

Butch on the Streets  
by Lisa Salmon  
Admin Prize

As a young lesbian, I thought old lesbians were frightening. They never cared for decorum. Their past was a wreckage they refused to discard. They drank beer by the gallon. Many of them limped, some used a cane. They all had an absolute distrust of authority and an insistence on calling anyone in a skirt a 'lady', which seemed to make them even scarier. My community was not huge, butch dykes, glamour dykes, sporty dykes; these miscreants were my chosen family. The butch ones would call us over by saying "Hey Baby Dyke, whatever your name is, come here a minute." It wasn't that they didn't care, just that they'd taken one too many for the team.

One pub had a 'Girl's Night' on a Tuesday. Dykes always got the off nights. We filled the place with clippered hair and denim jeans and leather boots and raucous banter. Youngsters played billiards whilst the older ones parked themselves at the bar. Though they rarely moved from their barstools, they ran the joint. Stories about dykes are often set in prison. We are the tough outliers, the butt of jokes, the downtrodden, doomed to dwell outside the loving family home, relegated to the dog house of society. I wonder if art reflects life or life reflects art? Jude has a metallic jawbone and Deb can't bend one knee, Mel has a scar that flames down her neck disappearing into her shirt. No make up, no bras, just brylcreem and cigars. They roar with laughter and thump the bar with tattooed fists, tell war stories of narrow misses and the one that got away. They offer friendly advice (kick em in the nuts and run), financial guidance (get the gay boys to pay, they're all loaded) and helpful tips (they're all bastards).

Matters involving sex were hidden. I remember wishing I was like Madonna, in the music video where she struts about in pointy bras and deep red lips. I loved the way she owned her sexuality and was not afraid to attract attention. Instead, we'd go under the radar to avoid the ogling male eyes and predatory advances. Men think girls kiss to turn them on, so we'd keep our kisses to ourselves.

Leers from straight men always felt transactional; men wanted to possess me, to own me. Their desire was to have me, not to please me. When butch dykes leered it kinda looked the same but it *felt* different. Their gaze was hungry but I didn't feel like a heffer at auction, their gaze made me feel like a juicy peach. Their desire was delicious. On the back of Mel's bike all I could see was her leather jacket and streaming lights as we whizzed home through empty streets. She'd rev the engine at stop signs to make sure I was still awake. The moment we got to her place she kicked off her boots and shook off her jacket. But that's it for disrobing, I never

saw her bare arms let alone her naked torso or (likely) hairy legs. Me, on the other hand, I tripped through the front door and stripped down to nothing to soak up her gaze, thrilled by the rough and the smooth and roused by the rub.

It was fuck or be fucked in lesbian bars, and we all understood that. You had to act tough to demonstrate that you had survived, that you weren't a pussy. In order to belong, you needed to make everyone think you didn't care if you were accepted or not. Park your motorbike on the curb outside and thump the bar with your fist when someone cracked a joke. All the while drinking each other in with thirsty eyes. So imagine my surprise when Mel pulled me into her flannel sheets and into her arms, her touch was soft and tender, and she purred sweet as a kitten when she came.