

The Femme Monologues

On Becoming A Dissident Writer

Part 2

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After bravely entering the offices of Upstream Feminist Newspaper, we find our femme heroine labouring at her first assignment, a review of 70's women's music...

I spent the next two weeks holed up in my bedroom with my dad's typewriter. I felt like a wartime decoder, cracking a foreign lexicon.



But then... "You've got to spill some over/Spill some over/Spill some over/Over all."



Another song, called "The Bloods", celebrated menstruation. Really? I knew it as shame-filled and disgusting. Tap, tap, tap, long into the night.

After two weeks of tortuous nocturnal writing, I reappeared in the Upstream office and handed in my assignment.



Fedora seemed surprised to see me. I handed her a 12-page review, single-spaced. She threw it on a pile of paper.

One song was called "Waterfall". Mz. Stimpson, my hippie-ish English teacher, said water could mean The Womb, or, it could mean Intercourse. The song seemed happy, except for phrases, like, "I need a little peace of mind". Was that because women couldn't ejaculate?

After dinner one night, I proudly showed the December 1976 issue of Upstream to my parents. My name - our name - in print!



3 weeks later I found Upstream at the women's bookstore.



My father accepted the paper from me, using only the tips of his fingers. He flipped a few pages and then put it down. I waited for him to say something, anything...

I truly hadn't considered that. I didn't even know how to say "lesbian" in Ukrainian.

My article had been edited down to a half column!



After that, I became Fedora's protégée. My writing became more sensual and more secretive. I wrote a poem about the stereotype of the Ukrainian peasant maiden, in whose image I'd been raised. It was published by Upstream, no questions asked. I stopped wearing a bra. I went to my first women's dance. I kept writing: for feminist journals, for the new lesbian & gay press: Broadside... Fireweed...Kinesis... Rites...Xtra.



Our coffee table was covered with dissident literature from all the corners of Eastern Europe. Shabbily-dressed writers fresh from The Gulag regularly visited my father, hands shaking from the trauma of arrests, prisons, and labour camps. I didn't get why Upstream wasn't on that coffee table too.

...And that is how I became a dissident writer, too.