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## In Amerika They Call Us Dykes\*

### INTRODUCTION

THIS chapter is a beginning, the beginning of our efforts to define for ourselves what it means to be a lesbian in this society. It is part of a larger beginning, as more and more gay women throughout the country have started to write, argue, sing, and shout their message to the straight world.

A lot of people worked on this chapter. The continuity was provided by a group of about nine women in Gay Women's Liberation who had been meeting together for a number of weeks before they decided to write this chapter, most of whom had been friends for some time before that. We had no connection with the group that was writing the rest of the book—except individual friendships between some of us—and in fact we disagreed, and still do, with many of their opinions. However, we took on the project because we thought that it was very important for any book dealing with women and sexuality to have a good section on lesbianism, and because we thought that writing it would help us sort out some of our own ideas, feelings, and politics around being lesbians in this society.

In addition to the nine of us, another half dozen women contributed pieces they had written, took part in tape-recording sessions, and helped edit and put material together. We write from many different points of view. But we all have in common that we dig being gay; we think it's one of the most positive aspects of our lives.

We want to break down the myths, misrepresentations, and outright lies that make possible our oppression and exploitation as lesbians, and that control not only our lives but the lives of straight women as well. The horror and fear with which others view us have served to ghettoize us, to isolate us not only from the straight world but from each other, since we must stay hidden to sur-

\*Since the gay collective insisted on complete control over the style and content of this chapter, the Health Book Collective has not edited it. Because of length limitations, however, the gay collective has had to leave out much material that they feel is important.

vive. The problems of our lives—from medical questions to the difficulties of living in a society that condemns our very existence—are not viewed as legitimate by straight society, which insists that our only problem is that we are queer. The fact that we are lesbians is used to discredit everything that we say, and to make us into scapegoats for everyone else's problems. The fear of lesbianism is used not only to divide us from other women but also to keep all women isolated from each other, to keep women from becoming close friends. It also serves to keep women "in their place": any woman who acts assertive or holds a "man's" job may be labeled a dyke.

This chapter is a beginning—that means there is much more to come. There are many things we had to leave out, because of space limitations or because we do not have the experience to write about them. We have included nothing about lesbianism in prisons or in the armed forces, about the problems of black lesbians or older gay women. We do not deal adequately with questions of class, role playing, legal problems, and many other subjects. We hope eventually to expand this chapter and use it as the beginning of an anthology by and about gay women. We welcome your criticisms and ideas. Write to us c/o Lesbian Liberation, The Women's Educational Center, 46 Pleasant Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139.

We have included four of our lives so that you may see us as we see ourselves—as real people. We weren't born lesbians. Coming to think of ourselves as gay was part of a process. We went through social conditioning, had experiences with men and women, and made choices, conscious or not. We have always loved some women—friends, mothers, sisters—but that did not make us gay. At some point our love for our women friends found expression in sexual feelings, and we acted on those feelings. For Clyde this happened when she was nine; for Nell, not until she was thirty-seven, married, and the mother of three children.

From this point on, we continued to turn to women

for love and friendship. Bisexuality might be possible in a healthy society, but it's not possible in this one. Relationships with men in this society have a built-in power imbalance, and few of us who have explored the possibilities of relationships between women would choose again to start with that handicap.

SARAH. I'm twenty-five, and I "came out" when I slept with a friend a year ago. We have been lovers ever since. But it took me about six months to actively assert my gay identity and feel bound to figuring out what gay politics was or could be. I understood my reluctance to being labeled "lesbian" after listening to a couple of gay women at a gay bar react violently to the word. They saw themselves as human beings, not as labels. But, I thought, that's just not the way people deal with each other in this society. They give you labels whether you take them or not. They reminded me too much of myself ten or fifteen years ago when I responded similarly to being called a Jew.

From the sixth grade on, I was the only Jew in my school. Everyone informed me of that; and it was no compliment coming from their mouths. I thought of myself as smart, capable, good at science and math. I was going to be another Marie Curie. But I was also intimidated by other peoples' judgments; I had to figure out how to fit in. "No, we don't bury our dead standing up," I would say. I really wanted to have friends, and I did get close to girls and boys. But I was always on the

fence; they might always turn around and say "You're a Jew." This explains a lot of my reluctance to identify myself as gay and say "I'm a lesbian."

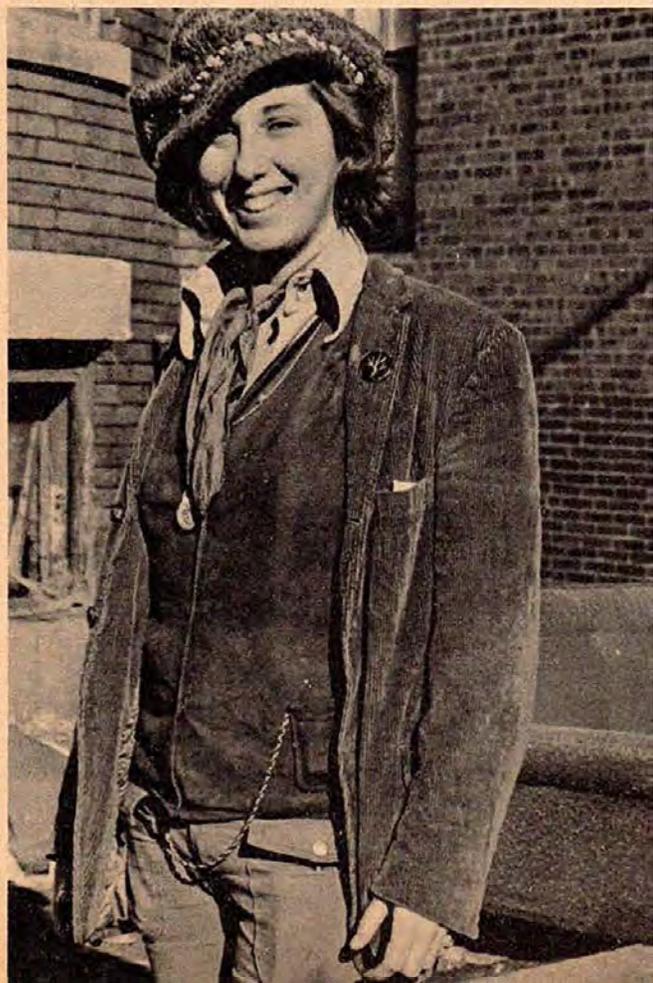
I thought I could have what people would call a gay relationship with my friend and not have to get into gay women's liberation or see myself as a lesbian. I had the choice not to do that. I knew by calling myself a lesbian I was asking for disapproval, distance, and perhaps violence, from most people. And since I had gone through it once, why ask for it again? So for a long time I did not identify. Then I realized that while ideally no one wants to be labeled, I do live in a society where people react to each other that way, and I don't have any control over that. I can't deny how people relate to me. Yes, I'm Jewish and I'm a lesbian.

I'm one of those women who "came out" with the women's movement. Women's Liberation made me think about my past, about when I was a kid and liked to play football and baseball. To me the accusation "You throw like a girl" was a terrible put-down—I didn't want to be lumped in with the "girl" category. I realized when thinking about my family that my parents had similar expectations for me and my brother—except that it was impressed on me to be nice, considerate, concerned for others in ways my brother was rarely pressed to show.

I thought about how, in junior high, the boys looked at the girls as developing bodies. They would yell, "Pearl Harbor, surprise attack!" as they grabbed our breasts and forced us down on the ground to get the "big feel." I know it scared me then, but how could I deal with my anger and fear when what was so important among girls was to be accepted by the boys? And having a boyfriend was often a protection from those other boys.

In ninth grade a group of girls got close. We used to hug and kiss each other a lot and have slumber parties. Most of us had boyfriends, but we seemed very important to each other. Once in a while someone would say, "What are you, a homo?" and we'd laugh. It didn't mean anything and it didn't change our behavior in any way.

That's the only reference to homosexuality before college that I can remember. In college I got hit with Freud and latent homosexual tendencies. What did this mean for me, who had always been more emotionally attached to women than to men? In freshman year my roommate and I became very close and dependent on each other, but neither of us could handle the intensity; that happened to me a lot with female friends. In psychotherapy I asked (indirectly of course) if I had "those tendencies." After about fifteen minutes the therapist figured out the question and asked, "Are you wondering if you're a lesbian?" Me: "Not really—ahh, I'm just wondering what you think about those tendencies." "You've given no indications of that," he said. Phew! was my reaction, not knowing what those "indications" were! (That's a story of how expertise has power over people's



lives.) So I didn't worry about being a lesbian, but continued to build close friendships with women; and the problems those emotional attachments brought weren't lessened.

After college I felt the sadness of women friends going in different directions without the question of sharing our lives, like there would be with boyfriends. I went with a guy for three years, but he was never more important to me than two of my female friends. That was to my liking, not his. He wanted to get married, but since marriage wasn't part of any world I could imagine for myself, he married another woman two months after we split up. Sometimes my friendships with women were threatened by their jealous boyfriends. With these feelings, I could no longer ignore the women's movement. I read something another woman had written about her—and my—experiences. Fantastic! I wasn't alone. I began thinking that men didn't understand friendship, that they were sexual prowlers wanting all the attention focused on them; whereas my relationships with women seemed natural, exciting, and intense.

Working with Women's Liberation in Boston meant being with women all the time. A group of us who weren't really close but were friends would hang out together, circle-danced at a bar, played basketball. Diana was one of them. She and I found we could tune into each other's survival tactics: her piercing, allusive quips weren't offensive to me. What a relief. We could accept each other without many hurt feelings, we shared a lot of interests and criticisms of the women's movement. Eventually we slept together. That was over a year ago.

DIANA. When I was a kid, I was always a tomboy. In seventh grade the situation changed—I went to a private school where I didn't know anyone and all my friends were girls. I never got to know any of the boys and couldn't see why anyone would want to—they were picking on younger kids, harassing women teachers, and so on. It seemed as though you couldn't get to know them as friends, but only flirt with them. I didn't want to flirt, so I didn't go to parties everyone else was going to. I knew of course that when boys and girls grew up they were supposed to mysteriously start being attracted to each other. I thought that would happen to me, too, later. But the kids in my class just seemed to be playing at being grown up.

In junior high I started identifying more strongly as a girl. Boys were becoming more and more of an alien group. I still hated stockings and frills, but I certainly didn't want to be a boy anymore.

We had dancing classes in junior high. One night between dances a cold breeze started blowing through the open window. I reached over and touched Margaret's knee and asked her if she was getting cold too. She shrank back in mock horror and said, "What's the mat-

ter, Diana, are you a lesbian?" Everyone nearby started snickering. I didn't know what a lesbian was, but I knew I didn't want to be one. Later I found out; there was a lot of joking and taunting among girls in my class about lesbianism, which they viewed as sick and disgusting.

I went to an all-girls boarding school for high school. I was happy to be in an all-girls school, because I thought of boys as people you couldn't act naturally with, people who would make the classroom atmosphere tense and uptight. I began to worry consciously about being a lesbian. I knew that wherever I went, women attracted my attention, never men. If I rode on a bus or subway I would watch the faces of all the women. My emotional attachments were all to women and I had crushes on women friends. But I thought that if my attachments weren't sexual I was okay. I tried imagining sex with one of the seniors and was repelled by the thought. That was a relief. I said to myself that I was attracted to girls' faces, not their bodies. I told myself, "I just think Kitty's body is beautiful from an *esthetic* point of view, not a sexual one."

I was a tactophobe—a word we invented to mean someone who was afraid of touching people. I was afraid that if I touched other girls I would like it and keep on touching them. So I became repulsed at the idea, to save myself from perversion.

I went to college, and as I began sleeping with boys I began to lose some of my fear of being a lesbian. I enjoyed sex with boys at first, though I didn't much enjoy being with them otherwise, and was always trying to think up reasons not to see my boyfriend. I thought men were boring, and I still felt I had to act very artificially with them.

I began to go on a campaign to become more boy-oriented. I tried consciously to watch more men and fewer women in the subway. I wanted to feel turned on to men, not because it would be enjoyable, but because I was afraid I would not be a complete woman otherwise.

One summer I went to Latin America. There the women are much more physical with each other, walking arm in arm, dancing close together, and touching each other more. I liked this freedom and thought that it showed how culture-bound our definitions of homosexuality are. I got close to one woman, a nurse named Edna. Before I left I spent a day at her house. We were sitting on her bed and she started sucking my finger. I was totally turned on. As I left I thought, Oh no, there's no denying it anymore. I'm a lesbian. Bisexuality did not occur to me as a possibility, although I knew the term. I thought if I was turned on to women, I must accept the fact of being a total queer.

I got into the women's movement, and felt an enormous relief that I would no longer have to play roles with men and act feminine and sweet, dress in skirts

and heels, and do all the things I'd done on dates. Then I began to feel hatred for men for having forced me into these roles. During this time I would buy women's papers as soon as they came out and look immediately for articles by gay women. I began to hang out with gay women, who turned out to be regular people, not the stereotypes I had imagined. On a gut level I was beginning to realize that gayness was not a sickness. One night I went out for a long walk, and when I got home I had decided I was a lesbian. For me it was not a decision to become a lesbian. It was a question of accepting and becoming comfortable with feelings that I had always had.

I don't know if I would ever have "come out" if it hadn't been for the women's movement. The women's movement first led me to question the "naturalness" of the male-female roles that I had always largely accepted. Because I thought that role-playing heterosexuality was "the way it's supposed to be," whenever I rebelled against these roles I was afraid that this meant I was not a complete woman, that there was something wrong with me—not enough sex hormones, no doubt. The women's movement helped me to reject these roles, and with them every reason for struggling to be heterosexual. I realized femaleness was something I was born with, it was not something others could reward me with when I acted "feminine," or take away from me as a punishment.

**RONNIE.** When I was a little girl I was very pretty and very good. My mother made me frilly dresses and set my hair into blond ringlets. She had had a hard time in a male-oriented immigrant family, and was determined that her daughters should be as good as her sons. She dreamed about sending us to college.

My parents loved each other, and my family seemed different from those of my friends because of all the affection. My sister and I have always been close. We slept in the same bed for fifteen years and usually snuggled, and she and I and girl cousins, drawing on our European background, would walk around arm in arm or holding hands and gossip about our periods.

As a teen-ager I hung out with a group of girls. We got crushes on boys and gossiped about them. In high school I didn't date much, but I wasn't unhappy about it. Instead I read books, learned to smoke, cut classes, and hid a bottle of Scotch in my locker that it took me two years to drink. I had fantasies of a career as a politician and said I didn't want to be a housewife, but as I talked big and tough I was shortening my skirts, dieting, and putting a rinse on my hair.

I went away to college, not knowing I was strikingly pretty, and faced with the wealthy girls in my dorm, I felt like I would always be an onlooker in other people's lives. I felt angry that I had to iron other girls' clothes to buy little Villager outfits, while other girls got money from home. I began to date fraternity boys,

though I thought they were snobs, and to look for someone with whom to lose my virginity. After several boyfriends I settled down with one man, and we spent five years living together, part of that time married.

My marriage was a good marriage, as marriages go. But it was hard for me to integrate my job, my friends, and my politics into a full-time relationship with my husband, and after enthusiastic starts I would usually quit what I started out to do. He didn't help me with the housework, and I, who had always wanted kids, began to think that if we had them, I would have to do all the work—and that scared me. After five years of living what got to be progressively more his life I began to feel cheated, and looked for something of my own to do. We tried a group marriage with friends, and it helped for a while, but it ended because it scared all of us. I tried professional school but didn't go to classes much. I thought about Women's Liberation, and a woman friend at school suggested that we start a women's group. I had new life in me. One night I suggested separation for a while, but when I left I knew it was for good. About this time a married woman friend at school, Susan, fell in love with me. This was not the first time I had to deal with my sexual and emotional feelings for women. At college my roommate Alice had been lovers with Sylvia. But Sylvia freaked out, married someone who was studying to be a psychiatrist, and told Alice never to talk to her again. Consoling Alice and getting closer to her, I felt drawn to her sexually, but was too shy to tell her for fear she would think that I felt that way because she was a lesbian.

One night we both got drunk and made love, but she fell asleep. After that we could drink wine by candlelight, reach out for each other's hands, and have bad fights just before I would go out to spend the night with my boyfriend. We loved each other, but I in my shyness and she, trying to draw back from lesbianism, did not know how to make it deeper.

My love for Alice had opened me to women sexually, but did not make me gay. I had more respect for my women friends though. But I never sought out gay women. I was aware of the sexual attraction that existed between me and my friends, like if we slept in the same bed together, but I never acted on it, because living with my husband took up all my energies.

After my marriage was over I responded to Susan, although I still needed men. We would often sleep in each other's arms, but it was becoming clear that she was married and that our love was a secondary secret garden. Once, when she and her husband had been fighting and were separated, I surprised myself by suggesting that she stay with me and sleep with me. She said no, and pulled back into her marriage.

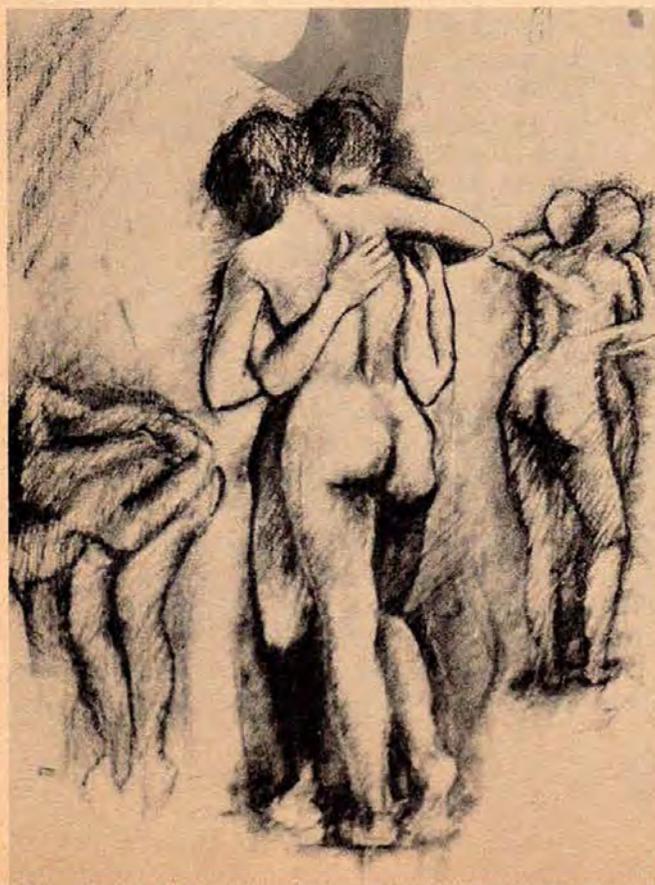
All this was two years ago. Soon I got into the women's movement with all my energy. I let my relationships

with men slip and became celibate. I wondered if I was gay. I was changing; I cared for women, and I could not lead the kind of life I wanted to with men. My commitment to women was making me stronger in every way.

The first woman I slept with after I decided I was a lesbian was someone I did not know well. She and I had dinner and we talked until it was too late and cold to go home. I slept on her bed, and because she had been a lesbian a long time, it never occurred to me that I could sleep with her and not make love. The sex was good, and I never told her she was my first gay lover. But when I woke up I felt sick, repulsed at having made love to someone I did not want to love, and frightened at being a lesbian. I never got past dealing with her as an obligation. I went through a period of self-consciousness, thinking there were rules to learn, not realizing it takes time to get used to a new identity. Fortunately, many people I knew were going through the same crisis too, and we talked often about our new experiences.

I never expected to be so much on my own, without a man, and sometimes I worry about being dependent on only myself for money. I am a hard worker, and whatever skills I have will be used for women. I like my life to be busy, and I guard my freedom. I feel really good about the relationships I can have with women. I never feel smothered and without power, the way I did with men. I feel that I will make mistakes, but no matter what I'm creating, it will be my life.

**MIKI.** I am a twenty-four-year-old gay woman who has been into the women's movement for approximately one



year. Although I "came out" many years ago, the movement has helped me accept myself as a woman and accept my gayness in a new way.

I was the older of two girls. I always knew my mother wanted a son, and consequently I have always had a high value on achievement (something that is usually more important for sons than daughters). As a young child I played mostly with one boy, because he was the only other Jew around and the other kids were Catholic and didn't want to play with us. From age seven to ten I was a tomboy but lived near more kids and I had several girl friends and one special friend. I always felt pretty normal—just a little smarter than the others in school. When I was in the sixth grade we moved again (still in Queens, New York City), and it was then that I began to feel different. I got crushes on girls, while everyone else had them on boys. My tomboy interests were no longer acceptable, especially to my mother, for I had gotten my period and was now "a woman."

I felt different from girls around me in many ways—they had money and clothes, and their fathers were professionals. They could dance and flirt with boys. I was segregated into special classes in junior high, and thus my social life was confined to bar mitzvahs of the boys in my class, at which we petted and made out. I was increasingly aware of my attraction to other girls. In high school I was placed in a special science class designed to make us all into nuclear physicists. There were forty boys and four girls in this class. I was friends with the girls, but developed a really close and important relationship with a boy, M. We talked about many things, and he accepted my feelings toward women as natural. Our relationship was based mostly on intellectual stimulation, since I didn't feel turned on to M. sexually. In a lot of ways I thought of girls as silly and didn't want to compete with them for boys; but I did compete with boys for achievement in school. I wanted to be a boy so that I could have the career that I wanted and also in order to have a girl friend, for I thought that girls only liked boys.

I had my first gay relationship at about age seventeen in college with an older woman, who looked like a dyke—short greased-back hair, pants, jacket, etc. It made me even more sure that I was gay, but I fought hard to be bisexual.

My years in college were spent with a small group of "druggies" at the beginning of hippie culture. There was a certain level of acceptance of my gayness; I slept with my girl friends, but they were still looking for boy-friends, and thought that all I needed was to meet the "right man."

In college there was a woman whom I spent a lot of time with—who taught me to trust, whom I loved very much. When I told her that I loved her and wanted to

sleep with her she said I was sick and she was going to help me with my problem. There was always a certain amount of sexual tension and rejection that I felt from the women that I related to, because they were straight.

Then I went to work for the Welfare Department in the South Bronx. I had my first real affair with a woman and my first taste of reality outside of academia. At the end of that relationship I couldn't deal with my feelings and started shooting heroin. This went on for two years. I didn't get very involved with the people or the realities around me, because it was too depressing. I had one close friend and lover, who fucked me over in a way cause when she got involved with a boy, that was clearly more important to her than our relationship. I got busted twice for dope, and kicked my habit. I stayed in Manhattan for a while and was part of the bar scene there and got into cruising and one-night stands.

At that time the women's movement to me meant child care and abortion demands, which had no relevance to my life as a gay woman. I went to a Radical lesbians meeting because I liked the title, and met a woman from Gay Women's Liberation in Cambridge who invited me to Cambridge in February 1971. I was really turned on to the feeling of community, and saw so many "freak" gay women that I didn't feel so much alone. Then women from Cambridge and Boston seized a building at Harvard for a women's center. After being at the women's center I went through a lot of changes and started to accept being a woman, identifying with the women's movement, and getting really angry. Only now I had women to help me figure out how to channel that anger. They helped me change the ways in which I was hurting myself and the women I was involved with, because of my former identification with and acceptance of male values.

Now I live my life nearly totally with gay women, and the possibilities for real friendship with women have become a reality. I am totally open with everyone—my family and the people at my job—about being gay, because I feel good about it. I don't feel bad about not being able to get close to men, and I am learning how to make relationships with women work. I don't feel sick and alone anymore, and I have more optimism about the future.

### OUT OF THE CLOSET AND INTO THE FRYING PAN

Lesbianism is not a physical characteristic—unlike the quality of being black or being a woman. So most of us have the choice either to be invisible by passing as straight or to be open. If we decide to be openly gay, we become vulnerable to physical and psychological harass-



ment. We're labeled sick, kept away from the kids, maybe fired from our jobs. If we keep our gayness hidden, we are constantly subjected to the insult and embarrassment of being assumed to be heterosexual: gynecologists want us to use birth control, friends want to "get us up" with boys, men make passes at us. More important, our lives become controlled by the fear that others will find out. We may be blackmailed (though this mostly happens to gay men)—for money if we have it, for favors and information if we don't.

One of the first decisions confronting gay women after they "come out" is whether to tell their family and friends that they are gay.

**HEDY.** Sexuality is a very heavy thing with my parents. When my mother found out that I wasn't a virgin any longer she started sobbing hysterically. I think she would rather have heard that I was a mad bomber than *that*. Since I've been more into the women's movement and have "come out" I've felt much more loving and sympathetic toward my parents, especially my mother. She's noticed that I've been happier when I see her and less hostile. She's also relieved that I'm innocently living with girl roommates instead of with degenerate male lovers. It's scary to think of shattering this—the first real affection between us since I was a kid—by telling her I'm now a pervert. I'm sure she'll accuse me of turning into a lesbian on purpose, in order to torture her. I have to tell them soon, though, because it's getting harder and harder to see my family and feel close to them while I'm still withholding this big secret.

**SARAH.** The mystique of the family really hits me when I think about telling my parents. I look at my parents as being totally isolated. Who can they talk to about their daughter being gay? (I have my gay friends

to talk to.) In this society people make very harsh judgments about gay people, and making a judgment about a kid is also making a judgment about the parents. At least my parents feel that they are responsible for the person I am, and they can get into guilt trips about what they did wrong.

After I "came out" I really didn't want to be preoccupied with being gay. That was a drag; I'm a regular person too, who has other interests, other things to talk about. Except that when I left this protected gay colony to venture into home-town, family affairs, I was constantly reminded: I'm gay, I'm gay.

For example, at a wedding an aunt let me know that I was expected to be next in line.

"Sarah, come here. I want to talk business."

"Yeah? What are you selling?"

"I'm old, I don't have many years left. Tell me, when can I expect your wedding?"

"I'm too young. I have too much to do."

"Too young? How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-four."

"Twenty-four! I was married for four years when I was your age."

"So you were too young."

She laughed, thank God—and I went to say hello to a cousin.

RIITA. Telling my sister was not so difficult and felt good. We have been pretty close most of our lives. She is divorced and has a child, and she has been broadening her ideas about ideal sexuality. I felt that if she could see my girl friend and me interacting—being friends, doing things together—it would break down the idea that we belonged to a secret, erotic, violent underworld, totally removed from other women. Her reaction was a mixture of acceptance because she loves me and confusion because of all her preconceived ideas. I felt that she accepted my gayness too much on the level of sexual preference, rather than understanding the difference in relationships or what it means for me to be gay in a world that is mostly hostile to homosexuality.

It's not just our family and friends whom we have to worry about telling that we're gay. The problem goes beyond that to all the institutions of our society, to our doctors, our psychiatrists, our employers, our teachers, our friendly neighborhood cops—all of whom have the power to make our lives very difficult if they know we're gay, and many of whom don't hesitate to use that power.

Homosexuality is illegal in every state but Illinois. Though the statutes prohibiting homosexual acts are almost never enforced against women, they may be used selectively, like drug laws, to punish political undesirables or others whom the Establishment wants out of the way. They may be used as an excuse for discrimina-

tion elsewhere, such as on the job. There are also laws in most states against "sex psychopaths," which allow homosexuals to be committed for indeterminate periods from one day to life.

However, most of the discrimination that we face whenever we come into contact with the legal system is based, not on the laws against homosexuality but on societal attitudes toward "queers." The police harass us, especially around gay bars. Since it is difficult to prove that anyone has committed a homosexual act, they arrest us for drunkenness or disorderly conduct, charges for which their testimony is usually enough to convict us. In court, lesbians convicted of crimes often get stiffer sentences than straight women. Gay mothers lose custody of their children. A study of divorce and child-custody cases showed that in every case in which lesbianism was an issue the mother lost her kids. The courts want to "protect" our children from us. One of the women working on this chapter lost custody to her husband without even being present in court to defend herself. Later, out of court, her husband gave her custody, but their separation agreement says that her children may not be "exposed" to her lesbian friends.

Doctors, lawyers, clergy, and counselors are others who because of their position of power over us can cause us much trouble if they know we are gay. Gynecologists pose a special problem. Often we are forced to tell them we are gay, because it affects their diagnosis or the treatment they prescribe for us. However, when we tell them, not only may we be subjected to lectures, snide comments, and voyeuristic questions but we may find that after all that, they are totally ignorant about our problems. Very little research is done on the medical problems of lesbians, and gynecologists often don't bother to acquaint themselves with what is known. One of us went to see a gynecologist because she was hemorrhaging badly. The doctor insisted that she was having a miscarriage although he knew she was gay. A friend of ours was hastily—and wrongly—diagnosed as having gonorrhea by a gynecologist who did not realize that VD is not easily spread from one woman to another.

JODY. I have pelvic endometriosis, a noncontagious disease that women can get from a bad abortion or low progesterone production. The disease isn't very common and doctors know very little about it. After I found out what I had, I knew I should ask my doctor about making love. He said, "Abstain from sexual intercourse for a while." I didn't have the nerve to tell him I was a lesbian. Besides, I figured that if I told him he still wouldn't have an answer, because homosexuality is something people don't even talk about, let alone do medical research about.

About two months later I figured I'd better find out more, so I asked a gynecologist who I'd heard was fairly

sympathetic to women. I was scared to death and felt like I had rocks in my stomach. Instead of answering my question, his face got very stiff and "professional," and he said, "Perhaps you should explain what you do sexually, so I'll have a better idea how it affects you." I just sat there flabbergasted. Here was this medical dude who wanted to know how we "do it." Finally I said, "I don't think that's any of your business. What I need to know is if any form of sex is harmful, or if it's just harmful when there's penetration." He kept pushing me to describe how I made love with women, what it felt like, whether I had been a lesbian my whole life, the whole trip. I got really mad, started yelling at him that we did it with bananas, what did he think—after all, everyone knows that the only reason you're a lesbian is that you want a penis or you're afraid of men. He said, "Your disease is psychological, not medical. I know a very good psychiatrist whom I would recommend that you see. He has cured many homosexuals." I said, "Do you mean that I spent five years in pain, spent months in and out of doctors' offices, and finally had surgery for a psychological disease? Are you telling me that I didn't get endometriosis from a rotten abortion six years ago, that it's all in my head?" He quickly retreated and admitted that he knew I had endometriosis and that that wasn't psychological, then rapidly changed the subject to my abortion with questions like "Do you think that having that experience was the reason you began to feel hostile toward men?"

By this time it was crystal clear that I wasn't going to get any information out of him that would do me any good. I was crying as I left, and the last thing he said to me was, "I strongly recommend that you see a psychiatrist. You're clearly very emotionally upset because you're a lesbian, and I think it would help you to deal with your disease if you began to work out your feelings about men. You're young, you can change." By that time I wanted to kill him, but I just told him that only a violent feminist revolution would deal with my feelings about men and that he'd definitely be on the top of my list.

Job discrimination is a big problem for lesbians. We gay women are very dependent on our jobs, since we cannot fall back on husbands for support if we are out of work. Yet in addition to the disadvantages we face as women, lesbians are subject to further job discrimination for being gay. If we are openly gay, we are the last hired and the first fired. Gay people are not protected by any civil rights act. Employers usually need no excuse to justify firing us. If we hide our gayness in order to find a job, we may live in constant fear of being found out.

MIKI. I was involved with my supervisor. She would meet me a block away from the office after work and

drop me off a few blocks away in the morning, because she was afraid to be seen with me in public. We would not even go to a bar together, because she was afraid that there would be a raid and she would lose her job.

Despite the risk it entails, many women choose to be open about their gayness on the job, because they don't want to playact all the time, because they don't want to be discovered and fired later, or because they are sick of always being assumed to be heterosexual.

CLYDE. I have worked in many places, mostly factories and plants. When you start a new job it's hard to get to know the people there. The first question I'm always asked is, "Are you married, and how many children do you have?" I just answer, "I have no husband, I have a girl friend." Most of the people in the places I've worked don't have much to say about me being gay. I mean, they're in no position to be worried about my sexuality when they're working in a place like that, because we are both being fucked over by the same people.

#### THE-RAPISTS: LESBIANS AND PSYCHIATRY

The theories of Sigmund Freud and his successors form an important part of the ideology of twentieth-century middle-class America. They permeate our thought and languages. We use terms like "inferiority complex" and "sibling rivalry" to explain people's behavior, the way the Puritans used witchcraft or pacts with the devil to explain people's behavior three hundred years ago.

The psychoanalysts say homosexuality is a sickness. Middle-class America believes and repeats, "Homosexuality is a sickness." (People seem to think that to call



homosexuality a sickness is somehow more humane than to call it a crime. But at least people accused of crimes have a right to due process. Once you've been labeled a deviant, you're convicted without a trial.) After hearing over and over that homosexuals are sick, we may come to believe it ourselves and think that we need a cure. Or we may actually break down under the pressure of constantly being told that we're perverted, being shunned, being harassed. So we get carted off to the hospital, and our problem is diagnosed as (you guessed it) homosexuality. But that's not our problem. Our problem is the doctors and other upstanding members of society who make life difficult for us.

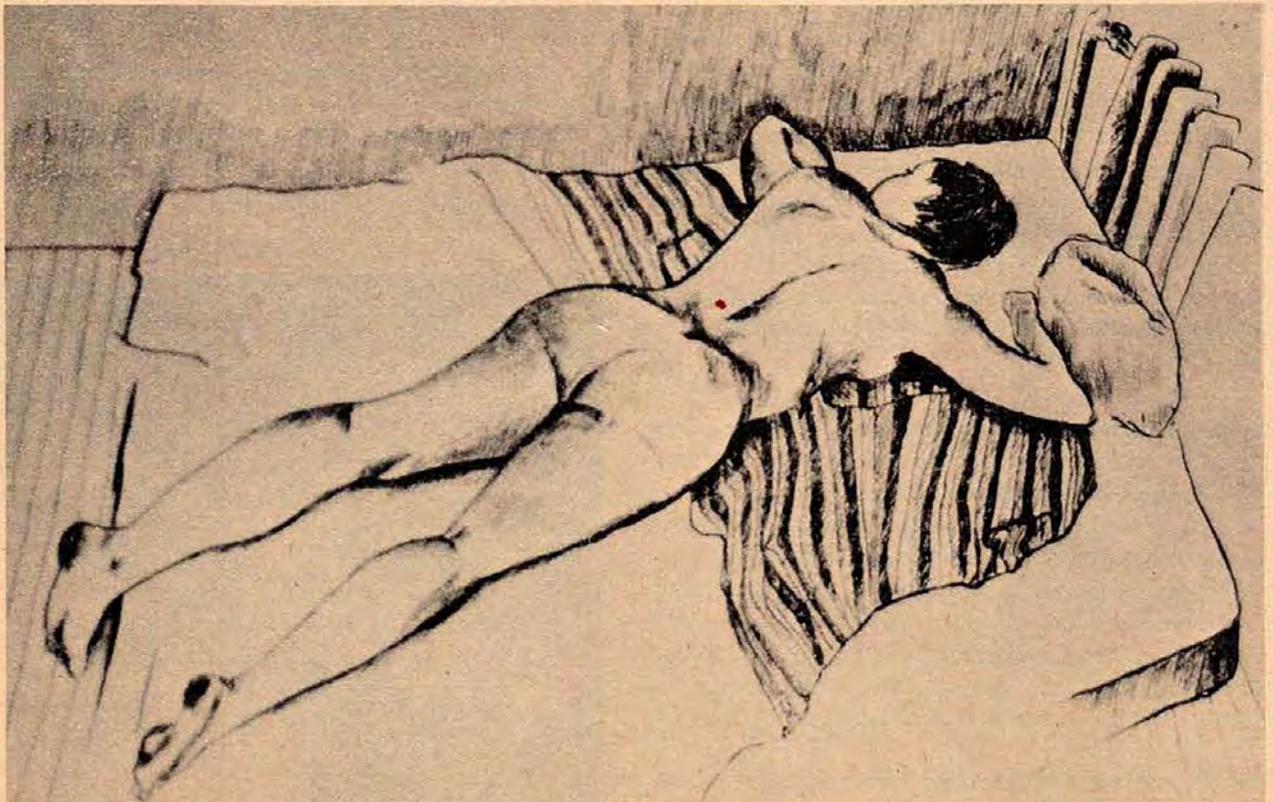
There is always a problem between psychiatric professionals and members of a minority group if the professionals assume that the source of a person's problems lies in the patient's mind and not in the racist, sexist world. For a lesbian this is extremely heavy—every school of psychiatry explains lesbianism as a maladjustment to life. All the theories regarding psychological development are based on male experience and male sexuality—as well as on bourgeois values and the nuclear family. Their “theories” of personality development are all based on a sexist view of women's role in society—as passive, submissive, wife, mother. Lesbians are seen as infantile, perverted, promiscuous, socially malfunctioning creatures. Lesbianism is never seen as a positive life choice for women who refuse to bow to society's demand

that we live our lives subordinate to men. Instead, regardless of what we consider our problems to be, they will always see our homosexuality as the root of all our problems.

**MOLLY.** I began to seek psychiatric help when the woman I'd lived with for years committed suicide. I was drinking heavily, couldn't accept her death, and had no idea how to continue my life. When the anxiety became unbearable I checked into a hospital. The interviewing doctor told me they would be able to help me. Oblivious to the fact that I managed to get drunk every day for fifteen months in the hospital, they began to assault my lesbianism: sometimes they assigned me an aide to follow me around the ward; they threw me into “preventative” seclusion; they investigated all my relationships with the other women patients, and on occasion threatened to interrupt friendships with massive doses of tranquilizers.

Doctors have told me I was utterly dependent (love women), had anxiety neuroses (alcohol withdrawal), was borderline schizophrenic (failed to conform to their idea of what a woman's life should be), and had a poor prognosis (I believed in myself more than in their theories about me).

In the few years following, things got worse: the drinking that threatened my life wasn't interesting to them. When I was close to dying, a clinic slip read “Patient



says she is alcoholic." But all the doctors were willing to ship me away permanently to the back wards of state hospitals, not because I was harming myself (drinking is just a symptom, they said), but because I lived wrongly. I could feel their need to punish me for not giving in to their opinions of what was wrong with my life—that is, I defended lesbianism as one of the more positive and beautiful aspects of my life. Yet they were so into forcing my life to conform to their theories that while I was literally dying of alcoholism they wanted to know what my lover and I did in bed.

My experience may seem extreme at first, but if we think about it, we can see that their treatment of me was just the logical extension of their theories. The same attitude is always there about lesbians (if they don't have you locked up in a hospital, it doesn't go that far, but it will be simply a milder dose of the same medicine): medicine seeks to undermine, mutilate, and ridicule the lesbian way of life.

Often doctors tell their patients that they accept their homosexuality and will assure the lesbian that they are able to treat her as a nondeformed being. However, in practice this is rarely the case, since it would mean that the doctor would have to put aside all of his (her) theories of how women develop in order to truly accept the validity of lesbianism. After all, doctors are people who often go through training that lasts up to fourteen years, and training fills their heads with false conceptions about the correct role of women in life. The student can't possibly come out of such intensive training with an open mind about lesbianism.

A therapist can't provide support in other areas if he or she disagrees with the basic tenets of a lesbian's life. And it would certainly be rare to run into a doctor who had had a lesbian experience and who could begin to understand what one was talking about.

I had one resident psychiatrist who assured me that my lesbianism was acceptable to him. However, he told me he was constantly criticized by his supervisors and forced to present a defense of himself for not treating me for my homosexuality, since they insisted that that was at the root of my problems. That therapist subsequently threw me out of a hospital when I wasn't in any shape to leave after I'd discovered that he was a homosexual.

Where does all this leave the lesbian who is deeply troubled and feels in need of help? Obviously, the ideal would be to find group therapy where the members of the group and the leaders were avowedly lesbians. This is rare, although not unknown, as, for example, the Homophile Clinic in Boston. Second, a number of female clinical psychologists have become part of the movement for women's liberation and are very supportive to women including lesbians.

A rule of thumb would be to avoid psychiatrists and analysts—that is, therapists with medical training—as that branch of the psych field is the most reactionary, most grounded in doctrine harmful to women, and its practitioners freely give out tranquilizers under the guise of treatment. Psychology is not always better, but the training is shorter—and more flexible—and it is in this realm that radical therapists and young women and men seeking radical relevant approaches to emotional troubles can be found.

When choosing a group, a lesbian should request that she be put in one with at least some other gay people. She should look for a group in which the leader is also required to participate, not as an inhuman, arrogant authority figure, but as another human being who happens to have a little more information about how people work than the rest of us and would like to share that knowledge.

And last, one should try to find out whether the orientation of the group is totally in terms of adjusting to society as it is or whether radical life alternatives are sought and valued.

## THE BARS

We need places where we can go to be with other gay women—to meet, talk, dance, relax, be sexual—to be totally ourselves. We need to be able to meet others like ourselves who will understand us when we talk about our lives. We exist secretly where we work and where we live. And each time we are made to feel invisible, insulted, or freakish, we add more anger and hatred to our stored-up frustrations.

Society, knowing that we need some place to vent our feelings, gives us our bars. Mafia-controlled, they are usually crowded and expensive. If we are lucky, we may have a gay women's bar in our town. Recently one opened up outside Boston; it's run by gay women, sometimes has an all-women band, and there are no men. The atmosphere is relatively pleasant and relaxed, but the Mafia connections are still there, and it's still a profit-making enterprise, with high prices and cover charges.

Often, however, gay women, gay men, and all of society's outcasts are lumped together in one dingy, crowded little bar—such as the Bottom Rock in Boston. The bar becomes a hustling scene, full of pimps and drug dealers, as well as straight men, often with straight women, who come to get their voyeuristic rocks off on watching us. Booze flows, alcoholism is encouraged, and sometimes fights break out. Then the cops, always hovering nearby, start beating and arresting. Some evening's

relaxation that is! And the anger that should be directed toward society is directed toward one another, as it always is when people are ghettoized. We get uptight, jealous, and strung-out on the destructive bar atmosphere.

Why do we keep going there? Because there is no other place to be with lots of other gay women, open and unashamed, to dance, hold each other close, and try to forget the straight world for a while.

CLYDE. I go to the bar because it's the only place to go, because my friends are there—friends I've been with since I was fifteen—you know, people who taught me to live with myself being gay. Because I was having a hard time putting up with it. At one point I was just totally gay, then I was bisexual—I went with this kid for two years, but I never had sex with him. But yet I still felt as though I was bisexual. And then I met this girl when I was sixteen. Bobby was my first lover, and I just went on from there.

SARAH. When I started going to the Bottom Rock I just sat there and watched the drag queens. I knew I was objectifying them, but then how could you deal with them in any other way? They were just caricatures of *femmes fatales*. They were like a joke.

I kept going to the bar. I was sleeping with Diana and starting to get to know gay women, and a lot of them went to the Bottom Rock. That was a problem for me, because I never used to go to bars, since I don't drink. But I thought I had to learn to dig it, because all these other people did. And some of my friends from back home would say, "Wow, what do you keep going to a bar for? I never knew you to go to a bar." And I'd ask myself, "Yeah, why *do* I go if I think the bar is totally exploiting all of us?" It was very expensive, and on weekends you couldn't move in there—and the smoke was so bad you choked—so it seemed silly to go.

And there'd be these boy-girl couples sitting at tables, sometimes just making out all night, and straight men standing around gawking. You just knew that the Bottom Rock was for everyone who is rejected from most other places. And I hear the bar is Mafia-controlled. I really don't want to support them much. But, then, it is a place where I can act gay and not be intimidated by the judgments I get outside.

But somehow the whole atmosphere seemed sick. I had been feeling good about being gay and being with women, yet at the bar I started feeling like there's something wrong with me. I didn't know why.

CLYDE. Well, like you said before, every type of deviant comes in. I can honestly say I feel as though the

people who come in to see the freaks (who are us) just come in to get off for the sake of getting off. I mean, we have love and feeling toward one another, where they don't. These dingaling executive guys, who have six kids and a wife, come over and pick up a drag queen on the corner. There's no love, there's no affection, there's no emotional feeling. It's all sexual when they come in. Like among us there're feelings, but like these freaks come into the bar—I mean, *they're* the freaks and come in to see us!

A hopeful alternative to the bars is beginning to appear. Weekly lesbian liberation meetings, more and more frequent women's dances and gay dances, a large room and an office for gay women at the Boston Women's Center, all provide a chance for gay women to get together, rap, dance, vent our anger and frustration, and celebrate our joy at being together, outside the dreary and sick atmosphere of a bar. We control the atmosphere; we set the terms. Nobody gawks at us, insults us, makes money off us.

## LOVING

DIANA. One night I gave Sarah a ride home from somewhere, and I went inside to have a cup of coffee and chat for a few minutes. We ended up talking all night long. During the whole time Sarah was jabbing, punching, tugging, wrestling with me. We felt a physical tension, but were too uptight to be physically affectionate. Finally, at around five in the morning, we began to nod out, and I asked if I could sleep there. She said "Sure. There're two beds in the living room."

We lay down completely dressed, she on one bed, I on the other. Then she started telling me that hers was much softer than mine. So I got up to try it, lying with my feet to her head. We decided that we'd both sleep on that bed (just because it was the more comfortable, of course).

But suddenly Sarah was afraid that my car might have been ticketed. So she jumped up and ran to look out the window. After she had been standing there for what seemed like fifteen minutes, I said, "Hey, Sarah, what're you doing?"

"Oh, I was just watching to see if the cops would come by to ticket your car."

Finally she came back to the bed and started to lie down again, head to foot and foot to head. I made a sour face, and she turned around. At last we were lying together in the same direction. Timidly I put my arm around her. "Hey, Sarah, is this okay with you?" She

said "Yeah" and snuggled up to me, putting her leg over mine. Pretty soon we were hugging each other. I tried to get up my nerve to kiss her—I'd bring my face up close to hers, then chicken out and turn away. After about ten false starts I got up the courage to do it—and she seemed to dig it.

That's as far as things went that first night, but soon we were sleeping together every night.

NANCY. (From a letter in July 1967 written to my woman lover after a stolen month alone together—I was then ceasing to be one man's wife and another man's mistress—overwhelmingly attracted by a deep and almost bewitching sense of the endless possibilities that could flow between women.)

"I am asking more than we ever spoke of—offering more than I ever whispered to myself. Let's go through, Judith, let's not stand here quaking, terrified to enter and too numb to turn aside—let's lock eyes and risk that unmapped place where we cannot hide. And soaring, to touch ground with you—to wander, seek, run toward—our lifelines blended and smashed together.

"Hot breath, moans of thirty days and nights—godesses on a single army cot. Listen, do we both truly long to travel as far as I now suggest—which is more than smiling, daily moving, almost richly touching togetherness, and much less insured, secured, guaranteed and warranted? I mean, on the line with our innards, all parts and pieces exposed.

"I falteringly now say to you that I will at least inventory what I ought to pack for such a journey if you are willing."

Five years ago. The first three together were lived in unwanted social exile from all former acquaintances and circles of friends—in and out of mental hospitals and

alcoholism. Six months of running in opposite directions, fleeing the pain of love turned mad when severed from the rest of life. Two years of slow building together again, inspired and ignited by the shared vision of a worldwide revolution while living in the wings of the women's community.

MIKI. My relationship with Daphne started when she was doing my astrology chart. We met and talked for hours, getting to know each other, walking and sitting by the river in the springtime. There is something very earthy, very sensitive, and very warm, kind, and understanding about her. She was married and is a mother—that too, and her kids, turned me on. Perhaps being a mother makes a woman more sensitive to feelings in others.

Daphne has had sexual feelings for women all her life, but has always fought them because she was trying to be a good wife and mother. The women's movement gave her the space and support to finally accept her gayness and "come out."

That first night by the river we kissed and touched one another hesitantly. For me there's something very exciting about first times, and I, too, was intoxicated by the freedom and pleasure she felt at finally being able to make love with a woman. For the first time in a sexual relationship with a woman, for me, things were equal. I trusted her, I could relax and enjoy her making love to me, for it was obvious that she got pleasure out of it.

We spent a lot of time together that summer up in Maine living outdoors—making love under the stars, in open fields at midday, in the woods. We had a very beautiful, very private, special and romantic first few months together. I was happy, secure in loving and being loved by a woman so beautiful, precious, and special to me. I was no longer feeling the confusion of having several relationships at once. I was planning that we could live together, that I would have a family with kids to be a part of my life. I didn't feel lonely, and aside from a few areas in my life that I felt Daphne didn't understand or take seriously enough (my past drug problems), I felt that we understood each other and were able to share the pleasures of our love for each other by a passionate, flowing lovemaking and in just being in nature together.

Then the bubble burst—her husband freaked and got custody of the kids just because she was gay. All communication between us was cut off. I've cried a lot.

RONNIE. I've slept with a lot of women. Some people would call this casual sex, but it has involved me in a lot of pain. I took chances sleeping with women I liked, and I have been hurt.

I slept with Lynn long after I first wanted to sleep with



her. I had buried my attraction for her because she was in love with June and living with her. One night she was lonely and we had done something together. We kissed goodnight for five minutes. I remember sleeping with her and being afraid to open my eyes when we were done. I felt like the pauper sleeping with the queen, afraid of her position, her banter. After making love we talked and laughed until morning, and she became a person like me. I liked her for her energy, her love of herself and life. That day we smiled when we met but did separate things.

The next night we went to the bar, the first time in months I had gone with a lover. We talked to many other women, extending ourselves because we were high on each other. That night I made love with her in a way you only can with someone whose pleasure you love.

Then I went back to the country. When I saw her next she was torn apart by the ending of her relationship with June. I knew she would feel different about me. She did, worried about what she had gotten herself into. I was angry that she didn't trust my friendship. Didn't she know that I understood her pain with June, that I hadn't intended sleeping with her to change our friendship? We talked and pretty much worked it out. For the rest of the summer there was some closeness between us.

She moved away, and in the fall I went to visit her. I wanted to see Lynn, but again I felt scared. I walked instead of driving the last five miles to her house. I spent hours with the other people in her house, seemingly chatting about old times, but really being tense. Finally only she and I sat in the kitchen. It wasn't easy. She invited me to sleep in her bed.

Being in bed broke our nervousness. We talked freely, laughed, spoke of our fears and feelings for each other honestly. Secure, we made love. Again I felt a welling up of passion for this incredible she-creature who, with luck, was my lover. Our bodies spoke their own language, but I felt that as I made love to her, I did so with a little less trust than before. Lynn said, "We have something nice. We can talk honestly about sex, and it seems as if we have a relationship with no expectations." I did not feel good with that summary.

When I left, she was still sleeping. I was upset. For many months I never contacted her, feeling that each attempt would only create more distance. I saw her again, and again she did not know how to relate to me; she was distant at first, warmer after a while. I resented her caution as well as her warmth. I closed myself to her, saw those things about her which I had never liked, forgot her beauty and my wonder.

Sometimes there is no way you can sleep with someone and come away feeling good about yourself and her. You have to forget something to survive. Casual is not my word. Every time I open myself to someone, I feel love, anger, ripped off, stupid, dulled, released.

## JUNE

It just happened one afternoon  
As we were walking home  
posters in hand  
on our way to day care  
for Jesse and Raphael

"Do you think you'll ever have children?"  
she asked me

My mind swelled with memories of my mother  
asking when I wanted to settle down and have a family  
memories of teaching retarded children  
memories of wanting a baby so he'd stay with me  
memories of needing a child to keep the loneliness away  
Thinking of my sister alone with her son  
Thinking of now  
Thinking of who I have become  
of whom I live with and whom I love  
Thinking of loving women  
of loving her (June)

"Do you think you'll ever have children?" she asked me  
I felt the dam breaking  
flooding my body and mind with warm liquid energy  
alive and real

RITA

SARAH AND DIANA. We're buddies. We live together. We work on the newspaper together. We do the crossword puzzle together. We sleep together. When someone gives one of us a joint, we wait till the other is around to smoke it. When one of us buys chewing gum, we buy another pack for the other. It's not that we have to do all these things with each other—we like to.

SARAH. When I first met Diana I didn't feel capable of expressing my thoughts unless someone else said it first. But then Diana and I discovered that we shared a way of relating to the world—our humor, feelings, and analyses made sense to each other. And that was really freeing for me. It gave me the strength to be myself, to actively assert myself individually, even without Diana's presence.

Lots of the time we do things separately. On



Wednesday nights one of us teaches a French class, the other goes to Lesbian Liberation meetings. We have different schedules at the newspaper.

We spend a lot of time with each other, but we are with other people too. We live with two other women, and there are always lots of people in and out of the apartment. All the things we work on, we do as part of a group. So whenever we get a chance we skip out and snatch a few minutes alone together somewhere beyond reach of visitors and phone calls.

All this is not to say everything's wonderful. We have some basic differences, and we often get into fights:

D. Sometimes I feel like knocking the shit out of her. So I go off into another room and play solitaire for a few hours to cool off. Or I take a walk outside, hoping some man will be foolish enough to try to rape me, so that I can vent my anger in beating the shit out of *him*.

S. Sometimes I feel like I'd like to get a good punch in. But then I don't really want to. So we scream and swear and take swings at each other, and then laugh and hug, all within twenty minutes.

Being buddies gives us the freedom to blow up at each other. We know that underneath our anger we both feel a long-term commitment to each other. So we know we can yell and scream at each other without worrying "Maybe she'll get so mad she'll walk out and never come back," as we would with other people. We can show our weaknesses and our bad points to each other as well as our good points. We can be ourselves with each other.

NELL. I've become very afraid of getting closed into any relationship that looks like it might develop into a monogamy. Maybe it's because I was married for thirteen years and I need a lot of private space around me. It's not that I don't have the same needs as any other woman. Sometimes I feel very lonely and really want to be intensely in love again, or to be able to just relax and depend on someone else to help me make decisions and share my life intimately. I'm thirty-seven and have three children, and I get tired and scared. But then I look at the lives of my monogamous friends, and I become more and more convinced that there has to be a different way for me to live with and love women. I know that a marriage of two women is better than a marriage between a woman and a man, because a woman will take better care of you than a man will. A couple starts off okay, but after a period of time the two people build up a frightening dependency on each other. I don't want to be responsible for someone else's happiness, not even my children's, or feel that she is responsible for mine. I don't want to feel that someone has to know what I'm doing every hour of the day and night. I'd end up lying to her. Even when a monogamous relationship is working well, friends of the couple become secondary.

It is often hard to relate to a tight couple if you are an unattached woman, especially if you're closer to one than the other, and it's not always possible to care for both equally. The other woman will probably resent your friendship with her partner if you're really close, even if it's not sexual. I'm not saying that that's always true, but I think it's common. And then what happens when one partner becomes a little bored with the other or begins to feel trapped? The feelings become unequal, and the pain really starts. If they break up, the process is long and awful. If they decide to loosen up the relationship and start being with other women, they find they can't control their jealousy even if they want to. Or else they agree to keep their thing the primary one and have casual side affairs that don't threaten it. Then these other women may feel second-rate and used. When I talk to my coupled-off friends about this stuff they say, "Maybe so, but no other kind of relationship looks any better." They're right, the way things are now, but I have a vision of what I think could work for me. I want to be very close to several women—live with some of them, sleep with some of them, and love all of them like family. I want the same amount of security and warmth that a couple can give each other, but I want it spread out to more than one woman. If one friendship is having trouble, the other ones can support and help it. If one woman goes away, I won't be totally freaked out and lonely. If I'm sleeping with more than one woman, maybe I can control my jealousy and my desire to own my sexual partners. I know it will be very hard to build free but long-term love relationships among a group of women, but the possibility of that kind of community keeps me going. If it doesn't work, I'll find a nice woman when I'm fifty and settle down.

### *Women I Love*

JUNE. To Nancy: Oldest friend, curious and wondering in your words over so many years, our canoes travel in different streams yet still meet in the forks of the clear mountain water of our minds. I think of your body, liquid strength, rhythmic energy in peace in the bow of the boat, and wonder why we cover our fears in metaphor, and never take a real canoe trip together. Visions of myself as the fearful freak and of the razor-edged distance which may always be between us because my longings are not yours. Who snuffed out those flames in you, my friend whom I can touch with my eyes, my words, but not my skin, nor my soul?

To Lynn: You were the flamboyant Southern writer, I was the daring independent radical woman, our mystifications of each other crashed, sometimes in painful explosions, sometimes in joy. Backing off from the intensity: months of a painful triangle, months of silent healing—for to accept such love would take a self-love

hard for a woman to maintain, so maimed are we so often in this country. (Oh sisters, remember where the blame belongs.) Now, with relief and wonder, as a friend/lover, I travel to the place you now call home and enjoy a more slowgrowing love, with glimpses of that first destructive awe and fear which has been so time-subdued and I feel we still will touch when older in years.

To Rita: We are not two jigsaw pieces under the label "couple," you are not my other half, for you are a whole with changing faces, sometimes a distant rainbowed fish I watch in fascination, sometimes octopuslike with arms which scare and entice me. I think, there is no other way to love women than to know that total vulnerability may descend at any moment. Tears on top of toughness, I sit here now with bittersweet memories of our women's skins, women's minds touching.

To Mother: Mistress of a psychoanalyst, wife of a formula constructed by men, you who warned me of the barren jealous homosexual existence, have you never let loose in the depths of women's communication and felt the small spark of the flames which now enrich me? I protest my unwholeness, only partly your doing, and know it is not the right time for you to hear the final blow of lesbian truth. Yet you call on me in your wife/protector role and I will be more real with you. Someday. Soon.

To Gail: It is 3,000 miles to you, my married sister, it is the second summer of my gayness and more steady hues have crept into my lesbian opal. Rita is with me, there is a fierceness of wary commitment singing in our blood. I kiss her on the back of the neck, unaware of your eyes, and so the words I have been groping for must begin—words of history and fantasy and new ways, ways which have filled out my awkward body to a sensuous peace and gathered up my energy for all the storms which will try to quench my desires. Not entirely free of sadness and anger at the men who put you here, still you show your love, and I feel gayness stretch her strands between us, spider webs growing to huge nets catching witches and myths and revolution in strong rope arms as we talk for what seems like, yes, the first time.

### **"BLESSED ARE THE POOR"**

As Lesbian Liberation has grown to include more and more women, and more different women, we have come to understand that many of our differences have a class origin. Here one woman describes how her lower-class

background has affected her relationships with other women and with the movement.

JESSE. I've always felt anxious when movement women started talking about role playing. I suppose it's because I'm a pretty "butchy"-looking dyke, supposedly very much into roles. Anyway, the idea of being confronted by a group of middle-class movement women on my "macho" behavior was very intimidating.

In the past I haven't involved myself in the movement to any great extent because I felt intimidated and bitter about that. I have, though, thought a lot about why the movement has isolated me and whether or not it's fucked up, because I want to see the movement grow.

I gradually started to realize I didn't like the way this society set up identities. I didn't like the kind of roles my mother and father played. I liked doing the things my father was free to do, like having the freedom to develop his body. At five or six I was very physically oriented and played basketball and softball. How was I supposed to enjoy wearing skirts when I couldn't climb trees or fight in them? It didn't take me too long to realize I didn't like the role society had planned for me.

When it came time for me to start dating, it intrigued me that this was the way to become accepted. In high school I became bored with boys and related trivialities; wanting a strong mind as well as body, I got into a mind trip.

The mind trip came about the same time I decided I was queer. The superiority complex I developed as a defense against middle-class and heterosexual people seemed to me justifiable.

It was justified because they [my schoolmates], with all their middle-class behavior, showed themselves to be totally ignorant. Not only were they ignorant of the kinds of problems I had (an alcoholic father who beat me and a mother made spiritless by him), but they were ignorant of the privileges their social position gave them. They simply took it for granted that some time in their lives they would go to college and to Europe, that a new suede coat would be provided for them in the fall. They never questioned why all these things would be done. They never realized the world was theirs for the asking. They would simply get married, have children, and get a new car every year, and have good Christmases. They'd watch TV versions of poverty and say, "Those poor, underprivileged people."

The only way my relationship with my heterosexual schoolmates changed was that I grew to hate them more. I wanted to completely isolate myself from them, so I joined an all-girls gang. We went around beating up people and shoplifting. I also refused to shave my armpits or my legs, bathe, or comb my hair. Instead of wear-

ing nylons and flats, I wore crew socks and sneakers. I did everything possible to make myself unattractive to my straight schoolmates.

As I approached the end of an ugly high school career and prepared to enter an ugly college career, my feelings of isolation from straight women came more to the front. I became frustrated with my state of forced celibacy. The only contact I had with other gay people was through idiot books I read—like psychology books—which filled my head with all sorts of shit about what gay people were like. It was really hard all my life to keep from thinking I was crazy, because those books and everyone around me told me I was, and often! But I never really thought that.

When I first came to Boston, it was my first real vacation from celibacy (and independence). I immediately proceeded into this really dependent relationship—which was fucked up.

Since the books I'd read told me there was a "butch" and a "femme," I identified with the "butch" role, and so I was "butch" in bed, but I really didn't control the relationship. I was tough, but so was she. Now I look on "butch" and "femme" as being the same as "sadist" and "masochist." They have a symbolic relationship in which one is strong and the other weak, and they both get off on it.

After this relationship I slept with lots of women. Finally I began a relationship with a woman who was the first person I've ever trusted. Since the beginning of that relationship she and I have both slept with several other women, so I can't say I'm unfulfilled sexually. I also feel fulfilled emotionally and intellectually, since our ongoing relationship has seen much equal dialogue.

I've explained quite a bit now about where my head is at. I love lots of women—my sisters. I may act "macho" at times, but I think being "macho" in some ways is right on.

The movement, by insulating itself with rhetoric, which is a middle-class thing, has insulated itself from me. It has no way of knowing who I am. What I want to say to the movement is: "Here I am. I'm a *Woman*, and you have to identify with me because of that. I'm going to trash you if I have to, because I love you."

My sisters have to deal with class and race, especially their own white, middle-class values. They must realize that they still have those values.

The lower (working) class will make the revolution. My sisters must become grassroots, learn to survive, before they can say they believe in themselves as revolutionaries. My sisters must believe in themselves. Only then will they be totally strong. And my sisters need to be totally strong, because they must make the revolution.

\* \* \*

Dearest,  
I am spending your  
middle-class  
no money  
on the street  
20¢ will buy you what,  
exactly.

Food for my body,  
Lest my soul perish.

I am oppressed, lady  
Who flies her freak flag  
from the antenna of  
her Peugeot, Who can  
afford the co-op & to  
shout "Right On!"

I am,  
Poor first  
Gay second  
and  
Woman third

Fuck your selfish rhetoric.  
When you get the Power  
I will be waiting  
still for freedom,  
and  
Panhandling my ass off  
For you, my white-ass  
Honey,  
Just for your church  
Supper, Amen.  
JESSE BUSHWACK SAVAGE

## LESBIAN MOTHERS

In a society that is afraid of lesbians and wants to shelter its children from "queers," being a lesbian mother is very hard. Telling friends and relatives about being gay can be hard for anyone, but if you're a mother, they can try to put added guilt on you. They say, "What are you doing to the children? What will they think of you? What will their friends think?" Many gay mothers are torn between wanting to be openly gay and feeling protective of their kids in an uptight world. A father can make it hard too, whether the mother and children are still living with him or not. Nell's fourteen-year-old daughter says, "I don't feel any pressure from my mother to be gay, and my friends feel good about her, but I do feel pressure from my father not to be gay."

It isn't only people we know who give lesbian mothers and their children trouble. They often hear conversations and see graffiti that put down "dykes" and "faggots." Television and books are heavily antihomosexual. Even friends call each other "faggot" to be insulting. It's hard for them not to be affected by this.

If you have unchallenged custody, and your children can get to know your lesbian friends and lovers, they can come to their own conclusions about their mother's gayness. In the end, our being open and unapologetic is probably the best way to help our kids not to be ashamed of us.

JOAN. I feel good about being openly gay around my kids. They accept my affection for other women very naturally.

NELL. My kids watched my "coming out" over a year's time. First I went to gay meetings, and then I talked a lot to them about my feelings and fears, and finally I made love with a woman. On the morning afterward, when the kids came in and found us in bed together, one of them whispered to me, "Did you make love?" I laughed and said yes, and she said, "Well—finally!" They all know that I feel very open and proud about being a lesbian, and they accept it in the same way I do. I don't care whether or not they turn out to be gay, but at least they won't be afraid of gayness or think of it as sick or mysterious. They'll know that lesbians are strong and loving women.

For unmarried gay mothers another challenge is raising sons without men. Nell feels that her hardest problem is finding unoppressive men for her son to spend time with. He will be the only male in his house next year, and he doesn't see his father very much. Nell doesn't feel that he needs men as models. She wants his sense of values to be learned from her lesbian friends. But she does feel that he needs male company to keep from feeling isolated and lonely in her women's world. A boy's insecurity can start very young. Nan's year-and-a-half-old son spent the summer with her on a lesbian farm. He seldom saw men. One day he saw two men swimming nude, and he immediately took off his clothes and started playing with his penis. He was clearly identifying as male, and apparently was relieved to find somebody like him.

Most people think that homosexuals should be kept away from children. Lesbians who want to work with kids have to stay in the closet if they want jobs as teachers, nurses, pediatricians, counselors, baby-sitters, community workers, and so on. And often people deny the love and need between children and their mother's female lover. One gay woman helped to raise her lover's child for seven years, beginning with the pregnancy. Once, when the natural mother had to go to the hospital, her parents came at four o'clock in the morning and took the child a thousand miles away so that he wouldn't be left in the care of their lesbian daughter's lover. They kept him for several months. Years later the mother died,

and the grandparents again immediately took the child. The mother's lover, who was at least as close to him as his mother had been, was never allowed to see him after that. If she had been the father, the grandparents could not have treated her in that way or dismissed so coldly the close relationship she had with the boy.

Gay women who would like to have children of their own but don't want to have sex with men find it almost impossible. Artificial insemination and adoption are not permitted to open lesbians, so they are forced to be bisexual. Many lesbians are married to men.

LOLLIE. I'm married, with two kids. Frank and I are good friends. We were never passionate lovers; we were two frustrated lonely misfits who liked each other. I had always been drawn to women but had found only one who wasn't afraid to have a relationship with another woman. I felt terrific with her until she lost interest. Rejections were really getting to me. Frank and I started living together; I eventually got pregnant, and then married him. I'd really wanted to be a mother, and I didn't want to do this alone. Having kids was tremendously absorbing, but now they are older and much more independent, and I'm feeling that maybe I could stop denying my desire to be involved with a woman. But it's so complicated. When I feel attracted to a woman I panic. I'm very doubtful that anything can work out between us. I don't want to mess up the people in my family. I get along well with Frank. We share child care and other jobs. We believe in allowing each other lots of autonomy. The kids seem very happy with things the way they are. I feel really good about that, and I'm scared of changing anything. I have to convince myself that my needs are as important as anyone's in this house.

JOAN. It is hard. But staying in the marriage can be absurd and schizophrenic. I tried to and felt trapped. I wanted to be with women and love women, but my husband needed me. So I kept sleeping with him while fantasizing that I was making love to women. I tried to detach myself from him. Being with him was degrading and made me feel unreal, like acting a lie. Finally I met other lesbians, and with their support I felt strong enough to get out of the marriage.

Many gay women are afraid to reach out to others. They may make a phone call to Daughters of Bilitis once or twice, and nothing else. Or they relate to other lesbians secretly. They don't tell their husbands where they're going. Then they have to live with the constant fear of being caught. Either way it's a lonely trap.

Look! Women are the source of life! Blood-lined bellies, soft-thighed nourishers of a billion million infants—wild, moon-ridden, moon-driven creatures of such lushness that a thousand wars have not burned us out—that's

who we are—that's where we're coming from—the mysterious, wondrous ones whom men know almost nothing about. When two of us are suddenly made able to see into each other, there is no course, no end for that jour-

ney. The earth trembles before our collision as we walk a path this side of loneliness, this side of what can be known through words alone—that side of revolution and madness—and everywhere love.

