

HAMMER  
& NAIL

Notes of  
a Journeywoman

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## PROLOGUE

As I begin to write this, a concrete truck growls outside my window. My neighbour is building a house and today the foundation is being poured. All morning I've opened and closed, opened and closed the window beside my desk. My muscles twitch as if I've had too much caffeine. But it's not caffeine.

I know what the guys on site are feeling right now (and I'm pretty certain they're all guys). They're grateful the rain has stopped, grateful there's a pumper truck nestled in beside the concrete mixer so they don't have to do this job the hard way—filling wheelbarrows one at a time with the gut-heavy mix that is wet concrete. That truck's been here for almost three hours, which means a big pour, lots of concrete, so I also know everyone's tired. But there'll be no rest until this pour is over.

I hear the hum of a pickup truck and guess the concrete finisher has arrived. I leave my desk to peek. Sure enough, a guy in lime-eaten clothes and a handful of finishing tools is walking slowly toward the job as the rest stand back. They're almost finished, feeling good by now—and here I taste a pain as clear and strong as a bitter nut I can bite down on. I close the window. I can't bear to be reminded.

Ten minutes later, nostalgia overwhelms me again and I creep back, open the window just a little to listen....

## FINDING A GATE

So how did a nice girl like me come to yearn for wet concrete like some fading Rose for her young lover? What makes a woman forsake her middle-class upbringing and all cleaner pursuits to embrace mud and sweat? And what does feminism have to do with any of this?

I was born in 1947. As the eldest of six kids, the neighbours called me “the little mother.” Family movies from that time show an embarrassingly righteous and self-possessed ten-year-old herding three, four, then five, docile younger siblings. In every photo after the age of six, I’m either hovering over, or have a baby in my arms. My mother was delighted that I wanted to be a missionary.

It was all great leadership training but perhaps also the beginning of my going off the beaten path, because instead of lining up to marry and bear my share of the next generation as Nice Girls were supposed to do, by age twelve I’d decided never to marry or have kids. I figured I’d already raised five, and after watching my parents struggle, and witnessing the impacts of my father’s drinking, marriage held no attraction.

I didn’t mention this decision out loud. It was simply a fact; I would be a single, childless woman. Full stop.

The only rattle in this otherwise smoothly plotted course was when, around age thirteen, I began a series of battles with my upwardly mobile father that lasted until I was thirty. We fought over everything, though I remember most clearly our regular Sunday night fights over the amount of respect due to working-class people (though I didn’t yet use the word “class”). My father was the son of a British ironworker, but as an immigrant to Canada he had worked

hard to “raise himself” to an executive position in a national company. Now he mocked everyone—it seemed to me—who carried brown paper lunch bags to the 8:10 a.m. commuter train and returned home (*sans* bag) on the 5:50. In my overly confident junior logic, I couldn’t see why these people too, didn’t deserve respect. They were working, weren’t they?

Eventually, in addition to the people with lunch bags, Dad and I argued about women. It started with comments about my mother—just a farm girl, etc.—until I felt obliged to defend Mum. Then he started criticizing uppity women in general and for no reason I could then articulate, this didn’t seem right, either. (Years later, when we’d reconciled, he teased me that I should thank him for the fact that I became both a feminist and a trade union activist, and there’s truth in that.)

Those Sunday night arguments were extremely unpleasant, complicated—I realized much later—by the fact they always took place after Dad had been drinking martinis all afternoon. But in hindsight, I could see how they forced me to stand back and see him as a separate person—just another man—so they set an early pattern of not being afraid to argue with authority. Later, in my thirties, when I started to give speeches, sit on committees and engage in arguments with senior men in construction and in government, I dearly valued the advice he gave me the night before my first major speech about women in the trades.

“Never forget,” Dad had told me, “no matter what their titles, they’re somebody’s father, just men, like me.”

My mother almost never spoke about my father. If he was late (again) for dinner, or suddenly announced he’d invited eight people for supper the following night, she said not a word. I learned from my mother that a woman bears all and bears it in silence. This was the Golden Rule that good mothers passed on to their daughters in the 1950s, the rule that said it’s always the woman who gives. Who else could it be?

I accepted the Rule—it was what my mother and her women friends lived by—because I had nothing with which to oppose it. Yet I could not abide by it. It affirmed what I later read by poet Louise Bogan who in the 1920s wrote that, “Women have no wilderness in them, / They are provident instead, / Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts, To eat dusty bread....They wait, when they should turn to journeys.”

I was clear I would not live my life eating dusty bread, but to say to my mother, “I refuse to be your kind of wife,” was beyond imagination, disloyal. The only option I could see—and this seemed daring enough—was not to be a wife at all.



I was the first person in our family to go to university, and it was a Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1966 after third-year university, when my life turned. I was sitting in the cool of our rec room reading a thick, blue paperback called *The Feminine Mystique*. The house was uncharacteristically quiet, or maybe just every other sound had faded behind my focus on what I was reading. The drapes were closed to keep out Montreal’s heat and humidity, and in the dim, cool interior I was only partway through the book when I stopped reading and laid it carefully, face-down on the couch beside me.

I felt as if I’d been driving down the same road for years and suddenly noticed a major street I’d never noticed before. How had I missed such an inviting, open, obvious avenue? Betty Friedan, the author of this small bombshell, had just thrown open the lid on a modern Pandora’s Box. It threw light on all the questions, the hunches and crazy urges I’d had for years but for which I’d had no name. Until now I did: feminism.

You’d think everything would have been clear after that, but I spent the next forty-five years, and continue still, integrating the implications of that book into my life.



In those days, girls had three choices for work: you could be a nurse, a secretary or a teacher. Very recently there was a fourth choice as

stewardess on one of the new commercial airlines but for that, you had to be a registered nurse. Since I couldn't stand the sight of blood, and didn't want to teach, I chose secretary, by default. Even now, it's surprising to remember how shocking—how exciting—it was in the '50s and early '60s to imagine supporting myself, earning my own money.

At university I took a BA with Secretarial Certificate—"something useful" people said—and my first job was as a "temp" in London where I'd been travelling but had run out of money. I was hired to help the president's secretary in a large British company. At school I'd been a hotshot at taking shorthand but not so good at reading it back, so when I took my first dictation, I returned the so-called "finished" letter directly to the boss with a polite note asking him to please fill in the blanks where I couldn't read my own writing. At the time I thought it a rather clever solution, but the man's permanent secretary did not. She took me behind a door to politely, firmly, suggest I move on.

On the second temp job, I erased a bank president's signature while using an ancient copying machine—really, they should have replaced it years ago—and realized that perhaps secretarial work wasn't for me. But if not secretary, then what? I dabbled at this and that—public relations writing, child care, teaching ESL, receptionist, going back to university even, thinking perhaps I'd teach?

It was the mid-'70s and women were waking up, asking questions. By now I was living in Vancouver and I began going to Consciousness-Raising (CR) groups—discussion groups for women where anything and everything could be brought up, talked about, questioned. It was exhilarating and terrifying, but mostly exhilarating.

The CR groups were my guide. Until now I had accepted the common saying that women talk too much, that our eagerness to talk was a weakness. Now, slowly, I was coming to see that it was—it is—in fact, our strength. With few exceptions, the world we were living in was built neither for us nor by us, nor was it being recorded

by us or for us. To my surprise, I was discovering that women's lives were not even mapped—at least, not by women. I had to ask other women, over and over: *How is it for you? Honestly?* And they told me.

It was happening across the country, across the continent. In Vancouver, women formed a Caucus and started a women's newspaper, the *Pedestal*, that the rest of us poured over, uncovering new injustices.

And injustice was everywhere, much of it focused around the issue of lower pay for the same work as men. The right to birth control and abortion were also becoming issues that could actually be talked about in public, though I never heard the word “sexual harassment” until a conference organized by the BC Federation of Labour in 1982. Women formed a Women's Health Collective to educate us all about our own bodies and I spent one afternoon sitting on the floor in a circle with a half-dozen other women, our legs spread wide, inspecting our vaginas with flashlight and speculum. Red and lush and moist—they were beautiful! Why had we been ashamed?

There were petitions and parades and International Women's Day on March 8 became a major event, with rallies and workshops and classes. It was all incredibly exciting and yes, a liberation, though we later realized, it was more a liberation for the white, straight women like me, than for many others. The rare woman who mentioned the rights of lesbians, or women of colour, was a surprising and usually lone voice. At the time, dazzled by our own courage, we straight white women couldn't see how other women's rights could possibly differ from our own. It was a failure of our time, one that marked a liberation still to come.

But in spite of the excitement and changes feminism promised, as I neared the age of thirty, I was in near-despair. I felt lost in a no man's land of Non-Identity: I was Not Married, Not Mother, Not Nurse, Not Secretary, Not Teacher—not to mention I was Broke. I was almost thirty years old and still didn't know what I wanted to “be” when I grew up. What was I going to do with my life?

I'd started back to school, taking a master's degree, thinking

maybe I'd become an academic and teach after all, but by 1976 I couldn't handle the questions anymore. I needed time to think. I dropped out of university for what I thought would be two months, to live in an isolated cabin on the Gulf Islands off the coast of Vancouver. It was there I wandered into construction.

Two months on the island turned into six, then twelve, and I was almost out of money, no matter how frugally I managed. I'd looked for local jobs as waitress, babysitter, clerk—but there was nothing. Then, at a party one night, a friend suggested I apply for his job as a carpenter, building the local community school. He'd just quit. It came out as easily as if he was taking off his shirt on a sunny day. It was ridiculous, of course. In 1977, no one had ever heard of a woman in construction. But desperation was about to uproot the mighty oak of tradition. What else was there?

I owned a pair of steel-toed boots from working the summer before piling lumber in northern BC, and the guys lent me a tool-belt and a hammer. After a quick lesson from the men ("Lie," they said) and a sleepless night spent dreaming up "credentials," (maybe I'd sort-of-built a house up north?) I applied the next morning at the foreman's hut, shaking with fear—and by some miracle, was hired as a labourer. Later I'd find out the guys had been slowing down on the job and he'd figured that maybe having a woman around would get them to speed up, show off. He never expected me to actually do anything.

I never in my wildest dreams ever imagined being a carpenter. Why would I? Everyone knew girls can't do construction. In high school, we were forbidden to take shop (and boys weren't allowed into Home Economics). I never hung out with my dad in the garage. We didn't have a garage. And if anything went wrong mechanically in our house, Dad would order Mum to "Call the Man," as if some generic trades god could/would/did, fix all.

But within a week on that first job, in spite of (or because of?) fatigue and blisters and aching muscles, I loved construction with the passion of a drowning person who has bumped into a boat full



of friends, food and wine. Still, it would be another two years as a labourer plus a four-month pre-apprentice course before I dared to say, “I want to work as a carpenter.” I couldn’t even imagine, *being* a carpenter, let alone a skilled journeywoman. Simply being able to swing a hammer, to build a house, seemed wildly ambitious enough. It had taken a while and the way hadn’t been exactly clear, but with some luck I’d found an opening, a gate to what looked like an interesting future.

It was one of the unthinkable desires that, years before, Betty Friedan had given me permission to think, and now to act on.