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Series of interviews with Silver Moon recorded by Allison Murchie commencing on 7th November 2006 for the State Library of South Australia Oral History Collection.

DISK 4

This is Oral History 800, this is card No. 4 recorded on the 8th February 2007, Allison Murchie continuing the interview with Silver Moon. And we were talking before we started the interview today and we've decided on a title, which will be self-explanatory: it's 'Men, Motorbikes, Marriage and Turning Lesbian'. So I think from that array let's start with motorbikes and where your passion for that started.

I suppose I probably got some of that just from my family, but my father had actually been a motorcycle racer, he used to race bikes on Rowley Park Speedway when that existed.

For those that don't remember, can you tell us where Rowley Park used to be located?

In Bowden–Brompton, and I went there as a child. I don't actually remember a lot about it. There was a lot of dust, dirt, shouting, lights, (laughs) but my father had a – I think it was about a 1908, he had this amazing motorcycle. It was a BSA and it had no brakes because it was a speedway bike, and a little tank. And it was pretty cool. So he had had that. But my mother, I think when my parents were courting my mother had been on the back of Dad's motorbike and she fell off on a corner and hurt her outfit and stuff, and she was a bit suss about motorbikes after that. And my second-eldest brother, Alan, the one that used to everything happened to Alan, he of course had a motorcycle and crashed it and nearly died, and things like that. So at some point I bought a motorcycle and I'd waited for an adequate amount of time for things (laughs) to have been forgotten, and –

How old were you when you got your first bike?

– my first motorcycle was 1974, so I was twenty-two. And I bought it brand-new, which I thought was pretty good. Although I had actually had a fair bit to do with motorcycles before then with friends and with boyfriends.

So tell me the important thing: what sort of motorbike was it?

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(laughs) Oh, the one I bought was a Honda CB 175, so something I could afford and something that I could physically pick up off the road if I crashed it, which I realised was important having hung around with boys with rather large, stupid machines. But I must admit when I had a series of boyfriends there was one – this is a little story motorcycles – I had a boyfriend, Andy, he had a CZ 175 and I decided to get rid of Andy and take up with another guy, and he had a BMW 750. And I can remember Andy remonstrating about this and accusing me of going to a boyfriend with a better motorcycle just because of the better motorcycle. And I was about to sort of reply back that there was no way I'd do that when I closed my mouth and I thought about it. (laughs)

And he was right.

And I thought perhaps yes, a BMW 750 was (laughs) certainly preferable. So I had kind of a little bit of a motorcycle focus there. And getting my own was really great, and I actually did a lot of travelling on my little one. I went to Queensland twice on my little [bike].

Did you travel by yourself or with a group of ---?

Mostly by myself; occasionally with somebody else. But it was just – there's no way I could have afforded a car or anything.

So tell me about the trip to Queensland by yourself – that's a fairly daunting adventure anyway, let alone on a motorbike.

Oh, yes. Yes. (laughs) That's right. And also I didn't have a lot of money in those days so I didn't really have leathers or anything, so I'd get quite cold and whatever, and buzzing down the highway on a tiny motorcycle (laughs) riding to Queensland is a bit funny.

Did you have any problems?

Well, the gusts of wind when big trucks went past, that was quite dangerous. But I used to kind of smile because I'd be buzzing down there and you'd see a single light coming the other way, and motorcyclists kind of nod to each other or you lift a finger or whatever, and it would be somebody on some black-and-chrome monster who would nod to me before they realised I was this little buzzing thing. Yeah. No, it got me around the place, which was great. And I always worked on it myself and I don't think at that stage I would have trusted anybody to look at it.

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Did it give you a sense of freedom as well as that adventure?

Yes, it did, and I certainly did do a lot of stuff driving much too fast or dangerously for a bit. But not too much.

And in those days I don't think helmets were even compulsory, were they?

They were, but below a certain speed it wasn't compulsory. And of course it was a while before things like full-faced helmets came in. And I certainly did crash my motorbike once and end up in hospital.

What were the circumstances of that?

A black dog jumped out in front of me in the middle of the night, which was one of those unavoidable things. And we both crashed together (laughs) into the road. And then I think the dog died, but I wasn't sure, and I ended up in hospital. And then later on, the next time I rode my motorcycle, having fixed it up and having fixed me up –

Were you seriously hurt?

– I smashed my glasses into my face, so that wasn't very good; and I also had broken my collarbone but I didn't tell them at the hospital about that. They didn't notice and I didn't tell them; I was trying to get out, just because I could. But yes, so that was a bit difficult, I had people picking bits of glass out of my eyes and I had bandages over my eyes for a while. And it was interesting to finally take the bandages off and then actually look at my face because it looked a bit different to how it used to be. But the next time I rode my motorcycle –

You weren't scared to get back on your bike?

– I was a little bit, so I made a point of doing it fairly soon. And then I went riding down the road and a black dog jumped out in front of me again. (laughs) But I didn't crash into it that time.

And have you maintained your interest in motorbikes? Do you still ride, or have you over most of your life?

I've actually got a quad bike because I live on a farm now, so I've actually got a Honda quad bike, so I've sort of gone – – –.

Moved up a little bit in size.

Well, it's changed somewhat. But yes.

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Is it an interest you have maintained over the years, in motorbikes, even if you haven't necessarily owned one?

To a degree, yes. At one stage I used to ---. It's more about the people that you know. And like we have a bloke that works in the vineyard who owns Harley Davidsons and Honda Gold Wings and things like that. But the nice story about my motorcycle was when little Fiona, who I was caring for – she was about five, I lived in a communal household – and I decided to take my motorcycle completely apart because I needed to rebore the engine, and so I took it completely apart and I had it on my bedroom floor, and the toddler that we had in the house, he was around so it was a bit of a worry, (laughs) but finally when I put the motorcycle back together there was one piece missing that he'd appropriated; but little Fiona was very interested in the fact that the men of the household kept on saying, 'There's no way it's going to work, you don't know what you're doing,' whatever, and little Fiona and I were this little team, and I knew perfectly well it was going to work fine. But I made a point of just taking Fiona along this little path where we were working on a bike together and I'd be telling her about how it worked (laughs) and whatever, and she'd be handing me things, and then I kick it over and of course it goes. It's fine. And that was a really nice thing to do with her.

Where had you learnt your mechanical skills? From your father?

Yes, and just through my own interest, really. As soon as I had anything to do with any vehicles, I was either helping my brothers or boyfriends or whatever and you just had to ---.

Well, you'd said earlier that you only trusted yourself to look after it, so you obviously –

Oh, yes, I wouldn't have trusted anyone.

– knew what you were doing.

Up to a point. There's always things. And I liked figuring it out. I knew more about cars, actually, than motorcycles, so one of the things that I liked about taking mine completely apart was actually to look at how the gearing mechanism and the synchro worked, and that sort of thing: I like knowing how things work.

Money aside, was there an ultimate motorbike that you would have liked to have had?

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I actually had a share for a while in a Ducati 750 Super Sport, which was kind of like the preferred one.

And that would fly.

That would fly; and also it was Italian so it was built for a smaller person, so it was a good one for women to ride.

You had no ambitions for a Harley?

No, no, no, I didn't, actually. (laughs) And one of the things about a motorcycle is that when I was starting to focus a lot on environmental work I didn't really want to be using a lot of petrol, so I would either be taking public transport or I'd take my bike.

Okay. Enough about bikes for today. I think it's time we moved onto men. You mentioned earlier that quite a few of your boyfriends had motorbikes and that was part of the attraction. But you still got married quite young, didn't you? Can you tell me the circumstances?

Oh, no, it was the same year I got my motorbike, actually. That's how I remember.

Yes, that's what I'm saying, but that's still relatively young, in your twenties. Can you talk about your boyfriend and then future husband and how you met, and tell me that story?

It's funny from the point of view that I now realise I am a lesbian and I obviously was one then.

We'll get to that shortly.

And so I think probably, looking back, I might see different things to some other people. And certainly I went through a myriad of boyfriends and – I don't know, I never thought – because, I guess, I was brought up in the '50s I didn't know anything about lesbianism, so it wasn't an option, being a lesbian wasn't an option.

Probably hadn't even heard the word in the '50s, had you?

That's exactly right. And so it's not like I was looking at men thinking I was a lesbian and trying them out.

You were looking at men thinking, 'This is what I have to do because this is the way life is.'

That's exactly what I have to do, yes. And also a lot of the clues that you could get – well, see, a lot of heterosexual women have a lot of difficulties with men and often

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don't like them much, so it doesn't actually help, it doesn't give you a clue (laughs) as to what you're doing. But when I look back now I think I sort of ---. Well, I had an interest in men with motorcycles, and beards usually.

And that really was the attraction.

Well, not necessarily, no. I had a perfectly nice –

Or you actually liked them as people, okay.

– yeah, yeah, yeah. I wouldn't bother otherwise. And certainly when I did meet Peter, who I married, if I was going to be married and have a male partner he was a good choice. He was smart, he was politically acute – that's what I wanted; he understood about personal politics, so when we talked about women's liberation ultimately when we were married he did his own washing, he cooked half the meals, which is a bucketloads better deal than most women get, even now.

So why wouldn't you marry someone like that?

Yeah, that's right. But essentially we ended up being married more because of his parents' pressure than anything else.

Before we get to that, just tell me how you met.

I worked for a bit over a year in the Department of Veterans' Affairs, which was where he was working, and at that stage Veterans' Affairs, it had been policy to preferentially employ World War II ex-servicemen, so there was a large proportion of World War II ex-servicemen, and I emphasise the 'men'; there were hardly any women at all. And then, just as we joined was when they were starting to retire, so there was this odd little collection of those of us who were younger, so you kind of stuck together because it was an extremely conservative place. But it was interesting politically in that, while on the one hand I'd been doing a whole lot of stuff about opposing the Vietnam War, one of the things that I was doing with the Department of Veterans' Affairs was seeing the first Vietnam vets come in the door with all sorts of bizarre and horrible problems that they often didn't know how to even describe, which was from chemical damage and so on.

As well as the emotional problems –

Absolutely.

– were they reporting them at that stage?

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Not so much, not so much.

I can certainly understand like the Agent Orange and some of those toxic things –

Yes, that's right.

– but I don't think they would have really been reporting, I don't think – – –.

Well, they were treated appallingly, actually, by the Department, and that was partly because a lot of the World War II ex-servicemen just didn't see them as being in a real war. And so those of us who were younger, if we saw someone youngish coming in the door, we leapt out (laughs) to the front counter, even if it wasn't your job, in the hope of sort of getting in the way of some people who weren't going to be treating them very well. So that was a kind of interesting aside. And Peter was one of the ones who saw that as I was seeing it, and he was also trying to help people, and we were getting a bit of a better idea of what had been going on and was going on in Vietnam.

I can see why you were attracted: you obviously had –

That's right, yes.

– a lot of issues in common and obviously he was the sort of person that you could share those things with.

Yes, that's right. And certainly this is in the middle of women's liberation stuff happening and whatever, so we had a lot of things to debate about and whatever. But Peter was politically cluey.

So why did you decide to actually get married? Because certainly a lot of people in that time fell in love and ended up together without the marriage certificate.

It was mainly his parents. And they actually disapproved of me, so you'd think why would they be pressuring – – –.

Do you know why they disapproved of you?

I was the wrong class. He was a nice, middle-class boy; I was a working-class girl. No. They didn't like me at all.

What about your parents, what did they think of him?

They actually liked Peter, they thought he was a good lurk, and they were incredibly disapproving when we split up. (laughs) So it worked kind of both ways. But no, we stupidly, I think, thought that if we got married it wouldn't make any difference

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and it would just shut his parents up, and of course it does make a difference. Even though we continued to live in a communal house – it didn't make a lot of difference to him, but it made quite a big difference to me.

Why was that?

Because people treat married women completely differently to single women.

You'd better explain that.

Well, it's just a societal thing. You're perceived differently. And a lot of friends I had stopped being friends or changed the way they acted with me.

What, you'd fallen in their estimation because you were now a married woman?

No; I probably had ceased to be a potential partner, for some. (aside) I'm probably looking back a bit cynically.

No, but there's obviously reasons why people change their attitude towards you when you get married. I totally agree with you, and I'm just trying to explore why that happened in your case.

Yes. But it was interesting that, given that I was living in a sort of communal household and people ostensibly have more progressive views, in actual fact people's views of me changed because I was married – those who knew I was. And I found that quite interesting.

But they didn't change their attitude to him?

No, not noticeably. Which was interesting.

So how did you handle that?

Oh! I argued a lot, (laughs) probably. I don't really remember now. So that was an experiment for me. And at this stage I still have no clue about actually being a lesbian.

All right, so what was married life like? Okay, living-wise, you were living in a share house and to some degree your life would have continued as normal with your feminist activities and work and things like that. But how did they change, what things changed in your life?

As far as being married, it's hard to say really what goes with what. In actual fact, when I look back, Peter was more conservative than me. He was a hack worker for the Labor Party. So I learnt a lot about the Labor Party.

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Had you had any involvement with the Labor Party up until then?

Not specifically.

Other than perhaps just your regular voting things and stuff like that, really.

Yes, and going to odd meetings and stuff. I used to check out everybody, really. So I learnt a lot about the internal workings of the Labor Party, which wasn't necessarily good. And at one stage I also lived in a household with a bloke who worked for the Liberal Party in a similar sort of way, and so I guess I developed fairly early a strong antipathy to both of the major parties, just by looking at the difference between what they said and what they did.

When you said that they were both 'hack' workers, do you mean that they worked as volunteers rather than paid office staff, or what was their job as a 'hack'.

Peter, for example, was the Treasurer with Young Labor, and because he was got called on to do things. He wasn't

More honorary roles rather than paid by the Party.

Yes. But he certainly did a lot of work.

But very committed to what they were doing.

Yes, that's right. So, it's hard to describe. But in fact I knew marriage wasn't for me from the beginning. In fact, from the day we got married.

All right, tell me about the wedding day, that must have been fun.

Well, I had a lot of friends come to see me in a dress, they were a little bit astonished.

That was quite a novelty. A nice, traditional white dress?

No, I got a rainbow-coloured skirt from Myer's, I think it was, cost thirty dollars, (laughs) and I got –

But it was a dress, you did do that part.

– yes. Oh, I was trying, I was trying. I can see why his parents didn't like me at all.

Church wedding?

No, no, in the Registry Office.

And so that would have been a point of objection from his family as well, if they were traditional?

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Oh, no.

They were okay with it?

They weren't particularly religious. So I don't think that would have been a big bother. But the thing that I do remember is my little niece Carol was a sort of flower girl and I'd made her – she'd wanted to be a flower girl, so I'd made her some silver jewellery to wear and I made a little blue dress for her; and we're going through the process that you go through to get married and (laughs) the guy that married us, he was actually a little bit drunk and was making kind of like slightly out left-of-centre jokes that weren't actually terribly funny. So it was kind of a bit of a weird thing. Anyway, we go through the stuff and at some stage I bend over and I say to Carol, 'Now we're married.' And Carol had obviously – she was only about five or six – she obviously had some notion of what marriage might be in her mind, and whatever we'd just done wasn't it. And she looked up and it was a moment of silence in the room, for some reason: she looked up and she said, 'Is that all?' In this little voice. And I looked at her and I thought, '(gulp) I've done the wrong thing.'

You knew then.

I knew straightaway I'd done the wrong thing. But (laughs) it was too late then. And for me, I found it very interesting – or it's interesting looking back – that I was involved in a whole lot of women's liberation stuff, some of which at that stage – it was fairly early in second-wave feminist theory – but there was a whole lot of debate about what the meaning of marriage was. And I think in some ways it was useful that I actually did it, to get to know what it was like. Because I felt like that in the four years that I was with Peter I was becoming less and less myself and more and more of a sort of effective zombie.

All right. You've said you just realised straight away that you weren't meant to be married, so what did you see your future as being as a married couple at that stage? Did you have any – 'aspirations' isn't really the word I'm looking for, but did you have some idea of what you wanted out of life? Did you see you're still, even though you didn't think you'd done the right thing, did you still consider that you were staying with him and that you would make a go of life?

I had always wanted to have children, but you don't need to be married to have children. But it was more picking a bloke that would be an appropriate father.

And he certainly sounds as though he'd fill the bill for that.

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And he would have been if I'd wanted to do it. And because he had a lot of political understanding, that was really good. I saw us as effectively being political activists together. (laughs)

You can actually see a future there.

Oh, yes, in a sort of a way.

Did you want to have children quickly?

No.

Because you were only young, so that was just more of a long-term aim in your life.

Yes. Because I've spent a lot of time with kids in my life and I like them, and not everybody does.

So what were those four years like? Were they comfortable enough, did you get on well enough and things like that?

I was actually doing a whole lot of stuff.

So you were still active in your own life.

But one of the things was I was still doing some study at university and I was doing Classical Studies.

Is this at Adelaide Uni?

Yes. And I had a particular interest – it was one of those things where I finally found something that I just really connected with and I did a whole lot of stuff on Ancient Greek, in particular, and some Ancient Roman, art and architecture. Which is a bizarre thing to have found, but – – –. A lot of my time at university I really spent playing table tennis and going on demonstrations and not paying a lot of attention, and just doing enough to get by. Whereas this was something where I *wanted* to know the stuff, I roared through the books, did a whole lot of works, so at some stage I went on what was an archaeological trip to Greece and Italy, which was just a

As part of your studies?

It was a summer school. Wasn't part of my studies, but it was sort of –

But it logically fitted in, didn't it.

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– through the Classics Department. And that was interesting for me because it was my first overseas trip, and also I became aware that I was pretty well focused on everything up to about AD40 and not much (laughs) later, kind of thing. And I was pretty obsessed. And I had a fabulous time during this trip, although the sorts of people that go on a cheap student trip often aren't people who are actually as interested as I was in the actual archaeology. They were actually interested in going shopping in Florence, that sort of stuff. But having done that trip, that was a bit of an eye-opener on some levels and not on others, but when I came back I can remember looking at Peter and thinking, 'Yeah, why am I here? This is interesting.' And certainly my parents, who obviously must have known me quite well, saw the fact that I went off on this trip on my own as a really bad thing to do when married, whereas I couldn't see what the problem was. But in fact later on I had a different focus, in that Peter was working in the public service and –

Had you left the public service by this time?

– yes, yes, I had. Oh, actually, no, I was still there for a while. But he was starting to drink. He was drinking – nice, middle-class boy, he drank a glass of wine after work to turn into a human being after being in the public service all day, and then after a while he was drinking more, and then he was drinking spirits. And so I decided that we were going on a holiday. (laughs) And he took a year's leave without pay and we travelled around Australia. And we had very little money so we had very little money to buy alcohol, and my intention was to wean him off, which is what I did.

Was he aware of your intention? He was happy enough to take that year off and go on a very cheap holiday?

Yes and no. He wasn't actually aware – it wasn't as cold-blooded as that, but that's essentially what I was doing because I couldn't see any other way to do it.

So you obviously did care for him a great deal.

Oh, absolutely.

To try and do that.

Yes. Yeah, yeah. But I have to say trying to wean an alcoholic off alcohol is a hard ask, (laughs) and he got there, but the process for me was just pretty soul-destroying. But also at the end of our trip – well, it wasn't meant to be the end of our trip – we

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had spent quite a long time travelling around and not particularly reading newspapers or even listening to the radio, and then one day we turned the radio on and it was the day that John Kerr got rid of the Whitlam Government. And we never even discussed it, we just –

Where were you when you heard that?

– we were down the bottom of Western Australia near Albany and we just packed up the car and started driving across the Nullarbor. And it was like this sort of weird, biblical time because there was this incredible thunderstorm going across the Nullarbor and it was raining like mad, and we were by far the highest metal object with lightning crashing everywhere. And then when we got to Port Augusta the weather changed and this huge, red dust storm came out of the North, and we felt quite – it was like we hadn't been interacting with the world much, and it was sort of like suddenly everything was going pear-shaped. And when we got into Adelaide I was sort of expecting to see tanks in the streets, it was that bad – and it almost was that bad then, really, wasn't it? But for him in particular, as a Labor Party person, this was a really monumental event.

So what did you do when you got back? I mean, not quite the world ending, but it was sort of on that scale, wasn't it?

No, but it seemed like that. And certainly I remember listening on the radio to a guy in the military who suddenly, out of the blue, started saying that the Australian Army wouldn't be used against the Australian people. And what that meant is that he'd been asked. That's what was interesting. And we'd been living out in the bush in little fairyland for ages, and you're sort of going, 'Uh, this is like really, really bad.' So it felt very peculiar. And we found somewhere to stay somewhere near Anzac Highway, so I kept waking up in the middle of the night hearing sirens and things, it just seemed really weird.

What did Peter do, because as you said he was so involved with the ALP, what did he do when he got back?

Well, he just immediately clicked in with his Labor Party people. And you knew that with the election Fraser was going to get in, basically, and the Labor Party would be rolled. But it was interesting to watch that whole process and think about the level of media control that there is in Australia and that there was then, because really it was about newspaper owners deciding who was going to be the government.

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What did you think about the way Bob Hawke handled it from the ACTU,¹ because he was telling everyone to be calm and to just settle down, whereas everybody wanted to go out and attack tanks if that was the case.

Yes, I think that was a mistake. But Bob's always been on the right of the Labor Party.

But was that a surprise for you? Because most people probably expected people to be rallying round and doing something.

No. But it's hard to know what a sensible thing would have been to do any different to then.

Because if he hadn't done that maybe they *would* have rioted, I guess that's the way he would perhaps rationalise it.

And of course a horrible thing, as a working-class person, horrible thing about it was that John Kerr had done it. I mean, traitor. And no wonder he got hounded for years. And in fact, when the first public appearance that John Kerr made – because he was basically out of sight for about a year – was at Loxton in South Australia, and I can't remember, he was opening something, and he had a problem with alcohol, it's interesting – – –. (laughs)

Well, the classic one was when he presented the winning cup at the Melbourne Cup and was so drunk and the whole place booed him. He never recovered from that, his public behaviour for that dismissal hounded him till his grave, didn't it.

That's right. Well, at this thing in Loxton it was interesting because it was his first public appearance. It was kind of obviously picked to be an easy one because it's out in rural South Australia. And me and Peter drove there and I can remember –

Because he was going.

– oh, absolutely, I was going to (laughs) be saying something – me and Peter drove there and on the way we had to stop because we realised – like there were police everywhere checking people and stopping cars, and we realised that one of our lights wasn't working properly so Peter did this quick solder job so we could get through – and then when we got to the oval where it was, there were, I'm not sure how many hundred police there were, but it was boggling. Like there were at least two hundred police in uniforms, and there were zillions of police not in uniforms. There was the

¹ ACTU – Australian Council of Trade Unions.

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local Heritage Society and they had twenty-two rifles and some sort of banner, they were mad as cut snakes. And there were also people there that I kind of vaguely recognised and that I knew were there as protesters, but everybody was too scared to do anything.

So contingents had gone up from Adelaide and other towns and things like that?

Well, presumably, yeah. But it was more like individuals, actually. And then at some point I thought, 'This is totally mad.' And there were millions of media people there, because it was his first thing. And I'd had like an A4 sheet of paper and I wrote 'Sack Kerr' on it, put it in my pocket because we wouldn't be able to get away with having anything more than that, and at some point I just held up this piece of paper – this is when he was going past – I held up this piece of paper and it was really scary because of all the police and these nutcases with rifles, but in actual fact in another sense it was actually very safe because there were so many media people there. And Peter was standing behind me, and this woman was trying to hit me with her umbrella, (laughs) saying, 'You hooligan' – like holding up a sign saying 'Sack Kerr' means I'm a hooligan – and a zillion media people were taking pictures of me. But I was the –

Were you the only one with any sign of any – – –?

– I was the only person that did anything.

Wow.

That's what was really scary. And you sort of think, 'Oh, how easily we were all intimidated.' It was horrible. But they're the sort of things I did with Peter, (laughs) which was good.

So when did you decide, 'Don't want to be married any more'?

Well, I was back at work, I was working in the Department of Finance at that stage, and at some point I just realised I was just going downhill and it was not right for me at all. And he knew, he'd known too that I was always going to leave, but he hadn't sort of said it quite like that.

And accepting of it?

Yes and no. The first thing he said when I said I was going to leave was that he was going to start drinking. And then he realised that he'd said that, so I don't think he

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did, but I don't know. And what was interesting is I was working in the Department of Finance there and the women I worked with didn't believe that I had a husband that did his own washing and cooked half the meals, like they just didn't believe it. And then, when finally I said that we were splitting up, they all said, 'How could you *do* that? He does his own washing and he cooks half the meals!' As if that's a good reason.

That's a good enough reason, yes.

And it may have – well, certainly for some women it *would* be a good enough reason. But yeah, it wasn't good enough for me. But I still didn't really have an inkling.

You just thought the marriage isn't working, was that it?

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right.

So what happened? You were still in this share house, or you'd moved on from there, or what were your living circumstances?

No, I think at that stage we were actually living together, but I moved into a share house where I started to look after some –

So you moved out.

– yeah. Yeah. And I was looking after a friend of mine's kids.

So how did the two families respond to that? Clearly instigated by you.

My parents were pretty bad about it, and Peter's parents were probably relieved.

Because they didn't like you anyway.

Yeah. No, on the surface they said it was a bad idea, but in actual fact they were happy.

Had you discussed having children in that time? Because you said that was something you did want to do. Did he want to have children?

Yes, but we didn't at the time.

And was he sort of the same age as you, sort of thing?

Yeah.

So it was very early to even really be talking that far ahead, wasn't it?

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Yeah, that's right, yeah. And then I actually went straight from that circumstance to living with a friend of mine who had terrible post-natal depression, where I ended up mothering her children for a number of years. So it was sort of like I went from the marriage to motherhood, except they weren't my kids.

But that would have been an experience you probably enjoyed.

Oh, absolutely, yeah, loved them.

Okay. So when did you discover that you weren't heterosexual?

Well, it wasn't like you discover it one day. I guess that going a whole lot of stuff – or perhaps you do, I don't know. (laughs)

I don't know, that's what I'm asking. Because, as you said, it wasn't something you knew about, growing up, whereas a child growing up today would probably realise relatively early on, and you've said you've counselled people in those situations, which we might talk about a bit later.

Yes, that's right.

But that's the only word I could think to describe it, because by that stage you're a woman in your mid- to late-twenties.

Yes.

So it sounded to me as though perhaps it *was* a discovery.

I came out when I was twenty-eight, so there was a bit of a gap. Had a few more boyfriends and things.

Oh, so you did have a few more boyfriends.

Yeah.

Just casually, like nothing – – –?

Checking things out. Yeah, well – – –.

I should ask a very blunt question: what was your sex life like with the blokes? Okay?

Ah, well – – –. (laughs)

I mean, that's a fair question to ask, I think.

Well, it's a bit hard – well, in a way, yes. But it was sort of all right, but it wasn't that interesting.

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Also a lot of women in the '50s didn't have high expectations of a sex life.

Absolutely, that's right.

Because marriage was actually what was drummed into you as a child. And I certainly remember so-called 'sex education' classes at school, it was much more making the happy family and learning how to cook and things like that, that was the only aspects that were really ever discussed, so you didn't have a high expectation of anything else.

Yes. Well, in fact I have to say at the time that probably most women's expectation of sex was pretty negative.

Yes, I would agree with that.

So yeah. (laughs)

So we've met those needs.

So that wasn't a clue, really, (laughs) for one way or the other. So I went through various other boyfriends and some of them were perfectly nice and some of them were hopeless and all the rest of it, just like anybody.

Same as any normal life.

Yes. But, more importantly – (laughs) and I've still got the motorcycle, and (laughter) that kind of stuff – more importantly, I was getting more political understanding, and a whole lot of feminist thinking is about what marriage means and is about how men and women relate. And so that was all happening while I'm going through these things, and also while I was looking after my friend's kids as well, because a whole lot of feminist theory is about motherhood and what happens to you and whatever.

And so this was a good experience for you, looking [after] – just young children, were they?

Yeah. One was ---.

And so that further made you feel that you did eventually still want to have children? That was a comfortable experience for you?

Yes. Oh, absolutely, yes. I find kids easy. And then one of the things I got involved with about that time was the Unemployed Workers' Union, and in the Unemployed Workers' Union me and some other women formed the Unemployed Women's Union, which –

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Which is a logical offshoot, isn't it?

– that's right – – –.

Was that more of a lobby group, was it, or what was it – I mean, I do recall it being there but I don't know anything about it.

We certainly did lobby about things. We created a newspaper and we did a lot of – the Unemployed Workers' Union did a lot of advocacy for unemployed people and pensioners to simply get their rights, really, from Social Security, so some of what we were doing was needling the powers that be so people actually got their actual entitlements. Plus there were various other people that just simply didn't fit into the system one way or the other, and trying to figure out how you get someone a new identity when they don't know who they are any more, (laughs) that sort of stuff. Some quite complicated things. So I was doing a lot of stuff to do with women and unemployment, and looking at things from those sort of angles.

And that would have fitted in with just your general activities and political beliefs anyway, wouldn't it?

Yeah, that's right.

It would have been a fairly logical progression to work for that.

Yes. And then, at that stage, it was then I actually started working at the Women's Liberation Centre doing abortion counselling and pregnancy testing and just answering the phone, effectively. In those days there just simply wasn't any other kind of service like that, and it was seen as a terribly radical, full-on kind of thing; in actual fact, people would ring up and you'd talk about whatever it was and that was it. But it was seen as –

The concept was probably still radical.

– absolutely. And certainly, helping anybody who'd been raped was seen as a really radical thing, and in fact there was a lot of quite solid opposition from both government and all sorts of groups to helping women who'd been raped, which was – – –.

After all, it was their fault? Was that still part of the public perception?

Yes, that was, and of course women – certainly married women – were still the possessions of their men –

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So they couldn't possibly be raped.

– and so they couldn't, yes; and at that stage rape in marriage hadn't been changed.

It was legal, wasn't it, effectively.

Yes, it was legal, that's right. And a lot of women wouldn't even have described what I would call 'rape' as rape, because they were married and it was their husband who was abusing them. So my kind of thinking is developing. As I'm doing more and more stuff with Women's Liberation I was spending more time with women, and at that time I started to live in women-only households. And that was described as 'separatism' and these days when people use that word they often mean 'lesbian separatism', but then separatism was simply living in a house together. And with those households of women I guess I was more in contact with women who were either bisexual or starting to define themselves as lesbians.

At that stage lesbian feminist thinking was that any woman could be a lesbian, and there were women who defined themselves as lesbians who actually didn't necessarily have a sexual interest in women but who wanted to live a life without men. So they may have been heterosexual or bisexual or whatever. So it was an interesting time.

Interesting times!

Yeah. And after a lot of stuff and living in households of women it starts to dawn on me I was pretty keen – – –. (laughs)

You were becoming very open to some of those ideas.

That's right, yeah. And it also made sense of some things that I'd felt in the past but not really understood about myself.

So really it was those – noticing things and listening to what other people – that you realised that *you* were a lesbian.

Yeah, that's right.

And what sort of revelation was that to you? Because really it's not an easy thing to acknowledge, is it?

Yes and no. It was quite gradual for me personally, although I chose a particular time to come out, *per se*.

And how did you choose and what were those circumstances?

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It was my motorcycle again. (laughter)

That keeps coming back, doesn't it?

I rode my motorcycle to Melbourne for a particular conference and it was called 'Women, Patriarchy and the Future'. And when I rode to the conference on my motorcycle, again I didn't have a lot of money, I didn't have leathers and whatever, and it was freezing. I was so cold that I stopped shivering, like it was *that* cold, when it's actually being dangerous. Anyway, I go to this conference and it was an absolutely astonishing conference, and talking with and meeting lots of amazing women and discussing a whole lot of interesting feminist and lesbian feminist theory and whatever. Anyway, I came out at that conference and I decided that coming out must improve your circulation because (laughs) on the way home I wasn't cold at all on my motorcycle.

So tell me what 'coming out' meant to you at that conference. What did you actually do?

It simply meant that I was in a group of women and we were talking about whatever it was, and I said that I now define myself as a lesbian.

And it was that simple for you.

Yes, that simple.

And so you felt warm going home, did you?

Absolutely. I can remember riding my motorcycle and the sun was coming up in my rear-view mirrors and the moon was going down. It was just ---.

Was it a case of you thought you'd finally found yourself, who you really were? Was it that defining in your life?

The first time I kissed a woman with desire, it was like I felt a whole lot of baggage just fall off. Aside from feeling that kind of desire that intensely. Even though, at that time in particular and even now, there is a whole lot of discrimination against lesbians and in some ways it's a whole lot of baggage you acquire, I felt like it was just fallen away instead.

So it was a totally life-defining experience? That's not over-rating it?

That's not over-rating it.

Okay. So you've done what you should have done.

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I'm twenty-eight.

Now you have to come back and face the real world of Adelaide and family and friends and work.

That's right. Yes. So I rode my little motorbike back –

How easy or difficult was that? You had a lot of time to think on the way back from Melbourne.

– yes, I did. I was living in households of women, so that –

That part was easy, I dare say.

– that was easy.

Had they thought that you were anyway? A lot of people when they come out they say, 'Oh, well, I knew that.' That sort of thing.

Yes. Some people had. And some people were kind of just waiting for it. (laughs)
But some people were a bit surprised, and certainly a lot of the people I had been working with at the Women's Liberation Centre were lesbians and –

And you knew that?

– oh, yes, mostly – so they weren't that surprised, really.

So I'm guessing that environment was particularly accepting and it was not necessarily a great surprise.

Yes, it was no problem at all.

What about family?

Ah, yes. (laughs)

That's always the big issue, isn't it?

Well, it was really good because of my family the first person that I wanted to tell was my sister, whom I'm closest to. And I thought about it and I went – I can't remember, I met her somewhere. And the person I'd had a crush on at the time was a doctor and I didn't know it but my sister knew who she was. And so I went round to my sister and I said, 'I've decided I'm a lesbian. The person I really like is So-and-so,' and she says, 'Oh, she's really nice, she's got lovely skin.' That's what she said, and I was stunned. And all my life my sister had sent me up – me and my boyfriends and whatever – by giving my boyfriends a mark out of ten. And a lot of my boyfriends –

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What did she give your husband?

– hadn't got – oh, he wasn't too bad, I think he was in the sort of sixes, maybe – but some of my boyfriends had not rated very highly at all, they were sort of low in the threes.

Obviously didn't have good bikes.

(laughs) That's right. And what was really funny is because my sister knew who this person was she immediately gave me a much higher mark than I'd ever had before, and I thought that was really funny because I hadn't been sure how my sister would respond. But she's never had an issue.

So she responded perfectly, didn't she, really?

Yes. Yes, that was fantastic.

Was she surprised? Because you were very close to her, weren't you?

I don't think she was surprised. But I was the one that was the wild one and Rosalie was the good one. So it wasn't – – –.

So it was never going to be her, it would always be you.

Yes, something like that.

What about your mum and dad?

I didn't come out to them then; I came out to them later when I had thought about it more. And that proved to be a rather funny circumstance because they were both starting to lose their memory. And I came out to them and whatever, and the next time I went round they'd forgotten. (laughter) So here's something that's terribly, terribly important to me and they just wandered round the garden and it doesn't mean anything.

That's just so funny.

You think, 'Ah, okay, just change your head space, Silver, this is stupid.' So I didn't bother. But even if they had sort of forgotten, they weren't as disapproving to some of my women lovers as they were some of the blokes, which is understandable I think, of some of the choices –

Well, you've had some three-out-of-tens, they weren't that good.

– because my choices of partners certainly did improve.

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So how quickly were you introducing your new partners to your family? Not that long after you've come out?

No, it was a fair while before I *had* a partner.

Okay. But you felt quite comfortable taking them to your family and stuff?

Don't know about comfortable, so much as it was just going to happen.

The thing to do.

Yes. They were just going to have to figure it out.

And your brothers?

My brothers – it wasn't important to me to come out to them, and I probably technically haven't, *per se*, but I've never really hidden it, either.

Really your sister was the one that you were closest to and that's ---.

Yes, she was the one that mattered.

And she clearly demonstrated that she understood and there was no problem. Were there any people that it *was* a problem for?

Yes, at various times. I've had people spit at me and go a bit sort of troppo. But in general most people it hasn't been an issue, or if it has they don't put it on you. I mean, I live in the country now and –

Which is reasonably conservative in most areas, isn't it?

– yes, pretty conservative –

Where you are certainly would be.

– and we are both out there. Mind you, we are older women now and so for some people, some people don't see older women as having a sexuality *per se*, and so –

Well, you're over fifty so you don't have a sex life.

– (laughs) yeah.

But there's also that perception that it's not an issue for older women, is it? In the same way that you would have had trouble ---?

It's usually not an issue for women –

Oh, it's very rarely an issue for women.

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– it still sometimes is; but it's usually an issue for men. Or a lot of men don't get it that you don't want men as the centre of your life. They expect to be the centre.

Probably used to it.

Yeah, that's right. And they just don't get it. So they think that you must hate them. That's where the notion that lesbians are men-haters comes from: they still want to be the centre, they just want to be hated rather than to be irrelevant.

And what about your partner? Tell me a little bit about her. Just being nosy.

My current partner?

Yeah. How long have you been together?

We've been together over twelve years.

And she's always been a farmer?

No. No, no, some of the time she's been a ---.

Because 'farmer' is not really a word I would have looked at to describe you.

No. Well, I live on a farm and I do do some farming –

But you basically do most – she runs the farm and you help out, sort of thing, would that be a more accurate description?

– yes. Well, basically I do the reveg and she does the stuff to generate money.

What sort of property is it?

She grows wine grapes and we've got sheep, we've got Dorper sheep, which are a specialist meat sheep that sheds its fleece, and they're good for Australia because they eat less fodder and they're very hardy so you don't need to feed them things that you need to feed merinos.

It sounds as though you're at a pretty happy place in your life.

Sort of, yeah.

And that must be a very nice feeling.

Yes.

Now I've got a really strange question: did you ever catch up with your ex-husband?

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Well, that's what I found difficult with him because I wanted to remain friends with him but he wanted me to be wife or nothing. And I found that very difficult.

So he couldn't cope with just being a friend.

No. No, and so basically I haven't seen or heard of him for many years.

Oh, just a curious question – I'd assumed he was perhaps still in Adelaide and I was wondering if your paths did cross.

No. So that's a blank there.

Just a nosy question, I think.

And that's one of the differences I see between heterosexual community and lesbian community. In the lesbian community, if you break up with someone there's actually a strong push in the community that you maintain a friendship with them, and a lot of people will support you in maintaining a friendship with them.

And is that something you manage to do quite well with ex-partners.

And that's sort of a norm. Yes, yeah. Whereas in the heterosexual community people often hate each other and are horrible to each other.

Well, become quite vindictive and nasty, yeah.

Yeah, and so there's different processes that happen.

So is it simple to define the 'lesbian society' in Adelaide?

Nah. (laughs)

That's what you were saying, and I find that really hard to believe that there would just be this lesbian society rather than lots of organisations that you would cross over as in any situation. It's just the way you said that, I thought that didn't sound right.

Well, I suppose one should more properly say there's a whole lot of lesbian communities. But when I was working – at one stage I did counselling for Lesbian Line, and people would ring up and we would chat, and people would want a connection into some part of a lesbian community, and that might be they might be a sporty person, like there's lots of sporty dykes –

There's a lot of those walking groups in the hills and things, isn't there?

– there's a lot of arty sort of people, there's people who go on walks, (laughs) whatever. There's a whole lot of different – – –.

SOHC/OH 800

And so they just wanted to link into those sort of things.

Yes. There's a whole lot of different connections.

Do you think it's correct to say that a lot of men still don't think there are many lesbians around, that there are only just these few men-haters around, without realising how big a part of society it is?

Yes. Well, the last stats I read in Australia, it's one in ten for homosexuals, and the suggestion was it was one in eight for lesbians for some reason I don't understand.

Oh, I thought it was about the same percentage.

No, it was ---.

Because I knew the one-in-ten, that's fairly consistent.

But that may be that women are more likely to say than men, I don't know.

It might be that simple, that it's perhaps easier to come out if you're a female and somehow that's a little bit more accepting.

Yeah.