

# An Insurgent Woman

by Suzy Coffee

It must have been exhilarating to be a feminist in the early 1970s when women were making breathtaking historical, cultural and social changes in America. I lived through those phenomenal times, and it felt like everything was moving in a new direction, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement, the Environmental and Back to the Land Movements. At that same time in history, anti-war protests, racial rioting, student uprisings, cops vs. people, people vs. cops... all these events made it feel like America was in the grip of real revolution, and anything could happen. There was a sense that people were powerful to overcome injustice, to right wrongs, and to change their government for the better.

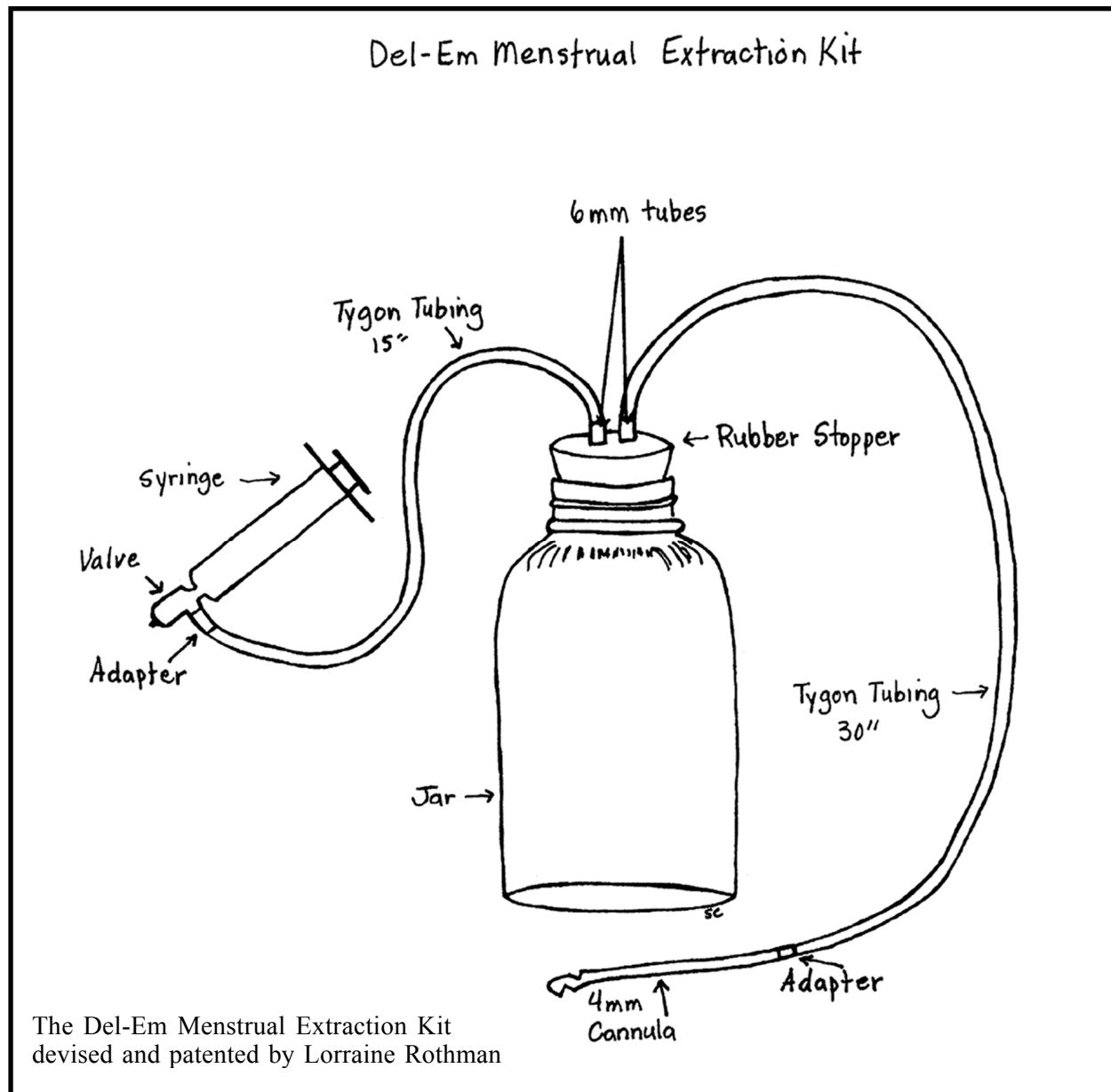
During those revolutionary times the exhilaration I was finding was in the pre-environmentalist, Back to the Land Movement. In the wilderness of Northern California, far away from the protests, bra burnings and female consciousness raising groups that were happening in Los Angeles and San Francisco, I missed the feminist revolution entirely. While my sisters in LA and my home town area of San Francisco were storming the nation for justice and the rights of all women, Del and I were living like pioneers of another kind, reconnecting with Nature, and turning our backs on American culture.

So when I read about the life and history of the late Lorraine Rothman, who in the early 1970s pioneered revolutionary change for women and for women's health, I am moved and inspired to carry on the feminist work in her name. Her story is one of brazen and audacious revolution.

In 1968, Lorraine Rothman attended a women's consciousness raising group at Cal State Fullerton, where her husband worked as a biology professor. I can picture Lorraine sitting in a cir-



Lorraine Rothman, 1985; a Founding Mother of the Women's Self-Help Movement



cle of a dozen or two women of all ages, each one taking her turn to tell her personal story. Vivid scenes of illegal, secretive, dangerous and costly abortions must have been described. Stories of rape, incest, sexual abuse and harassment, domestic violence, job and pay inequalities and the lack of equal educational opportunities would have been discussed. When I put myself there, I can imagine these personal stories hitting home in each woman's heart and mind, changing her forever. It's easy to see how an infectious, active and powerful Sisterhood could come into being, one that would grow like a giant wave, to ultimately culminate in Roe versus Wade in 1973.

It was through this vast network of insurgent women that in 1971, Lorraine first met a fellow NOW member Carol Downer at a self-help meeting in a feminist bookstore in Venice, California. Lorraine; a married school teacher and "Jewish mama" of four must have seemed an unlikely revolutionary; though early in her life, Lorraine took a strong stand against male authority. She refused to undergo a Bat Mitzvah in protest of what she felt was unequal treatment of women in her Orthodox Jewish religion.

It is evidence as to just how radical those times really were that Carol Downer and her group were meeting that night to discuss organizing an underground abortion clinic. They had brought a simple device used in an illegal clinic in Santa Monica, to aspirate the contents of the uterus. When Carol saw the women in the group weren't understanding the abortion technique she was describing, she hopped up onto the table and inserted a plastic speculum into her vagina, revealing her cervix for everyone to see, enabling the women in the group

to better visualize the procedure. Lorraine Rothman, along with all the other female freedom fighters in the room, must have been totally blown away. I can feel the ecstasy of power these women must have felt realizing the implications of having visual access their own cervixes, and in fact, it was a supreme moment of consciousness raising for every woman in the group. In this pure act of revolution, Carol Downer took a first and major step in the formation of the Women's Self-Help Movement.

Using correct medical terminology, Carol proceeded to give the women a basic lesson in anatomy that would demystify the female reproductive system and open the way for women to control their own bodies. It was highly subversive, and it must have felt contagiously and deliciously empowering to challenge doctors' long standing God-like control over women's health and bodies.

Lorraine was quick to see the social, political and cultural implications of this revolutionary device. While checking it out, her keen mind quickly grasped an essential flaw in the design that would allow air to enter into the uterus.

After the meeting, Lorraine went home and devised a prototype of a menstrual extraction kit, using common materials that most every woman would have access to. She returned to the next meeting with her improved version: a plastic bottle, a rubber stopper, plastic tubes and a two-way bypass valve that kept air from getting into the uterus.

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