

Nude newspapers and dyke dimples

*Signals. Symbols. I Know You Know bumperstickers.
Pink proud triangles. Will all those be lost in
our newly found freedom?*

B Y L E E L Y N C H

Some weeks ago I made the daily pilgrimage to my mailbox, that brave receptacle of civilization on our lonely rural route. Amongst the guilt trips from the dietist, vet and Obygn. lay a gay newspaper. Unstapled, without an envelope, limp and accessible to any eye, it sheepishly attempted to secrete itself

T H E



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under my ninety-first invitation to apply for a Citicard.

I looked over my shoulder to see who might have noticed this accusing envoy. It was probably the month's copy of *Sissies Speak Out*, or worse, *Raging Bulldagger Rag*. Even if it was the more discreet *OG&LHQMPC*, the headlines had done

me in with the postal service. *Transvestites To Bestow Lavender Robes On Pope. Dykes On Horses Rout Rangers' Bar Raid. Gay teacher Wins Right To Use Sapphistry As Sex Ed Text.*

One would think the publication of four lesbian books would help lay my fears to rest. Surely The World knows about me by now. Not so. The World doesn't frequent our kind of bookstores. The World is not on Naiad Press' mailing list. The World much prefers to keep its nose out of what it can't handle. It sleeps better at night when it ignores us prowling through its moral bushes. What can I say? I get paranoid easily.

Sometimes, of course, it's not paranoia at all, but good healthy self-defense, survival tactics, a wall of sanity against an insane world that would hurt us for simply loving one another. It doesn't make a bit of sense to me. Can it to them? Perhaps we queers touch a deep-seated fear of underpopulation in enormous numbers of heterosexuals. I sure wish they'd get over themselves. I'd love to feel comfortable when I receive envelopes stamped *Dykes Against Nuclear Technology*, or postcards exhorting me to *Elect A Dyke for President*. I would have loved to shout in joy when a woman approached me at a business meeting for my straight job and asked, "Do you happen to know a book called *Toothpick House*?" How could I get

out of that one when my picture is plastered across the back cover and my name across the front? But I was in luck that time. The woman was a lesbian, her approach simply a signal.

And it's signals which are the other side of the paranoia coin. *Bulldagger Rag's* arrival, undisguised, may have threatened my well-being in this community of tight-assed fundamentalists whose hobby seems to be circling the local Planned Parenthood office like famished buzzards; my co-worker's question may have given me a bad moment — but there's no way I would choose to live without either. I wouldn't have them if such risky ventures, which I'll call signaling, though of very different types, were not attempted.

Though I began a recent Northern California trip with Girlfriend intending to document for this column incidents of paranoia as we stopped in motels, visited tourist spots and spent most of our time in public, I found that it wasn't the paranoia, but the moments of positive connection which demanded my attention.

At Lassen State Park, for example, there we were, on a volcanic mountain-side, the stench of sulphur steaming at us from a thermal area, mud bubbling and seething all around. Two slender young men with *that look* about them followed us from the parking lot. The area was empty of people except for we two couples. There was no doubt that these men were compatriots, but how to make that contact?

We exchanged pleasantries with them. Quick-thinking Girlfriend, in naming our small town, identified it by saying *RFD* (the rural gay male magazine) had once been based there.

"Oh!" said one of the men, stretching the word impossibly into two emphatic syllables. Boyfriend, on the other side of their car, nodded, beaming, until I thought his teeth would fall out.

What made us want to cement this unexpected affirming connection in the wilderness? Why did we have to let them know, need for them to tell us in some way? Why now, as I tape this, driving through a small Western city, do I smile to see the two older men, obviously tourists, who walk motel row with gold chains around their necks and an infinitesimal sway to their hips? Why do I want to toot my horn in welcome?

There is a charm to this underground life of ours. At times it seems that our subculture, flourishing for centuries, is no longer needed, what with gay liberation and all. But if it should outlive its purpose, if life gets happier and easier in the open, I'd certainly miss the blend of fear and boldness that goes into our signaling, the sense of flapping wings, of charged air as

we circle one another yearning to give greetings.

I remember studying the language of lesbians. Learning to give The Look while barely meeting another dyke's eyes, as if one half of the face must deadpan and deny, while the other confesses and boasts. There would be a narrowing of one eye, a certain drawing up of one side of my mouth into what was more grimace than smile at first. With practice, I got my eye to twinkle with suppressed amusement. My head could nod so slightly no straight would swear it moved. And my left cheek would form a dimple: tough, brusque, amused, hungry — the dyke dimple. *You are not alone. Tell me I am not alone.*

Will all this be lost in our new found freedom? More and more I'm stopped by open smiles in strange places, by women starting conversations at the slightest excuse.

On my way home from North Carolina in May, I was settled in my seat on a DC10. Down the aisle came a woman with short grey hair, round glasses, slacks. Respectable-looking, but there was something in the way she moved — I labeled her a Probable. We were, after all, headed to San Francisco. Previous such airborne encounters had prepared me for her to take the window seat by my side. The irrepressible Universe at work again, bubbling hot dykes out of the sky, instead of gay men out of volcanic mud.

We made very brief conversation before our signaling became more sophisticated.

"Do you know so and so?"

"Well, yes! And do you know her — uh —"

"Sure! She used to be my best friend's ex's — uh —"

Within five minutes I knew she was a PhD who'd taken up teaching like a mission to open her male dominated field to other women. Within ten minutes she knew why my name sounded familiar. We'd both at least heard of each other's lovers. We, in fact, shared a whole local community. I'd found, as my high school gym teacher would have said, another member of the club.

So you see, I'd begun naming incidents of paranoia, and I ended by finding far more moments in which consciousness of my lesbianism led me to considerably more positive experiences.

Signals. Symbols. I Know You Know bumperstickers. Pink proud triangles. Pinky rings. Green on Thursday. Certain clothing, hairstyles, glasses. The Walk. How do we learn it all — *do we learn it?* Is there something inherent in our same sex intimacy that brands us? For years I longed to "look like a dyke." I was over thirty before I was satisfied with the extent to which photographs revealed the-dyke-in-me. Was it fifteen years of studied posing which showed, an accumulation of well-learned gestures and movements? Had the battering of a hostile society, the survival tactic of chemical abuse, left scars imbedded in my very flesh? Do the suffering of oppression and the joy of variant sexuality combine to shape our faces as well as our destinies? Such a bittersweet process, this becoming ourselves.

I want nothing less than liberation for us, nothing more than the simple, unthreatening delivery of a nude newspaper. Yet I treasure The Look, the signal dances, the dyke dimples. If the generation coming out now won't need all the difficult trap-pings of my era, how will I know them? What will guppies look like at sixty? •

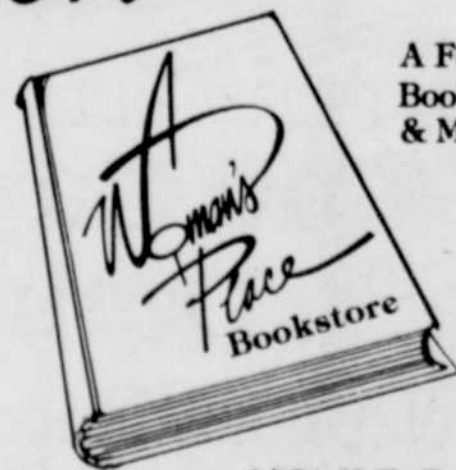


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