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LESBIAN NATION

When gay women took to the road.

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Lesbianism in the seventies promised a life of radical empowerment, and women were drawn by ideology as well as by desire.

There was a time, briefly, when women ruled the world. Well, their world, anyway. In the late nineteen-seventies, several thousand women in North America decided not to concern themselves with equal pay for equal work, or getting

their husbands to do the dishes, or convincing their boyfriends that there was such a thing as a clitoris. Why capitulate, why compromise, when you could separate, live in a world of your own invention? On the fringes, utopian separatists have been part of the American story since at least the early eighteenth century—the Shakers, in New England; the millennial Rappites, in Pennsylvania; the Oneida Perfectionists, in upstate New York—and these women decided to turn away from a world in which female inferiority was enforced by culture and law. Better to establish their own farms and towns, better to live only among women. This required dispensing with heterosexuality, but many of these women were gay, and, for the rest, it seemed like a reasonable price to pay for real independence.

The lesbian separatists of a generation ago created a shadow society devoted to living in an alternate, penisless reality. There were many factions: the Gutter Dykes, in Berkeley; the Gorgons, in Seattle; several hundred Radicalesbians, in New York City, along with the smaller CLIT Collective; the Furies, in Washington, D.C.; and the Separatists Enraged Proud and Strong (SEPS), in San Francisco. There were outposts of Women’s Land all over the United States and Canada—places owned by women where all women, and only women, were welcome. “Only women on the land” was the catchphrase used by separatists to indicate that men, even male children, were banned from Women’s Land (and they often spelled it “wimmin” or “womyn,” in an attempt to keep men out of their words as well as their worlds). Separatists were aiming for complete autonomy, and to that end there were separatist food co-ops—such as the memorably named New York Lesbian Food Conspiracy—separatist publishing houses, and separatist credit unions. “We will soon be able to integrate the pieces of our lives and stop this schizophrenic existence of a straight job by day and radical political work at night,” Nancy Groschwitz wrote in a 1979 treatise called “Practical Economics for a Women’s Community.” Perhaps the most successful separatist venture was the women’s-music-festival circuit, with its offshoot, Olivia Records, started in 1973. (Since the early nineteen-nineties, Olivia has concentrated on the lesbian cruise and resort business.)

“The template for this idea of separatism is black separatism,” Todd Gitlin, a sociology professor at Columbia University and the author of “The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage,” said. “The coverage of the Nation of Islam gained enormous traction with Malcolm X. Via him, separatism was in the air. Run a few years ahead and more people were estranged from normalcy—and normalcy was looking crazier because of the Vietnam War. The appeal of separatism is compounded. You have all kinds of versions of this; various forms of unplugging.”

There is no reliable record of how many women were calling themselves lesbian separatists at the height of the movement. “I think it’s quite impossible to say, other than thousands,” Lillian Faderman, the author of six books on lesbian history, said. Different groups had

different definitions of separatism, ranging from a refusal to associate with men to a refusal to associate with straight women to a refusal to associate with gay women who weren't separatists.

The most colorful separatists, although they were neither the most influential nor the most ideologically stalwart, were the Van Dykes, a roving band of van-driving vegans who shaved their heads, avoided speaking to men unless they were waiters or mechanics, and lived on the highways of North America for several years, stopping only on Women's Land. The Van Dykes had determined that the world was suffering from "testosterone poisoning," and they were on a quest: to locate dyke heaven.

They were kind of serious about this, but they were kind of kidding. Or they were completely serious, but they knew it was funny. (They were radical but silly.) When the founding Van Dykes, Heather Elizabeth and Ange Spalding,* first hit the road, in 1977, they wrote a recruitment song to the tune of "Mr. Sandman":

Would-be Van Dykes
bring us your dreams
make them the clearest that they've ever been
give us a sign, like nickels and dollars
and tell us that it's just a matter of hours
till we find our
land in the sun
with killer dykes there, all having real fun
plantin' grains and hoeing beans
please turn on and cook up some schemes!

It was ironic that Heather Elizabeth was singing about the joys of agriculture when, actually, she had just abandoned that life and a previous girlfriend, a woman named Chris Fox. In 1976, Heather, Chris, and another lesbian couple had bought a crumbling farm seventy miles outside Toronto, imagining that they'd create a thriving patch of Women's Land where they could live by their own principles and grow their own vegetables. They had fantasies of gardening naked in the sunshine. Instead, the snow was so high it reached the windowsills. The snowplow passed only once every three days. They had intermittent electricity and meagre insulation. Life was icy and miserable. On a trip into Toronto for supplies in the early spring, Heather ran into Ange Spalding, who was glowing and tan after almost a year of living out of her van in warm places. Ange talked about the anonymity and freedom of life on the road. In Mexico, she said, you could live off the fruit you picked along the roadside. Within a few hours, Heather decided to leave Chris and their freezing, female-only farm behind.

Heather Elizabeth and Ange Spalding became the first two Van Dykes. Ange would be Brook Van Dyke, because she was loquacious: a babbling Brook. Heather took the last name she has to this day. By the time she was twenty-nine, Heather had changed her surname three times, once for each of her ex-husbands. She didn't want any of their names anymore, and she didn't want her father's name, either. Like her contemporaries Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, Heather wanted a name that reflected her emancipation, not a reminder of a past as chattel.

Van Dyke was perfect. Not only was it accurate—they were, after all, dykes who lived in a van—but it had grand potential. Perhaps they could persuade every lesbian in America, in Canada, in the entire world, to cast off the slave name she'd been given at birth or taken at the altar in favor of this tough-sounding moniker that proclaimed, “Your eyes do not deceive you: I am a real live lesbian.” They had a fantasy that a maître d’ somewhere would one day call out, “Van Dyke, party of four?” and dozens of lesbians would stand up, to the horror of the assembled heterosexuals.

Anything seemed possible. This was 1977, less than a decade after the Stonewall riots, in New York, which had marked the rise of the gay-rights movement in America. Any sense of gay life as normal life was relatively new and still flimsy. Until 1961, there were sodomy laws in every state, which made gay sex illegal. The American Psychiatric Association did not remove homosexuality from its list of mental disorders until 1973. (Previously, despite Freud’s belief that homosexuality could not be “cured,” there had been a robust industry in the treatment of lesbianism as an ailment. According to a psychoanalyst quoted in *Time* in 1956, ninety per cent of homosexuals could be healed—and should be, because there were no “healthy homosexuals.”)

But now lesbianism had been transformed from a criminal activity practiced by the mentally ill into a radical political gesture embraced by the women’s movement. In her book “In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution,” the feminist Susan Brownmiller describes a “coming-out fervor akin to a tidal wave”: “I was bewildered by the overnight conversions and sudden switches in overt orientation by many of the activists I knew.” Many feminists who weren’t even particularly attracted to women were drawn to lesbianism, convinced that it was “not a matter of sexual preference, but rather one of political choice which every woman must make if she is to become woman-identified and thereby end male supremacy,” according to the début issue of *The Furies*, a publication put out by the separatist collective of the same name.

The feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson went so far as to claim that her brand of celibate “political lesbianism” was morally superior to the sexually active version practiced in her midst. Atkinson was not alone in this martyred line of reasoning; a 1975 essay by the separatist Barbara Lipschutz entitled “Nobody Needs to Get Fucked” urged women to “free the libido from the tyranny of orgasm-seeking. Sometimes hugging is nicer.” This argument was never particularly compelling to the lesbians in the movement who were actually gay.

Lesbianism—or the pretense of lesbianism—became so pervasive that Betty Friedan notoriously labelled it the “lavender menace.” In a 1973 article in the *Times Magazine*, she suggested that the C.I.A. had sent female homosexuals to infiltrate the women’s movement as part of a plot to discredit it. Friedan was right in one way: the Van Dykes and their separatist comrades had ideas that made those of the National Organization for Women look like an

appeasement policy.

Lesbianism in the seventies promised its practitioners a life of radical rebellion and feminist empowerment. Separatism was supposed to be an antidote to all the altruism that women had been afflicted with since time immemorial. Now, when the phrase “lesbian mom” is a commonplace, it’s hard to imagine a time when female homosexuality was imbued with a countercultural connotation so potent that women were drawn to it by ideology rather than by desire. Similarly, if you are a young gay woman today, it can be difficult to understand the idea of organizing your entire existence around your sexual preference.

The first time I laid eyes on the last of the Van Dykes, I knew it was her before we exchanged a word. She looked like Johnny Cash but bigger, tougher, sitting in a leather jacket at the back of a bookstore in Seattle, where she has lived since she pulled into town in her van in 1980, fed up with driving, non-monogamy, communal assets, radical feminism, and the name Heather. As a child, she used to say, “I’m Hedy Lamarr, the movie star!” over and over, because she’d heard the name somewhere and liked the sound of it. She told that story to a woman named Bear when she first got to town, and Bear said, “Your name is Lamar.” She has been Lamar Van Dyke ever since.

Van Dyke is an unusually large woman. People often stare at her on the street. She isn’t fat, but she’s built broad and stands six feet tall. She has an imposing presence. “If you look at me, there’s no question about it: I’m a dyke. I am gay,” she said. “If you don’t think so, there is something really wrong with you.” She has short, dark hair and tattoos winding up and down both arms, some of which she made herself during the eighteen years she owned and ran a tattoo parlor. I was nervous when I met her.

If I weren’t female and gay, I doubt very much that she would have spoken to me. “Your generation wants to fit in,” she said. “That’s your deal: I want to be just like you. The last thing I want to be is just like you.” Nevertheless, Van Dyke took me back to her house, which has a metal placard that says “LADIES” on the front door and is decorated with neon tubing, bowling balls, paintings she made of bird-people, Chinese lanterns, an old-fashioned barber’s chair, a large purple crystal geode with a crown on top, and a huge sculpture of a kimono that she fashioned out of scrap metal after she envisioned it in a dream. “One time, my mom looked at me and said, ‘I just don’t understand how you ended up the way you ended up—you’re just so flamboyant!’ ” Van Dyke said, sitting on a leopard-print couch in her living room. “I said, ‘Mom! Who dressed me up when I was three years old and gave me a Tonette and had me sing little songs for her friends at her parties? Who wanted me to be Shirley Temple? Who took me to tap-dancing classes? What do you mean, you don’t understand? What’s wrong with you?’ And she just started laughing.”

Lamar Van Dyke was born Heather Elizabeth Nelson in Canada in 1947, and grew up in Buffalo, New York. Her mother was a homemaker and her stepfather, a pipe fitter, “was a very staunch, German, patriarchal guy who said, ‘You will not do this, you will not do that, you will not leave the house.’ We were totally at war the whole time I was a teen-ager. It was some kind of Freudian thing: I grew breasts and he lost his mind.”

At nineteen, she left home. She got pregnant after a one-night stand with a Black Panther named Arnell, and went to San Francisco, where the weather was warmer and the culture was looser, to have her baby—a girl, whom she put up for adoption. “I didn’t really have a lot of qualms about that,” Van Dyke said. “I’d helped my sister raise her kids, so I knew what was involved and I knew I couldn’t do that. It’s like, no: this child’s going to have a good life and she’s got to have it someplace else.”

Heather got married three times in the six years after she gave birth. She met husband No. 1 while she was still in the maternity ward, where he had come to visit another woman. But Heather decided, “I’ll have him, I’ll take him.” He was a psychiatrist running a halfway house for ex-convicts, and Heather stayed there with him for about six months. On a visit home to Buffalo, she met up with husband No. 2, a biker named Skip Broome, who was a member of a gang called the Road Vultures. She showed me a faded newspaper clipping from 1968, picturing her with long brown hair, standing with Broome and his motorcycle, both of them looking gleeful and wild. (Broome was eventually imprisoned for selling pot and ended up in Attica during the riots.) In those early relationships, Van Dyke said, “It was about the thrill of catching them. It was the thrill of ‘Hey, you look good. I wonder if I can get you.’ Well, *yeah*. That’d be *yeah*. I mean, men’ll stick it in central vacuuming.”

Husband No. 3, Bruce Beyer, was a draft resister and a member of the Buffalo Nine, a group of antiwar protesters who were arrested when thirty-two F.B.I. agents and U.S. marshals stormed their demonstration at a Unitarian church. Beyer was facing serious jail time, so he and Heather fled to Stockholm, where they were married in 1972. “No. 3 was about the adventure and hiding out from the F.B.I. and running around the world using fake names and crossing borders,” Van Dyke said. “I was up for that. I thought that was really good.”

That spring, a young woman from New Mexico who looked like Faye Dunaway in “Bonnie and Clyde” came to stay with the Beyers in Stockholm; she was there to attend an international women’s conference. Heather decided to go along. She was exhilarated by the brand of radical feminism espoused by the women at the conference, and one idea in particular appealed to her: that you didn’t need a man. That you could be the protagonist in your life, the adventurer at the center of the story. According to these feminists, the ultimate enactment of this new kind of power was to have sex with other women. Heather and her house guest left the conference eager to try. Bruce Beyer gamely suggested that he might play a role in their experiment, but the

proposal was unpopular. “I said, ‘Uh-uh. She’s sleeping with me. You’re on the couch,’ ” Van Dyke said. She has a big, mad, raucous laugh. “ ‘For the *rest of our lives*, you are on the couch!’ ”

Beyer, who is now a carpenter living in Buffalo, told me, “I remember being in the other room going, Um, I’m not so sure I like this. Getting up and walking around and around this park at four in the morning.” For his wife, lesbian sex was a revelation—her new favorite thing about being alive. A few nights later, Heather brought home a pack of “man-hating dykes from England,” as she put it, and it dawned on Beyer that his wife had new priorities. “But at that time in history the mandate in the antiwar movement was to support women who were trying to find their voice,” he said. “I don’t mean to sound heroic about it, but that’s the way it went down.” He added, “I always thought of Heather as the Merry Prankster of the women’s movement—she brought a levity to everything. I really had my heart broken.”

Heather made her way to Toronto, where she’d heard that there were lots of lesbians, and quickly moved in with a couple who were publishing a women’s newspaper and experimenting with separatism and “smashing monogamy.” Promiscuity “was our final act of war resistance,” Van Dyke said, laughing. “We just wanted to not accept anything as fact and to establish what was real for our own selves about absolutely everything. We want to have relationships where we expand! And everything is wonderful! So we’re just going to let anybody do whatever they want to do whenever they want to do it, and, you know, there’s a certain freedom to that. And there’s quite a bit of drama. When the Van Dykes were running around, everybody was sleeping with everybody. It was chaos.”

As divorced from men and the heterosexual counterculture as separatists considered themselves to be, they did share certain generational tendencies. “It’s so weird that people talk about feminism being anti-sex—as if. As if!” said Chris Fox, who once owned that frost-bound farm with Heather and is now pursuing a doctorate in English at the University of Victoria. “People were fucking their brains out.”

Heather Van Dyke, for example, had a knack for getting women to fall in love with her. Almost as impressive, she usually managed to keep them as her friends and sometime lovers even after she had moved on. Some of this loyalty had to do with Heather’s seductive personal power. She expresses ideas that are technically insane with so much vigor that you find yourself thinking, Well, *maybe*. . . . She was a model as a teen-ager, and, with her shaved head in her nineteen-seventies incarnation, was stunning in an otherworldly way. But she also shared with her girlfriends a sense that liberated women did not limit themselves when it came to love.

In 1978, after a year on the road with Ange Spalding, Heather returned to Canada to sell her share of the farm. On this trip, she found a new girlfriend, Judith. But what Heather really wanted was to be on the road—not so much with a partner as with a pack. The dramatic

potential of a van gang appealed to Judith, and she enlisted her friend Nancy, a woman who was just getting out of a bad marriage. Nancy wanted to share the spoils of her divorce with other women and experiment with a new way of life. She quickly transformed from Nancy, a heterosexual with children, into Sky Van Dyke, a lesbian separatist with a van.

The Van Dykes decided that they would meet in Texas and then head to Mexico. Heather was convinced that they would be able to figure out how to locate or create dyke heaven if they would just contemplate the matter on top of some pyramids. Heather would take Judith, Sky would go on her own, and they would send gas money to Chris Fox and Ange Spalding, who agreed to drive together, even though Chris had been hurt by Heather's departure from the farm, she says, "when Ange showed up with a tan, smoking cigarettes in her sexy way." Chris and Ange did not think of themselves as jilted lovers following their ex-girlfriend on a road trip. They were convinced that their shared struggle to dispense with the straight world outweighed their bruised egos and broken hearts. "Ange and I melded a little over Heather not being with either of us," Chris Fox says. (Chris changed her name to Thorn Van Dyke, because she was prickly.) "I packed up my carpenter tools and I was ready to head off with Ange, not as her lover but as a friend. As a Van Dyke, as it were."

Several months later, Heather Van Dyke sat on the steps of the San Antonio city hall with her new girlfriend (Judith Van Dyke) and watched in awe as her two previous lovers, Thorn Van Dyke and Brook Van Dyke, rolled into town followed by their benefactress, Sky Van Dyke, and a woman she'd picked up along the way—Birch Van Dyke. There were no cell phones then, and no e-mail. It was remarkable that they'd all materialized— "An Affair to Remember" with radical lesbians.

On New Year's Day, 1979, six Van Dykes drove four vans across the Mexican border and headed south, toward the Yucatán Peninsula. When they got to Chichén Itzá, the women climbed a crumbling ziggurat, took one look at the stone altar on top with its charred marks, and became convinced that they had happened upon a site where women had once been sacrificed. "They were clearly burning women," Lamar Van Dyke says. The Van Dykes ran down the steps, got in their vans, and drove away.

Technically, the Van Dykes weren't high, but they were living off the fruit they found in the trees, so there was a general light-headedness in the group. Occasionally, they would camp out in a park and boil a pot of soybeans down to a little piece of tofu or fry up some soysage as a vegan treat. Even thirty years later, the woman who was once Heather refuses to call herself the Van Dykes' leader—hierarchy was considered patriarchal—but she did have a catalytic effect on the group. "I had slept with them all except for Sky, so, if things were going to happen, they would somehow come at me," Van Dyke said. "You know how you can say things to somebody you've slept with in a way you can't say things to somebody else? Well, I could do that with

most of them. They had relationships with each other, but they weren't as intimate." And, in this world of women, intimacy was currency.

In Cozumel, the Van Dykes found themselves adopted by a local woman named Paloma, who ran a jewelry store and had a closeted lover in Mexico City. Paloma had a big house with a thatched roof on the edge of town, steps from the ocean. The Van Dykes thought that maybe they had found their ideal destination, and camped out there for weeks. "We taught ourselves very important phrases, like *Los hombres son puercos*," Van Dyke recalls. "We didn't want to call anybody a motherfucker, because that would of course be wishing something horrible on a woman, so we decided the thing to say would be 'Go fuck your father.' I think it's *Chinga su padre*—it's not a phrase that they use."

One morning, the Van Dykes woke at six to find themselves surrounded by Mexican police. The charges were unclear, but the Van Dykes were escorted to the station, where they waited for hours. "Finally, the police said it had come to their attention that we were acting in ways they didn't really welcome," Van Dyke said. "We're not good for their environment."

There was an intra-Van Dyke battle when Brook attempted to steer the group to Belize, but Heather prevailed, as usual, and the Van Dykes wound their way back through the United States. "We were everywhere," Van Dyke says. "We found Women's Land in North Carolina, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico, Arizona, a lot of Women's Land in California and Oregon. You could actually go all around the country from Women's Land to Women's Land and you met all these other women who were doing the same thing. You would run into people in New Mexico that you had seen in Texas. . . . It was a whole world." It was the Lesbian Nation.

During yet another fight among the Van Dykes over who was sleeping with whom, Heather recalls, Judith left in a huff and caught a ride to San Francisco. There she met the sex radicals Pat Califia and Gayle Rubin, who had started a lesbian sadomasochist group that they called Samois, for the house of torture in "The Story of O." "She hooked up with those women and when she came back she said, 'You're going to love this,'" Van Dyke remembers. Judith was not mistaken: tofu quickly gave way to leather in the vans. The Van Dykes loved the drama of sadomasochism, the way it gave them license to play power games—which, really, they had been engaged in all along. For Heather Van Dyke, who had been a kind of lesbian Joseph Smith, driving around the continent looking for the promised land with a band of wives and ex-wives and future wives in tow, the idea of being explicitly dominant—a top, in the parlance of sadomasochism—was particularly appealing.

Characteristically, what was going on among the Van Dykes was indicative of what was going on in the women's movement at large. In "In Our Time," Susan Brownmiller writes about a phone call that she received in 1981 from the German feminist Alice Schwarzer:

She seemed to be saying that someone named Pat Califia, a pornography writer in California, was launching an important new feminist

movement. . . .

“What’s the new movement?” I inquired with interest.

“Lesbian sadomasochism,” Schwarzer replied. I thought I misheard her. “*Lesbian sadomasochism!*” she shouted into the receiver. “It is sweeping your movement. You do not *know?*”

Lesbianism in the seventies had been configured as a loving sisterhood in which sex was less important than consciousness-raising. For many gay women, sadomasochism was an antidote to this tepid formulation. It was permission to focus on what turned them on, rather than what was politically correct, a way of appropriating the lust and power hunger that feminist doctrine had deemed male. “We’d been being egalitarian,” Lamar Van Dyke told me. “And suddenly we were over it.”

Fights about S & M overlapped with fights about pornography within the women’s movement, and the issue became wildly divisive. Feminists “insisted that lesbians should permit themselves only those sexual interests that reflect superior female ideals,” Lillian Faderman writes in “Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America.” “They feared that the lesbian sexual radicals were not only making a big deal out of sexuality, which should be incidental to lesbianism, but were also deluding themselves and other women into believing that male images, fantasies, and habits were desirable for women too.” And there was something to that—Van Dyke calls this period her “Hugh Hefner and dinner jackets” phase.

The Van Dykes put on the first S & M “workshop” at the 1979 Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, to the horror of many attendees. “Festivals offer safe spaces for women in recovery from violence,” Bonnie J. Morris writes in “Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women’s Music Festivals.” “Whips and chains or dog collars in public space don’t suit this goal.” Other festivals subsequently adopted a “pro-healing policy,” banning public displays of sadomasochism which could cause “psychic damage,” in the words of the New England Women’s Music Retreat.

All this whipping and spanking seemed to promote an explosiveness among the Van Dykes: mad fits of pettiness became the norm. One night, Heather became jealous when she heard that Brook and Judith planned to go out dancing without her, so she hid Judith’s dancing shoes. When, later, Judith found her shoes among Heather’s possessions, she retaliated by setting Heather’s van on fire. At least, that’s how Heather remembers it.

“Lamar would say it was the introduction of S & M that sent me off into a much more straight, marital situation,” Chris Fox says. “But I don’t think that’s true. We went on that trip with the idea that we would save the money and come back and start a community that would be self-sustaining and involve other people and do good things for the world. What that trip taught me was that, in the end, people will act more on their personalities than on their politics.”

As Lamar Van Dyke sees it, “I felt like I had been in trouble my whole life for being too big, too loud, too demanding, too bossy, too everything that I am. When I discovered this S & M

thing, it was actually a place where people loved me for those things. It was very liberating and quite a treat.”

After Heather Van Dyke moved to Seattle, in 1980, and became Lamar, tattoos and leather became the focus of her life. She was a kingpin in the local S & M scene and, once again, had her own devoted following of women. One afternoon in 1994, the phone rang at Tattoo You, Van Dyke’s shop, in the Capitol Hill neighborhood. A young-sounding woman asked to speak to Heather Nelson, which completely unnerved Lamar Van Dyke. “There was no reason on earth for anybody to call that tattoo shop and ask for that person—there was no connection,” Van Dyke said. “I just went ballistic. I said, ‘Who is this? What do you want?’ I thought it was the F.B.I. and I hung up.”

At her office in Oakland, California, Traci Lewis, the daughter that Van Dyke had given up for adoption after her fling with a Black Panther, twenty-six years earlier, hung up, too. She had spent a month trying to find her birth mother. “She was so evil when I called,” Lewis told me. Lewis was raised in an African-American community in Oakland and is very close with her adoptive family. But she always yearned to know the woman who had given birth to her. “I imagined her skinny—in a skintight suit,” Lewis said. “Like she was this uptight businesswoman married to some guy named Bob, and I’m just going to bust in there one day and I’m her little black secret.” A few days later, Lewis called Tattoo You again, but this time she left a message using the name that she had been given by her mother at birth: Cherise Michelle.

“The top of my head just blew off,” Van Dyke said. “It was so emotional I couldn’t do anything. I was in here running back and forth, going from the hallway to the kitchen, holding on to my head saying, ‘Oh, my God! Oh, my God!’ I called my friend J.C. and said, ‘You’ve got to help me. You’ve got to call her!’ Oh, I was crazed. J.C. said, ‘Pour yourself some Jack Daniel’s and get in the bathtub and I’ll call you back.’ ”

J.C. telephoned Traci Lewis and asked her to state her date of birth and to provide other identifying details. Lewis thought that perhaps her mother was in a witness-protection program.

“Finally, J.C. called back,” Van Dyke recalls. “She said, ‘O.K., this is the scoop. It’s really your daughter. Not only that, but you’re a grandmother! Ha!’ Well, I lasted about thirty seconds. I just called her and said, ‘Hi.’ ” Van Dyke’s voice dropped to a whisper. “We talked on the phone for five hours every night for the next five or six nights.”

A few weeks after that phone call, Van Dyke flew to Oakland to meet her daughter’s family. Lewis’s adoptive mother, Paula, threw a barbecue on her back deck, and Traci’s friends and relatives came to celebrate the meeting. “They were just so excited,” Lewis said. “ ‘Traci’s found her birth mother! We have to get tattoos!’ ” The next time that Van Dyke came to visit, she brought along her tattooing equipment: Traci had got a fish tattoo on her ankle; most of her

friends requested stars or flowers. It was a relief and a delight, Lewis said, to find out where she came from. “Growing up, I had my own agenda,” she told me. “You know how most kids care if they get in trouble? I just marched to the beat of my own drum. I did whatever the hell I felt like.”

Lewis, who is forty-two, has never met her biological father. She hopes to find him someday. In 1994, she attended the Black Panthers’ thirtieth-anniversary gathering, in Oakland, where she passed out cards with her story, hoping that someone would be able to help. Nobody remembered the man who called himself Arnell, and it’s possible, of course, that he wasn’t really a Panther.

Van Dyke has pictures all over her house of Lewis, who is as tall as she is, and her two grandchildren: Monique, who is eighteen, and Royce, who is eight. Monique is a freshman at the University of California, Riverside, and Van Dyke keeps a photograph on top of her piano of Monique at a prom, wearing a teal dress and holding her boyfriend’s hand, standing in front of a trompe-l’oeil backdrop of a Paris street scene. Traci, Paula, Monique, Royce, and Lamar Van Dyke have been spending the holidays together and going on family vacations for the past fourteen years.

Brook Van Dyke died, of colon cancer, in 1990.** Nobody is quite sure what became of Sky. Judith cut off all communication with her rolling sorority after a fight over a T-shirt business that the Van Dykes had. (The shirts said “Killer Dyke” above Heather’s drawing of Patty Hearst holding a machine gun, and they were a hot item for a while on the women’s-festival circuit.) Thorn Van Dyke went back to being Chris Fox when she settled in Canada after several years on the road. “Now my life is very conventional,” Fox, who is fifty-eight, said. “When I returned from my travels”—in 1980—“within seconds of turning thirty, I started the relationship with the woman I’m still living with and got a job at city hall.” She also resumed speaking to males, as her new partner had two sons.

On a bright afternoon last April, I went to visit the last of the Van Dykes in downtown Seattle, at Speakeasy, an Internet-service provider where she has worked for five years. It is by far the most mainstream employment that Lamar Van Dyke has ever had. It was a few weeks before her sixty-first birthday, and she had just bought the first new car of her life, a black VW bug. Van Dyke also owns her house, but she doesn’t use credit cards. That would cross some kind of line. “I don’t want to be a capitalist pig,” she explained.

She drove me to the Wild Rose, a lesbian bar next door to the former site of Tattoo You, and inside there were fifteen or so women drinking and several children running between the tables. A woman with short hair and waxed eyebrows who appeared to be about fifty came over and tried to get Van Dyke to look at photographs of her grandchildren; Van Dyke had gone on a date with her once, a few months earlier. But Van Dyke was unmoved and the woman walked

away. “I don’t want a wife,” she told me. “I want somebody that I can run around with . . . like Batman and Robin, you know?”

Van Dyke works with men now, and even speaks to them. She talks about menopause and her grandchildren and her garden, but she is still wild, a big pirate of a woman. Regardless of the different people of different genders she has chosen over the years as her comrades, Van Dyke’s primary loyalty has always been to her own adventure. A woman in her sixties who has been resolutely doing as she pleases for as long as she can remember is not easy to come by, in movies or in books, or in life.

“Your generation wants to fit in,” she told me, for the second time. “Gays in the military and gay marriage? This is what you guys have come up with?” There was no contempt in her voice; it was something else—an almost incredulous maternal disappointment. “We didn’t sit around looking at our phone or looking at our computer or looking at the television—we didn’t sit around looking at screens,” she said. “We didn’t wait for a screen to give us a signal to do something. We were off doing whatever we wanted.” ♦

*Correction, July 8, 2009: The name is Ange Spalding, not Spaulding, as originally stated.

**Correction, July 8, 2009: Brook Van Dyke died in 1990, not 2000, as originally stated.

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