

## Excerpt from A Memoir-In-Progress

When you look back on your life, some decisions just can't be explained – decisions you are reluctant to declare purely random. It's as if you were acting on some knowledge you couldn't possibly have had – as if you could see into whichever future will turn out to be right for you and unerringly chose the path to get you there. Becoming a feminist was like that for me.

The facts are ordinary enough. It was 1971. I was working with my brother in the family business in London that my father had founded, and I had recently left Colin after being married for less than a year. I moved from Dorking to a flat in Swiss Cottage with my former flatmate, Lydia, and a friend of hers, both of whom wore black and hung out in pubs with artists and aspiring male writers – most of them broke. Every day I commuted south to my office through dense traffic, listening to tapes of John Lennon's "Imagine" and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." Every night I stood at a bar, jutting out my hip and smirking in what I hoped was a cool fashion. I went to a lot of parties where beer coated the linoleum and people threw up.

What was not ordinary was the care with which I read that particular *Sunday Times* – a paper I have never bought. It happened to be lying around the flat, its sections strewn across the brown velvet sofa, the colour magazine damp on a bathroom chair, and I remember clearly the place in the paper where the small but life-changing article appeared: it was on a right-hand page, about two thirds of the way down the outside column. The words "Women's Liberation" in the headline caught my eye, but when I scanned the two brief paragraphs, the article merely announced a new location for something called "The Women's Liberation Workshop," where reading materials and information about women's groups could be found.

I was in no way political. My first date had taken me to the Young Conservatives' annual ball and although I had only gradually fallen away from the assumptions of my staunch, Tory family, I had so far failed to develop an alternative point of view. Not long before finding the newspaper, I had gone to see a film called *Z* about the Greek Junta. On leaving the Mayfair cinema, I had been accosted by a political activist who signed me up for "more information." It seemed vaguely daring when I added my name to the long list of people I thought might be more interesting than those I had known so far. Since then, two announcements of meetings

had come in the mail, neither of which I could attend, but I suspected that one day soon I might venture into new territory. People all around me were beginning to exhibit a kind of energy as if they were waking up to an exciting new morning.

The article in *The Sunday Times* gave an address: Shavers Place – right off Piccadilly Circus, as I discovered when I looked it up in the A to Z.

It was a Sunday afternoon when I found myself driving along an empty Piccadilly with the clipping in my hand. Why was I going there, knowing nothing beyond the address? What faint echo of another life, another way of looking at the world, clung to the typesetter's letters that had stamped the newsprint with such intriguing promise? It was as mysterious as the pull of water on a dowsing rod.

In the narrow alley, a door opened onto a staircase where a sign hand-drawn with a black felt pen was tacked up: "Women's Liberation: upstairs." And in case the staircase itself was not clear enough, a wobbly arrow pointed the way. I climbed very slowly, sensing that something important was about to happen. At the top I paused, wondering if I should just turn around and go back down the stairs, but I opened the door and stepped into a small room made even smaller by the metal bookshelves that covered three walls. On the fourth side, in front of a rain-streaked window, was a desk with several rolodexes and stacks of a mimeographed newsletter. A woman in jeans and a plaid shirt sat on the desk chair facing into the room, where three other women sat on the floor, drinking Nescafé. A half-pint milk bottle sat on the one empty chair.

The woman at the desk looked me up and down. I felt immediately overdressed, aware of the sharp creases in my petrol blue pants suit.

"Can I help?" she said.

"I'm not sure," I said apologetically. "I just thought maybe I'd pick up some information..."

"Well, there are lists of groups on those shelves," said the woman, "and this is the latest newsletter if you'd like a copy. There are some articles from the New York Redstockings over there, and a few books too. The lists are free and the articles are marked. There's a box for donations by the door."

I thanked her and wandered around, picking up papers randomly, while the four of them remained silent. Then, suddenly embarrassed, I threw some money in the box and hurried down the stairs. Just before I opened the front door, I heard a burst of laughter from above. Were they laughing at me?

Back at the flat, I made myself a mug of tea and sat down to see what I'd collected. Those women certainly hadn't been friendly, but I wanted to know them anyway, wanted to go back and show them I wasn't really as staid as I looked.

I was shocked to find that the first article was called "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." Nobody had ever said the O-word in my presence, even though I'd become familiar with the thing itself during sex with women. I discovered that not only could one say it and think about it, one could write a treatise on the subject which was apparently neglected in the male literature. Working my way through the pile of papers, I discovered that housework damn well ought to

be paid for, that women's clothes symbolise our oppression, and that I had been very, very lucky when I'd found a safe, though illegal, abortion. The abortion itself had been painful and frightening, but now, suddenly, I saw how much worse it might have been.

At the bottom of the stack of papers I came across a single sheet headed, "Consciousness Raising Groups – London area." I had never heard of consciousness-raising and had no idea what it entailed, but I scanned the list for my part of town as if it were exactly what I'd been looking for. The closest was the Holland Park Group and the contact person was Lilian. I dialed the number and reached Lilian herself, who had an American accent. The group met on Wednesday evenings, she told me, and I was welcome to come. The next meeting would be at the flat of someone called Tina whose address I wrote down.

When I rang the bell and walked up to Tina's flat, I had no idea what to expect, never having belonged to any kind of group since school. Would these women have wild hair and understand politics? Would they think I was conservative and boring? Would they see through the silence with which I hoped to disguise my abysmal ignorance? I told myself I wasn't a prisoner: I could always leave if I didn't like it. But the women sitting in a circle, some on the floor, others on the couch or chairs, looked friendly and offered me a cup of tea. By the time the last two had arrived, we were nine and Lilian seemed to be in charge, though I quickly learned that no-one was supposed to be.

"Well, here we are again," said Lilian, by way of starting the meeting. She sounded slightly jaded, but then brightened up: "and we have a newcomer."

Everyone turned to me and I realised I was supposed to speak. Blushing, I said, "My name's Judy and I'm happy to be here," then lapsed into silence.

"Well," said Lilian, "since tonight's topic was proposed by Janet and she couldn't be here, I think this would be a good time to discuss the organisation of the collective, don't you? Shaver's Place is, as usual, in fucking disarray."

I'd never heard anyone use the word fuck before and was stunned at the casual way it slipped into Lilian's sentence – stunned not in a censorious way, but rather admiring of what immediately seemed cool. Before long I would come to realise that it was commonplace, particularly among the Americans and soon I, too, would find it indispensable to opinionated speech. But for now I crouched in my chair, observing.

That evening I learned that there was a "collective" meeting once a month open to all the London women's groups. The collective was supposed to make policy for the Shaver's Place Center (they called it "the workshop") and provide guidance and coordination to the rapidly growing movement. In fact, it rarely decided anything because of its determination not to reproduce "patriarchal" or "hierarchical" structures, which meant that it operated with no structure at all.

"I think our group should all go to the next meeting, don't you?" said Lilian. It wasn't really a question and we all nodded.

A couple of weeks later, the Holland Park group showed up at the monthly gathering. Beyond the office where I had picked up my papers on that first Sunday was a much larger room that

could, perhaps, have comfortably seated thirty people on the floor, but which was crammed this particular day, with fifty or sixty. The room smelled of sweat and was thick with cigarette smoke. Someone quickly raised the question of office hours and someone else wanted to discuss ordering books to sell. Within minutes, women were interrupting each other and shouting in frustration, some even getting up to leave when they failed to be heard. I listened intently whenever a new topic was raised, trying to understand the issue and consider its merits, but just as I would begin to grasp the significance of, say, allowing or not allowing men into the bookshop, someone would stomp off in a huff and the subject would flounder in a whirlpool of ideological speeches.

“We’ll never get anywhere if we’re run by a bunch of fucking separatists,” yelled a small, studious-looking woman at that first meeting. To which Lilian and half a dozen others hurled a chorus of responses:

“We won’t get anywhere under the thumb of the fucking male-dominated left either!”

“This is a *women’s* movement, assholes!”

Soon everyone had forgotten about the bookshop and the various other subjects that had been broached. After a couple of hours, the whole group, minus those whose tempers had launched them down the stairs earlier, drifted off with apparent good humour to the pub for a beer or to The Stockpot for a cheap steak and kidney pie.

When I arrived for the next collective meeting a month later, I noticed a new graffiti painted in huge black letters on the wall beside the stairs: “A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.” Over the course of the meeting, I realised that we were sitting in clumps of the ideologically like-minded: radical feminists, including my group, on one side of the room and socialist-feminists on the other. Scattered around were a few others – five or six Maoists, half a dozen respectable equal-pay types, and several journalists, whose philosophy was unclear. Flora, the woman I had met on my first visit, who, I was to discover, was the official volunteer office worker, got no decisions out of the collective, so had no choice but to run things as she thought fit, a choice for which she was constantly attacked on the grounds that she wielded too much power. Ultimately she was replaced by four part-time workers, which the collective deemed safer.

Although I had never attended anything remotely like these rowdy meetings, I was strangely comfortable there once I realised that I didn’t have to speak. Indeed, my one fear was that someone would ask me what I thought: I was so far from having an opinion on anything that I found myself agreeing with everyone since what each woman had to say was completely new and, in most cases, made some sense. Chaotic as it was, it didn’t take long for me to develop a romantic attachment to this new community with its bravado, its bluster, and its rebellious energy. Even now, in retrospect, that female energy remains so seductive that I have to remind myself of the frustrations, the painful personal hostilities and the pettiness that existed alongside the bravery and the absolute rightness of many of the ideas.

Our consciousness-raising group had, before I joined, agreed on a list of topics, one of which we would discuss each Wednesday. We pledged to talk personally and honestly, agreeing with the notion that, in the case of women’s lives, “the personal is political.” I understood right

away that our oppression was rooted not only in things like unequal pay, but also in aspects of our personal lives such as housework, reproduction, and parenting, but the idea of speaking about personal things terrified me. Enough other members of the group shared my fear to render the discussions slow and painful. Excruciating silences would fill the air as whoever's turn it was to speak blushed and mumbled, managing at last to say in apologetic tones, "I wouldn't normally complain, but my boyfriend always expects me to wash his dishes," or "I don't have any money of my own so I can't go to college and take those courses." Seven of us were middle-class British and therefore unaccustomed to revealing much of anything; not only had most of us lived with reticent parents, we had been raised to believe that complaining was a cardinal sin. Luckily we had two Americans, who were less fettered by social inhibition, but even in the wake of their matter-of-fact revelations, I dreaded my turn to speak. And when I saw that the next-but-one topic on the list was "lesbianism" I almost fainted.

For two weeks I obsessed about that meeting. What on earth could I say? I couldn't possibly talk about having slept with women: if I did, I would lose my fragile new connection to a community I desperately wanted to join. Yet I couldn't lie either. The honesty I had longed for my whole life – now more than ever – was terrifying. Could I defy the group – shock them with the facts, daring them to disparage my experience?

Night after night, I rehearsed. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I looked into my eyes and tried to say "I am a lesbian," but I couldn't, not even alone, without witnesses. I tried being theoretical: "My own experience makes me feel that it's not acceptable in this society to relate sexually to women." That was easier but a cop-out; they probably wouldn't even catch the confession buried in "my own experience..." Perhaps I could win them over by convincing them I had had no choice: "I was seduced by an older woman when I was at a very vulnerable place in my life..." True as this was, it didn't hold true for what had come later. It might explain Nicolette, but it didn't explain Jean or the several other women I had fallen for.

When the appointed Wednesday arrived, I still hadn't decided. The meeting was in Margo's living room, where we huddled close to the gas fire, cushions and quilts scattered over the thick brown carpet. I felt distinctly nauseous as Tina began speaking in a quiet voice with her dark hair falling over her eyes. "I'm open to it," she said as the others sat up straighter and looked at her with new interest.

One by one, members of the group declared their support for those they called "women-identified women," interrupted only by periodic searches for more coins to put in the gas-fire. Lilian announced that many of the leaders of the earlier wave of feminism had been lesbians. (That fact, of course, had been written out of the history, but we could, and would, write it back in later.) All the speakers were eager and enthusiastic and, I realised, quite unafraid of the topic: they might just as well have been talking about women's fashions or the male-dominated academic curriculum for all the physical effect it seemed to have on them. Yet my skin was crawling; the hair on the back of my neck standing up; my armpits sweaty.

"Your turn, Judy," said Margo, as faces turned towards me, smiling.

"Well," I said, hating the colour that was threatening to swamp my face. "Well, actually I've slept with several women."

If the group had sat up straighter when Tina spoke, now they positively levitated. Experimentation was written all over their eager faces, and thus it would turn out. Bed-hopping, not only in my little group, but in the movement at large, would soon run rampant. But I wasn't ready to seize the moment, even with so many eager candidates in one room. I sank back into my chair, sighing out relief as the group, realising that I wasn't about to elaborate – at least, not yet, moved on to the next speaker.

My radicalisation was swift. It took only a few months for me to rethink my appearance, my allegiances, my living arrangements, and most of my beliefs. The beliefs hit me the hardest since I hadn't, until then, realised how much my life reflected a particular set of values – conservative ones. They had dictated how I lived, who I knew, and what I was expected to do with my life, but I had never understood before that they were actually only one of many possible sets of beliefs – I thought they were simply the way things were. Now, trying to make up for years of obliviousness, I questioned everything – my job at the BBC where I had been expected only to look good and feed the fish; my father whose word was law, and the ways in which my mother had learned to work around him (“let him think it was *his* idea”); the absence of women in the history books I'd read at school, to say nothing of the literature. And how could I not have noticed the burden borne by the women I saw everywhere: on buses, in pubs, cleaning offices, dragging children along the street?

Soon my group started talking about rape and not long after that wife-beating. I remembered Colin smashing the bathroom door and how I had secretly believed that he was entitled to frighten me, even entitled to hit me that one time for refusing to make his breakfast. I remembered the shame I had felt when I told anyone about his anger, as if somehow it was my fault, and the shame I had felt as a child when strange men exposed themselves or touched me against my will. My own experiences had been, I realised, fairly normal. But, I was horrified to discover, it wasn't so abnormal for women to end up black and blue from abuse – to say nothing of dead.

Sobering as much of the feminist information was, there was something exhilarating about seeing the world anew. I was jolted by insights daily, sometimes even hourly. Trying to make sense of it all, I wrote copiously in notebooks, scrawling quotations from the newly-published theorists: Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millet, Eva Figes, and the poets: Alta, Robin Morgan and Astra. Often I would pull my car over and stop to write down a thought about something we had discussed at the last meeting. At night I sat up in bed making notes or woke up before dawn to record a dream.

Secure in the bosom of my group, I took the necessary step and admitted that, normal or not, many things in my life had been unfair and that unfairness rested squarely on the fact that I was a woman. Only later would this bald truth be tempered by questions of class and race, to say nothing of sexual preference; for now sexism explained almost everything. Tina and Margo clucked sympathetically and Lilian hissed when I talked about Colin, particularly when I found the courage to tell them how he had threatened to expose me as a lesbian if I left him. Soon I completely forgot that I had, in fact, secretly been a lesbian when I married him and that our relationship must have been as frustrating to him as it was to me. Still, I wasn't the one who had broken down a door to satisfy my pent-up frustration. I needed to dwell for a while in my anger.

Like most new converts, I was extreme. My father, Colin, all the ex-boyfriends, became part of a male world which had wronged me and which wronged all women; there was no room for nuance, no placing the memories into their particular contexts. And, although the theory would hold up over time and I would always remain a staunch feminist, only later was I able to acknowledge the complexities that arose from attempts to understand my father and, to a lesser extent, Colin.

Lilian, who wrote poetry and would later become a feminist publisher, discovered that I was privately writing poems and suggested that we put together another group, this one for feminist writers. We found six poets and were soon exchanging angry, didactic poems and talking about self-publishing a chapbook. Now I had two regular weekly meetings, a monthly collective meeting, and many other speak-outs, conferences, and events sponsored by various colleges; one I remember was a two-day discussion under the heading, "Women and Psychiatry," held at Goldsmith's College at which there were all the usual ideological confrontations. Every day I was elated to be so fully engaged. I felt alive and hopeful.

\* \* \*

I had spent nearly three years working with my brother as the marketing director of the family business. I was getting a substantial salary, driving a company-owned car, and working fewer and fewer hours. But my new politics made me uneasy about it all – my role as a boss, the Asian and Black factory workforce, the secretary I left to run things while I went to feminist meetings (she received a decent salary but it was nothing like mine). Not only did I want to throw off the values on which the company was built, I wanted to get out of the mainstream, where I had always dwelled, so I quit my job.

The energy for all these changes sprang from something deep – something that filled me with great zeal: I had fallen in love with women. I had loved individual women before but it had always been a shameful secret. Now it was a proud, collective thing: I watched them on the streets and wanted to save them. I loved complete strangers, and, for a while, until they started to drive me crazy, I loved the feminists most of all. I loved their passion, their rebelliousness, and I loved the way they looked.

It was the American women who brought blue jeans into our midst. Lots of women from the US were involved in London's burgeoning movement and the fact that they had thought up women's liberation a couple of years earlier than we British, definitely showed: they made the most articulate speeches and referred casually to the latest pamphlets from New York. Their Levis, like them, were well worn-in – nicely faded at the knees as if they'd been washed for longer than we had even known about jeans. The Americans sauntered into collective meetings at Shaver's Place, denim pants neatly narrow above scruffy tennis shoes, and just tight enough across muscular buttocks. It wasn't that the English women's jeans didn't fit, they never managed to look as if they'd grown on their owners like moss on a rock. Lilian always bought hers in New York when she visited her mother. "These English ones," she would say, her blue cornflower eyes deceptively sweet, "are *sure* not cut right." (That was before she acquired her British working-class accent.)

I was still unequivocally in love with my group when, in February, 1972, we all went to the Second National Women's Liberation Conference held at Acton Town Hall in a dingy part of London. Before setting off, I tried on both my pairs of jeans four times, assessing their relative merits in the mirror. The older pair was nicely faded, its denim softer, the ankles a little peggier. The newer ones, though, were snuggler around the pockets. They looked much better with the jacket. I settled for the new.

At the plenary session, the room was full of smoke. Woman after woman ran to the stage and grabbed the microphone. Six hundred pairs of blue jeans sat on six hundred metal folding chairs. The only skirt in the room was Charlotte Thompson's, and she could get away with it because she'd been in jail. Anyway, it was a blue denim skirt.

Lilian, who knew a lot about everybody, told me that Charlotte and her lover, Janie, had been in jail in connection with an IRA conspiracy, though everyone knew that the evidence had been planted by the police. According to the rumour mill – which often preferred a good story to an accurate one – Janie's mother, who was upper class and hysterical, visited the two of them while they were in jail. She wept bitterly at the sight of her daughter lounging in the visiting room, wearing frayed and very dirty jeans, and acting as if it were perfectly normal for a young lady of her background to entertain her mother for tea in Holloway Women's Prison. As her mother spilt copious tears over having a communist for a daughter, Janie, realising that things could hardly get any worse, decided to seize the moment and tell her mother that she was not only a communist but also a lesbian. "That's nice dear," sniffed her mother, smiling vaguely towards Charlotte, who was loitering nearby.

At Acton Town Hall, Charlotte's upper-class accent and wild cloud of red hair, as well as her skirt, labeled her as one of the few non-American leaders. Her fingers were long and sexy. Her calves – the only ones visible the whole weekend – were firm and somehow revolutionary. She quoted Marx frighteningly often and each time she did her skirt whipped against her legs as she whirled around looking for detractors. She was utterly terrifying.

Lilian, however, dismissed Charlotte's Marxism as irrelevant. We were to be separatists, she said. All that male theory was for the boys: we weren't going to bother with it any more. The other members of our group, sitting in a line halfway back in the auditorium, looked relieved: their mothers didn't want communist daughters either. I was relieved because I'd never read Marx and didn't want anyone to find out. As the plenary ended, women wandered out into the hallways to examine an array of smudgy position papers, duplicated on leaky machines like the one at Shaver's Place. At one table, selling socialist-feminist theory books, sat a young woman who looked familiar. I leafed through the books, eyeing her cautiously until suddenly it hit me: St Mary's Hall!

She had, indeed, been at my all-girls' school in Brighton, although she was a few years younger than I. "Sometimes you took us for prep," she said, laughing, but I could think of nothing at all to say, so shocked was I to find that someone else from that life had ended up here. So I simply smiled. "See you this afternoon."

I threaded my way through the throngs towards the door, ready to slip off and have a sandwich by myself, but my eye was caught by six women sitting on a bench by the stairs. One was



wearing black jeans, which I'd never seen before. Two had leather jackets. And two were kissing each other. Not a "darling how lovely to see you" kiss on the cheek. And not a "see you later, love" peck either. A real, low-down, tongues-involved, smooch. I stood stock still, staring. I wished I had worn my old jeans instead of the new ones. And I got a very funny feeling in my stomach.

After lunch alone, two workshops – one on women writers and one on class in the women's liberation movement – and another plenary session, I joined my group for dinner at a transport caf around the corner. Over baked beans on toast, we enthused about the day.

"I'm not sure about separatism," ventured Margo, her white lace blouse tucked into very pale jeans. It seems so difficult to really *live it...*"

"I went to the wages for housework meeting," said Suzanne. "It makes perfect sense, you know. I can't believe anyone would disagree."

"Who's going to the dance, tonight?" asked Lilian.

"I am," I said firmly, a blush spreading upward from my knees.

"Good," said Lilian, assuming general agreement. "We can all dance together then."

But in the end only four of us showed up. There was a women's rock band (I'd never heard one before) and about a thousand pairs of jeans gyrating, stretching, and bopping across the dusty wooden floor. There was beer in paper cups and smoke so thick you could barely see the door, if you happened to be watching for someone. (I was trying not to watch too obviously for the black jeans or the leather jackets.) Most women danced in groups or alone, weaving through the crowd, hooking up with another dancer for a few minutes, and melting away. In the corner, I thought I saw two couples holding each other, dancing close. I turned away and threw myself vigorously into our group effort, concentrating hard. Lilian, who deplored the uptight dancing of the British, flung her long hair backwards and forwards over her head. Soon I collapsed onto a rickety wooden chair by the wall, lit a cigarette, and surveyed the scene. The enormous hall was filled with dancing women, some of whom were stripping off their flannel shirts and letting their bare breasts dance as vigorously as the rest of their bodies. I felt strangely calm, almost as if I'd always known I'd end up here.

While musing on the turn my life had taken, I had been joined by a very tall woman with long, fine blonde hair. She leaned against the wall, propping her leg, which was in a plaster cast, in front of her, and smoking. She looked Scandinavian, which it turned out she was – a Swedish painter in fact, and quite a notorious one since the women's art exhibition at the Swiss Cottage library had been closed down by the police on account of her enormous painting: "God Giving Birth." Her name, she told me, was Monica and she lived in Bristol. We chatted casually for a while, sharing cigarettes and pointing out the most spectacular dancers, none of whom either of us knew.

Suddenly there was a stir at the door. Dancers started moving towards the table where women paid their entrance money. "What's up?" Monica asked a woman who had left the crowd and was strolling past us.

“Oh, nothing much,” shrugged the woman, “just some blokes in drag trying to get in.” She looked impressively bored and wandered on.

“Faggots!” said Monica. “Why can’t they just leave us alone to do our thing? Bloody men think they belong everywhere!”

But as the rumour of an invasion of men scurried around the dance floor, more and more women stopped dancing and turned to watch the entrance. A few pulled on their discarded shirts but left them unbuttoned while they waited to see what would happen. The band played on, banging out a beat that rattled the rough floorboards. The crowd by the door started to talk excitedly and gradually moved back, parting as if to make way for royalty, while at the same time linking arms to create a barrier. Then, two figures appeared in the doorway and stood perfectly still, surveying the scene. The band stopped playing, the drummer petering out in a trickle of thumps. The whole place fell silent.

Excessively tall and slender, the two newcomers appeared to be young women from a Henry James novel. They wore long, elaborate gowns that hugged their bodies, elegant high-heeled shoes, enormous, sweeping hats and elbow-length white gloves, and they both carried parasols. The one on the left had dark curls that fell beneath her flowered hat, and her dress was pale green. The other wore yellow and a hat adorned with narcissi. Very slowly they moved forward into the room. Women started to whisper: “don’t let them in, they’re men!” but the strangers just strolled on as if they were at a Buckingham Palace garden party. They paraded in a circle, stepping out with pointed toes, swiveling their upper torsos to the left and right like models on a catwalk, while no-one said a word. Monica, however, started nudging me in the ribs. “I know them,” she hissed. “It’s Jackie and Pat. I know them.”

“Jackie and Pat?” I repeated stupidly, having only a vague idea that gay men sometimes used women’s names. “But....they’re men.”

“No they’re not,” Monica said firmly. “They’re women. I know them. They live near me in Bristol. This is an *action*.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, but not really seeing at all.

Pretty soon Jackie and Pat, or whoever they were, arrived back at the doorway. They turned one last time to face the silent wall of women and threw out handfuls of business cards. I walked out on to the dance floor and picked one up. “Sistershow” it said. “Feminist political theatre by Jackie Thrupp and Pat Van Twest.” When I looked up again, they had gone and there was a buzz going around the room. People were starting to defend their right to dress the way they wanted, even if they did all look the same. “No one should have to put on all that uncomfortable stuff,” said one. “Did you see those shoes?” asked another. “Still,” said Lilian, appearing suddenly with a glass of water in her hand. “Still, we did all think they were men. That says something about sex roles and assumptions, doesn’t it?”

“Er, yes. I suppose it does,” I said, still wondering what had happened, while Monica nodded her head but also looked puzzled.

Margo, who had wandered up to join us, was more direct: “What do you mean?” she demanded. “What assumptions?”

“Well,” said Lillian impatiently, “Here we are, all rebelling against femininity and the expectations that are laid on us – and what have we done but create another uniform with even stronger expectations of conformity. So – don’t you get it? – when we see women dressed like traditional women in here with us, we have to assume they’re men!”

At that moment the band struck up again. Monica hobbled out to the dance floor on her cast, pulling me along, my arm firmly clasped in her large, paint-flecked hand. Lillian boogied away towards the band with Suzanne and Margo in tow as the crowd shelved the question of conformity and began to dance, singing along – soon shouting with the band: *Freedom’s just another name for nothing left to lose...* The room pulsed to the beat, a thousand pairs of blue jeans perfectly synchronised.

Nothing would ever be quite the same again.

**Judith Barrington’s** *Lifesaving: A Memoir* won the Lambda Book Award and was a finalist for the PEN/Martha Albrand Award. She is also the author of *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, as well as three collections of poetry. She is a faculty member of the University of Alaska’s MFA Program, a mentor for the University of Minnesota’s Split Rock Program, and she teaches for The Poetry School in Britain and Spain.