PROLOGUE: MASS MOVEMENT

APRIL 4, 1992
SANCTUARY THEATRE,
WASHINGTON, DC

This band is on fire. The lead singer is dancing with abandon, whipping her high teased-out ponytail around, doing aerobics moves, occasionally flipping up the back of her dress to moon her bandmates. The guitar switches to wails of feedback and Kathleen Hanna sings *Silence inside of me silence inside* four times in a childlike voice, never budging from a single note. She stands stock-still, looking plaintively at the audience and holding her left hand to her crotch, a gesture that twists the Madonna-esque virility pose into an act of pained protection. Then the guitarist tears into his chords again and, fed by the renewed clamor, Kathleen is instantly back in motion, leaning over as if she might vomit and roaring *I'll resist with every inch and every breath I'll resist this psychic death*. She screws her eyes tight, pushing the words from her body with visible effort. Tendons pop out on both sides of her neck.

After the song screeches to a halt, she shifts unsteadily from foot to foot and turns away from the audience, pulling her dress down in back, perhaps suddenly wondering whether she has revealed too much.

The crew of girls up front cheer and yell. These are the riot grrrls—*some* of the riot grrrls, anyway. Their movement, if one could call it that yet, began less than a year ago, as a noisy message of female self-empowerment voiced by several punk musicians and a

few of their friends, and already it has evolved into a whole mess of things, ranging from the half-formed to the full-blown. In DC it's primarily a group of girls who meet every weekend to have consciousness-raising discussions about their lives, create art and music, and plan political action. Erika Reinstein stands out: Her motions are more kinetic than anyone else's, her face more expressive. All her features are slightly oversize, which gives her the permanent look of living at an elevated decibel level. She always has her full lips open a bit, her head thrust up and forward, as if she's just thought of something new to say—which she probably has. She's known as a talker, a fearless girl who never shrinks from a spotlight. Recently graduated from high school in Virginia, she's built Riot Grrrl's numbers over the past few months by hopping onstage between bands at punk shows and inviting all the girls in the room to come to meetings. That's how Mary Fondriest, also up front at the Sanctuary, got involved. She's quieter than Erika, bad skin, bleached hair. She reads obsessively—before discovering feminism, her favorite book was *The Fountainhead*. She's been coming to meetings only a few months but in that time Riot Grrrl has become practically her entire life.

"Hey, riot grrrl!" Mary yells to Kathleen between songs.

"What?" Kathleen replies.

Mary throws a chocolate rose onstage. "I love you," she sings out. Kathleen catches the rose in midair and grins broadly. The girls are hawking wares tonight, silk-screened T-shirts and handmade zines—xeroxed pamphlets full of poems, photographs, and typewritten rants. One article begins by asking, "Why is 'feminist' a dirty word?" Near the end of a zine, there's a page with the words I WANT TO SCREAM written in block letters across the top. An unsigned monologue glitters with rage:

> I'm so angry that I don't know what to write, I just know that I want to write something, that I want to say something, that I want to scream something, something powerful and strong to make up for the helplessness that I feel now. ... I want to scream at the guy who told me that women should stop complaining because they already have all the rights that they need. I want to scream at my brothers who read the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue and who watch the Miss America pageant. ... I want to scream because I am just as much of a human being as any man but I don't always get treated like one, I want to scream because no matter how much I scream, no one will listen.

The zines are a dollar, but if the girls—Erika and Mary, May and Joanna, Ananda and Claudia—decide someone really needs a copy, they'll let her have it for free.

The band onstage is Bikini Kill, a three-fourths-female group that recently relocated to DC from the small college town of Olympia, Washington. Bikini Kill has spent much of the past year on the road, building a fan base the way all independent bands cutting their teeth do in the early '90s: piling into a van and crisscrossing the country every few

months, counting on a cassette-only demo they sell, and on word of mouth, to feed enthusiasm.

So far, the strategy is working. Between the band's ecstatic feminist anthems, riveting live shows, varied publications (annotated lyric sheets, xeroxed broadsides, zines dense with typescript), and its charismatic lead singer's affiliation with this nascent feminist force calling itself Riot Grrrl, Bikini Kill is quickly becoming one of the most talked-about bands punk rock has seen in years.

The lead singer, jumping around in a white minidress and oversize T-shirt with an off-center Riot Grrrl logo, is Kathleen Hanna. She's twenty-three years old, passionate and poetic. She logged time as a photographer, a writer, a domestic violence counselor, and a spoken-word artist before she started writing punk songs. Now she's on a mission to make feminism cool for teenage girls. She introduces the next song by saying, "This is for Riot Grrrl," and the girls up front scream their pride and approval. Kathleen is one of theirs, and they are hers.

This concert isn't just another punk rock show; it isn't even just another benefit, though the proceeds are going to Rock for Choice and several women's organizations in DC. It's also a pep rally of sorts, coming on the eve of a major pro-choice march on the National Mall. The riot grrrls will be there tomorrow, as will the musicians and nearly everyone else that's crowded into this repurposed church, three miles due north of the

march's kick-off point.

Before Bikini Kill's final song, Tobi Vail, the band's drummer and sometime singer, stands at the front of the stage in a red dress, fishnets, and sunglasses, and speaks into the mic. "I just wanted to say something about abortion becoming illegal," she begins. "To me, it says that not—not only do we live in a totally fucked-up patriarchal society run by white men who don't represent our interests at all, but we live in a—in a —country"—she's panting, trying to catch her breath or maybe not to cry—"where those people don't care whether we live or die. And that's pretty scary."

She turns around to face her bandmates: Kathi, the bassist, and Billy, the guitarist, tuning to each other; Kathleen, settling herself behind the drums. Tobi turns back to the audience but looks at her feet. "So we're gonna play a new song for you, and we don't know how it goes—"

"All *right*!" somebody shouts. "—but it might work."

Excitement in the front row. Erika and Mary know what's coming. The laid-back bassist begins a three-note riff, over which a friend of the band, Molly, reads from a recent newspaper article attacking Bikini Kill: "What comes across onstage is *man hate!* A maniac rebellion against the world and themselves." Kathleen flails at the cymbals with exaggerated awkwardness, waving her arms like a three-year-old trying to break something. Billy taps his foot to keep track of the beat. Erika's moment is almost here. Tobi is singing about wanting rock heroes' approval: *If Sonic Youth thinks that you're cool, does that mean everything to you?* Then she raises her voice for the chorus, naming that band's iconic guitarist: *Thurston hearts the Who! Do you heart the Who too?* As if in reply, Billy swings his guitar toward his amp to make caterwauling wolf whistles of feedback and jagged bursts of Thurston Moore-style noise.

The chaos mounts. Billy throws his guitar up high, letting it flip over itself in the air, and then catches it. Kathleen walks to the edge of the stage and leans down to the girls in the front row so Erika can hurl bloodcurdling screams into the mic. The two of them share the mic for a second, Kathleen's *whoa-oh-oh* and Erika's virtuosic *EEEEEEE!*, and then Erika takes the microphone and climbs onstage: She belongs there, and she knows it. At the song's end, Erika is screaming nonstop at the top of her lungs; Molly is still reading that stupid article, almost screaming herself, rushing to get through the whole thing; and Kathleen faces the back of the stage and dances wildly, starting with a little-girl sashay and changing it into a stripper's move, presenting her ass in a slow pan across the audience. The girls go crazy as Bikini Kill leaves the stage.

Later that night, when Erika and Mary and the other riot grrrls are back home in bed, and the Sanctuary Theatre is silent, locked tight against the city, and most of the traffic lights have switched from solid signals to blinking reds and yellows perforated by darkness, the clocks in DC lurch forward an hour. They do this in unison, as if suddenly realizing, collectively, how far back they have fallen, how dreadfully behind the times

they have become.

APRIL 5, 1992
NATIONAL MALL, WASHINGTON, DC

The largest women's rights demonstration in American history wasn't going to be big enough. No demonstration possibly *could* be. The organizers knew as much before the whole thing even kicked off, knew it as they surveyed the rally site on the bright, brisk April morning of the We Won't Go Back March for Women's Lives. A stage was set up at one end of the grassy Ellipse, with the White House as its backdrop; the sound system's powerful speakers sat heaped up in towers, their power supplies on standby. A call had gone out for people to come and save abortion rights, but nobody believed they would succeed.

The terrain was bleak. Clarence Thomas, who would cast the new swing vote on an important abortion case that spring, wasn't listening to them, these women and men who would soon fill up the streets between the White House and the Capitol building. Senator Jesse Helms didn't give a good goddamn what they said. President George H. W. Bush, at Camp David for the weekend, wasn't about to change *his* stance on the matter; he had an election to win that fall.

Feminist leaders were openly pessimistic: "I'm going to the Supreme Court and I'm going to lose," Elizabeth Kolbert, the ACLU attorney tasked with arguing *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, told *USA Today*. Not "I might lose;" not "I fear I could lose." The right to an abortion, the most sweeping nationwide political victory the women's liberation movement had won since women had gained the right to vote, was on the ropes. The feminist movement, such as it was in 1992, was on the ropes too. What could one march do?

Still, it had to be done: plan a march, amplify a rally, bring the troops together. Eventually, maybe, it would count for something.

By daybreak the influx was in full effect. Marchers flooded the city, arriving on battalions of buses from all compass points, shouldering into the aisles of packed Amtrak trains that smoothed themselves heavily between pavilioned platforms. The feminist troops emerged, blinking at the sun, with their banners and windbreakers and bag lunches, some groggy and stiff, some energized. Many were already singing, and shaking small tambourines like afterthoughts. But the songs they sang were old. The young did not know them.

College students were streaming off their own chartered buses after riding all night. News media and commentators in the early 1990s voiced constant concern that the era's

youth were alienated, disenfranchised, that they didn't believe in anything—their very moniker, Generation X, seemed to negate any possibility of meaning—but here they were, some of them anyway, roused from their supposed complacency by this new threat to rights they'd thought were safe.

High school students were arriving, too, in scattered groups. One knot of teenage girls scrambled from the subway into the sunlight that morning carrying a huge fabric banner, rolled up around sticks and crammed lumpily into a backpack. Whooping with laughter and anticipation, they walked arm in arm, almost knocking each other over at times, buzzing with the electricity of being in such a massive crowd. They had the sense of being these other women's kindred and at the same time being miles out ahead of them, seeing horizons unimagined by the older activists, who even now were adjusting microphone stands onstage or tuning the electric piano, its wired innards open to the morning, or trying to track down the TV reporter who had wandered away from the press coordinator and now was nowhere to be found. These girls with their hand-painted bedsheet banner weren't famous like Jane Fonda and Linda Carter and the other movie stars flying out from LA by the hundreds. They weren't icons like Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug, who would be together at the head of the march. In some ways, they were regular girls: Joanna Burgess, Mary Fondriest, Erika Reinstein, May Summer, raised in the highway-laced suburbs of Northern Virginia and straining at the cuffs of high school life. In other ways, they were not regular at all. They were sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old, and they were feminist revolutionaries.

Throughout the '80s, as articles came out year after year declaring feminism finished, and as the women's movement suffered national defeats on issues from the Equal Rights Amendment to abortion funding, the feminist movement had faltered, depopulated. Its radical wing, those activists who had always asked the biggest questions, fragmented amid bitter disagreements about sex and porn. In the late '80s and early '90s, artists whose work dealt with gender or sexuality were defunded and demonized, with innovators such as Karen Finley and Robert Mapplethorpe vilified on the Senate floor. As vanguard activist groups splintered and dissolved, the movement's major organizations occupied themselves instead with less controversial—and less exciting—issues, such as the corporate glass ceiling and Kiwanis club memberships.

It was hard to blame the movement's veterans for backing away from the struggle to fundamentally change what being female might mean. The front lines could be a punishing, thankless place; those who ventured there were rewarded most often with ridicule, or venom, or worse. And it hurts to keep losing. For critiquing domestic roles, feminists were labeled antifamily; for calling out male misbehavior, they were tarred as man haters; for agitating to expand the lexicon of acceptable female appearances, they were caricatured as "someone who is masculine and who doesn't shave her legs and is doing everything she can to deny that she is feminine," as one college senior had

described a typical feminist in a 1989 *Time* magazine article on the subject. The piece's coverline was originally going to be "Is Feminism Dead?" but, because a recent cover had asked the same question about government, the editors instead went with "Women Face the '90s." Next to an image of a sculpture by the artist Marisol—a stunned-looking woman painted on a block of wood, holding a baby in one hand and a briefcase in the other—the cover asked, "Is there a future for feminism?" In the article, it was reported that 76 percent of American women paid "not very much" or "no" attention to the women's movement, and that only 33 percent of women considered themselves feminists. People felt either that feminism had completed its work or that its goals had been misguided in the first place, leading only to more unhappiness for women who had been duped into thinking they could "have it all" or brainwashed into wanting to be like men.

Feminism had taken a beating. To survive, it had by and large traded prophetic visions of whole-cloth cultural change for a reined-in, pragmatic focus on access and ratios: how many women in this or that state assembly, how many fewer all-male clubs. But in doing so, feminism had backed off, too, from constituents whose survival depended on the big questions—the artists, the radicals, the queers, the misfits, the young. And a movement that has stopped talking about cultural change is a movement that has had its heart cut out.

True, by that spring day in 1992, it seemed that the pendulum might be swinging back. Hadn't *Backlash*—Susan Faludi's impeccable exegesis on the past decade of antifeminism—just spent months as a national best seller? Wasn't this march shaping up to be double the size of a similar one three years ago? Weren't 16 women—an unprecedented number—running for open Senate seats, and 140 vying for spots in the House? Weren't pundits already predicting that the fall elections would make 1992 the Year of the Woman?

It was the Clarence Thomas hearings, in the fall of 1991, that had finally got folks riled up again. Even women who didn't believe Anita Hill—polls showed about half of them doubted her allegations of sexual harassment—still bristled at the sight of an African-American female law professor being grilled and dismissed by a panel of white male senators. *Washington Post* columnist Judy Mann put it this way: "At a profound level, the Thomas hearings demonstrated that women are not equal, that men still have the power to take away women's rights. They marked a national epiphany, much like the atrocities of the Vietnam War, which turned scattered protests against the war into a mass movement that changed the conscience of the nation."

Commentators such as Mann hoped the hearings, as infuriating as they were, would serve as a turning point. So did political groups like the Fund for a Feminist Majority —whose president told the *Washington Post*, "The Senate has done more in one week to underscore the critical need for more women in the Senate than feminists have been

able to do in twenty-five years"—and Emily's List, a fundraising organization for female Democratic candidates, which more than tripled its roster of donors in the six months after the hearings.

The upcoming Supreme Court case on abortion, scheduled to be heard just weeks after the national march, stoked women's unease still further. Feminist organizations angled to capitalize on this mood. But a reinvigoration of twenty-five-year-old groups wasn't going to change the Court, let alone the whole country, anytime soon. And it definitely wasn't going to be enough to ignite a cultural shift among the younger generation, those Generation Xers who, depending on which newsweekly magazine one believed, were lazy slackers or nihilistic depressives or sought nothing except cheap thrills.

A movement that loses its young eventually dies out. The upswing prompted by the Thomas hearings might be enough to fuel a march and some media speculation on a "year of the woman," but it wasn't going to give feminism what it needed in order to thrive in the '90s and beyond.

Speeches were set to begin at 10. Premade signs, glossy and offsetprinted posterboard stapled to splintery wooden pickets, lay in piles on the patchy grass, waiting for marchers to pick them up.

I AM THE FACE OF PRO-CHOICE AMERICA
CHOICE IS THE AMERICAN WAY

This emphasis on *America* was purposeful. The march's strategy was not to persuade the Court to spare *Roe*—few believed they had a chance on that front—but to galvanize women to elect women to Congress and a Democrat to the White House. Then they'd have a shot at passing the Freedom of Choice Act that was currently marking time on Capitol Hill.

All the Democratic presidential candidates attended the march: Jerry Brown showed up, a contender once again after winning Connecticut and Vermont in recent weeks. Paul Tsongas, who had suspended his campaign after a string of defeats but told people to vote for him if they wished, marched with his teenage daughter. Bill Clinton, already widely seen as the most likely Democrat to challenge Bush in November, surrounded himself with supporters who chanted, "Pro-choice, pro-Clinton."

None of the candidates was given a turn at the microphone during the rally. Patricia Ireland, the president of NOW, addressed the crowd: "We are tired of begging for our rights from men in power," she intoned. "We are going to take power."

The details of this proposed power-taking, however, were not as bold as the applause line implied. No feminist revolution was planned—although, given the fact that the word "revolution" had most recently been seen following the word "Reagan," perhaps NOW's

"Elect Women for a Change" campaign qualified as one too. In an interview that day, Ireland simply reiterated the well-known plan: "If the courts won't protect them, then Congress has got to enact laws to protect a woman's rights. And if Congress doesn't, then we're going to elect pro-choice women to Congress."

Although the right to choose an abortion was particularly endangered for girls under eighteen—thirty-six states had parental notification laws on the books in 1992—the march's strategy revolved around yet another choice that only people eighteen or older could exercise freely. The mass-produced picket sign from the National Abortion Rights Action League told the tale:

WE WILL DECIDE, NOV. 3

It was a fine message, as long as one didn't know, as nobody then could have confidently predicted, that on November 3, women would help elect as president a relatively weak Democrat—one with his own complicated relationship to women—who would immediately be stymied by opponents in most of his efforts to promote feminist issues. The Freedom of Choice Act would never make it to Bill Clinton's desk.

Still, electoral change might have been a fine message among many others—for people who were eligible to vote. But what was a seventeen-year-old girl going to get to decide on November 3? What place did a high school student have at a march that was billed as an abortion-rights demonstration but was really more of a get-out-the-vote rally?

More to the point: When you're a teenage girl who's trying with all your might not to hate yourself, trying not to get harassed or raped, trying not to let bikini blondes in beer ads crush your self-image, trying not to be discouraged from joining a sports team or math club or shop class or school newspaper, trying not to let your family's crippling dysfunction (and the confounding irony of enduring domestic cruelty in an age of Family Values) make you want to fucking *die*, a feminist movement that's mostly about electing new Senators might not be all that compelling to you.

But because you're looking for something, anything, to make you feel a little less crazy, you might go to such a march anyway. The fact remains, though, that if this movement, this feminism, is going to be relevant to your life in the long run—which is to say, if feminism is going to *survive*—you're going to have to do some tinkering, even some large-scale renovations. You're going to have to make this thing your own.

Despite abundant sunshine, temperatures remained in the low 50s throughout the morning rally, and a wicked breeze gusted around the demonstrators who were to march from the Ellipse to the Mall. This would turn out to be the biggest protest Washington had seen since the Vietnam War—over a half million people would fill the National Mall before the day was over. The wind rippled the stage's bright-red backdrop, pocked with

smile-shaped slices to let the air come through; it ruffled the yellow sashes reading "Honored Guest" draped over the chests of the female congressional candidates who stood in a cheery line onstage, grinning and waving vigorously like a row of pageant hopefuls.

Within the crowd, Erika and Mary and the other riot grrrls gathered their forces. A dozen or more young women beat on drums and plastic buckets, swarming and clamoring around their massive banner, which was covered in glitter and bore the words RIOT GRRRLSand CHOICE and a bunch of big Valentine's Day-worthy hearts, one of them dotting the "i" in CHOICE. The "s" in RIOT GRRRLS was half the size of the other letters; it tilted to the side, as if about to topple off a ledge.

Many of the riot grrrls made their bodies into signs that day, writing on their skin with markers. They wrote words and drew hearts and stars and woman symbols on their arms and on the strip of stomach that peeked out from beneath a knotted or rolled-up T-shirt. CHOICE was a popular message for the self-inscribers. GIRL LOVE was another one, deliberately ambiguous: Was said love romantic or not? When you're seventeen, do you ever really know for sure? It was an unfixed catchphrase, standing for the hope that girls could, against all odds, be everything to one another: that, amid the forces of adolescence that turned girls into enemies and rended friendships with envy, girls could simply, purely love each other. It was as much a plea as it was a slogan.

The march kicked off at noon, and demonstrators streamed down Pennsylvania Avenue for hours, a chaotic flux of clashing chants, errant drumbeats, and the odd giant puppet. They passed and jeered at the White House, which looked quiet and vacant, the only visible movement a fountain's insouciant splashing behind its wrought iron stockade. "Hey hey, ho ho, George Bush has got to go," they hollered, filing on down toward the Capitol building, where another rally awaited. The riot grrrls, bored by the standard-issue chants, raised up wordless screams of frustration as they marched.

Spring's grass hadn't taken hold of the Mall yet, and the wind kicked up a massive cloud of dust that filled the airspace over everybody's heads. It hung there, diffusing the light, and it was anyone's guess whether this dirty fog was lifting or growing darker. Onstage, Odetta sang "Amazing Grace," her voice warm and weathered; Cyndi Lauper sang a song she'd just written about a girl dying of a "back-alley job;" and Jesse Jackson roared, "Keep! Hope! Alive!" Fonda, looking in her white turtleneck and oversize shades like a glamorous revolutionary on the lam, announced, "We are here to say to the government: You got enough problems of your own; stay out of my womb." Steinem jokingly proclaimed that she would accept the crowd's nomination for president. She had just published the best-selling "book of self-esteem" *Revolution from Within*; another recent blockbuster feminist author—thirty-two-year-old Faludi—had spoken earlier, at the Ellipse.

The women and girls whose lives would constitute the next crucial chapter in feminist

history were nowhere near the rally's stage on the Mall. They were mixed in among the record-breaking crowd, with their bedsheet banner and their bandmates. But they were closer to the spotlight than they ever could have imagined.

ONE

DOUBLE DARE YA: THE BIRTH OF BIKINI KILL

In the beginning, someone told a girl to start a band.

The year was 1989. George Bush had just replaced Ronald Reagan in the White House; Madonna was getting pilloried for kissing a black saint in the "Like a Prayer" video; an obscure band called Nirvana was about to release its debut album, *Bleach;* and Kathleen Hanna boarded a bus in Olympia, Washington, bound for Seattle.

Kathleen was nineteen years old and finishing her junior year at Olympia's Evergreen State College. Her high school years, split between Oregon and Maryland, had been marked by beer and pot, sleazy guys, big hair, small-scale heavy metal and reggae concerts, and enough of a disregard for schoolwork that Evergreen accepted her only provisionally into its class of 1990. She took one women's studies class, which seemed to have nothing on the syllabus besides Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, but she spent most of her time studying photography in the art department and working in the college darkroom developing film for the student newspaper.

She was going to Seattle to meet her hero, the writer Kathy Acker. Acker was forty-two, a star of the literary avant-garde, striking in her bleached crew cut and tattoos. Her work had been a revelation for Kathleen. "I was just writing all this crazy shit and I thought I was totally insane," Kathleen said. "And I got *Blood and Guts in High School* from one of my photo teachers, and I totally felt like, Oh, I'm not crazy! It was such a confidence builder for me. I wasn't even sure what kind of artist I was going to be, like if I was a writer or a photographer or what. But it made me feel like these other women had done this amazing shit and I could too."

Acker's insolent, demanding fictions tackled female sexuality head-on and took an ax to literary form. In *Blood and Guts in High School*, the 1978 novel that got Kathleen hooked, a young girl begs her father for sex, joins a gang, has two abortions, and goes to a Contortions concert—all in the first forty-three pages. The story is told in a fragmented, deadpan way, through shifting points of view and collage: fairy tales, scripts, poems, line drawings of men's and women's genitals, pages from a Persian-

language workbook. *Blood and Guts* suggested that the realities of women's lives, especially with regard to sexuality and abuse, were too complicated to be told through typical narrative. Only contradictions, ruptures, and refusals stood a chance of conveying the truth.

We don't hate, understand, we have to get back. Fight the dullness of shit society. Alienated robotized images. Here's your cooky, ma'am. No to anything but madness.

Kathleen had begun declaiming some of her writings at the spoken-word nights her friend Slim Moon organized at the Capitol Theater in Olympia. After discovering Acker, she stapled some of these pieces into a xeroxed zine, *Fuck Me Blind*, which she published under the pseudonym Maggie Fingers. In late May, when Acker came to Seattle's Center on Contemporary Art for two days to teach a workshop and give public readings, Kathleen enrolled in the workshop, and she brought *Fuck Me Blind* to show the writer. At first it looked like Kathleen might realize her dream of being taken under Acker's wing and nurtured as a protégée: The writer had to choose one student from the workshop to be her opening act at the reading the following evening, and she chose Kathleen.

Emboldened but not satiated, Kathleen called Acker's press representative after the workshop's first day, claiming that she worked as journalist for the magazine *Zero Hour*, and scheduled an interview with Acker. "I was like, any way to hang out with her—I was so desperate, you know? I was there for the weekend and I wanted to pack it *in*." Kathleen wasn't a journalist, though. *Zero Hour* was the publication of the friend she was crashing with in Seattle, Alice Wheeler, a photographer and Evergreen graduate who lived in a sort of commune called the Subterranean Cooperative of Urban Dreamers. She hadn't asked Kathleen to write anything for the magazine yet.

Kathleen couldn't believe how easy it was to bluff her way into a one-on-one with Acker. It taught her, she said, that "you should lie to people to get things you want; you can make things happen for yourself just by acting confident." She interviewed her idol while sitting at the counter of a café in the Pike Place Market. A handful of yards away from steely Elliott Bay, they discussed feminism, sex, and art. But Acker took issue with some of the younger woman's ideas. The pair's main disagreement was over how sexism affected men: Kathleen felt they benefited from it, and Acker argued with force that it harmed them emotionally too; that Kathleen was making an intellectual and political mistake by viewing sexism as an us-versus-them game.

Kathleen wasn't convinced, just deflated. "I walked away from the interview with my tail between my legs," she said. "But I kept thinking about the shit that she said to me. You know how when your feelings are really hurt, or you feel really humiliated, you can't stop thinking about it? She actually did me the biggest favor anybody could have done

me: She treated me like I was really a writer and that I had ideas of my own and that I was strong enough to be challenged. And I *wasn't* really strong enough to be challenged at the time, but it made me *want* to be that. I had a dream of becoming cool enough that I could become friends with her at some point."

Kathleen had a game plan for achieving this level of coolness, because Acker had told her straight out, on the second day of the workshop, what she should do. Everybody had gotten a brief one-on-one conference with the teacher, and Kathleen's meeting had taken a strange turn.

Acker: Why are you writing? Why are you doing spoken word?

Kathleen *(Tearing up a little. She feels it so deeply.):* I feel like my whole life no one's ever listened to me. I want people to listen.

Acker: If you want people to hear what you're doing, don't do spoken word, because nobody likes spoken word, nobody goes to spoken word. There's more of a community for musicians than for writers. You should be in a band.

People never do anything life-changing for only one reason. Kathleen started a band because she wanted to impress Kathy Acker, but also because she had a strong singing voice, which had once landed her the lead in a school production of *Annie;* and because she had chosen to go to college in arty Olympia, where starting a band was simply what people did for fun; and because she and some friends ran an art gallery that had become a place for rock shows, making her a booker of concerts. If Acker hadn't been the proximate cause, something else would have been. But Acker's admonitions did the trick, giving Kathleen not just a push but a lineage, not just an idea but a creation myth.

Kathleen's first band was Amy Carter, named after the thirty-ninth president's once-gangly daughter. Kathleen sang and played keyboard, Tammy Rae Carland played bass, Heidi Arbogast played drums, and Greg Babior played guitar. Kathleen's friendship with Tammy Rae and Heidi, born in the college darkroom, had evolved into a collective in which they got together to discuss their own art and the work of trailblazing feminist artists such as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman. The collective evolved still further after Kathleen had a run-in with institutional censorship. Several months before the Acker weekend, Kathleen and her friend Aaron Bausch-Greene had set up an exhibition of their artwork on campus—not in any great space, just a hallway that led to a cafeteria. Kathleen's contribution included a photostat from a childhood picture of herself, dressed in a bikini and a tiara with a beauty-pageant sash across her chest, a scrawl of SLUTSLUTSLUT roiling the whole background. When school officials took down the exhibition without any warning, apparently in order not to offend some visiting Boy Scouts, Kathleen and Tammy Rae and Heidi decided to open a

feminist gallery downtown. They scored a vacant garage on East State Street because Kathleen had heard that the guy who lived there was about to go to jail; she called the landlord and got dibs on the space. She and her friends called the space Reko Muse and mounted numerous exhibitions there, but they quickly realized that this was not the best way to cover the gallery's rent. What Olympia really needed, and what people were willing to pay money for, was a place where touring bands could play shows. By the summer of 1989, Reko Muse had become one of Olympia's most dependable music venues, hosting shows by national acts like Babes in Toyland, regional powerhouses like the Melvins, local ramshackle pop groups like the Go Team, and a new band in town that played one show at Reko Muse under the name Industrial Nirvana but usually just called itself Nirvana.

Once Amy Carter had a few songs, getting a gig was as simple as the Reko Muse women adding their band to a bill. It didn't matter that Greg was the only band member who had ever played with people before. Olympia didn't require expertise of its musicians, only passion and originality. "A great thing about Olympia is that everybody will clap for *anything,"* songwriter Lois Maffeo, who had a long-running all-girl radio show on the community radio station KAOS, said later. "You could get up and sing some godawful song and everybody would be like, 'Yeah! Good for you, that's so excellent!'"

The town embraced the dorky, the quirky, the strange-verging-on-mad. This was a tone set largely by Evergreen, an experimental state school founded in 1967, where grades and majors didn't exist and classes often assigned creative projects instead of term papers. The college's mascot was a geoduck, a mud-burrowing giant clam and rumored aphrodisiac that wore its thick trunklike siphon outside its shell; the school motto, accordingly, was *Omnia extares*—"Let it all hang out." Before Evergreen opened its gates to the tribes of dreamers and seekers and freaks, Olympia had been a sleepy hamlet at the southernmost extreme of Puget Sound's clan of salty inlets, a town held afloat by nearby logging operations, a modest shipping port, and the seasonal influx of state legislators who flooded the tawny capitol building before retreating to Aberdeen or Kennewick or Wenatchee. But the college changed the town for good. Since there was no dependable rock venue for touring bands until the mid-'80s, a self-sufficient and decidedly all-ages musical culture developed, with small house parties and informal performance nights welcoming to the stage anyone who had something to share.

By the end of the '80s, the town's punk scene was thriving, even magical. "Punk" here meant not mohawks and spikes but do-it-yourself, or DIY: creating something from nothing, fashion from garbage, music and art from whatever was nearest at hand, whether that be kazoos or ukuleles or strange garden implements on liquidation special down at the Yardbird's. DIY was a philosophy and a way of life, a touchstone that set its industrious adherents apart from the legions of Americans who passed their lives—as the punks saw it—trudging from TV set to first-run multiplex, from chain record store to

commercial radio dial, treating art and culture as commodities to be consumed instead of vital forces to be struggled with and shaped, experimented with and created, breathed and lived.

One Olympia artist, Stella Marrs, threw parties where everybody who came *had* to contribute something—a performance or a song or something to eat. Another artist, Nikki McClure, used to take long walks in the woods around sunset, making up songs and singing them to herself at the top of her voice; when she hit on something that sounded good to her, she'd run back to whatever house was hosting a show and sing into the mic, knowing the audience would be receptive. The scene's flagship band for most of the '80s was the willfully unvirtuosic Beat Happening, a shambolic trio that played a messy, barely amplified, childish pop of folk chords on acoustic guitars, sparse rhythms beat out on just a few drums at a time, and snapped fingers; their songs were often affectingly tender (and even slyly randy) ditties about secret picnic spots or dancing with fish at the beach.

Kathleen had loved music her whole life, and she appreciated the permissiveness of the Oly scene. But the cutesiness of the Beat Happening "love rock" circle wasn't her aesthetic. She was more excited about hosting shows by Mecca Normal, a Canadian band whose singer, Jean Smith, fiercely held forth on gender politics over swirling guitar squalls: "Man thinks 'woman' when he talks to me / Something not quite right." Many of the out-of-town groups that played the Muse on tour, though, were offensively bad, with their canned moves, filched riffs, and rote performances. This was not art but routine, and it offended Kathleen, who worked her ass off so these guys could autopilot through their shows. "I did everything from painting the floor to cleaning the grease off the floor to wiping their stupid cock-rock graffiti off the wall after they left," she said, "and picking up their cigarette butts, and spending my own long-distance money to book their dumb bands into our club, and then having them yell at me because there's not enough orange juice backstage, et cetera. And they were just doing boring work."

Her internship was the realest thing in her life. She worked at Safeplace, a domestic violence shelter, doing crisis counseling and giving presentations at high schools on rape and sexual assault. She had started a discussion group there for teenage girls, and hearing those girls talk openly with one another about their past traumas, watching how supportive the girls were of one another, Kathleen felt she was witnessing one of the most beautiful things in the world. It was with these girls in mind that she formed a new band, Viva Knievel.

This hard-rock group had two women and two men, with Kathleen as the singer, and most of the songs she wrote were about sexual assault. In the summer of 1990, one year after the Kathy Acker workshop, Viva Knievel went on a low-budget national tour, playing in basements and sleeping on floors for two months. After shows, girls from the audience would come up to Kathleen, wanting to talk about their own abusive fathers,

violent boyfriends, and incest flashbacks. Kathleen would switch gears from performer to counselor; she'd find a quiet place away from the crowd to listen to each girl in turn, tell her it wasn't her fault, help her identify supportive people in her life, and urge her to call a local crisis line. "Essentially," she said, "I was doing the same work that I did at the shelter." Some nights it felt like every girl at the show, the ones who came to talk to her and the ones who didn't, had some terrible story. Some days Kathleen felt like the only way for her to redeem the traumas of her own adolescence—traumas she referenced obliquely from time to time—would be to keep other girls from going through the same kinds of hell, or at least to help them find ways to emerge stronger. But the sheer scale of the girls' need was overwhelming. She couldn't save them fast enough.

Kathleen knew the facts from her work: A woman was battered every fifteen seconds. Half of all female murder victims were killed by their husbands or boyfriends. One in four girls was sexually abused before the age of eighteen. One in four women had experienced rape or attempted rape, and 78 percent of these involved someone the woman knew personally.

These things weren't abstractions to Kathleen. Her own childhood had been harrowing, and she didn't feel any safer when she got to college. Near the end of her junior year, an Evergreen student was assaulted at the campus beach. That summer, right after Olympia's daily newspaper ran an article about how dangerous the sprawling, forested campus could be, another assault took place at the same beach.

Kathleen lived off campus with her best friend, but they had to move out of one apartment after a guy came in one night and beat up Kathleen's roommate. "The guy woke her from a dead sleep and attempted to kill her," Kathleen said. They had to leave their next apartment too, she said, after they heard the woman next door trying to convince her screaming boyfriend to put down his gun; that guy was acting manager of the building, so he had keys to Kathleen's apartment. It felt like danger followed her wherever she went.

She was haunted, too, by the high-profile acts of violence against women that hit the headlines every few months. The so-called Green River Killer, who had murdered at least forty girls and young women near Seattle in the '80s, was still at large; three more victims' bodies would be discovered in the early '90s. In April 1989, a woman jogging in New York's Central Park was raped and savagely beaten. On December 6 of the same year, a man in Montreal walked into a roomful of engineering students, ordered the men to leave, and opened fire on the women who remained, saying, "You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists." By the end of his rampage, he had killed fourteen women.

Two days before that attack, *Time* had published its article about how most women didn't consider themselves feminists. For Kathleen, that article, combined with the massacre's coming right on its heels, settled the matter: The world was officially insane. Women were continually under attack but weren't supposed to acknowledge it, weren't

supposed to resist it. If feminism's work was finished, then what were all the women at Safeplace doing there? Kathleen knew, too, that feminism was alive and well—she saw this every time she looked at what she and her friends had built with Reko Muse—but the world at large thought it was dead: The term *postfeminist* was already making the rounds. Most important, Kathleen knew that feminism could save people's lives. How could the girls she met on tour possibly fight against what was being done to them if they lost the ability to name it, to analyze it, to see how it was part of a system?

When Kathleen was growing up, her mom told her about the volunteer work she did with survivors of domestic violence, and she took her daughter to a rally where Gloria Steinem spoke. Her mom also subscribed to *Ms.* magazine, which didn't always feel particularly relevant to a still-young girl—for every item like the cover that named Cyndi Lauper a 1985 woman of the year, there were many more articles about the glass ceiling in the corporate world. But by college, Kathleen was well aware that it was the feminist movement that had founded domestic violence shelters and rape crisis hotlines, and that without feminism, women who'd been abused would have no place that took them and their safety seriously.

Now, as Kathleen was conducting impromptu therapy sessions in rock clubs and dingy basements, Susan Faludi was rigorously researching a conservative backlash that tarred feminism as an outmoded idea that had hurt women more than it had helped. Internecine struggles within the movement were contributing to its woes as well. When Kathleen went looking for her activist peers at Evergreen, she found a feminist movement that had been riven for a decade by debates over porn, censorship, and sex work. She attended a talk by Andrea Dworkin on the evils of pornography, and she went to a meeting in Seattle of the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT), but she felt out of place at both events. Dworkin, the intellectual architect of an antiporn orthodoxy that was the most well-known strain of feminism at the time, took the view that all sex workers were victims of patriarchy. Kathleen worked as a stripper, and she considered it a choice she had made freely; she liked to tell people that it felt no more degrading than working as a waitress, and it paid a lot better. When she brought this up during the Q&A, Dworkin's response left Kathleen in tears. "To her, feminism and sex-trade work were diametrically opposed conceptions," Kathleen recalled. "She said, 'Oh! I appreciate you coming out and saying this in front of all these people. And I just want to tell you that if you think this experience has not affected you, I want you to know that it's going to affect the whole rest of your life. You'll be paying for it forever, blah blah blah.'"

The women of FACT went too far in the other direction. At the meeting in Seattle, Kathleen saw a woman who worked at a club she, too, had danced at briefly, a place that she knew mistreated its dancers and was a miserable place to work. But the woman kept talking at the meeting about how much she loved her job, which gave Kathleen the creeps. And when Kathleen and her friends asked questions about how the porn industry

was run by men, the FACT women became defensive and called them Dworkinites.

Art and music were the only places Kathleen saw that had room for contradiction and ambiguity. But even within punk rock, her peers seemed to think feminism was no longer useful. When she met other female musicians on tour, she interviewed them, asking, "How does the fact that rape exists affect your life? How does being female affect your work?" With distressing frequency she got the same answer: "Oh, it doesn't matter that I'm a woman; I'm a musician first." One musician admitted that her male bandmates pressured her to wear a tight dress and lipstick at shows while the guys dressed more casually. Yet she insisted she had transcended gender.

So the punk world was just as oblivious as the world at large. How could gender be irrelevant when so many girls were coming up to Kathleen in tears; when an AC/DC cover band had the nerve to accuse Viva Knievel of being a novelty act because there were two women in the group; when Kathleen and her bandmate Louise were so often the only women onstage the whole night; when they had to open for a band in Ohio whose singer blurted, between songs, "Incest is best, put your sister to the test;" when Kathleen felt a terror in dark alleys behind rock clubs that the men in her band never experienced? What fantasyland were these other women living in?

Kathleen knew only one other girl rocker who saw how much gender mattered: Tobi Vail, an Oly punk who played in the Go Team and wrote a fanzine, the thick and hyperliterate *Jigsaw*. Tobi was a good drummer and a superb writer, her prose a long fuse sparked with little explosions of enthusiasm and celebration. "First of all, I would like to inform you that the Go-Go's don't suck so stop putting them down. YES that means you Mr./Ms. rock journalist," she wrote in *Jigsaw* #2.

> Secondly that kind of thing is just so TYPICAL. Of course if there was ever a good girl band … and they were A BAND … in the top 40 of course it would be likely to get a bad name … because girls + guitars is equal to sex + power … which is something that is not supposed to be associated with women in our culture. It is threatening to the power structures that be. Of course we are told that there are never any good girl bands and are deprived of our heroines!

Tobi had a gift for taking the stuff of everyday life, snacks and walks and little one-off bands and art projects, and making them sound like the most exciting things in the world. She had read the Beats, learning from Kerouac and Ginsberg how a breathless tone and a stance of wild romanticism could transform ordinary goings-on into adventure, everyday life into myth, and a self-contained scene into a veritable pantheon of mutually reinforcing genius. Everything was accessible, everything was meaningful, everything was available to be discussed and assessed and incorporated into an exuberant and revolutionary worldview.

It was a five-page article on gender titled “Boxes” that convinced Kathleen to write Tobi a letter. “I’ve always been interested in playing music with other women,” Tobi wrote in her article. “And it seems like I’ve always been misunderstood and gotten called sexist for it. I don’t know, maybe I’m crazy, but to me it seems natural to notice the difference between men and women and I don’t understand WHY I’m constantly told to ignore that in the context of rock and roll.”

She went on to break down the history of feminism as she’d learned it from a recent reading of *The Feminine Mystique*, and then turned her attention to all-girl bands that didn’t want to talk about their gender in interviews. “I think denying the all-girl label is destructive,” she wrote. “And the thing that really gets me is ‘We want to be taken seriously, not as all girl.’ What does that mean? That girls aren’t serious about their music?”

When Tobi was going to high school in Olympia in the mid-’80s, girls had hung around the town’s teen punk scene and went to shows, but of the kids who participated in obvious ways, by playing music or skating the Lacey ramps, most were boys. Tobi herself had unusual encouragement; her dad, a musician, taught her to play drums when she was twelve, and three years later Calvin Johnson, a KAOS DJ who had just founded Beat Happening and a record label called K, asked her to form a band. This band, the Go Team, was great fun, but she didn’t want to spend all her time with male musicians. While continuing to play with Calvin, Tobi also formed an all-girl group, Doris, with some of her high school friends.

Tobi had been aware of Kathleen for several years. “I thought she was very brave and I knew people talked shit about her, which made me want to get to know her better,” Tobi said. People in town said Kathleen was too political, or too angry, or that she’d converted to punk suspiciously fast. Women in Olympia often referred to their home as a girls’ town, and it was true that many female artists, especially those who’d been active since the early ‘80s, flourished there. But rules still remained for girls to follow, and punishment awaited anyone who stepped out of the lines. People in the scene talked trash about Tobi, too: that she was a slut, a bitch, too cool for school.

Hearing those things made Kathleen want to be Tobi’s friend even more. There had already been a few little breakthrough moments between the two of them: During Kathleen’s Acker weekend in Seattle, Tobi had reached her hand out to Kathleen from inside a sold-out Fugazi show and pulled Kathleen into the venue, although they hardly knew each other yet. A bit later, Kathleen booked one of her favorite Portland bands, the Obituaries, to play a show at Reko Muse, and almost nobody at the show liked it except for Kathleen and Tobi. The band was loud rock ‘n’ roll, and the musical orthodoxy in Olympia was sweeter, cuter, quieter, but Tobi got it. A similar thing happened at a Babes in Toyland concert, with Tobi and Kathleen and another girl, Kathi Wilcox, who worked with Tobi at a sandwich shop: “Everybody was debating,” Kathleen said, “could they play

their instruments, was it fucked up that they were pretty—what are they supposed to do, wear bags on their head?—was it fucked up that she was wearing a dress: All this kind of ridiculous questioning! And me and Tobi and Kathi were just like, that's the most amazing thing we've ever seen."

But none of these things coalesced into a friendship until Kathleen read *Jigsaw*, right around the time that she went on tour with Viva Knievel, and she realized that she and Tobi were meant for each other. Kathleen was doing her interviews with musicians she met on the road, "and I thought, I'll send them to that girl Tobi and try to get her to like me."

When the tour ended, Kathleen moved to Portland, into a house where Kathi also lived, for the few months before school started again. Kathleen was working two jobs, tired all the time. She'd been procrastinating, but she finally decided it was time to send the interviews to Tobi. A friend of Kathleen's had just brought her favorite typewriter down from Olympia, so she eased a sheet of paper behind its cylindrical platen, turned the knob and felt it give way. The paper advanced in measured spurts through the wheels of the machine. She could hear a bunch of boys hanging out downstairs, listening to Cheap Trick and talking about the first records they'd ever owned. Kathleen couldn't take part in the conversation; she couldn't let the boys know that the first record she'd bought with her own money had probably been something by Donny and Marie Osmond —definitely nothing with underground cred. Punk was a society of misfits, yet it had its own set of standards, rigid markers of coolness that she knew she couldn't live up to.

But she could write. "I read Jigsaw and it made me so happy," she wrote in the letter she sent to Tobi along with the typed-up interviews. "I felt like we are/were trying to do some similar type things and I felt validated. I know what it's like to have a girl tell me that she doesn't think it really means anything that she's a girl. I could tell you were nice and wouldn't laugh at me, too much, for writing to you."

Her gambit worked. Reading that letter, Tobi said, "I knew we were going to start a band when she came home from tour." Kathleen moved back to Olympia that fall to finish up some final credits at Evergreen, and she and Tobi got started right away. Tobi even had a name all picked out. A few years earlier, her old band Doris had played an all-girl-bands show that Lois had booked at the Capitol Theater. Tobi ran into Lois backstage and said, "Hey, what's your new band going to be called?" Lois answered, "Either Bikini Kill or the Cradle Robbers."

"I was like, God, Bikini Kill is the coolest name for a band!" Tobi said. "I remembered it forever." When Lois settled on the Cradle Robbers, Tobi thought, *Good, now I get Bikini Kill.* She didn't know that several years earlier, Lois had done a one-night performance by that name, with her friend Margaret Doherty. Lois and Margaret had worn black wigs and "punk cave-girl costumes out of fake fur," Lois said, and they reenacted a 1967 B-movie they had become obsessed with, *The Million Eyes of Sumuru*,

by singing, “Two bikini girls kill one bikini girl, glug glug glug she’s dead … “In *The Million Eyes*, an evil woman controls an army of brainwashed sexpots (in bikinis, of course), with whose help she plans to achieve world domination; when one girl deviates from the plot, two others are sent to kill her.

Tobi liked how the word-pair encapsulated the nexus of sexiness and violence. It also reminded her of the bathing suit’s namesake in the Pacific Ocean: the Bikini Atoll, where the United States had conducted nuclear tests in the 1940s and ‘50s. Gender politics, geopolitics—it was all connected. She sent Lois a letter informing her that *she* was claiming the name.

Tobi and Kathleen rented apartments across the hall from each other, and they would hang out for hours on end, visiting back and forth, trading reading lists, discussing politics and art and music. They found, as so many feminists had found, that two people could be opposed to sexism while disagreeing heartily over the details. Tobi had never given much thought to the sex trade; Kathleen’s insistence that a feminist could also be a stripper was new to her. Tobi’s politics were being shaped by black feminist writers such as Angela Davis and bell hooks, whose books got her thinking about how being white affected her own experience of being female; she was also influenced by poststructuralists such as Judith Butler, who wrote about the ways that gender was actively enacted and performed in relation to social power. But when Kathleen talked to women at Safeplace who’d been beaten by their boyfriends or raped by their uncles, they didn’t care if “female” was an unstable category constantly called into existence through rhetoric and institutions. Kathleen saw women and girls who were being nearly destroyed by men; interrogating categories wasn’t going to change that reality. Still, she read the books and articles Tobi lent her, and Tobi read the art theory and essays on white privilege that Kathleen gave to *her*, and gradually the two friends staked out common ground, arriving at a vision of a cool, accessible feminist movement that Tobi dubbed the Revolution Girl Style Now.

Tobi, who had an encyclopedic knowledge of punk history, turned Kathleen on to some of the genre’s most famed gender rebels, Darby Crash of the Germs and Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex. Crash was a queer man in the early LA scene who burned out fast; Poly Styrene was a woman who came to prominence during a moment in British punk, in the late ‘70s, when bands of women making sonically diverse, bluntly experimental music were all the rage: the Slits, Young Marble Giants, the Raincoats. Alongside these groups, X-Ray Spex landed several saxophone-embroidered punk hits that addressed gender, at times head-on: “Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard,” Styrene pronounced in clipped, sarcastic tones at the outset of one such track, before she howled the song’s titular retort: “But I say, Oh bondage, up yours!” Her vocal lines—though it’s not accurate to call them *lines*, exactly; her voice was more like a tattooer’s needle, jabbing repeatedly at a single spot—left lasting impressions:

Bind me tie me chain me to the wall!
I wanna be a slave to you all!
Oh bondage up yours!
Oh bondage no more!

One would never know it by looking at the punk bands that made up the genre's canon in 1990, when Bikini Kill got started—Black Flag, the Clash, the Sex Pistols, the Ramones —but the early history of punk rock was full of memorable women, in the United States as well as Britain. New York had Patti Smith, Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, and post-punk dance bands Y Pants and ESG. The late-'70s LA scene had been even more gender-balanced: Exene Cervenka of X and Alice Bag of the Bags were magnetic performers, and the Bangles and the Go-Go's cut their teeth in that scene before cleaning up their sound to go mainstream. Even in Washington, DC, in the early '80s, where the teenage band Minor Threat was seeding the shouty, sinewy, overwhelmingly male hardcore sound, the all-female group Chalk Circle paid tribute to European bands like Kleenex and the Au Pairs.

So it wasn't as if punk had always been a male-dominated domain; far from it. But as the '80s drew on, hardcore became the dominant sound of punk. Its simple musical conventions were easy for untrained teens to imitate; its penchant for louder-faster-harder performances and frenetic slam dancing were catnip for boys anxious to blow off adolescent steam. The concerts' mosh pits, flurries of flying elbows and wandering hands, drove most girls to the sidelines or out of the scene altogether. Not that other options were any better. Turning on MTV in the mid-'80s meant being hit with video after video of male performers mugging amid cleavage shots, ass shots, phalanxes of inert robotic models.

By the fall of 1990, punk and mainstream rock were both on the cusp of enormous change, and Kathleen and Tobi were at the epicenter of that shift. Tobi was dating Kurt Cobain, who lived in Olympia and, having released one album on Seattle's still-small Sub Pop Records, was now plotting Nirvana's next steps. When Dave Grohl moved to town to be the band's new drummer, he and Kathleen hit it off, and for a while that fall, the four of them hung out frequently. One of the girls' friends remembers hearing them plan an evening by saying, "Let's go out with Nirvana." After one evening of spray-painting pro-choice slogans on the abortion-alternatives center in town, Kathleen graffitied "Kurt smells like Teen Spirit" on the guitarist's bedroom wall. "I was just super drunk and had seen the deodorant at the store and thought the name was hilarious," Kathleen explained. "There's no big story besides I was being a drunk idiot." Even though Cobain and Tobi were in love, he broke up with her later that fall. He then wrote a set of heartbroken songs (arguably about her) for the album they were working on—an album that would also include the song Kathleen helped name before it was composed.

The boys of Nirvana had their hearts set on fame and stardom, which made them unusual in Olympia, as did their polished, anthemic sound, all brawny power chords and cataclysmic drumming. Tobi was particularly critical of her friend's designs on success; she had nothing but scorn for "lame career-goal bands," which to her defeated the anticonsumerist raison d'etre of punk rock.

Whatever: Tobi and Kathleen had a band of their own to worry about. They knew from the beginning that Bikini Kill was going to be something special, not a feint at the Top Ten or at bourgeois stability. They had plotted it out carefully in strategy sessions: Their band was going to be a revolution. They would settle for nothing less.

Tobi thought Kathi would make a good third member of Bikini Kill. The cool, sophisticated film student, who had been Kathleen's housemate in Portland and Tobi's co-worker at the sandwich shop, had just moved back to Olympia. Though she'd never been in a band before, she had played clarinet, violin, and piano while growing up, and she was game to learn guitar and bass. The three of them gathered that fall in Tobi's practice space, a garage on the west side where she kept drums and amps and a PA for vocals, and they got started.

"I remember being nervous," Kathleen said, "but thinking I was on a total fucking mission, so I was just gonna fake my way through this 'being in a band' thing. I liked playing music with them from the start. I felt like I could write whatever I wanted, and they were really into the fact that I always showed up with a file folder full of poems and lyrics and stuff. I felt appreciated and also like the sky was the limit."

Tobi shared that sense of possibility. "So really, NOW, more than ever feels like something is happening bandwise here," Tobi wrote in *Jigsaw* #3. "Maybe it has a lot to do with being excited about my NEW band, BIKINI KILL. Not only is BK and Revolution Girl Style Now ready to indoctrinate the universe but there is one big time explosion of bands happening." She listed a few, and ended the list with "Bikini Kill Bikini Kill Bikini Kill!!! Yeah."

At the early practices, Kathi and Kathleen took turns playing bass. None of the girl guitarists they auditioned that winter felt right, but they started playing parties anyway, as a three-piece; before they had written enough songs to play all originals, they filled out their sets with covers of "Judy Is a Punk" by the Ramones and "The American in Me" by the Avengers.

By Valentine's Day, when the trio played a show at the North Shore Surf Club, they had already devised a tight and arresting set, including many songs that would stay in their repertoire for years: "Liar," "Feels Blind," "This Is Not a Test," and the statement of purpose "Double Dare Ya." Kathi had taken quickly to the bass, her slender violinist's fingers so long and agile there seemed to be an extra knuckle in there someplace. Tobi's playing had the casual heft that drummers who've played since childhood often have, giving the impression that each muscular fill and cymbal crash so naturally belongs right

there that it scarcely takes any work to nail it. Her sticks floated like magic wands around her set, her upper body nearly motionless except for her arms.

Kathleen cut a fearsome figure onstage. With her pale skin, jetblack bob, and faded black T-shirt, she looked stark before she even opened her mouth. Singing, she became utterly magnetic. "Dare you to do what you want!" she roared, her entire torso rising with each breath before she bore down on the next line. "Dare you to be who you will!" Every muscle in her body drawn stick-taut, her eyes clenched shut, Kathleen danced like a convulsion, like she was trying to throw up or shake her skin from her bones. Her face blared rage, disgust, baleful accusation. A ferocious scowl erased the arch from her eyebrows. During a two-bar break in "Double Dare Ya," her gaze darted to the right and her mouth froze into a sneer as she marched in place, getting into repugnant character for the next verse—

Don't you talk out of line
Don't go speaking out of your turn
Got to listen to what the fuckin' man says

—before turning again into the infuriated, manic playground provocateuse of the chorus—

Double dare ya!
Double dare ya!
Double triple fuckin' triple fuckin' dare ya!

—casting feminist self-assertion as something one might do to avoid being shamed by a cooler, tougher girl. This was how girls spurred each other in youth to take dangerous risks; in adolescence, Kathleen wagered, it might move girls to save their own lives.

Despite its power, the three-piece lineup was limited. Again, Tobi had someone in mind: her sometime Go Team-mate Billy Karren had just moved back to Olympia from San Francisco. The lanky, good-natured boy was, Tobi said, "the best guitarist I knew;" most of his friends were girls, and he identified as a feminist and a revolutionary. Bikini Kill, tired of auditioning guitarists, was ready to compromise on the initial idea of having an all-girl group. As soon as Billy plugged in and started filling in the gaps of what the girls had written, the whole sound fell into place. They had their band.

Throughout the spring of '91, Bikini Kill played shows in Olympia and around the Northwest, but they were perplexed at how few people seemed to recognize their greatness. "Nobody in Olympia gives a shit about us," Kathleen lamented in an interview that year. "There's like five or six girls who go to all of our shows and stand in the front and support us. Other people are pretty apathetic to us."

Sometimes the reactions went beyond indifference. Nobody talked smack directly to Kathleen, but things would get back to her. "Why is she dancing like that?" her friend Allison Wolfe heard someone say about Kathleen at a Bikini Kill show. "Does she have to pee?" One time, a guy Kathleen was friends with asked Billy what it was like to be in a band with a bunch of "militant feminists." Kathleen was devastated when Billy relayed the anecdote; she'd thought this other guy was supportive, she'd even trusted him a little, and behind her back he was turning her passion into a punch line. She found it harder and harder to talk to anyone: Even if they were nice to her face, they might turn right around and shit-talk her. She holed up in her apartment, seldom leaving except to go to band practice. There were a lot of band practices, anyway; since she and Kathi were both new to playing rock instruments, the band logged long stints in the practice space, rehearsing several days a week for two to four hours at a time.

Bikini Kill's big chance to get out of town was coming up. Tobi had struck up a friendship with the DC punk band Nation of Ulysses, who invited Bikini Kill to tour across the country with them in June. To Tobi, Nation of Ulysses represented the future of punk rock. "They were political aesthetically, in an art-theory kind of way," she said, "and I was really drawn to that. They had an agenda, and they were deliberately creating a mythology." Against the classic punk stance of blanket opposition—the all-encompassing nihilism of the Sex Pistols' Antichrist—this gang of lean, stylish boys, who wore tight high-water pants and played a jazz-inflected chaospunk, counterpoised a gleeful energy of youthfulness and action. "Their intention," read the band's zine, *Ulysses Speaks*, skating a slender line between earnestness and parody, "is against dissipation, and for focus, transforming a simple space simultaneously into the fallow field universe of pregnant possibility, and the lush ripened mango of violence and petulant behavior."

Punks had long called for smashing the state, but in a city where advocating statehood was a radical act, Nation of Ulysses festooned its stages with a DC flag, the red stars and red bars against a white background acquiring the celebratory, propagandistic starkness of Russian Constructivist poster art. The face in profile gazing strongly into the future, as the stripes radiated from his head like rays of a blood-dawn sun, belonged to the band's singer, Ian Svenonius, a hyperactive art-school dropout in modish suit and tie who fervently spat aphorisms as if he'd swallowed a Little Red Book, chased it with a little blue pill, and was experiencing a euphoric bout of reflux. In performance, he yowled and twitched, testified and reeled, and fell to the floor in spasms: preacher, prophet, nut.

The boys of Ulysses liked to proclaim that their city was on the verge of becoming a youth mecca—"like San Francisco in the '60s," Svenonius had predicted the previous year in *Sassy*, when the cool girls' magazine had crowned him 1990's Sassiest Boy in America. And the members of Bikini Kill were open to persuasion. When they left on tour in June, they were actively seeking a new home base for the coast-to-coast

revolution they planned to start: It would be as irresistible as Ulysses' quasi-Pentecostalist quasi Futurism, yet grounded, too, in feminist theory and the realities of girls' lives. DC seemed to have the strongest claim on Bikini Kill's future, but they couldn't make any decisions until they had seen the city for themselves.

TWO

COME OUT AND PLAY WITH ME: BRATMOBILE BEGINS

The girl down the hall was just about the most terrifying girl Allison Wolfe had ever encountered. The fall 1989 semester at the University of Oregon hadn't even properly begun yet; the students had all just moved into the dorms, and everyone was trying to make a good impression on the people who would be their neighbors for the next nine months. Everyone, that is, except the girl down the hall. Apparently she didn't give a fuck. She was on the pay phone at the end of the corridor, screaming and crying and yelling at somebody—a boyfriend, maybe? Perhaps she *wanted* people to hear her. Allison watched the raging girl as long as she dared. "I was like, 'Who is that crazy girl?' "Allison said. "She just seemed like a force to be reckoned with."

The girl on the phone, Molly Neuman, was noticing Allison, too. "I was like, 'Who the fuck is that? What is that?' "Allison stood out from the other first-year students: In the sea of batik dresses and dreadlocks that tided around the college town of Eugene, Allison wore loud-print thrift-store dresses and plasticframe glasses that took up half her face; her bangs were a thick slab on her forehead. Molly's style was more low-key cool: cutoffs layered over leggings and a wide cloth headband holding her hair back from her face.

The two lived next door to each other; they fell into a friendship easily. Allison, who had grown up in Olympia, introduced Molly to the lo-fi pop music of her beloved hometown bands: Spook and the Zombies, Oklahoma Scramble, and her favorite band on earth, Beat Happening. Molly had never heard music that sounded so easy to make, music that seemed to announce with every note, *You can do this too*. Growing up in and around DC, she'd had glancing interactions with punk but listened mostly to hip-hop and R&B. Rap was in its golden age: Public Enemy had recently hurled *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* like a Molotov cocktail into the commons, and female rappers Roxanne Shanté and Queen Latifah had just released their debut albums, which did double duty as feminist communiqués.

Until this point, Allison had held feminism at arm's length. Raised by a lesbian activist mother who brought Allison to antinuke rallies and founded the first women's health

clinic in the Olympia area, Allison's version of adolescent rebellion was to roll her eyes and declare the women's movement a stodgy, mom-ish, uncool relic. But Molly made feminism sound cool, even revolutionary. She had come to it by way of her passion for racial justice—her father worked for the Democratic National Committee, and through him she had met leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus whom she admired deeply. She devoured the writings of Eldridge Cleaver, had an "epiphany-style experience" watching *Do the Right Thing*, and attended Huey Newton's funeral in South Oakland in August 1989, just before starting college. Her political world had been all about race, and examining her role as a white person in society, until a former art teacher of hers, a black man, had written a letter encouraging her to think about how being female affected her life too.

Molly and Allison became inseparable. Together they enrolled in women's studies courses and checked out meetings of campus activist groups, dissecting ideas and tactics. In many ways, they were an unlikely pair: Molly was occasionally emotive but she was just as likely to project an icy smoothness, leaving folks wondering what she was thinking. Allison had no patience for coolness or phoniness or social conventions. She also had no filters. But the combination worked. "Our union was really fierce," Molly said, "because we both had this sense of fearlessness." They started to look more like each other; Molly, despite her perfect vision, started wearing glasses. ("Fake glasses," she said, "like a goober.") Their classmates got them mixed up, occasionally calling one by the other's name. Lying in their respective beds at night, they would reach up and knock on the wall between their two rooms if they wanted to talk to each other, or just to know the other was there.

They set out to explore Eugene's music scene, but the options were slim: To see good shows, they had to leave town. Neither girl had a car, so they'd post their travel wishes on the campus ride board and give a couple bucks for gas to whatever student or local offered them a lift heading north—preferably to Olympia, three and a half hours away. They liked the way everything in Oly felt ad hoc, with bands forming and unforming freely among friends. Tobi had summed it up in *Jigsaw:* "A band is any song you ever played with anybody even if only once." Most shows took place in people's basements, or even in an alley downtown; a band might run an extension cord out of a store or just play an all-acoustic set. And Molly and Allison liked the way music there wasn't a specialized activity for a cadre of skilled initiates; it was a simple thing that anybody could do if she just put some guts into it. The two friends traveled to Oly as many weekends as they could during that first year of college, spending their days hanging out downtown, seeing bands for cheap or free every night at Reko Muse or at people's houses. It was heaven for people like them: girls who hadn't spent years noodling around on guitars in their bedrooms, who would rather see a tiny show and talk to the drummer afterward than get crushed in a mosh pit at some four-hundred-person venue

with fancy lighting.

The more Molly and Allison went to Olympia, the more enmeshed they became in the scene there. They met Kathleen, who was playing in Viva Knievel at the time. They were in awe of her—"I'd never seen a girl scream like that," Allison said. They got a copy of *Jigsaw* from Tobi in January 1990, midway through their first year of college, at a show at Olympia's Grange Hall where the lineup was Beat Happening, Nirvana, and the beloved Melvins. These musicians knew their rock history, and they engaged it with irony and overstatement: Cobain drew fake track marks on his arms with stage blood that night (he hadn't tried heroin yet, but many people already took the sensitive, emaciated boy for a junkie), and the Melvins closed their set by singing Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World." These knowing nods to rock conventions might have alienated Molly and Allison, but *Jigsaw* was the antidote. Reading that zine, "I realized that there were [other] people with these ideas" about feminism and music, Molly said, "that Allison and I weren't the only people. Because in Eugene we *were* the only people."

Instead of just accepting Molly and Allison's compliments on her writing, Tobi asked them: Why don't *you* start a fanzine? Or a band, for that matter? She was giving the girls something she had always felt from her hometown scene, a mix of cheerleading and gauntlet throwing. "One of the best things to me, about growing up in Olympia and the underground thing here," Tobi wrote in *Jigsaw*,

> is this whole true punk thing of making up songs and just singing them for your friends and how that happens at parties and stuff—just the way that I've always felt encouraged in this one way, that people do want to hear what other people are doing and encourage each other to participate and that whole support thing.

"It was as simple as someone going, 'You should do a fanzine' or 'You should start a band,' "Molly said. "At that point it was like, 'Oh, okay, that's what we should do.'"

Molly and Allison wrote articles for their zine and interviewed bands from the Northwest throughout 1990. In the process they became ever more integrated into the Olympia scene—Allison started dating the singer of Spook and the Zombies, and Molly grew close with Calvin Johnson, who, in addition to playing in Beat Happening and the Go Team, ran Olympia's main indie label, K Records, together with his business partner, Candice Pedersen. Through Calvin, Molly suddenly found herself in the company of scene big shots, including Bruce Pavitt, who ran Sub Pop, and Cobain. "I was nervous," Molly said. "I was really into these bands and all of a sudden we're, like, in their apartments. That wasn't my understanding of how things worked yet. And all of a sudden that was my life."

By winter break of their sophomore year, the first issue of their zine, *Girl Germs*, was ready to go to press. Home in DC for vacation, Molly, who had worked for

Representative Morris K. Udall of Arizona in high school, used her Capitol Hill access to get into his office, and on the copy machine there she ran off several hundred copies of the zine. A winter storm hit the city, and Molly was snowed in alone overnight in the deserted building. Munching on candy bars and potato chips to keep herself awake, and taking brief naps on the couch, she copied and collated all night. When she flew back to Oregon at the beginning of 1991, she had the first print run of *Girl Germs* #1 in her suitcase, ready to be given to Tobi and all the other punks of Oly who seemed to be waiting for Molly and Allison to step up, to do something.

Molly and Allison were also determined to start a band, although neither of them played any instruments or had ever written a song. Molly had started taking guitar lessons, and Allison learned to finger a couple chords, and they came up with a killer band name: Bratmobile. Molly and Allison had both seen the new Tim Burton-directed Batman movie, and Prince's "Batdance" was playing everywhere. They would be just like that superhero pair, only younger and female. And without a car: They still had to rely on the ride board for their travels.

Months into their band-life, the dynamic girl duo had written no songs. "We were a fake band," Allison confessed. "We were all talk." They had worked up a few a cappella numbers, covers of Beat Happening and Go Team songs, and started grabbing the mic between the sets of reggae bands at frat parties in Eugene. Partygoers mostly ignored them, when they weren't laughing at them outright. Molly later described their guerrilla performances as "ridiculous—things that two years later I would never do, once you get some sort of self-consciousness, but we just didn't have any."

Bratmobile might have stayed in fake-band limbo for a long time if nobody had cared enough to call their bluff. But that winter, Calvin phoned Molly and Allison and invited them to play a Valentine's Day show in Olympia. The bill would be Bratmobile, scene mainstays Some Velvet Sidewalk, and Bikini Kill.

At first the girls tried to get out of it. "We're not really in a band," they said.

"But you always *say* you're in a band," Calvin pointed out. The girls, cornered, said yes.

Several weeks later, they realized it was almost Valentine's Day and they still hadn't written any songs. Desperate for guidance, they approached Robert Christie, one of the only musicians Molly and Allison liked in Eugene. Clean-cut and generous, he had been a founding member of Some Velvet Sidewalk and now played in the Eugene band Oswald 5–0. Christie loaned Molly and Allison the keys to his practice space and offered to let them borrow all his gear, but the girls wanted concrete songwriting advice.

"Listen to Ramones records," he said. "You'll come up with something."

Molly and Allison had never listened to the Ramones. "Something in me clicked," Allison said. "Like, okay, if most boy punk rock bands just listen to the Ramones and that's how they write their songs, then we'll do the opposite and I won't listen to *any*

Ramones, and that way we'll sound different."

By the day of the show they'd managed to write five songs. War had just broken out in the Persian Gulf, and the flyers for the Valentine's Day show at the North Shore Surf Club announced its theme as "Make Love Rock Not War." The first song Bratmobile played was minimal in the extreme: two chords on Molly's guitar, two notes in Allison's sung melody, repeat repeat repeat. Molly methodically switched her distortion pedal on and off, paralleling Allison's vocal toggle between sweet singsong and nasal whine. We might be tempted to read something into that duality: a band's attempt, perhaps, to find its own way through a musical landscape marked out on one side by the tunefully twee Beat Happening and on the other side by fuzzed-out grunge? An abstracted etude on rock structure? A comment on girl rockers' historical dialectic between naughty and nice? All these themes were audible in the song. Fundamentally, though, this was just a band learning to write songs for the first time and airing that process in public. Even if the two-piece configuration of Bratmobile wasn't quite working yet, it was good enough for Olympia, because it was a heartfelt contribution to the community.

In contrast to Bikini Kill's haunted, unhinged vision of childhood, Bratmobile's earliest songs heralded a carefree, guileless one: "Come out and play with me / Come tell me who you are / Come tell me who I am," Allison sang plainly, like an eight-year-old in music class. Lest anyone forget that these girls were barely out of childhood themselves, they proclaimed in another song: "I'm not aged to perfection / I'm not stuffed up with your fears ... / I'm a teenager." The kiddie trope made another appearance in "Girl Germs," which announced, in a melody like a playground chant:

You're too cozy in your all-boy clubhouse
To even consider having Kool-Aid at my house
Girl germs, no returns
Can't hide out they're everywhere

There wasn't much to the show, but that was part of what would make Bratmobile matter to so many girls over the coming years: This band made having a band look easy, because what it was doing *was* easy. "Bikini Kill were starting around the same time," Molly said, "and it was like, *'Kathleen and Tobi are playing music together!'*—like they were mysterious. We weren't that mysterious. They were *so* fierce, and we were *so* dorky. And I think that was helpful in some sort of accessibility."

This was already starting to inspire Corin Tucker, a moonfaced Evergreen first-year from Eugene who had met Allison at a YMCA weekend encampment during high school and had stayed in touch with her. Corin was making a documentary about the Olympia scene for a school project, and she interviewed Molly and Allison on the edge of the North Shore's stage before they played. When Corin asked a question about grunge,

Allison stuck her tongue way out. "Aaahhh. Vomit! It's vomit!" she ranted, giggling. Molly allowed evenly that she liked most of the bands on Sub Pop, even though there were hardly any female musicians in the bunch. But Allison, not to be reined in by manners or circumspection, continued her castigation of Seattle, calling it the "Sub Pop boy grunge grab-your-dick scene" and griping that it was all about "Samson with his long hair, and his strength through long hair, and whipping it and lashing it around in front. Sub Pop's shows are really gross, because the girls always get pushed to the back and it's all this sweaty long hair beer belly thing in front. Girls need to reclaim the scene for themselves."

After Bratmobile's last song, as the sound system switched over to an old cut of "My Funny Valentine," Pat Maley, a gentle man (and onetime bandmate of Lois Maffeo's) who tried to record all Olympia's short-lived bands before they dissolved, ran up to the stage and offered to record the duo for free—how about tomorrow? "I thought they were fun," he said. "They were spirited and funny and charismatic, and I liked their stage presence." And Slim Moon, a slender, mustached guy who did spoken word and played in the art-rock band Witchy Poo, told Molly and Allison he wanted to include "Girl Germs" on a compilation he was putting together. He was going to call the record *Kill Rock Stars*, and if it did well enough, maybe he'd keep putting out people's music. They recorded the song with Pat the next day. A few months later, Slim would end up releasing it on the promised comp—and starting a record label of the same name.

The Bikini Kill girls, for all their fierceness and mystery, cheered the new duo on. Tobi put a photo of Bratmobile on the cover of the next issue of *Jigsaw*, namechecked the band repeatedly, and devoted a whole page to Molly and Allison's zine, "the most exciting thing that has happened in the pacific northwest in years":

> Girl Germs is what they made happen in reaction to the male-based-ness of 'the scene' you know, and well its so fucking neato because in their attempt at becoming more actively involved in stuff they came up against some pretty solid boy barriers and they have since left them shattered ... this is a part of their process of creating their own turf and reclaiming the domain of punk rock.

It made them proud to think of themselves as reclaiming that domain—especially since it was hard to imagine they could have much effect on the world at large. The United States had begun bombing Iraq in January. Protests took place in both of Molly and Allison's stomping grounds: Eugene's rallies struck Molly as ineffectual and anachronistic throwbacks to the Woodstock era, just a lot of out-of-touch hippies singing "give peace a chance." In Olympia, some campus activists trained community members in civil disobedience, to prepare people for more militant actions. But even though the Olympia activists' energy and creativity excited Molly—this scene was younger, more

daring, closer in spirit to the Black Power movement that was so meaningful to her —there was no chance that these antiwar protests would make a difference. This was America's most popular military action in decades, and President Bush was untouchable, with approval ratings pushing 80 percent—the highest of his presidency. Allison, incensed about the bombing and its positive news coverage, made xeroxed stickers that said PROPAGANDA, and posted them on newspaper boxes all over Eugene. But overall, trying to oppose Operation Desert Storm in the midst of the sea of pro-war yellow ribbons was a disempowering, alienating experience. Molly and Allison went back to the project they had some control over: Bratmobile.

When spring break of their sophomore year came around, Molly and Allison flew east to DC. Molly's stepmother had just had a baby, so there was a new brother to meet, and DC offered a packed social agenda. Molly was learning that her hometown's punk scene had many close ties with Olympia's. Several key Olympians had lived in the DC area—including Calvin and Kathleen, who both attended high school in Maryland—and K Records had an anticorporate soulmate in DC's Dischord Records, the label founded in 1980 by three punk kids, including Ian MacKaye, who was then the singer for Minor Threat. By 1991, when Molly and Allison made their first joint trip to DC, MacKaye was the frontman of the wildly popular hardcore crossover band Fugazi, whose code of ethics stipulated no alcohol, no drugs, no meat, no band T-shirts or other consumerist merchandise, and no ticket prices over five dollars. He also continued to run Dischord, which was now among the most influential independent record labels in the country. If Dischord's DIY philosophy—it refused for years even to print barcodes on its albums' packaging—was akin to K's denunciation of "the corporate ogre," Dischord's angular hardcore aesthetic was worlds away from K's melodious, defiantly de-skilled, coed music. Despite these differences, K and Dischord had just teamed up (as DisKord) to release a 7" single by Nation of Ulysses.

Heading to DC, Molly and Allison were most excited about spending time with Erin Smith, a dark-haired teenage girl from suburban Maryland who made a fanzine about old TV shows, *Teenage Gang Debs*, with her older brother. Calvin had introduced Erin and Molly during winter break, at a Ulysses show in DC, and they had become pen pals. A devoted record collector from age eleven on, Erin had been so obsessed with K Records and Beat Happening during high school that by the first time she went to Olympia—on a college visit to Evergreen in May 1989, when she was in eleventh grade —people there already knew who she was. "I was kind of infamous," she said. "I had to be the best fan possible; it never occurred to me to be anything else." Creating, too, was important to her. She took guitar lessons and was developing a distinctive surf-guitar style. She had a hard time finding collaborators, though. She didn't know any other girls

who played music, and the boys at her high school didn't take her seriously. When she tried out for the talent show playing her Capa Minstrel teardrop guitar—a more affordable copy of the classic Vox Mark VI that the Rolling Stones' Brian Jones had once played on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—or even just walked through the halls carrying it, boys asked her whose guitar it was, as if it couldn't possibly be hers. Guys would walk past her guitar lessons, admiring the vintage gear she had picked out so carefully, and say, "Do you even know what you have there?"

She later described her pre-Bratmobile existence as being "in my room playing my electric guitar to my Beat Happening records all by myself." But there was something generative in that: "I think that was a really important thing that fueled all of us, was this kind of isolation," she said. "And then to have to work to find each other."

Erin could play but needed a band. Molly and Allison had a band but needed another member, preferably a girl who knew how to play. Shortly before spring break in 1991, Molly sent Erin a postcard that read: "My stepmother's having a baby. Let's jam."

At this point Molly and Allison were thinking of Bratmobile as a loose-bordered organization of sorts, perhaps even a teen-girl-power empire with overlapping regional branches. An Olympia syndicate of Bratmobile existed, with the girls' friend Michelle Noel on guitar; the group with Erin would be Bratmobile DC. These franchises invariably existed in concept form first: The acts of imagining, naming, and even hyping a project were necessary first steps in its process of creation.

Molly and Allison flew to DC in March, picked up Erin at her parents' place in Bethesda ("I open the door," Erin said, "and Allison has her backwards baseball cap and tights and shorts, and I was like, 'Whoa, who's this girl?' She was kind of wild."), and drove straight to the Embassy, a group house in DC's Mount Pleasant neighborhood that was the headquarters of Nation of Ulysses and home to a revolving cast of local punks. There was a practice space and rudimentary recording studio in the basement, where Erin sometimes jammed with Christina Billotte, a meticulous musician, slender and blonde and serious. Christina also played bass and sang in Autoclave, one of the only all-female punk bands DC had produced in many years. (Mary Timony, who would most famously front the spooky-pop group Helium in the mid-'90s, was Autoclave's guitarist and other singer.) The plan had been for Molly and Allison to sit in on a practice of the Erin-and-Christina project, but Erin and the newcomers clicked with one another instantly. "The way we just came together, it was like nothing was ever wrong that anyone did," Erin said. Christina favored the pristine pop of Blondie, but the others were all devoted to the same ramshackle K cassettes. Erin started playing a guitar part she had written, Allison came in with some vocals, and suddenly, almost effortlessly, they had finished a whole song.

The thrill! It could happen! It didn't even have to be hard! The universe was full of songs, just waiting for you to get some friends together and write them. And then you

weren't just a fan anymore; you were a member of the fellowship of people who made things.

Beat Happening and Nation of Ulysses were touring the East Coast together at the time, doing a run of shows with Autoclave that very week. The Bratmobile girls saw their friends play in DC and then, borrowing Molly's father's car on the pretense of taking a short trip to Baltimore, they drove five and a half hours to Bard College, north of New York City, to see the bands again. The concert began at midnight and didn't wrap up till well after 2 A.M.; Allison and Christina slept over at the college, but Molly and Erin drove back to DC in the wee hours so Molly could put in an appearance at her family's house.

The next evening, Molly and Erin turned right around and drove, on almost no sleep, back up to see Ulysses, Beat Happening, and Autoclave play at Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey. In a fit of new-friend infatuation, DIY confidence, and a sleepless taste for adventure, the members of the newly minted Bratmobile DC decided they should perform their new song, "Stab," before Ulysses' set.

The other bands were completely supportive. "They were just like, 'Of *course* you're going to play our guitars,' "Erin said. So Molly, Allison, and Erin, along with Christina, grabbed their loaner instruments and got onstage to play their first show as a full band. Over a single furious chord and a relentless drumbeat, Allison sang, "You know where I've been, you want to stick it in, you want to tie me up." Then she screamed, "You fucked me up!" and launched into the chorus:

You want to stab me
And fuck the wounds
Stab me
And fuck the wounds

The band alternated the verses and choruses a few times, relishing the rush of being onstage in front of a real audience! Of strangers! Suddenly they looked at each other, realizing that they had never written an ending to their song. Having plunged into their performance without hesitation, they had no idea how to get out of it. Somehow they crash-landed "Stab" and left the stage. Some audience members must have been saying, as people so often said about Allison, with her funny clothes and fearless demeanor, "What *is* that?!" But the girls couldn't hear it. The cheers of their friends, their fellowship of people who made things, drowned it out completely.

The rest of the week in DC was a whirlwind. The girls practiced three more times and wrote five more songs; they played a show at a Salvadoran restaurant in the suburbs with MacKaye's sister Amanda's band, Desiderata; and they recorded their new compositions in the Embassy's basement studio with Tim Green, a recording engineer who was also the guitarist in Nation of Ulysses. One of Bratmobile's best new songs was

"Cool Schmool," which opened with the singsong taunt: "We're so cool, yeah yeah / Fuck you, too! Cool schmool!" Over a bed of pure, sparse surf rock, Allison declaimed the verses in a cheerleader's *sprechtstimme*, snotty and withering. The chorus had almost no vocals at all, just a couple rich, open guitar chords that rang out warmly compared with the brittle staccato Erin played on the verses, and then the pithy takedown again—"Cool schmool!"—twice as terse as X-Ray Spex' "Oh bondage, up yours," and more carelessly dismissive.

The songs Bratmobile had unveiled at their first real show, back in Olympia on Valentine's Day, had protested against a general condition of phoniness and exclusion, and "Cool Schmool" continued this theme, but with more specificity. In addition to delivering another shot to the heart of social fakery ("I don't want you always telling me what's so cool about what I'm wearing / When you can't even tell me how you feel and you can't even be my friend for real"), the song also took aim at the Northwest punk orthodoxy in particular ("I don't wanna sit around and talk about the Wipers / Weren't those the good old days"), mocked the do-you-like-the-right-bands olympics ("I hate dogs so I love cats"), and skewered two traditional options for girls in punk:

I just wanna be one of the boys
I just wanna be your little fashion toy

Of course, this wasn't entirely fair. The poles Allison named, for all their magnetic force, had never been girls' only options in Oly or DC. But a more nuanced critique wouldn't fit into a two-minute song. With "Fuck you, too! Cool schmool!" the band had found its strategy: profane ridicule.

The end of spring break came too soon, but the girls were already thinking ahead. "We were like, wow, this is a really great time," Molly said a few months later. "What do you think could happen—this is what everybody was thinking—what do you think could happen if we had more than a week?" They decided to find out. Allison and Molly resolved to spend the summer in DC; back on the West Coast, Molly mentioned the plan to Bikini Kill and added, You all should come too. Bikini Kill had already booked a tour with Ulysses for most of June, which would end in DC, and they were considering moving there permanently. Sure, they could stick around for the summer.

And so it was set: The revolution girl style now, Northwest branch, was coming to take over the nation's capital.

The DC punk scene was way overdue for a girl revolution. Some of the city's punks were dimly aware of this, but Jen Smith, a scene denizen and University of Maryland student who lived at the Embassy, found it suddenly at the forefront of her mind. Jen wasn't related to Erin, despite their shared last name. But after spending a week with her

and Allison and Molly, she felt like they were family. She had jammed with Bratmobile once during that week, and played a few songs with them at the show with Desiderata. Once Molly and Allison had left town, she was left to ponder how almost all the prominent people in the scene, nearly everyone who had a band or ran a label, were boys.

Here was the lineup: Ian MacKaye, who ran Dischord, and his all-male bandmates in Fugazi. Ian Svenonius and *his* all-male band-mates in Ulysses. Mark Andersen, who helmed the punk activist group Positive Force. Geoff Turner, who ran the WGNS cassette label. Mark Robinson, who had just started the Teenbeat Records label. Skip Goff, the owner of Silver Spring's famed record store Yesterday & Today. The list went on and on.

There *were* several legendary women in the city's punk history. People still talked about Fire Party, a beloved all-girl band from the late '80s. Most punks owned *Banned in DC*, a book of photos from the scene's early years, which had been compiled by female scene stalwarts Sharon Cheslow, Leslie Clague, and Cynthia Connolly. And even people who'd spent the age of New Wave in grade school had at least heard of Cheslow's band Chalk Circle, the scene's first all-girl group. "It was kinda hard being girls," Cheslow said in 1982. "But look, if men can do it, so can women, and we said, 'Who cares? We're gonna do it.'"

"We want to be taken seriously," her bandmate Mary Green pleaded in the same interview. "We want to be taken for people."

Yet throughout the '80s, any woman who played music was considered a curiosity. "People would be like, 'I'm going to see this band, and they have a *girl* bassist,' "MacKaye said. Women more often held support roles, taking photos or booking shows. When Bikini Kill and Bratmobile decided to spend their summer in DC, Connolly was booking shows at dc space, and Amy Pickering, formerly of Fire Party, was working at Dischord after having spent several years in the late '80s booking at the 9:30 Club. But very few women had places out front. Jawbox's bassist, Kim Coletta, and the drummer of the Holy Rollers, Maria Jones, were the exceptions, along with Autoclave, the city's one all-girl band at the time, which would soon break up without releasing a full-length album. And that was about it. Yes, there were women in the scene, but, as Jen put it, "The *personalities* were boys."

Through living at the Embassy, she was intimately acquainted with the scene's boyocracy. The boys jammed with one another in the house's basement, in rotating but usually all-boy lineups; they danced up front at shows. At one of the first parties Jen attended in DC, she walked into a room and saw a bunch of people standing in a circle, having a dance-off with each other. The dancers were boys, every one of them, all with the same long lanky limbs and short skinny pants and dyed-black hair ranging from military short to greasy bouffant, all dancing with the same twitchy moves. It wasn't

hateful or mean; Jen could just tell she didn't belong. As she became closer friends with people in the scene, this sense of not belonging faded somewhat. "Connecting with the whole DIY aesthetic was a total revelation for me," she said. Still, Bratmobile's visit made her wonder: Why weren't girls more visible in DC? Would the summer change this for the better?

Her ideas about girl revolution got a jolt that spring from a reallife urban uprising. On May 5, 1991, four blocks from the Embassy, a Salvadoran immigrant was shot and critically injured by a police officer. He had been drinking with his buddies in a small park, and police said he had lunged at an officer with a knife. Rumors quickly spread through the neighborhood, though, that he had been shot while handcuffed; many believed he had died. People were already out in groups around the neighborhood, celebrating Cinco de Mayo, and they began to gather at the scene. A bystander threw a bottle at a cop, a crowd roared its approval, and by nightfall Mount Pleasant had hit flashover. As many as six hundred people took to the streets, throwing bricks and bottles at police, then racing in packs through alleys to outrun their pursuers. Sirens and angry shouts of "*Justicia!*" cut through the night. Squad cars burned out of control; the police threw tear gas canisters that hissed out their acrid clouds, sending plumes across Sixteenth Street. Officers in helmets and gas masks were beat back by the rioters.

An early morning rain finally quelled the crowds, but the following evening the unrest started up again. Stores were smashed and looted; a Dumpster was dragged into the middle of Kilbourne Place and set ablaze. Many Mount Pleasant punks, including several of Jen's housemates, went up to watch and even join in. One of her friends later boasted that he had cut his hand while throwing a rock at a cop car. But Jen stayed home, watching the melee on the news and listening to the helicopter that hung like a stuck clock pendulum over the neighborhood. It wasn't that the riots scared her; they just didn't feel like her fight. "I felt like, as a white person from a middle-class background, for me to go up there and participate was like me being a cultural interloper," she said. "I feel anger about the police state too, but it was another community's tension."

At the same time, all that anger and disaffection made an impact on her. The riots burrowed into Jen's unconscious and resurfaced a few days later, as she was walking along Park Road to her job at a health-food store across the street from the National Zoo. She used to make up little songs as she walked to work and home again. "Girl riot," she sang to herself one day in May. "Girl riot, not gonna be quiet." By the end of that month, the Supreme Court would uphold a regulation widely known as the gag rule, banning federally funded clinics from discussing abortion. Girl riot, not gonna be quiet.

Jen wrote a letter to Allison with a line like "This summer's gonna be a girl riot" or "We need a girl riot" or "I want a girl riot." Years later, she wouldn't remember the exact sentence, the letter would be long gone, and nobody's memories would quite line up. Like the first bottle thrown in Mount Pleasant, immediately lost among the thousands of

projectiles that followed, Jen's utterance blurred into everything that would come next: its specificity dissolved, its power only magnified.

THREE

REVOLUTION SUMMER GIRL STYLE NOW

Kathleen turned toward the back of the stage at dc space and pulled off her T-shirt in a deliberate, prosaic motion. Bikini Kill had played its first few songs fully clothed, but now, wearing just a skirt and a scalloped black bra, Kathleen turned to face the audience so everyone could see what was written on her stomach: SLUT.

She'd begun doing this at shows in recent months, confronting audiences with what they might want to see (a topless woman) and what they might think of such a woman, all in one fell semiotic swoop. As if nothing had happened, Tobi started up the drumbeat for the next song, and then everything kicked in, a frantic, conflicted song about craving trashy pleasures whatever the cost:

I wanna go to the carnival
But I know that it costs fifteen dollars now …
I'll win that Mötley Crüe mirror
If it fucking kills me

June 27, 1991: This was the final show of Bikini Kill's crosscountry tour with Nation of Ulysses, and the Olympia band's first show in Washington, DC. Buzz about Bikini Kill had preceded the band to the city, and the room was packed, the air jittery with excitement.

Nothing on tour had prepared them for the response they got in DC. The people in the audience, male and female alike, were dancing like mad for a band they had never seen before, cheering and whistling after every song. When Kathleen announced, "This is our last song," people cried out, "No!" and "More!" As soon as the set ended, people rushed the stage.

Kathleen was thrown off balance: "I thought they were just trying to pull me away from the crowd so they could kill me or something!" she said that summer. "People usually aren't that nice."

"I was totally awestruck," said Kristin Thomson, who had recently founded a record label, Simple Machines, with her friend Jenny Toomey. "I was completely enthralled by the band, especially Kathleen, who could deliver songs with such emotion, yet be concerned that the girls had room up front. It was really inspiring."

"They were *incredible,"* Ian MacKaye said. "I was completely blown away by them." He offered to record them for free at Inner Ear studios; he just knew in his gut this band needed to be heard. The session they did at Inner Ear that week only confirmed his feeling. "Kathleen was really—she was dialing it in from somewhere else, like high up," he said. Some of the tracks, including "Feels Blind," would be released on a self-titled EP in late 1992.

Even people who weren't at the show heard about it nonstop for weeks. "It was almost like an earthquake, the reverberations that went out through the scene," said Positive Force's Mark Andersen, who skipped the show and actually teared up years later at the thought of how much he regretted missing it.

Piggybacking on Ulysses' itinerary had let Bikini Kill play bigger shows at better venues than it would have been able to get for itself—with no releases other than an eight-song demo cassette titled *Revolution Girl Style Now*—on this, the band's first trip off the West Coast. But most of the audience members had been there to see Ulysses and hadn't known what to make of Bikini Kill. "People fucking *hated* us!" Kathleen said. "The total indie hipster people were like 'Fuck you' to us." In Olympia, too, people outside the band's inner circle had never seemed to *get* Bikini Kill. But the group had touched a power chord in the heart of DC. Maybe it was because their hard-edged roar of old-school punk went over better in Dischord's hometown than in Olympia's la-la land of love rock. Maybe it was because DC had always loved political bands, from Bad Brains to Fugazi. Maybe the scene was just starved for a band with some girls in it.

Despite their royal reception, the members of Bikini Kill weren't certain that the city could ever feel like home. For starters, the DC area was much richer than Olympia. While most Oly punks had gone to Evergreen—public, inexpensive, experimental—DC's punks had attended some of the country's best public and private high schools. In the place of Olympia's de-skilled musical collectives, DC grew polished bands from teens who had taken piano lessons in elementary school or received electric guitars as birthday presents before their small fingers could even press down a barre chord.

The city of DC itself was mostly black and mostly poor, with an overwhelmingly white professional class that commuted from the suburbs and a Congress that ran the company town, surveying its swampy demesne from a comfortable outpost on the Hill. Many punks hailed from suburban enclaves, but when they went to shows downtown, the discrepancies glowered unignorably, in the boarded-up storefronts and the blanket-wrapped bodies sleeping on sidewalks. In 1991, the city's murder rate hit its all-time high; fueled by a crack epidemic, killings had more than doubled in the past four years.

With so many rebellious youth confused by their own privilege and seeking to expiate it, the DC scene wore a cape of scrappy altruism; many punk shows, for example, were benefits for organizations serving the city's needy. But the members of Bikini Kill couldn't afford to play benefits; they needed to earn money from their shows. Tobi was sharing a room with Ian Svenonius at Pirate House and snacking on crudités backstage at other people's gigs. In order to afford a room of her own in a group house near the Embassy, Kathleen picked up shifts dancing at the Royal Palace, a strip club just north of Dupont Circle.

Aside from the money issue, Bikini Kill and Bratmobile both appreciated the DC scene's activist orientation. In Olympia, activism often meant things like environmentalists teetering meters above the ground in the canopies of ancient redwoods. Punk politics there most commonly consisted of critiquing "the corporate ogre"—i.e., major record labels and other forms of mass culture—and tailoring one's consumption habits accordingly, but making overtly political music was frowned on. Despite the antiwar protests that winter, the main connection to national politics came through regional environmental issues, such as saving the spotted owl; aside from that, protesting about national matters felt futile so far away from Bush and Quayle. In DC, on the other hand, national marches regularly flooded the Mall, and the proximity of the White House provided an accessible emblem of power: Protest felt relevant.

The hardest thing to get used to about DC was the fact that girls didn't rule the town. But the newcomers weren't sure, at first, what they should do about it. With Kathi Wilcox leaving on a monthlong backpacking trip through Europe, Bikini Kill couldn't play any shows for a while. Bratmobile DC was temporarily stymied as well: Erin Smith had gone to New York to intern at *Sassy* for the month of June.

This summer was supposed to be historic. A girl riot had been prophesied. Sharon Cheslow, one of the grandes dames of DC punk, had just come back to town after several years in San Francisco; she'd met Kathleen at a Bikini Kill show out West and felt that something huge was about to happen in DC, that a group of women were stepping up and just might be taking over. The girls needed to prove her right. This window of time, free of obligations, was their chance to fashion—out of nearly nothing but friendship, noise, and restlessly majestic vision—a new era.

Summer already occupied a special place in DC punk mythology. The scene's previous golden age, in 1985, was what Fire Party's Amy Pickering had then dubbed Revolution Summer, a storied period of scene unity and creative ferment. Six years later, people could still be heard invoking the Revolution Summer spirit. Naming it, proclaming it to be something special, had *made* it special—a footnote, maybe, to Freedom Summer, the Summer of Love, and the many long hot summers of urban agitation. A single season could change the course of history. Even with the bands temporarily out of commission, this was going to have to be Revolution Summer Girl Style Now.

The summer was already fun; nobody had to work to make sure of that. Most of the West Coast visitors hung out nonstop with the Ulysses boys. It was like being on tour, only without the playing shows every night part or the getting in the van and driving several hundred miles part, which left just the getting pizza and making up jokes and talking about art and listening to records parts.

To Molly and Allison, being in DC with so many of their friends after two years of exile in Eugene—and the promise of finally having regular band practices with Erin, once she came back from New York at the end of June—was pure joy. Tobi, too, felt like she'd found heaven. The frustration she felt at the scene's lopsided gender ratio was outweighed by how fantastic so many of these boys were. "I felt like I had peers for the first time in my life," she said. "We were all really interested in culture, politics, and creating. I would just hang out in people's rooms for hours studying their record collections. It was a constantly rewarding, invigorating exchange of ideas and music." Svenonius turned her on to Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Politics of Style*, a foundational work of cultural studies that analyzed punk and mod fashions in late-'70s Britain as expressions of political disaffection. To Hebdige, mod style had been a form of protest for working-class youth, and Tobi saw potential parallels with the Revolution Girl Style Now. Madonna had gotten millions of girls to wear lacy gloves and crucifixes. What if Bikini Kill could launch a similar craze, but with an explicitly political message—a look that communicated not "I'm a fan of this musician" but "I'm a revolutionary feminist and I won't rest until sexism is obliterated"?

Kathleen kept thinking about how to spread the word through music. With Bikini Kill on its brief break, she started two new projects—the Wonder Twins, a duo with Ulysses' Tim Green; and Suture, a band with Cheslow and Dug Birdzell, who'd played in the '80s DC punk bands Beefeater and Fidelity Jones.

One night in early July, Allison, Molly, Kathleen, and Jen Smith went to Molly's dad's office on Capitol Hill and ran off copies of a new minizine they had just made. They had decided to put out one issue per week for the rest of the summer, so they'd have something to pass out at shows, a way to make connections with other girls who lived in DC. They named the zine *Riot Grrrl:* a blend of Jen's "girl riot" and the growling "grrrl" spelling that Tobi had recently made up as a jokey variation on all the tortured spellings of "womyn/womon/ wimmin" feminists liked to experiment with. ("Angry grrrl zine," she had written on the cover of *Jigsaw* #3.) A riot grrrl was a revolutionary update of a *Teen* or a *Young Miss* or a *Mademoiselle:* The new zine's title created its audience of girls by naming them, radicalized them by addressing them as already radical.

Riot Grrrl #1 was printed on a single sheet of paper folded into quarters, both sides crammed with the blowsy, uneven letters of a manual typewriter. The front cover image showed Madonna proudly punching the air above her head, surrounded by handwritten "XO"s; on the back cover, the logo of Utz potato chips—a mischievous-looking girl

dipping her hand into a bag—had been altered to read “slutz.”

The zine decried “the general lack of girl power in society as a whole, and in the punk rock underground specifically” and explained how to give a cop car a flat tire and how to rig postage stamps so they could be reused. One page announced Bratmobile’s plans for the summer (concerts, an appearance on Erin’s brother Don Smith’s college radio show), another listed Bikini Kill’s (recordings, an appearance on Don Smith’s radio show), a third listed some angry grrrl zine addresses (*Girl Germs, Jigsaw, Chainsaw, Teenage Gang Debs*, and a couple others), and a half-panel piece proclaimed, “Clarence Thomas is not your friend.” (President Bush had announced his Supreme Court choice on July 1; Anita Hill’s allegations wouldn’t come out for several months, but activists who knew of his opposition to affirmative action were already vowing to bring him down.)

The girls handed out the zine at a barbecue in Erin’s parents’ backyard on the Fourth of July. The Ulysses boys were there in force, throwing fireworks around, and Bratmobile DC played its first show of the summer, with Allison on vocals, Erin on guitar, and Molly and Christina Billotte switching off between guitar and drums. (Jen sang one song with them, almost frozen with stage fright, and decided she was done with music for a while.) The group had had almost no time to practice since Erin’s return from New York, and they played a sloppy, seat-of-their-pants set. Allison liked it that way. “I think it’s important to show people that these structures onstage can totally be broken down,” she told Andersen in an interview that summer. “I’m not trying to play bad music, but who’s saying it’s bad?” Molly was committed to becoming a strong drummer, but she was comfortable with letting people see her learning process. “I think it’s really good for bands to go out when they’re not ready,” she said during the same

interview. "Because then, as you do get a grasp on your instruments, people see you in a continuum, as opposed to just you jumped out of nowhere, which is what I always thought: The boy comes out of the womb with a screaming Led Zeppelin guitar, and I feel like I'll never know how to do that." Christina was farther along on that continuum; she and her bandmates in Autoclave were all experienced musicians. She seemed annoyed after Bratmobile DC's set, left the barbecue early, and promptly went out of town, even though the band was already booked to play a free outdoor show at Fort Reno Park a week later.

Bratmobile DC began its next practice in the Embassy basement freaking out over what to do now that Christina was gone. The band needed to find another guitarist *and* another drummer, or maybe a guitarist-drummer, to play her parts. Bikini Kill's Billy Karren was upstairs, and the girls called him down to play with them. "I'm a terrible drummer," he protested, and proceeded to play so badly that Allison suspected he was screwing up on purpose. Then he announced he was going back upstairs to make a sandwich, leaving Bratmobile alone in the basement to spin straw into gold. Or at least into something interesting.

Christina got back into town the day before the show and didn't mention the band at all. Everybody understood, without having to say anything, that Bratmobile was now a trio. Over dinner at a friend's house the next evening, someone said, "Aren't you guys playing a show tonight?" Christina demurred: "I don't know ..." And Allison echoed: "I don't know ..." Just a few years earlier, DC's high standards had forced the all-girl Fire Party to incubate for six obsessive months before setting foot on a stage. Now, Bratmobile's insistence on their right to play a sloppy show, as long as they had something to say and their energy ran pure, was changing the game.

At the Fort Reno show, they handed out the second issue of *Riot Grrrl*, which had taken shape in a week. Its cover image showed a woman, apparently clipped out of a comic book, charging toward the viewer. Sashed with an ammo belt, she wore a short skirt and brandished an assault rifle.

The zine had doubled in length, to eight quarter-sheet pages. Half of these were taken up by Tobi's scene report, "riot grrrl dc/olympia news," which touted the fast-approaching International Pop Underground Convention, a K Records-sponsored music festival that would take place in Olympia in August; an upcoming show at "Molly's parents' house" (no address given); and a Friday night dance party to be held at a Mount Pleasant group house near the Embassy, identified here by both the address (1830 Irving Street) and the designation "way cool riot girlHQers0069."

The issue's centerfold, reprinted from that winter's *Bikini Kill* zine, was a two-page list of instructions written by Kathleen that could perhaps be read as her reminders to herself. Its exhortations included:

Recognize that you are not the center of the universe.
Figure out how the idea of winning and losing fits into your relationships.
Be as vulnerable as you possibly can.
Recognize vulnerability and empathy as strengths.
Don't allow the fact that other people have been assholes to you make you into a bitter and abusive person.
Commit to the revolution as a method of psychological and physical survival.

By all accounts, she was taking the last of these imperatives extremely seriously. She struck everyone around her as unusually solemn and intense. She didn't seem to allow herself any time-outs; even while watching television, she was likely to speak up with a critical takedown of the television show's sexual politics. And she hardly ever hung out on the living room couches at the Embassy with her bandmates and friends. She was too busy strategizing about how to launch a feminist revival that could save all the girls she met on tour, along with all the girls who weren't plugged in enough to even come to a

show.

Kathleen thought a collectively produced magazine might be the way to go: a younger, hipper remake of the *Ms.* magazines she had read when she was growing up. But who would join such a collective, other than the few women she already knew in town? Meeting other girls wasn't easy: Most DC punks had known one another since high school or earlier, and could be slow to embrace outsiders.

On the back cover of *Riot Grrrl* #2: "We don't know all that many angry grrrls, although we know you are out there." The angry grrrls were, in fact, out there. But many of them didn't feel much need for making common cause with temporary transplants. They had come to terms enough with the scene's gender dynamics to stick around, and though they knew there was room for improvement, many bristled at the interlopers' attitudes. "It was jolting to have a group of people move there and speak in directives," Melissa Klein, another resident of the Embassy, said.

Kathleen heard the complaints. "That's one of the critiques I've gotten since putting out *Riot Grrrl,"* she said that summer. "'Oh, that's easy for her to say, she's just going to pick up and leave.' "But she insisted, "I'm not gonna let something like not knowing where I'm gonna live next month make me someone who has to stay silent. Just because I'm visiting doesn't mean I'm going to stop being a revolutionary."

As a matter of fact, she was going to step it up. In the time-honored tradition of revolutionaries everywhere, Kathleen decided to call a meeting. "It was like, 'God, if we're thinking of actually moving here, I want to know if there'll be women to do things with—not just our band and Bratmobile,' "she explained. "We can't work in a vacuum."

She didn't want to hold the meeting at the Embassy or any of the other Mount Pleasant group houses of DC's hipster-punk demimonde. She had her sights set on the Positive Force House, a big, homely yellow wood-frame building—more evocative of a Midwestern grange hall than a suburban abode—in Arlington, Virginia, just across the Potomac River from DC. It was the headquarters of Positive Force, a six-year-old activist group that channeled young punks' idealism and anger into activism and community service. The Embassy denizens fused Situationism and Futurism into agitated manifestos, but during the antiapartheid struggles of the mid-'80s, it was Positive Force that had organized punks to protest outside the South African embassy by banging on drums and ten-gallon buckets. Ulysses had its DC flag and the hometown-pride anthem "You're My Miss Washington, D.C.," but it was Positive Force that set up benefit shows for local organizations such as the Washington Free Clinic and the Washington Peace Center, Positive Force that arranged for punk kids to work volunteer shifts at a homeless shelter and to deliver food to low-income senior citizens, Positive Force that held well-publicized weekly meetings that were open to all comers.

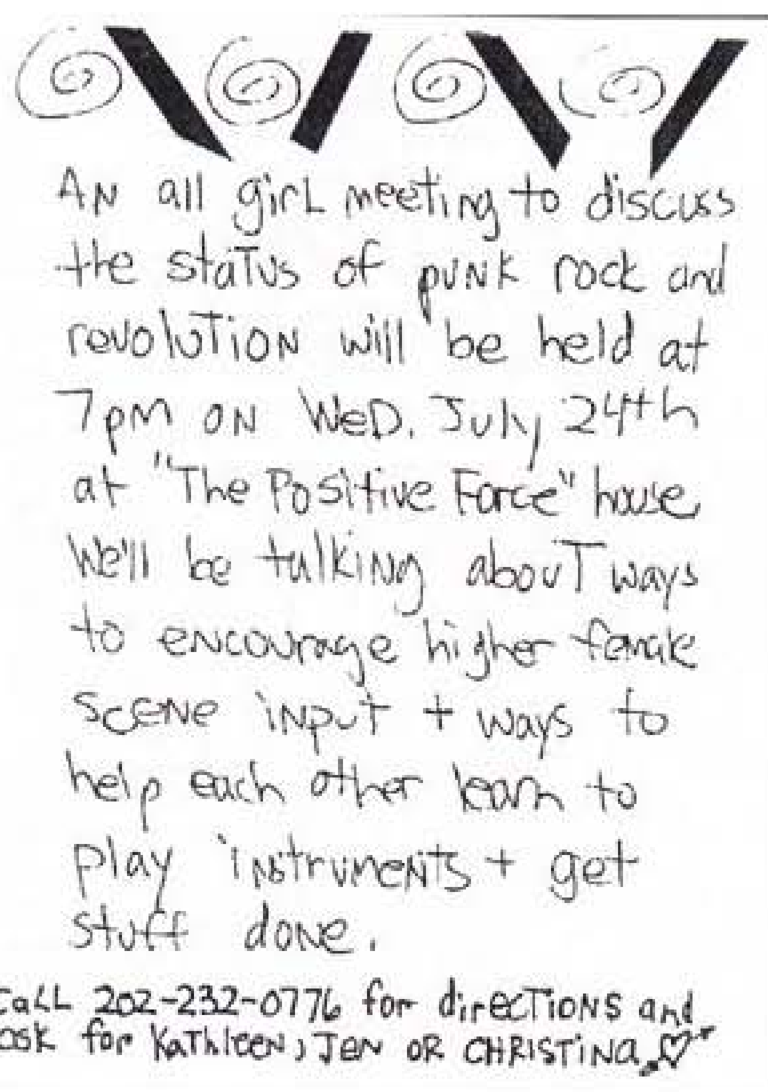
When Kathleen learned about the group, she was impressed and grateful. She felt like much of the groundwork for what she wanted to build was already in place. "In Olympia

it felt a lot more politically isolated," she said that summer. "Music everywhere, but talking about politics and stuff, no. I felt like, oh, I have to set up my own thing. And it's already set up here." Plus, Positive Force, by being headquartered in middlebrow Arlington, was separate both from in-crowd Mount Pleasant and from the private-school geographies of Maryland's Montgomery County and DC's Upper Northwest. Neither too cool nor too rich, and easy to reach by Metro, Arlington was relatively neutral ground.

So one weekend, Kathleen went to a Positive Force meeting in the house's front yard to propose her idea. High school boys in wire-rimmed glasses and army shorts, teenage girls in Birkenstocks and band T-shirts, and politics majors on summer break from the city's universities were clustered on the patchy grass, taking turns talking and volunteering to make a flyer for a benefit show or to research area food banks. Andersen, one of the group's founders and practically its patriarch at age thirty-one, gently nudged things along when necessary, but stepped back as much as possible, to let the younger kids run things themselves.

One of the teenage girls at the meeting was seventeen-year-old Ananda La Vita, a passionate activist who had run the animal rights club at her high school and was living at Positive Force for the summer to escape the pitched battles between her mother and stepfather. Erika Reinstein was another teen habituée of the group; assertive and garrulous, she was often the one to go onstage at benefits and explain that there was to be no smoking, no drinking, and no fighting at the show, and that everybody should make sure to check out the literature table at the back.

"I'd like to hold a meeting here," Kathleen told the gathered idealists. "It would be for girls only, to talk about teaching each other how to play instruments."



Later, Ananda would wonder whether Kathleen had downplayed the meeting's agenda on purpose, to keep the boys of Positive Force, aspiring revolutionaries themselves, from clamoring to be allowed in. Kathleen actually wasn't sure what her agenda was. It would depend on who showed up and what they wanted to do.

Maybe her magazine idea would materialize, maybe a music-lessons exchange or a show-booking collective, maybe something else. Girls would get together in one room to figure it out.

Permission granted, she printed a notice announcing the meeting in the third issue of *Riot Grrrl*. She got onstage at several rock shows to invite all the girls and women in the room; she and Allison walked around with a clipboard asking girls directly if they were interested, and wrote down phone numbers so she could call to remind them to come.

The first Riot Grrrl meeting—as it would retroactively become known—began a little after 7:30 P.M. on Wednesday, July 24, 1991. The marigold evening air was finally cooling off a bit; it had been a blisteringly hot week, with the temperature topping one hundred for several days, but on Wednesday the mercury stopped at ninety-three. For someone looking for signs that girls needed a revolution, that day's *Washington Post* offered ample evidence: Three more women had come forward to talk about having been sexually attacked by William Kennedy Smith, who was already facing rape charges in Florida; New York City police had arrested a man for raping his three-year-old niece in a Manhattan park in broad daylight; and the federal government had canceled a nationwide study of teenagers' sexual activity, even as HIV rates among teens were rising.

Twenty or so people attended the meeting, which felt like "an overwhelming response," Kathleen said later, considering that the information had been passed around by flyers and word of mouth. Positive Force's small second-floor living room was jammed full. Ananda and Erika were there, along with other Positive Force members, a contingent of Mount Pleasant punks, and Molly, Allison, Tobi, and Kathleen representing for the Northwest carpetbagger crew.

They started off with a go-round. It took hours for each person to say what she had come for and what she wanted to get out of the meeting. Some were seeking community with other female musicians or artists, some wanted to organize shows, but the biggest appetite was simply for talking and listening—especially among the younger girls, girls who went to shows with a handful of friends from high school or Positive Force but might not have known anyone else there. These girls had never been invited to discuss and dissect the way they experienced the world as girls, and they were stunned at what came pouring out. "It wasn't until the option was in front of me that I realized how much I needed it," Ananda said.

A second meeting took place the following week, and it was mostly the teenagers who came back, suddenly aware that they were desperate to find a community of girls to help

them make it through late adolescence unmaimed. They were stuck in that aggravating period of time when girls get hit from all sides, belittled as children *and* sexualized as women. They needed safety and support; they needed one another.

Right after that second meeting, Kathleen, Molly, and Allison sat down for an interview with Andersen. He was writing, very slowly, a comprehensive history of DC punk (to be published in 2001 as *Dance of Days)*, and he wanted to hear more about this fledgling feminist movement that struck him as possibly being the epitome of everything he loved about punk: politics, community, marginalized people making noise.

The four of them talked for nearly two hours. Allison spoke about the word *girl* and how academic women's studies rhetoric "alienate[s] teenage and younger and prepubescent girls. And it alienates punkers, I think." Molly reflected on the place of activism in her life: "Revolution is kind of my spirituality," she said. "I've come to understand that this is what I rest my head on."

Kathleen was most eager to discuss what the meetings might grow into. "Even though we haven't had an official objective or any kind of real strategy or plans, just to hear them talk and see how kind of relieved they are to hear each other speak, it's so great. It makes me kind of like, God, I wish I could really start to DO—I wish I could stay with these girls. But I'm convinced that there's these girls everywhere, and these girls everywhere really need to have some kind of—" She broke off, realizing how grandiose she sounded. "And I'm not a crusader," she finished, convincing nobody.

Near the end of the conversation, Kathleen offered the closest she ever came to a vision statement. Despite having been a main instigator of Riot Grrrl, she was never technically its leader; she would dodge that designation many times over the coming years. And to whatever extent the thing that grew out of these meetings could be considered a movement, it was something a bit different from what she put forward that evening in July. Still, it's a window into what she was thinking.

"I've had so many people come to me with stories of sexual abuse and being battered by their parents," she said. "People talking about sexual abuse and getting beat up and emotional abuse in their houses is so important, and making bands around that issue is, to me, the new punk rock—can be the new punk rock. And I want to encourage people—"

"To break their silence?" Andersen suggested. "Yeah, to break their silence," Kathleen allowed. She went on: "I'm really interested in a punk rock movement—an angry girl movement—of sexual abuse survivors. ... I seriously believe it's the majority of people in this country have stories to tell that they aren't telling for some reason. I mean, with all of that energy and anger, if we could unify it in some way—"

She trailed off. Her voice had been the loudest voice on the tape during the whole interview, but now it diminished to a whisper. It's easy to imagine her looking down at her hands, overcome with the intensity of her vision.

The girls at the meetings *were* beginning to unify their energy and anger. Teenage girls from the suburbs like Ananda, whose stepfather screamed at her and her mother when he got drunk, and sometimes kicked them out of the house, and Erika, who was wrestling with memories of sexual abuse, knew right away that this group was exactly what they needed. Kathleen "didn't have to do much at all," Ananda said. "It was just a matter of calling this meeting, and then those of us who were into it, were *really* into it. I was, like, *so ready*. It was what I was waiting for."

Riot Grrrl would later be spoken of as girls challenging sexism within punk. The DC girls did have complaints about punk, but all boiling down to this: In a subculture that congratulated itself for presenting an alternative, in a realm that should have been a refuge, they found more of the same crap. Boys' efforts were lauded and girls' were unrecognized. Objectification and sexual assault went unaddressed. The mosh pit was a perfect figure for what was wrong with the scene: Boys about to dive into the surging sea of testosterone would strip off their black bomber jackets and hand them to female friends—*Here, hold this*—leaving a strip of girls-ascoatracks along the wall, literally sidelined. Punk wasn't really the point, though. The problems with the scene burned the girls up precisely because it echoed the way the world at large treated them.

The girls were furious about things like parental-consent abortion laws, bikini-clad women who hawked beer and cigarettes on billboards and TV, and the archaic gender roles that pervaded the cartoon section of the *Washington Post*. They were ready to revolt over things like hallway gropes and sidewalk heckles, leering teachers, homophobic threats, rape, incest, domestic violence, sexual double standards, ubiquitous warnings against walking certain places or dressing certain ways ... The affronts were neverending. The girls couldn't block these things out and they didn't want to; they wanted to stay acutely aware of the war against them so they could fight back.

You've got to know what they are (Kathleen sang)
Before you can stand up for your rights ...

They were mustering for battle against the idea that to be a girl was to be in grave danger that you could never fully escape, only manage by narrowing your life, your range, your wardrobe, your gaze. The end of the summer was near, but the girl revolution was just beginning.

Another opening salvo was heard in late August, at a concert in Olympia called Love Rock Revolution Girl Style Now, and Bikini Kill and Bratmobile drove back West to be part of it. Girl Night, as the Tuesday-evening show came to be known, kicked off the International Pop Underground Convention, a five-day event—part music festival, part summer camp, part family reunion—organized by Calvin Johnson and Candice Pedersen

of K Records. They were calling it a convention to emphasize that this was not a typical music fest or industry hobnob; it was an ingathering of tribes and exiles, a drawing together of secret agents and underground reps who'd been living in the wilderness, tenuously connected to one another by vinyl-only mail order and once-a-year tour dates and third-generation dubbed cassettes passed reverently from hand to hand.

Fifteen acts were on the Girl Night bill, including Bratmobile, Tobi playing solo, and Kathleen's two summer bands. The show had originally been planned as a female-performer-only event, but the parameters were loosened so Margaret Doherty, an original "Two bikini girls kill one bikini girl, glug glug glug" performer and one of the show's organizers, could invite a new coed duo, the Spinanes. The planners wanted to encourage experimentation and inexperience. "It was really about getting the young women in the audience who were sitting on the edge of, 'Maybe I'm gonna play in a band, maybe I'm gonna pick up a guitar, maybe I'm gonna write a song about how I feel,' "Doherty explained. "It was mostly about putting a fire under them to get themselves out there, and to know that you can jump off a cliff and your community will catch you." This Olympia-style creative risk-taking, combined with the political consciousness-raising that had just begun in DC, was what made the summer of 1991 so catalytic. Without either one of these components, there would have been no Riot Grrrl.

One of the first-time bands to play Girl Night was a pair of teenage girls, Corin Tucker and Tracy Sawyer, calling themselves Heavens to Betsy. Until now, the group had existed only theoretically—a cool name and a trumped-up mythology wrapped around a few basement jam sessions. But once again, Olympia threw down the gauntlet, and Heavens to Betsy more than rose to the occasion; within a year, the band would be touring the country with Bratmobile, the third group in the canonical trinity of Riot Grrrl-associated bands.

Corin and Tracy had grown up in Eugene and become best friends during high school. Corin was fearless and outgoing; Tracy was cautious and shy. But they both liked music. A lot. In the late '80s, when the newly titled genre of alternative rock was the most accessible option for high-school malcontents, Corin and Tracy programmed their family VCRs to record MTV's *120 Minutes*, which played videos by the Cure and the Cocteau Twins, and they watched the documentary *Athens Georgia Inside/Out* over and over. The documentary painted a dreamy picture of the Southern college town that had given rise to R.E.M., the B-52s, and countless smaller groups—kids who met at parties or art school and got together to jam and went from there.

Corin finished high school in 1990, and she and Tracy—who had one year left before graduation—made a summer pilgrimage to Athens, taking a cross-country train from Oregon to Georgia. Pylon, a much-beloved Athens band from the '80s, had recently reunited to do some tour dates with R.E.M., and the group was playing a club gig during Corin and Tracy's visit. Too young to get in to the show, they stood out on the sidewalk

and listened through the venue's open windows. Corin was captivated by the singer, Vanessa Briscoe, a live-wire dervish of a woman whose voice ricocheted between monster howl, gutteral growl, and smooth monotone. When Briscoe sang "Hey, kids" in the song "Stop It," the "hey" slid down from a falsetto peak to the midrange, languid come-on of "kids," which gave way, at last, to the song's hoarse, urgent refrain: "Now! Rock and roll now! Now, now, now, now!"

Corin and Tracy heard the message. "We were sick of just watching it; we wanted to be a part of it," Tracy said. They bought a few pieces of a drum kit in Athens and took them home on the train. For the rest of the summer in Eugene, Corin practiced on her father's rehabbed old Les Paul guitar, and Tracy started learning her way around the drum kit. Corin played these drums, too, and Tracy taught herself bass. But before these explorations had time to condense into a band, Corin went up to Olympia for college, while Tracy stayed in Eugene to finish high school.

That Olympia was the West Coast equivalent of freewheeling Athens didn't surprise Corin one bit; she'd chosen Evergreen largely for that reason. And just as she had first become acquainted with Athens through a video, she set out to make sense of Olympia the same way. During her first winter in town, she and a classmate started making a documentary about local music scenes. The two soon parted ways, because the other girl wanted to cover the Seattle scene and all the Sub Pop bands, and Corin was enamored with Olympia. She loved the scene's small size, with the same twenty or thirty people at each basement or gallery show. A continuum of musicianship was regularly on display, from groups on the brink of national fame to bands whose songs still lacked bridges, titles, second verses.

Some bands were plainly bound for wider arenas, and Bikini Kill was one of them. The first time Corin saw them play, she said to herself, "This is the most amazing band I've ever seen." It was Bratmobile, though, that really yanked Heavens to Betsy into existence. "In the same spirit that Bratmobile had started," Corin said, "where they had just picked up the instruments and started writing, I thought Heavens to Betsy could be that kind of band. I felt like, 'I could do that.' "Corin had known Allison Wolfe for years: After meeting each other at the YMCA retreat, they had seen each other again at a Pixies show in Eugene. Corin watched it all happen, watched Allison go from a dorky-strange girl to the lead singer of a real band: still dorky, but with a microphone and an audience. Corin saw that you could do your growing in public and people would appreciate you anyway, that they might even appreciate you *for* being so honest.

Visiting Athens had made playing music feel necessary. Living in Olympia made it feel possible. And watching Bratmobile emerge made it feel proximate, less like a needed leap than a simple but still audacious step. That spring, Corin started informing people in Olympia that she had a band, with her best friend from Eugene, and that they were called Heavens to Betsy.

It wasn't exactly a lie. She and Tracy played together a little bit that year, in Tracy's basement, whenever Corin was home from school. But they were nowhere near ready to perform when Corin's friend Michelle Noel called and invited them to play Girl Night. "I said, 'Okay. *Crap!*'"Corin recalled. "I don't think it would have actually happened had I not been prompted—like, put your money where your mouth is."

During the summer of 1991, Heavens to Betsy practiced regularly in Eugene, working up a three-song set: "Seek and Hide," "My Secret," and "My Red Self." For most of Corin's life, she had wanted to be a writer, but getting poems or stories down on paper had always been a struggle. It turned out that the stories she'd been trying to tell had wanted to be songs all along. Metaphors and images appeared in her mind, bright fruits hanging low in an arbor; she could smell their juice even before she pulled them off the vine.

The subject matter for the songs came easily to her too. She had hit puberty at eleven, before anyone else in her grade, and boys were always grabbing at her body. "It was just like, 'That's the way boys are,' "she said. "There wasn't the education that that kind of harassment can really damage your self-esteem and make you feel really ashamed." Her mother had gone on domestic strike the following year, to protest the family's lopsided division of household labor (pressed into service, her dad bravely concocted a failed jambalaya while young Corin applied herself to the family's laundry). By high school Corin was writing a feminist critique of Shaw's *Pygmalion* for English class. When she arrived at Evergreen, her classes gave her a basic literacy in key feminist texts by Betty Friedan and Audre Lorde; and the bands she interviewed for her video—Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Calamity Jane—got her noticing the sexism that riddled the world like a network of fine cracks in china. She poured these observations into her songs. She had had only the barest musical training—a few years of piano lessons in high school, a couple guitar tutorials from her dad—but she had listened to hundreds, maybe even thousands, of records, and she knew when something sounded good.

When Girl Night arrived, Corin and Tracy realized they had underestimated how big the show was going to be. Even though the bill was mostly a roster of complete unknowns, a hundred people had come to the Capitol Theater, including some of the girls' favorite musicians—not only Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, whom they had met before, but the members of Fugazi, who were bona fide stars to them. Tracy froze up. "The thought of going up in front of people and playing was absolutely terrifying," she said. "I didn't think I was going to be able to make it through." Corin managed to convince her quaking bandmate to get onstage and do their three songs. The strongest of these three, the uncompromising "My Secret," put a sexual abuser on notice. Into the gaps of her distorted stop-start guitar part, Corin sung-shouted quick barrages of rage:

A knife

In you:
I'd stick it in
Listen
Listen
I'm about revenge

She sang the bridge's repeated line, "I am getting through this," in a strained voice of wild determination. She promised to name the secret crime—"I'll tell again and again"—but by the end of the song, any straightforward telling of abuse was made impossible by the murderous furor it provoked, as Corin's terse lines exploded into an arresting yowl:

My
Secret
Is
I WANT YOU DEAD I WANT YOU DEAD
I WANT YOU DEAD I WANT YOU DEAD

Listening to Heavens to Betsy, Allison cried. "Their performance was mind-blowing," MacKaye recalled. He ran up to Corin and Tracy at a picnic the next day so he could shake their hands and tell them how much he had loved their songs, and his bandmate Guy Picciotto chimed in that their set had really moved him.

"It was amazing to have that kind of support," Corin said.

"My heart dropped. My knees were all jello," Tracy said. "It all seemed really unreal."

The International Pop Underground Convention went on for four more days, musicians and fans from around the world cramming the compact downtown for what amounted to a giant homecoming weekend for nerds and weirdos. As if the nightly shows and post-show dance parties weren't enough, there was also a *Planet of the Apes* marathon, a pet parade, and a cakewalk, with elaborately crenellated confections laid out around the gazebo in Sylvester Park. Bratmobile played at Girl Night, with nearly everybody who had ever jammed with them getting onstage for a few songs, and then played again the next morning, a sleepless 10 A.M. set. Bikini Kill played at the North Shore, the front row packed with girls who knew all the words by now.

The IPU "was sort of an audacious idea," Calvin Johnson said. "We had hardly sold any records ever, and no one had ever cared much about anything that we did. It just seemed like if just the people who made the music showed up, that would be a success." In the end, nearly a thousand people came to Olympia to hear such bands as Fugazi, the Pastels, and the Melvins. The convention had been more of a success than anyone had dared to hope, and it changed Olympians' image of themselves; it changed what they thought they could accomplish. Slim Moon had pressed his first-ever record in time for

the convention, the *Kill Rock Stars* compilation, and he ran around town hawking the discs while his mononymous friend Tinúviel frantically silk-screened the record sleeves by hand and hung them to dry on clotheslines in her basement. Moon sold three hundred copies over the week, a good enough number that he decided to keep putting out records under the name Kill Rock Stars, with Tinuviel's help. "There was a sense of power," he said of that period in Olympia, "a feeling that our little town could affect the world."

"It was the first time you got to be king—the freaks got to be king," K's Candice Pedersen said.

Having power, affecting the world, being king—such things felt positive in the late summer of 1991. Unlike the Sub Pop-ites up the road in Seattle, who spoke of "world domination," the Olympians didn't really want to rule anything; they just wanted to build a community strong enough to keep them from feeling terribly alone, and now they had done it. Few people realized how precarious this moment was. Nirvana's major-label debut, *Nevermind*, would be released the following month and go gold almost immediately, signaling the sudden marketability of punk rock culture. This development would violently breach the bulwarks that had protected Oly's small scene from the wilds of corporate rock and, by extension, from mainstream America as a whole. It would change everything.

But in August, with *Nevermind* the twelve-ton boulder rolling unseen down the valley, the Olympia scene basked in its coup. The IPU "showed that the ideas of how things could be aren't so utopian," Calvin said later. "It's not 'could be'; it was."

The convention also marked the return of Olympia's most vocal feminist musicians. "The coolest girls in my town had all packed up and moved across the country," Moon lamented. Now they were back. Molly and Allison, yielding to the inevitable, had transferred to Evergreen. And Bikini Kill was back in town, but only temporarily, a two-month stopover before going back East to make DC their home base.

One night, Kathleen and Kathi and Billy all slept over at Tobi's parents' house and watched *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains*, a cult movie from 1981 that had gotten late-night airplay in the '80s after bombing badly at a few art houses. In the film, a teenage girl (played by a young Diane Lane) starts a punk band with her sister and cousin, and the group amasses a huge following of girls who turn up at shows dressed like the singer, with their hair done in her distinctive coiffure, a bleached skunklike stripe going up the side. Tobi and Kathi both had seen the movie on TV—it had been a main influence for Tobi in pulling together her all-girl band in high school—and Tobi had gotten her hands on a rare laserdisk copy, but this was Kathleen's first exposure to it. "I remember lying on the floor, watching *The Fabulous Stains*," she said, "and feeling

like this was exactly the most perfect moment, watching that movie, being in a band with them, the whole thing."

Bikini Kill played up and down the West Coast that fall, culminating with a Halloween show at the Paramount Theatre in Seattle, where they were to open for Mudhoney and Nirvana. This concert was a big deal. Only two years before, Bikini Kill and Nirvana had been two underground bands living in Olympia, trying to solidify lineups and set lists. Now Nirvana was blowing up. The group's instore appearance at Seattle's Beehive Records the previous month had been mobbed, two hundred kids lining up in the early afternoon for a 7 P.M. performance, begging for autographs. (According to one account, Cobain tried to tell the kids they should be listening to Bikini Kill.) By Halloween, it was blaringly obvious that Nirvana was going to be—was *already*—enormous, on a scale no punk band could even conceptualize. "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was dominating the airwaves, at least of those discerning radio stations that weren't afraid to broadcast such a ferocious song during daytime hours; MTV seemed to have the song's pep-rally-from-hell video on repeat. The unfathomable news of *Nevermind*'s going gold—selling half a million copies—came just two days before the Halloween show. The record would be platinum two weeks later.

Nirvana's success didn't shock Kathleen or Tobi or anyone in Olympia who'd known those boys. The band's chart-topping potential had always been obvious. Nikki McClure, an Olympia artist who was friends with Cobain, said that the first time she heard a tape of the group, she had a prophetic vision: "people with lighters in the Kingdome." But to many people close to Nirvana, the Halloween show felt, at least in retrospect, like the beginning of the end, the point when it stopped being fun. Cobain often spoke about feeling torn between Olympia's anti-fame values and the rock-star dreams he'd harbored since his troubled childhood. Calvin told a friend that Cobain had called him when the band was in LA recording *Nevermind* and Calvin was solidifying the IPU lineup. Cobain was wondering whether he might duck out on a planned European tour with Sonic Youth in order to play the convention in Olympia. The IPU's tagline was "No lackeys to the corporate ogre allowed," but this wasn't an ironclad policy, as L7's inclusion attested: The don't-ask-us-about-being-all-women LA band had signed to Slash/Warner Brothers but not yet put out anything on the label. Still, Calvin and Cobain "agreed it wouldn't be appropriate for [Nirvana] to play," Sub Pop's Rich Jensen reported; Cobain told Everett True, a British rock journalist, that he felt he'd been cast out of Olympia.

Nirvana had chosen the corporate route, the multi-page riders and tour buses with drivers, the gentlemen escorting them to the halls, the fancy rooms to trash and the guitars to smash and the junk to cook up that nobody would get mad about as long as they made it to the stage at the appointed time. And so the world of the spectacle, which Olympians held so meticulously at bay, was now right up in their faces.

Within the next few months, major-label representatives would begin sniffing around

at shows in Olympia, looking for the next big thing. Someone from Nirvana's label would call K Records to see whether they could discuss buying the indie label. (Candice Pedersen would reject the idea out of hand. "You don't get it; we're talking a lot of money," the caller said. But the Olympia scene had never been about money, and it didn't intend to start now.)

The Halloween show was at the three thousand-capacity Paramount Theatre, making it easily Bikini Kill's largest audience to date. By having Bikini Kill open, Nirvana seemed to be attempting to bridge the gap between its Olympia past and its excess-laden rockstar present. Cobain also invited his old neighbors Nikki McClure and Ian Dickson to dance onstage during Nirvana's set while wearing T-shirts that read GIRL and BOY. This infuriated the label, which had hired six cameramen to film the concert: The Oly dancers' twee abandon kept ruining the videographers' shots of tortured anomie.

But even these gestures did little to erase the widening chasm between Nirvana and Olympia. Kathleen, hanging out backstage, didn't like what she saw. In a zine interview the following month, she talked about the show with contempt, saying that the people there "were totally into money and getting fucked up. Kurt, Dave, and Kris [Novoselic] are really nice guys … and I'm not dissing on them, but they're getting led around by their fucking balls. They don't know what's going on; they're not in control." The whole mindless display only made the members of Bikini Kill happier to be leaving the madness behind. The next day, Olympia's coolest girl band with a boy guitarist set out on the road again, the nose of its van pointed once more toward Washington, DC.

FOUR

WHEN SHE TALKS, I HEAR THE REVOLUTION

As the Revolution Summer Girl Style Now cooled off into fall, DCs new Riot Grrrl group continued to meet, drawing a dozen or more people to weekly gatherings at Positive Force House. A bunch of the girls went to the DC Rape Crisis Center's annual Take Back the Night march, filling the streets around Dupont Circle with chants of "Women, unite!" When Operation Rescue came to town, threatening to block abortion clinic entrances, the girls woke up at dawn to stand outside the clinics and keep them open. And after Bikini Kill got back to DC from the West Coast, Riot Grrrl collaborated with Positive Force to organize a Bikini Kill show to benefit local battered women's shelters.

Many of the girls had also been part of Positive Force, and Riot Grrrl was adopting that group's familiar template of stitching young punks into the city's activist fabric through meetings, concerts, and political action. This process had an especially well-suited facilitator in twenty-five-year-old Kristin Thomson, a regular at meetings who spent her days working as an organizer at the National Organization for Women. A longtime Positive Forcenik, she loved the brass-knuckles politicking that went on at her job almost as much as she loved running the Simple Machines label and playing bass in her new band, Tsunami; she found all NOW's jockeying for relevance and influence invigorating. One of her main duties was organizing outreach to colleges, and she saw how Riot Grrrl could energize younger women whom NOW wasn't quite reaching.

DC punk was in transition. The venerable dc space announced plans to close for good in December, making Positive Force the main organizer of all-ages shows. Simple Machines, the first DIY label in DC that had ever been run by women, was gaining more of a profile. Kristin and her bandmate and labelmate Jenny Toomey began by releasing a series of four-song 7" records, each including at least one coed or all-girl band, and soon they were putting out a proper roster of indie bands. They also published "An Introductory Mechanics Guide to Putting Out Records, Cassettes and CDs," a booklet that was available through mail order and featured in *Sassy*. Jenny and Kristin knew

that a single label, like a Dischord or a K, could set the tone for an entire scene. People couldn't lobby a label owner to get him (and it was almost always a *him*, with Bettina Richards, the founding head of Thrill Jockey Records, and Lisa Fancher of the LA punk label Frontier, standing out as notable exceptions) to change what kind of music he liked. Better to put the tools in as many hands as possible. The manual explained how to contact a record-pressing plant, where to buy blank twenty-minute cassettes in bulk, and how to choose among the different options for CD cases. Jenny and Kristin hoped that by demystifying the process of giving music physical form, they might encourage other people to put out records and put their own stamp on their scenes.

A few more girls were stepping up in the DC scene that fall: teen quartet Choptank, whose members sometimes came to Riot Grrrl meetings, played good-natured shows around town, and Tsunami was starting to get well-deserved attention for its tunefully dissonant indie rock. Some bands started to invite girls to move toward the stage at shows, breaking up the mosh bloc. And among the people who took the mic between bands to announce meetings or protests, there was a new regular: Erika Reinstein talking up Riot Grrrl.

Erika was eighteen, and she already knew how to take up space in a room and on a page. Anybody who listened to her talk or who read the zine she had begun publishing, *Fantastic Fanzine*, could easily become hypnotized by her words' raw force:

> This world teaches women to hate themselves, but I refuse to listen to its message. I'm not going to let boys come between me and my girlfriends. I'm not going to try and be your idea of sexy if sexy means being thin and helpless, tottering around on high heeled shoes. I'm not going to stay home at night hating my sex because if I go out then I'm asking for trouble.

She'd spent the past few years bouncing between her mother's town-home in Reston, Virginia, and her dad's place in DC. Now, taking a year off between high school and whatever would come next, she lived in an apartment of activists in Arlington, a few blocks from Positive Force, and devoted herself to building Riot Grrrl.

By winter, the group was in a tenuous position. Several of the most enthusiastic founding members had left on tour or gone away to college; the girls who were still in high school had stuck around through the early fall, but gradually dropped off; and the few older punks who'd become regulars had drifted back to their previous lives, content to bring their conversations about sexism and gender back to the community they'd had before.

But Riot Grrrl *was* Erika's community. It was the best thing she'd ever been part of. And as the group's initial flare-up ebbed, Erika saw an aspirating glow that still might reignite. At times that winter of 1991-92, Riot Grrrl in DC was not much more than Erika

talking about it at shows, inviting girls to come to a meeting and air out whatever was on their minds. Many such meetings consisted of Erika sitting in the Positive Force living room by herself, waiting for people to show up, or talking with her two good friends from high school, May Summer and Joanna Burgess. These three from Reston, a planned community deep in the suburbs, remained at the group's core. They had been the misfits of South Lakes High—dorky, demonstrative, smart but not at the top of their class, politically aware but not the student-government type—and they reveled in their not-fitting-in, their refusal to conform. Open about their bisexuality, they didn't really date other girls but were notorious for holding hands with each other in the halls and grinding up against one another at pep rallies and in the cafeteria, deliberately making a scene.

"It wasn't fun to be made a spectacle *of*, which I think happened to me a lot in high school," May said. "But when we did it ourselves, and we chose to do it, and the fact that we were doing it together—it was our joke on *them* to be dancing and freaking them out."

At Riot Grrrl meetings, Joanna would talk about her body; she had never felt pretty enough or thin enough. May would discuss her parents' recent divorce, and sometimes she talked about an abusive boyfriend she'd had a few years ago. That had been a horrific situation, but her older sisters had helped her get away and resolve never to let anyone mistreat her like that again. May wanted her experience to be helpful to other girls in similar situations, and the meetings made her feel that her story wasn't just something that had shaped her; it was part of a larger pattern, and seeing it that way was the key to unraveling it.

Erika had the most to talk about. Memories of incest were surfacing after what felt like a long, corrosive interment. Hearing Kathleen Hanna sing songs about sexual abuse had helped Erika realize she could open up to other people about the vivid nightmares she'd been having, dreams that seemed more like past events doubling back on her. The more she talked about them, the better she felt.

Sometimes new girls came to the meetings; sometimes they kept coming back. Other would-be, might-be girl revolutionaries who saw Erika announce the group at a show that winter were intrigued, but then did nothing about it for a while. The idea had to nudge its way down into the gut first, waiting for the perfect moment to shoot back up.

The spotlight twitters on. A low rumble drives its tentative glare. Singly or in pairs or threes, they appear.

This girl was raped by her boyfriend; this girl felt fat; this girl watched her father beat her mother; this girl had four friends who had been raped, and she knew it could happen to her; this girl was tortured at night by dreams of incest she only dimly recalled; this

girl wished to touch other girls; this girl felt powerless, full of rage, for reasons she couldn't even specify.

It's okay to feel uncomfortable about this. We can go ahead and feel uneasy at the voyeurism that attends these girl revolutionaries parading down the runway of narrative, in their frayed cutoffs and oversize T-shirts.

If I tell only one or two, it won't be true. The point is that there were many.

The point is that no one encapsulated it.

The point is that they were various.
The point is that the pain of all girls is not alike.

Mary Fondriest didn't go to any meetings in the summer and fall of 1991. What was she doing then? It's hard for her to remember. Things that happen at seventeen have a habit of turning blurry and bleeding together when looked back on a dozen years later. Mary had grown up in Detroit with her mother, younger sister, and volatile father, then moved—minus the father—to Alexandria, Virginia. Mary started over at a new junior high school, unlucky enough to be the new girl in class at the age when fitting in is most important. She spent a lot of time at home by herself or looking after her sister. Belonging anywhere felt impossible. She became depressed. She finished junior high and moved on to high school. She made a few friends, all boys. She was smoking a lot of pot, drinking beer. She missed having a best girlfriend. Her mother worked three jobs. Mary felt unseen. A mass of instinctual, unfocused anger was assembling inside of her, with no place to go but out.

Then one night this girl got up on stage.

That's how so many of these stories go. A girl onstage, a girl at a show: She seemed so cool, so tough, so together. Dozens of these moments, scores of them, are lodged here. It's the high school friend-crush mobilized to political ends. Then I saw this girl, and she gave me a tape, sold me a zine, told me about a meeting. Then I saw this girl—and the jolt of recognition and reflex-sharp longing: I wanted to get to know her, to learn how to be like her, to ...

"Hey girlfriend," Kathleen was singing. "I got a proposition."

The proposition wasn't that you would go back to her room, alone; it was that you would come out into the common space with her and all the rest of the girls. There was a deliberate, fuzzy-edged erotics to this, for sure: "In her kiss, I taste the revolution!" screeched the pinnacle of the song "Rebel Girl," which had come out that summer on Bikini Kill's *Revolution Girl Style Now* cassette and was well on its way to becoming a movement's fight song. But in that revolutionary kiss, there may not have been any tongue. As for third base—well, there is that line about hips, but we have to look at it in

context.

It's the song's second verse. We've just had a chorus that went "Rebel girl rebel girl rebel girl you are the queen of my world," sung-chanted to a beat that could govern a drill line of revolutionaries in vulva-shaped berets. Dust is still settling from that seismic event, the distorted guitar slides into a low, ominous grumble, and we are held in place by a ceaseless bass line, steady report of snare drum flams, and Kathleen's voice:

When she talks, I hear the revolution
In her hips, there's revolution

These hips are made not for fucking, though, but for walking. And that's just what they do—

When she walks the revolution's coming

—walk over to the speaker in the song, so the hips' owner can—here it comes, mounting to an unbridled scream—

In her kiss I TASTE THE REVOLUTION

On the word "I," Kathleen sounds like her mouth turning itself inside out, every consonant of the alphabet dissolving into that vowel. She's gone over the edge; she's become something else. Listening, being one with her "I," we go inside out too.

The rebel girl is the queen of "my," not "our," world—the '70s collectivism ("We are a gentle angry people") has morphed into the self-centered language of alienated adolescence and been adapted for the political primacy, especially potent in the early '90s, of the personal story. Yet this chorus is written to be sung along to, first alone but then in a group: moving from the lonely bedroom or bathroom mirror to the front row of a show.

With this incantation, the girls raise the shade of the role model, the someone they've been longing to see. The intensity of their desire, the power of that projection, conjures her into the room. The invoked apparition sharpens, focuses. They make of each other that girl. They make her themselves.

I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah.

Honey, if you want it that bad, it's yours.

And so Mary Fondriest, depressed high school senior, was at a show in early 1992. What matters is not who played—she can't remember—but that between bands she saw this girl get up onstage: Erika announcing the time and location of the weekly Riot Grrrl meetings.

Mary already knew what Riot Grrrl was: a bunch of lame girls creating divisiveness in the scene, being sexist against boys, fighting sexism the wrong way or making up the problem altogether. Bitches; man-haters. That's what her male friends said, anyway. But something about seeing Erika onstage converged with something about that moment in Mary's life and made her decide to do the thing that was guaranteed to make her uncool in the eyes of all her friends.

She describes it as courage: "I just got up the courage to go one day." And rebellion: "It felt like something I wasn't supposed to be doing. It wasn't cool at all. It was really scary."

She made it to the meeting. She knew almost as soon as she walked in the door that these girls would understand her; she could just feel it. Talking with them, listening to them, made her knotted-up anger start to make sense. The roots of her rage: "Having been raised with an angry father. Having a mother that wasn't around. Feeling disenfranchised at high school. Typical things—just your average disconnection." At the meetings these problems changed from individual trials—from disconnection—into a system of unfairness, a room that could be torn down from inside. The girls just had to wrap their arms around the columns and tug.

By springtime, Riot Grrrl DC was growing. A core of about a dozen girls attended meetings faithfully, and a few new faces appeared each week. Some people came only once and decided it wasn't for them: A woman in her thirties felt too old for the group; a lesbian found the group not gay enough for her (most of the girls identified as bisexual, but by and large they dated boys if they dated anybody at all). Others showed up to find, like Mary, that they felt entirely at home.

Weekly meetings weren't rigidly planned. Occasionally there would be a project to work on, like silk-screening Riot Grrrl T-shirts or making stencil cutouts and then spray-painting woman symbols on sidewalks. Some days were zine days, when everybody filled a half-sheet of paper with writing or drawing or collage, then rubber-cemented the pages together into a plump compilation to be xeroxed by whichever of the girls had a good copy scam running at a local copy shop or a parent's office.

Mostly, the girls just talked. Their stories ranged from extremes of rape, incest, and child sexual abuse to those widespread indignities of female adolescence, so common that girls seemed to be expected to take them in stride: the makeup and hair-mousse ads warning girls they would never get a date unless they looked like models; the supposedly cool boy who forced a kiss at a party and acted like nothing had happened; the English teacher who everybody knew gave better grades to girls in short skirts; the man on the bus who said "What's your number, sweetheart?" and wouldn't back off.

In 1992, feminism was in the news again—Faludi's *Backlash* spent thirty-five weeks

on the *New York Times* best-seller list—and the adult world was even beginning to pay belated attention to *girls'* problems. A new national study on rape grabbed headlines that spring, coming on the heels of high-profile acquaintancerape trials against William Kennedy Smith and professional boxer Mike Tyson, and arriving smack in the middle of debates over the prevalence of rape on college campuses (Katie Roiphe's *New York Times* op-ed "Date Rape Hysteria" was published in late 1991, a precursor to her 1993 best seller *The Morning After)*. The new report, "Rape in America," revealed that its titular offense skewed even younger than people had suspected: "The true shocker," *Time* magazine wrote of the study, "is that 61 percent of rape victims were younger than eighteen at the time of their attack." "A tragedy of youth," newspapers blared, quoting one of the study's authors. That same year, the American Association of University Women published a report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, about the gender gap in academic performance, especially in math and science; and feminist psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan came out with a study documenting girls' higher rates of depression and anxiety, and tracking the nosedive girls' self-esteem took during adolescence. Gilligan and Brown described seeing in teenage girls "evidence of a loss of voice, a struggle to authorize or take seriously their own experience." Plus, now that the Anita Hill hearings had turned *sexual harassment* into a catchphrase, it was suddenly dawning on people that such harassment was epidemic in high schools and even middle schools; and that behavior which school personnel had long accepted as boys being boys was feeding girls' depression, anxiety, and self-criticism.

Not that any of this was *new*. God, no. Teenage girls were simply living some of the thick residuals of sexism the feminist movement hadn't managed to destroy. Rigid gender roles were alive and well and forced on girls as they hit puberty, which was especially difficult for children of the '70s to swallow. Many of the riot grrrls had been taught by at least somebody—if not a parent, then a supportive teacher or coach—that they could do anything they wanted, and that there were no barriers. Then they found out it wasn't true. *Hello!* Confusing! They could do anything *except* walk down the hall by the shop classroom, anything *except* stop shaving their legs, anything *except* wear that skirt to the party, anything *except* play drums without being exclaimed over like some sort of circus seal, anything *except* choose sex and not get whispered about as a slut. Why on earth wouldn't a teenage girl be confused, depressed, anxious, angry? How the hell could she not be?

And how could a new, energetic movement that finally acknowledged all this stuff, that invited girls to sound off about it, that promised—in an era of apathy—to make it cool for girls to give a shit, talk about how politics affected their lives, and take action —how could such a movement possibly stay underground for long?

That April, the night before the huge pro-choice march on the Mall, Bikini Kill opened for Fugazi and L7 at the benefit show-slash-pep rally that Kristin Thomson had organized, with help from members of Riot Grrrl and Positive Force. MTV had wanted to film the show: The network was launching a pro-voting campaign, Rock the Vote, and adding more political content to its celebrity-heavy news show. But it was still the organ of commodified youth culture, and true punks would have nothing to do with it. Plus, the channel wanted to install tracks for its cameras in front of the stage, cutting off the audience from the musicians. There could be no better metaphor for the sinister reach of the spectacle, trying to butt its way into the middle of a human interaction, to turn an authentic exchange of energy into debased image-production. Forget it. Bikini Kill and Fugazi both refused to be taped, and MTV backed off.

Bikini Kill was in top form that night. The band had spent the winter of 1991–92 touring and recording, honing its set to a poison-tipped point. Tobi was laid back and cool as ever behind her drum kit, not even seeming to break a sweat. Kathi planted herself in front of her bass amp, chewing gum and barely moving as she played. Billy, wearing a black sleeveless dress and sporting the word RIOT in block letters down both his arms, got a moment in the spotlight near the end of the set, when for two minutes he took the mic and shrieked “GEORGE BUSH IS NO HERO” over and over while prowling the stage like a rangy, loose-jointed jungle cat, then rolling on the ground and kicking his legs in the air.

Kathleen’s voice was undeniable, her stage moves provocative. In “Lil Red Riding Bitch,” she tore the old fairy tale a new asshole: “These are my long red nails / The better to scratch out your eyes.” On the line “This is my ass,” she whirled around, bent over, and flipped up her dress to reveal the pale globe of it, cleanly bisected by a thong bikini’s thin black line. Later, while Billy handled some guitar troubles, Kathleen sang a snip of Hall & Oates—”Oh, here she comes; watch out, boys, she’ll chew you up”—and segued into a Patti Smith-style spoken word piece:

I’m a man-eater
I’m a real bitch walking down your street
Cause you know there’s two kinds of girls: good ones and bad ones.
And if you wear that dress tonight
and if you wear those high heels
and if you expose your bare ass to two hundred people
you KNOW what kind of girl you are, honey.

It was a night for the riot grrrls to be proud, dancing and whooping at the front of the theater. When Erika got onstage and Kathleen gave her the mic so she could scream her head off, that made it official: In less than a year, these teenage girls had gone from

beleaguered outcasts of suburbia to creators of culture, makers of zines and shirts and necklaces, queens of their own scene, and anointed entourage of a badass band.

L7 played second. The LA band—whose breakout album, *Bricks Are Heavy*, would drop the following week—had recently founded Rock for Choice, an organization that sponsored benefit concerts to support abortion rights. L7 was also the only group that hadn't objected to MTV's designs on the night.

Fugazi closed the night with "Suggestion," a song about street harassment and rape. For the past five years, the song's first-person female viewpoint—"Why can't I walk down the street free of suggestion?" MacKaye would sing; "Is my body my only trait in the eyes of men?"—had raised no eyebrows. The band had long invited female singers onstage for the song; at the IPU that past summer, a girl who many in the audience knew to be a rape survivor had gotten through a few lines before breaking into tears. In DC the guest vocalist was often Amy Pickering, formerly of Fire Party, and she sang it at the Sanctuary that night, lifting up her shirt while shouting the lines "I've got some skin / You want to look in," and talking to the crowd about an abortion she had had. "Suggestion" was still Fugazi's song, though, and in recent months it had begun to sound to some riot grrrls like a self-righteous white boy appropriating girls' issues so he could appear more virtuous.

MacKaye resented the criticism. "It's a *human* issue!" he said. "And it was a deeply important issue to me." He had written the song after a female friend came home inconsolable after an attempted assault; it was his attempt to explore the emotional terrain of harassment and gender roles. The end of the song, when the speaker shifted from the female "I" to a gender-neutral "we," went, "We play the roles that they've assigned us," and the audience usually shouted the final line along with MacKaye: "We are all guilty." No other all-male group of such stature was playing a song that dramatized sexual assault and blasted its audience for being complicit. But the riot grrrls didn't want any favors from Fugazi. To find their own voices, they felt, they couldn't accept anyone else's attempts to do it for them.

Less than three weeks after the March for Women's Lives, the Supreme Court heard arguments in *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylania v. Casey*, the case so many feminists feared would spell an end to *Roe v. Wade*. The Pennsylvania law at issue required married women to notify their husbands before obtaining an abortion, mandated a twenty-four-hour waiting period, and obliged girls under eighteen to obtain a parent's consent. By 1992, thirty-six states had such parental notification or parental consent laws on the books, though half these restrictions remained tied up in legal battles. Virginia's state legislature had passed one such law just that March. The Democratic governor eventually vetoed it, bowing to the outcry from his base—as the

Democratic Leadership Council pushed the party toward the right on many issues, abortion was one of the biggest remaining differences between the two parties—but parental notification laws were extraordinarily popular nationwide, with as many as 75 percent of voters favoring them.

After arguments in *Casey* had wrapped up in May 1992, the justices took a preliminary vote on the case, showing that a five-justice majority was prepared to overrule *Roe*. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who had penned that case's antiabortion dissent in 1973, triumphantly went off to draft a new opinion. Only a last-minute change of heart by Justice Anthony Kennedy saved *Roe v. Wade*. On the court's final day in session, June 29, the justices issued a ringing reaffirmation of a woman's fundamental right to have an abortion.

Among the contested clauses in the Pennsylvania law, though, only the part making women notify their husbands was struck down. In one curt sentence, the court allowed the parental consent provision to go into effect.

That spring, Riot Grrrl DC held a slumber party and went out painting graffiti on concrete walls. GEORGE STAY OUT OF MY BUSH, they wrote, and FUCK PATRIOTISM, and REAL BOYZ WEAR PINK. Another night, they stenciled Riot Grrrl logos on the sidewalks around Positive Force House.

"We were playful," Mary Fondriest said. "I remember sitting on the couch together was really significant because we were next to each other, we were touching—shared physical space."

They were teenagers, which meant that sometimes they were still kids. In many cases they hadn't been able to enjoy their childhoods, whether due to abuse, divorce, or just knowing that they were somehow different from their classmates. So now they embraced the word *girl*, they filled their zines with childish clip-art drawings, they had sleepovers, they held back their bangs with brightly colored plastic barrettes, they nestled next to each other on the couch. They would have another childhood for as long as they wanted, and they would be the ones to art-direct it this time.

Irene Chien came into the group in June 1992, while living at home in Maryland after her first year at college in Ohio. Irene wasn't desperate to find girls she could relate to: She had her best friends from high school, a tight crew of Chinese-American girls who understood her strict family and her anxieties about boys. She didn't need an introduction to feminist theory, either. She'd gotten that from her first year of classes at Oberlin, so effectively that at Riot Grrrl meetings she would sometimes catch herself thinking, "Oh, this appears to be a third wave of feminism that is modeled off of consciousness-raising groups in the '70s but is also related to a different kind of feminism that's not radically separatist ..."

Irene was drawn to the meetings because she wanted to link the theory she was learning with the visceral realities of her life. In short, she was there to get politicized, and to develop for herself an identity as "a defiant young woman, which was never the way that I thought of myself or that anybody thought of me." She became so passionate about the group that she baked up her own batch of Riot Grrrl Shrinky Dink necklaces and sold them, along with her zine, *Fake*, at punk shows. She enthusiastically applied her new tools of feminist analysis to everything she saw, including the meetings themselves. Frequently a girl would just complain in a time-honored female way about a boy not calling her back, and people might not take the extra step to discuss why she was putting so much energy into that relationship or what else she might want to focus on. Irene felt like these conversations reiterated boys as central to girls' lives, and they also made her feel less cool or worldly than the girls who had this complaining to do. Irene and her friends didn't ever talk to boys, not for any feminist reason but because they didn't know how.

When Kathleen was around, everything made sense, transcendently. In retrospect, Irene realized, "I wasn't looking for peers; I was looking for leaders." Kathleen came to meetings whenever she was in town that summer. At twenty-three, she had several years on just about everybody else there, and the girls felt the age difference. But Kathleen didn't lord it over people. She didn't play up her fame, either; any friction with bandmates or reporters—in recent months Bikini Kill had been written about in publications including the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Sassy*, and music magazines *Option* and *Melody Maker*—became just one more thing to discuss and analyze with the group.

The girls were grateful for Kathleen's consciousness, a telephoto lens effortlessly zooming out from specific experiences to the big picture. Ananda La Vita, who had just finished her first year at Eugene Lang College in New York City and was back in town, said Kathleen was so insightful and inspiring that just a few words out of her mouth could change the whole feeling in a room. At one meeting, after Ananda finished talking about her family troubles, Kathleen looked her in the eye and said something incredibly simple like "Of course your feelings are totally valid," and the way she said it was so compassionate and affirming that Ananda nearly started bawling. Kathleen had a way of talking that made all the present obstacles seem temporary; she brought the future victory into focus. When she talked about the revolution, it wasn't just rhetoric; she meant it. She never seemed to doubt that all these young women working together had the power to end sexism, rape, harassment, and abuse. Who could resist being part of that?

Once Irene heard Kathleen tell a story about a female relative, an aunt or grandmother, who had suffered from chronic pain and was always apologizing for not being able to take good enough care of the people around her: I'm so sorry that I can't do

the dishes tonight, but my back is just hurting me too much.

Women of our generation don't feel like that exactly, Kathleen said. We don't expect ourselves to be tireless housekeepers and cooks for our husbands. The world has changed for the better that way.

But she went on to talk about subtler ways women and girls might put pressure on themselves to be heroes, to be loyal, to nurture friends or family, to heal people in pain. What is our programming as females making us feel obligated to do? she asked the group and herself. What do we let ourselves feel guilty for failing at?

By the time Kathleen told the parable about her relative, she had spent a year touring extensively, writing and recording two EPs, keeping her band together while starting two new projects, and finessing her role with Riot Grrrl DC. She didn't want to be considered the movement's leader, and while the girls themselves didn't see her as being in charge, exactly, she was set apart. "She was way older than us," May explained. "She seemed a little bit like—'Oh, it'd be so cool to be like you when we're grown up.' "Mary was blunter: "There was a hierarchy, even though nobody really wanted one."

Kathleen saw a younger version of herself reflected in these girls. "I knew they had their own specific shit going on as well," she said, yet her identification with them, and her empathy for them, ran deep. She told them that if they ever needed a ride anyplace, if they were stuck at home and wanted to get out, they should call her and she'd come pick them up. She went to Joanna's sleepover birthday party in Reston. She read the girls' zines and gave specific, encouraging feedback. In June, after Vice President Dan Quayle attacked the TV character Murphy Brown for having a baby out of wedlock, Mary made a zine about the incident; Kathleen told Mary that she loved the zine and had put it on her coffee table. Later, she would send Ananda a postcard that read, "You make me not wanna give up." She attended meetings whenever she could manage it, and when she had to miss any she felt compelled to apologize.

She had chosen to save herself by saving others, and she had a real gift for it. But her generosity was already beginning to take its toll on her.

Some of the riot grrrls knew their group wasn't perfect. They were good at talking about what they had in common, but they weren't sure how to approach their differences. For instance, while a majority of the people involved were white and middle-class, quite a few were Latina or black or Asian, and some had grown up in struggling families. These things were rarely discussed.

Academic feminism at that time was talking a lot about how being a woman meant something different for women who were black or poor or disabled or queer, and how the '70s feminist language of "sisterhood" and "women's issues" had concealed an assumption of whiteness, class privilege, and so forth as default traits. Some of the girls

in Riot Grrrl looked around the room each week and, seeing the danger, wanted to learn from and avoid the pitfalls of the past. So far, nobody was issuing position papers or —well, it would happen in zines this time, and it hadn't happened yet; there were no angry writings pointed inward at the group or specific members, no furious denunciations or bitter trashings. They still had a chance, they hoped, to get it right this time.

The discussions at meetings were studded with intense stories of trauma, which made some girls uncomfortable. One member, a women's studies major at the University of Maryland, worried that people were trying to help each other with issues that nobody actually knew how to deal with. But what could she do? The girls talking about incest and rape were relieved to finally have a place to spill their guts, and if some of the others felt like they were in over their heads, they were glad to feel that by listening and being supportive they were helping, at least a little. It was like punk: If somebody gave you drumsticks and said, "Play a show," you'd just hit the drums. You'd learn that way. It might not ultimately be enough; for the girls staggering under the heaviest memories, simple support from peers could never complete the hard work of healing. But it could start a process.

If the girls had known how to get therapy, or even just that they needed it, they might have done that instead. But therapy might not have been the right thing for them then. From a teenage point of view, going to a shrink can imply that there is something wrong with you that needs to be in some way fixed. If you're angry or confused or depressed about things that are totally unfair, is it really your *reaction* that's the problem?

"When you get right down to the heart of the matter," Kathleen sings in the song "This Is Not a Test." Billy's guitar comes in at the beginning of the song playing in a different key from the one Kathleen is singing in. She holds her ground at first, but slides around and ultimately comes into phase by the time the verse starts. It's a breakneck song without any delicacy to it, the melody barrelling through atop three punk chords. Kathleen sings a litany of woes, as if running through a diagnostic checklist for a psychologist: "I'm sad. I can't sleep. There's somebody following me."

In the lead-in to the first chorus—"When you get right down to the bottom! of! it! all!"—the guitar seizes up for a moment, a quick breath, and Kathleen's voice muscles through the caesura. "You're dumb! I'm not!" she shouts: I may be feeling bad, but you are the one with the problem; you're the one who is the problem.

"You're FUCKED!" The guitar returns with a three-chord rebuttal, twice. "I'm not!" Kathleen sings into the next silence, and keeps singing over the guitar's subsequent re-entry, tracing a descending punk melisma with bluesy tone-bend at the bottom: "I'm nah-ah-ah-ah-aht." This is the nut of the song: It's here, in this fluid redirecting, this redefinition of pathology. And that "not," when it comes back, is what closes out the song, ends the battle of wills between fretted guitar and supple voice. Cymbals and

chords cut out abruptly, at the push of a Mute button, leaving a full two seconds of the final "not," a single tone this time, boring its way through space, steadfast.

You're fucked; I'm not.