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The Young Lesbian Who Dated Boys

I was born to and raised by two caring and loving parents in 1951. They both held down jobs, and gave their five children the start of a Catholic school education. I was a good kid, and by the age of five I knew I was attracted to girls. I'm not saying I understood it, but I knew what I felt. I liked boys as friends, but I sensed early on that my heart leaned toward some select females. And that was my first self-taught lesson on lesbianism: Just because I liked girls didn't mean I had to like all the girls. And just like boys, I liked who I liked. Of course growing up in the fifties and sixties meant you kept such feelings secret and tried to fit in to the role society wanted you to play. These stories are some glimpses of my attempt, from pre-teen to late teen, to do what the other girls were doing with boys. I often felt like I was trying to fit my foot in to a glass slipper that was three sizes too small. It was uncomfortable and awkward, but I went at it with all the sincerity I could muster until I found out being a woman is not a one-mold fits all.

Eddy was in third grade with me, and nearly 40 other kids, who sat alphabetically in rows of wooden desks bolted to the floor. We all feared raising our hands to ask to use the 'lavatory' during a class lesson, so for the most part we looked like a classroom of squirming kids with their hands neatly folded on the desk. Eddy was a slender, soft-spoken farm boy with a sandy-haired crew cut. I was an athletic, street-wise child with medium-length brown hair. My face was more round to his oval. He took a bus to school, I walked from a few blocks away. He wore darks slacks and white shirt. I wore the traditional dark blue uniform over a crisp white blouse, but wished I could wear slacks. One morning while waiting for the nuns to open the door, I found a ring outside St. Mary's school. Eddy was the person I chose to give it to. My reason: I liked the way he looked. It was that simple. After the girls I stood with tried on the adult-sized ring, they encouraged me to go over and give it to Eddy who was standing in a huddle with other eight-year old boys. I hesitantly walked over, and handed him the ring. He made a face of disgust, and said, 'I don't want that.' He pushed away my extended hand. The boys laughed. I felt for the first time a combination of feelings: a cocktail of embarrassment, rejection and anger. I never expected the dismissal. Who wouldn't want a ring? It was new territory. I walked back to the circle of girls, and hurled that ring on to a lawn next door to the school. I avoided Eddy from that point on, but my sense of feeling not good enough remained a strong reminder that I'd have preferred giving the ring to my classmate, Monica, but I knew already that it was considered 'wrong' to do so. I was happy to be done with him.

Ten year old twins, Lee and Lesley's eyebrows were nearly as white as their hair. It gave their eyes a dreamy, heavy lidded quality. They were identical twins who, when visiting their grandparents in the neighborhood, ventured on to the same playground I raced around on. They looked like miniature versions of the twin brothers who are on the Antique Road Show that assess furniture. They were not as aggressive as the other boys on the playground, and they were always looking for girlfriends. One summer, Lesley picked me. I don't know how it happened. It was like a silent ritual. A boy came up and asked to hold your hand. You said ok, and then like social magic, you were going together. In my case, we'd sit side by side under a tree near the cyclone fence,

never talking. It was boring, as he hung his arm around my shoulder. I wanted to go to the arts and crafts table, or preferred sliding down the metal slide, or soaring so high up on the swings that I felt the chains go slack. As summer days passed, I missed going to the playground for one week when my parents took us to Pennsylvania to visit my mother's family. When I returned to the Charles Williams' school playground, Lesley was holding hands with another girl. 'You weren't here, so I got another girlfriend.' I said, 'Oh.' I was slightly disappointed, as a new social game developed behind the school. It involved kissing, but joy over took me during a potato sack race on the playground. I won. I was happy to be done with him, and spent all my time sitting near the pretty playground counselor, pretending she was my girlfriend.

'You can't date Larry – he's a nose picker.' That was the advice given to me on my first attempt to accept an invitation to the movies at age 12. The news of Larry's tunneling was grossly described by the baker's doughy son, Joseph, who ended up taking me instead. Truth be told, I had a crush on Joseph's older sister, that's why I went to the movies with him. I hoped to get a glance at her, as I did every time I went to her parent's bakery to buy a cookie or a candied apple in the fall. Joey didn't ask me out again. Maybe it was because I kept asking, 'Where's your sister?'

I happened to fear both of the seventh grade nuns at St. Mary's because they brought a couple of sixth grade boys, who blew farts in their hands, to tears on a 'moving-up' day. I begged my parents to let me go to public school. It meant no more tuition fees for them, so off I went. Hudson Junior High led to a dark-haired high school boy who lived on a farm with horseback riding stables. He showed up one day to stand on the 4th street corner near the school of 7th and 8th graders. He pointed to me after class and said, "Do you want to go with me?" I shrugged my shoulders and said ok, thinking, oh boy free horseback riding. I didn't even know his name, but he gave me his ring to wear. I said bye, turned around and walked home. He picked me because I went horseback riding once at the stables and he liked what he saw. He corralled me like a foal in the paddock. It lasted one week because I didn't kiss him on the street corner or go in the alley with him. I only talked about school and the sports I played. I didn't get this 'going-together stuff.' He smelled like his mucking-boots and sour milk. A few days later he stood on the corner hugging a 13 year old filly who wore the ring he wanted back. I had gladly handed it over in exchange for my complete freedom from having to stand on the corner with him. I was happy to be done with him, and so began a huge two year crush on my physical education teacher, Miss Zambito.

Freddy was so quiet. I didn't even hear him ask me out. We just ended up standing side by side one day, in line, at the movies. He was olive-skinned and handsome. He rode me all over town on his bicycle because my mom never let me have one in the small city. Mom, who had steely strength in mind and body, but a bit over-protective said, "See that boy? He has a steel plate in his head because he was hit by a truck while riding on a bike." One day Fred didn't say a word, as he pointed to a ring in the jeweler's window. I felt panicky at fourteen. I did not want another boy's ring. He made it easy to reject him after he left me dangling from a rope over deep water in Keeler's Creek, yelling, 'Swim.' I hadn't learned to swim since being scared by a floating dead fish at age five. I was happy to not be his steady anymore even though I did flop my way back to shore. Unknowingly, he forced me to see I didn't need water wings to

survive, nor to hang on a guy's back to get across the creek. In college I went on to earn my lifeguard certification, grateful to Freddy's high jinks on a hot summer day.

Roger was in my 8th grade homeroom. He was funny, and chunky. But at the movies all he wanted to do was kiss. I hated it. I didn't want the contact and kept leaning away from him, as I watched two boys out of the corner of my eye give each other advice on how to open the side-zipper on one of their date's pants. I only wanted to hang out with beefy Roger, not neck with him. My rejection stung. In class on Monday he told everyone I kissed like a fish. He was probably right because I felt like he was reeling me in for something bigger and I wiggled to get off the line. To my juvenile credit I came back with my own barb of, 'You kiss like a wet sponge.' Powerful stuff in junior high in the early 60's. He shut up. It was a draw. I was happy to be done with him. I liked the Volvo the upper classman drove around in that summer, not him so much. I think it was his mother's. 'Want to go for a ride?' He pulled up to me as I sat on our front stoop on busy Warren Street in Hudson, NY. He had his friend drive, as he got in the back with me. Suddenly, the car slowed down, the guy hugged me and nearly smothered me with a kiss out of the blue. Then he looked over my shoulder to the sidewalk, to his girlfriend who was walking by. He apologized for using me to make his girlfriend jealous, and dropped me off up the street. Such drama. But I was impressed with his apology. All I wanted was a ride in the boxy-looking Volvo. I was happy to be done with him, and a bit flattered that he thought my looks could make his gal jealous. I sat back down on my stoop and thought, one day I'll buy a Volvo, as I watched an attractive woman drive by that looked over at me.

Bob was a skinny-skinny guy, a year ahead of me in high school. My field hockey, volleyball, basketball, softball-biceps, bulged shapelier than his wiry arms, but I said yes when he asked me to the prom in tenth grade. Turns out, I hadn't yet learned to say 'no' to boys when they approached me. He asked me out because his gal dumped him that week. I didn't know that. But his ex-gal got jealous and came to me on the lunch break: 'Please, don't go with Bob. I still like him.' She thought I was being way-cool when I said sure, no problem. Truth be told, I was programmed to say yes to boys even though I'd have rather gone to the prom with her. I was thrilled to not go. I was beginning to sense that saying no was an option when boys asked me out. His gal always gave me a big smile whenever she walked by holding his hand. I was happy to be done with him.

Jimmy was sweet, slender, blond, and my height. He starting kissing me at a party one weekend night in a classmates' backyard in the boulevards. It was my first night time venture into the upper areas of Hudson. The boulevards were streets of houses designed for one family, two at the most. I was from down street, where several families dwelled in three-storied apartments. It felt odd to be hanging out with classmates in a large backyard with trees, instead of cement sidewalks with bars on every block, or a back alley with screaming cats. Jimmy tasted like the pretzels he had eaten. I often laughed when any boy kissed me; half out of nervousness, and half out not wanting to be kissed by a guy. I swear they never asked, they just came up and planted one on you back then. I remember Jimmy leaning back and smiling at me. I saw pretzel hunks in his front teeth. He was polite, in other words, he kept his hands out of my slacks, and took me to a movie where we kissed again. I told him his lips were like a soft pillow. Once, we kept our lips pressed together like it was marathons. It felt

silly, but I learned to breathe through my nose. I think he sensed I wasn't in to him as much as he wanted me to be. It never went any further. He was a good guy, but I was happy to be done with him.

My gregarious, rotund cousin Mike was five years older than me and lived in Pennsylvania. He had a lazy eye-lid that drooped, but his continuous telling of jokes, and his laughter turned that eye in to an accent of fun. Around age fifteen, my mother sent me for a two weeks summer vacation from our home in upstate New York, to stay with his parents. His mother, my mother's sister, was always at work, so she had Mike watch over me. He drove a delivery truck part time, but he mostly hung with his girlfriend and his handsome blond buddy who looked like the older brother on the show 'Flipper,' or a young Brad Pitt by today's standards. Mike gave me my first 'custard' ice cream. That's what he called soft ice cream. He gave me my first taste of fried chicken in a cardboard bucket. And he took me to my first drive-in theater with his gal, and the actor-look-a-like. And through his blond buddy, I got introduced to a hickey on my neck. I remember Mike telling the buddy to not do funny stuff with me as he went in to his bedroom with his gal. The blond was a perfect gentleman, except for the suck mark. Another, more religious Pennsylvanian aunt, saw my neck after Mike's gal convinced me that running a comb up and down the huge hickey would make it disappear. It did not. Neither I, nor Mike's gal, understood the concept of capillary actions. The scraping of the comb up and down my neck made the hickey twice as big. It looked like blood-dark tines had been gouged down my neck. Even a borrowed turtle-neck did not cover what looked like a blood-red cornfield of hickies. When I got back to New York, my mother asked me to my horror and embarrassment, "Did you get your period?" I was horrified. Also, I was pissed at my aunt for telling, but I couldn't decide if I was more surprised my mother thought I'd actually let a guy go that far, or that she didn't really know who I was deep inside. I was happy to be done with the bruise on my neck; but Mike, his gal, his blond buddy, the custard ice cream, bucket o' chicken, and the drive-in movie, I'll always remember with fondness.

A bunch of us teens were walking up Warren Street on the typical Thursday night in '67, when all stores stayed open late. 'Lose 5 pounds,' the smarmy male classmate said, 'And I'll take you to bed.' I was sixteen, athletic and slim. Hank was a handsome hunk, pot smoker, the cool hippie-freak of the 60's wearing bell-bottoms and a dashiki that was a background for strings of dangling beads and a peace sign. But he stripped it all off to play varsity basketball. He had an arrogant streak that, in my youth, foolishly left me thinking I was fat, when I was not. I continued to hang out with the gang of kids, on and off, until I graduated from high school. Many years later, at a bar in my hometown, I ran into Hank. I left the bar for a minute, and when I returned, he was hitting on my female companion, not knowing she was with me. He waved me off when I came to my table, like I was interrupting him. I enjoyed seeing the look of arrogance knocked firmly off his face when I said, 'She's with me.' I was happy to have been done with him from long ago.

Jonathan, a talented violinist, never asked me out, but I'd have said yes at seventeen. I was so lonely and lost in my mere thoughts of unattainables like Natalie Wood, Janis Joplin, Katherine Ross, Genevieve Bujold, or more realistically, the gal I sat next to in choir and homeroom who made me laugh every time we put our heads together for conversation. Jonathan seemed like a living myth hovering between a male

and female spirit. His hair was silky black and longer than mine. His face was pure, kind, with a blend of Venus and Earth in his smile. He seemed as shy, as I often felt around the girls. Deep down I secretly shared his feeling, at least, of liking girls. One day I saw him holding hands with a classmate, and I think my heart dipped for a moment. It was not because he didn't choose me, it was because soft-spoken Jonathan found someone. I knew then I liked the feminine side of Jonathan; that sweet basket of male kindness that I knew I'd never dangle from my wrist. He was a near-perfect male; the kind of guy a closeted lesbian might marry. Many years later, I was not surprised to learn that he had a family, and harvested his own trees of black ash to weave baskets by hand. A true artisan, a tender soul. I was happy to have known him so long ago. James was adventurous, and a gentleman in my senior year. He never tried to kiss me, but held my hand now and then. I think he sensed I wanted a friend. He taught me to drive a standard shift VW Beetle, and a motorcycle that broke down on a country road one summer evening. We sat and talked until his father arrived with a truck from their apple orchards. I knew he wanted more physical closeness, but I couldn't give it. It would have been a lie, and he was too kind for me to pretend that I cared deeply in the traditional male-female bonding. We drifted together in friendship in high school, then we drifted apart without ever a kiss between us. If there was one, I don't remember it. We ended up in the same junior college, where eventually I was able to tell him I was attracted to woman, just like he was. One day, he married and had children; one is gay. We rarely saw one another, but when we did, there was a solid hug of two old friends. I was happy to have known him.

In 1971, I fell in love with a young college woman, like myself. Kathy. We joined all the sports teams as the seasons changed, and we shared our poetry. She felt like I did about women, but we both still dated guys until our second year of college. We took months to build up the courage for that first kiss. But in the meantime, I had a first interracial kiss with Mitch. I drank too many beers, and so had he. He grabbed my arm, as I walked by him sitting on a sofa at a frat party. He plunged his tongue half-way down my throat without asking. I was in a sorority, and a few of the white sisters put me down for kissing Mitch. I quit the sorority, but I also quit Mitch because after that first eel-kiss he said, 'I love you.' I didn't even know his last name, nor did he know mine when I asked him. I was starting to let go, more and more, of what others wanted me to be.

Before I quit the junior college sorority, I went to my last frat dance at Rennslear Polytech Institute in Troy, New York. This dark-haired, black spectacled, engineering student who stood shorter than me, took me up to show me his bedroom. I swear he looked fourteen. He was the quintessential 'Howard' from 'The Big Bang Theory.' He started necking with me under the room's over head light. I couldn't help myself; I started laughing at a poster I saw over his shoulder. "What's so funny?" I pointed to the poster. He said, "Pick any position you want." It was a poster of a man and woman 'doing it' twelve different ways. I lied as I thought, not in your lifetime. "I have to go or I'll miss my ride." And I was out of there, thinking, a straight girl can find a guy in a nano-second.

One more male in community college. I had fallen in love with my first woman, who essentially broke my heart because she wasn't ready to awaken to her true self for several more years. She got freaked by her sorority sisters who said we were spending too much time together, it didn't look right; and a male coach made a comment to her as

well. I dated Don a few times during my two years in community college, and we spent some nights necking. But the intensity of wanting this new woman friend in my arms, grew much more than I wanted Don. I was growing weary of laying back and letting guys suck on my neck. I stopped going out with him after I dropped in on a psychology professor after a day of classes. She told her students to stop in and talk to her if there were any issues, personal or scholastic, that they would like to discuss. I felt nervous walking into her office, but I told my secret for the first time to an adult. 'I'm more attracted to girls than guys.' She told me, if I could cope in my daily life with how society viewed lesbians, and the prejudicial behaviors I might come across, then go for it. 'What you're feeling is normal for you. The operative question is: can you cope with how you'll be treated and viewed?' I knew I could, but I wasn't ready to wear it on my sleeve, quite yet. I smiled inwardly and outwardly, and told Don I couldn't see him anymore. I never shared why. He thought it was because I was transferring to another college in the fall, which I did. I let him think that. It was easier. He had a girlfriend within months. I was happy to have known him, but happier to have finally grown with myself. The psychology professor gave me permission to be free. Yes, I needed the validation to move forward at that time, to awaken to my complete self. It only took one voice to give me approval. I was lucky enough to have shared my feelings with the right person. Don was the last guy I dated. That was 1972.

By the time I turned twenty one, I had made the turn inward toward emotionally honesty. I was a lesbian. I needed to start living my truth out loud, and not keep my desires trapped in my head. I spent the next twenty years meeting various women. Some I was happy to have known, some I was certainly not; that's another story. But I finally settled in for one, going on twenty-three years now. I am happy to know and grow with her. She awoke at age forty.

Frances Drabick's poetry was nominated for Pushcart Prize 2010, 2012. Poems/nonfiction/fiction in: Maines's *Off the Coast* (M.Brown&V.Lawson Editors); *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*, U of Oklahoma, 2011; *AARP Bulletin*; *ProtestPoems.com*; *OneFortyFiction.com*; *Bangor Daily News* and others. "The Young Lesbian Who Dated Boys" is part of a larger memoir in progress *Lives in Eastport, Maine*.