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Death of a Revolutionary

Shulamith Firestone helped to create a new society. But she couldn't live in it. By Susan Faludi

Firestone, top left, in 1970, at the beach, reading "The Second Sex"; center left, with Gloria Steinem, in 2000; and bottom right, in 1997. Best known for her writings, Firestone also launched the first major radical-feminist groups in the country, which made headlines in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies with confrontational protests and street theatre. Photographs by Clockwise from top left: Courtesy Laya Firestone Seghi; Santi Visalli / Getty; Charles Gatewood / The Image Works; Courtesy Lori Hiris; JP Laffont / Sygma / Corbis; Jo Freeman

When Shulamith Firestone's body was found late last August, in her studio apartment on the fifth floor of a tenement walkup on East Tenth Street, she had been dead for some days. She was sixty-seven, and she had battled schizophrenia for decades, surviving on public assistance. There was no food in the apartment, and one theory is that Firestone starved, though no autopsy was conducted, by preference of her Orthodox Jewish family. Such a solitary demise would have been unimaginable to anyone who knew Firestone in the late nineteen-sixties, when she was at the epicenter of the radical-feminist movement, surrounded by some of the same women who, a month after her death, gathered in St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, to pay their respects.

The memorial service verged on radical-feminist revival. Women distributed flyers on consciousness-raising, and displayed copies of texts published by the Redstockings, a New York group that Firestone co-founded. The WBAI radio host Fran Luck called for the Tenth Street studio to be named the Shulamith Firestone Memorial Apartment, and rented "in perpetuity" to "an older and meaningful feminist." Kathie Sarachild, who had pioneered consciousness-raising and coined the slogan "Sisterhood Is Powerful," in 1968, proposed convening a Shulamith Firestone Women's Liberation Memorial Conference on What Is to Be Done. After several calls from the dais to "seize the moment" and "keep it going," a dozen women decamped to an organizing meeting at Sarachild's apartment.

Midway through the service, the feminist author Kate Millett, now seventy-eight, approached the dais, bearing a copy of "Airless Spaces" (1998), the only book that Firestone published after her landmark manifesto, "The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution," which came out in 1970. Millett read from a chapter entitled "Emotional Paralysis," in which Firestone wrote of herself in the third person:

She could not read. She could not write. . . . She sometimes recognized on the faces of others joy and ambition and other emotions she could recall having had once, long ago. But her life was ruined, and she had no salvage plan.

Clearly, something terrible had happened to Firestone, but it was not her despair alone that led Millett to choose this passage. When she finished reading, she said, “I think we should remember Shulie, because we are in the same place now.” It was hard to say which moment the mourners were there to mark: the passing of Firestone or that of a whole generation of feminists who had been unable to thrive in the world they had done so much to create.

In the late nineteen-sixties, Firestone and a small cadre of her “sisters” were at the radical edge of a movement that profoundly changed American society. At the time, women held almost no major elected positions, nearly every prestigious profession was a male preserve, homemaking was women’s highest calling, abortion was virtually illegal, and rape was a stigma to be borne in silence. Feminism had been in the doldrums ever since the first wave of the American women’s movement won the vote, in 1920, and lost the struggle for greater emancipation. Feminist energy was first co-opted by Jazz Age consumerism, then buried in decades of economic depression and war, until the dissatisfactions of postwar women, famously described by Betty Friedan in “The Feminine Mystique” (1963), gave rise to a “second wave” of feminism. The radical feminists emerged alongside a more moderate women’s movement, forged by such groups as the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966 by Friedan, Aileen Hernandez, and others, and championed by such publications as *Ms.*, founded in 1972 by Gloria Steinem and Letty Cottin Pogrebin. That movement sought, as now’s statement of purpose put it, “to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society,” largely by means of equal pay and equal representation. The radical feminists, by contrast, wanted to reconceive public life and private life entirely.

Few were as radical, or as audacious, as Shulamith Firestone. Just over five feet tall, with a mane of black hair down to her waist, and piercing dark eyes behind Yoko Ono glasses, Firestone was referred to within the movement as “the firebrand” and “the fireball.” “She was aflame, incandescent,” Ann Snitow, the director of the gender-studies program at the New School and a member of the early radical cadre, told me. “It was thrilling to be in her company.”

Firestone was best known for her writing. *Notes from the First Year*, a periodical she founded in 1968 (followed, in 1970 and 1971, by the *Second Year* and the *Third Year*), generated the fundamental discourse of radical feminism, introducing such concepts as “the personal is political” and “the myth of the vaginal orgasm.” Most of all, Firestone is remembered for “The Dialectic of Sex,” a book that she wrote in a fervor, in a matter of months.

In some two hundred pages, “Dialectic” reinterpreted Marx, Engels, and Freud to make a case that a “sexual class system” ran deeper than any other social or economic divide. The traditional family structure, Firestone argued, was at the core of women’s oppression. “Unless revolution uproots the basic social organization, the biological family—the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled—the tapeworm of exploitation will never be annihilated,” Firestone wrote. She elaborated, with characteristic bluntness: “Pregnancy is barbaric”; childbirth is “like shitting a pumpkin”; and childhood is “a supervised nightmare.” She understood that such statements were unlikely to be welcomed—especially, perhaps, by other women. “This is painful,” she warned on the book’s first page, because “no matter how many levels of consciousness one reaches, the problem always goes deeper.” She went on:

Feminists have to question, not just all of *Western* culture, but the organization of culture itself, and further, even the very organization of nature. Many women give up in despair: if that’s how deep it goes they don’t want to know.

But going to the roots of inequality, Firestone believed, was what set radical feminism apart from the mainstream movement: “The end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege*but of the sex distinction itself: genital difference between human beings would no longer matter culturally.”

In one of the book’s later chapters, Firestone floated a “sketchy” futuristic notion that she intended only “to stimulate thinking in fresh areas rather than to dictate the action.” She envisioned a world in which women might be liberated by artificial reproduction outside the womb; in which collectives took the place of families; and in which children were granted “the right of immediate transfer” from abusive adults. Predictably, the proposal stimulated more outrage than fresh thought, though many of Firestone’s ideas—children’s rights, an end to “male” work and traditional marriage, and social relations altered through a “cybernetic” computer revolution—have proved prescient.

“Dialectic” was both lauded and excoriated, often in the same review; the *Times* called its author “brilliant” and “preposterous.” It was ridiculed on talk shows as it climbed the best-seller list, and was cast as “the little red book for women” while it was changing world views in un-red female America. Millett, whose book “Sexual Politics” appeared the same year as “Dialectic,” told me, “I was taking on the obvious male chauvinists. Shulie was taking on the whole ball of wax. What she was doing was much more dangerous.”

Firestone was equally important to women's liberation as an organizer. She launched the first major radical-feminist groups in the country, and played a key role in conceiving the movement's theoretical positions and organizational structures, and in reconnecting it to a lost history. And she did this in just three years. Jo Freeman, a feminist writer and activist who worked with Firestone from the beginning, said at the memorial, "When I think back on Shulie's contribution to the movement, I think of her as a shooting star. She flashed brightly across the midnight sky, and then she disappeared."

Over Labor Day weekend in 1967, a coalition of leftist groups involved in the battles over civil rights and the Vietnam War convened the National Conference for New Politics, in Chicago. Two thousand young activists attended, including Firestone, who was then twenty-two. She was living in a gang-ridden neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago, working as a mail sorter at the post office and studying figurative painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She had come to Chicago from St. Louis, three years earlier, and her political experience was limited to a stint protesting racial policies at a St. Louis bank and a dalliance with the Catholic Worker movement. Yet, at the conference, she noticed immediately that a crucial topic had been left off the agenda: the secondary status of women. It was a common omission; the New Left was pervaded by a machoism typified by Stokely Carmichael's quip that "the only position for women" in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee "is prone." It was then that Firestone met Jo Freeman, who shared her dismay, and they drafted a resolution calling for equitable marital and property laws, "complete control by women of their own bodies," and a fifty-one-per-cent representation of women on the conference floor.

The chairman skipped over it. "They laughed at us," Freeman recalled. "The chair said, 'Move on, little girl. We have more important issues to talk about here than women's problems.' And then he reached out and literally patted Shulie on the head." Soon afterward, Firestone and Freeman convened Westside, the first radical-feminist group in Chicago. Yet many of the women in Westside, and its successor, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, thought that the concerns of the male-dominated New Left should take priority. Naomi Weisstein, then a young neuroscientist at the University of Chicago, recalled, "The first thing the Chicago Women's Liberation Union did was vote to give half our money to the Black Panthers." Firestone, who had no interest in what she called "Ladies' Auxiliaries of the Left," united a faction that called itself, simply, the feminists.

A few months before the New Politics conference, some film students in Chicago had chosen Firestone to be the subject of a project on the Now Generation. Their gemlike documentary,

“Shulie,” chronicling her life as an aspiring painter, captures her ardency. “I just keep thinking, I’m twenty-two and what have I done?” she tells one of the directors, Jerry Blumenthal. “I want to do something. Instead of beauty and power occasionally, I want to achieve a world where it’s there all the time, in every word and every brushstroke, and not just now and then.”

That intensity emerged in Firestone early, and it was a source of antagonism within her family. She was the second child and the oldest daughter of six children—three girls and three boys—born to Kate Weiss, a German Jew who had fled the Holocaust (she came from a long line of Orthodox scholars, rabbis, and cantors), and Sol Firestone, a travelling salesman from an assimilated Jewish family in Brooklyn, who served in the Army during the Second World War. In 1945, while Kate nursed the newborn Shulamith, Sol’s unit marched into the liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. As a teen-ager, Sol, studying on his own, had become Orthodox. With a convert’s zeal, he controlled his younger siblings and, later, his children—especially his oldest daughter. As Tirzah Firestone, the youngest of the three girls, recalled, “My father threw his rage at Shulie.”

Laya Firestone Seghi, the second daughter and the family peacemaker, who is now a psychotherapist, remembered an ugly fight when Shulamith was sixteen. Father and daughter grappled on the stairs, with Sol shouting, “I’ll kill you!,” and Shulamith yelling back, “I’ll kill you first!” Firestone’s younger brother Ezra suspected that the animosity derived from a deep commonality. “He wouldn’t bend, and she wouldn’t bend,” Ezra said. “They were both very brilliant and very, very opinionated.” Kate did not intervene. “My mother had this completely passive view of femininity that was governed by what she regarded as ‘what Jewish women do,’ ” Tirzah said. Shulamith endlessly questioned her parents’ tenets. When she asked Sol why she had to make her brother’s bed, he told her, “Because you’re a girl.”

In the Firestone home, a girl who did not follow the rules was destined to be cast out. Laya violated the Sabbath once, by reading a book in bed with a flashlight, when she was seventeen, and was banished from the house. Tirzah married a devout Christian and was formally disowned. (Later, she embraced Jewish Renewal, a mystical approach to Judaism that champions feminine spirituality, and became a Renewal rabbi, earning further paternal opprobrium.)

Shulamith’s younger brothers, Ezra and Nechemia, remained strictly Orthodox; Ezra later studied to be a rabbi, and Nechemia became a West Bank settler. Only the oldest son, Daniel, violated his father’s wishes: instead of continuing his yeshiva education, he studied classics and philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis. Shulamith skipped a year of high school to

join him there. Born less than twelve months apart, she and Daniel had been inseparable as children, “almost like twins,” she wrote in “Airless Spaces.” But she added:

By our sophomore year . . . I was no longer observant, and one Sabbath when our parents were away he beat me for breaking the Jewish law. It was over some trifle I can’t even remember now. But he never spoke to me again.

“Marx was on to something more profound than he knew,” Firestone wrote in “Dialectic,” “when he observed that the family contained within itself in embryo all the antagonisms that later develop on a wide scale within the society and state.” For her, the only family tie that proved sustaining was the one between sisters, in particular the one between her and Laya, who became, as Laya herself said, “Shulie’s prime support system.” They roomed together in Chicago, and, later, Laya served reluctantly as Shulamith’s representative and mediator in movement disputes. “Shulie recognized the unfairness of it,” Laya said. “She’d say, ‘It’s not right for me to make you into the wife.’ But, at the same time, she needed it.”

In October, 1967, Firestone told the Westside group that she was moving to New York. “I assumed that she was going to advance her art,” Freeman said. Several of Firestone’s art-student friends told me that she was also fleeing a physically abusive boyfriend. In an unpublished roman à clef, which Firestone worked on during the decades before her death, she recalled his repeated beatings; one time, he hit her so hard that he knocked a tooth out of place. “I think she was afraid he was going to kill her,” Andrew Klein, a close friend of Firestone’s at the time, told me. The fear wasn’t something that she shared with other feminists. The only “sister” she told was Laya.

In New York, Firestone settled in the East Village—then a declining neighborhood of Eastern European immigrants, which had become an outpost for both the drug trade and the counterculture. She took a one-room apartment on East Second Street, which she kept as an art studio when she found the place on Tenth Street. She worked as a cocktail waitress to support herself, and drew and painted in every spare moment. She made dark Expressionist portraits of family members and also of solitary anonymous women and nineteenth-century radicals, including the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass and the feminist writer Margaret Fuller.

Soon after she arrived, Firestone and Pam Allen, a civil-rights activist she had met in Chicago, recruited half a dozen young women from civil-rights and antiwar groups, and co-founded New York Radical Women, the first group of its kind in the city. They met weekly in the women’s

apartments or in a borrowed office on the Lower East Side. “That women would choose to get together to talk about their lives without any males present was radical,” Allen says. “It freaked people out.” Women who attended those early meetings describe a time of “euphoria,” an “explosion of ideas,” and a kind of “falling in love.” In a letter to Laya, dated February 3, 1968, Firestone wrote, “I think we’re really onto something new & good, that is, radical feminism, and if we don’t get fucked up, we’ll take a decidedly different direction.”

Firestone was a catalytic force. “She already had the arguments, already had a plan,” Colette Price, an early member of the group, told me. “To us she was the American Simone de Beauvoir.” Carol Giardina, who went on to co-found Gainesville Women’s Liberation, in Florida, the first such group in the South, said that Firestone knew “that groups have to have an organizing structure and principles . . . or else you are just higgledy-piggledy all over the place.” Yet hierarchy was anathema to many feminists, who saw leadership as oppressive and male, and sisterhood as a community of equals. Firestone ran afoul of this egalitarianism. She was impatient with “scut work,” her former comrades recall; she “refused to collate,” and “wouldn’t type.” The author and former *Ms.* editor Robin Morgan still sounds annoyed when she talks about the time that a few of the women decided to clean a meeting space, and Firestone said, “I’m an intellectual—I don’t sweep floors.” On one occasion, after Firestone had spoken at length, a woman chastised her for having “male hormones.” Firestone pointed to her breasts and said, “But look at these!”

The sisterhood was no more welcoming to feminist “mothers.” But Firestone, who had extensively researched feminism’s first wave and had dedicated “Dialectic” to Simone de Beauvoir, believed that the new movement needed to know its historical progenitors and precedents to thrive. In the summer of 1968, Firestone was in Paris with Anne Koedt, a member of the New York group, and tried to deliver a copy of *Notes from the First Year* to Beauvoir. “Went to see S de B. on Sat.,” Firestone wrote to Laya. “She wasn’t home & a horrible woman concierge barked at us that we need an appointment.” They left the journal and a message, but Beauvoir was away for the summer.

In January, 1969, on a trip to Washington, D.C., Firestone and a couple of other women knocked on the door of Alice Paul, who had written the original Equal Rights Amendment, in 1921, and who was then in her eighties. She ushered them into a dark parlor, where old National Woman’s Party literature was spread out on the tabletops. “She was very suspicious of us,” Barbara

Mehrhof, one of the visitors, recalled. Paul pointed to a wall of framed oil portraits of formidable-looking women—all suffragist leaders—and demanded that they identify them. “We didn’t have any idea,” Mehrhof said. “Which was just emblematic of the whole problem: how can we pass the torch when we don’t even know who we are?”

The women were in Washington to attend the New Left’s Counter-Inaugural to Richard Nixon’s first Inauguration. Late in the protest, under a large tent set up near the Washington Monument, the antiwar leader Dave Dellinger, serving as master of ceremonies, announced, “The women have asked all the men to leave the stage.” They hadn’t, but his words gave a nasty impression, made worse by the sight of a paraplegic Vietnam veteran being carried off to make way for the “women’s libbers.” Marilyn Webb, a local feminist who was slated to speak, remembers thinking, “Holy God, how did I get here?” Webb was three sentences into “the mildest speech you can imagine,” she said, when men in the audience began to shout, “Take her off the stage and fuck her!” and “Fuck her down a dark alley!” All the while, she recalled, “Shulie is on my right saying, ‘Keep going!’ ” Firestone tried to speak next, but was drowned out by a howl of sexual epithets.

That evening, Webb and other members of her group gathered in her apartment. “Everyone in that room came to the conclusion that there had to be a separate movement,” she said. (Webb later launched *Off Our Backs*, which became the longest-running radical-feminist newspaper, and she started one of the first women’s-studies programs, at Goddard College.) Firestone finally got her say in a letter “to the left,” published ten days later in the *Guardian*, a radical weekly based in New York:

We have more important things to do than to try to get you to come around. You will come around when you have to, because you need us more than we need you. . . . The message being: Fuck off, left. You can examine your navel by yourself from now on. We’re starting our own movement.

In March, 1969, Firestone organized the nation’s first abortion speak-out, at Judson Memorial Church, on Washington Square. She persuaded twelve women to talk about experiences that were then regarded as shameful secrets: contraceptive devices that failed, back-alley operations, the anguish of giving up a baby for adoption. The speak-out drew hundreds of people of both sexes, who listened to the women respectfully and applauded their testimony.

By then, the groups that Firestone had founded, and a host of offshoots, were making headlines with confrontational protests and street theatre. They disrupted state abortion-law hearings in

Albany; occupied restaurants that wouldn't serve "unescorted" women; conducted a "Burial of Traditional Womanhood," in Arlington National Cemetery (the deceased wore curlers); released dozens of white mice to wreak havoc at a bridal fair at Madison Square Garden; held an "ogle-in" on Wall Street, to dole out some payback to leering men; and, most notorious, hurled brassieres, high heels, pots and pans, copies of *Playboy*, and other "instruments of female torture" into a Freedom Trash Can at the Miss America pageant, in Atlantic City. When Firestone was fired from a waitressing job and her boss withheld her wages, feminists stormed the restaurant and made him pay her on the spot.

But the rapid mitosis of groups was as much an indication of problems as of promise. New York Radical Women died soon after the Counter-Inaugural, overwhelmed by an avalanche of converts and riven with internal disagreements. Its successor organization, the Redstockings—co-founded by Firestone and Ellen Willis, then a writer for the *Village Voice* and *The New Yorker*—collapsed amid divisions over the role of consciousness-raising and accusations that Firestone and Willis were "dominating" meetings and, after they were quoted in the *Guardian*, "hoarding" attention. In late 1969, Firestone, with Anne Koedt, co-founded an organization that she hoped would circumvent these issues. Koedt drafted the founding statement, and Firestone wrote the organizational manifesto, in which she devised the structure for what became New York Radical Feminists, an organization made up of small "brigades." After an initial six-month period, in which members would steep themselves in feminist history and carry out a feminist action, a brigade would apply for formal recognition in the larger organization and start "seeding" new cadres. Each brigade would name itself after a historical feminist, and write a biographical booklet about its namesake. "We are committed to a flexible, non-dogmatic approach," Firestone wrote. "we do what works."

In April, 1976, *Ms.* ran an essay that generated more letters than any article it had previously published. The author was Jo Freeman, and the subject was one that she had avoided committing to print for a long time: a "social disease" that had been attacking the women's movement for some years. She called it "trashing." She wrote:

Like a cancer, the attacks spread from those who had reputations to those who were merely strong; from those who were active to those who merely had ideas; from those who stood out as individuals to those who failed to conform rapidly enough to the twists and turns of the changing line.

“Trashing” had surfaced in New York Radical Women just weeks after the group’s founding. In a letter to Laya, Firestone wrote that several women had drawn up a statement against her, Anne Koedt, and Kathie Sarachild, an early member of the group, “for being a divisive faction,” and “attacked me for being ‘defensive’ and ‘unsisterly.’ ” The women voted to eject Firestone from the group. Another member, Anne Forer, objected. “I said, ‘We have to have Shulie. There would be no women’s-liberation movement without her.’” The vote was dropped.

In Washington, D.C., Marilyn Webb was forced out of *Off Our Backs—because* she was the only one with journalistic experience. “First it was ‘You can’t write at all; you have to help other people,’ ” she recalled. Then she was told that she couldn’t accept public-speaking engagements. “And then it was just ‘Get out!’ ” Freeman was ostracized by members of Westside, the group she had helped found. “There were dark hints about my ‘male’ ambitions—such as going to graduate school,” she said. Carol Giardina, who now teaches women’s studies and American history at Queens College, said, “I don’t know anyone who founded a group and did early organizing” who wasn’t thrown out. “It was just a disaster, a total disaster.” She was ousted from her Florida group by “moon goddess” worshippers who accused her of being “too male-identified.”

Anselma Dell’Olio, the founder of the New Feminist Theatre, in New York, was the first to speak publicly about trashing. In a 1970 address, titled “Divisiveness and Self-Destruction in the Women’s Movement: A Letter of Resignation,” which was delivered to the Congress to Unite Women, in New York City, she warned that women’s “rage, masquerading as a pseudo-egalitarian radicalism under the ‘pro-woman’ banner,” was turning into “frighteningly vicious anti-intellectual fascism of the left.” After hearing about the speech, several women, including Freeman, met and vowed to fight the problem. “Instead, each of us slipped back into our own isolation,” Freeman said. “The result was that most of the women at that meeting dropped out, as I had done. Two ended up in the hospital with nervous breakdowns.” After Ti-Grace Atkinson resigned from the Feminists, a group she had founded in New York, she declared, “Sisterhood is powerful. It kills. Mostly sisters.” The observation rang true for so many that it soon became one of the lines most frequently quoted by feminists, or, rather, misquoted: the “mostly” was dropped.

Firestone and Koedt named New York Radical Feminists’ first cadre the Stanton-Anthony Brigade, after Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Clues to the group’s fate lie in the chronicle of another brigade, the West Village-1, which named itself not for a feminist forebear but for its neighborhood. The unofficial leader was Susan Brownmiller, a *Village Voice* writer.

The partial minutes of the brigade's 1970 meetings are in Brownmiller's papers, at Harvard's Schlesinger Library:

Feb. 1, 1970: A motion passed: "All actions initiated by 'our' group and totally carried out by us, should be credited to our name and not identified with the greater group as a whole."

Feb. 8: Vote taken on whether to "split" the brigade in half. (6 yeas, 5 nays, 3 undecided).

Feb. 15: Last week's debate to divide the group causing "upset" and "raised questions about passivity in women and their capacity to deal with power."

March 8: Agenda item: "Abolition of the name 'Stanton-Anthony Brigade'—why should they have the name of two well known feminists?"

March 29: "Discussion of N.Y. Radical Feminist Manifesto—bring up point at large Group Meeting, to revise the manifesto."

Rancor toward the Stanton-Anthony brigade began building almost from the start. Firestone's tendency to be dismissive of others' grievances didn't help, nor did her intensity. At a famous demonstration in which a hundred women rallied at the *Ladies' Home Journal* offices to protest the publication's sexist content and hiring practices, Firestone jumped on the desk of the editor-in-chief, John Mack Carter, and tore up copies of the magazine in his face. Her detractors accused her of homicidal tendencies.

"The group is falling apart," Firestone wrote to Laya on May 26, 1970, and confessed to "a little bit of a sleepless night." She added, "Basically, I don't believe finally that the revolution is so imminent that it's worth tampering with my whole psychological structure, submitting to mob rule, and so on, which is what they're all into." Some days later, the members of New York Radical Feminists gathered in a hall downtown for a general meeting. The West Village-1 group aired its complaints, women began shouting at one another, and then they voted overwhelmingly to abolish the structure that Firestone had crafted. The Stanton-Anthony brigade retreated to the cellar, where Firestone and Koedt announced their resignations and left the hall. All but two of the Stanton-Anthony members quit soon thereafter, and Koedt withdrew from activism. "I was done with groups after that," she told me.

Brownmiller declined to talk to me about the incident, referring me to her memoir, "In Our Time" (1999), which claims only that Firestone "abruptly quit her fourth creation, New York

Radical Feminists, after a split over leadership inside her Stanton-Anthony brigade." John Duff, a sculptor who was Firestone's on-again, off-again boyfriend in this period, remembers Firestone telling him that she had been forced out by an "anti-leadership" faction. "And guess who became the new leaders?" she said to him. "The anti-leaders." Late on the night of the vote, Firestone showed up at Anne Forer's door. Forer remembers her saying, "They threw me out and that's it."

The dissolution of New York Radical Feminists coincided with the movement's first mainstream publishing successes. Kate Millett's "Sexual Politics," Firestone's "Dialectic," and "Sisterhood Is Powerful," an anthology edited by Robin Morgan, all sold well and were widely covered by the media. (Millett was on the cover of *Time*.) But, by the time "Dialectic" appeared in bookstores, in October, 1970, Firestone was half a year into her self-exile from the movement. In the copy she sent to Laya, she wrote, "To Laya, the only true sister, after all."

Brownmiller wrote in her memoir that Firestone wanted her book to "place her in the firmament next to Simone de Beauvoir. She watched the media circus engulfing Kate and champed at the bit, awaiting her turn." Others recall the opposite. Firestone had already been denounced by feminists for violating the "We're all equals" ethic by accepting a book advance—of less than two thousand dollars—and for appearing on "The David Susskind Show." James Landis, Firestone's editor at William Morrow, remembers with amazement that "she came to me quite troubled and said that the women in whatever group it was wanted to own the copyright. I told her, 'Forget it!' "

Instead, at the last minute, she slowed the book's production with a flurry of small corrections. She explained why in her roman à clef: "She thought of Anne Moffitt"—her pseudonym for Millett—"as a decoy, to deflect the klieg light." Her fears proved to be founded. The attention accorded the publication of "Sexual Politics" provoked an instant backlash within the movement as well as outside it. The emerging lesbian wing browbeat Millett into revealing that she was bisexual, and then denounced her for not having revealed it earlier. Millett had a breakdown and was committed to a mental hospital. In "Flying" (1974), she recalls a dream she had at the time, in which "figures of women ranged about a room question and cut at my life."

Meanwhile, "Dialectic" was stoking a small revolution at the Morrow offices. The female employees began asking questions: Why were all the secretaries and publicists women? Why were the few female editors underpaid? "We started having lunchtime meetings behind closed doors," Sara Pyle, an assistant in the publicity department at the time, told me. "We all stopped wearing our little heels and skirts." What made the women at Morrow "go a bit nuts," Pyle said,

was the book's unvarnished radicalism. "Firestone took Marx further and put women in the picture," she said. "This was our oppression, all laid out." And not just women's oppression. The book's longest chapter, "Down with Childhood," chronicled the ways that children's lives had become constrained and regulated in modern society. "With the increase and exaggeration of children's dependence, woman's bondage to motherhood was also extended to its limits," Firestone wrote. "Women and children were now in the same lousy boat." The argument drew the appreciation of one notable feminist, which must have pleased Firestone. Simone de Beauvoir told *Ms.* that only Firestone "has suggested something new," noting how the book "associates Women's Liberation with children's liberation."

The liberator for Firestone was the right to be loved for oneself, not as part of a patronage system "to pass on power and privilege." She was trying to imagine a "home" where "all relationships would be based on love alone," a world, to quote the last words of the book, that allows "love to flow unimpeded." When "Dialectic" was published, Firestone's sister Tirzah said, their father called it "the joke book of the century," and refused to read it.

In 1970, in a contribution to *Notes from the Second Year*, titled "Woman and Her Mind," Meredith Tax argued that the condition of women constituted a state of "female schizophrenia"—a realm of unreality where a woman either belonged to a man or was "nowhere, disappeared, teetering on the edge of a void with no work to do and no felt identity at all." By mid-century, Elaine Showalter noted, in "The Female Malady" (1985), scores of literary and journalistic works had defined schizophrenia as a "bitter metaphor" for the "cultural situation" of women. It was this state of affairs that the radical feminists had set out to change, only to find themselves doubly alienated. The first alienation was a by-product of their political vision: radical insight can resemble the mind-set described by the clinical psychologist Louis Sass, in "Madness and Modernism" (1992), when he wrote that the schizophrenic is "acutely aware of the inauthenticities and compromises of normal social existence." The second alienation was tragic: alienation from one another.

Medical researchers have long puzzled over schizophrenia's late emergence (it was first diagnosed in 1911, in Switzerland) and its prevalence in the industrial world, where the illness is degenerative and permanent. (In "primitive" societies, when it exists at all, it is typically a passing malady.) In 2005, when Jean-Paul Selten and Elizabeth Cantor-Graae, experts on the epidemiology of schizophrenia, reviewed various risk factors—foremost among them migration, racism, and urban upbringing—they found that the factors all involved chronic isolation and

loneliness, a condition that they called “social defeat.” They theorized that “social support protects against the development of schizophrenia.”

The second-wave feminists had hoped to alleviate this isolation through the refuge of sisterhood. “We were like pioneers who’d left the Old Country,” Phyllis Chesler, a feminist psychologist and the author of “Women and Madness” (1972), told me. “And we had nowhere to go back to. We had only each other.” That is, until the movement’s collapse. Last fall, as I interviewed New York’s founding radical feminists, the stories of “social defeat” mounted: painful solitude, poverty, infirmity, mental illness, and even homelessness. In a 1998 essay, “The Feminist Time Forgot,” Kate Millett lamented the lengthening list of her sisters who had “disappeared to struggle alone in makeshift oblivion or vanished into asylums and have yet to return to tell the tale,” or who fell into “despairs that could only end in death.” She noted the suicides of Ellen Frankfort, the author of “Vaginal Politics,” and Elizabeth Fisher, the founder of *Aphra*, the first feminist literary journal. “We haven’t helped each other much,” Millett concluded. We “haven’t been able to build solidly enough to have created community or safety.”

By the time “Dialectic” came out, Firestone’s life was in severe disarray. The coup within New York Radical Feminists was “totally devastating to her,” Dell’Olio, one of the few feminists Firestone was still speaking to at the end of 1970, said. “It was like she’d been rejected by her family.” She had begun work on an ambitious multimedia project that she described as a “female *Whole Earth Catalogue*.” John Simon, an editor at Random House who discussed it with her, recalled, “You had the impression that there was something going on that was really complicated and deep and thoughtful,” but, ultimately, “you couldn’t make any sense of it.”

Sometimes Firestone hid in plain sight. Her friend Robert Roth, the editor of the literary magazine *And Then*, recalled her wandering the East Village in disguise—sporting odd clothes and hairdos, and calling herself Kathy. Sometimes she kept far out of sight. She took a summer fellowship at an art school in Nova Scotia, where she tried, unsuccessfully, to work on the multimedia project, and then lived, for a time, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she worked, unrecognized, as a typist at M.I.T. John Duff recalled visiting her in the early seventies at her Tenth Street apartment and “this cockroach was walking across her desk. She went to crush it, and its guts smeared out in this really grotesque awful mess. And her remark? ‘That’s the story of my life.’ ”

It’s unclear when the first symptoms of schizophrenia surfaced, but the decisive episode in its onset was a family crisis. In May, 1974, Firestone was summoned home to St. Louis, with the

news that her brother Daniel, then thirty, had died in a car crash. “It took me over twenty-four hours to dig out of my father the bitter truth that the body had a bullet hole in the chest,” she wrote in “Airless Spaces.”

In 1972, Daniel had left the family faith, quit a job at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he had been teaching classics, and joined a Zen monastery in Rochester, New York. Two years later, he drove to a desolate area of New Mexico, made a makeshift Buddhist shrine, and shot himself in the heart, a fact not revealed until after he was buried with full Orthodox rites, a privilege that is denied in the case of suicide. Firestone refused to attend the funeral. She wrote that her brother’s death, “whether murder or suicide, afterlife or no, contributed to my own growing madness.”

In 1977, Sol and Kate Firestone announced that they were moving to Israel, and Shulamith flew to St. Louis to collect her paintings from the house. “Shulie and my father got into it again,” Laya said, and Sol threatened to cut her out of his will. Some weeks later, he received a certified letter from Shulamith, disowning him first. Laya and Tirzah still have copies of a letter that their sister sent at the same time, to Kate. It was titled “Last Letter to My Mother” and finished with a jeremiad:

When I see that in the final analysis, you are his, not His (let alone Hers); that you will let your loyalty to Sol (or even to his death), rule you (to the bitter end); that you have never made a serious attempt to govern your own life, (seizing it if necessary) but instead choose to go down with him (complaining all the way)—then . . . I can afford no pity for the maternal sufferings you (continue to) bring on yourself.

Be grateful that you will not have the madness of this daughter as well to atone, for hereby i dissolve my ties of blood.

Sol died, of congestive heart failure, in 1981, at the age of sixty-five. (Kate, who has Alzheimer’s, still lives in Israel.) Laya had to send friends to Shulamith’s apartment to get her to call, and, when she finally did, she was “ranting delusional stuff about how we were all part of a big conspiracy.” Tirzah told me, “It was when our father died that Shulie went into psychosis. She lost that ballast he somehow provided.”

In early 1987, Firestone’s landlord on Second Street called Laya to say that the situation had become “dire.” Neighbors were complaining that Firestone was screaming in the night and that she had left the taps running until the floorboards gave way. Laya flew to New York and found

Shulamith emaciated and panhandling, carrying a bag holding a hammer and an unopened can of food. In the roman à clef, Firestone wrote that she had not eaten for a month—fearing that her food had been poisoned—and "looked like something out of Dostoevsky (which actually helped her beggar's earnings)." The next day, Laya took the action for which, she said, "Shulie never forgave me," and brought her to the Payne Whitney Clinic for evaluation. Her condition was diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenia, and she was involuntarily transferred to a residential facility in White Plains. "I am in deepest despair with no movement possible in any direction," Firestone wrote to Laya some weeks later. "Do not rest assured. Things are not O.K." On the back of the page, she scrawled in red ink, "Are you even on my side? Are you on your own side?"

The first hospitalization lasted nearly five months. During the next several years, Firestone was repeatedly hospitalized, at Beth Israel Medical Center. Her care generally fell to Dr. Margaret Fraser, a young psychiatrist. Fraser was struck by Firestone's "obvious" intelligence and her ability to speak coherently even in the midst of a psychotic break. She also recalled that Firestone suffered from a particularly insidious form of Capgras syndrome, the belief that people are hiding their identities behind masks: Firestone believed that people were hiding behind "masks of their own faces."

In 1989, a local newspaper ran a small gossipy item about how the author of "The Dialectic of Sex" was acting crazy and was about to be evicted from her Second Street studio. Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kate Millett, and a few others organized the Friends of Shulamith Firestone to fight the eviction in housing court. But Firestone, convinced that a member of her former cohort had placed the gossip item, wouldn't let them represent her.

In an anguished letter sent to the other members of the group the day after Christmas in 1989, Sarachild wrote that "none of us have been able to fulfill to our satisfaction any of our obligations as friends, neighbors, admirers and old political 'co-conspirators,' " and that Firestone may now be "in greater danger of homelessness and starvation than when we began." Two weeks later, Millett sent a letter to Firestone. She wrote, "Please get your act together and take an interest. Get with it. You have a hell of a lot to lose and burying your head in the sand isn't going to help." Firestone didn't reply. She was ultimately evicted from the studio, her art consigned to the trash.

A second effort to convene a support system was more successful. Starting in the early nineties, and under the supervision of Margaret Fraser, a group of women met weekly with Firestone to

help her with practical needs, from taking her anti-psychotic medications to buying groceries. The composition of the group fluctuated, but the most dedicated members were a few young women who had studied her writings, and Lourdes Cintron, a caseworker from the Visiting Nurse Service of New York, who had been inspired by "Dialectic" in her youth as a pro-independence activist in Puerto Rico. The service didn't want Firestone as a client—she had no health insurance—but Cintron insisted. "I said to my supervisor, 'Look, this is a woman who did so much for women,' " she recalled, " 'and now she's going to be abandoned by women?' " A nearly decade-long friendship began. Firestone dedicated "Airless Spaces" to Cintron.

The periods between hospitalizations lengthened. After 1993, Firestone was going a year or more without relapse, helped by the medications and, especially, by the support of her new circle, including two young women who moved to New York to find her: Marisa Figueiredo, a physician's assistant who said that "Dialectic" had "changed my life" when she read it as a teen-ager in Akron, Ohio; and Lori Hiris, an aspiring filmmaker so galvanized by the book's "incredible clarity" that she came to Manhattan to make documentaries about radical feminism. Along with Beth Stryker, a new-media artist, and Lourdes López, a human-resources manager at Columbia University, they became mainstays in Firestone's life, taking her on trips to the country (on Hiris's motorcycle), helping her to adopt a cat (Pussy Firestone), and debating Beat poetry, classical music, and punk rock over the two-dollar Sunday egg special at a neighborhood dive. There was only one subject that Firestone wouldn't discuss, Hiris said: feminism. "It was the one conversation piece that you did not want to bring up."

"The support group is really proving its worth," Firestone wrote to Fraser in a New Year's Day card, in 1995. "I may be redeemed once again." At her young fans' urging, she had started writing "Airless Spaces." The book opens with a dream: A woman is on a sinking luxury liner. While deluded merrymakers dance "like in a Grosz cartoon," she descends belowdecks seeking an "air pocket" and locks herself in a refrigerator, "hoping to live on even after the boat was fully submerged." Through autobiographical vignettes, Firestone describes a population of what she calls, with her usual directness, "losers," solitary exemplars of the state of "social defeat." Beth Stryker took the manuscript to an editor she knew at Semiotext(e), an avant-garde imprint, who accepted it at once. To celebrate the publication, in 1998, a group of Firestone's old colleagues turned out for a reading in an art gallery downtown. Several of them, including Kate Millett and Phyllis Chesler, did the actual reading; Firestone was too nervous. Chesler remembers her "hugging the wall, like a little wounded child, but also proud."

The recovery didn't last. By the late nineties, the support group had started to dissipate—Margaret Fraser moved, as did the psychiatrist who replaced her; Lourdes Cintron fell ill; the younger women found jobs in other cities—and soon stopped meeting altogether. Firestone again began to be hospitalized repeatedly, ultimately in the gritty public ward of Bellevue Hospital. She withdrew into her old seclusion, not answering the phone or the door, not speaking even to Laya. One spurned visitor recalled that she heard a torrent of Hebrew coming from inside the apartment. Firestone was reciting Jewish prayers. When Laya came to New York a few years ago, and her sister finally answered the phone, she begged her to at least show her face. "I said, 'Shulie, I'm walking by your apartment. Just look out the window and I'll wave to you.' " She didn't.

On August 28th last year, after Firestone's rent bill had sat outside her door for several days, the landlord sent the building superintendent up the fire escape to peer in her window. He made out a still figure, face down on the floor. The police were summoned. A neighbor phoned Carol Giardina to tell her that Firestone's body had been found, and Giardina and Kathie Sarachild hurried to the apartment, to what end they weren't certain. At least, Sarachild remembered thinking, they could "make sure the door was locked" after the police left. When they arrived, the police told them to wait in the stairwell. After a while, Sarachild said, several officers emerged and the women watched them "going down those five flights of stairs, that little body in the bag."

Firestone was buried, in a traditional Orthodox funeral, in a Long Island cemetery, where her maternal grandparents are interred. Ten male relatives made up a minyan. None of her feminist comrades were invited. "At the end of the day, the old-time religion asserted itself," Tirzah said. Ezra gave a eulogy. He lives in Brooklyn, where he works as an insurance salesman, but he hadn't spoken to Shulamith in years, and he broke down several times as he told how she, more than anyone else in the family, had tended to him as a child and taught him compassion. He recalled a story she told him when he was a boy, about a man on a train who realized that he had dropped a glove on the platform and, as the train left the station, dropped the other glove from the window, so that someone could have a pair. Then he lamented Shulamith's "tragic" failure to make a "good marriage" and have children "who would be devoted to her."

When Tirzah's turn came to give a eulogy, she addressed Ezra. "I said to him, 'Excuse me, but with all due respect, Shulie was a model for Jewish women and girls everywhere, for women and girls everywhere. She had children—she influenced thousands of women to have new thoughts, to lead new lives. I am who I am, and a lot of women are who they are, because of Shulie.' " ♦

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