

### Chapter 3: Early Lesbian Days by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

In Forest Grove, I reveled in living in a small-town atmosphere, with no lesbians around. I had crushes on several of my classmates at Pacific University, more often than not reciprocated, but the padlock was still firmly locked. Several straight female classmates pursued me, apparently not realizing what they were doing. This was the post-hippie era, and before the religious right rose to prominence in small-town Oregon. I felt quite comfortable being a fairly open lesbian in this small community.

I dusted off my ten-speed bicycle, which I had always viewed as little more than a toy while I lived in San Francisco, and used this to get to school and back. I received food stamps at this time in my life (yes, there was a time when full-time students were eligible) and one day had an appointment with the local food stamp office, in a town some seven miles away. For reasons I don't now remember, the bus was not an option that day.

A friend from school suggested I ride my bike to the appointment. At the time, I scoffed at the idea of riding to another town on my bike, despite the fact that it was only seven miles. There was something about the idea of riding to a completely different town that made the distance seem insurmountable. But I did it, having first loaded into my backpack food and water, as if I were about to climb Mt. Everest. I left far too early, having no concept of how long such a ride might take me. Before I knew it, I was there.

I felt so free, so independent, riding my bike to this appointment, I got bitten by the bicycling bug. I bought a bicycle repair book and took my bike apart, learning how it

worked. I bought a subscription to *Bicycling* magazine. I learned that in anticipation of the Bicentennial in 1976, a group of dedicated cycle tourists had devised a cross country tour route, called the Bikecentennial, and that hundreds of riders had done this ride during the summer of 1976. The organization still existed and had published touring maps. I decided then and there that I would do a bicycle tour, also. My mother had sold her last car shortly after my father died, and I'd grown up using the then-excellent bus system in San Francisco. I had never acquired a driver's license, and bicycling became my primary mode of transportation.

In June of 1977 I attended my first Gay Pride Parade in Portland. I met a lesbian couple there, Tracy and Val, who had recently moved to Portland from small-town Tennessee. I was just shy of my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. The three of us clicked, and they invited me to come spend weekends with them, to get away from small-town Forest Grove and interact with lesbians.

Tracy and Val were gregarious women, and had become quite active in local gay/lesbian organizations. They introduced me to a lot of people when I came in for weekends. Through them, I met a woman named Whitney. I realized immediately I was attracted to her, and sensed that this feeling was mutual. One afternoon we were left alone in Tracy and Val's apartment while the others went to the store. This was New Year's Eve, and Whitney made her move by asking me, "Don't I get a New Year's kiss?" That's all it took, and it was quite an effort for us to sit up and make ourselves presentable when the others came back from the store.

This was the first time any woman had been attracted to me to the same degree I

was attracted to her. My other attractions had not been requited, so I had never been in a situation that would bring my bodily discomfort to the forefront. I suddenly found myself in the very confusing position of being intensely attracted to a woman and realizing that I was so attracted, I did not want to be sexual with her! I tried to sort this confusion out. How in the world could it be that I was this attracted to someone, yet was repelled by the idea of making love with her?

I was not one to openly discuss my feelings with anyone, so I don't remember how the conversation started, but I clearly remember discussing this with Tracy and her asking me at one point, "Are you sure you're really a lesbian?"

At the time, I was indignant at the question because I thought the only alternative possible was to be a heterosexual woman. In hindsight (over twenty years' worth), I realize Tracy hit the nail right on the head without either of us realizing it. I was *not* a lesbian. I didn't want to make love with a woman, and the more attracted to her I was, the more I resisted the attraction. I realize now it was not that I was repelled by the woman's body – *I was repelled by my own* and didn't want to be in the position of exposing it to someone I cared about.

This is hindsight speaking, however. At the time I had no idea where my confusion lay. Being who I was then, I found all kinds of negative reasons to lay on myself. Internalized homophobia. Internalized sexism. Some puritanical streak of societal prudism. In exasperation, Whitney broke off with me in the spring of 1978, feeling unable to break through to the real me. How could she succeed in that endeavor when I couldn't?

She also told me I had been leaning too

heavily on Tracy and Val, that they were tired of my visiting them every weekend. I was an incredibly needy person at that time in my life, and had come to look on Tracy and Val as family. They were the first family of choice I ever had, and in my extreme need I depended far too heavily on them.

In essence, they had become "mom" to me, and I treated them as one does a mom. I visited every weekend, without checking that this was alright, because they had initially invited me for weekends in Portland. At the time they extended the invitation, however, I don't think they were envisioning *every* weekend for the next six months, but this is what it had turned into.

Hearing this from Whitney, in my small-town apartment, right after hearing she was not going to see me again because she was surprisingly getting involved with a male co-worker – this was a devastating ten minute conversation for me. Losing Whitney was the least of it. Losing my new family of choice was much harder to bear.

Being who I was then, it never occurred to me to call Val and Tracy and resolve things with them. I wrote to them, always my communication style at that point in my life, and pretty much blamed them, as I recall, for not making their dissatisfaction known by telling me. I should not have had to hear this from Whitney. Etc.

Cut off from my Portland friends, I developed a much closer friendship with Harriet, a fellow student at Pacific University. She and I came close to having an affair, and we actually did talk about it, a little. I wrote her a letter while I was visiting my family in the Bay Area in the summer of 1978, and acknowledged that our relationship had gone into some gray area that was beyond friendship. She agreed, also by letter. Our friendship had become more

intimate than any I'd ever known.

After I got back from the Bay Area, I saw a notice at A Woman's Place Bookstore in Portland, seeking riders to share driving and expenses to get to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in August. I asked Harriet to go with me, and she agreed. Her family had moved from Minnesota to Oregon when she was a teenager, and she still had many friends back there she wanted to visit.

An unspoken reason I'd invited her, and she'd agreed, was that this would move our friendship to a new realm. Harriet could experience how it felt to be with me in the context of the lesbian community, rather than a small-town college community. She had never been involved with a woman before, but was quite open-minded and not at all averse to self-exploration.

We got to the Festival, and she called two friends of hers immediately. She learned from them that one of her favorite teachers, a mentor, had died quite suddenly the week before. She lost her focus on me and the Festival and went off with her friends, to attend his funeral and grieve her loss. In hindsight, this was completely understandable. In the moment, I saw this as yet another abandonment of me, and that Harriet was running away from the lesbian context because she couldn't handle it. The former was a very self-centered reaction; the latter did Harriet an injustice she did not deserve.

Ultimately, Harriet did not attend any of the 1978 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Her two friends drove her onto the land the last evening of the Festival, looking for me. When she found me and said her friends were there to give us a ride, I was furious. One of her friends was a man, and she had told him to just drive and not speak and he'd be taken for a masculine woman. He was

Mayan and had no beard, so this did work. But I had just spent four days on my own in women-only space, and for the first time in my life had made some tenuous connection to the lesbian community that was not mediated through Val or Tracy or anyone else. I had begun to feel a part of a larger community in my own right. Now Harriet had brought a man into what I viewed as sacred space, and I was so filled with rage I couldn't speak to her.

I don't remember how we reached St. Paul, but we did. My memory is hazy, but I do remember being with Harriet and another friend of hers, Paul, thinking as I did that she always seemed to attract nice guys. I was still so furious with her, I couldn't even speak to her. I walked away from the two of them in downtown St. Paul where Harriet had just booked an airline ticket back to Oregon. I had no money, no idea where I was, and no idea where I was going to sleep that night.

After consulting a phone book, I found my way to Amazon Books in Minneapolis, after a very long walk, and threw myself on the mercy of the woman behind the counter. She called two friends of hers, Marie and Donna, who were quite willing to take me in until I could find a ride back to Oregon. I ended up staying with them for three weeks, a very healing time for me. They had an inflatable kayak and were happy to let me take it down to one of the many lakes in Minneapolis, just a few blocks from their house, and paddle all over. I fell in love with Minneapolis, and almost moved there until I found out their first frost is in mid-September. Too much for this California kid!

I did not go back to school that fall. When I finally got back to Oregon, I stayed in Forest Grove just long enough to pack up my things. Harriet wouldn't speak to me.

Tracy and Val re-entered my life out of the blue, calling me as if nothing had ever happened. Though things were never as innocently happy between us as they had been, we spent some enjoyable time together late that summer. Tracy agreed to help me move and was going to arrange a moving van. She showed up at my apartment and asked me where the van was. I reminded her she'd said she would take care of it, and she angrily denied this.

As I did not have a driver's license, there is no way I could have reserved a moving van or picked it up, which is why she had offered to do so to begin with. However, the unresolved and undiscussed issues Whitney had brought up earlier that year still lay between us. The moving van issue gave Tracy and I a forum in which to be angry with each other, without discussing the real underlying issue of my needing them too much and them feeling alternately burdened and guilty for not being able to meet all my neediness.

Tracy agreed grudgingly to pack her station wagon as full as possible, make one trip, then I was on my own. I was moving in with a friend of theirs, Ivy, who had a large apartment in Portland near S.E. Hawthorne. I didn't have much stuff at that time in my life, so most of my possessions fit in this station wagon. I ended up leaving quite a few odds and ends behind, however, as I didn't have the wherewithal to carry them and didn't like to ask people for favors like a ride to Forest Grove to bring things back to Portland.

This trivial issue over the moving van ended my friendship with Val and Tracy once and for all. Fortunately, though my new roommate Ivy was a casual friend of theirs, there were so many other friends in her life, it was not a big deal that I wasn't on

speaking terms with Val and Tracy. In a small town, such meltdowns in lesbian friendships just can't persist. There is not a large enough community to absorb complete ruptures. Such is not the case in Portland, and I simply developed other friendships, and turned my back on my life in Forest Grove completely and permanently.

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