Threads

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

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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.

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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)

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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!

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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

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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

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STARTING OUT

by Jayne

here 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.

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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.

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I PHONED THE LINE

by Arlene

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

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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

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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.

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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

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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,

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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.

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SEVENTEEN AND RARING TO GO

by Heather

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

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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

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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

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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, singlehandedly!

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

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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-ofthe-

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

- Threads -

*- 13 -*

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 religiousity, 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

we have some way to go.

- Threads -

*- 14 -*

TIME OF OUR LIVES

by Jayne

hese 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

- Threads -

*- 15 -*

T

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'.

- Threads -

*- 16 -*

FISHNETS AND STILETTOS

by Jayne

e 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 oul 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.

- Threads -

*- 17 -*

W

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.

- Threads -

*- 18 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 19 -*

IN THOSE DAYS

by Jayne

he 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

- Threads -

*- 20 -*

T

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.

- Threads -

*- 21 -*

A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

by Jayne

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 Mystére de Rochas

perfume lingering from her body; her head had fallen slightly,

- Threads -

*- 22 -*

I

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!

- Threads -

*- 23 -*

MOLLY AND LUCY

by Jayne

olly 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.'

- Threads -

*- 24 -*

M

MY WAY

by Irene

k, 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

- Threads -

*- 25 -*

O

together afterwards. One of these uncompromising, selfassured

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 -

*- 26 -*

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!!

- Threads -

*- 27 -*

IN THE CLUB

by Jayne

hursday'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.

- Threads -

*- 28 -*

T

*This is her story.*

y 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

- Threads -

*- 29 -*

M

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

- Threads -

*- 30 -*

**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.

- Threads -

*- 31 -*

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.

hirty 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 oul' 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

- Threads -

*- 32 -*

T

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

- Threads -

*- 33 -*

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!

- Threads -

*- 34 -*

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

- Threads -

*- 35 -*

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

- Threads -

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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!

- Threads -

*- 37 -*

IF YOU KNEW LUCY…

by Jayne

t'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.

- Threads -

*- 38 -*

I

*This is that story.*

eth 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 …

- Threads -

*- 39 -*

B

WHEN YOU HAVE GRACE IN YOUR LIFE…

by Rose

n 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,

- Threads -

*- 40 -*

I

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 selfesteem

were enriched when I could converse with like minded

- Threads -

*- 41 -*

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, nonpressured

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?!

- Threads -

*- 42 -*

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 -

*- 43 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 44 -*

A ROSE …

by Rose

any 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 Sheehey'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.

- Threads -

*- 45 -*

M

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.

- Threads -

*- 46 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 47 -*

1983?

by Marion

y 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.

- Threads -

*- 48 -*

M

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 dearest ….still

deeply cherished.

- Threads -

*- 49 -*

DUBLIN'S - FAIRER CITY?

by Antonia

he 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

- Threads -

*- 50 -*

T

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

- Threads -

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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

- Threads -

*- 52 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 53 -*

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 teeshirts.

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

- Threads -

*- 54 -*

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 feminity at all.

- Threads -

*- 55 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 56 -*

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

- Threads -

*- 57 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 58 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 59 -*

BUS RUN TO DUBLIN

by Jayne

t 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

- Threads -

*- 60 -*

I

that Luanne, who fancied Jill, was the least a bit drunk when

she jumped into the river to save her! It was with great

difficultly 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.

- Threads -

*- 61 -*

DUBLIN - HERE WE COME AGAIN!

by Jayne

e were staying in a friend's apartment situated in

Walkingstown 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

- Threads -

*- 62 -*

W

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!

- Threads -

*- 63 -*

REMIND ME NEVER TO SLEEP WITH…

by Jayne

hat 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

- Threads -

*- 64 -*

W

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 suns' 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.

- Threads -

*- 65 -*

THE LAST STRAW

by Jayne

orking 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

- Threads -

*- 66 -*

W

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.

- Threads -

*- 67 -*

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

- Threads -

*- 68 -*

A MAID'N' CITY IN

MORE WAYS THAN ONE!

by Margaret (A)

iving 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 [everyone] 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.

- Threads -

*- 69 -*

L

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.

- Threads -

*- 70 -*

DEANO

by Margaret (A)

he 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

- Threads -

*- 71 -*

T

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

- Threads -

*- 72 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 73 -*

ROSIE'S INNOCENCE

by Jayne

n 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

- Threads -

*- 74 -*

O

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

macs 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.

- Threads -

*- 75 -*

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

- Threads -

*- 76 -*

**THIS IS HER STORY**

y 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.

- Threads -

*- 77 -*

M

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.

- Threads -

*- 78 -*

LEAVING JACK

by Mary

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.

- Threads -

*- 79 -*

I

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.

- Threads -

*- 80 -*

IT'LL CHANGE YOUR LIFE

by Margaret (B)

t 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?

- Threads -

*- 81 -*

I

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.

- Threads -

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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.

- Threads -

*- 83 -*

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

- Threads -

*- 84 -*

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 Irené.

(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!

- Threads -

*- 85 -*

MY FIRST TIME

by Jayne

er 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.

- Threads -

*- 86 -*

H

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.

- Threads -

*- 87 -*

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.

- Threads -

*- 88 -*

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 complied 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

- Threads -

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 is 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 it 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