

To Sisterhood! covers the formative period in the lives of four friends from 1969-1972: a time when chaos in the streets echoed the chaos within families divided by the Vietnam War, changing social mores, and expectations for women.

To Sisterhood!

By Gail R. Shapiro

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Gail R. Shapiro

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Prologue

May 4th, 1969, Boston, Massachusetts

The Sunday classifieds in *The Boston Globe* read: “Help Wanted – Male,” and “Help Wanted – Female.” Fewer than 30% of married women with children work outside the home, and women earn 45% less than men for the same jobs. If a woman gets fired for refusing her boss’s sexual advances, well, tough luck. There are no laws against sexual harassment in the workplace, or anywhere else. With rare exceptions, abortion is illegal in the United States. Birth control – unless one is married and has a doctor’s prescription – is illegal in Massachusetts. “Domestic violence” does not yet exist as a term or a concept; wife beating is a private problem, not a public health issue. A responding police officer is likely to tell the batterer to “go take a walk and cool off.” Married women cannot obtain credit in their own name. Most leaders of the anti-Vietnam War Movement are men. Men can refuse to serve; women can “say yes to boys who say no.”

The second wave of the women’s movement has just begun. A conference at Emmanuel College in Boston, sponsored by Bread and Roses and other female liberation activists, will change the way a group of four young women see themselves, live their lives, view society and their place in it, and develop friendships. They will hear about sexism and the oppression experienced by women – and what women can do about it. They will learn about self-defense, community organizing, class divisions, the influence of the media, and taking back control of their bodies from a male-dominated medical establishment.

One afternoon. The power of ideas.

⌘ One ⌘

Ellen stood in the dorm hallway, wondering if she should knock on Laurie's door or just walk right back in. Juggling her square beige Samsonite overnight bag, nightgown, and towel in one hand, she squeezed the water from her dripping long blonde hair into the towel with the other. She tapped the door gently with her foot.

From down at the end of the corridor, she heard Judy Collins singing, *Someday Soon*. Judy was on the cover of this week's *Life* magazine. Ellen had a copy tucked in her bag, saving it to read on the bus back home tomorrow afternoon. A few people had even told her that she looked like Judy, but Ellen, though secretly pleased, didn't think so. Ellen's neck was long and slender, her face thinner, though her eyes were just as blue.

"It's open!" Laurie called, and Ellen walked in to find Laurie sitting cross-legged on the lower bunk in striped, pink pajamas, chewing thoughtfully on a pencil, the Sunday crossword puzzle on her lap.

Laurie looked up, smiling at her guest. "Was there enough hot water?"

When Ellen said yes, Laurie said, "I'm almost through here. I need a quick shower, then I'll take you over to breakfast. I'm stuck. What's a five-letter word for 'miscreant'? The last two letters are o-n."

Ellen wrapped the towel around her head, turban-style. She pushed her glasses up and peered down at the puzzle. After only a second's pause, she offered, "Nixon?"

Laurie laughed and put down the puzzle. “I like you, Ellen. I do hope you get to transfer in.”

“Me too.” Ellen’s calm answer belied how badly she wanted this. To be able to transfer to Radcliffe for junior year, to be part of this august institution, studying with the best professors, among the brightest women in the country, to graduate with a joint degree from Harvard...

Since the day of her Great Aunt Martha’s funeral almost a decade ago, when a bevy of Martha’s Radcliffe ’23 classmates swooped into the church, looking like a flock of exotic birds, with their bright colored filmy dresses, curled hair, and high heeled shoes that absolutely scandalized the somberly-dressed, sensibly-coifed ladies of the parish, eight-year-old Ellen realized that getting into Radcliffe College – wherever that might be – was the ticket out of the life that was already planned for her in King’s Lake. She still remembered pieces of those women’s conversations, as she drifted among them, trying to hear without being noticed.

“...that new comedian Lenny Bruce, what a scandal, oh my, Martha absolutely loved him...” “Allen Ginsberg, yes that’s with Grove Press, can you believe he finally had the nerve to publish it?” “...do you think your daughter is on the pill yet? Yes, they say it’s finally going to be approved in a few months. Too bad it’s too late for us...” And “Fidel is so sexy, don’t you think?” “Ah, yes, but Miles Davis is God...”

At the time, Ellen had no idea what or who they were talking about, but clearly, it was a lot more interesting than crop prices, the rainy late-summer weather, and who in the county won first prize for best cheddar at the state fair.

It had been her dream, way before she started this year at Ethan Allen State, the only place her parents would let her go. *Why do you want to bother with college? Why spend all that time and money, when you're going to work here at the store until you get married?* Ellen had worked hard all through school – earning the top grades in her high school class – because she knew Radcliffe took only the best students. But her parents wouldn't budge.

Ellen had tried again and again to explain her love of learning, her desire to be someone, to do something important with her life. They didn't understand. Letting Ellen attend junior college was a compromise, plus she had to live at home.

Ellen's plan was to apply for transfer admission and a scholarship. And if she got in – *when* she got in, please, please! – she'd enroll and then tell her parents. She could get a job to cover her living expenses if they refused to help her. She wanted this more than anything.

As Laurie left to shower, Ellen looked longingly at the room again, so different from her own room at home. On the wall over the desk was a red poster of a bearded man wearing a beret with a star in the center. The adjacent wall had a big red fist poster from last month's Harvard student strike, urging the students to participate for a host of reasons listed. Ellen especially liked, "Strike because there's no poetry in your lectures," and "Strike to make yourself free."

In place of curtains were navy metal Venetian blinds, open to let in the early morning spring sunshine. They matched the blue-and-white striped spreads on the twin beds. There was a colorful cotton rag rug on the floor, and a large spider plant sprouting a lot of babies hung in the window, but other than the two posters and the books spilling off

the desk and covering every horizontal surface, the room was bare of decoration. No flowery prints, no chintz, no pastels, nothing girly. Ellen loved it.

She dearly wanted to jump up and shout, “I’m here! I’m finally here!” but that definitely would not be cool. She sat still, and imagined that it was September, 1970 – 16 months from now – when she’d already been accepted, and really belonged here, instead of simply doing a weekend pre-admission visit. Ellen closed her eyes again, and tried to envision how she would decorate her own dorm room, here in Comstock Hall or wherever she’d be assigned.

She brushed her damp hair. It was thin and straight and never took long to dry. Then she pulled on a pleated khaki skirt and a short-sleeved white Villager blouse, an outfit which seemed smart when she packed it, but which she now feared would make her look overdressed, or at least a bit stuffy on this freewheeling campus. Then she tried to figure out what to tell her parents about the “field trip” she was supposed to be on this weekend in Boston with her art history class. Easy. She’d spend the afternoon at a Harvard art museum, pick up a couple of prints, and that should do it. They’d believe her. Their Ellen never lied.

Laurie returned in twenty minutes, looking anxious. “Do you have anything special you wanted to see today?” She wore a tee shirt and a short denim skirt with brown leather sandals. *I’m definitely wearing the wrong thing*, Ellen thought.

“Well, we’ve toured the campus. I sat in on a couple of classes on Friday. I was planning to go over to the Fogg Museum, I guess. I appreciate your hospitality, Laurie, but you don’t have to hang around

with me all day if you have other things to do. I have a friend from home I can call – that guy I’m going to stay with tonight.”

“Boyfriend?” Laurie asked.

“No,” Ellen said. “We dated in high school, but it’s been over for some time. We’re still good friends though. He goes to Boston College, lives someplace off Commonwealth Avenue.”

Laurie was quiet for a minute. “Look,” she said, “why don’t you come with me? I ran into a girl from my history class. She said there’s a women’s conference today at Emmanuel College, across the river in Boston, being organized by women from a collective around here. I don’t know if you’re political or anything, but I guess a bunch of people from our class are going to go and you’re welcome to join us.”

“Oh, yes!” Ellen tried not to show how exciting that sounded. “I’d like that. I’ll get ready. Is what I’m wearing all right or should I change?”

Laurie laughed. “You look fine,” she said. “I’d rather wear jeans but ‘Radcliffe students do not wear shorts or slacks to classes, or on the public streets,’ or so it says in our handbook. Of course,” she continued, “no one pays attention to that rule, especially since the strike, but I’m not going to push it right now. My parents are already freaked out enough that exams were cancelled, and one of my classes even stopped meeting. I just have to turn in a paper to get a grade...”

“Wow,” Ellen said. “No exams? Lucky you!”

Ellen would fit in here, Laurie thought, as she fashioned her own long dark hair into one messy braid down her back. Ellen was kind of serious, but so were a lot of the other girls.

Laurie thought back to last September, when she first arrived at Radcliffe. There was much to learn – not only in her classes – even though growing up in nearby Newton, she'd been hanging out in Harvard Square since junior high. Some of the professors wanted to keep things formal, while others invited students for coffee. Lots of her classmates were highly competitive, and she was still figuring out who she could trust.

Laurie looked out the window onto Walker Street. It was a perfect spring day, welcome after those two record-breaking blizzards in February. And today should be fun. All she knew about the conference was that a Boston collective was bringing together a group to talk about women's common issues and to discuss how women could organize within and outside of the Movement.

Ellen walked over to stand next to Laurie. She, too, looked out the window, at the girls walking alone and in pairs. *Will I get to be one of them for real?* Only one more night before she had to head back north. In Vermont, it was still mud season. In King's Lake, she would be pulling out her Sunday dress, trying to get her hair to curl, and heading to church with her family. In King's Lake, Ellen would know every single person she ran into all day, and everything about them and their families. A women's conference? Absolutely yes!

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Nina hurried off the train and ran up the stairs out of Back Bay Station. She still had more than an hour before the conference started, but since

it was her first time in Boston, she wasn't exactly sure how to get to Emmanuel College. She didn't want to be late. Doing a great job covering this story was important. It could be the one that launched her from lowly intern to low-paid freelancer, and on her way to a coveted staff position. *That* ought to shut up Muriel, who was always saying that Nina was an underachiever, whatever that meant. What Nina thought it meant was that Muriel and Herb were pissed off because they paid a lot for her to go all the way through The Dalton School, and now she was "throwing her life away," renting a pad in the East Village after dropping out of Sarah Lawrence, and working for free. That Nina was working at her dream job – well, at least at the entry-level to her dream job – at an important Movement organization was totally lost on her used-to-be-cool father and her Chanel-wearing, Establishment stepmother. Plus, all that tuition money was from Nina's mother's estate, so Muriel should lay off already.

Nina's mother had supported her dream. She'd had the idea to become a journalist almost as far back as she could remember, since long before her mother died.

Rod, Nina's supervisor, had written down directions from the station. "Turn left, walk two blocks to the Copley stop, take the inbound train to Park Street, then take the outbound car on Huntington."

But it was a truly gorgeous day – when she'd left New York early this morning it was still cool and overcast – so Nina decided to walk instead. It was only a couple of miles. Maybe she'd find a coffee shop on the way.

As she headed up Stuart Street and then down Huntington Avenue, Nina braced herself when she saw the construction site ahead. Head

held high, back straight, wavy copper hair flashing in the sunlight, she walked past the site, ready to ignore the catcalls and whistles. She could handle a few piggy old guys, who were bound to notice and comment on her figure. She'd been good at handling guys all her life.

So she was surprised to hear nothing. Not even a "Hey, babe!" or a "Lookin' good!" But as she crossed to the next block, she realized she didn't even hear an electric saw or the crackling of welders or a jackhammer. *Good going there, Nina*, she chided herself, *it's Sunday, you silly girl.*

Laughing, she stopped at the next corner to grab a coffee, and frowned when she sipped the too-sweet, too-light brew. Apparently, "regular" did not mean "black" in Boston. She considered going back and getting another cup, until she checked the time. She had to be there early, to talk to some of the women before the conference started.

She sped up her pace, and fifteen minutes later, the plain red brick buildings of Emmanuel College were in view. Nina was delighted to see that the lawn in between the buildings was full of women, some sitting on blankets eating sandwiches with their radios on, and others playing Frisbee® with a couple of good-looking dogs. *So Movement women in Boston do have fun*, she thought. This was going to be cool. She rolled up her sleeves, gave her best jeans a tug, hoisted up her knapsack, and strode confidently toward her future.

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Diane sighed and cleared the mess in the kitchen from their late breakfast. Her mother had gone back to bed and her father'd disappeared right after he'd finished eating. At least he'd said thank you, with a wave of his hand, to indicate the pancakes and bacon, the

coffee, and the “Happy 18th Birthday Theresa” banner decorated with red and blue balloons. Diane had stayed up late painting that banner, so she could see her sister’s delighted smile this morning.

Diane yawned as she headed upstairs. She finished wrapping the new bathing suit. If it were up to their mother, Theresa still would be dressed in pink polka dots with bows. At the party tonight, she was going to give Theresa the new suit and the big stuffed Dalmatian Theresa had oohed and aahed over when she saw it in the window of the Coop last week.

Diane heard her sister getting out of the shower, and quickly hid the gifts under her bed. A few minutes later, Theresa bounced in.

“Wow, Dee, can you believe I’m eighteen years old today!” Theresa was wearing her new red sleeveless jumper over a crisp white blouse with a Peter Pan collar, and matching PRO-Keds[®], white with a red stripe. Last week, Father had given Diane a check and asked her to buy Theresa a gift from him and Mother. He was surprised when Diane told him Theresa wanted fancy basketball shoes, but told her to go ahead and get whatever she wanted.

“I know, honey, almost as old as me. I got you presents.” Diane had been working extra shifts at the candy factory, so she could get Theresa a few more things, and to pay for the big surprise.

“Can I have them now? Are you going to take me to Rome, Italy to see the Pope?”

Diane was touched by her sister’s eagerness. “Well, not this birthday, honey, but I’m saving my money to take you there someday. I’ve got

some other things for you, though, but you'll have to wait until the party tonight."

"Okay, I can wait." Theresa clutched her new red shoulder bag with both hands and looked out the window for the school van.

As Diane freshened her lipstick, Theresa came over to stand close to her. They could be twins. Black curly hair, teased and pulled into a bouffant style with side-swept bangs, round faces, and short curvy bodies. Theresa was proud that she could do her own hair, and Diane's too, and today she sported a red bow above the bangs.

Diane looked at her sister in the mirror. She was thrilled with all that Theresa had accomplished this year, and who knew? Her talent for doing hair might give her the opportunity to get a job in a salon, at least if Diane could find her a good training program. Theresa was also wonderful with small children. Perhaps she could work as a mother's helper, or in a nursery program, as long as there was supervision.

Diane couldn't wait to get Theresa out of this house. She'd been planning and saving for an apartment for the two of them for the past two years. But today was the big day. Theresa was finally eighteen. Diane planned to talk to her about moving tonight, right after the party.

"Have a great time today at Paragon Park!" Diane hugged her sister. "I know you'll have so much fun with your friends."

"I don't want to go on the Giant Coaster, Dee." She looked worried.

"You don't have to go on any ride you don't want to. Nobody will make fun of you, the teachers won't let them, you know that."

“But I like the horsies so much,” she said.

“Yes, we had a good time on the Carousel when we went the last time, didn’t we, honey?”

Theresa smiled, nodding yes.

“Now, Theresa,” Diane said, “you remember that I’m going to a meeting in Boston today, right? But I’ll be back in time for your party tonight. Isn’t it great that the school trip turned out to be right on your birthday!” She slipped two dollars into her sister’s pocket.

“Thank you, Dee,” said Theresa.

“Now, don’t stuff yourself full of cotton candy and hot dogs. Save some room for your birthday cake tonight!

“I will.” Theresa tried to look serious but her dark eyes were laughing.

“Love you, kiddo...”

“I love you too, Dee,” Theresa said, and leaned over to give her sister a great big hug.

⌘ Two ⌘

Nina checked her watch. 11:30 am. The first-ever Boston Female Liberation conference was due to start at noon. She needed some background first, and got out her notebook. She approached two women about her age, possibly a couple of years younger, who were sitting on a blanket eating blueberry muffins.

“Hello,” she said, smiling.

They smiled back at her, and one gestured for her to sit. Nina sat down, crossed-legged on the blanket. She held up her notebook.

“Nina Rosen. Revolution News Bureau. I’m here from New York to cover the conference. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“Ah, the Movement Press,” said the brunette. The blonde looked puzzled, and offered Nina the box of Pewter Pot muffins.

“Forgive me,” said the blonde, “but I don’t know what that is. And hi, Nina, I’m Ellen MacDougall. This is Laurie.”

“Revolution News Bureau,” Nina told Ellen. “RNB. We write and gather stories about politics, culture, and other happenings, and distribute them to the underground press and college newspapers all over the country. We’re up near Columbia, but this is the first time I’ve been sent out of the city on assignment. Actually, it’s my first time in Boston.”

“Cool,” Laurie chuckled. “At least we’ll get some reasonable press coverage. See those women over there? They’re from the *Globe* and

the *Herald*. Can you believe those rags sent guys first? Of course they were turned away. I don't know where they scrounged up these women, but they don't seem to know anything at all about what we're doing here today. Look at what they're wearing!"

Nina saw two women, from supposedly rival papers, huddled together and dressed almost identically in navy pant suits, heels, and pearls.

Just then, a short pretty woman with curly dark hair walked up. "Hi," she said. "I'm Diane. Diane Romano. I was supposed to meet a friend, but I don't see her, and I don't know a soul."

"Hi, Diane, welcome. Have a muffin." Laurie waved to the empty spot on the blanket.

"I'm Laurie Goodman. And this is Ellen. She came down on Friday from Vermont. Though not for the conference. She got lucky. We were with a group from my history class, but they met some friends from another school. They're all over there someplace." She gestured across the green. "This is Nina. She's a reporter."

"Hi, all." Diane made herself comfortable on the large blanket and helped herself to a muffin. "Thanks, yum!" she said, taking a big bite.

Ellen tucked her long legs under her before she spoke.

"Hello, Diane." She stretched out her hand. "I'm Ellen MacDougall, from up near Barre, Vermont. I'm here this weekend to visit Radcliffe before I apply as a transfer student. And look at what I ran into!" She gestured at the crowd, which was increasing both in size and volume. "Isn't it exciting?"

Diane nodded pleasantly.

“Wow,” said Nina, amazed at the first real Vermont accent she’d ever heard, so different from her own fast, clipped New York speech. “You didn’t come down here for the conference? You just happened to find out about it? Still, my first question was going to be, ‘what brings you here?’ You could be hanging out in Harvard Square. Why did you come across the river today?”

Ellen took a bite of her muffin and chewed slowly before answering. “I wouldn’t call myself a radical or anything like that. Hardly. I’m not against men. I guess I’m *for* equal opportunities for women. I grew up in a small town. My father runs the general store. It was my grandfather’s store before that. My mother’s folks still farm, that’s the house where I grew up. The plan for me was to graduate from high school, then go help out my parents in the store until I get married. But it’s my younger brother – he’s only eight – who will inherit the store, and probably the farm, too, someday.”

Nina wrote down as much as she could.

“Look,” said Ellen. “You can write about this if you want, but please don’t use my name. I can’t imagine that my parents would know anyone who would read your story, but they would clobber me if they found out. They don’t even know I’m here this weekend. They think I came to Boston on a class field trip.” She stretched once, then shifted to look at Diane, who was grinning. “Oh, listen to me babble on...”

“Why Radcliffe?” Nina asked.

“Well, I think I’d have the best chance to get an excellent education. And I’m excited about studying only with women.”

“Not to mention all those cute Harvard guys,” Diane added.

Laurie laughed.

Ellen blushed. “Actually, I have a beau at home.”

“Is it serious?” asked Diane.

“Sort of,” Ellen said. “Though he doesn’t know yet of my plan to come to school here. We’re sort of engaged to be engaged. I guess we’d be pinned but he’s not in a fraternity. He goes to military school.”

“The enemy!” said Laurie. “What are you doing with a military type?”

“He’s a good guy,” Ellen replied calmly. “We’ve been doing some anti-war activities together in Montpelier. I’m not sure yet what I want to do, but it *is* going to make a difference in the world, and it *isn’t* going to be working in the general store in King’s Lake.”

How easy it is to talk to these women, Ellen thought. They’re strangers, but I can tell them things I can’t tell Nick or my parents. And they seem to – well, they don’t think I’m crazy or rebellious.

“What about you, Diane? What brings you here today?” While Nina chewed her pencil, Diane told her about the community organizing work she’d been learning about, and the people working to keep Harvard from buying more property in her neighborhood.

Nina wrote faster as Diane added, “It sure looks like you’re gonna get an earful today. My friend knows some of the organizers.”

Laurie added, “They’ve got an impressive lineup of workshops. Look at this!” She offered a mimeographed program to Nina while she read her copy aloud.

"Control of Our Bodies."

“Self Defense: Protect Yourself on the Streets.”

“Sexuality.”

“Women in the Left.”

“Community Organizing.”

“That’s the one I’m going to,” said Diane. “My friend Patty and I heard about it from someone on her block. I don’t know too much about this, and I haven’t been active in anything like this before. But I want to work with women who are doing good things and helping themselves too.” Diane was not ready to share her story with a total stranger. Especially not with a reporter. So she stayed friendly and upbeat.

“Do you know Cambridge?” Diane asked.

“No, not at all.” Nina said.

“Cambridgeport is the neighborhood between Mass. Ave. and the river, from River Street, over toward Harvard Square, to MIT on the east,” Diane explained. “That’s where I grew up, and my family still

lives there. Mostly working people: Italian, Irish, some Black, mostly families, some students. Now the area is starting to attract a few communes and collectives. The rents are still cheaper than the housing that's closer to Harvard or MIT. One and two-family houses mostly, some folks have put in apartments. There're a few apartment buildings like the one on River Street near Memorial Drive, but not many."

Diane shook her head. "Harvard is making plans to take over more and more of Cambridgeport. I came today to see what I can learn."

Laurie said, "That's great, Diane! I'd be interested in that too. I grew up in Newton, and hung out in Harvard Square most weekends, and I've been watching what Harvard's been doing to the community. Plus, since I'm at school there now, I guess I feel some responsibility."

Diane shrugged and said, "I guess we need all the help we can get. I still don't see my friend, maybe she's inside already. Let's go find out what this is all about."

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They went into Emmanuel's main auditorium together. Like Radcliffe, Emmanuel was an all-female school, and today the room was packed with women of all ages. A tall, solid-looking woman on the stage called for quiet. The room hushed as they all gave her their attention.

"Sisters," she began. "Welcome to the first Female Liberation Conference here in Boston. I'd like to thank the kind folks at Emmanuel College for allowing us to use their space today, and want to introduce our first speaker, who'll tell you why we are here..."

Cheers and clapping drowned out the rest of her words.

Nina whispered to Ellen, “Did you get her name?”

“Sorry, no.”

Nina frowned.

The speaker climbed up to the podium. She was petite, with short dark hair. She wore dark jeans and a plain white T-shirt with a women’s symbol in purple.

“Welcome, sisters!” A few people called back greetings.

“Most of us here are involved in the Movement in some way. Some are working to end the illegal war in Vietnam...” She was interrupted by both boos and some cheers. “Some are fighting to end the oppression of our Black sisters and brothers. Some are fighting for decent working conditions and living wages. Some are here because we want to determine for ourselves what happens in our communities. And no matter which struggle we are involved in, all of us have experienced another form of oppression – oppression as women.”

Ellen sat forward on the edge of her chair, and Laurie excitedly grabbed her hand.

The speaker went on. “We want to learn to take control of our bodies, not have male doctors and the government make decisions for us. We want the right to walk down the street any time of the day or night without being hassled. We want to be able to work at jobs we love, and not have to worry about who will look after our children. Look around you, sisters. There are more than 500 of us here today! And this is only the beginning of the Movement for Women’s Rights.”

“Woo hoo!” someone shouted from the back of the room, as many others clapped and stomped their feet.

“Wow!” Laurie whispered to Diane, sitting on the other side of her. “This is so exciting!” Diane, listening intently, did not reply.

“For background of why we’re all here today, I’m pleased to introduce Molly, one of the sisters who organized this meeting.” Molly, a large white woman of about thirty or so, who was wearing overalls and a bright purple shirt, took the podium to enthusiastic applause.

“Beginning a couple of years ago,” she said, peering out into the audience over her wire-rimmed glasses, “groups of women began gathering here in Boston for informal discussions about women’s issues. When we began to talk honestly and openly about our own experiences, we began to realize that our *personal* problems weren’t just personal. That is, in talking about our own lives in small groups of women we could trust, we began to identify the *social* nature of our oppression. We talked about things like the oppressive structure of the nuclear family – where the father goes out to work and kids go to school to learn to be good soldiers, and mother stays home and cleans up everyone else’s shit.”

Many of the older women nodded.

Molly continued, looking directly into the crowd. “In one of the sessions today, we’ll be talking about the history of the nuclear family, in which the man gets to rule over everyone, like since the beginning of recorded time. It’s not all that different today. It’s even true in most communes, the alternative families we’ve tried to create ourselves. Who gets to talk at house meetings? Who does the cooking?”

A few women laughed nervously.

“For those of you sisters who have children, who makes the lunches for the kids every day? Who takes the kids to the doctor? Who changes the diapers?”

“Right on!” someone yelled.

“And you younger sisters, now in high school or college, think about this: Who talks the most in the classroom? Who gets called on? Who’s encouraged to study math and science and who’s told by her guidance counselor, ‘Oh, you’re not doing so hot in algebra? Don’t worry. Take typing instead. After all, you don’t need a college education, you are just going to get married and your husband will take care of you.’”

The audience boomed, and Ellen was embarrassed to catch herself nodding vigorously. That’s what she meant about Radcliffe. She wanted to study in an all-female environment, where the men didn’t drown out what she and the other women had to say.

“Today at the workshops,” Molly said, “you’ll hear about issues that you can do something about, some things that are revolutionary acts: beginning to learn about our bodies, and taking control of our own health care, learning self-defense, especially judo and Tae Kwon Do – and by the way, we’re offering classes two nights a week in Harvard Square for all who are interested. It’s critical that women get stronger and know that you can defend yourself.”

Defend yourself, Diane thought. She sat absolutely still. She started to drift back, but took several slow, deep breaths, forcing herself to stay

present, right here, in this room, with these women, listening to the speaker. She told herself she was safe here; she could feel it.

“Another thing you can do,” said Molly, “is to protest oppression where you find it. Restaurants and private clubs – like Locke-Ober in downtown Boston, which doesn’t let women in except at certain hours and only if you go through a back door. Or look at the Playboy Club down the street a couple of miles – it makes money by exploiting women as objects.”

Nina couldn’t even look up. She was writing so fast that she was sweating with the effort, completely enthralled. She knew she had to get every word, because she couldn’t write and process what she heard at the same time. Thinking about all this would have to come later.

“And another action you can take,” urged Molly, who was now punctuating each point with a jab of her fist, “is to confront men on the street when they harass you. They can do these things because they believe you’ll be too scared to call them on their piggy behavior and you’ll put your head down and act all girly and take it – whatever disgusting names or comments they shout at you. NO MORE!” The room erupted with cheers.

Nina thought about how she felt walking past the empty construction site a couple of hours ago, braced for verbal attack. She’d been okay, even if the hardhats had been on the job, but she was tough; she’d grown up in Manhattan. She wondered about the others, but she didn’t want to miss the speaker’s next words.

“Only confront them when there’re lots of other people around,” Molly cautioned, “not when you’re alone or on a deserted street, so you don’t

put yourself in danger. Tell them that you will be spoken to with respect!”

Someone in the back stood and belted out, “R-E-S-P-E-C-T...” but Molly held up her hand for her to stop. “I’m serious, sister!”

She said, “Think about re-naming yourself with something other than the name you got from the patriarchy.”

Diane looked around to see if anyone else was as mystified as she, but everyone seemed to be nodding their heads in agreement.

“And look at our self-image, especially as it relates to using cosmetics and so-called fashion, which is shoved down our throats by Madison Avenue. Right now, we’re a large population that’s being exploited for profit – the new lipstick, the newest model boots, even the best kind of jeans. Are you making a free choice of what to wear, or were you sold a way to make yourself look sexy and fashionable and good-looking to men?”

Laurie and some of the other women squirmed uncomfortably. Others looked confused.

“Today in the workshops,” said Molly, “You’ll hear about class divisions in our so-called ‘classless nation,’ and about racism too. You’ll hear from our Black sisters about what they’re doing to take more power in their struggle. You may remember our sister Ruby Doris Smith-Robinson, who unfortunately passed away a couple of years ago at the age of only twenty-five, who was a moving force in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. In 1964, she contributed to a brilliant paper called *The Position of Women in SNCC*,

which criticized the treatment of women civil rights workers at a SNCC staff meeting. Stokely Carmichael responded to the paper: ‘The only position for women in SNCC is prone.’” She paused, waiting for all the boos and hisses to die down.

“Look, sisters,” Molly said. “Men run the Movement. They’re not going to give up their power voluntarily – why should they? To be nice? Nowhere in history do we see masters relinquishing their power to slaves or subordinates. The slaves have to rise up and take control. And that, my sisters, is what we’ve been – slaves. Slaves to our husbands, slaves to our fathers, slaves to our bosses and our professors, slaves to the capitalist system that tells us what to wear, how to look, what to do with our time.”

Ellen thought of her father’s admonishment right before she left Vermont. “Don’t go getting any highfalutin ideas down there in the city, Ellen. You’re a good girl, and me and your mother, we want you to stay that way. You’re our little girl and you belong here with us until you get married.”

Molly said, “Look here. Radical men may talk about the need for revolution, but sisters, let me tell you that unless we take matters into our own hands, guess who’s gonna be cooking the celebration dinner the night we overthrow the system? Men will not give up their power. We have to take it from them.”

“Right on, sister!” someone shouted from up near the podium, as many women clapped.

Molly paced around as she spoke. “We are slaves to men’s ideas of sex, as evidenced by who gets to be on top, whose pleasure we’re

talking about in bed. How many of you in this room have never had an orgasm? Okay, you don't have to raise your hands right now. How many of you have faked an orgasm?" She pointed into the audience.

Nervous laughter, as lots and lots of hands were raised.

"And for what reason? So you can stroke the ego of your man? What about saying, 'Hey, buster, where's mine?' You'll find a workshop on sexuality, and you'll hear from a remarkable work in progress by Anne Koedt from New York, that she's calling *The Myth of The Vaginal Orgasm*."

Nina looked up and stared at the speaker. She'd heard about Anne Koedt at work, though she'd never met her. This sounded like some pretty radical stuff.

Molly walked back behind the podium as she began to conclude. "We also want you to talk to us and talk to each other, about the issues that are important to you in your own process of liberation. Our ultimate goal is the destruction of the caste system, and the posts that hold it up – the family, private property, the government, and the machinations that keep these going – capitalism, racism, imperialism, class divisions, and now sexism and misogyny."

"Go to your workshops now – you'll find the list on the papers at your seat, and if you don't have one, there are signs on the classroom doors. And talk to each other. Talk out loud and tell the truth. Sisters, I'm telling you, speak your truth and, like the poet Muriel Rukeyser told us, the whole world as we know it will blow apart!"

The room exploded into stunning applause. Nina stopped writing and looked around. Women were standing up – some even standing on their chairs – and cheering and yelling and raising their voices with the kind of energy she'd heard last month at the anti-war rally in Central Park, only that was half a million people, not 500 women.

Ellen's face shone with the excitement of it all. Laurie was busy, trying to organize the four of them so they each could go to a different session and compare notes later.

Diane was the only one who was quiet. She didn't understand a lot of what Molly had said. It seemed like most of the women here were middle-class, college-educated, white women. What would her colleagues on the line at the candy factory think of this meeting? As far as Diane knew, no one there thought or talked like this speaker. No one at work seemed to know anything about this stuff. Most of the women she worked with had brothers or boyfriends or husbands or sons who were serving in Vietnam. *What did all this have to do with us?*

⌘ Three ⌘

As the women gathered their bags, and all the pamphlets and papers they'd picked up at the conference, Laurie proposed that they walk back across the river to Harvard Square. "It's not that far," she urged. "It's such a gorgeous day. And we have *so* much to talk about."

Ellen hesitated. "I'm not sure I can walk that far..." she began, but Diane looped her arm through Ellen's.

"C'mon, we can take it slow," she said. Only Diane had noticed Ellen's slight limp. "Or if you get tired, we can always hop on the T in Central Square."

Nina looked down at her favorite work boots, which already had a couple of New York miles and a few Boston miles on them today. "I'm in," she said, hoisting her knapsack over both shoulders. "Let's go!"

Nearly an hour later, they arrived in the center of the Square – hot, sweaty, and thirsty from talking nonstop about what they saw and heard all afternoon.

Ellen was excited about the workshop on Marriage as an Oppressive Institution. Nina was at the health group briefly, and learned about women taking control of their own bodies. Then the room got too hot and crowded, so she slipped in next door, where Laurie, mesmerized by the self-defense demonstration, was watching two women from the collective smash boards with their bare hands. Diane went to the community organizing group, and learned about class division, as well as racism and sexism in the workplace, and about how Harvard was trying to buy up her neighborhood. She knew something about that.

The property at the end of her block was vacant and she'd heard rumors about a new research building. It was a lot for her to take in at once. She listened to the excited talk of the others, not sure that she was feeling what they all seemed to be experiencing.

Diane shouted: "Anyone for ice cream?" and she and Laurie engaged in a brief debate on the merits of Brigham's versus Bailey's, considering both taste and price.

They decided to splurge, and headed around the corner to Bailey's. They ordered hot fudge sundaes all around, except Nina, who got black coffee and a cream cheese on date-nut bread sandwich.

"I, um, forgot to eat lunch," she confessed. "I was in a hurry getting off the train and finding Emmanuel."

The others groaned with delight as the server pushed the gooey sundaes toward them over the counter. Carefully carrying their treats and a glass of water each, they made their way to a round marble table, and settled down in the cast iron chairs to continue the conversation.

"This conference – all of today – was so far out!" Laurie said. "Of course, I was part of the strike at Harvard last month – I mean, I didn't occupy the building or anything, but I was part of the boycott, and the demonstrations. But this – this Movement is *ours!* Women unite!" Several people at the counter turned around to look at her. Laurie grinned, and flashed them a peace sign.

Nina liked Laurie's enthusiasm. "What impresses me," she said, "is how many radical women were in one place. I'm going to have to spend some time reading over my notes. And I hope I got down all the

important points. I never thought in such clear terms about how screwed up the Movement is, with the men getting to make all the decisions.” She leaned forward on her elbows, eyes shining.

“I wouldn’t know much about that.” Ellen popped a fudge-covered maraschino cherry into her mouth. “I’m thinking that at least we can choose who we wish to marry. The speaker in the workshop I went to said that for much of recorded history, women were chattel, to be passed from father’s house to husband’s house. Of course, I know that from reading the Old Testament, but –”

“I’m never getting married,” Diane said. “I guess I haven’t seen it work all that well.” She knew too many couples who stayed together “for the sake of the children,” when, Diane thought, the children would have been much better off without either of them, no matter what the Church said. She pictured her parents’ constant battles, her mother screaming and her father getting quiet and leaving the house.

“That’s kind of extreme,” Laurie said. “My parents have a great marriage. My father teaches psychiatry at Harvard Med School and has a private practice. He works long hours and I know it can’t be fun for my mom. But they have a good social life, lots of friends. They take a vacation each season, and we all go to our house on the Cape every summer. My mother doesn’t work, but she’s involved in about every Jewish charity on the Eastern seaboard.”

“Sounds like work to me,” said Nina. “My parents – or rather, I should say, my father and my stepmother – have a weird relationship. She married him for his money, but she didn’t get it ahead of time that he doesn’t *have* any money. He just lives like he does. It’s all show. She’s pissed at him that she didn’t figure it out, and she takes every

opportunity to snipe about him behind his back. But he thinks she married him because he's so talented – he's a writer, but he works as an editor. They each think I don't know the story. They're all lovey-dovey with each other in front of me.”

“Wow,” said Laurie. Ellen adjusted her glasses and leaned forward. Diane waited for Nina to go on.

“My mother died when I was thirteen,” Nina said. “She and I were close. She'd been sick for a long time. One of the last things she asked me was to look after my father when she was gone. Kind of a strange request, don't you think, to ask a kid? My father completely fell apart without her. And only a year after she was gone, he married Muriel. That bitch. She hates me.” Nina sat up straighter and paused to collect herself. She couldn't believe she was telling this to a group of women she hardly knew.

“Why would she hate you?” Laurie frowned.

“I don't know. Except she knows that my father loves me – and his work – better than he loves her. But I'm his daughter. He's supposed to love me.” Nina gave a small shrug.

“What about you, Ellen?” Laurie asked. “Do your parents get along?”

“Oh, yes.” Ellen was quick to reply. “But even if they have disagreements, I wouldn't know about it. Everything is talked about behind their bedroom door. My father rules the house and my mother does everything he says. Except she doesn't.” Ellen stifled a giggle.

“When she wants something, she knows how to get around him. Like last month, we needed a new living room sofa. The old one was ratty, chewed on by the dogs and everything. The one she wanted cost a lot more than she knew my father would agree to. She went to the store up in Burlington, where they don’t know our family. She put 25% down on layaway, then came home and told Father she’d ordered the sofa, and showed him a picture of it she’d cut out of the catalog and the receipt for the deposit. He grunted, ‘hmm, expensive, but if it’s what you want, I guess it’s worth it.’ He didn’t get that the receipt was only for the deposit; he thought it was for the whole thing. Mother thanked him warmly. She paid for the rest of the sofa by selling her grandmother’s brooch, which she seldom wore. He never knew it cost four times what he thought.”

“Whew,” Diane whistled. “Now *that* was sharp of her.”

“Feminine wiles,” Nina replied. “Sounds like woman-power to me. Good work, Ellen’s mom!” Ellen smiled.

“Sounds like you have a pretty smart mother, Ellen. Did she go to college?” Laurie wanted to know.

“No,” said Ellen quietly. “In our family, college is only for boys. You cannot *believe* how much I had to beg to get them to let me go to the junior college in our county. ‘An education is wasted on a girl,’ I heard all my life. ‘Why spend the money when you’re going to get married and raise children?’”

“Maybe because you want to learn about your world,” Laurie said. “Religion, history, literature, mathematics, science, philosophy...”

“I know, I know,” Ellen’s eyes were shining. “I want to come to Radcliffe *so* much. To get the best education. No distractions. No guys raising their hands and having the teacher call on them first. I want to study with and learn from women. My aunt went to Radcliffe, and going there has been my dream ever since I first read *The Little Locksmith* in junior high school.”

“What’s that?” Diane asked. She’d polished off her sundae, and sat back in her chair, listening carefully.

“It’s a book, a memoir, by Katharine Butler Hathaway. She lived in Maine, she was an invalid as a child, confined to bed, and *her* dreams were to be able to pursue her writing, and to be independent, and to find someone to love. Her doctors and her family told her she was deformed, and no one would ever love her. When she was healthy enough to leave home, she came to Radcliffe, and met several fantastic women who took her under their wings, and her whole world opened up. Listen to this...”

Ellen took a breath, closed her eyes, and recited, “*If you let your fear of consequence prevent you from following your deepest instinct, then your life will be safe, expedient and thin.*”

“Wow,” said Laurie. “She wrote that?”

“Yes,” said Ellen. “I’ve read *The Little Locksmith* probably forty times. It’s a wonderful book. Then she says –”

“Wait!” Laurie stopped her. “Don’t ruin it for us. I’ll get a copy at the library.”

Ellen laughed. “What’s *your* dream, Laurie?”

“Me? I’m not sure. But I know it *will* have something to do with repairing the world. Look at the mess it’s in – the war, the street people, kids going to bed at night hungry, all because the greedy military industrial complex rules the country. I don’t know yet. But that’s why I’m doing liberal arts. I want to learn a lot about a lot of things. And then I’ll figure out how I can be most useful. Probably I’ll get married and have kids someday. But not until I’ve had a chance to see the world, and do something valuable and important!”

Ellen reached over and squeezed Laurie’s hand. She turned to Nina.

“What about you, Nina? Did you go to college?” Ellen asked.

“One year,” said Nina. “Sarah Lawrence. Then I dropped out to go to work and live on my own. I was the big disappointment in my family, especially to my grandparents. They had high hopes for me. Me, I wanted to get out into the real world and try to become a writer like my father, only I want to write about things that matter, about what’s happening in the world, things the straight press doesn’t cover. I guess I want to be the best journalist the alternative press has ever seen! Right now, I’m still an intern at RNB. But I think,” she said calmly, though her heart was beating fast. “I think, if this story about today’s conference is good enough, I could get a real job there, as part of the collective. That’s what I want. And it will make Muriel just shit.” Ellen flinched at Nina’s language, but didn’t say anything.

“Cool,” Laurie said. “Your turn, Diane. Are you in school?” And when Diane shook her head, Laurie asked her, “What’s your dream?”

“You know,” Diane spoke softly. “I’m going to have to give that some thought and get back to you. I have some things I like to do, but not anything you’d call a grand passion. I get up every day, go to work, help out at home...” She sat up straight with a start.

“Oh, my gosh!” she said, pushing back her chair. “This, you all, it’s been wonderful, but I’ve got to go. I promised my sister I’d be home by six. It’s her birthday today. I’m so full. I don’t know how I’m going to eat a bite at the party. But really, we all should keep in touch.” She tore a napkin in pieces and wrote her phone number three times.

“Thanks, Diane,” Ellen said. “Nina, write to us from New York, will you? Please send us a copy of your story when it’s published. Here’s my address,” she said, writing on another napkin. “When do you think it will come out?”

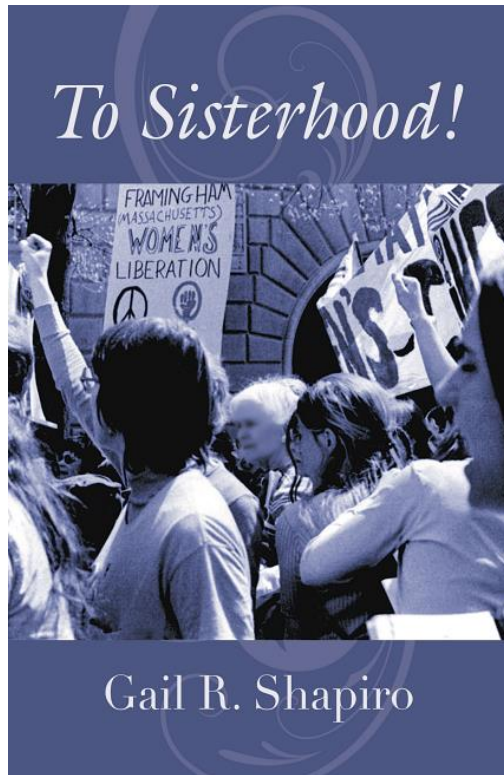
“Of course I will,” Nina said, “not sure yet when it will be in print. And someday,” she said, “you’ll see my byline in a cool paper, like the *Village Voice*.”

As they got up to leave, Laurie said, “Can you imagine this conversation happening if we’d been a group of men? We’d have been sitting here for two hours talking about the Red Sox!”

Nina, Ellen, and Diane all laughed.

Laurie raised her nearly empty water glass. “Nina, here’s to your success,” Laurie said. “And to all of ours. Here’s to sisterhood!”

“To sisterhood!” the others chimed in, clinking their glasses together and beaming at their new friends.



To Sisterhood! covers the formative period in the lives of four friends from 1969-1972: a time when chaos in the streets echoed the chaos within families divided by the Vietnam War, changing social mores, and expectations for women.

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