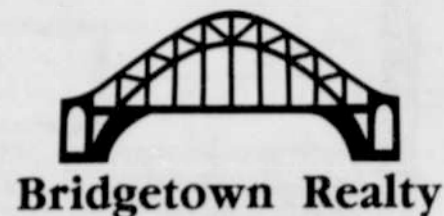


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The only lesbian on campus

*The style a queer kid needs, to survive,
 never entirely disappears*

by Lee Lynch

I was the only lesbian at my college. When I read now about gay and lesbian street kids, I know that back then I led a comparatively privileged existence, but at least today's kids have queer camaraderie. I opted for street life too, running away after two weeks of feeling like the only lesbian at school. I wasn't much of a runaway, though, and returned to four years of idyllic academe.

Of course, in 1963 it wasn't idyllic at all, nor was I the only lesbian. I soon brought out a lover, and we managed many a private sweaty session behind our locked doors. It was not a healthy relationship, but it was a necessary one for both of us.

Three years later, I learned that one of the upperclasswomen was a lesbian. Wendy and her lover were always either locked in her single room or partying with their sorority. I wondered if the whole sorority and its attendant boyfriends were gay. It was the sorority that physical education majors traditionally joined. I knew Wendy was gay, because one night in the dorm hallway she advised me to play her game. After that, she never had anything to do with me. I was pretty out for 1966 and therefore dangerous.

I was not bereft of support. The dean's intentions were good when she referred me for counseling. The heterosexual psychologist drove me to a breakdown, then increased my visits as a result. Infirmary personnel renewed my tranquilizer prescriptions without question. My adult dorm counselor knew the signs of my deeper depression. Pale, blonde, wraith-like, she was kind and wise beyond her years. She would invite me to the apartment she shared with her husband, a foreign student, and her pre-school sons, and she would keep me there until I had pledged not to do away with myself. I made sure I was out to the counselors on my floor, both of whom struggled within themselves to accept me. In the end, they supported and defended me. Later, I, myself, became a floor counselor, a position that offered some safety and respect.

It also helped that I was the unofficial class poet. Everyone knew that poets were supposed to be queer or crazy or both. My habits of attending classes barefoot, tripping with cool people, and drinking with the older intellectuals, seemed to take the edge off my deviance. The students would cruelly abuse "Mrs." Evans, the bleached-blond, gay male drama teacher, but they left me, in my jeans and flannel shirts, alone. "Mrs." Evans was later murdered by two under-age hustlers. I got out alive.

Sometimes I hurt too much to want to survive. One year the left-folk-singing-poetry-reading crowd—and every long-hair with a guitar was either the new Joan Baez or the next Bob Dylan—brought culture to the dorms with traveling sing-outs. I attended one gathering in my lounge. Folk singing, truth be told, bored the daylight out of me, but where else did I kind of fit in? I sat and looked intense, along with all the other revolutionary teen-agers and grown-up radicals. Then a

long-haired boy strummed a Peter, Paul and Mary tune on his guitar and substituted for their words a song that began, "Puff, the tragic faggot..."

I could not believe what I was hearing. This was the intelligentsia, these were the people who knew I was gay. These were supposed to be the sensitive ones, who believed in equality, marched for civil rights, and were the future hope of this country. Mortified, enraged, frightened, literally in shock—I reeled out of there and fled to my room where I shook and cried for hours.

I have never written or spoken about this to anyone. It is still painful, 28 years later. I never dared to wonder why, but as I finally let it out, I see that the song, the moment, the laughing crowd of peers, blew my world apart. The proud poet-butcher, the gay child-rebel, the peacenik-poseur, the little girl deposited in an institution that literally taught normalcy—"the only lesbian on campus"—couldn't pretend any more. I was really, undeniably, unbearably, alone.

I was never beaten up. I was taunted and insulted. To this day, I avert my eyes in public bathrooms and in the vicinity of women in states of undress, a habit based on old dormitory fears that I'd be accused of voyeurism. Regardless, more than one door slammed on me back then, as I walked along the hall. There were so many



incidents. Once, a group of girls on my floor dragged me into a room and held me, while one, whom I had thought was a friend, tried to kiss me—I presume on a dare. Once, a male student grabbed my arm and forced me onto a bed where he was making out with his girlfriend, who had risked being my friend. I call these acts psychological terrorism, and no queer kid should have to endure such treatment.

The women long-hairs, the bisexual and even straight men, were, one on one, intellectually exciting, adventurous. My small group of dorm pals, none gay at the time, accepted me. We didn't talk about my sexuality, we just had fun. One gay male teacher treated me like dirt, another was an inspiration. My lesbian teachers, mostly in the PE department, ignored me as hard as they could.

When I got desperate I went to New York and drank at the bars. I wasn't of that world any more, so there was nothing for me there but liquor and the wordless companionship of anonymous queers. Even so, it was terribly hard to leave and sober up on the gritty, rocking train, often packed with raucous, besotted, male baseball fans. It was hard to walk the miles from the midnight train through the dark downtown, past the hulks of smoking factories, along the loud and littered housing projects, and finally into that alien land, the college, which sought to impose conformity as much as it sought to educate, where I was neither welcome nor comfortable.

There is a snapshot of me in my college yearbook, a barefoot, androgynous blur hurrying across campus, as if pursued and trying to escape. That style, the style a queer kid sometimes needs in order to survive, never entirely disappears. If I learned nothing else in college, I learned not to linger in some places too long, or look at some people too closely, lest I hear the laughter, see the hard truth of closed minds, find myself lost, the only lesbian on some new campus.