

Chapter 3

Learning Nushu

In the 1960s, we sisters in the underground counter-culture and radical left politics had the choice of several roles. We could waft gracefully in gossamer kaftans, some important bloke's girlfriend, silent, smiling, serene. But this required long straight hair that hid your face mysteriously and so not for me and my unruly hair. Another option was to be an honorary bloke in the class struggle, freeing the working man from his alienation from the means of production – but then you had to don dungarees and I had just bought a new Biba jacket on my last decadent trip to Kensington High Street, where this new temple to style had recently opened its doors and half my term's grant had gone in one afternoon. Another possibility involved training with weighty books to become an intellectual who 'thought like a man'. Or you could be Janis Joplin.

For a while I was the singer in a rock band. I had the hair and the moves but not the magic howl; I croaked. But when you are singing hauntingly of that 'needle of death' or in soulful rapport with the anguish of black convict railroad workers, you don't want your audience to rush forward with throat lozenges. I'd like to tell you we disbanded because the band forgot we were not multi-millionaire rock gods who could buy new gear no problem, and in an orgasmic frenzy smashed the guitars to pieces, but I can't. Eventually even we realised we were not the Grateful Dead, and never would be. We wandered off like those album tracks that end in an inglorious fade because no one knows how else to end them. Other doors closed to me, I became an intellectual.

For this you had to spend a lot of time reading impenetrable French stuff about Lacanian mirrors and the penis being the signifier, but at least your hair was free to go its own way and you could say what you wanted even if it was incomprehensible. Though that was OK, we were going beyond the frontiers of the mind anyway.

We sisters of the revolution had happily got on with the business of being girlfriends, mothers, daughters, muses, honorary blokes, one of the guys, until somewhere about this time the glaring absence revealed itself. We also noticed that in all the talk of making love not war, there was rarely mention of children. On the one hand birth control and abortion opened up sexual choice and liberated us from traditional responsibilities, on the other it appeared to relieve men from recognition of their own

sexual responsibility. Mmmm. There can be no denying, some of us were changing or maybe we just stopped trying. Certainly, en masse, we were about to stop faking it.

We stood up and breathed more deeply. We put aside Jean Paul Sartre and picked up Simone de Beauvoir. We looked around and heard new female voices coming from America. Gloria Steinem. Shulamith Firestone. Kate Millet. We noticed that the radical press was mostly written by men, about men, for men. And when we looked into that Lacanian mirror we found the significance of having no penis was, wow, having a vagina! Penis envy suddenly seemed relatively insignificant compared to womb phobia.

It began for me one night in a pub after a meeting about what to write on the banners for the next anti-Vietnam War demo and whether libertarian anarchy means you can drive on whichever side of the road you feel to. These post meeting booze ups were where we got on with other business – non-revolutionary gossip such as where to score the best weed, which party to go to Saturday night, and of course the hidden agenda behind even the most fervent slogan chanting, getting up close and personal with the one you fancied.

More and more frequently these post-meeting meetings found us female comrades huddled in the loo, swapping make-up and laughing at tales not for our male comrades' ears. Ladies' Toilets are exclusive clubs but without the applications for membership that apply in similar establishments for men, and certainly there's none of the antler wearing, one trouser leg rolled up antics some of those go in for. Many a life changing deal has been sealed in women's lavatories, and I don't just mean various kinds of powder sharing.

That evening we had been told that this particular pub did not serve women. Neither were we allowed to consume the drinks bought for us by our male comrades in this bar, we had to go next door to sip them in the lounge. The brothers swaggered around, waving their roll ups, offering to buy us ladies Babychams. They thought it was funny. Like most people thought Stokely Carmichael was funny when asked about the position of women in the Black Power Movement and he had said - 'on their backs!' We didn't. We walked out and began our own meetings.

The comrades were not pleased. They tried to talk us out of our bourgeois individualism and told us feminism was a divisive capitalist plot to undermine the solidarity needed for the class struggle. But we just stared at them with a new look, one eyebrow raised, a knowing smile and fuck-you drags on the fags.

‘Back up boys, you’re breathing our air!’

They soon came round. Most of them anyway realised pretty quickly, if they wanted to get up close and personal with any female comrade in future, they had to take feminism seriously. Apart from the hard left, that is, who still practiced manoeuvres in the dark around corners in Broomspring Lane so that they could do their bit in the guerrilla class war that was about to break out on the streets of Sheffield. But as they tended to be the guys who never sighed when making love, just grunted, this was no great loss.

We arranged to meet the following Wednesday at Mary’s house. A student of English Literature and a fan of Virginia Woolf, Mary had insisted on a room of her own long before the rest of us had even thought about it. Twelve of us gathered there for our first women’s meeting. The last time I had been in a room full of only women had been in the Loreto Convent, and that was probably only to wait for a priest. Here we were waiting for neither God nor man. Actually we were not sure what we were waiting for.

We knew we were not meeting for make up tips, Tupperware and fashion gossip, but would we fall into factions and argue all the time as per usual in the left, or would we be friendly and girly, or what? All I knew was an imperative feeling of urgency had forced me here. I had even turned down the chance of a curry cooked by an Indian friend, a great sacrifice as there were no Indian Restaurants in Sheffield then; if we fancied a curry, it was stew with a few sultanas added or dried powdery prawns rattling around in Vesta packets.

Mary puzzled me. She was sexy, smart, intelligent - a real foxy lady in every way, including long straight hair that wafted. That wasn’t what puzzled me.

‘How come you’re so together when you were brought up a Catholic?’ I asked her.

‘But you were a Catholic, and you’re cool as well as together.’

What! I was dumfounded. But did she really see me or was she merely taken in by my flawless act? I tended towards the latter as I certainly had a good act together if nothing else. Though could it be that getting your act together is the real thing anyway, as isn’t being unreal the reality of being really human? My head is spinning and I am only in the kitchen making tea *before* the meeting. Clearly we will be discussing very different things from the Marxist, Leninist, Trotskyite debates that went on in those smoky rooms

off the union bar. Or even from the Marcusian, Levi Straussian, Lacanian semiotics we went in for before we got too stoned to pronounce the words.

We sat on cushions and chairs around the room at different heights, as were our skirts, some mini, some midi, some to the floor, though most of us, still in honorary bloke mode, wore Levis. Balancing mugs of coffee and tea on our knees, we completed the hellos and ‘how are you?’ gossip that settles a tribe before the real business can begin. We gazed around. None of us spoke. The silence told us we were here for something more profound and mysterious than we had anticipated. Perched on the rock face of a sheer cliff, we looked down into the ocean, where, beneath the waves, we could make out obscure shapes in the dark. Our breathing quickened. Our hearts beat faster.

‘This feels strange, just us. Just women I mean.’

‘What’s even weirder is it feels somehow wrong, as if we shouldn’t be here, yet I like it, I really like it.’

‘That’s exactly how I feel!’

‘Me too!’

We sit looking at each other. We have no agenda. No minutes. No chairman. No hierarchy – not yet anyway. And no idea what we were going to talk about. This is absolutely not like the meetings we are used to.

‘I suggest we start by talking about what brought us here.’ This was from Mary. No way was I as together as she was, whatever she said.

We began to share concerns that we hadn’t realised were bothering us because the context hadn’t been there to recognise them. Like the first time we’d heard The Velvet Underground’s ‘White Light, White Heat’, we hadn’t known whether we liked it or not because there was no way of knowing - the music itself taught us how to listen. And that’s what we were doing – teaching ourselves to listen to the new sounds of women talking about themselves, for themselves, to themselves. A Chinese woman died a few years ago, the last speaker of Nushu, a centuries old language known only by women, taught to girls in secret, to express their inner feelings, to articulate their hurts and angers that could not be spoken elsewhere. We were learning a new language - our version of Nushu.

‘I can’t stand the way men dominate every meeting I have ever been in.’ Suddenly it occurs to us that this has always been our experience too.

‘And even worse is the way they put you down by turning you into a sex object!’

‘Wow, that is so how it is!’ we chorus.

‘Yes. And we’re expected to be supportive, available, sensitive, in the background, caring but *never* powerful, authoritative or angry.’ This is so clearly true, why have we never noticed this before? We shake our heads in disbelief while nodding in absolute agreement – a knack very useful in such meetings.

‘Sexual roles are learned through culture not biological instincts.’

‘Marriage and the nuclear family are ways to keep women in bondage both psychologically and materially.’

‘Women’s bodies are seen as machines by the capitalist system that has to control the means of production so has to control us.’

‘Men are so afraid of the power of women they keep women oppressed in every culture.’

‘Patriarchy, the rule of the father, has its roots in fear and hatred of the power of the woman and the mother.’

‘The oppressive inequality of sexual relationships manifests in every intimate relationship between a woman and a man.’

The insights are coming thick and fast, and we know they are true even if we haven’t yet worked out the theory of why or how. But we will, we will.

‘Yeah! Even language is patriarchal, man... shit! See what I mean?’

Yes we do, sister!

What stunned us most was as soon as someone shared their experience suddenly we realised this was our experience too, but had not known it. This wasn’t scales falling from our eyes; it was steel shutters crashing down. We had not seen all this before because Patriarchy, the rule of the father, had been so intrinsic to society, culture, language and thought, we had taken for granted that this is the way things are and always will be. Like the very air we breathe and the atmosphere in which we had grown, it never occurred to us that reality could be different. Not really. Though when I thought about it, I did remember being up in arms that my brother had the job of cleaning shoes which only happened once a week, while my sisters and I had to share the ironing, cooking, dusting, washing up, drying and shopping, and that had to be done everyday.

It didn’t take long for a whole new set of graffiti to emerge, first appearing in women’s toilets, later on walls throughout the city.

‘The personal is political!’

‘A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.’

‘Sisters are doing it for themselves.’

‘Don’t fuck in the missionary position - fuck the missionary!’

‘If men had periods, menstrual blood would be sacred.’

And the more prosaic ‘I like dykes.’

We learned fast. After a few meetings we were quoting Heather Booth, Evie Goldfield, Sue Munaker, Kathie Amatniek, Marge Piercy and a whole host of women who had begun to write about Women’s Liberation. In just months we were fluent in the Nushu of the Women’s Movement with the ease of native speakers – which of course we were.

Suddenly lesbians and gay guys sprang up everywhere. Where had they been? Hiding of course. Surely I should have understood that as well as anyone. Denise came out and told me she loved me. Well I loved her too but not in that way. It was cool though as I introduced her to Angie and they fell in love. They cut each other’s hair, went shopping for dungarees, and wore home made badges proclaiming ‘A dyke without a bloke is like a bike without a choke!’

We all went in for rather surreal badges, you understand, as back then, we were hacking through the undergrowth of centuries, creating the footpaths that have now become motorways, and there was no political IKEA with pre-packaged stylish slogans, we had to construct our own. As well as our own music. Fortunately no one now cared that I croaked. And, anyway, how else would a woman sing having been gagged and in chains for centuries of Patriarchy?

In cities all over the US and Europe groups of women like us were coming together to discover that Patriarchy had set sisters against sisters, divided us from each other in order to rule over us, but now we could befriend and love each other. We discovered that the sisterhood was the tribe we had longed for all our life, but so profound had been our exile, we had not known it.

We packed into four cars and went to Oxford for the inaugural Women’s Liberation conference in 1970. Glorious confusion reigned. Anyone who wanted to stuck up sheets of papers offering workshops on ‘Socialist Feminism’, ‘The Politics of Sexuality’, ‘Lesbian Liberation’, ‘Wages for Housework’, ‘Love and the Nuclear Family’, ‘The Body Politic and the Politics of the Body’, ‘Radical Separatist Feminism and Cooking’, ‘Anyone Wanting a Lift Back to Liverpool’. And you signed up for whatever took your fancy.

We sat in circles to gossip, listen, offer advice, to support and take care of each other - an ancient ritual. We could have been shelling peas into wide skirts, squatted on mud floors grinding spices, or making coil pots outside a cave; in these circles, we were taking the shells off ourselves, coiling a different kind of pot, and weaving potent new spells. I had a great time, we all did, including the kids in the 'Men Against Sexism' crèche. We drove home with a new freedom in our hearts to love each other - and ourselves. From now on, the sisters were doing it for themselves.

In the same DIY spirit of the times, I came up with my own graffiti - 'When God returns to Earth, She'll come back as a group of women.' Not catchy, but deep. At least I thought so. Someone else must have thought so too as less than a year later a friend told me she had seen it in a women's toilet in Chicago. We really were gossiping in a global village, either that or I had a soul sister out there somewhere.

Not long after our great seminal coming together in Oxford, where, high on the sisterhood, we had proclaimed to the world the necessity of breaking down Patriarchal structures such as the nuclear family, I got married. I was not only a divided self, I was a fragmented self. And some of the fragments clearly did not know what other of the fragments were up to.

Pete and I had been living together for over a year after he had switched from Nottingham University to Sheffield for the final two years of his architecture degree. We were lovers and comrades, and in my plan, were to become the Simone and Jean Paul of the cool feminist counter culture. Except that I was terrified my parents would find out we were living together, rather a stumbling block should we ever go public.

My parents came to visit me once. I cleared out every sign of Pete's presence, drafted in my best friend Alison as flat-mate and sprinkled a few of her cardigans and dresses around the place. I spent their visit smiling frantically while offering random and rather manic suggestions about what they might like to do in Sheffield to distract them from all the details I kept noticing I'd missed - shaving cream, a black leather man's jacket, size 10 shoes, architecture books. I was quite simply terrified. Though I couldn't work out exactly what it was that frightened me so much.

I suffered regular panic attacks that I might die in a traffic accident. I wrote my first novel that abruptly ended with the heroine killed in a car crash. I was convinced that paper bags lying by the road were animals writhing in prolonged agony having been run over and left to die. I even wondered if the Church had been right all along and these

fears were my punishment for living in sin. Pete suggested we get married; perhaps this would put my demons to rest.

I discussed it in my women's group. We were still in the exploratory phase where every question and cultural dynamic had so many unknowns the correct ideological analysis had yet to be worked out. Should we, for example, refuse to pander to male definitions of beauty, chuck our lipsticks in the bin and go forth pale lipped, or should we proclaim ownership of our own lips by painting them any colour we fancied? Though, if all else failed, there was always the semiotic analysis of that phallic red stick emerging glistening from its protective sheath.

We explored the personal, cultural and political dimensions of my getting married.

'Perhaps you should think about what you want and not what your parents want?' suggested Jill.

A good suggestion but that was my dilemma – I didn't know what I wanted.

'Maybe you get married yet keep your own name and refuse to wear a wedding ring' Janet pondered.

Wouldn't that just confuse further a person already confused?

Rosie was adamant.

'If you marry you are pandering to patriarchy, and become property not a person.'

There's a slogan in there, somewhere.

'Whatever we say, no one knows better than you what is right for you.' This was Mary, like I said, a foxy lady.

One fragment of me was a feminist committed to redefining the politics of sexual intimacy. Another fragment was stylish and cool - not so cool I could freeze hell, but I was working on it. Yet another was walking up the aisle of a Catholic Church dressed in a long white dress, with the organ playing here comes the bride. And when Pete and I went back to our flat in Sheffield that night, one of my fragments could not get over the fact that making love from now on, at least with this man, was NOT A SIN!

Pete and I went on our honeymoon to Venice, where to appease the goddess I read the Second Sex all over again. Pete, to keep his gods happy, read Trotsky's letters to Lenin. A tornado ripped through Venice while we were there overturning a vaporetto and bringing down trees, one blew over on our campsite near our tent and nearly killed us. Maybe it is not so easy to appease a goddess.

The most successful revolutions are ones where no one looks back to the good old days and the next generation have no idea what it was like before. The Women's Movement of the seventies was so successful young women today have no idea how bad it was before. That's good - because it was pretty dreadful. And our Women's Movement was a revolution of the spirit, as well as of hearts and minds. We turned our backs on the Patriarchal God to find the spirituality of the Earth, the sacred in life, not in an after-life. We called out to the goddess and She came back down from the mountains and the hills, emerged from the forests, the oceans and the wilderness, returning from where She had been living with the birds and the beasts, banished by a Patriarchy that was afraid of her. And when the Goddess returned from her exile, she brought with her a lot more than healing and light.

If you have been repressed, attacked and incarcerated for millennia, confined to the dark dungeons of the collective unconscious for centuries of Patriarchy, when freed, you are unlikely to emerge with just a sweet smile. As any goddess worth her salt will tell you, she is as destructive as she is creative, as raging as she is compassionate. Even sex goddesses. Marilyn Monroe once glided up the aisle of a cathedral, so luminously beautiful, so gloriously sexual, everyone turned and stared. 'See' she said, 'even in His church, the power of the goddess is greater than the God!'

The Goddess was coming home. She came home to us. But it was not all bread and roses. It was tough breaking down the taboos of centuries of oppression. We had to fight where our conditioning had taught us to appease. We had to lift heavy furniture on our own. We had to learn plumbing and how to use a screwdriver. We had to argue with the egos of all our lovers when we would have preferred to lie down and enjoy ourselves. And we had to go to parties (sometimes) with no lipstick or mascara.

Yet those whom the goddess loves she neither destroys nor drives mad; she empowers with a different kind of wisdom.