MY BUTCH CAREER A MEMOIR

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For LOUISE FISHMAN:
my first great love

for F. B.:
Le papillon qui tape du pied
[the butterfly that stamps its foot]

and for HOLLY HUGHES:
steadfast and inspirational from
beginning to end of this book

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1996 I received the honor of presenting the David Kessler Lecture from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I was thrilled to receive the invitation to this once-a-year event honoring a queer scholar, and I threw myself into it, using text and even music to create a PowerPoint version of my life. I was rewarded with a standing ovation, and many people urged me to develop the material further. Without the Kessler lecture, this memoir would not have happened.

I was still working full time until 2006, and progress was halting and slow, but in 1999 two grants allowed me to take time off from teaching. Once again, CLAGS supported me with a Rockefeller Fellowship in the Humanities, and I received a small but helpful boost from the President's Research Support Grant at Purchase College, State University of New York.

In 2001, a version of the first chapter, "A Hard Left Fist," was published in *GLQ: Journal of Queer Studies* 7, no. 1. And in 2003, the original lecture was published as "My Butch Career: A Memoir," in *Queer Ideas: The David R. Kessler Lectures in Lesbian and Gay Studies* (New York: Feminist Press).

Hardly any LGBT writers could be "out" in the modern sense of letting their sexual orientation be known publicly during the years described in this memoir. That began to change in the 1980s, and I thank the editor Michael Denneny for recognizing and promoting so much queer talent, including mine; my agents Frances Goldin and, later, Ellen Geiger of Goldinlit Literary Agency; and Ken Wissoker of Duke University Press for believing in me and my work.

The project before me was to transform the Kessler lecture, memory, journals, and letters into a coherent narrative, and without serious editorial help, this story, had it ever been published, would have been lumpy and indigestible.

On the recommendation of my partner, Holly Hughes (we married in 2015), I turned to her friend Cynthia Carr for editorial help. I had admired Cindy's writing since her days as a cultural critic for the *Village Voice* under the byline C. Carr, and this was a most fortunate choice because Cindy understood what I was trying to do and yet was tough with me. She did the heavy lifting of turning a much longer manuscript that even I perceived as shapeless into something coherent. In more recent years, five anonymous but perspicacious and dedicated readers for Duke University Press led me through three rounds of painful cuts and revisions until *My Butch Career* reached its final form. At the very end, Holly Hughes and Ellen Lewin both read versions of a balky chapter 11 and helped me drag it over the finish line.

On a personal note, I thank my brother, Robert Newton, for giving me our father's transcribed recollections on which much of chapter 1 is based, and my cousins Barbara L. Cohen and Betty Levinson for the photograph of the Cohen family and for helping identify them; Jane Rosette, who gave me important technical support in putting the Kessler lecture together, and staff at both the Social Science Department of Purchase College and the Women's Studies Department at the University of Michigan for going out of their way to help with scanning and copying; my French friends without whom chapters 8–10 would not exist; and Bena Ball and June Fortney, my friends at the Resort on Carefree Boulevard for insisting that I keep working through the revisions. Thanks to all those Ann Arborites who visited and encouraged me through the four hospitalizations that have impeded my progress on the manuscript for the past two years. You know who you are. And most especially, I thank my in-laws, Trudy Hughes and Jeff Bieszki; my friends Stephanie Rowden, Vicki Patraka, Lisa Nakamura, Christian Sandvig; and, most of all, my life partner Holly Hughes for putting up with twenty-two years of angst over this project and for her gutsy and beautiful writing that inspires me every day.

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN
NOVEMBER 5, 2017

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of how I came into this world a "Commie Jew bastard"—my grandfather's slur—and became an anthropologist who helped create sexuality and gender studies. That is the career of my title. It is also the story of how I came to see myself as butch, a stigmatized identity quite at odds with the concept of a career. By "butch" I mean an identity within LGBT communities that describes someone who identifies as a woman but whose sense of self is deeply rooted in masculinity.

This narrative centers on the first half of my life, from childhood to age forty. These were years when I suffered torments, as did most gay people of my generation. We were hated, hounded, arrested, and slandered without being able to answer back. Through it all, I finished high school, college, and graduate school suppressing, and lying about, my masculinity and homoeroticism even while naively daring to write *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, the first anthropological description of the American gay community, which was published to no notice and didn't prevent me from getting fired from my first academic job.

What does it mean to have a career, and why did I want one? The idea of career is bound up in class and gender. To have a career means education and training in business, politics, armed forces, medicine, law, or academia and like professions. A career is supposed to be a spur to ambition and a calling that gives shape and meaning to a life. Having a career almost always depends on expectation—because of your class privilege you are expected to do so; family stability—so that you can concentrate on your goals over a period of time and earn at least a middle-class family income.

In the nineteenth century, well-situated or unusually enterprising men entered professions. Only a few elite women became professional anythings; the rest were ladies, housewives, or laundry washers, maids and farm or factory workers and slaves, and most women were mothers, too.

My great-grandmother was one of those exceptional women in being a nineteenth-century journalist for a major New York City newspaper, and she established the possibility of a career for women on my mother's side. My father, the son of Jewish immigrants, also believed in careers for women, not because he had such role models, but because the Communist Party theoretically believed in gender equality (though it was far more active in the struggle for racial justice).

I was born in 1940, on the eve of World War II. By the time of my adolescence in the 1950s, it was a given in upper-middle-class families like mine that girls would go to college, although the usual rationale was that a bachelor of arts degree made them better wives and mothers.

My career path was not level and smooth because from childhood on I had a boyish demeanor and was attracted to girls and women. As a teenager I told a psychiatrist I thought I was homosexual, as we said then, and at eighteen a strange and sexy woman seduced me and showed me lesbian bar culture, where women were either butches or the partners of butches, femmes. Within that scheme I was butch, no doubt. Back in college, though, lesbianism was not acceptable, and femininity was mandatory. Wanting to finish college, I went into therapy in a vain and damaging attempt to "fix" myself.

By the 1960s, Cold War government funding meant that many graduate schools were admitting far more women than they ever had before.

But the pressure to marry was so great that advanced training produced more marriages than female professionals. Such women more often married male professionals than went on to such careers themselves.

Although I had had (problematic) sex with men in college, I could not bring myself to marry. So in the absence of a trust fund, I was going to have to support myself. Two brief stints at menial jobs had convinced me that career was the better option. But one could not be openly homosexual as a professional; there was no choice but to lead a deceptive public life and a separate and secret private one. And as a gender "deviant," as we said then, hiding my sexual orientation was even more challenging, since any mannish ways were supposed to be the mark of a lesbian.

From high school through a full professorship, my persona, interests, and, later, feminist/gay politics blocked my advancement so much that by the 1970s I was almost completely alienated from the whole notion of having a career just when I should have been notching accomplishments.

During the part of my life described in this memoir, my research and writing had no context and no audience. As a professor, I was lucky to survive, much less thrive. But by the 1980s, on the energy of feminist and gay liberations movements, eager readers emerged outside the universities, and mainstream publishers started to take notice. Women's studies programs and departments and gay academic conferences were providing the beginnings of supportive institutional structures. These movements, more than academic support (I was the only out gay or lesbian professor at my college from 1974 through the early 1990s), gave me hope, and all of my work since then has been written not just for academic colleagues but also for the national LGBT communities that were taking shape.

Around 1980, working-class lesbian intellectuals were creating a new and more generous conception of the butch-femme roles and sexuality of my youth that were a revelation and liberating. Since *Mother Camp* I had done little academic work. "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," which I wrote in 1981, was my return to scholarly work, and it made masculine lesbians my subject. Finally I could pull my career and my queer life together.

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The butch is either the magical sign of lesbianism, or a failed, emasculated and abjected man.
—SALLY MUNT, *Heroic Desire*

We live in an America where long held assumptions about sexuality and gender are dramatically shifting. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, most people believed that same-sex attraction was caused by gender "inversion," a man who was too feminine or a woman who was too masculine. These inverts were thought to be the aggressors in same-sex liaisons with more "normal" people, which was the basis for the stereotype of the sexual predator, both male and female.

Sigmund Freud, who started publishing in the early years of the twentieth century and was hugely influential, especially in America, argued that sexual orientation and gender identity were both shaped through childhood experience (the famous Oedipus complex) and that neither determined the other, although in his essay "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" Freud noted the patient's refusal of traditional femininity, noting, "She really was a feminist."[1] In using the word "homosexual," Freud brought about a new way of thinking about same-sex desire, as a specific (and morally neutral but socially undesirable) form of eroticism. As Freud's ideas gained traction, the sexuality aspect of same-sex desire grew dominant over the "gender inversion" hypothesis.

"Butch" is a gender identity within lesbian culture that fuses female masculinity with homosexual desire. Butch became compulsory for even slightly masculine women during the 1950s and '60s in the one semi-public space in which lesbians could have fun, dance, and meet partners: bars.[2] Other subcultures and even countries have related gender identities with different names: within African American communities, for instance, some masculine lesbians call themselves "aggressives," or AG, as in the 2005 film of that name. But whatever name they use, such women emerge from every American class, race, and subculture.

A rather masculine lesbian friend of mine, who does not identify as butch but, as she puts it, always knew she was gay, teased me one day, "If you are so butch, where is your tool belt?" When I have practical problems in my Florida home, I call her. In fact, she built the desk on which I am writing. But her father was a mechanic while mine was a psycholo-

gist who never wore a tool belt or fixed anything. Postmodern butch is not necessarily about tool belts or who is more dominant in a relationship; it is not even about what you do in bed (or elsewhere). It is about a gender expression that combines some version of the masculinity that you saw around you as a child with same-sex desire.

Butch is not, as is often claimed, just a copy of manhood. Although Gertrude Stein said, "Thank god I was not born a woman," she always wore skirts. One's gender presentation is, among other things, a projection of your personal and cultural imagination. Stein was saying that because of her masculinity she was not and never had been like other women. And she had the expatriate lesbian community around her in Paris to support her claim. Although butch identity appropriates certain aspects of normative masculinity, it is an invention of the lesbian community.

Whether caused by biology or experience (and more likely a combination), feeling innately masculine or feminine is not a choice, but how people mesh that sense with their adulthood possibilities is, within the available avatars in any culture. Because the world of my childhood presented only conventional gender possibilities, I had no way to make sense of my discordant sense of self. Even after accepting that I was gay, my intimate and sexual relations were confusing and conflicted when I could not fit them into a lesbian-feminist template. At forty-one, then, I claimed this butch identity because it made sense of my sexual and personal experience and because, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, to claim an identity is to place oneself in a narrative of history.

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Tonight in the lesbian retirement community where I spend the winter I was flipping the TV dial and happened to come across a rerun of *Dirty Dancing*, a 1987 film set in a Jewish Catskills resort. I loved it even more than when I first saw it. But online I learned that Jennifer Grey's Jewish nose, which I had especially loved, had later been mutilated by her choice to have a nose job. Grey is supposed to have said that she went into plastic surgery a celebrity and came out anonymous. In other words, she chose to alter a characteristic she was born with and wound up compromising her beauty.

Although I have ideas but not certainties about why I grew up, despite relentless opposition, a mannish woman who wanted intimacy with other, mostly feminine women, I can't remember a time when this wasn't true. If these parts of me were not innate, like Jennifer Grey's nose, they might as well have been.[3] As an adolescent I wished for what might be called a "gender job"—some magic that would make me feel like other girls and everything that went with it, including heterosexuality. I felt ugly and awkward, and it was only through the affirmation of my female lovers that I gradually came to see myself as they did: a woman more masculine than feminine, with good looks and charisma who could live in her own body.

Judging by current newspaper and Facebook wedding photos, feminine-looking lesbians now sometimes marry others like themselves, and although for some reason I don't see their wedding pictures in the *New York Times*, I know about quite a few masculine-masculine couples. We appreciate now that both gender and sexual orientation are not either-or propositions; that they are, rather, continuums that are much more fluid than I was led to believe as a child and young adult.

Many—probably most—lesbians are more in the middle, and many who appear to be more masculine or feminine don't accept a "label" or look down on butches, so by no means is this the story of every lesbian, although many queer people of my age will recognize the toxic atmosphere of my youth.

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You are not what you want. You are what wants you back.
—GARY SHTEYNGART, *Little Failure*

In the 1950s and '60s the partner of any butch had to be feminine and preferably identify as femme. The femme lesbian looked more feminine in dress and mannerisms, but she had antipathy toward aspects of the conventional female role, and she was attracted to butches. I presume that many of my readers, both today's young "queer" women and others, may not know (or know that they know) any lesbian femmes, even though the identity is still evolving and vibrant. The majority of my

partners have been femmes, although some did not call themselves that, and in their loving gaze I saw who I could be.

Feminine women in mainstream media are not legible as femmes because they never get to say so and are always represented as attracted to men. Although I cannot speak for them, in trying to characterize femmes as I have known and loved them, I return to *Dirty Dancing* and its portrayal of a (heterosexual) femme-like attitude: Jennifer Grey's performance of Frances "Baby" Houseman, the young Jewish heroine. From the early scene when Baby purposely spills water on a sexist jerk and walks away, you know that she is gutsy and determined. When her doctor father tries to order her around, you can see by the set of her mouth that she won't obey. Baby pursues Johnny, a blue-collar gentile dance instructor and she keeps at it until she gets him in bed. There's no ulterior motive. Her heart is true, and she's not a conniving bitch. She wants him because everything about him gives her pleasure, and she's not ashamed of it, and this is what their thrilling dancing embodies.

But there is no glossing over the fact that Johnny is a working-class guy who works as an Arthur Murray dance instructor/rent boy, while Baby is the Jewish upper-middle-class daughter of a doctor. The film acknowledges that their class differences are a powerful part of their attraction and will ultimately separate them.

OK, so Johnny's a man. But we gays have had to project ourselves into heterosexual narratives. Working-class Johnny can't believe that this doctor's daughter wants him, and his attitude is not one of conquest; it is always of gratitude and tenderness. They don't slurp open-mouthed kisses and hump in offbeat locations and positions, as in today's conventional representations of heterosexual lust. Their masculine-feminine attraction is played out in partnered dancing and in tempo, in gestures, her hand running over his ass, the electric moment *before* they kiss. As Grey plays her, Baby matches Johnny's sexy masculinity with her powerful femininity. This is definitely a queer film in the current sense, disrupting normative gender roles and heterosexuality.[4]

The only couple I knew of who had what could be called an intellectual femme-butch relationship was in books about the lives of Alice B. Toklas and the modernist writer Gertrude Stein. Toklas willingly devoted her life to Gertrude's comfort and success, but if this was ever the pattern of most feminine lesbians, it is no longer. As I was to discover,

femmes often are not interested in domesticity and are looking for an equal relationship. They are feminine yet determined and more headstrong than submissive by temperament.

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Lived identities are complicated fictions essential to our social function.
—SALLY MUNT, *Heroic Desire*

There is a contentious and sometimes painful debate going on in the queer world about the relationship of butch identity to transgender. I first became aware of this when the female-bodied Brandon Teena was raped and murdered in 1993. On hearing about the atrocity, I assumed that Teena was butch, but suddenly there were voices claiming her for transgender and insisting on something that butches don't do: referring to Teena as he instead of she. (A similar controversy has erupted over the famous author Radclyffe Hall, who used the older term, "invert," to describe herself.) According to the Wikipedia entry on Teena, he began passing as a man in his late teens, and wanted to transition but either could not get access or could not afford it. Every entry I saw recently online referred to Teena as "he."

My first personal encounter with a transman was at an LGBT academic conference, when a good-looking young person who appeared to be butch introduced herself and told me she was going to become a man. Without thinking I said, "Why?" This person, who was then a graduate student, answered, "Because it takes too much energy to be seen the way I want to be seen." A part of me was shocked and alarmed, and the other part knew instinctively what she meant.

I share a double gender-consciousness with drag queens and with transgender people who choose to end the discrepancy between their bodies' sex and the gender they deem themselves to be, and I know how strong and indelible is the sense that one's socially ordained gender is a performance that feels put on. Like transgender men, butches have been the targets of medical intervention—in our case, to correct our grievous mistakes, our impermeable certainty about how we should look and move. My body commits every one of these movement "mistakes"—

for example, *hands on hips*, *fingers forward*—that are used to diagnose gender identity disorder, a category of mental illness listed in the DSM-IV, the shrinks' diagnostic handbook.

The aristocrat Michael Dillon is the first transman in the modern sense that we know about. In the nineteenth century there had been women who successfully passed as men and sometimes had female partners who were the cultural ancestors of both butches and transmen, but the technology of altering your body to more closely resemble the gender you felt yourself to be did not exist until the discovery of hormones and the development of plastic surgery techniques during World War I. Dillon began to transition (which was then called "sex change") around 1939 with the then experimental hormone testosterone and later had multiple plastic surgeries to create a phallus.

As a young adult I knew vaguely about Christine Jorgensen, the army soldier who'd transformed into a woman in 1952, but following that example never crossed my mind as a possibility, even in the 1960s when I first met transitioning drag queens. (It seemed like one more opportunity open to men and not to women.) But beginning in the 1990s the option of renouncing womanhood and becoming, (or, as is now said, affirming being) a man has opened to many more female-bodied people. Quite a few have been former masculine lesbians, including a number of my students, which has raised the alarm from many lesbians that "we are losing our butches!"

Hostility to me as a lesbian is now greatly reduced, but my gender presentation remains problematic. I am still called "sir" in public, and in women's bathrooms I get strange looks or am even challenged, including once at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Why, then, do I still identify as butch? Why not transition?

Generational and autobiographical factors are the most important reasons. As a child I did not think of myself as a girl trapped in a boy's body. I knew full well that I was not a boy, perhaps because I had wished that I were one so intensely. Recently I saw the excellent PBS Frontline film *Growing Up Trans*. The option of blocking puberty with hormones has become medically available, and the filmmakers captured the viewpoints of the conflicted parents and doctors in the face of determined children who, thanks to mass media and the Internet, already called themselves trans. I had to face the fact that I was seeing myself

in these children and realized that if I were a child now, I likely would have wanted that testosterone.

In my childhood, though, I was OK with a body that was healthy, capable, and strong. What I hated was compulsory girlhood and the inferior everything status of my gender. I think that most girls share these feelings, but there are varied ways to deal with the disadvantages of girlhood, including within the femininity I rejected.

Puberty was drastically worse. Now I hated both being a girl in a man's world that was basically hostile to women and those parts of my body that to me were girliest: having a period and breasts. (The cessation of the former has been one of the benefits of old age. As to the latter, until recent years it would have been impossible to talk some surgeon into removing healthy breasts.)

Later I was swept up in feminism, the gay liberation movement, and lesbian feminism, which changed my relationship to my gender because (after a struggle against homophobia) these movements expanded the boundaries of womanhood to include me. Up to that point, despite being raised almost exclusively by women and going to a girls' camp, I felt attraction to but little solidarity with other females. My interests and persona seemed to diverge so radically from theirs. But since feminism, I no longer wanted to be part of dominant masculinity. Young people do not see being butch as "transgressive," but lesbians challenge the gender hierarchy just as much, or more, by *staying* women. I am opposed to pressure being put on masculine girls and women to "go all the way" by transitioning, just as I dislike any one-upsmanship over who is or is not more butch.

In my experience, the majority of people who become transmen were younger than forty when they made that decision. I do know one butch lesbian who, in her sixties and only after her elderly mother died, became a man. But for the majority of butches of my generation, "that ship had sailed," as my friend Gayle Rubin, the great butch intellectual, said. After sixty-five, most people don't want major surgery for any reason except in matters of life and death. You are glad your body is recognizable to medical personnel while hoping that, in the future, trans men and women will be treated better by doctors and nurses.

Will transmen supplant butches entirely? We have no way of knowing. Just as butch and femme have evolved, the trans movement as it

Self-portrait,
around 2012.

matures will also. Perhaps butch and trans will merge into a broader or changed definition of female masculinity. Or of trans masculinity. Or of gender queer. Already, older terms such as "transsexual" and "sex change" are passé, and people with more varied self-definitions are asserting themselves. Some see themselves as men, and others see themselves as transmen, whether they have had surgery or not.

So far, butch as a way to understand yourself and be in the world has survived. Ellen Lewin, another dear friend who is a lesbian feminist academic, summed up her political, sexual, and aesthetic reasons for preferring to partner with butches this way: "I like a girl in boy's clothing."

PROLOGUE

Coming out stories have long been important to queer narratives, and so I invite you to see me as a freshman in college, in a dorm room in Mary Markley Hall at the University of Michigan in the spring of 1959. This first sexual encounter with a woman was bizarrely wonderful and so scary. If Betty Silver, as I'll call her, had not existed, I would not have been able to make her up.

A skinny blonde girl named Shirley Walton and I were assigned as roommates, we speculated because we both smoked. We seemed to have nothing else in common. For fifty-six years we remained best friends until the cigarettes we both had loved did us in. Shirley died of lung cancer three years ago. I subsequently was stricken with asthma and COPD.

Shirley was originally from a small town in Washington State, but her middle-management father's corporation had moved the family to Evanston, Illinois, north of Chicago. We'd both spent our high school years in plushy, privileged suburbs that we hated. Shirley's older sister had belonged to a sorority, and she was expected to join it.

I didn't even try to rush the sororities and couldn't face college mixers, but when Shirley arranged blind dates, I accepted. The fraternity men bored me, but I liked double dates with Shirley because we could hash them over afterward. A thirtyish bisexual librarian, whose impotence I mistook for sensitivity, had an apartment and a Karmann-Ghia convertible. Girls in the dorm were impressed with my older man, and I thought my homosexual longings were safely hidden.

But not from Shirley. Coming from a conventional home, she knew a lot more about conventions than I did. She never understood my wanting to be like everyone else. My New York background fascinated her. I was an oddity trying to pass for normal, while she was a conventional girl run wild. For instance, in high school she had been arrested in a car, making out with a black classmate, and her horrified parents had to bail her out. After she was rejected by the sorority, Shirley took to wearing bohemian black and hanging around the student union, where the graduate students and kids outside the Greek circuit gathered.

"Have you ever met a lesbian?" she asked me one night in our dorm room.

I put my hand over my mouth to hide a crazy smile. My chest tightened.

"You have!" she pounced. "Come on, admit it."

"No," I said weakly. How had she come up with this? We had already discussed—down to the size of their sex organs—several men I'd dated.

"You're lying," Shirley said matter-of-factly. "I've just met one." She'd been sitting in the Union with some of the art students and met Betty Silver—or, as Shirley described her, "A real weirdo who everyone says is a lesbian."

I asked her whether Betty looked like a man. Since reading *The Well of Loneliness* I knew that lesbians were women who should have been men, and looked it, like I would if it weren't for my vaguely bouffant hair and clumsily applied lipstick.

Shirley shook her head emphatically. "She doesn't look anything like a man. She's very sexy. Stacked. And she wears tons of black eye makeup."

"So how could you tell she was one?"

"The kids swear Betty Silver even boasts about it." Shirley stubbed out her cigarette and picked at some cracked red nail polish on her left hand. "I thought you'd be interested. Don't you even want to meet her?"

"Why should I?" I sat down at my desk, facing the cinderblock wall, so Shirley couldn't see my face. Our room was the size of a walk-in closet.

"You don't have to be so fucking defensive." I could hear her lighting another cigarette, and automatically I did, too. The silence stretched out, accusing. Was I going to lose her friendship now? She had listened sympathetically to the edited version of my high school breakdown. Having rejected the school, my mother, and the bland weather and smug wealth of the California suburb made me worthwhile in her eyes. But lesbian tendencies were just disgusting, I knew. That others might find them titillating was way over my head. Dating men was cool; sneaking around the curfew in our women's dorm to spend the night with them was being grown-up.

But finally curiosity and hope overcame fear, and I stopped by the Student Union cafeteria, picking Shirley out from a group of older-looking students by her bleached blond hair. Books, sketchpads, ashtrays, and coffee mugs covered the wooden surface of the table.

"What are you doing here?" Shirley smirked.

"Lost my meal ticket, OK? Just lend me some money."

She handed over her change purse. Everyone was watching a game show on black-and-white TV. Shirley didn't introduce me to the others, but I knew they were the wild crowd she'd been running with by their black turtlenecks and an unshaven, uncombed air that shouted "bohemian" against the crew cuts and khakis at every other table.

After a while Shirley dug her elbow into my ribs. "Hey look," she whispered. "That's her."

"Who?" But I knew.

"Betty Silver, over there. Staring a hole right through you."

The cafeteria, the size of a bus station, was crowded, but Betty Silver was unmistakable. Dressed all in black, even black tights, colored beads cascading over a large bust. Betty Silver. Was she really staring at me? Her eyes were almost lost in rings of black eyeliner.

"God, she looks like a raccoon," I sniggered defensively.

"Stop giggling, you jerk," said Shirley. "She's going to come over."

Betty Silver had a nervy stare and a sexy smile as if she were acting in a lesbian movie that didn't exist yet. After all, she was an artist, and they are visionary. As she threaded her way through the tables, I bent intently over my cold cheeseburger. Betty pulled a chair over from another table and squeezed brazenly between Shirley and me. Although I jerked away as our thighs touched, I knew then that she was going to seduce me, that Betty had seen right into me and knew I was "that way."

"Do you mind if I sit here?" Betty asked in a low, breathy voice. Marilyn Monroe crossed with Lauren Bacall. An unlit cigarette dangled between her fingers. Could she be waiting for me to light it? A forbidden act, like wanting to carry a girl's books, something I had never dared. A naughty smile played over Betty's lips. I felt in the pocket of my oversized man's white shirt, then in style, and came up with some ratty paper matches. My hands were shaking, and the matchbook dropped onto the sticky floor. Betty was still waiting, and all eyes were on her. "Give me a light," she said to a guy with a thin beard and pimples who deftly snapped open a Zippo.

"Betty's been up to some tricks," he announced. "This girl's been giving the art school a name. . . . I won't say what kind, 'cause there are freshmen here." Everyone snickered.

"Asshole, you're just jealous," Betty replied indolently. She seemed composed to the point of being completely indifferent. Later I realized she had been high, but until she introduced me to it I had never heard of marijuana. She had a cute little round face, framed by a cap of straight brown hair. But her large green eyes and husky voice gave her such airs! One of those bad glamour queens who drive men to desperation.

"Where's that photographer you've been hanging around with?" the Zippo boy asked. "The one with the crew cut?"

"He got to be a bore." Betty blew a perfect smoke ring. "Wanted to marry me. *In church!* Can you imagine?"

"Uh-uh. My imagination can't keep up with you."

"I liked the idea of the wedding dress," she mused. "All white, with a train. But," she waved one hand languidly in the air flashing several silver rings, "I just couldn't see myself in the part."

So she isn't one, I thought, both relieved and disappointed. As I pulled my books together to leave, her other hand slid down my leg under the table. She introduced herself to me as if her hand weren't stroking my thigh. We exchanged a few stilted words about our dorms, studies, and hometowns. She came from a wealthy Detroit suburb.

"I've got some errands this afternoon," she said abruptly. "Want to come with me?" I was already fifteen minutes late for my zoology class. The bohemians still at the table were staring. I stood up in a trance, whispering to Shirley, "Make yourself scarce this afternoon, OK?"

Betty's only errand was the loss of my lesbian abstinence. We walked back to my dorm. Nothing was said, not one word. I had the presence of mind to lock the door behind us. It would look suspicious, if anyone knocked, but better that than someone walking in on us. We would be instant pariahs. Get kicked out of school. My life would be ruined. And I was still going to do this.

Betty took off her colored beads, strand by strand, and laid them on the bureau top. Too excited and scared to speak, I wondered what I should do. How should I act? The boys I'd known were clumsy, the librarian with the sporty car more talkative than hot. Clark Gable never got beyond the kiss.

She broke the silence. "Have you ever slept with a girl before?"

I shook my head no, thinking she'd know if I lied.

She pulled her sweater over her head, revealing a small, plump torso

and a large, well-filled black bra. "The moment I saw you, I thought, 'Now there's a cute butch.'"

I had never heard the word "butch" before and could only guess at its meaning. I still stood frozen. Although I had pulled the vinyl curtains, there was still plenty of light. Wasn't sex supposed to happen at night, in the dark? Betty didn't do anything by the book. "Well," she laughed, "aren't you going to light my cigarette?" I fumbled in my shirt pocket. Impatient, Betty snapped the cigarette in two. "Come over here. Don't you want me?"

Yes I did. Wanted to run the palms of my hands over the insides of her plump thighs. The ample breasts pressed together inside the black bra. To hear a woman speak to me in a swollen voice—"Oh, yes, oh, God, yes . . ." It was so obvious, suddenly, what I wanted, had always wanted.

Betty tilted her face up as I moved toward her. She meant to be kissed on the mouth, I knew, because she closed her eyes. Between her lips and my kiss were huge black newspaper headlines: "PERVERT." Her face swam out of focus as I pulled her closer. Betty put her hand on the nape of my neck. She was shorter, smaller, so feminine, and I loved this. A moment after our lips met she put her hand on my face and twisted our heads so we were cheek to cheek, facing Shirley's mirror. "Look, look!" she whispered. There were our two young faces—eyes wide with terror and the thrill of it. She still got the adrenaline jolt she lived for from doing something so *Wrong*. There we were, the unthinkable, the abomination: two girls kissing. I squeezed my eyes closed and tasted the sweetness of her lipstick, the fragrance of her breath. "Take off my bra, baby, go ahead," Betty urged. My legs shaking, I pulled Betty, laughing and sighing, down under me on the narrow dorm bed. Peeling up her straight skirt, then fumbling with the black tights. Each move was more taboo, more spine-tingling. My hand felt the intense heat of her cunt. Her legs opened wider as her nails dug into my neck.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "Go on, don't stop now." Obeying her, I'd never felt so powerful. "More, more," Betty cried out with a note of anguish. I tried to wedge my fingers further up, but she didn't open, inside. Ignorant as I was, I sensed her excitement had already peaked. Whatever she wanted, she'd already gotten, or already given up.

Exhilarated and afraid to disappoint her, I still handled her clumsily. She squirmed away. "Wow!" she said, out of breath. "You got it."

What did I have, what did I get? A rush of power and affirmation that had seemed more out of reach than the moon. Betty was getting dressed in an unnerving silence. "Did you come, honey?" I said, thinking you were supposed to ask. With a last look in the mirror, she checked her makeup and fluffed her cap of hair. I waited, confused, my thumbs hooked in the pockets of the women's jeans I'd never even unzipped. "Uh. . . I love you," I offered. Wouldn't we be together now?

She hoisted her purse to her shoulder and strolled toward the door. "Come with me to New York this summer," she said. "Lots of girls in Greenwich Village."

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And so my introduction to the concept of lesbianism (via *The Well of Loneliness*), lesbian sex (thanks to Betty), and gay life (with the "Greenwich Village girls" I indeed met that summer) all began under the sign of butch. In what follows, my father's and mother's stories set the cultural and emotional context into which I was born and became a New York tomboy. My youthful gender dysphoria and longing for women finds a shape in that 1950s butch identity, but massive social pressure and my developing academic career push me into trying to "go straight" and, later, into the gay closet. In graduate school, I studied the cultural significance of female impersonators and got away with it, thanks to a powerful mentor, but the initial failure of *Mother Camp* and getting fired from my first job soured me on academia. Saved by second wave feminism, the anti butch-femme ideology of 1970s lesbian-feminism, though never whole heartedly accepted by me, still led to conflict and confusion in a passionate Parisian love affair. And then, at the age of forty I begin to achieve personal and scholarly coherence in the company of the first politicized generation of out lesbian and gay scholars, we who helped create gender and sexuality studies.