

*Zami:
A New
Spelling
of My
Name*

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To Helen, who made up the best adventures

To Blanche, with whom I lived many of them

To the hands of Afrekete

In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair.

I carefully kept what I hoped was an impassive expression on my face as I toyed with my fruit drink, screaming inside. But Frieda put her drink down, leaned forward, and patted me on the arm reassuringly.

"Now don't worry about her," she said kindly. "That was the best thing in the world Eudora could have done for herself, getting out of this fishbowl. If I wasn't afraid of losing Tammy to her father in the states, I think I'd leave tomorrow." She settled back in her chair, and fixed me with her level, open gaze.

"Anyway, you're going back home next week, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, knowing what she was saying and that she was quite right.

"But I hope to come back some day." I thought of the ruins at Chichen-Itzá, of the Olmec heads in Tabasco, and Eudora's excited running commentaries.

"I'm sure you will, then," Frieda said, encouragingly.

I returned to New York on the night of July 4th. The humid heat was oppressive after the dry hot climate of Mexico. As I got out of the taxi on Seventh Street, the sound of firecrackers was everywhere. They sounded thinner and higher than the fireworks in Mexico.

23 I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, feeling I had the truth and the light and the key, but a lot of it was purely hell.

There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour. Just as there were no rings to make tangible the reason for our happy secret smiles, there were no names nor reason given or shared for the tears that messed up the lab reports or the library bills.

We were good listeners, and never asked for double dates, *but didn't we know the rules?* Why did we always seem to think friendships between women were important enough to *care* about? Always we moved in a necessary remoteness that made "What did you do this weekend?" seem like an impertinent

question. We discovered and explored our attention to women alone, sometimes in secret, sometimes in defiance, sometimes in little pockets that almost touched ("Why are those little Black girls always either whispering together or fighting?") but always alone, against a greater aloneness. We did it cold turkey, and although it resulted in some pretty imaginative tough women when we survived, too many of us did not survive at all.

I remember Muff, who sat on the same seat in the same dark corner of the Pony Stable Bar drinking the same gin year after year. One day she slipped off onto the floor and died of a stroke right there between the stools. We found out later her real name was Josephine.

During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lay in our fewness, our rarity. That was the way it was Downtown. And Uptown, meaning the land of Black people, seemed very far away and hostile territory.

Diane was fat, and Black, and beautiful, and knew it long before it became fashionable to think so. Her cruel tongue was used to great advantage, spilling out her devastatingly uninhibited wit to demolish anyone who came too close to her; that is, when she wasn't busy deflowering the neighborhood's resident virgins. One day I noticed her enormous bosom which matched my own and it felt quite comforting rather than competitive. It was clothed in a CCNY sweatshirt, and I realized in profound shock that someone else besides me in the Village gay-girl scene was a closet student at one of the Uptown (meaning past 14th Street) colleges. We would rather have died than mention classes, or tests, or any books other than those everyone else was discussing. This was the fifties and (the gulf between the Village gay scene and the college crowd was sharper and far more acrimonious than any town-gown war)

There were not enough of us. But we surely tried. I remember thinking for a while that I was the only Black lesbian living in the Village, until I met Felicia. Felicia, with the face of a spoiled nun, skinny and sharp-brown, sat on my sofa on Seventh Street, with her enormous eyelashes that curled back upon themselves twice. She was bringing me a pair of Siamese cats that had terrorized her junkie friends who were straight and

lived on a houseboat with the two cats until they brought their new baby home from the hospital and both cats went bananas back and forth all over the boat, jumping over everything including the box that the baby screamed in, because Siamese cats are very jealous. So, instead of drowning the cats, they gave them to Felicia whom I ran into having a beer at the Bagatelle that night and when Muriel mentioned I liked cats, Flee insisted on bringing them over to my house right then and there. She sat on my sofa with her box of cats and her curly eyelashes and I thought to myself, "if she must wear false eyelashes you'd think she'd make them less obviously false."

We soon decided that we were really sisters, which was much more than friends or buddies, particularly when we discovered while reminiscing about the bad days that we had gone to the same catholic school for six months in the first grade.

I remembered her as the tough little kid in 1939 who came into class in the middle of winter, disturbing our neat tight boredom and fear, bringing her own. Sister Mary of Perpetual Help seated her beside me because I had a seat to myself in the front row, being both bad-behaved and nearsighted. I remembered this skinny little kid who made my life hell. She pinched me all day long, all the time, until she vanished sometime around St. Swithin's Day, a godsent reward I thought, for what, I couldn't imagine, but it almost turned me back to god and prayer again.

Felicia and I came to love each other very much, even though our physical relationship was confined to cuddling. We were both part of the "freaky" bunch of lesbians who weren't into role-playing, and who the butches and femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Ky, or AC/DC. Ky-Ky was the same name that was used for gay-girls who slept with johns for money. Prostitutes.

Flee loved to snuggle in bed, but sometimes she hurt my feelings by saying I had shaggy breasts. And too, besides, Flee and I were always finding ourselves in bed together with other people, usually white women.

Then I thought we were the only gay Black women in the world, or at least in the Village, which at the time was a state of mind extending all the way from river to river below 14th Street, and in pockets throughout the area still known as the Lower East Side.

I had heard tales from Flee and others about the proper Black ladies who came downtown on Friday night after the last show at Small's Paradise to find a gay-girl to go muff-diving

with, and bring her back up to Convent Avenue to sleep over while their husbands went hunting, fishing, golfing, or to an Alpha's weekend. But I only met one once, and her pressed hair and all too eagerly interested husband who had accompanied her this particular night to the Bagatelle, where I met her over a daiquiri and a pressed knee, turned me off completely. And this was pretty hard to do in those days because it seemed an eternity between warm beds in the cold mornings seven flights up on Seventh Street. So I told her that I never traveled above 23rd Street. I could have said 14th Street, but she had already found out that I went to college; therefore I thought 23rd was safe enough because CCNY Downtown was there. That was the last bastion of working-class academia allowed.

Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget.

It was not that I didn't have friends, and good ones. There was a loose group of young lesbians, white except for Flee and I, who hung out together, apart from whatever piece of the straight world we each had a separate place in. We not only believed in (the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later,) but we also tried to put it into practice, with varying results. We all cared for and about each other, sometimes with more or less understanding, regardless of who was entangled with whom at any given time, and there was always a place to sleep and something to eat and a listening ear for anyone who wandered into the crew. And there was always somebody calling you on the telephone, to interrupt the fantasies of suicide. That is as good a working definition of friend as most.

However imperfectly, we tried to build a community of sorts where we could, at the very least, survive within a world we correctly perceived to be hostile to us; we talked endlessly about how best to create that mutual support which twenty years later was being discussed in the women's movement as a brand-new concept. Lesbians were probably the only Black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other; we learned lessons from each other, the values of which were not lessened by what we did not learn.

For both Flee and me, it seemed that loving women was something that other Black women just didn't do. And if they did, then it was in some fashion and in some place that was to-

Dutch femme

SOS Lesbian Community

tally inaccessible to us, because we could never find them. Except for Saturday nights in the Bagatelle, where neither Flee nor I was stylish enough to be noticed.

(My straight Black girlfriends, like Jean and Crystal, either ignored my love for women, considered it interestingly avant-garde, or tolerated it as just another example of my craziness. It was allowable as long as it wasn't too obvious and didn't reflect upon them in any way. At least my being gay kept me from being a competitor for whatever men happened to be upon their horizons. It also made me much more reliable as a confidante. I never asked for anything more.)

But only on the full moon or every other Wednesday was I ever convinced that I really wanted it different. A bunch of us—maybe Nicky and Joan and I—would all be standing around having a beer at the Bagatelle, trying to decide whether to inch onto the postage-stamp dance floor for a slow intimate fish, garison belt to pubis and rump to rump (but did we really want to get that excited after a long weekend with work tomorrow?), when I'd say sorry but I was tired and would have to leave now, which in reality meant I had an already late paper for english due the next day and needed to work on it all that night.

That didn't happen too often because I didn't go to the Bag very much. It was the most popular gay-girl's bar in the Village, but I hated beer, and besides the bouncer was always asking me for my ID to prove I was twenty-one, even though I was older than the other women with me. Of course "you can never tell with Colored people." And we would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black, since, of course, gay people weren't racists. After all, didn't they know what it was like to be oppressed?

Sometimes we'd pass Black women on Eighth Street—the invisible but visible sisters—or in the Bag or at Laurel's, and our glances might cross, but we never looked into each other's eyes. We acknowledged our kinship by passing in silence, looking the other way. Still, we were always on the lookout, Flee and I, for that telltale flick of the eye, that certain otherwise prohibited openness of expression, that definiteness of voice which would suggest, I think she's gay. *After all, doesn't it take one to know one?*

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that

fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me.

This was not to deny the closeness of our group, nor the mutual aid of those insane, glorious, and contradictory years. It is only to say that I was acutely conscious—from the ID "problem" at the Bag on Friday nights to the summer days at Gay Head Beach where I was the only one who wouldn't worry about burning—that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay or straight.

The question of acceptance had a different weight for me.

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society—Black or gay—I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight. To be proper. To look "nice." To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying.

But in this plastic, anti-human society in which we live, there have never been too many people buying fat Black girls born almost blind and ambidextrous, gay or straight. Unattractive, too, or so the ads in *Ebony* and *Jet* seemed to tell me. Yet I read them anyway, in the bathroom, on the newsstand, at my sister's house, whenever I got a chance. It was a furtive reading, but it was an affirmation of some part of me, however frustrating.

If nobody's going to dig you too tough anyway, it really doesn't matter so much what you dare to explore. I had already begun to learn that when I left my parents' house.

Like when your Black sisters on the job think you're crazy and collect money between themselves to buy you a hot comb and straightening iron on their lunch hour and stick it anonymously into your locker in the staff room, so that later when you come down for a coffee break and open your locker the damn things fall out on the floor with a clatter and all ninety-five percent of your library co-workers who are very very white want to know what it's all about.

Like when your Black brother calls you a ball-buster and tricks you up into his apartment and tries to do it to you against the kitchen cabinets just, as he says, to take you down a peg or two, when all the time you'd only gone up there to begin with fully intending to get a little in the first place (because all the girls I knew who were possibilities were too damn complicating,

and I was plain and simply horny as hell). I finally got out of being raped although not mauled by leaving behind a ring and a batch of lies and it was the first time in my life since I'd left my parents' house that I was in a physical situation which I couldn't handle physically—in other words, the bastard was stronger than I was. It was an instantaneous consciousness-raiser.

As I say, when the sisters think you're crazy and embarrassing; and the brothers want to break you open to see what makes you work inside; and the white girls look at you like some exotic morsel that has just crawled out of the walls onto their plate (but don't they love to rub their straight skirts up against the edge of your desk in the college literary magazine office after class); and the white boys all talk either money or revolution but can never quite get it up—then it doesn't really matter too much if you have an Afro long before the word even existed.

Pearl Primus, the African-American dancer, had come to my high school one day and talked about African women after class, and how beautiful and natural their hair looked curling out into the sun, and as I sat there listening (one of fourteen Black girls in Hunter High School) I thought, that's the way god's mother must have looked and I want to look like that too so help me god. In those days I called it a natural, and kept calling it natural when everybody else called it crazy. It was a strictly homemade job done by a Sufi Muslim on 125th Street, trimmed with the office scissors and looking pretty raggedy. When I came home from school that day my mother beat my behind and cried for a week.

Even for years afterward white people would stop me on the street or particularly in Central Park and ask if I was Odetta, a Black folksinger whom I did not resemble at all except that we were both big Black beautiful women with natural heads.

Besides my father, I am the darkest one in my family and I've worn my hair natural since I finished high school.

Once I moved to East Seventh Street, every morning that I had the fifteen cents I would stop into the Second Avenue Grid-dle on the corner of St. Mark's Place on my way to the subway and school and buy an english muffin and coffee. When I didn't have the money, I would just have coffee. It was a tiny little counter place run by an old Jewish man named Sol who'd been a seaman (among other things) and Jimmy, who was Puerto Rican and washed dishes and who used to remind Sol to save me the hard englishes on Monday; I could have them for a dime.

Toasted and dripping butter, those english muffins and coffee were frequently the high point of my day, and certainly enough to get me out of bed many mornings and into the street on that long walk to the Astor Place subway. Some days it was the only reason to get up, and lots of times I didn't have money for anything else. For over eight years, we shot a lot of bull over that counter, and exchanged a lot of ideas and daily news, and most of my friends knew who I meant when I talked about Jimmy and Sol. Both guys saw my friends come and go and never said a word about my people, except once in a while to say, "your girlfriend was in here; she owes me a dime and tell her don't forget we close exactly at seven."

So on the last day before I finally moved away from the Lower East Side after I got my master's from library school, I went in for my last english muffin and coffee and to say goodbye to Sol and Jimmy in some unemotional and acceptable-to-me way. I told them both I'd miss them and the old neighborhood, and they said they were sorry and why did I have to go? I told them I had to work out of the city, because I had a fellowship for Negro students. Sol raised his eyebrows in utter amazement, and said, "Oh? I didn't know you was cullud!"

I went around telling that story for a while, although a lot of my friends couldn't see why I thought it was funny. But this is all about how very difficult it is at times for people to see who or what they are looking at, particularly when they don't want to.

Or maybe it does take one to know one.

24 It seemed preordained that Muriel and I should meet.

When Ginger and I had been getting to know each other over the cutting-room X-ray machines in the heat and stink and noise of Keystone Electronics, she was constantly telling me about this crazy kid called Mo who had worked at my machine a year or so before. (It was her way of letting me know that she knew I was gay and it was all right with her.)

"Yeah, she sure was a lot like you."

"How do you mean; did she look like me?"

"Very funny." Ginger cut her doll-baby-round eyes at me. "She's white. Italian. But both you-all have that easy way about

happiness in our "incorrect" love was so great besides her obvious unhappiness in her "correct" ones, that the only response to such cosmic unfairness was tears.

Finally, Rhea turned and ran into her own room, closing the door. We could hear her sobbing through the closed door until we both fell asleep.

I never discussed that night with Rhea, nor whether those furious tears had been for her own loneliness or for the joy that Muriel and I were finding in each other. Perhaps, if I had, both of our lives might have been different. Rhea left New York City one week later, and I did not see her again for many years.

Much later, I discovered the real reason why Rhea left New York that spring to take a job in Chicago, on what seemed at the time to be such short notice. A visiting higher-up in progressive circles had come to the house one evening while I was there. She later returned to headquarters in New Jersey with the shocking report that Rhea shared a house with a homosexual, and a Black one, at that. In other words, Rhea had been denounced for her association with me. A progressive in good standing could not afford such questionable company in 1955. I had become an embarrassment.

I was totally oblivious to all this, immersed as I was in the fact of Muriel and me. I only knew that Rhea was becoming more and more troubled, culminating in the scene over my couch. But the word had come down to her; get rid of me or give up her work. Rhea loved me, and valued our friendship, but her work was more important and she had to protect herself. Her last affair was a perfect excuse. Rather than ask me to leave or let me know what was going on, Rhea decided to give me the apartment and move to Chicago.

The Last of My Childhood Nightmares

*My Mother's House,
July 6, 1954*

Hickory-skinned demons with long white hair and handsome demonic eyes stretch out arms wide as all tomorrow, across the doorway exit from a room through which I run, screaming, shrieking for exit. But I cannot stop running. If I collide with those long arms barring my pathway out, I will die of electrocu-

tion. As I run I start to shout in despair, "Our father who art in heaven. . ." and the arms start to dissolve and drip down the walls and the air between the door and me.

I then pass into another room of my parents' home—their bedroom, the room in which I am now asleep. It is dark and silent. There is a watermelon shaped like an egg on the bureau. I lift the fruit up and it drops down upon the linoleum floor. The melon splits open, and at the core is a brilliant hunk of turquoise, glowing. I see it as a promise of help coming for me.

Rhea is asleep, still, in my parents' large bed. She is in great danger. I must save her from the great and nameless evil in this house, left here by the hickory-faced devils. I take her hand. It is white and milky in the half-dark.

And then suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me. The doors refuse to open. The glass cracks when I touch it. Even the bureau drawers creak and stick when I try to close them. The light bulbs blow out when I switch on the light. The can-opener won't turn; the eggbeater jams mysteriously.

This is no longer my home; it is only of a past time.

Once I realize this, I am suddenly free to go, and to take Rhea with me.

26

In March, I got a job as a library clerk in the New York Public Library Children's Services, and I was truly delighted. Not only was I relieved to be making money again, but I loved libraries and books, and was so pleased to be able to do work which I enjoyed. Muriel and I saw each other as often as we could now, and we began to discuss her coming back to New York to live.

When she was animated, with her tousled dark hair and her round monkish head, Muriel reminded me of a chrysanthemum, always slightly bent over upon itself. She talked incessantly about her "sickness" of the years before, and about what being schizophrenic meant. I listened but did not know enough to realize that, out of her love, she was also warning me.

On the few occasions that we smoked reefer together, she waxed most eloquent and I was most open.

"Electric shock treatments are like little deaths," Muriel said, reaching across me for the ashtray. "They broke into my head

like thieves with official sanction and robbed me of something precious that feels like it's gone forever."

Sometimes she sounded angry, and sometimes she sounded curiously flat, but however she sounded it made my arms ache to hold her. Pieces of her memory had gone too, she told me, and that made Suzy, her old New York lover, keeper of that piece of her past.

It was the equinox, and we lay smoking in bed in the evenness of springtime, with summer already coming.

"Did it make anything better?" I asked.

"Well, before shock, I used to feel this deep depression covering me like a huge bushel basket, but somewhere inside at the very core of it all, there was a little feeble light shining, and I knew it existed, and it helped illuminate chaos." She shuddered and lay silent for a moment, her lips tight and pale over her front teeth.

"But the thing I can never forgive the doctors for, is that after shock, the bushel only lifted a little; you know what I mean? But that little light had gone out, and it just wasn't worth it. I never wanted to trade my own little flame, I don't care however crazy it was, for any of their casual light from outside."

All this made me very sad. The only answer I had was to hold her tight. I swore to myself that I would never let that happen to her again. I would do anything in the world to protect Muriel.

That night, lying in the front room on Rhea's bed, Muriel warned, "If I give up my job in Stamford to come down here, I don't know how I'll ever be able to get another one. I just can't ask someone to hire me and run the risk of their saying no. I don't know why, but I know I can't take that. It will break me."

Having gone through the horrors of looking for work just recently myself, I thought I knew what she was talking about. But I did not, for the depths of her shaky reality were alien to me, although I never considered that possibility. I felt confident that eventually, out of our love, Muriel would find the strength to face that hurdle, too. So I did not heed her words as a warning, the only kind she could give me.

Rhea left, and in the beginning of April, Muriel returned to New York City to live. I painted the kitchen and bathroom and put up new bookshelves in anticipation.

Once Muriel quit work in Stamford, the physical transition to New York began in trickles. For months, every time she went back home for a visit, Muriel would reappear on Sunday after-

noon with a stool or a box of tools or some wood or a shopping bag of books. Sometimes her friend Rupert would drive her down in his Volkswagen beetle with a load of books and papers.

Although the change from "staying over" to "living together" was a gradual one, I knew I had made a major decision. And I knew that decision would affect the rest of my life, although exactly how was not really clear to me then. When I had moved into the apartment with Rhea, I had merely scratched my name beside hers on the slip of paper stuck into the slot of our mailbox in the hall.

But one blustery day in the first week of April, on my lunch hour, I walked around to Hite's Hardware on East Broadway and ordered a proper metal mailbox tag, with Muriel's and my names upon it. I stood watching as the machine stamped the two names into the shiny brass rectangle, feeling proud, excited, and a little bit scared. It felt like a ritual joining, a symbolic marriage.

Afterward, I bought an egg cream on Chatham Square to celebrate, and stood looking at the little shiny plate with our two names side by side, separated only by a little dash. This would be my surprise for Muriel when she came down to New York on her birthday, the following week.

No more playing house.

For me, this was the real thing, a step from which there was no turning back. I wasn't just playing around any more, gay-girl. I was living with a woman and we were lovers. I had done, silently and easily, what I had longed and feared to do, I had made a commitment which was irrevocable. Without conscious articulation of why, I knew *together* meant *forever* for me, even though there was no troth plighted, no wedding ceremony, no paper signed. Muriel and I were united together by our loving and our wills, for good or ill.

Through the spring, I had thought long and hard about whether or not I could live that closely with anyone, and for the rest of my life, as I felt this was going to be—without question. Once I decided I could make that commitment, I never doubted for a minute that Muriel was the person I wanted to make it with.

We made our own vows of love and forever. As the spring evenings turned warmer, Muriel met me at the Chatham Square Library. Sometimes we went wandering through the back streets of Chinatown, buying strange succulent vegetables and peculiar fragrant pieces of dried meat to experiment with,

along with hard wrinkled mushrooms by the piece. Each of us knew a different New York, and we explored together, showing each other secret treasured places in the middle of the alleyways south of Canal Street.

Sometimes she met me for lunch and we munched Musli apples leaning up against the Catherine Slip tenements in the strengthening sunlight, watching the sparks fly as workmen continued the complex task of dismantling the last great piece of the Third Avenue El, the Chatham Square Station. Sometimes we walked home together on the nights I worked late.

We talked about leaving New York, about homesteading somewhere in the west where a Black woman and a white woman could live together in peace. Muriel's dream was to live on a farm and it felt like a good life to me. I borrowed pamphlets from the library, and we wrote to all the appropriate government offices to find out if there were any homestead lands still available anywhere in the continental United States.

Sadly enough for us, the word came back that there was not, except in some of the more desolate northern reaches of Alaska, which was not yet a state. Neither Muriel nor I could stand the thought of living in a cold climate, and that far away from the sun. Besides, since we would not be able to support ourselves by farming, northern Alaska was definitely out.

When I came home from work with my arms full of the latest books and my mouth full of stories, sometimes there was food cooked, and sometimes there was not. Sometimes there was a poem, and sometimes there was not. And always, on weekends, there were the bars.

Early Saturday and Sunday mornings, Muriel and I wandered the streets of the Lower East Side and the more affluent West Village, scavenging the garbage heaps for treasures of old furniture, wonders that the unimaginative had discarded. We evaluated their future possibilities and dragged our finds back up six flights of stairs, to add them to the growing pile in the kitchen of things we were one day going to repair. There were wooden radio cabinets, gutted, that could be fitted with shelves for a fine record-holder. Old dresser drawers supplied stout wood for bookcase shelves, supported by scavenged bricks. There were brass lamps and rococo fixtures to be re-wired, and a magnificent old dentist's chair with only one arm support missing. Occasionally we found something that needed no repair (my bed-lamp still sits on a Victorian lampstool that we dug out of a junkheap in Chelsea on our way home from the Grapevine one Sunday morning).

Ordering and re-ordering our world, Muriel and I sat up into the small hours reading the books I would sneak out of the cataloguing bins at the library, and eating pasta with margarine and oregano when we were poor. Other times we had wondrous meals concocted from our adventurous buys in Chinatown, together with a scrap of meat or a few chicken feet or a piece of fish or whatever we could afford and took a fancy to in the First Avenue Public Market. Around the corner from us, we did most of our food shopping there in the many stalls of busy hawkers.

I met the few of Muriel's friends that she could remember from the old days, and she met mine. There were Mick and Cordelia whom I had met in high school. Nicky and Joan, friends of Suzy, Muriel's old lover. We were poor and always hungry, and always being invited to dinner. Going to Suzy's house for dinner was always chancy. Suzy had once heard that pork fat was nutritious, so she kept a skillet of bacon drippings permanently on the back of her stove and cooked everything in it.

There were Dottie and Pauli, two skinny blonde artists from our neighborhood whom we met at Laurel's; Bea and Lynn, her new girl; Phyllis, who wanted to be an architect, but only talked about it when she was drunk; and, of course, there was Felicia, my adopted little sister, as I called her, and the only other Black woman in our group. Together, we formed a loosely knit, emotionally and socially interdependent set, sharing many different interests, some overlapping. On the periphery there existed another larger group of downtown gay-girls, made up of congenial acquaintances and drinking buddies and other people's past lovers, known by sight and friendly enough, but not to be called upon except in emergencies, when of course everybody knew everybody else's business anyway.

But the fact of our Blackness was an issue that Felicia and I talked about only between ourselves. Even Muriel seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. "We're all niggers," she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it. It was wishful thinking based on little fact; the ways in which it was true languished in the shadow of those many ways in which it would always be false.

When Muriel and I received stares and titters on the streets of the West Village, or in the Lower East Side market, it was a toss-up as to whether it was because we were a Black woman and a white woman together, or because we were gay. Whenever that happened, I half-agreed with Muriel. But I also knew that Felicia and I shared both a battle and a strength that was un-

available to our other friends. We acknowledged it in private, and it set us apart, in a world that was closed to our white friends. It was even closed to Muriel, as much as I would have liked to include her. And because that world was closed to them, it was easy for even lovers to ignore it, dismiss it, pretend it didn't exist, believe the fallacy that there was no difference between us at all.

But that difference was real and important, even if nobody else seemed to feel that way, sometimes not even Flee herself, tired as she was of explaining why she didn't go swimming without a bathing cap, or like to get caught in the rain.

Between Muriel and me, then, there was one way in which I would always be separate, and it was going to be my own secret knowledge, if it was going to be my own secret pain. I was Black and she was not, and that was a difference between us that had nothing to do with better or worse, or the outside world's craziness. Over time I came to realize that it colored our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the worlds we shared, and I was going to have to deal with that difference outside of our relationship.

This was the first separation, the piece outside love. But I turned away short of the meanings of it, afraid to examine the truths difference might lead me to, afraid they might carry Muriel and me away from each other. So I tried not to think of our racial differences too often. I sometimes pretended to agree with Muriel, that the difference did not in fact exist, that she and all gay-girls were just as oppressed as any Black person, certainly as any Black woman.

But when I did think about it, it was as something that set me apart, but also protected me. I *knew* there was nothing I could do, including wearing skirts and being straight, that would make me acceptable to the little old Ukrainian ladies who sunned themselves on the stoops of Seventh Street and pointed fingers at Muriel and me as we walked past, arm in arm. One of these old ladies, who ran the cleaners across the street, tried to give Muriel a used woolen skirt one day. "For nothing," she insisted, pressing it into Muriel's hands. "No money, for nothing. Try it on, is nice. Make you look nice, show you legs little bit."

I had gone in and out of that store in dungarees for years, and this little old Ukrainian lady had never tried to reform me. She knew the difference, even if Muriel did not.

Somehow, I knew that difference would be a weapon in

my arsenal when the "time" came. And the "time" would certainly come in one way or another. The "time" when I would have to protect myself alone, although I did not know how or when. For Flee and me, the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance nor solely bureaucratic. We met them every day, even in our straight clothes. Pain was always right around the corner. Difference had taught me that, out of the mouth of my mother. And knowing that, I fancied myself on guard, safe. I still had to learn that knowing was not enough.

Every one of the women in our group took for granted, and would have said if asked, that we were all on the side of right. But the nature of that right everyone was presumed to be on the side of was always unnamed. It was just another way of silently avoiding having to examine what our living positions were within our small group of lesbians, dependent as we were upon each other for support. We were too afraid those differences might in fact be irreconcilable, for we had never been taught any tools for dealing with them. Our individuality was very precious to each one of us, but so was the group, and the other outsiders whom we had found to share some more social aspects of our lonelinesses.

Being gay-girls without set roles was the one difference we allowed ourselves to see and to bind us to each other. We were not of that *other* world and we wanted to believe that, by definition, we were therefore free of that *other* world's problems of capitalism, greed, racism, classism, etc. This was not so. But we continued to visit each other and eat together and, in general, share our lives and resources, as if it were.

One evening coming home from work I ran into Nicky and Joan on Houston Street and invited them home to dinner on the spot. There was only \$1.50 in my pocket and no food in the house. We stopped off in the market on First Avenue and bought a pound of extra-thin spaghetti, some fresh parsley, half a pound of chicken hearts, and a packet of powdered milk. With the other seventy-five cents I bought a huge bunch of daffodils and we all had a fine dinner, although I forget what we were celebrating. Because we were always celebrating something, a new job, a new poem, a new love, a new dream.

For dessert, we had a home-cooler: tall glasses of skim milk poured over cubes of frozen coffee heavily laced with cinnamon and almond extract.

The bars on weekends were a ritual of togetherness that I only came to fully understand years later when I was tired of being alone. Every Friday night, it was the same.

"Hurry up, Audi, let's try to get a table tonight." In Laurel's, like in most of the other bars, the tiny tables lining the dance area were first come, first served. Sometimes we'd run into Vida and Pet, two of the few Black gay-girls we knew. They preferred the word "dyke," and it seemed much more in charge of their lives to be dykes rather than gay-girls, but we were still a little scared of the way the word was used to badmouth someone. Vida and Pet shared a house with another dyke named Gerri, and we went to parties at their house out in Queens. Vida and Pet were older than most of our friends, and more settled. They were both very kind to Muriel and me, sometimes even buying us food when we had no money, and mothering us in a way that I both resented and appreciated, like making sure after their parties that we had a ride back to the city or somewhere to stay over for the night.

One warm Saturday evening, Muriel and I stood eyeing the ripe melons piled high on the sidewalk stands in front of Balducci's. Cartons and crates of beautiful and expensive fruits and vegetables extended out onto the sidewalks of Greenwich Avenue. Across the Village street in the early summer dusk, a handful of impatient husbands and lovers stood, calling up back and forth to unseen but well-heard inmates within the grated windows of the Women's House of Detention on the west side of Greenwich Avenue. Information and endearments flew up and down, the conversants apparently oblivious to the ears of the passersby as they discussed the availability of lawyers, the length of stay, family, conditions, and the undying quality of true love. The Women's House of Detention, right smack in the middle of the Village, always felt like one up for our side—a defiant pocket of female resistance, ever-present as a reminder of possibility, as well as punishment.

"Think we can cop a honeydew?" My mouth was watering for the fresh sweet fruit. I looked up Greenwich, which was growing more crowded with evening strollers. I made up my mind, more daring than scared.

"I don't know, but let's try. I'll get one from the side and go down Sixth. If he comes after me, yell 'Cheeko!' then meet me around the corner on Waverly."

We separated with elaborate casualness and Muriel walked over to the oranges, feeling them in deep consideration. The

fruit vendor approached her expectantly. I sidled around the other side of the crates behind his back, snatched the ripest golden green melon that caught my eye, then took off. First rule of snatching anything outdoors: try to do it on one-way streets and always run against the flow of traffic. I sprinted down Sixth Avenue, avoiding startled pedestrians, turning into Waverly Place a block away only slightly winded. Pleased with my feat, I leaned against a railing to observe the luscious spoils and wait for Muriel.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed my arm from behind. My heart in my mouth, I tried to wrench free without even looking, still clutching our melon. Oh shit!

"Take it easy, girl, you're lucky it's just me!" I recognized Vida's rough kindly voice with a wave of relief. I sagged against the railing, unable to talk. "I *thought* that was you. I'm driving up Sixth and I see you tear-assing along, said to myself, lemme park this car and see what my buddy's doin'."

Muriel sauntered around the corner, stopping short with surprise at the sight of Vida. She and I exchanged quick glances. This was not exactly what we'd have preferred Vida find us doing. Uncool, definitely, stealing fruit on Saturday night. Vida laughed a broad laugh.

"Scared you good, didn't I?" Her voice changed, earnestly. "Well, I'm glad. You-all better stop this jiveass shit before next time it isn't me. Come on, Pet's in the car, let's go for a ride."

Muriel and I talked endlessly. I knew who I was going to spend the rest of my life with, yet it seemed as if there was never enough time to talk and share and catch up with all the pieces of each other that had existed before we met. As our newness became more known to each other, I marveled at how very dear Muriel's face was becoming to me. The fact of us was a most wonderful and novel idea, one that I pondered over, examining and savoring every aspect of what it meant to be permanently connected to another human being.

To go to bed and to wake up again day after day besides a woman, to lie in bed with our arms around each other and drift in and out of sleep, to be with each other—not as a quick stolen pleasure, nor as a wild treat—but like sunlight, day after day in the regular course of our lives.

I was discovering all the ways that love creeps into life when two selves exist closely, when two women meet. Like the smell of Muriel on my sweatshirt, and the straight black hairs caught

in my glove. One night, I cried to think of how lucky we both were to have found each other, since it was clear that we were the only ones in the world who could understand what we understood in the instantaneous manner which we understood it. We both agreed ours was a union made in heaven, for which each of us had already paid several hells.

For our close friends, we were Audi and Muriel without definition. For our other friends, we were just another young gay couple in love, maybe a little more peculiar than most, traipsing around with notebooks under our arms, all the time. For the regulars at the Colony and the Swing we were Ky-Ky girls because we didn't play roles. And for the fast set at the Bag we were weirdos who deserved each other because Muriel was crazy and I was Black.

Meanwhile, Muriel and I built bookcases and had writing bees and adopted two little scrawny Black kittens which we named Crazy Lady and Scarey Lou.

Muriel was very much the dandy about her clothes. Like everything else about her, what she wore had to be precisely so, according to some secret guide in her own head, or Muriel would not go out. As long as something was not touched by her inner rules, it didn't matter, but Muriel's rules were inflexible and unmoving and once you came up against one of them, it was unmistakable. What those various rules were, I only found out slowly.

When I lived in Stamford, I had worn old dungarees and men's shirts to work. Just before Thanksgiving, I bought some corduroy and Ginger's mother helped me make a skirt for the holidays. When I lived in Mexico, I wore the full peasant skirts and blouses so readily available in the marketplaces of Cuernavaca. Now I had my straight clothes for working at the library—two interchangeable outfits of skirts, sweaters, and a warm-weather blouse or two. I had a pair of shoes for work, and a flamboyantly cut woolen suit which I had made out of the old coat my sister had given me to wear at my father's funeral. Since I never wore stockings, I stood waiting for the bus some days in the icy winds blowing down East Broadway and prayed for the warm protection of my dungarees or riding pants.

I had very few clothes for my real life, but with the addition of Muriel's quixotic wardrobe, we developed quite a tidy store of what the young gay-girl could be seen in. Mostly I wore blue or black dungarees which were increasingly being called *jeans*. I fell in love with a pair of riding pants which Muriel gave me,

and they became my favorite attire. They became my uniform, along with cotton shirts, usually striped.

Muriel had her gambler's pants for winter, and in the warmer weather she preferred Bermuda shorts and knee-socks, usually black. Winter chic demanded our navy surplus turtleneck sweaters, and we pressed the point, often wearing them into the late spring on any air-conditioned occasion. I loved the deep dark secure feel of wool against my body, and the freedom of casual clothes. I always fancied that they made my large breasts look smaller.

Other than army-navy stores, for which both of us had an absolute passion, we did most of our other clothes shopping at John's Bargain Store. For each of us, there was a positive virtue in being able to live poor and well at the same time, and this took effort and ingenuity and a sharp eye for real bargains. When John's failed us, there were always the little open shops along Rivington and Orchard Streets on Sunday mornings. In these side streets near the Public Market on Essex, men in yarmulkes hawked their wares. A sale on sneakers for \$1.98, or solid-color sweatshirts selling for ninety-nine cents were finds to boast about.

We were reinventing the world together. Muriel opened me to a world of possibilities that felt like a legacy left me by Eudora's sad funny eyes and patient laugh. I had learned from Eudora how to take care of business, be dyke-proud, how to love and live to tell the story, and with flair. Muriel and I were making the lessons become real together.

When I recall the time Muriel and I spent together, I remember the assurances we gave each other, the sense of a shared niche out of the storm, and the wonder grounded in magic and hard work. I remember always the feeling that it could continue forever, this morning, this life. I remember the curl of Muriel's finger and her deep eyes and the smell of her buttery skin. The smell of basil. I remember the openness of our loving that was a measurement against which I held up whatever was called love, and which I came to recognize as a legitimate demand between all lovers.

Muriel and I loved tenderly and long and well, but there was no one around to suggest that perhaps our intensity was not always too wisely focused.

Each one of us had been starved for love for so long that we wanted to believe that love, once found, was all-powerful. We wanted to believe that it could give word to my inchoate pain

and rages; that it could enable Muriel to face the world and get a job; that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne. (We were like starving women who come to believe that food will cure all present pains, as well as heal all the deficiency sores of long standing.)

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In that golden summer of 1955 we were very busy and full of light. During the week I worked at the library and Muriel built beds across town for Mick and Cordelia. On the weekends, we wrote and read and studied Chinese calligraphy and went to the beach and the bars.

Jonas Salk announced his new vaccine for polio at my sister Helen's graduation from City College, and since so many of the girls I knew from Hunter High School had varying degrees of disabilities from polio, this news had a personal meaning.

Life had so many different pieces. *Jet* was a girlie magazine trying to be a Black newsmagazine which I borrowed from my brother-in-law Henry on my infrequent visits to the Bronx, read avidly on the long subway ride downtown, and then surreptitiously dropped onto the next seat as I got off. When I mentioned at the library that I wrote poetry, somebody was bound to mention Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*, the runaway bestseller that year. It had no more to do with my work than a scallop to a whale. Spurred on by Muriel, I sent some of my poems to *The Ladder*, a magazine for lesbians published by the Daughters of Bilitis. Their prompt and unaccompanied return crushed me.

I supplemented our reading from the library with a steady trade in the used bookstores over on Fourth Avenue. Muriel spent a lot of her time over there too, where used copies of Byron and Gertrude Stein could be bought at the Strand one week and traded in for a little less at the Pine down the street a week later. Books were not so much in excess then; I remember trading a birthday copy of Lindbergh for a handful of used paperbacks, two hardcover volumes of minor poets, and a first issue of *MAD* magazine, which cost ten cents.

In June, Lynn came to live with us. We hadn't planned it that way, that's just the way it worked out. Muriel and I had re-established a guarded communication with Bea, and Lynn was

her ex-lover whom we had first met on that infamous New Year's Eve.

She came to call unexpectedly from Philadelphia one Sunday evening in early summer, her long blonde hair streaming around her short sturdy neck, and an overstuffed duffle bag slung across one shoulder. Rumpled army fatigues covered her ample hips. Lynn had a sly smile and screwed up her face whenever she laughed. She was broad, and squat, and very sexy, and in terrible emotional shape. She was the same age I was, twenty-one, but had lived a very hectic life.

Lynn's young husband, on army leave, had died three months before, burned in a truck accident from which he had thrown her clear. They had been moving Lynn's belongings to her new lover's house in Philly.

Lynn arrived on our doorstep with no place to go. She and Bea had broken up for reasons I knew only too well, and Lynn had followed the gay lorelei to New York. Jittery with dextro-drine and crazed with exhaustion, she was afraid to go to sleep because of her nightmares of death and dying and the burning wreck from which arose billows of guilt over Ralph's death.

Nobody I knew could have remained immune to this game little girl-woman's piteous story. This was a chance to put into practice the kind of sisterhood that we talked and dreamed about for the future.

Muriel and I took Lynn into our home to live with us. For a while that summer, we had a vision and possibility of women living together collectively and sharing each other's lives and work and love. It almost worked. But none of us knew quite enough about ourselves; we had no patterns to follow, except our own needs and our own unthought-out dreams. Those dreams did not steer us wrong, but sometimes they were not enough.

I found myself day-dreaming over the library catalogue, imaging Lynn's malocclusion, and I had to finally admit to myself how physically attracted to her I was. I was frightened and embarrassed as well as perplexed by this strange and unexpected turn of events. I loved Muriel like my own life; we were pledged to each other. How could I desire another woman physically? But I did. (Naturally, the thing to do was to examine this new state of affairs in all of its endless ramifications, and to discuss each one of them in detail.)

That is what the three of us did, endlessly, over and over until all hours of the morning. Muriel thought it was an exciting