

# An Open Moment: My Seven Mothers and the World They Envisioned

[Danish: Et åbent øjeblik. Da mine mødre gjorde noget nyt (Gyldendal 2020)]

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## Note to Readers

*An Open Moment* is a story about seven feminists who in the early 1970s hoped to discover what women could be if they didn't relate to men--if, instead of measuring themselves against men, they worked together to dismantle the patriarchy and found new ways to be women. To begin with, they thought, women should stop competing for men's attention and find each other as collaborators, friends, lovers, and partners and open themselves to all the things women could do together.

The seven feminists met in Copenhagen in 1970 and at a women-only camp on the small island Femø in Southern Denmark in 1971. In September that same year they participated in squatting three houses in downtown Copenhagen, turning one of them into a "Women's House", and establishing a commune in the others.

Their story of struggle, change, love, and heartbreak is also my own. I was born in this commune on New Year's Eve 1972, and I was their only child. The seven women took turns caring for me, and I called them all mother. Even though my birthmother and I moved out of the commune just before I turned four, I visited my other mothers every Wednesday and a weekend a month for several years, and many times a year after that. Even after all my mother's left the commune, I visited with them one-on-one. They took me on vacations, and we celebrated big events together. I know their hands, their bodies and their voices, as if our early years together still lives somewhere close to my center. In *An Open Moment* I again call the seven feminists my mothers.

The book is based on interviews with my mothers and a few other feminist Copenhageners, as well as archival and other materials. The story is my interpretation and my responsibility.

## Prologue

*Copenhagen, Saturday June 19, 1971*

Sanne sat on her mattress leaning against the wall, drinking black coffee and smoking a cigarette. Her grey and white striped kitten Miv slept peaceful and round in a sun filled windowpane. She noticed, to her surprise, that she enjoyed being alone.

"It was actually really nice to sit there on my mattress and drink coffee and read the paper," Sanne recalls. "I was finally free from Per and his demands, his criticism, and his bad energy." Sanne had left her husband Per on a rainy November evening six months earlier. She had never been happy in their marriage but didn't find the resolve to break up with him until she found out that he was sleeping with another woman.

Sanne's mother had helped her find a room to rent and now, after having lived there for months, she had hung her painted wooden beer crates on the wall and organized her books and clothes. The room was only 130 square feet. There was no indoor plumbing in the house, and only a small gas oven for heating. But it was her own.

Sanne found her Thursday paper in a pile on the floor, flipped to page three and the article "Successful feminist action: Femø-camp all of July only for women." She had read the article several times already, but this time she reached for the heavy black phone on the floor next to her, lifted the receiver and dialed the number under the article--Sundby 4684.

As she listened to the ring tone, she noticed her heart beating and fought a strong urge to hang up.

"Femø women's camp," a voice answered.

"Hello, my name is Sanne Ipsen. I would like to sign up for the camp in July."

"The whole month?"

"Yes, please."

"Weren't you afraid to sign up for a whole month?" I ask on one of my many recorded interviews with my mother. She was and is socially awkward. She has never liked meeting new people. How did she end up at that feminist summer-camp filled with women she had never met? "You didn't know anyone there."

My mother's decision to attend the camp on Femø set the direction for the next five years of her life. Without that single, out-of-character phone call, I might not have had seven mothers. I wish I could go back to that moment on the mattress and ask my young mother where she found the verve to do something so radically different and new.

It was not the first time she thought about "women's issues", Sanne says, and she had paid attention to the movement for a while. She read about happenings and meetings in the paper and heard about the movement at Copenhagen University where she studied sociology. In the spring of 1970, when the women's movement was just starting, she had attended a meeting. They had talked about equal pay, women's oppression, and women's subordinate position. Their ideas resonated with Sanne and she was impressed by the radical way the movement women spoke. She wanted to speak like them. But she didn't. She was too shy and preoccupied with "keeping her head above water", as she says. She struggled in college, especially reading the heavy theory, and the rest of her time she spent on her exhausting relationship with her husband.

In the years before she joined the women's movement, Sanne wrestled with low self-esteem and depression. She felt, as she says today with a Danish expression, "far below the floorboards." She met with a psychiatrist in a student counseling office who, after a very brief consultation and a few facts about her childhood, concluded that Sanne was bipolar and suicidal like her father. Sanne didn't trust the doctor, but she

took the strong anti-depressants he prescribed, and a heavy cloud of passivity and indecision enwrapped everything she did.

“The woman on the phone *did* sound surprised when I signed up for a whole month,” Sanne laughs. “But it didn’t occur to me to only sign up for a week. If I was going to do it, I had to do it right. I felt horrible. I needed to get away.” She hesitates. “I was really nervous, but it actually felt good to do something completely different.”

Sanne can’t explain where her sudden determination came from. It helped that it was a women-only camp. She was through with men for the time being. But there was also something in the air. So many people did new things in 1971. Whatever caused it, the moment opened, and Sanne saw a new path.

The resolve from that sunny moment on the mattress quickly dissolved, and in the three weeks between the phone call and the departure for the camp, Sanne wavered. In fact, she only barely made it to the post office to send off her payment to the camp. She walked with her kitten in a park near her house and continued to take her strong anti-depressants.

On Saturday July 3, 1971, when Sanne packed her white faux leather confirmation suitcase and waited for a taxi to Copenhagen Central station and the trip south to Femø, she was all but paralyzed with fear. “What in the world have I gotten myself into,” she thought. “Why did I think, I could do this?” At that point, only the most fragile thread tied her to that open moment on the mattress. I always thought she was so lucky that she didn’t turn around. I know it was lucky for me.

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*Madison, Wednesday April 11, 2018*

How can I write about my most intimate relations? My mothers are, as Virginia Woolff wrote in *A Sketch of the Past* in 1939, among the “invisible presences” that always are with me. They are inside me. Their eyes are always on me. My mothers are in all that I am. They hold me together, but also tug me this way and that. Does telling their story require me to separate from them? Impossible. As Woolf said: “I can see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.” (80) I have to swim on my own and learn to see the stream.

I have interviewed my mothers for years, over long meals, all eight of us together or one-on-one. I have researched their story and collected materials. My mothers’ old magazines and writings are organized in folders and piles around my desk. I have leaped head-first into their youth, the years before I was born, and it felt so right from the first interview, the first archival box. This is the story I have always wanted to tell. Perhaps therefore, the weight is unbearable at times. How can I possibly close the book and say: “here is the story of my seven mothers”? How will my mothers feel when they read *my* version of their story in black and white? They each live with different versions of the same events, and when this book is done, we still, hopefully, have many years

together. Can our relationships bear my honesty? Their story is filled with conflicts and hard choices. They didn't agree then, they don't agree now. Whose perspective do I write from?

On a more practical level: how do I write a story with seven main characters, who were all born in the Denmark in the 1940s. In the 1970s my mothers were all feminists, socialists, more or less anarchists, heavy smokers, and idealists with a flair for the dramatic. There was nothing they loved more than sitting up all night discussing politics and composing songs about women's liberation, politicians, current events and the world in 37 verses. From my perspective they were almost as different as Danish feminists could be in the 1970s, but from a distance they may seem all too similar. Will my readers be able to tell them apart?

I begin the story 180 kilometers south of Copenhagen in the summer of 1971 at the first of many women-only camps on the tiny island Femø. My mothers Vibeke, Hanne and Inger were among the camp organizers. Sanne stayed the month she had planned. Susanne signed up for a weekend but ended up staying most of the summer. Lotte was there for a week in August. Else Marie only visited the camp for three days in the end of July, but she says with conviction that those three days completely transformed her life.

My mothers didn't all know each other that first summer. Their beginning as a collective was not well defined. They didn't walk towards each other on the beach barefoot in the sand in loose tie-die dresses. It took months for them to really find each other. But they always return to that summer on Femø, when they tell me how their life together began, how they planted the seed for their liberation.

*An Open Moment* is about my mothers, our commune, the Danish women's movement, and the Danish lesbian movement, about gender, sexuality and feminism. It is a story about how life-giving and challenging liberation is – even in the 1970s, an era so ripe for radical change. My mothers lived in a world being redefined by the youth movement, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, and the environmental movement, as part of a generation of young people in Europe and the rest of the world who made the personal political, made social revolutions, and changed how we can live. Yet it was hard and unrelenting work to change themselves and their worlds.

Much of what my mothers created in their open moment was fragile, and some of it was profoundly challenged in the decades that followed. Sometimes it can feel as though their work was in vain. But it wasn't. The women's movements in Denmark helped lay the foundations for the Danish welfare state, where reproductive responsibilities are not just individual issues, where wealth and resources are redistributed through taxes and social institutions, and where women's and men's lives are therefore radically different than they were before the second wave of feminism hit Denmark's shores.

Like many others in my generation and the generations that followed, I carry the women's movements of the 1970s within me. My mothers' ideas and dreams shape how I understand the world. So, this is how I write about their lives. Deep breaths. One, two,

three. I dive into the process. Here is the story of my seven mothers and the world they envisioned.

## Chapter 1 An Island of Women

*Femø, Saturday, May 22, 1971*

Vibeke stayed behind when Inger, Hanne and the other organizers walked to the beach to inspect the swimming options. She lit her curved wooden pipe, closed her eyes, and tried to visualize how the large green military tents--sleeping tents, a cooking tent, a tent for meetings – would all fit within an area the size of two soccer fields. An abandoned orchard stood on one side of the field, old apple and cherry trees mixed bushes and high weeds. On the other sides, long rows of pine trees and a narrow beach of sand, stones, shells, seaweed, and dunes covered in rosehip bushes. She saw clear air and waving tall grass, but not at all what she had imagined.

In the weeks since the Ministry of Culture approved their camp, Vibeke's expectations had grown to staggering heights. "I wanted a whole island of women, isolated from the rest of the world," she remembers in one of my many recorded interviews. "We would start all over. A new language, new thoughts, new ways of communicating, new dreams. Everything would be new. The colonial power would disappear, and we would flourish."

Small women's communes, later villages and, eventually, a whole new society: "That was what I worked towards," Vibeke explains to a group of students in an interview from 1981. The students collected accounts from the early years of the women's movement ten years after; besides Vibeke, they also interviewed my other mothers Inger, Susanne and Lotte. On those tapes, my mothers' voices sound so young. Higher-pitched, sharper, faster. They connect me to my childhood.

Eyes open or closed, Vibeke couldn't imagine her dream unfolding on these boring, empty green fields.

"My vision was *not* what happened," Vibeke says forty years later, on a sunny morning in July 2014, while we drink coffee and eat porridge with large ripe black currants in the sun on the terrace by her wooden house in Western Seeland. I have been up for hours. Knowing Vibeke would sleep in, I ran to the ocean and along the beach, showered, and still had plenty of time to answer e-mails. Vibeke's voice may be deeper today, but her poise and intensity are the same. She speaks carefully and precisely. I slow down and settle into her rhythm.

"The scales would fall from our eyes, and we would start a whole new life. It was just a matter of time," she says and pauses. "It turned out to be more difficult than I thought, of course."

On cassette tapes and film recordings from the 1970s Vibeke's country dialect sometimes surprises me. She moved from her childhood home in Southern Jutland to

Copenhagen in 1964, and even today her voice unmistakably reveals her origins close to the Danish-German border, but in the 1970s her southern dialect was so pronounced that it was one of the first things people noticed about her. Not at all embarrassed of her country origin, Vibeke spoke in her thick dialect with an infectious, for some annoying, confidence. The pipe accentuated her air of self-possession. She started smoking in high school, and in the early years of the women's movement her pipe was rarely far from her hand.

On a film recording from the first camp on Femø, Vibeke sits on a blanket in the grass. Her hair in a short pixie cut, her head slightly tilted, suntanned in a sleeveless white shirt, smoking her pipe, she is listening to two other women. One of the other women is explaining how she can't get people to view her as she sees herself.

"If I stood on my head in the middle of the street, they still wouldn't perceive me differently," the woman sighs. "Do you get it?"

The three women sit in silence for a bit before Vibeke, removing her pipe, says: "It's kind of like traffic rules, right? Turns are not allowed." She looks down and slowly starts smoking again.

"The camp turned out to be so different than we imagined," Vibeke explains in 2010. I have summoned my seven mothers in my summer cabin in Denmark to tell me about the first women's camp on Femø. They arrive early from their homes to the east and west, and they stay into the night. Memories, anecdotes, and images pour out of them, despite several of them not having seen each other for years.

Vibeke and the other camp organizers thought the women's camp participants would take responsibility right away, she says. That they would make the camp their own. Women from all over the country with and without children would come together to create an anarchist and truly equal society. Instead, many women in the camp "behaved as if they were on vacation", as Vibeke wrote in one of the weekly camp-papers that first summer. Women went swimming and hung out on the beach for hours. They cooked and cleaned when it was their turn, but they rarely thought about the revolution. They didn't even think about what it meant to run the camp in practice, or, as Vibeke called it in Marxist-inspired lingo of the time "the camp's production conditions." They just assumed food supplies would arrive on time, that tents would stay up and that toilet buckets would be emptied. They left all oversight and planning to the organizers, and Vibeke felt trapped. She would much rather participate in discussion groups and write op-eds for newspapers than order cooking gas from the mainland and police people smoking in the tents.

In 2010 Vibeke speaks with a soft reflective voice as she remembers her hectic critique of the "a-political" vacationers on the first camp on Femø. In hindsight, my mothers agree, the real revolution took place in all the talking, in the tent groups, and while women were working on practical activities together. Cooking, printing on silk, working with a hammer, tie-dyeing. For a moment Vibeke returns to the deep engulfing tie-dye colors against the blue sky and the green grass. A wild yellow, she remembers. A bottomless sun-orange, scarlet red. Long, waving dresses and flowing pants.

Vibeke and my other mothers wore loose-fitting clothes on Femø. In Copenhagen they wore jeans and t-shirts and steered away from traditionally feminine dress so as not to draw too much attention from men, but on Femø they expressed themselves without worrying about male eyes.

In one of many effortless transitions from specific memories to the larger meaning of it all in the ten-hour long conversation in my summer cabin, Sanne asks: "Did we know what a giant cultural shift we were experiencing on Femø?"

"I don't think so," Hanne responds. "We knew that something was happening, but not *how* big a transformation it was going to be."

We sit at my big heavy wooden dining room table, just like the one we sat around in the commune in my childhood. Sanne and Inger found a large door in an alley, sanded it down, lacquered it and gave it legs. I always sat at the end of the table. When I was big enough to control a cup, I poured milk on the table and watched it run down the grooves in the door. Later I stood in my highchair delivering long speeches in complete gibberish to my many fascinated mothers.

My mothers didn't pay much attention to cooking or home-decoration in the early 1970s, so in 2010 we eat better food than we did in the commune. We drink wine instead of beer. Almost all my mothers have stopped smoking, and Hanne, who still makes her own filter cigarettes on a little plastic machine, politely steps outside on the terrasse to smoke.

We resume our old "we", my mothers and I. They leave some past arguments behind them, at least for now. Over the past two summers I have interviewed them one-on-one for the first time. First versions of their narratives are starting to find their place in me. Now their memories and images of Femø start blending together. We lean into our mutual past.