

From Darwin to Jerusalem - By Sara Elkas

The year was 1979 and I was 30 years old. Exactly eleven-years before that I had stood under the chuppah in Haifa, Israel. Now the marriage was over and I was living in Perth, Australia. I had just completed a post-graduate course in librarianship at the Western Australia Institute of Technology. I had been looking for work in Perth for some weeks with no success when I met a woman recently arrived from Brazil. Maria was a member of a religious sect I had never heard of - something to do with reaching God through mathematics - and was keen to spread the word. When she told me she was going to Darwin and asked me to come with her I thought why not. I had heard that it was easy to find library jobs in Darwin.

It so happened that Joan, a teacher returning to her job at an Aboriginal school in the Northern Territory, advertised for a couple of women to join her and share petrol costs. In a few days I was packed and ready leaving most of my possessions with friends.

Here we were on the highway – the three of us as well as Joan’s dog. The first day out we lost the dog. The poor thing fell off the canvas on top of the van without anyone noticing for some time. We went back but couldn’t find her. The dog limped her way to the house of a kind woman and was later returned. The second day on the road the radiator burst and had to be replaced at great expense. We reached Port Hedland and were only a couple of days away from Darwin.

On the third day somewhere between Port Hedland and Broome the van broke down completely. Luckily it happened just outside a road service station appropriately called “No Name Place”. Apart from a few cars on the highway there was nothing for miles but sunburnt red soil.

I remember just standing there and for once in my life I wasn’t anxious or worried about my responsibilities. There was nothing I could do about the situation. Nothing mattered except the feel of the earth under my feet and the sun on my face. It was a moment of freedom and bliss that I will never forget. I believe it helped me prepare for what was to follow.

After a while a truck came and took the car and us back to Port Hedland. On the way I was fortunate to witness one of those amazing tropical electric storms while the truck made its way slowly over a bridge. We stayed in Port Hedland overnight and flew to Darwin the next day.

We arrived in Darwin and booked into the local YMCA, a large wide building with a glass front situated right on the beach. For some strange reason Joan and I ended up in a double room while Maria was given a single room. As soon as we

were alone Joan, who had been drinking, made sexual advances to me. I replied that I wasn't interested.

Afterwards I told Maria about the advances and assured her that I was "in control" of the situation. However, the next night in the double bed Joan gently touched my back and that did it. We hardly emerged out of bed for the next three days. I was oblivious to everything including Maria's displeasure that I wasn't spending any time with her. Joan left to undertake her teaching duties and then it hit me like a brick. I had had sex with another woman!

While my body was saying that the sex had been great my mind was telling me that it was all wrong. When Joan came to visit, holding the dog on a chain, I told her that the idea of being sexual with her made me feel like throwing up. Later, I understood that as well as suffering from internalized homophobia I was also troubled by the fact that I wasn't in love with Joan. Indeed I was in love with Maria and did express my feelings to her on one occasion. However, even though she said she loved me as a friend she was not attracted to me and shortly after formed a relationship with a man she met at the YMCA.

Six months went past with me working full time as a librarian at the Darwin Community College. I was also working hard at being heterosexual having a couple of one night stands and even a short affair with a teacher at the college. It met neither my sexual nor my emotional needs.

I made friends with a couple of women I worked with at the college. One of them invited me to a party where I met a woman who had recently arrived in Darwin. Sonia was tall and good looking and I think I was attracted to her from the very beginning. She was very open about her sexuality and her interest in finding a new lover. However, I played hard to get mainly because she seemed so sure of herself. One evening she was in my room talking and chain smoking and all of a sudden she reached over and touched my hair. That did it again. The next day I told the woman whom I was sharing the house with what had happened.

"You must be bisexual," she said.

"No. I am a lesbian"

I had no more doubts. I had arrived at my own Jerusalem.

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