

"It first came out of not being able to be together," says Nehra, a free-lance artist who leads art workshops for at-risk kids in London. "We created a virtual space just for us."

The first comic strip features a lovelorn character named SpykeGrrl calling up her sweetheart, Misster Scratch, across "the pond" from the United States.

"I miss ya, dude," says SpykeGrrl.

"I know, I know, jam tart," replies Misster Scratch.

The comic is full of quirky British turns of phrase as well as naughty gender-bending fun. Misster Scratch asserts (as does the real-life Nehra) that she identifies as genderqueer, not as lesbian.

"The comic gives us a voice, power, recognition and a creative outlet for our frustrations about unjust national laws," says Nehra, "as well as a way for us to be together in some way: by being our creation, living our relationship in comic form."

One of the complexities for both the real and comic book versions of SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch is that they do not want to get married. They support marriage rights for same-sex couples, but even if they were able to legally marry they would not want to be required to

do so in order to live together.

And even if they wanted to and could get married, there is still the question of what box would Nehra check, male or female? As a genderqueer, she says, neither fits.

"Basically our situation is far too gingerbeer," concludes the comic character Misster Scratch. A glossary alongside the strip tells readers that "gingerbeer = queer."

Her solution?

"Let's escape this dowdy prosaic realm and experience some 2-D comic(al) antics...where there's more than an ounce of Peace, Awareness and Rocket Shaped Love!"

Though initially invented just for themselves, the comic made its public debut in *The Pink Pauper*, a spoof of London's well-known gay publication *The Pink Paper*. *Pauper* features a full-color ad for "Assets Independent Insurance Advisers" with the tagline "Your oppression is our profit." *Pauper* champions queer voices and challenges the notion that all same-sex couples desire marriage.

As with the *Pauper*, Nehra says, the point of the comic is: "I don't necessarily want to be like a heterosexual couple."

But she and Spondike would like some of the rights and advantages heterosexuals have when it comes to immigration options. According to the Human Rights Campaign, because same-sex relationships are not recognized under U.S. law, binational gay and lesbian couples are often forced to live apart or in fear of deportation.

The book *Why You Should Give a Damn About Gay Marriage* describes a scenario in which a U.S.

woman travels overseas and falls in love. "If she's heterosexual, she'll have to fill out some paperwork," writes Davina Kotulski, but ultimately she'll be able to have her beloved join her in the United States.

Not so for gays and lesbians, the author adds. "If she's a lesbian, her partner will have to apply for a work visa, and they'll both have to keep praying it will be renewed or that some nice employer will spon-

sor her for citizenship." (See related story on Page 26.)

"There is no way for a U.S. citizen to sponsor her same-sex partner from the U.K.," says Victoria Nielson, legal director at Immigration Equality.

A bill before Congress could change all this. The Permanent Partners Immigration Act would add the term "permanent partners" to the Immigration and Nationality Act so that U.S. citizens and permanent residents can sponsor their same-sex partners for immigration.

U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., introduced the bill in 2000, and a Senate version followed three years later. The legislation will be reintroduced to the new Congress this year, but it is unclear when—or if—it will pass.

In the meantime, despite the recognition of same-sex marriage in some states, binational couples are still at the

mercy of federal law, says Nielson. "Even if a couple is married in Massachusetts, if the Massachusetts resident applies for legal permanent residency for her same-sex spouse, [Immigration Services]

would deny the application and cite the Defense of Marriage Act."

Not that Spondike and Nehra are considering a move to Boston. A more hopeful option for our "queer" heroines would be for Spondike to move to the United Kingdom, which at least recognizes same-sex domestic partners.

"Laws are a lot more pro-homo in the U.K. than the U.S.," says Spondike. "Scratch and I would have to live together for two years and prove cohabitation to the British Council through bills, rental paperwork, etc. After our two years...we can apply for the visa. If approved, I would be able to stay in the U.K. on that visa and would be able to work legally as well. We would still have to cohabit for another two years, and once again prove it. After that, I would be able to apply for another visa to stay in the U.K. for a longer period of time."

Spondike says queer couples have to jump through more hoops than their straight counterparts. While heterosexual binational couples have to prove two years of cohabitation in the United Kingdom after their marriage, they do not have the same restriction on cohabitation prior to the non-U.K. partner taking up residence in the United Kingdom.

Spondike notes that it is "very difficult for someone who is not living in another country due to school or employment because a U.S. citizen can only stay in the U.K. for a maximum of six months at a time. And a U.K. citizen can stay in the U.S. for only three months max!"

According to U.K. attorney Owen Davies, who has been called "the immigration lawyer's immigration lawyer," the strain on gay and lesbian binational couples can be huge. He has helped several same-sex couples with immigration, but he says they do not always need an attorney if their case is fairly simple.

Davies says the United Kingdom recently took a "big forward step" by passing a civil registration bill that provides domestic partnership recognition to same-sex couples. By the end of



the year, he explains, couples like Nehra and Spondike could register in advance of cohabitation. "Sort of like a fiancée."

Advances aside, Davies says the United Kingdom is becoming stricter with its immigration policies. "Immigration is a tit-for-tat industry." As U.S. border controls get tighter, the United Kingdom and other countries follow suit. "Now it's far more difficult for a U.S. citizen to come to the U.K."

Where does this leave our heroines?

That is exactly what readers of their comics are asking. The last episode left the question open, with Misster Scratch and SpykeGrrl traveling through outer space and landing in a strange city.

"Where are we now?" asks SpykeGrrl.

"I wonder," answers Misster Scratch. "Well, it's awfully grey and I think I can hear pigeons. We must be in London!"

"London?" SpykeGrrl wonders. "Past? Present? Comic? Real Life?"

"Well, let's open the rory and have a butchers," says Misster Scratch. The glossary on the margin indicates that "rory = door" and "butchers = look."

"Then let's find a rub-a-dub [pub] where we can get some grub [food] and tiddly wink [drink], we could do with some Tommy tucker [supper]."

The next panel asks in a *Star Wars*-like typeface: "Are SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch in London? If so, are the tubes still running or will the need to get a night bus? Which realm are they in?"

The next episode is due out this month; look for it at *In Other Words Women's Books and Resources*. Readers in other towns and countries—SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch have fans everywhere from Berlin to San Francisco—can find all the episodes online.

"Sometimes I feel like my life and our life is sorta surreal," admits Spondike, sporting her striped sport socks hiked up to the knee, which she claims give her super powers. "We miss that whole daily life thing."

Nehra, whose super-power-inducing rocket tattoo peeks out from her shirt sleeve, concurs. What's hardest, she says, is "missing out on all the little stuff."

"SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch live out a relationship that we cannot yet [have] and are struggling for," she says. "In a way SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch are more real [because] they exist together, always." ☐

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—Karen "Spike" Spondike



RESOURCES

SpykeGrrl and Misster Scratch: Our heroines' official site, where you can read all the episodes of their comic. www.spykeandscratch.com.

Love Sees No Borders: A site dedicated to disseminating information about the injustices suffered by queer U.S. citizens and their foreign-born partners. www.loveseesnoborders.org.

Immigration Equality: A coalition of immigrants, attorneys and other activists addressing the widespread impact of discriminatory immigration laws on the lives of those in the sexual minorities community and immigrants who are living with HIV/AIDS. Formerly known as the Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force. www.lgirtf.org.

Queeruption: An international site "where alternative/radical/disenfranchised queers can exchange information, network, organize, inspire and be inspired, self-represent, challenge ourselves and each other, and learn about DIY ideas and ethics." www.queeruption.org.