be no sexual revolution in a vacuum. Our sexual status, like our economic and political status, has improved somewhat since the Victorian era, but the rhetoric of emancipation has far outstripped the social reality. The "liberated woman," like the "free world," is a fiction that obscures real power relations and defuses revolution.

How can women, subordinate in every other sphere, be free and equal in bed? Men want us to be a *little* free—it's more exciting that way. But women who really take them at their word put them uptight and they show it—by their jokes, their gossip, their obvious or subtle putdowns of women who seem too aggressive or too "easy." By denying that these attitudes still predominate, the s.r. propaganda has undermined our main defense against them, which was to insist, as a prerequisite to sex, that men love us or accept responsibility for us—or at least hang around long enough so that we can know what we're getting into. Now that all this is unhip we are under pressure to sleep with men on their terms, because if we won't, other women will. Not that there's anything wrong with casual pleasure. It must be nice to be able to be casual. But we've never had that option. On the contrary, to avoid both the humiliation of being treated as an object and the frustration of celibacy, we have to be supersensitive game players. It's nervewracking and not much fun, except for a few real adepts (the femme fatales). Many women just give up, let men treat them like shit, and call it freedom or innate feminine altruism. A few decide that men aren't worth the hassle. But most of us try to hang in there.

For the first time I understand what is ultimately wrong with the "change your head" line. Up against the wall, Beatles.

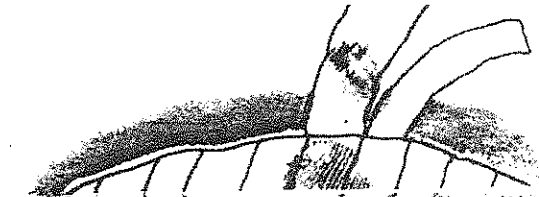
1969

January: The Mobilization-sponsored counter-inaugural activities in Washington are to include a women's liberation action. The theme will be Give Back the Vote; we will destroy our voter registration cards to dramatize the futility of the 80-year suffrage struggle in gaining freedom for women.

Mobe's ad in the *Guardian* calls for an end to the war and freedom for Black and Spanish people. No mention of women's liberation. Women in another group want to ask men to destroy their voter cards. Apparently they have interpreted the action as a simple protest against electoral politics, rather than a specifically feminist rejection of appeasement-by-ballot.

I get the funny feeling that we're being absorbed. Will we get the chance to deliver our message, or are we just there to show our support for the important (i.e. male-oriented) branches of the left? Our group decides to confront this issue with a speech attacking male chauvinism in the movement.





Dave Dellinger introduces the rally with a stirring denunciation of the war and racism.

"What about women, you schmuck?" I shout.

"And, uh, a special message from women's liberation," he adds.


Our moment comes. M. from the Washington group gets up to speak. This isn't the protest against movement men, which is second on the agenda, just fairly innocuous radical rhetoric—except that it's a good-looking woman talking about women. The men go crazy. "Take it off!" "Take her off the stage and fuck her!" They yell and boo and guffaw at unwitting double entendres like "We must take to the streets." When S., who is representing the New York group, comes to the mike and announces that women will no longer participate in any so-called revolution that does not include the abolition of male privilege, it sounds like a spontaneous outburst of rage.

By the time we get to the voter card business, I am shaking. If radical men can be so easily provoked into acting like rednecks, what can we expect from others? What have we gotten ourselves into?

Meanwhile Dellinger has been pleading with us to get off the stage, "for your own good." Why isn't he telling them to shut up?

Just yesterday many of the women present were arguing against S.'s statement on the grounds that in spite of their chauvinism movement men are basically our allies, and we shouldn't embarrass them in front of the straight press! As it turns out, none of the aboveground papers so much as mentions the women's action. Even the *Guardian* mysteriously neglects to report the second speech.

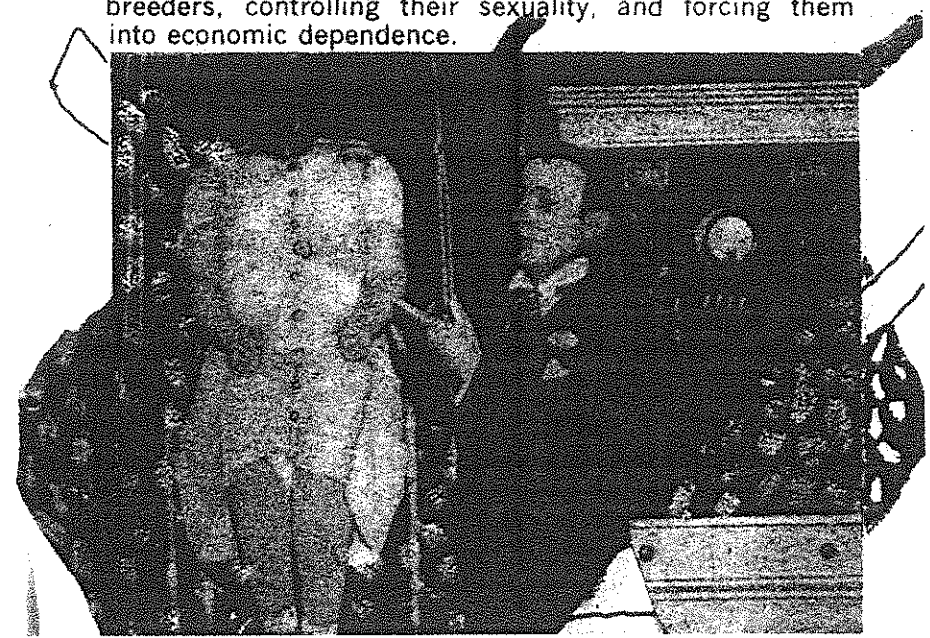
The whole fiasco has forced me to do some thinking. Without realizing it, I've held two contradictory views of women's liberation. On the one hand I recognize the Black analogy and the need for separate groups free from male bias and male control. I know that socialist revolutions have not eliminated male supremacy, that Soviet women still bear the burden of domestic responsibility, that machismo still flourishes in Cuba. But until now I've also assumed that women's liberation was part of the radical movement, that one of our essential functions, in fact, was to bring masses of women into the left. Washington has destroyed that illusion. How can it be good for women to join a movement whose ideology, history and practice have been created by their oppressors? We need not only separate groups but a separate movement, free of pre-



conceptions, which will build an analysis of women's oppression that is rooted in our day-to-day experience and base on that analysis our own revolutionary program. It is also clear that a genuine alliance with male radicals will not be possible until sexism sickens them as much as racism. This will not be accomplished through persuasion, conciliation, or love, but through independence and solidarity: radical men will stop oppressing us and make our fight their own when they can't get us to join them on any other terms.

Most of the women in New York's counter-inaugural delegation have come to the same conclusions. We decide to form an action group based on a militantly independent, radical feminist consciousness.

Many women violently disagree with this approach, insisting that capitalism is the only enemy, that male supremacy is a symptom, that only ruling class men benefit from it. This contradicts my experience and common sense: all men benefit from having women to relieve them of menial, repetitive domestic tasks, cater to their needs and build up their egos. Anyway, the ideology of male supremacy does not stem from capitalism but from the patriarchal family, the oldest, most pervasive class structure in existence. The family is the basic institution that oppresses women, defining their roles as domestics and breeders, controlling their sexuality, and forcing them into economic dependence.



**February:** The state is holding another of its "expert" hearings on abortion reform, in which (mostly male) doctors, lawyers, politicians and clergymen go before an all-male legislative committee to decide whether in certain special circumstances the government should stop forcing women to have babies. The witnesses this time are fourteen men and a nun.

Feminists, both liberal and radical, organize a protest: these phony experts have no right to control our bodies and our lives. Forced child-bearing is slavery. We want total repeal of the law and free abortion clinics. Half a dozen women's liberationists, including me, plan to disrupt the hearing and demand that the forum be turned over to women, the only experts on abortion.

I volunteer to make up a leaflet, I write it, type it, letter it, mimeograph it, amaze the whole time at my self-confidence. In other political organizations I would have worried over a job like this for days and called a dozen people to ask what I should say. But this time I'm doing it *for myself*, writing from the memory of pregnancy scares, of the doctor who wouldn't prescribe pills for me because I was unmarried and underage and then bawled me out for wasting his time, of my friend screaming in the hospital. I'm writing from anger. Nobody needs to tell me a thing.

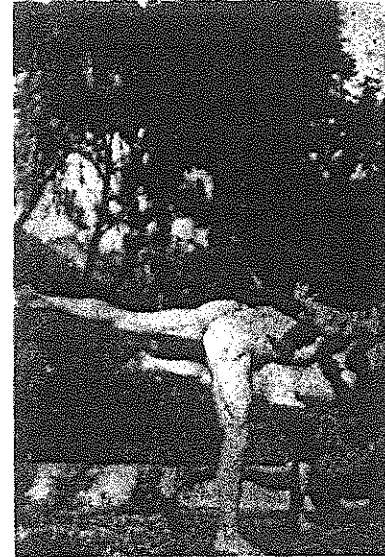
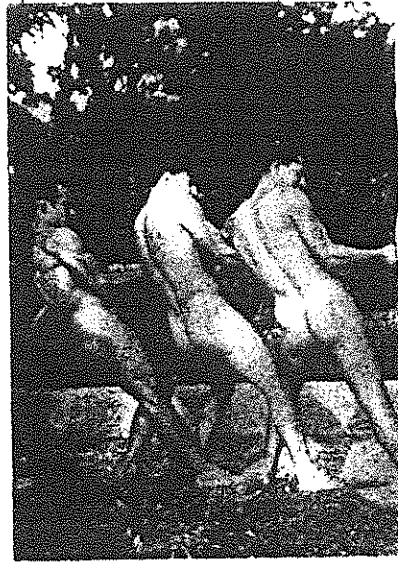
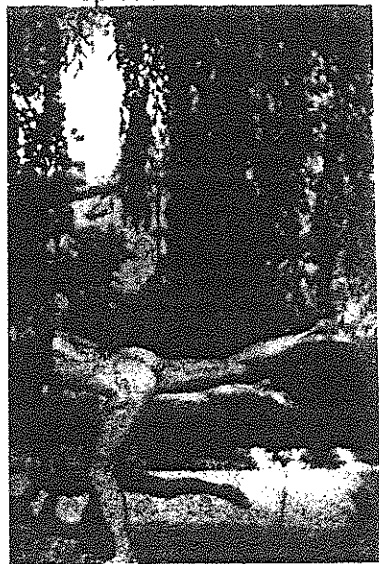
At the hearing, I am nervous. I have deep feminine inhibitions against being nasty and making myself conspicuous. But as the testimony proceeds—a decrepit

judge is advocating legal abortion for women who have "done their social duty" by having four children—my adrenalin rises. Then a member of our cadre gets up and shouts "Okay, now let's hear from the *real* experts!" When she finishes talking, I start, and I have never felt less inhibited in my life. In another minute, most of the women in the room are angrily demanding to testify.


"Won't you act like ladies?" a legislator pleads, but no one is listening.

**March:** We give our new group a name Redstockings—and plan our first action. As a followup to the abortion demonstration, we will hold our own hearing, at which women will testify about their abortions. About a dozen women agree to speak. Many others refuse because they are afraid of static from employers or families.

One problem in setting up the hearing is to make sure it's understood as politics rather than soap opera. A poor man can tell how it feels to go hungry, and everyone will take for granted the political context. But if a woman speaks frankly about her sexual reproductive life—which is as central to her oppression as the poor man's economic life—the standard response is pornographic enjoyment of what are considered highly intimate revelations. As a result we are inhibited about discussing sex with each other, let alone in public. At one meeting we got onto men's attitudes toward women's sexual pleasure and a woman said "Let's get serious" (by which she meant








let's discuss capitalism). We also have to contend with the widespread assumption that women's concerns in general are "personal," "subjective." Women have been excluded from the larger society and defined as private creatures. The very idea of male-female relations as a political question confounds most people; politics takes place between groups of men, in the "world." It is because of this prejudice that our consciousness-raising method—an attempt to define our political reality that has had its analogues in the black movement and the Chinese revolution—is so often dismissed as "group therapy."

There are two ways to get over this obstacle: to confront the audience with the spurious personal-political distinction and to have at our disposal a thorough knowledge of the politics of abortion. We spend a couple of meetings discussing abortion prohibition as a sexual punishment, motherhood as women's "social duty," the white middle class monopoly on relatively safe abortions, male authoritarianism and misogyny in the medical profession, the taboo on the idea that a normal, healthy woman might not want children, reprisals against women who speak out. But we agree that although the witnesses will have this context in mind, they will not talk theory. They will talk about themselves.

It works. In fact it's more effective than we had hoped. The testimony is honest and powerful and evokes strong reactions from the audience—empathy, anger, pain. Women stand up to give their own testimony. One woman decries "the atmosphere of hostility toward men." A man yells



"Lesbians!" another remarks that women talk too much, and another sneers at "sob stories." A hint of defensiveness creeps into the women's replies. But then a feminist in the audience walks up to the mike and speaks, controlling but not concealing her rage: "Yes, I have to admit I'm hostile to men. Men have exploited us; why shouldn't we be hostile? Is an oppressed group supposed to love its oppressors?"

Afterward a Black guy says he's never been to such a supercharged meeting except where Blacks were speaking to white people.

We're hoping the idea will catch on and become the equivalent, for the women's movement, of the Vietnam teach-ins.

**April:** Consciousness-raising has one terrible result. It makes you more conscious. I can't walk in the street any more. I used to be fairly oblivious to the barrage of comments from men on my anatomy and what they'd like to do with it. I didn't even realize that I generally stare straight ahead because if I catch the wrong man's eye he'll think I'm encouraging him.

So what's wrong, a male friend wants to know, with men digging you? Don't you like to look at attractive men? Sure. I even like to look at attractive women. But most men who ogle us on the street, especially the ones who feel the need to say something, or even touch, aren't digging us. They're showing hatred and contempt. The message: baby, you're just a collection of sexual parts, walking down the street for my benefit. I can say anything I want and you can't object because I'm stronger than you and you're scared.

Think of a Black man in a southern town. A white man makes a jocular, insulting comment and he can't answer back. A white woman passes and he knows he'd better point his eyes elsewhere. Straight ahead, and stay out of trouble. That's powerlessness.

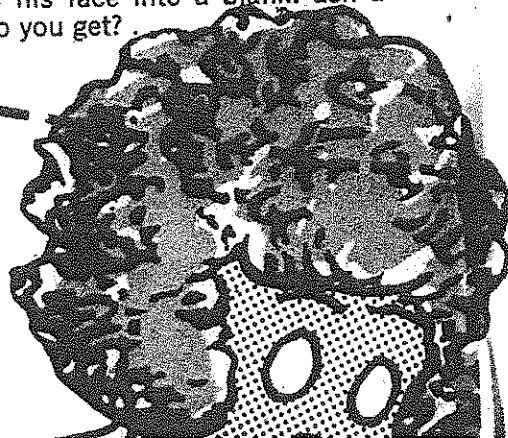
How I'd love to be able to say "Shut up, motherfucker, or I'll beat the shit out of you!" Sometimes I curse them or give them the finger, if the street is crowded.

I stop to buy a hot dog and the counterman talks baby talk to me, in the manner of countermen. He calls me "dear" (cf. "boy"). I conceive an experiment in self-liberation. I say, with a propitiatory smile, "You know, you don't have to talk to me as if I'm five years old." The counterman is enraged. He raves, not to me, but to the other (male) customers. "See? You act nice to somebody and look what you get! Try to be nice!" And then he turns to me with the crusher: "You'll never get married if you act like that!" I guess I should make some consciousness-raising comeback like "Tried it once—didn't like it." But I don't have the heart. I feel like an idiot. A certified crank. No sense of humor.

Another discovery: a lot of men, especially working-class men, won't get out of the way for a woman on the street. They walk in a straight line and expect you to move. I develop a policy of confrontation. I walk straight too and bump into them. They don't quite understand what's happening and mutter something like "Lady, watch where you're going."

I go to a dinner party. As usual, when dinner is over the men relax while the women clear the table. This time I actually ask two men to help. They make no sign that they've heard me. I cart off my share of dishes and sit down, and one of these same guys asks (honest!) "So what are you into in women's liberation?" "I'm into being pissed off at men who don't clear the table," I reply. He says nothing and composes his face into a blank: ask a serious question and what do you get?

"très bien; you —



—son-of-a-bitch—

After a Redstockings meeting, some of us are sitting in the coffeehouse around the corner. Two men come over uninvited and openly listen to our conversation, ignoring our suggestions that they get lost. Men at a nearby table are staring at us. They can't stand the spectacle of women together without men and not looking for men. Finally one of them (Black, with an Afro and hippie glasses) stands up and says "What are you hens chattering about?" We talk back, of course, but they've done what they wanted, ruined our conversation. We won't give them the satisfaction of leaving, but they've won anyway. For the first time I have some really specific violence fantasies.

What used to be called my private life is affected too. I can't switch off my new awareness and see my relationship with B. as strictly individual, human, free of class considerations. He checks out on the obvious things: respect for my work, absence of domestic servant hangups and Don Juanism, etc. But he definitely prefers to be the leader in any situation, whether it involves men (a concomitant of male dominance is competition among males) or women; he is the kind of person who when he's going somewhere with a group, walks two steps ahead and chooses the route. B. plans most of our social life, and most of our friends are his friends. (When I don't like friends of his, I try to get to know them better and conquer my dislike; when he doesn't like friends of mine he either refuses to see them or acts like a martyr about it.) We have always had something of a mentor-neophyte relationship. B. got me out of my job and into free-lancing and convinced me to stick with journalism; he even encouraged me to join the women's movement when I was procrastinating.

B's assumption of dominance clashes with my increasing need to assert myself and we fight. Sometimes we work it out, sometimes we don't. But I know there is a limit to how far I can challenge him before he finds being with me intolerable. And here is where the ugly fact of power comes in. B. can find any number of women who will

accept him the way he is; I've never known a man who could accept me the way I now want to be. And sometimes when I fight with B. I get terribly frightened. For my commitment to heterosexual sex is very basic and I want, need love and companionship. I still find it possible to confront B.'s chauvinism and at the same time appreciate what is individual and human about us. But how will I feel when I've been in the movement five years instead of six months?

Some feminists advocate complete separatism. I'd like to believe they are crazy. . . .

The abortion reform bill is unexpectedly killed. The bill was a farce, but that only makes the Assembly's action more shocking and disgusting. Key man in this spirited affirmation of the compulsory pregnancy system is Assemblyman Martin Ginsberg, who was crippled by polio as a child. He argues that if we allow women to abort deformed fetuses, the next step is murdering deformed children like him. After which 14 assemblymen, spontaneously or by design, withdraw their support for the bill, reversing the result.

My first reaction is simply that I want to kill him. A man who is more concerned about his own hypothetical death than about the real deaths of thousands and thousands of women is unsalvageable.

Fanon says that an oppressed individual cannot feel liberated until he kills one of the oppressors.

Women? Killing? The idea seems ludicrous. But the anger is there, and it is real, and it will be expressed. We have begun and we can't go back.

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