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Amazon Trail: Before the Bars

We don't think of our every day lives as making history, but sometimes they do.

"When did you first know you were gay?" is one of those questions gay people hear all our lives and sometimes one of the most difficult to answer. I always respond that I was 15, because that's when I had my first relationship. But sometimes I wonder if that's not too simplistic a reply.

The first time I remember being in bed with a girl and getting caught, I was four years old. She was an older woman named Gail Gobely and lived in an apartment across the court on the third floor. Gail was already in school and I was totally impressed when I was invited to play with her. Our mothers were talking in another room. We weren't actually in bed - we were on top of the covers. We weren't actually doing anything bad - we were giggling wildly and carrying on. Yet, I remember clearly how charged the small room felt with a thick, heavy excitement. Our mothers must have felt it too, because they suddenly appeared in the doorway and, with expressions of suspicion, pulled us apart, my mother telling me sternly to get off the bed.

That day I learned a lesson that would not leave me for decades: this was something you hid.

There were more lessons in store for me, well before I ever understood the term homosexual or thought of myself as gay. One day when we were both 11, my friend Kathy from down the block called me to come over and play. I walked into a darkened living room. Kathy was lying on the couch. Was she sick? Though this happened seven years later, I remembered the intense excitement of my visit with Gail. I felt just the same way that day in Kathy's living room. Maybe her instruction to lock the door tipped me off. Or maybe it was the fact that not even her little sister was home.

We didn't do anything explicitly sexual, or touch, but everything we did - and I can't remember what we did - felt erotic. Mostly, I think, she teased me. I felt bewildered; she'd never talked or acted like this before.



The sensations I was experiencing were pleasant, but Kathy kept a knowing smirk on her. I didn't know what a come-on was then, nor have I ever been very good at recognizing one, but I think that may have been what was going on. When I left I felt guilty, because I'd learned with Gail that my feelings were bad, and I felt embarrassed, because I knew that I was supposed to have some knowledge that Kathy had and I did not. I was clueless.

Kathy and I had been walking to school together since first grade. The next day, Kathy took to walking to school on the

One day when we were both 11, my friend Kathy from down the block called me to come over and play. Maybe her instruction to lock the door tipped me off.

other side of the street with Pam Guido, a boy-crazy girl from her class. If I'd had the language, if I'd been even just a little bit sophisticated, I would have figured out that I was gay that day. Kathy apparently had.

I still didn't get it when, the next year, those feelings came back every time I thought of, or saw, Marsha Kassel, the president of my Girl Scout troop. She was a gawky girl and funny, kind of like Gail Gobely had been. That's all I remember of Marsha, but I haven't forgotten a bit about the passion I felt for her. It's hard for me to believe that I never questioned why I was in love with Marsha and not with the nice boy

I sat next to in school. Well, except that Frank was as dull as bologna on Wonder Bread and inspired no emotion, no sensation, no desire to be with him night and day.

When Marsha left the troop, I think I missed the way she made me feel more than I missed her. The troop leader, Mrs. Federman, next stole my heart. Why wasn't I longing to have a date with Kookie, from the TV show *Route 66*, or with Matt Dillon on *Gunsmoke*? No, what felt right was to try and comb my hair and stand like Kookie while I pined for married Mrs. Federman.

In retrospect, it is so obvious that I was gay from jump. So is that what I should answer when people ask when I knew? It's like the question, "When is your anniversary?" The first time you went out together? Slept together? Was it your bonding ceremony? If you married do you celebrate that day? What about all the years before, do they no longer count?

Obviously, I didn't come out with Gail Gobely or with

Kathy, but my innocent congress with them gave me my first remembered moments of lesbian ardor. And oppression. And rejection. By the time Marsha and Mrs. Federman came along, I knew enough to hide my feelings. By the time I was fifteen, I knew enough to kiss Suzy when I felt that way again. ▼

Copyright Lee Lynch 2005. Lynch's 12th book, the novel *Sweet Creek*, will be released from *Bold Strokes Books* in January 2006. Lynch lives on the *Oregon Coast*. Her web page is at <http://leelynch6.tripod.com>.