

Threads

Stories of lesbian life in Northern Ireland
in the 1970's and 1980's

First Edition 2013

© Threads Moya Morris 2013

SPECIAL THANKS

I wish to dedicate this book to all the women, who have given their time and talent freely including those who had the laborious task of proof reading and editing. It is because of these women, we have this book and I believe it records an important episode in the history of lesbian life. A history of survival, of a minority group who were shy to the public eye. These are their stories, told in their own words. It has long been a dream of mine to gather their words and put them into a book. I sincerely thank them, straight from my heart, for their encouragement and support in making that dream a reality.

Jayne.



FOREWORD

Last year I met Jayne, the woman who has doggedly put this anthology together. She approached me at the Outburst festival where I was doing a reading and asked if I would look over a collection of short stories she had gathered from various lesbian women. For 15 years Jayne had wanted to put into print her and these women's stories. Jayne is a gentle, warm and sincere woman, and she was determined to achieve her goal. She believed deeply that what these women had to say was the untold story of the coming together of lesbians, in the dark days, 30 years ago, to survive and support each other. After having read these stories I agree with her. In their warmth and humour these women record for the first time that tender social history of a lesbian community and its early development. How they gathered in places like the Chariot Rooms, the Club Bar and at times in each other's houses, to form a loose support group and at the same time to have fun and build friendships. Just to enjoy their own sexuality in safety in the world of 30 years ago in the 6 Counties was no mean feat and took a lot of courage. These stories give an insight into that world and serve as a great reminder of how much the gay and lesbian community have achieved. Some of these women went on to become activists on behalf of lesbians throughout the North, forming Lesbian Line and other support networks, promoting awareness both amongst the gay community and the general population.

From lesbian women being invisible to being out, with venues they can go to openly, with support networks in place, an annual festival and much more, is a huge achievement worth celebrating. This collection of stories reminds us of the first building blocks of a lesbian community and society and I would like to thank personally every woman who contributed to this book and Jayne in particular.

I would recommend this book not just to those who identify themselves as gay, but to others and the heterosexual community also, to gain an insight into lesbian lives and experiences, and share in the celebration of this achievement.

Brenda Murphy (Author & Playwright)

INTRODUCTION TO THREADS

These are stories mined from the memories and experiences of women who grew up with me, who travelled with me along the path of self-exploration, who revelled in the discovery of an accepting, inclusive, gay community in 1970's/80's/ 90's Belfast. Thirty years ago we embraced the diversity of those seeking refuge and understanding. Although some of the names have been changed to respect those who are still 'in the closet', the stories have not changed. This will bring back fond memories for some and for others it will provide a picture into local lesbian and gay experiences. We hope you get as much pleasure in reading our stories as we did when writing them.

To my knowledge, this book is the first of its kind. It offers a colourful, first-hand insight into our varied backgrounds and common experiences. This book has been written with honesty, openness and a fair sprinkling of humour. There were times when we felt hurt, abandoned and belittled but we realise now how strong we were then and today we are delighted that we still maintain that strength.

The big metal security barriers which created 'The Ring of Steel' in Belfast city did not deter us. We took the chance to go through it. We did not agree or comply with the limitations set by a divided society.

Belfast's City Limits were not off-limits to us. From the core of Belfast's no-go areas to the edges of its suburban landscapes and beyond - we have survived!

The title of this book is THREADS and the one single thread is me. It is very easy for one thread to slip through an eye of a needle but when the other threads join with me, our strength becomes that of a rope. That's where we are now - a strong network of friends, linked together by bonds of experience, adversity and joy.

I have collected these true stories which recall the past thirty years of our lives in a warm fond way even though things were not always easy for us. As a marginalised, minority group, most of us went quietly about our business and only those close to us would have known we were lesbians. We grew up in a different and difficult world; one far removed from what society now has to offer. In the north of Ireland we lived through a political and religious war. There was severe repression and poverty on both sides of the border in those days. Socially and politically, we came from very different backgrounds. Even though we didn't always see eye to eye, our lesbian identity created an affinity with one another.

Over a number of years we have given support to each other and this has held us in good stead and allowed us to form firm bonds. Recently, when we had a thirty year reunion in the Black Box, 130 of us from that defining era attended and some of these women have helped me make this book possible. Every one sees things differently and their perspectives serve to complement and contrast with mine. So I am most grateful to them for sharing their experiences and deepest feelings with me and now also with you.

Throughout the past thirty years, even though the bombs and bullets were flying, we felt it was very important to meet regularly and ensure our group survival. We maintained good

cross border and cross community relations! Class distinction on the gay scene did not hold the same divisive power as it did in heterosexual society. We were a minority group of women, all in the same boat, any religious and political views we held were kept outside gay venues. Characteristically, any arguments which arose only came from outrageous attempts to steal or get off with someone's girlfriend.

I feel privileged to have met so many wonderful women who have encouraged my knowledge and perspectives to mature with time. Their lives and mine have moulded lesbian and gay culture in Northern Ireland. We have made progress, nevertheless, some of us remain "in the closet". I hope that future generations will learn something of our past from this book.

Jayne



*Printed by
Nova
Belfast*

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| STARTING OUT | 1 |
| I PHONED THE LINE | 3 |
| SEVENTEEN AND RARING TO GO | 9 |
| TIME OF OUR LIVES | 15 |
| FISHNETS AND STILETTOS | 17 |
| IN THOSE DAYS | 20 |
| A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP..... | 22 |
| MOLLY AND LUCY | 24 |
| MY WAY | 25 |
| IN THE CLUB | 28 |
| COMMON DENOMINATOR | 32 |
| IF YOU KNEW LUCY... .. | 38 |
| WHEN YOU HAVE GRACE IN YOUR LIFE... .. | 40 |
| A ROSE | 45 |
| 1983? | 48 |
| DUBLIN'S - FAIRER CITY? | 50 |
| BUS RUN TO DUBLIN | 60 |
| DUBLIN - HERE WE COME AGAIN! | 62 |
| REMINDE ME NEVER TO SLEEP WITH... .. | 64 |
| THE LAST STRAW | 66 |
| A MAID'N' CITY IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE! | 69 |
| DEANO | 71 |
| ROSIE'S INNOCENCE | 74 |
| LEAVING JACK | 79 |
| IT'LL CHANGE YOUR LIFE | 81 |
| MY FIRST TIME | 86 |



STARTING OUT

by Jayne

Where were you in 1969? The beginning of the troubles in Northern Ireland. It makes you think. I was about to become a teenager, an important point in anyone's life. I didn't understand nor did I want to. I was busy with family, friends and hobbies.

Anyhow it will all blow over soon, I thought. It did not. We were all survivors. People kept to their own areas, frightened of going outside their comfort zones, just in case, so I guess I fitted in with my community. But even then I was different. Different in the sense that when my friends in class were talking about who they fancied and so on, I felt I had to pretend to seem interested so as to 'fit in', knowing in my heart I was living a lie.

I got so used to living that lie that I almost believed it myself. After all, my parents wanted the best for me, which was, in their eyes, to settle with a good man who would be able to provide for me and our children. How could I possibly disappoint them? I tried so hard at first. Following in the footsteps of my older and only sister was a hard act to follow. I loved my sister and my parents dearly, but deep inside I had such a strong sense of confusion, it was tearing me apart. I realised then that I had two choices; to be who I wanted to be, or to be who they wanted me to be. I knew then, life was not going to be easy.

With all these strange feelings I was an awkward child, very shy and unsure of myself. My worst nightmare was when anyone complemented me for anything; I would feel myself burning with embarrassment and going a bright red from the neck up. I remember every Sunday being sent to Church and Sunday school wearing my Sunday Best, which usually seemed to be dresses that I felt I was poured into and felt desperately uncomfortable wearing. I still cringe at the thought, but that is how it was then.

I was overjoyed to meet a new friend who I really connected with. We were in the same class, we both loved sports and while I would have been quiet and shy, Fiona was outgoing, good fun and she had a terrific imagination - especially after the hockey match on a Saturday when she had drunk two lager and limes!

As a matter of fact we became very close and rarely would one of us be seen without the other. Although we lived about three miles apart, if Fiona came to my house after school I would walk with her half way home. At fifteen years of age we each started going out with boys - actually two brothers, Mike and Jim. We weren't that interested to be honest but then, as a well known old saying goes - 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do'. Everyone else was doing it, so we tried it too. Our relationship was going to be a hard act for any mere lad to follow! Pale and uninteresting in comparison, the relationships with the lads fizzled out after a few weeks as we got bored by them. Still - we didn't mind, we were girls and we had each other.

I PHONED THE LINE

by Arlene

A taxi pulled up, outside my house. A week earlier I had rung a gay and lesbian helpline called Carafriend whose number I had found in a local Belfast newspaper. The night I rang I spoke to William and he seemed very nice. I made arrangements to meet him the following week and tonight was the night. I had been thinking all week that I didn't know what I was getting myself into, 'These people', I thought, 'could kidnap me, keep me hostage' or worse. 'Right', I said to myself 'Believe me, if they kidnap me they won't be long bringing me back, and if they hold me hostage they'll be out a fortune trying to feed me!' 'But I don't know who they are' I toyed with my head. 'No I don't, but I do know what they are, they are just like me and I want to get to know who they are I assured myself.

That is why I am in a taxi on my way to University Street in Belfast. I needed to know I wasn't the only one; I needed to find the gay scene. The taxi pulled up outside the door of a large house. I checked the number on the address I'd been given. It was raining heavily. I sat for a second and thought, 'This is it, I'm here'. I had known that I was gay/ lesbian from I was much younger. I was eighteen now and never really had any problem with the person I was. I had accepted that I was emotionally and physically attracted to other girls although my family and some friends did not know. I was about to set about changing that. I ran from the car to the door, ringing the bell. I was very nervous and turned to tell the taxi driver to wait as I was a bit

afraid, in time to see the taxi already turning out of the street. I was so nervous now I thought about making a run for it just as the door opened by a softly spoken man who asked if I was Arlene. 'Yes' I answered 'you must be William'.

William led me along the hallway and up some stairs on to a landing full of books and posters, gay books, gay posters I thought. He opened a door into a large room with couches and chairs, three other men and one woman who was reading a book. William called out their names and they each nodded. The woman asked if I would like some tea or coffee? I thought that I could be doing with a stiff drink as my legs were now shaking and my nerves were all over the place. 'Tea would be very nice', I answered. As she handed me the cup William asked me to follow him back downstairs to a room at the back of the house. He said if I wanted he would ask two of his friends to have a chat with me. I agreed and he introduced me to two women. I was delighted to meet them. These were the second and third lesbians I had ever met; the first had just made me tea upstairs.

The two women were older than me and explained that they had been together for a long time. I thought they looked happy and content with each other and I respected that. Some day I wanted the same, someone to love me just for being me. They asked how I came to be there and I told them of my recent past and of my friends, mostly from school. They were good friends but I still felt lonely. I told them I had heard rumours of a gay scene in Belfast but I didn't know where.

As they chatted to me about work, family and friends, I thought about the people upstairs - maybe this was the gay scene and I had found it? My thoughts returned to the present when one of

the women asked if I had any questions for them. Yes, I said, I heard there was a disco in Belfast and did they know where it was? After a short silence they said that there was a disco but they didn't really like to go to it. I must have looked very disappointed as they looked at each other and said, 'if you really want to go we could come along with you this time, maybe introduce you to a few of our friends, and we could keep an eye on you to make sure you are safe'. I thought that was really nice of them. 'Hurray', I thought, 'I'm going to a gay disco'. Arrangements were made, the time, the place - the Chariot Rooms in Lower North Street. I thanked my new befrienders for being kind and understanding and left.

I didn't get in touch with anyone for a few days. I thought I would keep it to myself for a while but that was the hardest part of all as I wanted to tell the world of my new adventure.

Saturday night arrived and I was really excited but nervous. I was going to somewhere in the city alone. In the 1970's and 1980's Northern Ireland was in the grip of political and religious war and young people were advised not to go into town as it was too dangerous. It was safe to go to school or work or socialize in our own communities - where we came from; we never went into town or across town, especially at night. That was all well and good, but I needed to be, 'Where the bright lights were shining on me'.

Belfast had next to no night life. Retail shops and bars all closed at five pm and because the public transport stopped at ten pm most people stayed in their own communities where they felt safe. The British Army had steel security barriers built around the inner city centre of town. A security ring to ward off sectarian attacks, everyone going into town had to be searched.

Most of the barriers had exits, but only a few had entrance points. I was now heading towards one myself because the Chariot Rooms lay within the security ring. I had a bad habit of being late. I never understood how I managed it but I was always late. At the security barrier I was searched by a female soldier, not always an unpleasant thing to have done I have to say. In a rarely heard broad English accent she said, 'Pass on through'. 'Nice eyes', I thought.

At the meeting point there was no sign of my two befrienders. I was frantic, I was twenty minutes late. I decided that because it was so cold they must have gone into the disco in the hope that I would follow suit, and that's what I did. I found the nerve to go through the front door, up the staircase to a table with an older man standing behind it. He gave me a strange look and grunted, 'Are you new?' 'Yes' I replied. 'Fifty pence' he grunted again and stuck out his right arm, 'that way to the lounge, behind me to the disco'. I didn't really get a chance to choose as my feet were already heading towards the music.

Stepping through the door, I was blinded by the bright lights and deafened by loud music. It took a short while for my eyes to adjust, and to my right I could see a group of young men talking and dancing. Across the large room I could see a group of girls doing the same and as I glanced backwards towards the girls I could see my befrienders waving. I made my way towards the two women, who seemed glad to see me, giving them some story as to why I had been late. That was another bad habit of mine; I was quite the story teller. My new friends introduced me to their company - all women. My face was brighter than the disco lights, shining like a beacon with embarrassment as I met them one by one. They told me they were training to be nurses, social workers, teachers, civil

servants and even a surveyor. I couldn't believe it. I was in Heaven. Within an hour I had a crush on all eight of them - a new record for me!

Before long my two befrienders were pointing out to me who I should talk to and who I should maybe stay away from. I didn't think I would take their advice. I wasn't here to judge anyone. I was from one community and amazed to see how many races and creeds was here under one roof. It was great. On the other side of the security barriers people were trying to kill each other for being different, while here at the gay scene, we were welcomed for being different.

As I looked around the room I spotted a beautiful girl in a white dress. She had long dark curly hair. I just knew I had to speak to her. The only problem was she was in the corner I was advised not to go to and as I could feel my befriender's eyes boring a hole in the back of my head, I thought I'd wait a while. I watched the girl move up the room talking and dancing as she went. She then disappeared through a door at the top of the room. 'What is behind that door?' I asked one of my befrienders. 'Oh', she said, 'that leads to the lounge and the ladies upstairs toilet, go and have a look'. I did. The lounge bar was as full as the disco. I thought 'Where have all these people come from?'

I made my way upstairs to the ladies toilet (nice, with floor to ceiling large mirrors). The girl was there. She was fixing her make-up. I'd had a few drinks by now and a couple of dances so my confidence was high. I said to her, 'would you like a drink, a dance maybe?' she just turned and stared at me, then in a very deep voice she said, 'Listen love, I'm a man, the name is Cecil but you can call me Cecilia'. I was never so embarrassed,

ever. I nearly fell back down the stairs. I mumbled that I was sorry and ran. I never made the same mistake again.

I returned to my corner and enjoyed the rest of the night and when my befrienders asked me if I'd be coming back, I said, 'try and keep me away'.

I soon found the only nights the Chariot did not open were Monday and Tuesday and from then on I practically lived there. I got to know all kinds of people and after a while the owners took a shine to me and gave me a job behind the bar. It was a dream job. I was working with sixty two year old Daisy and she could work the bar like a teenager. Daisy was old school and wise. She certainly taught me a lot.

On one of the many occasions I felt downhearted I remember her telling me that life would bring me tears and smiles, disappointment and memories. 'Dry your eyes' she told me 'the tears will disappear, the smiles may fade but your friends and memories will last a lifetime'. Daisy had it sussed. She was really well respected amongst us all.

Months later a lot of my school friends came to the disco, and our group, like other groups, were very close knit. Emotions ran high and I'm sure most of us got hurt at some point.

I never found love at the disco. Years later, when the security barriers had gone and the Chariot was shut down, I met Liza, the love of my life. She keeps me alive in every way. She is very precious to me and has been the best thing to happen to me. I have no regrets, although I miss putting my coat on and going to the place where I could see any of my friends at any time of the day - the Chariot. I miss it a lot, it has become part of the best days of our lives.

I loved it.

SEVENTEEN AND RARING TO GO

by *Heather*

I was born and raised in the country. Way out in the sticks. Not near anywhere. There were powerful expectations of what a woman should be. And what she should not be. At a very early age, I remember standing in the middle of the farmhouse kitchen, watching my mother rushing through the ironing of the shirts so she could start preparing lunch for the men. It would have to be ready to serve the minute they walked through the door. The men would sit and shovel down the good, wholesome food, chatting amiably and exclusively amongst themselves, and then leave without thanks. I clearly remember knowing in that moment, with absolute resolve, that I would never take on that role.

It was a physically and emotionally harsh environment, the farm. The forced and brutal farming of animals left me with a shock still frozen inside. Combine this with the relentless insistence of dogmatic religion and I soon disappeared off into my head. From my earliest days of self awareness, I felt different. I didn't comfortably fit in anywhere. I imagined that most people must have felt like this and yet it appeared that everyone else seemed to be happy enough with their place in life, they seemed to accept their pigeon-holed prospects. I knew I was not going to accept mine, in at least a couple of major ways. Marrying a man and having children would have suffocated who I was. Not a cell in my body drew me to that experience. My own exciting prospects were clear in my mind but not visible, never mind acceptable, anywhere else. I knew

my emotional-loving-sexual relationships would be with women but there wasn't anyone else doing that. It was not something that was ever discussed within my eager earshot in rural Co. Down in the sixties or seventies. It was cloaked in silence, made shameful by the ignorant masses biting the alter rails for their dose of comforting dogma. It is a testament to the power of taboo that without being told in any actual words, I knew not to speak openly about myself, my real self. I wasn't satisfied with my lot and I needed more, maybe not so much more as other.

Being aware of something so big and so crucial as my lesbian identity in a hostile world led me to question many things in life. From a very young age, I wrestled with the big questions and queried and poked at everything. At 13, I was subscribing to Psychology Today, instead of Jackie. I became an avid reader and researcher; my early cultural interests looked nothing like those of my peer group. This intensified my sense of alienation. Deep inside, there was a hunger for answers, for knowledge, that was rarely sated. Little did I know. Little did I know that the people I engaged in philosophical, religious, political, sociological discussion had none of the answers for me. This youthful quest for clear absolutes would, of course, gradually mellow and I would later keep reasonably genial company with a myriad of murky unknowables, when grey areas and contradictions would start to sit easier on older bones. There was a powerful feeling within me that I couldn't leave my life's journey up to providence and Paddy McGinty's goat. I could take nothing for granted, my future was one I would have to carve out for myself.

As soon as I could, I escaped to college in the city of Belfast. Sweet freedom. At seventeen, coming out all over the place

was my mission. I was filled with the confidence and exuberance of youth. Before arriving in Belfast, I had telephoned Carafriend to find out where to go to meet other lesbians. They held back the information and insisted on arranging a 'befriending' meeting with me as I was so young. I told them that I had no qualms about being a lesbian, my sexuality was an intensely exciting and wonderful thing to me. I really just wanted a social springboard. The arrangement was made for us to meet up. I patiently indulged them their protective, befriending chat. This very nice, very ordinary man and this very nice, very ordinary woman were a delight to talk with. They gave me the all-important underground information I needed. Imagine knowing of a place to go to socialise and have fun with other gay people. Imagine not knowing about something so basic in life. Instead of a wasted youth, boring myself senseless by dating boys while I waited to fully live, I should have been enjoying my lovely, healthy queer adolescence since the age of 11 or 12. It is a disgraceful reflection on our society that in 2008 young people still don't have that carefree, basic, social freedom.

I was very lucky; before I even got to the Chariot Rooms in Belfast for the gay disco, I had met and become involved with a woman in college. I burst onto the gay scene and embraced it to within an inch of its life. Full of the joys, I kicked up my heels and set forth, full steam ahead. As things turned out, I rarely had relationships with women I met through the gay scene. Ordinary life brought me people and opportunities. And I rarely missed an opportunity. University, politics, sex, alcohol, fabulous women, motor bikes, pussy-tail parties... happy days. A delicious heady mix.

In the early eighties, I responded to a request for help from the woman who had just resurrected Lesbian Line and was

struggling to run it on her own. Suddenly, her life circumstances changed and she headed off into the pink yonder. I was now that woman running Lesbian Line, single-handedly! One by one, other volunteers came along and we blossomed into a good, strong collective. At this point, I had a degree in psychology and some training in counselling, so, another woman and I devised and delivered the first (to my knowledge) in-house Belfast Lesbian Line training programme. We attended various conferences in British and Irish cities; I remember being awestruck by the huge, brand new, London Lesbian and Gay Centre funded by the GLC (Greater London Council, headed by Ken Livingstone). I recall driving raucous busloads of wemmin to Cork, Dublin, Galway, all over the place, to conferences and events, mostly in the name of cross border communication and relations. I ran sexuality workshops with various groups of people and gave gay awareness talks to bodies in the public sector. Many women were befriended through Lesbian Line and we were often the first people they had ever spoken to about their sexuality. After the phone calls, if women wanted to meet up to chat, we organised this by always having two volunteers present and meeting in a public café. Much as I enjoyed the social gay scene, I became more and more concerned that it was not always an easy place for women just stepping out for the first time. I came up with the idea of an alcohol-free, casual, friendly, women's drop-in centre. There must have been a trace of the Co. Down W.I. in me after all - when in doubt, organise a Coffee Morning! A few of us discussed the idea and Lavender Lynx was quickly born.

It was a fun-filled time and I have many, many happy memories. Numerous placards and banners were defiantly and proudly raised to march against Ian Paisley's Save Ulster from

Sodomy Campaign, to Reclaim the Night, show Gay Pride and so on. Being on these inaugural marches gives me a sense of having lived through a bit of our history. We had a strong sense of sisterhood, politically and socially. We spray painted sexist billboards in the dead of night and gently tended to the occasional broken heart. I could not have discussed the ups and downs of my love life with my own mother. There were times when I was in physical danger, like on one dark night when a group of skinheads chased my girlfriend and me across the derelict Smithfield area on our way to the suitably out-of-the-way gay club. They were full on and aggressive, throwing bottles and yelling offensive names at us. The battle cries of insecure, ignorant, misogynist homophobes. A bottle cracked against my girlfriend's head. My body, without connecting with its brain, suddenly stopped running, my hand picked up the broken neck of the bottle that had bounced off her head. I swung round in a flash and charged towards our attackers, screaming blue murder. They jolted to a stop and fled in all directions into the thick, dark night. The element of surprise coupled with the vision of an obviously crazy, unpredictable, out of control woman had cooled their passion for queer bashing. On reflection - not my smartest move. Something I can only describe, within the limits of language, as instinct, had taken over and saved us from further possible physical attack. I experienced a few occasions when strange men felt moved respond in a hostile manner to our outward, sometimes very subtle, signs of female intimacy. This happened by formal means of state control as well. During the seventies and eighties there was never gay disco night when we did not have the indignity of the fully armed and uniformed RUC, UDR or British Army entering the premises. They stopped all proceedings, the music and dancing came to an abrupt halt. All the lights were switched on, so we could see that they could see

all of us. They walked around and through us, taking note of us. It made me furious, this attempted public shaming, sanctioned by the state. Back in the seventies, lesbianism hadn't any acceptable, trendy overtones. Northern Ireland was, and still is, a place riddled with religiosity, designed to keep people in narrow boxes of stifling conformity.

In the olden days of benefit discos, there were so few of us that the organised womens' gatherings were very familiar occasions; same faces, same places. Times have changed. It delights me now to go to various queer social events and, not only do I have no part in organising them, I don't know a fraction of the bustling crowd. A whole new energy. Occasionally, albeit rarely, I see some young dykes out and about publicly, cavorting around and flaunting their sexuality, just like their heterosexual friends. More power to their elbows. Just forty eight years in total and I have lived through some great social and political changes. Nowadays I am living in - guess where? Rural Co. Down! Only this time around, happily, it is with my partner of almost twelve years, my civil partner in fact. Not only do we have lesbian neighbours round about us, but an LGBT group has started up in the local town. Never thought I'd see the day. In many ways, we have come a long way. I am still impatient with human evolution, it feels like we have only just scraped our knuckles up out of the dirt. While there is still kerfuffling behind closet doors and heterosexism creates the daily choice of 'coming out', we still have some way to go.

TIME OF OUR LIVES

by Jayne

These memories are deep in my mind. To me it is like looking through a camera's lens, so far away, yet, being able to zoom close to get a clear picture whenever I choose. We were young then, with not a lot of sense and definitely not the opportunities one would have today. For example, perfumes popular with women in the 70's were Patchouli oil, Geminesse, and Youth Dew and usually at the end of an evening I had a mixture of all three. You can take out of that what you like! Supposedly, for men, it was Old Spice, Brut or Hi Karate but what the gay men loved most of all was dressing up and putting on their make-up. This took place in the ladies toilets in the Chariot Rooms, as large mirrors filled the wall. The women only used the loos when really necessary as the floor was like a swimming pool, and even while trying to tip-toe through it one could hear the squelch of the mixture of water and urine splashing at one's ankles.

The lounge area was great though. A bar across the top of the room, small semi circular booths, seating covered in peach velvet, joining lamps with peach coloured shades and a small rectangular table furnished off each booth. At the bottom of the lounge, opposite the bar, was a large pool table which was usually frequented by the women, eager to play in such easy company.

Up three steps beside the bar, in the lounge, was a door that led into the disco. Walking into the disco it took a few minutes for one's eyes to become adjusted to the lighting. All the walls

were painted black and down each side were rectangular booths with tables, with usually about twelve people crammed into each booth.

On a Friday and Saturday night the bar was packed to capacity, with everyone pushing and shoving to get a drink. We all knew each other in the Chariot and each clique had their own regular booth. Even the punk rockers had their own booth and although some of the punks were bisexual or heterosexual, this never caused any problems.

The Chariot would always have drag shows and fancy dress competitions. When The Miss Belfast competition was held, some younger gay boys actually brought their mothers to support them with their dress and make-up. The contestants were very serious and also very competitive but all in all it was a fun night out. The music was terrific. In those days it was mainly Abba that blasted out to everyone's own style of dancing. Around 10:30 pm a few smoochies were thrown in like 'Talking in your sleep' by Crystal Gale and 'Andante, Andante' by Abba.

As soon as The Chariot's Theme Tune 'Thank you for the Music' played, we knew to drink up, as Jim would be collecting the glasses, putting our drinks into plastic tumblers for us to take outside, and if it was needed, Jim or Ernie would sell a carryout which saved running over to Rock Town.

It wasn't all perfect. There were many squabbles, bitching and falling outs, but this is nostalgia, and as far as I'm concerned, it really was the Time of our Lives.

I dedicate this story to Jim and Ernie.
'Thank you for the music'.

FISHNETS AND STILETTOS

by Jayne

We had been there all afternoon and the lounge bar was busier than ever. My friend Gillian had just arrived, laden with her daily shopping. She placed the plastic bags filled with groceries behind the bar where they would duly stay until the disco ended.

We had arrived earlier than usual, wanting to get a good seat for tonight's Cabaret Show. The advertised show had everyone in good spirit and looking forward to the evenings surprise guest appearance. Jim and Ernie were very secretive about who this was going to be and it was Jim's responsibility to organise the stage set-up.

The atmosphere was relaxed and easy going in the Chariot but tonight, we had feelings of excitement and were, as the song goes, 'Glad to be Gay'. We had already paid out Bobby our £1.00 entrance fee and had the back of our hand stamped with the logo E&J.

Ernie, posing on his podium behind the bar, was an affectionate and lovable person who always gave cuddles freely. He loved to tease, welcoming some of the women with a 'Good evening Monsieur George' bowing his head slightly for dramatic effect demonstrating emphatically that he was as 'camp as knickers'.

Jim was more of a 'mans man' tall and broad in stature. He was a distinguished looking person and always wore a shirt and tie. Jim did not have a lot of patience and we noticed that his thick brown moustache used to twitch when his tolerance was low.

It is now 8:00pm and we have slowly moved into the large disco room. To-night the room has the brightest lights, illuminating the theatrical stage set-up. Jim is gripping the microphone and we can see his moustache is twitching... we strain to hear Jim's voice over the whistles and banter of the crowd. Eventually the crowd calms down and Jim begins to speak. The act you are about to see tonight is The Wonderful, The Marvellous, Miss Mae... and entering the stage is Harry dressed as Mae West wearing a blonde wig, fishnet stockings and stiletto heels. Harry being melodramatic begins with, 'Hello, I'm Mae, Come up and see me sometime'. The audience sing along with Mae when she begins 'I'm just an old fashioned girl with an old fashioned mind, Not sophisticated I'm the sweetest simple find', the crowd go wild, clapping, cheering and wolf whistling for Mae as she finishes off with, 'I want an old fashioned house with an old fashioned fence and an old fashioned mill-i-on-aire'.

After the squeals and mad stamping of feet the room lulls to a hush as Miss Mae prepares for her fire-eating trick. Parading across the stage Miss Mae is a remarkable sight in her stiletto heels that took her to way over six feet tall and when she nearly chokes on the fire-eating sticks, everyone holds their breath and Jim rushes to her aid with a glass of water. She bows to a loud applause, then stumbles, resembling a tiller girl with a broken heel as she exits off stage. Amidst the good humour, everyone rushes to reclaim their booth while the room is being set for the disco. I recall that we danced the night away, smooching to romantic music like 'I Will' by Ruby Winters and 'Together we are beautiful' by Fern Kinney. I will fondly remember the small bunches of crimson roses around the room and the uncountable red hearts threaded to the large silver glitter ball hanging from the ceiling.

Ernie & Jim had certainly made this their St Valentines Special. I dedicate this story to Harry (Miss Mae) who brought a lot of humour and fun into the Chariot. Harry we will always laugh with you.

IN THOSE DAYS

by Jayne

The Chariot room had many different characters. I'd like to share some of my memories of them.

Let me take you into the Chariot with me. It's Wednesday night and I'm sitting in the lounge bar, waiting for some friends. I'm twenty two years old. The woman behind the bar I reckon to be in her mid sixties. She is small in stature, has a thick mop of white hair and an engaging smile. Although she is old enough to be my mother, I know she is gay and I have an affinity with her. The lounge bar is quiet tonight, so she comes over to my table and begins to chat. I feel very relaxed in her company and go with my gut feeling of being able to trust this woman. We begin to get to know one another telling little snippets about our lives. This is her story.

'Back in my day' she said, 'life was very different. I am who I am and there's no getting away from that. It wasn't that I was barefaced about my sexuality but I wasn't going to deny it either. Why should I live a miserable life to please other people? Why should I worry what they said about me behind my back? I'm not saying it doesn't hurt, of course it hurts. It's not that I don't WANT to conform, I CAN'T conform. I bought myself a motor bike you know, my pride and joy, that is. I can take off into the countryside where there's only me and the wind. I love the wind. I feel it softly on my face, caressing my hair, cleansing all the hurt in my heart and gently blowing the dust from my body. That is when I feel free. I always have to

come home though, and know when I ride my bike down our little street that someone somewhere is watching me. They pretend they are not interested in me, but I have seen the curtains twitching in nearly every house I pass. There are nosey neighbours everywhere love', she says, wearing her hard earned knowledge on her sleeve. 'When they're talking about me, sure aren't they leaving somebody else alone?' 'You're so right' I thought. 'You are so right'.

Imagine what it must have been like in the late forties to be a lesbian, and to be truthful about it. What a brave courageous act, to actually 'come out'. I knew that woman. Her name was Daisy. She had a hard life and was so alone. She told me of the beatings she had received in her younger day from the so called 'hard men' of her community and the jibes and mental torture she had to endure. Cruelty is not a strong enough word to describe what she experienced. She had little support and few friends who would stand up for her. She couldn't turn to a ready-made support network, when she felt overwhelmed by the unfairness of it all she had to just get on with it. And that's what she did. She found her own escape and learned to rely on herself.

Lesbians in Belfast - a long legacy of strong, self reliant, independent women.

A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

by Jayne

I remember so vividly that fine summer evening. Mother Nature was good to us that week. She had given us a succession of cloudless skies, allowing us to wear our summer clothes. I remember distinctly my cream double breasted jacket. It had wide lapels threaded with saddle stitch around the edging and three cream buttons on each sleeve. The matching lining was made from polyester and viscose (so it had said on the inside label. Whatever they were?)

I swell with pride remembering how I had to save to buy it, knowing that to me, it was worth every penny. When I wore that jacket, it felt like a magic cape. I was no longer the childish, withdrawn girl who sat quietly in the corner. I was now proud as a peacock, witnessing myself doing extraordinary things that I'd never have thought I'd be capable of, especially being able to ask a woman to dance, and not just any woman, but the one I had admired from a distance many times before. Sauntering across the concrete floor I reached the table where she was sitting talking to friends. 'Got your ticket, Got your suitcase, Got your leaving smile' had started to play in the background and without any words she was off her seat and we were on the dance floor, arms entwined, just as Leo Sayer was singing the next part of his song, 'cause I can't stop loving you'.

I remember there was a sweet scent of Mystère de Rochas perfume lingering from her body; her head had fallen slightly,

to rest gently on my left shoulder. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and I was deeply content. The world was looking distinctly rosy!

But as everyone will tell you, all that glisters is not gold... our attachment dissolved somewhat when (Beverly to you) met the love of her life and married him. You see, youth is necessarily fickle, confused, selfish and short!

Although we haven't been in touch for a number of years, I've heard through the grapevine she hasn't changed and is happily married with four lovely children. I'd like to take this opportunity to wish them well.

I will always love the smell of that perfume and I still wear it, although my memories are being pigeonholed as relics of a bygone era long before I feel old enough for that, as the manufacturers are slowly taking it off the market! In the 1980's a lipstick called Strawberry Meringue was another favourite product of mine that has been discontinued, proving that nothing stays the same but our memories!

MOLLY AND LUCY

by Jayne

Molly was Lucy's dog who was a very intelligent animal and they usually went everywhere together. 'Sure I remember that night like it was yesterday', said Lucy. 'I got all spruced up, had a few drinks at home and off we went to the Chariot Rooms in Lower North street. Oul Bobby was perched in his usual position at the top of the stairs waiting to collect everyone's money, when he spied Molly and me'. 'You can't bring that animal in here', he said, and without blinking an eye I asked him, 'How much is it in Bobby?' 'Sure you know its £1:50' he said. 'Well here's my £1:50 and Molly's £1:50 so don't you argue with me, right? And my Molly, bless her, sat patiently all night looking after my handbag while I danced the night away. It was the first time auld Bobby was lost for words, I can tell you.'

MY WAY

by Irene

Ok, ok - so how can that be? A young, gay woman in 1970's Belfast who was never in the Chariot Rooms? Did that scream 'Denial?' Did it yell 'Saddo?' Did it sob 'Help?' Did it point to a lonely, cowed, confused introvert choosing convention over acceptance?

Well - no, it didn't. Like other European cities at the time, Belfast was a city awakening to wide political debates and social challenges. Notorious internationally for brutalities perpetrated in the name of religious/sectarian zeal, radical politics and causes nevertheless flourished, away from the glare of the global news industry. These were exciting, exuberant, exhausting days of planning, campaigning - AAACCCTTION!!!

Aaanndd - best of all - WIMMIN!!! Strong, determined, competent, persistent women from all over Belfast and beyond joined together to fight for safety for women in the home, on the streets. They led the long struggle to put women's rights and interests on the local agenda and to get their voices heard in their local communities. Women's Centres, Women's Refuges, women's groups developed - changing the landscape of women's lives in Northern Ireland forever.

An innocent abroad, I attended a job interview, where, incongruously, applicants adjourned to a bar for a drink

together afterwards. One of these uncompromising, self-assured strangers told the assembled company her name and that she was a lesbian. My introduction to the term. My introduction to the Women's movement in Northern Ireland. I was intrigued - this woman was softly-spoken, articulate, and passionately championed the causes of women in our community. I was hooked - not to the person, but to her openness and to the causes.

So now you're saying, 'Oh, oh! You really ARE sad!!' And how wrong you would be!!! For amongst the crusaders of these causes were the very vocal, very active, very political lesbians of Belfast. (Oh, yes - there were plenty around at that time as well). And how could I not be utterly entranced by them? Alternative, creative, zest for life saturated their campaigning - lively conferences, powerful meetings, vivacious discussion, inventive actions, AANNDDD - magically - flamboyant socialising: zany women's events, wacky cabarets, discos, parades! And lots of them! Wimmin! Wimmin! Wimmin! This was a world where a woman could be totally immersed in women's culture and company! This was a world I was happy to be in!!

I had chanced upon a milieu that challenged and nourished my views of myself and the world, that provided community and offered space to explore. It was hedonist, indulgent, affirming, absorbing. I danced and debated. I ate and drank. I watched and admired. And learnt from those wiser, smarter, more sophisticated than myself.

Life. Love. The universe. All of that. And more! And so much more!!

- Threads -

Exhilarating, provocative, explosive - wild worldly wimmin, passionate ideas - and a very young, sheltered, spellbound, woman, on the verge of coming out.

Yes - in the seventies it was easy to miss the Chariot Rooms amidst all the other exciting things going on. Rose tinted? Well - that's how I remember it anyway!!

IN THE CLUB

by Jayne

Thursday's were a pleasure to look forward to, as we received our little brown envelopes. Wages were not up to modern day standards but we loved our work and had our independence. We worked as contract drivers taking children to school and elderly people to day centres. The elderly told us stories about their young days - fascinating oral histories, many now lost. The children also got to know us individually, as they were permanents on our school run. Both the old and the young, despite their disabilities, always had a smile and a good sense of humour. Work was good.

We have just finished, Julie and I, and are heading over to The Club Bar on University Road where we shall indulge in something appetising to eat. Then we shall stay drinking, and chatting, until closing time, spending most of our hard earned wages. Julie had been married to her ex-husband for several years. She always knew she was gay but tried so hard to stifle 'those' feelings. Now it was as if she had found a new lease in life - yearning to go to as many gay venues as she could. Julie is fabulous company and a terrific storyteller. She is in her element to sit and hold court with The gang hanging on her every word.

As luck would have it, the gang are already in the bar with seats kept for Julie and me to squeeze in. Chatting casually while we eat, I can see Julie is enthusiastic to get talking.

This is her story.

My ex husband, Tony, and I went to France for our honeymoon many years ago. I had never been any further than Newcastle, County Down. (Even that was a Sunday school trip, where they gave us kids a paper bag with two corn beef sandwiches and a Paris bun as our picnic). Anyhow, ignoring my fear of flying, I managed to fall asleep on the journey. When Tony woke me up, I could hardly believe that I was actually there.

The views along the way to the hotel were breathtaking, as we drove past beautiful buildings and views of the clear white peaks of the mountains in the distance. We reached our destination and 'A Room with a View' - WOW!

We had been honoured with a complementary bottle of champagne on ice and two free tickets to the Cabaret show that evening. So, dressed to kill, after dinner that's where we headed and were ushered to a centre table near the stage. The first entertainers, a singing quartet, had the enthusiastic audience joining clapping and swaying to their rhythm. Next act was a magician who in broken English, welcomed, 'The young honeymoon couple' at the front. Everyone was cheering when I realised he was talking about Tony and me. To make matters worse, he gestured for me to join him on stage. I was being egged on by the audience, so - up I went!

The magician asked me, 'What item I treasured most that Tony had bought me, other than my wedding ring?' I proudly showed

off the gold watch that hung delicately on my wrist. He asked to borrow it for a moment and reluctantly I handed it to him. Wrapping the watch into a gentleman's large handkerchief, he threw it up into the air and caught it by a frayed corner when it fell, showing the watch had disappeared. He then thanked me for my assistance and led me back to my table, telling Tony and me to meet with him after the show. My thoughts were distracted for the next half hour and at the end, we immediately rushed to his dressing room. The magician's manners were impeccable and a table spread with a banquet awaited us. There on the table were fruits, vegetables, salad, cold meats, cakes etc., and a large puff pastry pie.

GUESS WHAT WAS IN THE PIE?

ANSWER - OVER THE PAGE

Steak and Kidney.

Ok - some old jokes never die! I hope you found this as funny as we did. It almost became part of an initiation ceremony for the 'new kids on the block' - everyone was welcomed into the sorority who showed they could laugh with us, after they shouted out 'The Watch!' Simple, gentle, welcoming - trademarks of the community.

COMMON DENOMINATOR

by *Paula*

This is a revised version of the story that *Paula* had printed in a book called 'Out for Ourselves' in 1986.

Thirty years ago I met a crowd of lesbians in the Club Bar in the university area of Belfast. I haven't looked back since. These women, from a variety of ages and backgrounds, would all sit together in one particular corner of the bar and they always seemed to be having a great out' time. Being somewhat slow on the uptake, it was several months before I realised what the common denominator was. Even then, I only found out when someone warned me to stay away from them. I was intrigued and eventually seduced by the 'danger' they represented. It wasn't long before I became someone to be warned about too.

There seemed to be something almost magical about the Club Bar in those days. You could turn up on any night of the week and be sure to find someone to have a drink and a chat with. You could catch up on the latest state of play in relationships by checking out the inscriptions on the back of the toilet door. Most of us had very little money, being students, on the broo (benefits) or in low paid jobs, but that never seemed to be much of a problem. There was a steady supply of lonely middle-aged men who were happy to buy us drink all night in return for a bit of company. Well - fair exchange was no robbery! Although we were generally discreet about our sexuality (holding hands only under the table) most of the other customers and the bar

staff knew we were gay. We would have felt very insulted if anyone had called us lesbians but we were glad to be gay and grateful for being tolerated.

We were, of course, like everyone else in Belfast, living in the middle of a war - but we largely managed to ignore it. Politics and religion were taboo subjects. There was amongst us, we believed, no sectarian divide. Mind you, although it was never an issue, we were somehow always able to tell what "foot someone kicked with". I remember one 11th July the Club Bar was closed, so a gang of us headed to a loyalist shibeen in the adjacent Sandy Row. Catholic and Protestant, we all belted out The Sash My Father Wore, the only difference being that, for some reason, the Catholics among us knew more of the words. On another eleventh night, two lesbians, both Catholic, led the parade round the bonfires in Sandy Row carrying a huge Union Jack. We enjoyed the irony of that. If any of us had reservations we didn't voice them. Religion/politics, as I say, were forbidden subjects in those heady days.

The Club Bar was by no means our only outlet. Weekends were eagerly anticipated for their visits to the gay club and the possibility of 'getting off' with someone. We were probably quite predatory in our pursuits, though there was innocence/adolescence/joie de vivre to it. We wouldn't have understood, had we been told, that we were treating each other in a male heterosexist way.

If you weren't already in a stable relationship (i.e. one lasting more than two weeks) you generally had your eye on someone. For days, sometimes for weeks, before the disco you'd be in conference with your mates planning your campaign with military precision. Scripts would be rehearsed, outfits chosen

and all manner of trivial information weighed carefully for any potential significance. Who does she know? How does she dress? What music does she like? In truth it very rarely worked and the process became so convoluted and complicated that I honestly wonder how any of us managed to get it together with anyone else at all.

One night we had a 'wedding' in the gay club, complete with large paper bells, buffet supper and champagne. Two women exchanged vows and rings before a 'minister' (a woman dressed in a surplice). I confess to having been 'best man' and another woman was 'father of the bride' - if you can work that one out. Of course it was a farce and we knew it was a farce, at least I hope most of us did. In retrospect, a more ideologically unsound occasion is hard to imagine but the sense of community among us that night was very real and it was one of the best night's craic I ever had. To cap it all, six of us went on the 'honeymoon'. It is somewhat ironic that we were having civil ceremonies before the legal partnership aspect came about! I suppose heterosexual society took a while to catch up - Belfast's gay community being, as ever, at the cutting edge of social change!

Mind you, it wasn't all fun. We had 'spring fever' to contend with. This phenomenon presented itself without fail around March each year. For some inexplicable reason, couples would start splitting up all over the place. This had a domino effect and before we knew it, relationships had taken on all the subtleties of musical chairs. There was a mad scramble to see who would be left partnerless. No-one else need have worried too much - it was usually me!

We were, it has to be admitted, a fairly incestuous bunch. My theory is that the spring fever only abated a few years later because we had exhausted all possible combinations. Happily, while it lasted, there was a lot of support around. We would all meet up in someone's flat for days on end, dispensing tea and sympathy and playing suitably morbid records. Our play list would include Chicago's "If You Leave Me Now", Genesis, "Follow You, Follow Me", Janis Ian's, "Jesse", Linda Ronstadt's "Someone To Lay Down Beside Me" and the all time favourite - "Torn Between Two Lovers" by Mary McGregor. No doubt psychologists would have something to say about the beneficial effects of allowing ourselves this period of mourning - wallowing in misery - but at any rate, it cheered us up enormously!

There was great camaraderie between us and the gay men in those days. We joined in the camp humour, addressed them by the women's names they had adopted and hailed the drag queens as 'Miss Larne' and Miss 'Ballymena'. In fact not only did we fail to take offence at drag, we actively participated. In 1977 the gay club hosted the 'Mister Belfast' competition. There were four women contestants all dressed as men - at least they weren't required to appear in bathing costumes. As it turned out, it was more like a fancy-dress costume event, with a twenties style gangster, a 'heavy', a rocker, and a sailor - it was good fun too.

Many of the men referred to the women collectively as 'fish' but we didn't take the insult too seriously (to be honest, I had to get my mother to explain the term to me) and besides, we affectionately called them "queens" or "fruits". Some of the men were involved in serious political activity like the campaign to get the '67 Act implemented in the North through

the European Court and many suffered harassment from the RUC. We sympathised, but reasoned that as we weren't illegal, it didn't really affect us. Lesbians were omitted from the original legislation covering homosexual acts because apparently Queen Victoria refused to believe that women could get up to such things. If you spotted some 'God Bless the Queen' graffiti on a toilet door in the gay club you could be pretty sure that the artist was not some rabid royalist but rather a grateful lesbian.

You may gather that there wasn't a lot of heavy political analysis abounding in our group at this period. We gradually got wind of the women's movement and a few feminists emerged. I regret to say I was not impressed. My main complaint against them was that they were far too serious and couldn't take a joke. Discuss roles? Certainly, bread rolls, cheese rolls, or jam rolls? What was the point, I argued, in getting all het up about trivia like drag shows and advertisements - besides no man had ever oppressed me. Women's heritage and history dismissed in one fell swoop, hardly pausing for breath, my tongue was nowhere near my cheek.

Well, that was all more than thirty years ago. There was no bolt out of the blue but things started changing. The Club bar, having been blown up a few times, changed management and people gradually stopped going there. The gay club closed down for a while and was eventually replaced by a series of clubs that never recaptured the old atmosphere (nostalgia ain't what it used to be). Many of the changes have been positive - a lesbian helpline was set up and has been meeting the needs of many isolated lesbians for decades and with great success. We even have equality legislation, despite the best efforts of

reactionary politicians and church leaders. Our own advocacy service has been established - LASI, the name apparently is not Ulster-Scots for lesbian - but it should be.

Meanwhile, we are still having a lot of craic. A number of us have survived as close friends and in November last year, we had one hell of a reunion to celebrate our years of lesbianism. We are of course no longer practising lesbians - at this stage, we're good at it!

IF YOU KNEW LUCY...

by Jayne

It's Friday night and everyone heads to Lucy's house. Not that she's throwing a party or anything, we all just feel so comfortable there. It's usually the same crowd of people calling in for a laugh and a drink. Lucy sits on the floor beside the stereo and makes us all feel special as she plays requests, from her large collection of LP's. She announces, 'This is a special request for Caroline' putting the needle on the exact spot for the music to begin, 'I'm in the mood for dancing' by the Nolan Sisters. 'This is a special request for Renee', and 'Maggie Mae' by Rod Stewart starts to play amidst the whistles and cheers of the crowd. Toning it down a little and a few vodkas later Lucy is finding it difficult to balance the needle on the record. Scratch, scratch 'This is a special request for Joanne' - 'Castles in the Air' by Don McLean is played. Meanwhile Lucy is still sitting cross-legged on the floor, capturing everyone's attention, flirting endlessly with virtually no effort. We are all hooked. Beth has just arrived in without her partner, but no one mentions this. We all just think 'They must have fallen out again'. Beth has certainly cheered up by the end of the evening and decides to stay overnight at Lucys. Beth was still at Lucy's on Saturday when I phoned to check if she was alright, and, content that she sounded fine, I went about my business. It was the following Thursday when Beth phoned me to relate the events of Saturday.

This is that story.

Beth and Lucy had cleaned the house from top to bottom gathering beer cans etc. from the night before. Amongst the chaos they found an unopened bottle of vodka, and as Beth said, 'We got tore in'. Quite a few vodka and cokes later, they realized they were very hungry, so Lucy got her coat from the cupboard and headed to the Chinese takeaway, ten minutes walk from the house. Beth was ravenous by now and impatiently awaited Lucy's return. It was a long wait. Finally Lucy arrived with the Chinese carryout in one hand and a very distressed seagull under her other arm. The seagull had clipped its wing. Well, Lucy was nothing if not an animal lover and an earth mother! (It was the seventies, after all!) 'I'll make it comfortable for tonight anyway', she said, as she got a cushion and settled the submissive (dying!) seagull beside the radiator.

Beth greedily started to rip open her Chinese carryout. And that's when Lucy nearly (as that oul' Belfast saying goes) took squally nerves. 'There's no way you're eating that now' she squealed, 'you shouldn't have ordered chicken! After all our seagull could be his cousin!' Beth choked - but knew there was no point in arguing. Lucy was self-appointed defender of the bird kingdom for that night and adamant that eating chicken was akin to cannibalism.

Deep desire thwarted - anticipation brought to naught. Beth trembled with disappointment!

I roared with laughter and hung up the phone, cause if you knew Lucy, like I knew Lucy ...

WHEN YOU HAVE GRACE IN YOUR LIFE...

by Rose

In 1983 when I was 29 years old, living with my parents, and working in Belfast, I planned my first trip to the U.S.A. Early in the year, Karen Carpenter from the famous singing duo, the 'Carpenters' had died suddenly. I was sad for weeks when I heard the news, and realised that I would never see the duo perform live. I was sad for another reason; a few years earlier I had fallen in love with a woman from Northern Ireland, who I knew would never fall in love with me.

So I wanted to get away to experience the U.S. of A. When I arrived in California it was as if I had come home. Just before the Tri-Star 1011 landed at LAX, I looked out of the window and saw the night city lights twinkling their welcome to me. I stayed in a small hotel in Los Angeles not far from Santa Monica and enjoyed meeting new people practically every day of my stay - almost one month. I experienced my first Gay Pride march there also. I was later to realise it was the wind beneath my wings.

I met a young man who worked as a restaurant waiter in the evenings. We were introduced by his former boss, manager of a hotel in West Hollywood, and he and I became friendly. My new friend, Christian, happened to be Gay. I poured my heart out to him and he understood. He told me that this life is not a dress rehearsal and that I had to be true to myself.

I went back to California for another holiday in 1986, when Christian and I met up again and had a wonderful time together,

spent visiting as many Gay locations as we could. When I returned home I knew I had to make contact with Gay women in Northern Ireland.

I managed to find a Gay disco in Belfast and went along most weekends. I met some wonderful people then. The scene was very supportive to me and I appreciated this very much. I kept my visits to those discos quiet. Being Gay and living in Northern Ireland in the 1980's you just knew to keep your mouth shut.

In the early 1990's I trained to be a volunteer Befriender with lesbian Line. I served the Line for over five years. I would go down to the 'office' on Thursday evenings, and take calls from women from all over Northern Ireland and beyond, who would phone to talk to someone with a friendly voice who would not judge them.

Many were married with children, living lonely lives, knowing they could not share their secret with anyone else - for obvious reasons. Some women had left Northern Ireland and had settled in England, in the hope that their 'gayness' would be tolerated better there than they had experienced back home, where strict Catholic and Protestant ethics dissuaded any openness of their sexuality.

A few women I spoke with, over the years, on those Thursday evenings, told me of their thoughts of committing suicide.

Working for Lesbian Line SAVED MY LIFE. I worked during the day in a very Catholic environment which did not embrace diversity. So on Thursday evenings my self-worth and self-esteem were enriched when I could converse with like minded

people. Thursday evenings kept me sane for the rest of my working week.

As my confidence grew, I was invited to accompany another Befriender from the Line, and meet up with some isolated woman who wanted to talk face to face with other gay women. These meetings were so valuable to me. I realised how important it was to be 'heard' in life and, at some level, to be visible.

The arrangement was that the meeting would take place in an alcohol-free environment, where the three of us could talk for about one hour together. Then a follow-up meeting could be arranged, if the woman wanted. Some women only ever needed one meeting. Some arranged several meetings, and some went on to visit Lavender Links, a monthly drop-in space where Lesbians met for a morning or afternoon to enjoy the freedom of just being themselves and meeting others in sociable, non-pressured surroundings. Lavender Links also organised picnics in the summer months, and car loads of exuberant women would all meet up on a sandy beach, light a Bar-B-Que and dance to the music of the month, into the wee small hours! Summer bliss!

Local Pub Quizzes were a big hit in Gay friendly bars in Belfast. So every couple of months you would see the 'usual suspects' arrive and make up teams with only one thing on our minds - winning! These events kept everyone in contact with each other. If you got lonely all you had to do was telephone the 'Line' and find out when the next event was taking place. The 'Line' ran its own Discos at local gay friendly venues, and I just loved being D.J. for those nights, when the floor would be packed for 'Y.M.C.A.', anything by ABBA and of course at least one playing of 'I Will Survive'! So what's changed?!

I remember well, when Lesbian-Line got the chance to make an advertisement of their work and contact details which was aired late at night on UTV. I helped make this happen. UTV sent me a copy of the video and I played it at home, for my Mother. She was very proud of my efforts.

I have come a long way on my journey of being gay and living in Northern Ireland. At its' beginning, when I was in my mid 20's, I was unsure of my feelings and turned to no-one for help.

In my 30's I was sure of my feelings and when I chose to tell my Father, he did not turn away. He told me he loved me, saying "whom ever you decide to spend your life with, either man or woman, if you have a friendship and companionship as enriching as that of mine and your Mother's you will have grace in your life".

In my early 40's I allowed myself to fall in love again. This was one of the most important lessons I have learned in my life. To allow myself to love and take the leap of faith to risk not being loved in return. I am fortunate that I am loved in return, and my desire is to be with her for the rest of my life.

When I told my Mother about my current relationship, she could not have been happier for me. She had found my sexuality more difficult to come to terms with than my Father had, but she acknowledged the love between my partner and myself and told me that she saw that we enhanced each others' lives.

Now I'm in my 50's and I realise how far I've come. I'm at peace with myself and know that I've had the strength and support to deal with the challenges I've faced over the years.

- Threads -

And I know that I've given something back to the community and people who have been there for me.

I dedicate this story to my friend Christian who died in 1992.

A ROSE ...

by Rose

Many years ago, when I was in my 30's and becoming comfortable with being gay, I attended a self-awareness weekend. The venue was in a beautiful rural setting in the heart of Northern Ireland.

A group of about 20 people gathered, to relax and enjoy time together and quiet time alone, where we could explore the journeys of our lives.

One of the books discussed on the course, was Gail Sheehy's "Passages". Quite a few of us had read the book, recommended by the course Facilitator as a great tool to help us chart our progress in life.

During a coffee break on the second day, one woman, attending with two of her friends, joined me for a cigarette and a stroll in the gardens.

Her name was Rose, and we had talked together a good deal on the first evening of the course. We were on the same wavelength. We understood each other without judgement, and exchanged our experiences of growing up in Northern Ireland.

Rose was in her mid-60's, and I listened attentively to learn from this woman, as any advice she could give me would be appreciated - she seemed wise, smart and thoughtful.

Imagine my surprise, when she told me, that for some reason, she was drawn to me. We had never met before. She said she felt very comfortable in my company and she wanted to tell me something she had never told anyone else.

She said she felt sad at what she was going to say, but this was possibly her last opportunity to unburden herself to another human being.

She related how she had married late in her teens, and had been blessed with a good husband. They had had seven children, all grown up now and left home.

But, she recalled, in her early 20's she recognized her romantic/emotional feelings for other women. She did nothing about them, hoping they would pass. They never did. She had had them the rest of her life, and had not acted upon them. But now, on this week-end, she had met me, and wanted to share her story with me. She didn't know why she had to tell me, she just did.

I was very moved by her story. I was silent for a few minutes. 'Please don't think of me as a 'bad person' she said.

I don't think of you as a 'bad person', but I have something to share with you', I said.

'For the past 5 years, I have been a volunteer on Lesbian Line, in Belfast'.

She looked at me, and said, 'I don't believe it. You were sent to me'. I told her that I didn't know much about life, about having children, about running a family, but I did know that we all have a right to be true to ourselves. Rose smiled and said, she was so pleased she had the courage to tell me what she had.

She had been true to herself and had found someone to admit her feelings to.

We finished our cigarettes and walked together, back into the room, to rejoin the group.

Rose rejoined her friends, and we didn't talk to one another again until the end of the course. She came up to me, when we were all saying our good byes and good lucks.

She drew me aside and said she thought she would not be contacting Lesbian Line; there was no point in it for her. She had satisfied herself. She was happy now to go back home to her family, to resume her family life.

Rose and I gave each other a hug. I have heard nothing from her since. And now I know that sometimes that's all a person needs - someone to hear their story once.

1983?

by Marion

My scene was one where you could go to the club dressed as a highwayman if the notion took you.

My scene was one of segregation - not between Prods and Catholics but between men and women.

My scene was visited nightly by the RUC. We would respond by acting as if someone must have put the lights on by mistake.

My scene was one of city centre barricades which brazen queens flaunted through.

My scene lived in alleyways with unlit doors.

My scene had soft round women in chiselled suits.

My scene had carpet that your feet stuck to.

My scene had its own music.

My scene protested and had candlelit marches.

My scene got Peace and Reconciliation money for weekends spent with lovely Cork dykes.

My scene had a late night women only minibus service.

My scene had outfits from charity shops and only 1 vintage store which we would never have used.

My scene had the House of Jezebels.

My scene had dawn walks though Botanic Gardens and stolen pints of milk from café doorsteps.

My scene danced in the Carpenters and Orpheus and got drunk in Lavery's and the Hatfield.

My scene soaked butter beans overnight and read Women's Press.

My scene was jealous and had weekend brawls.

My scene was where I had my heart broken.

My scene included a handful of my nearest and deareststill deeply cherished.

DUBLIN'S - FAIRER CITY?

by Antonia

The difference between Belfast and Dublin was that in Dublin, we were all broke and things were pretty black economically in the Republic at the time. We are talking about the late seventies and early eighties. Things were so bad then that many young women had to leave home for work and survival and not just homophobic pressures. Those who were left behind were the spark of the feminist movement here and throughout the 10yrs prior to that, had been were trying to break through from the 50's, and from De Valera's old ideas of boys & girls dancing at the crossroads. Ireland as a Republic hadn't really appeared on the world stage yet.

It was only after Dana sang in the Eurovision in 1970 and we started to be seen as contenders; plus joining the EEC in 1973 - that hope and other things started to happen. It was so bad here in Dublin, we were just struggling out of abject social and economic misery.

Belfast was in a very different situation from Dublin. I think we were looking for a loosening up of the social norms at the time. Now the feminist girls had gone out and done the run to Belfast to get the condoms and to get the Pill and create a public storm to shake awareness awake. Contraceptives were still not freely available in the South and the women were pushing for change since the seventies. It was a time when we of the baby boom generation, born in the 50's were now adults. It was now the 70's and we had grown up, watching the Beatles and the

Rolling Stones. We had free education, craving open minds, and had traveled to America and elsewhere. A lot of us were emigrating in the late 70's and early 80's for work. There was little or no work here in Dublin. The economy hadn't boomed. We were not long in the EU. However we didn't have a political war on in our streets and that is why I think the concept of homophobia was stronger, gay issues were pushed deeper in Belfast. While your focus was on civil rights, we were pushing social doors trying to reconstruct a new vision of society here for ourselves.

In the only gay friendly bar at that time Bartley Dunne's by 1979 and 1980 and certainly by 1981, it seemed that Thursday night was where women gathered before they went out to the Hirschfield. The scene was so small that the boys and the girls all met together in the same place. It was some years later that, the girls began to establish some exclusively female venues and a more varied vibrant women's scene began.

I started on the scene in 1979. I remember it well, because that is when I discovered the Hirschfield. I was going out with a woman then and it was all very private. A boy friend of mine had come out that he was going out with a much older man, George. George was very kind and sound; he was extremely tolerant of residual homophobia in us. He was older than me and we got on well. He used take us to the Opera and we would go Ice-Skating on a Sunday morning followed by a slap up breakfast at his. He was just like an older brother, a rock of sense.

George knew there was an emerging Women's disco at the Hirschfield, said he would make some 'phone calls. There was a Women's Night, that very same evening. He had asked but

wouldn't be allowed go to the disco with me, because he was a man. But he got dressed up and volunteered to go out and introduce me to a few women he knew. So we got dressed up and went to Bartley Dunne's. There I met some Gay women and they adopted me. There was a Disco on at the Hirschfield, so off I went first night nerves and all.

Some of the girls played guitar and sang in Cassidy's Camden Street on a Sunday afternoon. In the early weeks of my coming out, having joined in the session, when the girls finished playing in Cassidy's and moved round to the Cloisters, the whole of the club went with us. That was normal then, one goes, all go, inclusively, we had a new 'family.'

Women rented space at The Viking which is now the Royal Oak on Dame Street. The Viking was established as gay friendly before The Parliament, but they both happened more or less at the same time. The Parliament was one of the last pub discos to go back into straightdom as the Turks Head.

So on Thursday the women went to the basement of The Viking. On Friday you could go to any of the places that were Gay friendly. Another place was The Long Hall, Georges Street, not Gay friendly but women adopted it because it was across the road from JJ Smiths. Nobody advertised the fact that they were Gay women going in there for a drink. Some friends and I used to go in and walk out the back, to a little place called The Chinaman, which was a local Pub for residents.

The Foggy Dew was another haunt still in the newly invented left bank of Temple bar. It was mainly for the Trad music women, who played squeeze box and tin whistles etc, but that was the very early days of the Trad revival. In those days Trad

women, mostly called Mary, wore white aran jumpers and jeans. There were quite a few characters around.

The men who started the Hirschfield were a resourced/resourceful group, the current Senator David Norris being one of them. At that time the men had the money, they opened the clubs etc. The women didn't have that kind of money. At this time there was a gay/theatre sub-culture going on. We were aware of it, but straight people who were getting on with their own lives would not have been hugely conscious of the thriving gay underbelly in the country. It was like an underworld, hidden but very vibrant, very alive and if it wasn't parties it was social activities. Dublin Aids Alliance also started at that time. The girls went along to the venues the boys opened and frequented mostly on Thursday evenings. To this day, all over the country, many clubs have Thursday night as a women's night.

In 1981 JJ Smiths became the exclusive women's scene womb every Saturday. I remember when it opened. A Saturday night for women was extraordinary! It was there for eleven years, a lighthouse and a safe and better place for women. Myself and a few friends would go to the bar but wouldn't sit. We wanted to stand. We wanted to meet people and I wanted to dance. Standing at the bar it was easier to meet women ordering and hopefully dancing. There we met and collected some young ones who joined us in our habit of standing.

So how did the community named Royal Family emerge? It began with me and three others, then expanded. There were some interesting women and they attracted a lot of attention. They dated and loved and lost and moved on to other women and so it went and grew.

One of those was a singer with a well known Rock Band. She was our own local 'Star'. The Rock Star was the same vintage as U2. Her band was voted by music critics as the Irish band most likely to succeed, even more so than U2! They were offered a record contract, but they were young, didn't have a Manager and thought they were going to be taken to the cleaners. U2 were offered a lot of money at the time for a contract, so this group was hanging out for more, because they believed they were better! They, like most, went to London but after a year, they came home and never signed. They just committed to a particular record contract and it didn't happen and when they came home it left their whole careers in a very awkward situation. Imagine if you won the Eurovision contest and you were later singing at weddings; people would be wondering why!

Anyway - my friends and I glammed up, quite deliberately, every Saturday night. We had noticed that a lot of the girls went out dressed in their best black jeans and best black tee-shirts. I remember thinking 'no way!' So myself and girlfriend went into town and bought jeans outfits with lemon tee-shirts, pink tee-shirts, and turquoise tee-shirts. This was around the start of the TV programme, Dallas, synonymous with glamour and shoulder pads. Typical! When the economy is down, people start to dress up. So the Glam thing had started and we went to JJs, every week, with our lemon and pink and turquoise blues. We certainly stood out from the best black jeans and the best black tee-shirts, or the white shirts with the sensible black shoes & leather belts. I have some clothes up in my wardrobes that are lamé silver and black. You wouldn't wear them to a dinner dance now, they would be too glamorous! With the colours, the high shoulder pads and the high-heel shoes, anyway, we glammed up, quite deliberately, every Saturday night. That made us visible, noticeable - and a little bit to be

ridiculed maybe, I don't know. But we were determined not to be 'same old', 'same old'... There was a lot of peer pressure to cut your hair and wear the kind of clothes that were acceptable. A lot of the straight feminists were burning their bras. Certainly the gay feminists were not going to be getting into shoulder pads and silver lame!

I must say at that time in Dublin women did not have regular occasions for glamour. There was a memorable Black & White Ball for women in the vaults of Christchurch. Back then it was the boys who really expressed the glam, new romantic era. They had regular coffee mornings, garden parties and black tie evenings at private select dinner parties. They still pursue that style of evening except there is better mixing of the genders now. However the women of Cork have retained their exclusive Fantasy Ball, which is an ever-growing success, every November.

The Gay Women's Community in Dublin was very supportive to women who had break-ups, or problems with their parents and families around gay issues. Many women had 'open houses' and opened them up to women in trouble. Offering cups of tea and a shoulder to cry on at 2 o'clock in the morning! Way back then there were few ways open for support and many turned to drink to cope and suppress the loss/anger. There was some aggression in some of the women and there was a hell of a lot of drinking going on. There was a higher proportion of women from working class Dublin on the scene then. To come out as a working class person in Dublin it was tough. In a world that perceived it safer to be 'macho' to survive, coming out often meant dressing and behaving like hard core little men. There were young women who were angry and feeling disenfranchised and not in touch with their femininity at all.

Having said that, there was honesty and a frankness about them that was refreshing. That made the homophobia more insidious in the middle class women. It's a different kind of struggle to come out from a middle class, boarding school, farm, rural or small town background. There were always quite a few such characters around. I remember going to a venue when a particular woman got up, so full of excitement & personality that she lifted her long flowing skirt and - oops - she'd worn nothing underneath it!

I must say the Gay Women's Dublin Scene was extremely homely. I remember DJ Joni playing 'Song of the Soul' and everyone holding hands and singing along and dancing to it. I never heard it played anywhere else! You would be invited to everything, and kept informed of everything that was going on. Practically every Saturday night, at that time, there was a party after a women's night. If you were at the Viking or JJs and later had nowhere to go, there would most always be a party, often at Lisa's in Dalkey or Henrietta Street. If you went along, every cross section of humanity would be there and everyone had their party piece. There was the Royal family, the Intellectual lot from Dunlaoire, the Political ones and the Arty ones, half of whom were living in a house in Sandymount together and encouraging each other. There were few jobs so they were pursuing their Art! They were making sculpture and painting pictures and doing God knows what. There were others learning alternative therapies. There really was little formal work and a lot of people were on the Dole. Those of us who had jobs, and I was lucky to be one of them, were working away and having a great social life. A friend of mine had bought her own house, in 1980 at 25 years old (family money) and that was very unusual. I bought mine soon after, in 1981.

There was an organization set up by Gay Men supporting people with HIV and Aids in Dublin, called CAIRDE. These men were highly qualified counselors, some of them psychologists. The HIV realities had come to Dublin and they were good people who wanted to help. They had a Programme Manager, Annemarie, who was straight but had a really good feel for people. The people who worked in CAIRDE were trained up for about 4 months to work voluntarily. After the training period we were told whether or not we could join the organization. One had to be emotionally stable and unshockable. The task - to 'buddy' people who were HIV positive and, at that time, living with imminent death. Subsequently I joined CAIRDE myself. I remember being introduced to Karl, one of the founders. I was at his funeral about 2 years ago which was enormous. Karl was wonderful; he was a counselor and psychotherapist. They were the sciences that began to grow in the 80's and 90's. Psychotherapy grew in this country then. Karl was one of the key people involved at the time.

After JJs there was Stonewalz in the Barracks. It had regular themed parties and was the biggest to date. It could hold up to five hundred women, from all over the country. Like JJs it was always there, always on a Saturday night and you got used to it. They would put little bags of sweets on the tables, and had balloons and spot prizes. They ran Fancy Dress Nights. Up until then women were excluded. Now things began to change, women were a lot more visible. The women were not in competition with the gay guys, they were setting up a whole course of action on their own. Women were doing it for themselves!

The women had a whole parallel life then. There was always a 30th or 40th Birthday Party to go to for the women. Or you

could go to a Disco in the Ormonde. It was a very vibrant time. The women had only second class citizen status even in gay society and it was time to take control of our own fate. There was a Lesbian Line in Dublin for a very long time, even before 1979. From my perspective there was no urge for political input. It was almost unattractive to be political. So I didn't get involved with Lesbian Line in the early days. From National Women's Council involvement I become conscious of the Dublin Lesbian Line and it was in 1990 that LOT got started.

At the end of the worst part of the War in Belfast, we went up to the Gay Pride March and went to a women's venue and the vibrancy reminded me of Dublin. We went to a Disco, on the Saturday night, but it was mostly gay men and I felt distinctly unsafe on the streets after the Disco. I remember when I worked across the north going to visit in North Belfast and staying in a friend's house. While driving through Ballymena and Londonderry the streets would be dark and empty. When leaving the light and warmth of her house, it was as if life went out. Life and vibrancy was alive in the houses in Belfast but not on the streets. The contrast was striking on the way home, as I drove to Dundalk, there were lights and people out on the streets enjoying themselves, drinking and talking, laughing and walking.

The law in Ireland changed in the mid-1980's. The reason I remember it is because Karl was very excited about the change in the law and I was with Karl bravely enjoying a gay pride parade when the news broke. We hugged together at Bank of Ireland Dame Street and watched as The Diceman, gay mime artist and Dublin street regular, danced with joy.

A momentous occasion, a new future began that day.

This may all be chronicled in the various archives of that important time in Dublin. Well it lived in me it was my life and times Sometimes I hanker after those old dark days, in the words of Dylan; I miss it all and get those Subterranean Homesick blues.

BUS RUN TO DUBLIN

by Jayne

It was a mixed crowd of women getting on the bus. Everyone had brought a carry out. There was beer, vodka, red wine, white wine, soft drinks and, of course, sandwiches and crisps. All fifteen of us had arranged to stay in a small hotel in Gardener Street. This was the early eighties and it was costing 5 punts per person for bed and breakfast. There was an atmosphere of excitement on the bus, people were talking, clapping hands, singing and dancing. The drink was flowing freely but I persuaded the women to stop drinking for five minutes as we went across the border.

We had to stop at the checkpoint and were asked by the Garda if we were carrying anything over 200 pounds? A voice piped up from the back of the bus, 'Only the driver'. The Gardai found this funny and waved us on through. Two minutes over the border and everyone needed to go to the toilet. There was no public loo around. We were in open countryside, so I pulled the bus into the side of a grass verge which sloped down to a river. It was bedlam, two by two rushing out of Noah's Ark - everyone pushing and shoving to get out of the bus. One of the women - I'll call her Jill - said, "I'm not long out of hospital. I had a D&C and I have to be very careful not to get an infection, - I'll wait until the rest of you have gone, then I'll go. (OK, I suspect she was just being modest). But anyway, everyone had finally relieved themselves, when we heard yells and screams echoing from the river. Racing down the slope, to our horror, we saw that Jill had fallen in the river. It's probably safe to say

that Luanne, who fancied Jill, was the least a bit drunk when she jumped into the river to save her! It was with great difficulty we managed to haul them both out, under direction from a voice in the background shouting, 'Make a human chain!' (Wouldn't you know she was a teacher?) It was like a scene from the Sound of Music, when the Von Trapp children fell out of the boat!

Finally, creatively using Sarah's scarf, we got them to level ground, only to realise that Jill, previously so modest, now had her knickers round her knees. She was near to tears, so to distract attention from her, interest turned to Luanne's irretrievably filthy, smelly trainers, soaked in the murky river water. Whipped from her by many hands, they were tied together and thrown as high as could be managed, catching far up in the branches of a tree. On our journey home next day; there they were - swinging in the breeze.

Anyhow, we are still on our way to Dublin and are now at Swords, because we have to go through every town and village en route (there being no motorway). And here we need to make a stop for plasters - one of our number needs to cover tattoos related to an organisation in the North.

So the tattoos are duly plastered over and by Dublin the other travellers are also well 'plastered'. As the driver, watching goings-on in the rear-view mirror, I see hands flying, drink spilling as we rattled along the roads. I thought it amazing that Sarah never seemed to miss a drop even though by then she was well oiled.

Five hours later, we sang our own fanfare as we finally arrived in Dublin to that little hotel in Gardener Street. Hallelujah.

DUBLIN - HERE WE COME AGAIN!

by Jayne

We were staying in a friend's apartment situated in Walkinstown Dublin. The apartment was spacious, very new and had all the mod cons anyone could ask for. Arriving there that late afternoon, we were exhausted by the three hour journey from Belfast, but when entering the apartment we were enlivened by the cream painted walls and the freshness of the spring air seeping through the large window. The aroma coming from the stylish fitted kitchen was that of spices and herbs, the smells of the chicken curry Pauline had so kindly prepared for us. It certainly tasted as good as it smelt. The ice cream sundae afterwards cooled the tonsils, still burning from the Vindaloo. The room had grown dimmer and Pauline switched on the lights adding gentle warmth. We were so content, the thought of going out had lost its appeal, but as we had arranged to meet with a few of 'the Derry crowd' (who were staying in Dalkey) we got ourselves ready.

Music was playing as we walked into the bar. Searching round for a moment, waves and smiles from Mary, sitting in the far corner, beckoned us. Seats had been saved. 'You're just in time to see Freda and Ruth', said Mary. 'They are absolutely brilliant,' after hearing their first song I agreed. The duo sang and played the guitar and my favourite song that night was 'Speed of the Sound of Loneliness'. In those days I didn't need to leave the bar to have a cigarette as smoking was the norm, so I was able to enjoy the act from start to finish. After introductions were concluded, Ruth and Freda invited us all to

a party at their home. There were three carloads of us and Ruth had given the address and directions to the first car.

Following in pursuit, I felt like a circuit of Ireland rally competitor, as we dodged in and out of small winding streets, ignoring traffic lights and speed limits in quieter areas of the city. Several hand brake turns and sharp gear changes later, we came to a sudden halt outside a magnificent Georgian house, shadowed by overlapping trees stretching the full of it's pathway. Parked on the narrow road outside was that yellow Volkswagen Beetle belonging to Ruth and Freda.

June was just dragging her guitar from the car boot, pulling out a large, hard, black, Julie Andrews style instrument case. The clinking of alcohol bottles (carryouts) emphasizes the quietness. The only other sound is our footsteps. Amber street lights spread along the avenue, but most of the houses are in complete darkness. We press the white circular button and can hear the bell faintly ringing. The old lantern light comes on and we stand there, like carol singers at Christmas time, waiting for the door to open.

Clunk, click, a man pulls the heavy door ajar and we know by his appearance he has just got out of bed. 'Is this where the party is being held?' we asked. 'No it bloody well isn't!' he says. It took ages for us to get back down the path, giggling like schoolgirls, wiping eyes wet with laughter. We tried ten more houses that night before we gave up.

You've probably already guessed that yellow Volkswagen Beetles were very popular in that area in that era!

REMIND ME NEVER TO SLEEP WITH...

by Jayne

What was so special about Dublin? Was it the getting away from the troubles in the North to enjoy a day out without being stopped to have your bag searched? Was it the feeling of freedom to go to a gay bar and not be recognised? Was it the women only disco that attracted so many of us to frequent Dublin? Could these be some of the reasons that we would drive one hundred miles for a weekend break? It was unusual for protestant people to even consider a visit to the Free State (as Dublin was then called by the old timers.) My parents worried when I started heading south. They were very concerned for my safety and often asked what the attraction was. I would promise to phone them as soon as I arrived and that was no mean feat as trying to find a phone box, to phone home was a chore. (No, we did not have mobile phones then). One weekend in particular a few of us had made arrangements to stay with my friend Francis who lived in Dublin and after a great night out with the crowd we all went back to her house. We were all rightly jarred that night as I recall and eager to get our heads to a pillow. I remember...

A tall slender girl, smiling with broad full lips and laughing eyes. Her long blonde hair naturally falls into a middle shade. She is immaculately dressed with her shoes polished and laces tied to exact precision. The knife edge crease down the pinstripe trousers and the handkerchief rolled to exact dimensions folded at her breast pocket. I watch as she slowly undresses with great care. Each piece of clothing placed neatly

over the chair and shoes side by side underneath. She climbs into the inside of the single bed and leaves me as much space as she can.

I am much larger than her in every way and use all the agility I can muster to lie beside her without passing the boundary of touching or getting too close. Words were not necessary as we both lay deep in thought. We were good friends and to find ourselves in this situation was kind of awkward.

We both said, 'goodnight' and she turned towards the wall, I towards the window. We were trying not to invade each other's space.

We slept a light sleep and as morning broke, with the sun's rays shining through the tiny window, I rubbed my sleepy eyes and wondered what was different about her face. Her smooth complexion was now marked like a rash of tiny spots - especially on her forehead. Shock, horror! Then it dawned on me, I must have moved over in the middle of the night and squashed her against the wall. It was the sinister pattern of woodchip wallpaper that had dug into her forehead! Yet despite that night, we are still the best of friends but strangely enough we have never shared a bed since.

THE LAST STRAW

by Jayne

Working all day, I decided to take a break. I drive a taxi and used to work in the evenings but after changing to the day shift I discover I don't have the temperament for traffic jams. I radio through to my controller and ask to be taken off the green (our terminology for skiving off.) I make my way to Lucy's house where I know I'll get a hot cup of tea.

I'm driving with the car window down having just lit a cigarette, when I hear music blasting as I turn into Lucy's street. I reach the gate at the top of the path. Meanwhile I'm thinking Lucy must be in a good mood, as Sexy Eyes by Dr Hook is booming loudly. Opening the door I see that Lucy has company with her, another good friend of mine. It's Beth. I've just sat down and I'm handed my cup of tea and a chocolate biscuit. 'Well what's the biz?' I ask. 'Nothing much', comes the reply. 'We'd love to be going out tonight but there's nothing happening'. 'Why not go to Dublin?' I said, 'we've not a lot of money', said Beth, but emptying our pockets we have fifteen quid between us.

Anyway - wild horses won't stop us now, and we pull the plugs on everything, lock the doors, and head for Dublin. Bubbling with excitement we stop to buy some nibbles for the journey south. We bought three packets of Tayto crisps and a box of Cadbury's roses to share. The conversation flowed and we were so absorbed we turned the music down low. Wasn't this just a wonderful feeling? It was late and we just made it to J.J.Smyths

for the last dance but we didn't mind. We were having a whale of a time.

Checking how much money there was in the kitty after paying for the petrol and so on, we had £5 left, enough to get us a Kentucky fried chicken each. We were famished by now, nibbling on the chocolates we bought earlier. Kentucky was still far away, at the opposite side of the one way system. We were so desperate to get there before it closed! Lucy was taking wrappers off and feeding us sweets. Which we loved! As she rolled down the window to throw out the wrappers gusts of fierce winds whirled them into the air like a vision of tiny diamonds, there one minute, and gone the next, disappearing amongst the leaves and the other rubbish on the street.

We arrived at Kentucky and went in to wash our hands. Ah - how Kentucky seemed like an oasis of civilization and gourmet delights in the desert that night! Standing in the gargantuan queue, our mouths watering, salivating from the enveloping aroma of barbecue chicken and chips, drooling at the thought of the chicken gravy (free with the meal deal!) was pure torture for us.

'Right Lucy', I said, 'Get the money out'. I can still see her face, staring back at me blankly, fidgeting in her pockets and feeling the emptiness. She couldn't speak, but I knew: eventually she said, the money must be in the car, and we all ran out, as much from embarrassment as fury - because by this time we had nearly reached pole position - next in line to order! Searching, searching, searching. It wasn't there. 'It must have been thrown out with the paper wrappers!' I said to Lucy, almost in tears.

Nothing for it but to drive back to where we were litter louts! So, both Lucy and Beth skirted along the kerb, scanning the edges, while I drove behind, shining the headlights full beam on the road.

With heavy hearts, we eventually accepted defeat. We were fated not to retrieve the money, and had now run out of options. We headed home hungry, tired, distressed, poorly comforted by the remnants of the red and white striped straws each of us had lifted while standing in the queue in Kentucky.

Lucy is a lovable person, if dippy. She remains a great and loyal friend. But - casting our last fiver to the wind? Well - that really was THE LAST STRAW

A MAID'N' CITY IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE!

by Margaret (A)

Living in a rural town, in Co Londonderry, in the seventies, was not the most exciting of places to be young and gay. Social limitations made it difficult to express or acknowledge any interest in gay relationships. In the community where I lived as in many other tight-knit neighbourhoods, every one knew everything about one another and difference was not easily tolerated.

I always avidly studied any gay information that came my way, as it gave me hope for my future. As it happened, our local university had a small group of students, gay and otherwise, start a local branch of Cara Friend, (at that time a Belfast based gay helpline and befriending service.) Through a meeting with Doug, chairperson of Carafriend, I took on the role of director in my local area and, with the students, our group was launched.

We kept everything running to the Belfast Carafriend guidelines by holding meetings and giving support when needed. We held Discos in the university and in Portrush, they were always very well attended. I sometimes had great parties in my own home with all of the lads, who by the way (if they read this) drank all my booze.

Derry/L'derry was an awakening city. It was home to great feminist women and one of the best friends I ever met - Mary-Kay. She rang me to ask if I would give her training to start up a Helpline in Derry in 1979, and I was more than pleased to do this.

Mary-Kay along with many supporters started up a disco in Magee College, to raise funds to help with the running of their Cara Friend. Those discos were absolutely brilliant. Where else, I ask you, even in that era, would you get a raffle ticket, a lovely supper, plus all the beer you could drink, for the princely sum of £1! Nights everyone could afford and enjoy and still manage to be fairly jolly by going home time!

I was very fortunate to have a good friend called Peter, who accompanied me to all these discos, parties and pubs and we remained close friends for 14 years.

Derry/L'derry folk are great craic and the gay scene had real community spirit. They were great fun to be with. I spent many nights in the city, at parties, in flats of young Gay men, singing and dancing to the latest records, relaxing, celebrating. The men were young and vibrant, and had energy to burn! And boy did they camp it up! It was wonderful! I was usually the token lesbian there, but that did not matter, there was great camaraderie. I have fond memories of those lads and the good times we shared. By the 1980's everything for the gay scene was up and running in Derry/Londonderry city.

They had managed to get rooms to meet in where everyone was made feel welcome. For such a private lass, from a small village, I feel good, that I helped make all this possible.

Great place, great people, great gays.

DEANO

by Margaret (A)

The film 'Tipping the Velvet' had nothing on me. From an early age of eight to be exact, my sister had told some of my friends, that one afternoon she had watched me through our open plan staircase. There I was, standing in front of a large mirror in my bedroom talking to my own image. I was dressed in a white school blouse with my brothers black bow tie and my black Burberry coat which I had buttoned back to front to give the impression of tails like a tuxedo jacket. I had soaked my long blonde hair with brylcream and combed it into a side shade trying to quaff it at the front as that was the style for the boys in those days. I had rolled a thin piece of paper to pass off as my fake cigarette and held it tightly between my two fingers. There I stood pretending I was Dean Martin and as I have a terrific imagination, I still think I am Deano.

Life was pleasant when I was growing up, as being the youngest of eight children I was quite spoiled by the older ones. I was the closest to my mum as she took me with her everywhere. I was only fourteen years old when I fell in love with a beautiful married woman who lived in our small community. She knew of my obsession for her and she used to let me stay at her house, but my mind was in turmoil as she had many lovers, all male of course, which I found very hard to cope with. They say that love is blind and in my case that was very true.

At sixteen I made a big decision to move to London to live with my sister and brother in law. Times were great at first and

living in London fairly broadened my knowledge and outlook but alas I was home sick and returned to Northern Ireland when I was nineteen. I then met a woman of my own age. We fell in love with each other and lived happily together for seven years but sadly she got the seven year itch and I got the furniture. This was the first time I ever had to live by myself and I was frightened of the unknown but thankfully I survived and was able to build on a life for myself.

I had made friends with a gay man and as we were very compatible we went everywhere together. Some even thought us to be a couple as did the barmaid one night in a pub in Derry. It was Friday night and the disco upstairs in the pub was packing up with gay men and women. The small bar downstairs was for heterosexuals and as she served us our drinks she whispered, 'do not be going up stairs tonight as it is full of fruits.' The expression on her face was something else when we said we were going up to the disco and we were fruits also, but not oranges.

Magee College held terrific discos in Dill House every Saturday night and for only £1.00 you were welcomed to free beer and a lovely supper. Sometimes it was hard to see what you were eating as the gay men had everything as dark as possible to create the mood but I must say the candles brightened the tables.

I joined Carafriend and became director and I stayed with them as a befriender for seven years. The Derry group really worked well together and it was there that I met a woman who I went out with a few times. My heart did not race and I knew there was something missing so it finished after a short start.

My first Belfast disco was so exciting. It was The Chariot Rooms run by Ernie and Jim. On my first evening I met a nurse

called Eileen who was up beat and very good looking. We had arranged to meet the following week and I was counting the days. When Saturday finally came I travelled to Belfast and low and behold there was Eileen but she was ignoring me. Taking the bull by the horns I tapped her on the shoulder to ask why, when I eventually realised it was not Eileen although that was after I had made this woman come outside to prove to me she was someone else. Needless to say it must have been a pretty good chat up line as we are still together after thirty years including bringing up two children, three dogs and having an open house for our friends.

We really looked forward to a Saturday night at the Chariot and it was usually when we reached Ballymena that we put our ties on thinking we were the bees' knees. Going back in time, I remember, at the height of the troubles, army soldiers staffing the gates in Belfast. On one particular evening, we travelled with a transgender man who was from Ballycastle. He was a sight to behold dressed in his blue evening gown and we were amazed at the size of his hands which were like shovels (Bless him). He was a labourer on the roads before he decided to go for his operation to be a woman. He told us he was going to Denmark to have his operation and we heard a few months afterwards his operation went wrong and he bled to death in a Belfast city centre toilet. This happened in the early seventies (God rest him). We were very very upset by this and the fact that not many people attended his funeral. Why? He was an outcast in Ballycastle because of his/her courage to be him/herself. All the wonderful people that I met on the gay scene have enriched my life and thank God for the new found freedom that the younger people are now feeling in 2008. I have been in the closet all my life, but at least I did get to pretend I was Dean Martin.

ROSIE'S INNOCENCE

by Jayne

On the last Monday and Tuesday of the month of August, Ballycastle holds its annual fair. Nearly everyone I know has been there at sometime or other. We were in great form on the Sunday evening, as we booked into the bed and breakfast in the main street. We hardly slept, knowing that next morning would be a very early start. At six am, the noise began. There was clattering and banging of metal rods on the pavements as the stallholders were getting set up ready to sell their wares. From our upstairs window we could see traffic jams already starting. Large trucks and trailers were splashing the flowing rain water, making it bounce off the kerb and flood back unto the road. It nearly always rained on Lammas Fair Monday but that never deterred the crowds. This Monday was no different. Still, people travelled from far and near to it. This was our Mardi gras!!

We loved to stand amongst the crowds, straining to listen to the patter of Hector selling his towels. 'Who'll give me £20 for this beautiful bale of towels? The first three people to trust me with their money will be pleasantly surprised. I'll make it worth your while. Right - we have three takers. Now Mrs - I'm not going to charge you £20 or even £15. Not even £12. Seeing as you're a great lookin' woman, they're yours for a tenner!!' At this point all the hands would shoot into the air, waving their tenners at Hector. Who would say to his mate 'Right there, Jimmy, hurry up there and get these women their bales and as I'm feeling generous today give them all a wee tea towel and don't charge

them one brown penny.' He pattered so much that each and everyone would leave his stall thinking they'd got a great bargain. Of course then we had to hawk the bale of towels around with us all day!

The centre of the fair was at the Diamond, with stalls of dulse and yellow man selling like hot cakes. Trying to reach the Diamond, you took one step forward then would be swept two steps back by the crowds of people. As music blared from the jam packed pubs, the shops surrounding the Diamond were crammed like sardines in a tin. People sat on their plastic rain mats on the rough ground as that was the only way to rest. Those who had experienced the fair before knew to bring their flasks of tea and sandwiches with them. Most of them ate contentedly, watching the world go by. Others found the burger vans, following the aroma of the fried onions from half a mile up the hill.

By eleven thirty we had seen faces in the crowd that we recognised from The Chariot Rooms in Belfast. We didn't know their names, nor did they know ours but when we were approached by these strangers we felt comfortable to chat to them. It was amazing at how quickly the ice was broken as we chatted as if we had known each other for years. We had so much in common the main connection was we were all lesbians. They immediately offered their hospitality (not knowing us from Eve) with an invite to their home in Coleraine. Sure - it was only round the corner we were told! (It happened to be a fair bit away but country folk don't seem to notice that!)

We duly arrived late in the afternoon. It was cold and we were grateful the fire was lit as we entered the living room.

A long wide sofa stretched the length of the window and an antique sideboard sat in all its glory against the back wall. A rocking chair in green brocade was beside the hearth. Two armchairs filled the spaces. China plates were displayed to the left of the L.S. Lowry print hanging above the fireplace. The glow of the fire added a soft tone to the afternoon light. The smell of turf lingered in the air as we watched the sparks fly and listened to the crackles of logs burning. Libby raked the embers with a heavy iron poker. Flames leapt up and caught threads of soot, making them burn like little red rings on the back boiler.

I took a spill from the bunch on the hearth, touched the flickering flame and lit my cigarette. Diane came in with a tray of sandwiches, cakes, tea and steaming coffee. We huddled around the fire chatting idly. It was gentle and friendly and these women opened their hearts to us - although we hardly knew them, they treated us as if we'd been friends all our lives. The serendipity of that first meeting has sustained a long and lasting friendship over the years.

Talking about our families, *Marie* told us a story about her mum and sister

THIS IS HER STORY

My sister Sarah lived in London and my mother used to go on frequent visits to her.

Our Sarah seemed to be associated with many influential people, one of whom was a gay man from a small village in Co L'Derry, who had known my mother from years back. Danny was his name and he was one of the many who left his small home town to live in the big smoke. Years ago it was mainly due to oppression that gay men and lesbians moved away to start a new life.

When our Sarah mentioned to Danny that my mother, Rosie, was coming over for a visit, he decided he would throw a party in her honour. Rosie was well known and very well thought of, for her generous nature and easy going manner. He was fond of my mother and wanted to make her visit special. He organised to make use of a penthouse apartment situated in Elm Park Mews, owned by one of his friends.

So - setting the scene: Rosie and Sarah arrived and were seated at a table fit for a Queen. Everyone was there in all their finery, in their hand made suits and shoes, flowing evening dresses etc. Stockbrokers, managers, theatre people - London's upper crust - all were there that night at Danny's request, to meet Rosie. And there they were all sitting with their brandies, martinis, cigars and cocktail sobrani cigarettes, when Danny clinked his fine wine glass with a tea spoon. 'A toast to Rosie' he said. Rosie blushed. Ach sure I'm only a wee Irish woman from Derry she answered.

Danny continued his speech, talking about his fond memories of Northern Ireland, the support he had had from Rosie's and her family who never ever judged him. He raised his glass once more and said, 'Rosie, I'm queer'. You could have heard a pin drop. 'Well lad', Rosie replied in her broad accent, 'you'll maybe feel a bit better in the mornin' son'. The room erupted with laughter and to this day Rosie's innocence is still talked about in and around Chelsea.

LEAVING JACK

by Mary

I remember back to that cold October morning. It's as if I'm the observer, not really believing these memories are mine. I see the little house where I reared my children. I feel a sense of pride knowing that I kept it clean, warm and comfortable for them. Until now this feeling has been filed away at the back of my mind. I've not allowed myself to say, 'didn't I do well' as it might just sound boastful to those in our neck of the woods.

I provided well for my children making sure they had food in their stomachs and clothes on their backs. I was not so lucky in my own childhood. My children were always so important to me, and my love for them, is, and always has been, unconditional. I never experienced this sort of love when I was young, and now it is reciprocated by my children - they clearly show their love for me.

I'm glad now, that I stayed in that so-called marriage. I did try to leave my husband, Jack, thirty three times, but I stayed, and I suffered, because my children needed me.

I remember positioning myself in the old armchair beside the fire, too frightened to relax. I listened patiently for the click of the key in the lock, and when that sound finally came, my insides churned with nerves. I prayed that tonight he would just give me a hiding and get it over with. It was easier to endure than the mental torture, which went on for four or five hours at a time.

My children are adults now and my real life has now begun. Yes, I have finally left Jack.

I knew a friend of a friend who was a lesbian and we entered into a relationship. But there was still something missing. My instincts were right. It didn't last long. It was not right for me. It was my first foray into a very different world. Then I was invited to a gay venue one spring night in Belfast and met a woman who was on the same wavelength as me. At this stage in my life I feel so blessed, to have met a woman who is now my love, my life and my best friend.

IT'LL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

by Margaret (B)

It will change your life if we take you on' said Eileen during my interview to become a volunteer with Belfast Rape Crisis Centre.

Eileen used to, as I later discovered, do some Tarot card reading. I still don't know if she was being prophetic or merely dramatic when she said that.

'She looks like one' said David, my 21 year old son, as we sat outside the Rape Crisis Centre while I mustered the courage to go in, because to my surprise they had indeed agreed to 'take me on'. He was referring to the young woman who had just walked down the street and buzzed to get into the centre. She had a shaven head, á la Sinead O'Connor, wore stripy leggings and Doc Martin boots. 'One' was a vegetarian lesbian, which he had warned me was what the centre would be full of. The next woman along however had long curly hair and was dressed more conservatively so I girded my loins - metaphorically of course - and went in.

I was a 38 year old woman who had been married to the same man for almost 22 years and had 4 children AND a dog. I had seen the ad in the Belfast Telegraph for volunteers for the centre and applied. I am still not sure what exactly prompted that. Fate or destiny? Who knows?

Once inside the centre I was surprised to find about 30 women in the upstairs room. I had never been involved with any type of women's group before and felt a bit out of my comfort zone. What was I doing here? What could I offer? I wished that I had driven there myself so I could make a swift escape.

A few minutes later a woman with a riot of curly hair bounced into the room and said to the woman sitting next to me 'what the fxxx are you doing here?!' I felt more relaxed. Maybe it would be OK after all. She sat in the empty seat beside me and when it came to the part where you talked to the person next to you and told them all about yourself and then they introduced you to the group (and vice versa), she was the woman I had to talk to. I told her my name was Margaret and about my husband, children and life in general. She told me her name was Irené, she had a new job and had recently moved back to live in Belfast!

As everyone in the room was introduced I felt more and more uncomfortable. All of these women had done STUFF. Many had at some stage volunteered with Women's Aid and it seemed to me that volunteering with the Mother and Toddler group was not quite in the same league! What did I have in common with these women?

I continued to go to the training sessions however and was always pleased when Irené talked to me. I didn't find out much more about her but I did know that she had been to university - as had so many of the other women. I had left school at 16 because I was pregnant but had started to do some GCEs when my older daughter started school. I had continued and taken some science 'A' levels and Irene seemed genuinely impressed that I had managed to pass chemistry 'A' level. She made me feel good about myself.

Usually after the training sessions several of the women would go out together for a drink. I never did. My husband came down and met me and I went for a drink with him. I was a happily married woman after all!

I stayed with the training and after some months we had a social evening in the centre - to celebrate that fact that some of us had managed to stick it out for six months! I was sitting chatting to Irene and another woman who was there asked her where XXXXXX was? Irené answered 'at home probably in front of the fire.'

I felt as though someone had punched me in the solar plexus! I was absolutely gutted! A partner? I immediately felt so jealous. Why? I had a husband. What was I jealous of? This woman was a friend, a very recent, casual friend. I was a happily married woman!

But still I felt so jealous.

I tried to rationalise my feelings but couldn't. I didn't understand why I should feel like that. I certainly didn't say anything to anyone, least of all Irené about my crazy notions.

So we kept going once a week and everything was the same - that is, nothing was said by either of us - neither to each other nor to anyone else.

We had agreed to go out for Christmas dinner as a group but then for a few weeks I didn't go to the meetings. Mary, another of the new volunteers, she of the long curly hair and more conservative appearance, phoned me and encouraged me to come along to the Christmas event.

I went and nearly wept when I realised that Irené would not be coming. I wanted to go home!

We met again after Christmas. Still neither of us said anything.

The centre had a few Saturday workshops organised in the New Year and Irene and I usually went for coffee afterwards. I was thinking about her more and more.

I began to feel that there was something palpable - although unacknowledged -between us. But what the hell would I know about this sort of thing? I was a happily married woman after all! Irené was the one who knew about these things. Why didn't she say something to me? Oh my God! Maybe this was just me having a massive inappropriate crush on her. If she felt the same she would surely SAY something. But no, she didn't!

It came to March and International Woman's Day - which I had never even heard of before!

We were having a 'Reclaim the Night' march and a little genteel celebration afterwards. I talked to myself for days. I was definitely going to SAY SOMETHING to Irene. I just hadn't quite decided what exactly that SOMETHING would be.

Meanwhile I felt schizophrenic, maintaining a happy, 'normal' existence to my family and 'other' friends. For God's sake I was now a 39 year old woman with a 22 year old son, a teenage daughter and 2 pre school children! I had been married to the same man since I was 16. I had never had these feelings for anyone else - male or female! I ran a local mother and toddler group! I was a bona fide Stepford Wife and probably proud of

it! But my constant thoughts were about a woman I had met just a year previously. I don't quite know what those thoughts were except that I could not bear the thought of a life without Irene as a major part of it.

But this was a woman who had never given me the slightest hint that she might be interested in me. What did I know or understand about 'alternative' lifestyles? So on 2nd March we 'Reclaimed the Night' and had our celebration afterwards. My taxi came and I asked the driver to return later to collect me because I had not, in spite of the (tentative) determination to do so, SAID ANYTHING to Iren . (Naturally that was not the reason I gave the taxi driver. Probably something about more wine to be drunk.)

The absolute last minute came and the taxi returned.

I got up to leave.

I still had not SAID ANYTHING.

BUT

I kissed her as I left!

Eileen was so right - my life did change - and how!

MY FIRST TIME

by Jayne

Her warm dark brown eyes meet mine and we smile. She must sense my nervousness, as she whispers softly, 'I'll look after you'

We begin to walk a long narrow hallway, which seems to take forever

Then when we finally arrive at the small room, I am drawn in by low lights and scented candles, burning and flickering in their glass jars, creating an aroma of beautiful flowers.

I sense the serenity and calm of the room, and as I undress down to my black underwear I'm thinking, she can't really see me as her long black hair masks her face.

She does not judge my physicality, though I am very conscious of my broad thighs.

I blush when she sweeps back her long dark hair, as I feel her gaze straight at me.

Somehow, my black underwear does not appear to be as sexy on me as it did on the model in the lingerie department.

She beckons me towards the couch with a backward wave of her hand, and I obediently oblige.

How beautifully manicured her nails are, I think to myself and such delicate hands.

There's a first time for everything and I don't know what to expect.

I have had nothing or no one on which to make a comparison. I feel her soft hands on my skin and I hope she'll be gentle with me.

Oohs and ahhs at different intervals are streaming from my mouth.

She doesn't utter a word. Ah release, I take time to sit up as my head is spinning.

It's over but I know I'll come again.

I fumble in my purse searching for the money to pay her.

Thirty-five pounds for half an hour!

I leave the building thinking, my physiotherapist must be worth a bloody fortune.

This book is just a glimpse into these women's lives. It is also the key that may unlock the chest, to unravel the lives of many more untold stories.



For more information please contact:
moya693@icloud.com
please acknowledge when referring to content of book

Women in Our Community

Moya Morris and 'Jayne' on Threads: Stories of Lesbian life in Northern Ireland in the 1970's and 1980's

In 2008, a groundbreaking book was published detailing women's experiences of life, love and loss in 1970s and 80s Northern Ireland. However, these were previously unheard experiences, specifically detailing lesbian life, love and loss. *Threads* is a collection of 26 personal stories and poems which has been compiled and independently published by Northern Irish women. All contributors including 'Jayne' use pseudonyms, so in 2010, Belfast woman Moya Morris decided to put her name and image to the book. Moya and author 'Jayne' shared their thoughts with me about the importance and significance of *Threads*. In this article, Moya and Jayne's thoughts on the origins, developments and future of the book illustrate why *Threads* is a vital resource illustrating how far lesbians and bisexual women have come and what challenges they face for the future.

Moya describes the stories in *Threads* as being linked through their depictions of various 'journeys'. Indeed, there are tales of the significant lengths journeyed by some of the women in order to access a party, club or takeout! However, whether they knew it or not, by attending those parties, clubs and cafes the women were crucially aiding the development of lesbian visibility in Northern Ireland. When talking about their sexual identities, aspirations or desires, the women situate these stories against the backdrop of wider political and social developments. Their stories depict the journeys they took to discover their own sexual identities at a time of sexual silencing; to meet others 'like them' who also felt like they were 'the only one'; to escape from the pressure of living separate lives which conformed to the wishes of those around them. As a result, *Threads* demonstrates how many lesbian and bisexual women growing up in Northern Ireland simultaneously occupied three positions in their lives: with family and friends, within the framework of the Troubles, and within the lesbian community. These separate lives may have proved difficult to balance at times, but as Jayne noted the close friendships made between the women illustrate the importance of forging strong bonds with others despite imposed differences.

The wider context of the Troubles was an inescapable facet of everyday

life for many. Here, Moya points out that by day the women may have been divided by their postcodes, political leanings or national sympathies but by night these topics were strictly out of bounds. Women who came together under a shared sexual identity did so through positivity, love and inclusion. The women's involvement with lesbian communities proved a lifeline for many involved with the book. Several venues across Belfast, Derry and Dublin are depicted as providing an important social and informative function. Those involved with these venues demonstrated a welcoming acceptance for difference at a time when segregation and suspicion predominated. Such environments were vital as they provided a framework for self-acceptance, an area which Moya was keen to highlight. This is a fundamental issue in progressing lesbian and gay equality in any society, not just Northern Ireland. Whether or not they realised it at the time, having social spaces where interactions with others who understood, appreciated and accepted difference and diversity was a fundamental part of both the women's personal journeys and the larger, burgeoning lesbian and gay movement.

The reflective nature of *Threads* offered an opportunity for the women to re-evaluate some of the decisions they made. Jayne commented that the seemingly 'devil may care' approaches to life may have actually been coping or survival mechanisms. Discussing an inspirational woman named Daisy, Jayne noted that the confidence demonstrated by her peers in the 1970s and 80s may have stemmed from the fact that they were not as identifiably 'out' as lesbian. Having come out as lesbian in the 1960s, Daisy wore her pin-striped suits as proudly as her sexuality. Despite the beatings she received and the warnings she gave to the younger lesbian women about being aware of the judgements of others, for those enjoying a new-found social freedom, such warnings were understandably seen as inhibitors to a life they'd only just discovered. Nevertheless, many women were reluctant to identify with a lesbian label at the time.

Labels aside, owning oneself was the first step towards self-acceptance which was a necessary base to strive for social acceptance. Jayne noted how engaging in this reflection proved difficult for some of the women concerned as the accounts depict the myriad ways in which a person comes to 'own' themselves and their identity. Moya agreed, stating that confidence is a key part of personal development but doesn't mean that all women have to, or should be, identifiably 'out' as lesbian if they are not comfortable with this. Both Jayne and Moya recognised that women

in rural areas may still find it difficult to have the confidence to come out.

The stories shared by the contributors to Threads are not limited to those women, or women in Northern Ireland or even women in Ireland. There are elements of the stories which speak to all women; tales which tell of desire, of making tough and sometimes difficult decisions, having fears of moving away or coming home, about forming new friendships or experiencing new adventures, but also about undergoing loss, hardships and rejection. Moya herself depicted the turmoil she underwent in her 20s owing to the social signals she was interpreting about lesbians: "It was difficult to know exactly what it was that I was, apart from being different, and that difference was somehow unspoken, it was somehow negative. That was the message I got from it: it was a negative, it was not particularly good to be gay, not particularly good to be lesbian."

Having no-one to discuss her thoughts and feelings with at the time, Moya cites how being left in a "limbo", she could have easily have turned to a more destructive, yet socially acceptable outlet such as alcohol. Instead, she, like many of the other women in Threads, found solace in volunteering at Lesbian Line. In the five years she spent on the Line, Moya found that the comfort she offered to other women in turn brought her an inner peace. This helped her to negotiate the separate elements of her own identity which she juggled on a daily basis to get by in what she described as a "tunnel-visioned" community.

Moya and Jayne both see Threads as epitomising, embracing and espousing hope. The stories reflect the hopeful attitudes which helped to bring about significant changes for lesbian and bisexual women in Northern Ireland. Although much has been achieved, there are new challenges to overcome, such as what the future holds for older lesbians and bisexual women in Northern Ireland. Reminiscing about the concerns she and some of her friends had in their 20s Jayne observed: "When the women got together, they used to talk about 'I wonder what's going to happen to us, when we get older?' because we didn't really know any old lesbians." Picking up on this issue, a special screening of the film 'Generation Silent', hosted by the Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative (LASI) at the QFT in 2010, sought to address some of these questions in a productive and informative manner but this issue has some way to go in terms of resolution.

The rawness of the stories included in the book is compounded by their presentation: the language is not bound by academic regulation, there is no capitalist agenda motivating content and there is also no target audience to appease. Despite, or perhaps because of this, there is still some way to go with realising the potential of this book. Perhaps it is because it does not concern celebrities, cooking or crime fighters that it has been overlooked on a grander scale, but to its credit the honest and agenda-free production and promotion of *Threads* echoes the very stories it depicts.

Threads is not only a vital resource for lesbian and bisexual women's visibility but should also be seen as imperative to the understanding of histories. These histories may relate to sexual equality, gender equality or identity politics, but there are also important lessons to be learnt in relation to historical accounts of Northern Ireland and the UK. As if to compound this fact, *Threads* is officially a historical document in the Linen Hall Library's gay archive section. However, issues around suitability and censorship means that its distribution of the book is yet to be included in several Northern Irish educational institutions, despite requests from Moya and Jayne for it to be made available. In a society where learning from the past is such a fundamental part of future progress, most people will learn something from reading these women's stories about a largely overlooked group in society at a time when identity meant everything.

Marian Duggan

My thanks to Moya Morris and 'Jayne' for facilitating the discussion for this article.

Dr Marian Duggan

Senior Lecturer in Criminology

Department of Law, Criminology and Community Justice

Sheffield Hallam University

37 Clarkehouse Road

Collegiate Crescent Campus

Sheffield S10 2BP

I S B N 978-0-9927602-0-5



9 780992 760205