



AMAZONTRAIL BY LEE LYNCH

Have Things Gotten Better?

THE PIANIST AND THE HANDYDYKE COOKED while the Butch Nurse, visiting for the weekend, and I hung out and got in the way. Things were better than they used to be, the three of them insisted, while I stuck to my position that improvements had done nothing to change the essentially vulnerable condition of gay people.

The Handydyke went to set the table, but kept bopping back in to add to her list of things we could do now: hold hands

in public, be with our partners in the hospital, buy property together, keep jobs, make love legally, live together without being hassled, adopt kids, get non-discrimination laws passed - watch The Ellen Show!

Oppression has never been a problem for the Butch Nurse. A seminal moment occurred for her while vacationing in Hawaii. A non-gay couple was walking in front of them, holding hands. She took the hand of her partner, the Femme Nurse, and resolved always to live openly. Since then, "We just live our lives," she explained, "worrying like everyone else about whether we can pay the mortgage."

It was a photograph of the Butch Nurse and the Femme Nurse that had started the discussion weeks before. They posed together in identical sparkly vests the Femme Nurse had sewn for them. Their small church was having a dance and this was how they'd dressed up for it. They are the only gay couple in a congregation that not only accepts them, but whose minister, unbidden by the couple, has offered to marry them should they ever want to take that step.

"That would never have happened thirty years ago," declared the Pianist. She told us about a young woman and man who double-dated at their prom with a lesbian couple. The Handydyke popped back in to recall a tale of a teacher who announced to her principal that she was a lesbian, in effect daring the principal to fire her. She kept her job - the principal, it turned out, was a lesbian too. Both couples swapped stories about lesbian policewomen, how one lives a severely closeted life with her partner, never going anywhere because she's afraid of losing her job. The Handydyke, on the other hand, talked about a totally out lesbian cop who has an active community life with her partner.

Could it be our perceptions that drive some of us into the closet while others see no reason to

hide, asked the Butch Nurse. "Do gay people hear about something like Matthew Shepard's killing and get too scared to be themselves in public?"

"By the time we left where we used to live," the Butch Nurse went on, "the parents in our cul de sac were telling their kids they wanted them to be just like us when they grew up, because

we were the most normal people there, even though we were the only gay ones. Now our next-door-neighbors are Mormon. The wife is having her eighth child. They're our closest friends in the neighborhood."

The Pianist remembered how she and the Handydyke lived before they retired from teaching high school in a large western city. "We

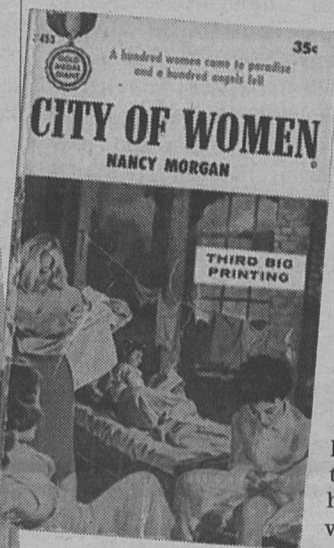
"She took the hand of her partner, the Femme Nurse, and resolved always to live openly."

were scared all the time. We wouldn't even have a lesbian book in our home." When they moved to the Northwest they opened a bookstore and sold both children's and lesbian books. They have a friend who now leads a gay kids group in a high school.

"We're not a threat to straights when we live normal lives," insisted the Butch Nurse.

"They didn't even have a word for us 150 years ago," declared the Pianist as final proof of progress.

I think of the February murders of two gay men at a New Bedford, Massachusetts bar. That same month, despite the fact that sexual orientation is a protected status in South Africa and last year same-gender couples won the right to marry there, 19-year old lesbian Zoliswa Nkonyana was attacked by a group of men and killed in Cape Flats township. And I think, with all the outward signs of progress, the universal fear and aversion to gay people runs so deep that as long as one gay man in Saudi Arabia, where homosexuality is a crime punishable by death, or one old gay woman shunned by the staff at in a nursing home in the U.S., is vulnerable, not much has changed at all. ▼



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