

Way Back When - by Rachael

We had been trying to make love for hours, but still there was no joy. There I was in bed with Dr Anna Schultz. Dark eyed, dark haired, with little fraulein about her. She was charming, cultured, intelligent, passionate. She was German. I was useless.

Finally I said it. 'How do you feel making love to a Jew?'
Being a Jewish lesbian had its down side.

In the couple of decades following WW2 Melbourne families had all kinds of problems. Apart from mothers wanting to marry off their daughters, fathers who didn't want to know about it, siblings who pestered, doctors who nodded wisely and lamented it was just a phase, there was the difficulty of being different.

My parents were born in what was formerly Palestine (now Israel) and migrated in 1923. I was born in Perth. Our family was normal. I went through school with the usual crushes during puberty, knowing who I was and what I was. We had to behave like everyone else, though, and I went through the dances, the dating and the social life like other teenagers. It was the accepted thing that you got married, had children, spent most of your life in the kitchen and became a model Jewish citizen.

I couldn't take it. I fought to separate myself from this lifestyle and found that a career might be the answer. I had to abandon thoughts of being a school teacher because we could not afford college fees, so I went to business college, became a stenographer and struggled in the male business world, wearing the accepted dresses and high heels. It was pretty boring, and I needed an outlet for my rising insecurities.

Having brought the house down as a compere for a variety show at school, I had a great urge to show off, to act, to write and to become something other than a housewife. That performance as a compere, by the way, gave me a great chance to get into drag. I borrowed my father's dinner suit, made a top hat out of cardboard and wore a monocle. Wow, did I think I was the answer to a maiden's prayer. I was 12 years old.

I joined a local amateur theatre where I performed in many plays, and got very involved in performing original comedy routines on radio. A well known radio personality thought I was very talented, and after trying to seduce me in the front seat of his car, promised to try and find me a job. Eventually I was offered a job in advertising as a copywriter, where I learned to write and produce commercials.

This was the start of a new life. Lesbians and camp guys were all over the place and I was in a glamorous field, working with models, oh those long legged models, photographers, actors and clients and going to smart lunches

and product launches. I met a few kindred souls, but it was a risky time when you couldn't show yourself.

Where did you meet other lesbians, how would you recognise each other, how would they feel if you made a pass? There were no clubs, no meeting places, no dances. You were constantly on the alert, knowing they were out there somewhere.

Perhaps one of the girls in the office flirted with you over lunch, and you might ask her home for tea. Nobody had cars of their own or a place of their own, so you took the tram and walked three blocks. You looked in places you had heard about, like the theatre, sporting clubs, coffee lounges. Perhaps one of the softball girls would smile at you.

A great source of inspiration came from the camp boys who knew where to go, where the parties were, and who was involved with whom. In those days most of the camp boys looked and behaved like heterosexuals, but I got to know some who were very flamboyant, walking like Marilyn Monroe, waving limp wrists and squealing while they demolished someone's character with cries of "My deah, you should have seen how she carried on!" For years, the expression 'my deah,' was a kind of password. Although 'drag' was in its early stages, the boys loved dressing up and putting on make-up at parties.

Eventually all roads led to Val's Restaurant, the only coffee lounge run by a real live lesbian who wore tailored suits and cravats. We were all crazy about her. Here was the springboard to the gay life. Saturday night the place was overflowing with the 'boys' and the 'girls'. If you were really game you made a statement and wore slacks. Sometimes a glance here, a smile there, and you might get invited to a lesbian party. A lesbian party was the place to meet all types of girls and perhaps a partner or a one-night stand.

The words 'gay' and 'straight' didn't exist. You were 'camp' or 'that way' or else a 'square'. We were known as 'Charlies' or 'lesos'. The boys were known as 'pansies' or 'queans'.

There was a definite 'class system' among the girls. At the top of the tree were the cultured and refined types, unfortunately scarce. There was the middling class made up mostly of office girls, salesgirls, factory workers, nurses and students. At the bottom of the heap were the 'butch Charlies', usually very rough and tough, drinking too much, ready for a fist fight, and riding motorbikes in their male leather jackets. Leather for women had not yet arrived. Somehow we mingled.

Parties often involved two main themes. Drama and New Faces. If there were New Faces you jostled for position which eventually led to Drama. Drama could be anything from quiet sobbing, dragging your loved one away from someone else, to smashing glasses, slamming doors loudly, or standing on the breakable records. Jealousy was rife. Everyone smoked, flashing their cigarette cases and cigarette lighters everywhere, drank beer and wore the ubiquitous slacks with a man's shirt or tailored blouse and something at the

neck like a cravat, a bolar tie, a bow tie or the very daring man's tie. I had a collection of cigarette holders which I thought were real classy. Hair was cut very short, or you might see the occasional perm. Apart from a watch, nobody was into jewellery.

The most popular of all the New Faces were the girls in uniform, mostly from the Army or Navy. Nurses in uniform were an object of adoration, and I once had a fling with a girl in another kind of uniform – a tram conductress.

Most of the girls didn't like being called by their first name, especially if they had a 'girlie' name, so a lot of nicknames were made up from your surname. So instead of Shirley or Pat or Helen you responded to Woody, Bushy or Picky. We had nicknames for others, such as The Quivering Bun, The Flying Witch, or The Vagina Grinder. Jackie was known as Mrs Harpic because she was 'clean round the bend'.

There was a general acceptance that 'femme' lesbians got around with 'butch' partners. Although some of the girls treated this very seriously and behaved according to their 'type,' the idea gradually wore down, and it was fair game to go after anybody you fancied. I remember some very 'butch' types who wore very masculine outfits, wore the shortest of haircuts and put on gruff voices. You had to be pretty game to be seen with one of those in public!

We danced in the old fashioned way, holding our partners very close. Our favourite music came mostly from the female singers. We loved Sassy and Bassey, Doris Day, Rosemary Clooney, Lena Horne, Ella and Frankie and Billy Daniels.

We also had our own entertainment. During supper someone sang or played a guitar. We had a wonderful blues singer with a sexy, smoky voice and a group called the Gay Latin Trio. There was also the odd impromptu performer like Pammie who loved to stand on the table, take off all her clothes and do strange things with apples.

Drugs were unheard of, although drinking was quite heavy. There was a kind of incestuous feel around our crowd because of the constant changing of partners.

I never met one Jewish lesbian but I did find some anti-semitism around. Nothing very strong, usually just the odd 'lkey' joke or remarks about rich Jews. Everyone knew I was Jewish and enjoyed my Jewish jokes. Some of my partners thought having a Jewish girlfriend was a bit of a novelty, something different. Usually the subject never came up.

I did have one interesting affair with a Catholic. She often talked about being damned if she didn't go to confession and how the priests told her seeing me was a sin. We were madly in love and although it was difficult when she wouldn't make love if she was in a 'state of grace', we continued to see each other. It was all on, then it was all off, then it was all on again. The usual story. I went to mass with her one day to prove I was caring.

As I sat in the unfamiliar surroundings, listened to the service, watched people kneeling as they prayed, became aware of the priests, the choir, the smell of incense, I was overcome with emotion as I realised how differently we viewed life. I started to cry and my friend, who completely misunderstood this display of emotion, pressed my hand and whispered, "Do you want to see a priest?"

Being a Jewish lesbian had its down side all right.

Life wasn't all parties. Some of the girls found partners and stayed together for a long time. We still went to work in our dresses and high heels and pretended to have boyfriends. We went out to lunches and dinners and to the movies and concerts. On special occasions we would dress up in smart frocks instead of slacks. This was called 'going out with legs on'.

We made a lot of our own fun. We had picnics and swimming parties and played cricket and baseball, and did silly things like holding a marriage ceremony for our cars, or our cats. We had fancy dress parties, played poker and had singalongs. We read *The Well of Loneliness* and *Nightwood*. We even had a few criminals. One dressed up in male clothing and robbed a bank. Others stole, some finished up in jail.

There were lesbians who left the camp life and got married, had children, and sometimes reappeared. We had a few single girls who became pregnant.

We had quite a few lesbian weddings when everyone arrived with gifts and grog, and the loving couple gave thanks and had their pictures taken and turned on a fabulous supper. Some of these didn't survive for long, Others I know have been together 30 and 40 years.

Then the most extraordinary thing happened. I met a camp Jewish boy who was in the same play as I was in our theatre group. To find we were both Jewish and camp was bigger than landing on the moon or parting the Red Sea.

We decided to get married, to get away from home and be able to lead our own lives. Great sighs of relief from our families, engagement parties, kitchen teas and holding hands and smooching in public.

We were married under the canopy in the full tradition. I wore a blue outfit and a gorgeous hat with roses. We honeymooned in Sydney where we had a great time catching up on the clubs and pubs.

There was a suitable apartment available where we could each have our own room, and ,if aunties or uncles dropped in, I would fly around and put his slippers under my bed and throw his dressing gown on top of my bed. It was all very respectable. We were able to have our friends home, some of mine, some of his, sometimes a mixture.

Eventually the strain of keeping up the pretence was beginning to show on both of us. I felt guilty about deceiving my parents, and after a year we parted

on friendly terms. I continued to live in the apartment, wore my wedding ring, was known as 'Mrs' and became a Gay Divorcee in the fullest sense.

Watching the changes over the years has been quite remarkable as the gay scene grew and thrived. I met many Jewish lesbians and what a great delight that has been.

When I marched on Gay Pride Day I felt the freedom that coming out brings to all of us.

Being a Jewish lesbian can be wonderful, let me tell you.

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