

Chapter 4: 20-Something

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

The first few months I lived in Portland were wonderful. I made new friends, realizing I'd depended so much on Val and Tracy to provide me companionship, I had never developed friendships in my own right. My roommate Ivy had recently broken up with a lover, so we were both single. We discovered a mutual passion for Yahtzee and Monopoly, and spent many evenings playing marathon games.

My mother had sent me a tuition check for fall term, 1978, and I didn't go back to school. I had not made this decision until after she had sent the check, but she told me to keep the money to get myself established in Portland, though she was not happy at my dropping out of college.

Since I had this money in the bank, I was in no hurry to get a job. I wasn't really qualified to do anything anyway. I had no particular job skills, though I had taught myself how to type. I was aimless, in my early 20s and reveling in discovering the lesbian community. I was still smarting from my break-up with Harriet, if it could be called that, and wanted a clean break from my small-town life in Forest Grove. Though Portland is only 30 miles east of Forest Grove, the difference was such I might as well have been in another state.

In late December of 1978, I met a woman at a party. She was visiting from the Oregon coast, and we were immediately attracted to each other. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that in my extreme need for others' approval and acceptance (upon which my own was predicated), I was attracted to Elena's attraction for me. We became lovers in early January, my first true sexual relationship.

I discovered right away that I was non-orgasmic with her, though I could always bring myself to orgasm. For the first month, I could not have an orgasm with her. The first orgasm I had with her was oral, her first attempt at oral sex with me. From that point on, I could achieve an orgasm with her manually, but not without concentration. It was fairly mechanical for me. From her perspective, however, I was the best lover she'd ever had. She had her first multiple orgasm with me, a feat she often achieved during our relationship.

Looking back on this relationship, the only satisfying sexual relationship I ever had during my tenure in the lesbian community, what strikes me is how similar our sexuality was to heterosexual sex. Her multiple orgasms came from vaginal penetration, and I felt most natural while penetrating her. Had we known about harnesses and dildos (I don't even know if they existed then in the form they exist today), we might have gone that route. That might have been too uncomfortable for me, however; it might have hit too close to home about my own true nature if I'd strapped on a dildo. Then, too, we were living an ostensibly separatist lifestyle, trashing men right and left. For me to strap on a dildo might have seemed too patriarchal for us, though penetration was her favorite form of stimulation.

Elena had caught my enthusiasm for bicycle touring, captured by the romance of it. Though I had yet to do a tour and it had never before occurred to her, both of us had the idea that it would be a wonderful way to see the country. In the summer of 1979, we decided to ride to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. This was a disastrous trip because Elena had a bad back. Had we done sufficient training riding prior to attempting this trip, she would have realized sooner

than eastern Oregon that she was not going to be able to ride 2,500 miles. As it was, I felt frustrated at our 30-mile-a-day pace, while she was in pain much of the time.

Near the border of eastern Oregon, she gave up and hitch-hiked on. We agreed to meet in Missoula, Montana, without the least idea how long it would take me to get there or how we would connect once I arrived. Looking back on it, I find our decision-making processes ludicrous! Nevertheless, the next three or four days were blissful for me. I rode about 60 miles each day, at my own pace and with the peacefulness of my own companionship.

I arrived in Missoula, and found a hikers/bikers hostel in a church. Shortly after I checked in, I was informed there was a phone call for me. I picked up the phone in astonishment, and Elena was just as astonished she had found me. She had managed to connect with a lesbian household, three women in a polyamorous relationship. We stayed with them for about a week, then left.

Because of Elena's back problems we knew we would not have time to ride the rest of the way to Michigan, so we decided to hitch-hike. I was intent on spending another three weeks with Marie and Donna in Minneapolis, the previous summer had been so idyllic. To have the full three weeks, we needed to hitch-hike the rest of the way. We arrived in Minneapolis and I called Marie and Donna. I'd already asked them via letter if we could stay with them on our way to the festival.

Again, looking back on it, I do not understand my own thought processes. Why I thought they would welcome houseguests for three full weeks is beyond me. The previous summer, I had been stranded, and had connected with them in a family kind of

way. This time, I was with a lover they had never met and pretty much foisted the two of us on them. Marie was surprised to hear from me so long before the Festival, as they had assumed I had meant we would stay with them the weekend prior to the festival, not attempt to recreate the previous summer's stay.

I often felt my thought process was not my own during this relationship. I did things, decided things, that appall me in retrospect. I was not my own master. But then – I never had been. Being true to oneself implies some degree of self-knowledge and centeredness, and I had neither. The only time I ever felt halfway centered was when I was touring – alone – on my bicycle.

I left this dysfunctional relationship with Elena after nearly two years. None of my friends liked her, and several of our mutual acquaintances expressed to me after our breakup that they had wanted to get to know me better, but didn't want to be any closer to Elena than necessary. Given my extremely low levels of self-esteem at this point in my life, I was astonished to hear this. In fact, I'd been intensely jealous of one of these women, who had never said much to me. I had thought she wanted to be alone with Elena (they had had an affair prior to Elena and I getting involved) and that she resented me. When she phoned me after our break-up and asked me out on a date, I was astounded!

When Elena and I broke up, I moved into a collective lesbian household, a big mistake for me. I did not have good boundaries or communication skills, I was not assertive, and I found myself in a household with a very strong personality pretty much running the show, though it was called a "collective" household. The best thing about that

experience is that I met Sherry and Naomi, a lesbian couple who moved from Boston and took two available rooms in our household.

This was the late 1970s, a time when “monogamy” was a dirty word in the lesbian community. The household was suspicious about accepting Sherry and Naomi as roommates because they were a couple (oh, horrors!) and only wanted one of the rooms as a bedroom. Sherry was a musician and wanted the second room as a practice room. The suspicion was that monogamous relationships were unstable and inherently unhealthy, that Sherry and Naomi might fight, break up, and leave the household in a lurch when it came time to pay the rent.

(Years later I told Naomi about this and she roared with laughter. She told me then that she and Sherry had never had a monogamous relationship, though neither had had an outside affair at that point. In later years, both did have affairs. Our collective household had assumed monogamy where it did not exist!)

Sherry and Naomi bought a house and moved out a few months after moving to Portland. Our entire household relocated some time after that. Shortly after our move, my relationship with the most powerful member of the household (Barbara) deteriorated sharply. I was used to not picking up after myself, used to living with a rather slapdash housekeeper and never have been a tidy person myself. Barbara tried bluntly to inform me my habits did not mesh with collective living, and I just got defensive about it and began avoiding being home when she was awake. I would be away from home until past midnight, sneaking in and going to my room. I'd wait until she was gone in the morning to come out again.

In the summer of 1981, I decided to ride

my bicycle to the West Coast Women's Music Festival in Yosemite, partly to get away from the household and partly to recapture that idyllic experience I'd had riding on my own a few years before. I told my mother I would not have time to visit the Bay Area for the annual September Birthday Party (four of my family members, including myself, have a Virgo birthdate). This was not true, however. With the aid of my family, I made plans to ride to San Francisco prior to the Yosemite Festival. The family planned to take my mother out to dinner at a fancy restaurant, and I was going to be there as a surprise.

I rode east from Portland, over the Cascade Mountains at Santiam Pass, east of Salem. I rode through central Oregon and entered California near the Nevada border. I rode back over the Cascade Mountains at Lassen National Park, through Chico, then over toward the coast through the Napa Valley. As I approached the Bay Area, my excitement grew. The day I walked my bicycle over the Golden Gate Bridge was momentous. I had come a long way from the time I didn't think I could ride seven miles to the next town over from Forest Grove!

I had overestimated the amount of time the trip would take, and was six days early. I spent those six days at my oldest sister's house in Oakland, in an in-law apartment behind her house. I had lived homeless by choice for fifteen days, and reveled in cooking on four burners, with a roof over my head and a big bed to stretch out in at night after a hot shower in a bathroom with running water. Because of bicycle touring, I have a profound sense of thankfulness that this is the basic standard of living in this culture, and I have never taken it for granted since that first trip.

My mother was more than surprised

when I showed up at that family dinner – she didn't recognize me. I had cut my hair very short for this trip, and my mother had thought I was a male friend of her youngest grandson's that he had brought along to dinner. This was just one of many incidents involving mistaken gender during my life. I ignored this one, also. The effect it had on my mother was interesting. She has never forgotten that incident, and constantly wishes I wore my hair longer (even post-transition!). I think that in that moment, she felt for the first time the deep gender dissonance in me, and it jarred her.

I met up with many of my Portland friends at the music festival in Yosemite. I rode back to Portland, by previous arrangement, with my housemates. Two days on I-5 in a van. I had taken eight rolls of film and filled two journals on the way down. I took no pictures and wrote about two pages in my journal on the way back. Car travel is not conducive to contemplation.

That touring experience changed my life. I had felt competent, secure in my aloneness, and independent. I was about to break out in Portland as well. I don't remember what brought things to a head, but I moved out of the collective household rather abruptly in the fall of 1981, less than a month after returning from that bike trip.

For the first time since I moved to Portland, I rented an apartment on my own. I acquired a cat, Bear Cub, who was to be my constant companion for the next 16+ years of my life. Except for one brief period of crisis, I never again lived with anyone who was not my lover, and doubt I ever will. I had too little self-knowledge at that point in my life to realize I'm far too private a person to ever live easily in a collective situation.

Shortly after I moved, I took stock of where I was geographically in relation to

various friends. I was living in NE Portland. At that time, most of the lesbian community still lived in the Hawthorne area of SE Portland. In checking addresses of friends, I realized that I had inadvertently moved within six blocks of Sherry and Naomi! I walked over to their house one winter evening. They were home, and delighted to hear I was now a neighbor. I became much closer to them over the course of the next year or so that I lived in that neighborhood.

That winter, I became involved as a founding member of the Portland Women's Theater Company, then called A Real Professional Women's Theater Company. As with most things in my life during my twenties, I got involved with groups largely because people would ask me and I didn't know how to say "no." In the case of the theater company, however, I would not have wanted to say no. This was pure luck on my part, as I said "yes" to a job without having the faintest idea what it entailed. As it turned out, the friend who asked me to be stage manager knew it would be right up my alley, so in saying yes, I began a course that would eventually change my life.

Something happened to me in that group, and I'm still not sure what triggered the change. When I attended City College of San Francisco right after high school, I had been asked to participate in setting up the curriculum for a prospective new class at CCSF, *Women in Science*. At this time, Women's Studies departments were still in the future, so this class was considered ground-breaking territory. Several women who were majoring in various sciences were invited to help develop the course, including me.

When invited, I said yes, because I did not know how to say no. It was then I discovered that I could only talk to friends if

the occasion was strictly social and superficial. When in an official meeting with these same friends, where my voice would be my opinion, I found my tongue padlocked. This situation changed over the course of my time in the theater company. I was the first stage manager that group had, and was so obviously perfect for the job that even I knew it.

As time went on and it was clear how much the theater company needed and valued the organizational abilities I'd never known I had, my tongue became less padlocked. I was able to voice my opinions in meetings. I was even able to audition for a part in the third play the theater company produced. Just a few years before, it would have been unthinkable for me to be on stage, speaking lines in front of an audience.

Certainly, I felt stage fright along with everyone else, but it did not affect my ability to remember my lines. In fact, I was exhilarated to realize I was the only one of the cast who did not mind individual scenes with our best actor. The other actors dreaded being onstage alone with her. She was an alcoholic, often semi-drunk onstage, and did not reliably remember her lines. She was a marvelous actor who always remembered the general gist of a scene. Hence a scene with her often turned into a form of improvisational theater – with a paying audience. I found that I rather enjoyed this, and found myself making sure I had a short synopsis of the scene in my mind when I went onstage with her – just in case.

In my first play, this actor played a realtor. I played a naïve young woman in search of a suitable space to rent. With some friends, I was going to start a restaurant (vegetarian, of course – this *was* a 1970's lesbian play, after all!). The realtor and I were supposed to have a conversation that would

reveal information that would become relevant later in the play.

Toward the end of the scene, she was supposed to ask me how large a space we were looking for. The answer was supposed to be in terms of numbers of tables we wanted to have room for. We sat down at the beginning of the scene, and looked at each other and my semi-drunk realtor said right off the bat, "So... about how many square feet do you think you'll need for your restaurant?" At this point in the scene, she was not supposed to know we were opening a restaurant! And square footage was never even mentioned in the script! Without missing a beat, I replied, "Oh, about 1200 square feet." And we salvaged the scene from there.

This experience, as well as my ability to deal with onstage emergencies in my capacity as stage manager for the previous two plays, showed me some abilities I'd never known I possessed. My self-concept was slowly being altered by this experience, and I developed some self-confidence in terms of my work capabilities. I also learned how to play a part, and this allowed me to play the part of "lesbian" more convincingly (to myself – no one else had reason to question it!) than I had to date.

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