

## Excerpt 2, continued

Louise was the first one I knew to learn the “Twist” and I loved watching her dance. We enjoyed hanging out together, going to museums and exhibitions. She got us appointments to the mostly private Barnes Foundation on the Main Line. Luminaries such as T.S. Eliot, James Michener and LeCorbusier were turned away by Alfred Barnes for reasons he alone understood. After ten years in the courts, the Philadelphia Inquirer finally compelled the foundation governing the arguably greatest private art collection in America to admit the public two days a week.

Once inside, Louise would discreetly direct my gaze to Violette de Mazia when she appeared, her pale face decked with tinted glasses topped off by a halo of wild red hair. Rings flashing and gossamer dress billowing behind her, Violette was European, a teacher, a character, and a fixture. Thirty years Alfred’s junior and reputed mistress, she had been named perennial director in his will and was frequently seen navigating the world of masterpieces cramming the walls in a millennia of Western European Art.

Hung close together throughout the rooms, one hundred and eighty-one Renoirs, fifty-nine Matises, forty-one Picassos, and a couple of Titians crowded a healthy smattering of Modiglianis, El Grecos, and, Soutines. Crowning the collection were sixty-nine Cezannes, Nancy’s primary inspiration. She is a credit to him, I thought, but didn’t say, fearful of seeming overly favorable.

Louise and I didn’t lack for conversation and discussed Violette, the collection, theories of art, school, our families and her parents’ fearful attitude towards her Lesbianism. She was my introduction to the Philadelphia Lesbian bar scene, which was both attractive and unsavory. In her presence I felt confident and strong, partly because of my heterosexual superiority complex, but mostly because she herself was tough and grounded. I trusted her, cared about her, worried about her. She was always having woman-trouble.

After my relationship with Nancy ended, I told Louise that we had been lovers. She was surprised. “I didn’t think you had the guts to actually DO anything,” she said. Of course we hadn’t DONE that much. On the other hand, many years after I had come out, Louise heard me mention having been “straight,” and remarked, “You were never straight, Alix.”

Maybe not, but I certainly was nothing like that crowd of women with whom Louise hung out. Their world seemed gray, shadowy, and wounded: a world where saloons provided common ground and alcohol was currency. Finding a multitude of

differences between me and Lesbians, I was grateful for the discomfort I experienced. Some of the women looked so rough and mannish, not attractive at all, I thought to myself, seizing on dissimilarities. It was my psychic shield and I polished it vigilantly.

Through my friendship with Louise, I became acquainted with a scene encompassing some of Philadelphia's most diverting mavericks and misfits. I liked to tag along with her to Lesbian parties, feeling both thrilled and strangely disconnected from the sad, chaotic, crisis-ridden lives I perceived around me.

Like Communists, Lesbians were outcasts, but these women fell even lower on the social scale, carrying secrets deeper and more intimate than ours. Communists might be jailed for what we believed, but Lesbians were a target because of who they were. My heterosexual privilege protected me. On the other hand, I felt lucky to be allowed entry into Louise's Lesbian social circle and to share in their freedom and bawdy, rowdy fun, their ease with each other and edgy, often sexually laced humor. After Louise, my favorite Lesbian was Mike. Her humor entertained me and her playful flirtation flattered me.

Louise had met Mike downtown at the Museum School — now the Philadelphia College of Art — where Louise had studied before transferring to Tyler. They loved each other and all had gone well until Louise was betrayed by a counselor who reported the romance to Louise's mother who panicked, locked her daughter in her room, and threatened to have Mike arrested. Mike's parents weren't much better. Their own families, I realized, had proven more dangerous to these girls than the FBI ever had to me. Their lives could be disrupted and ruined at any moment. Police raids on bars were frequent, and they could be arrested and find their name and address in the morning paper. Outside, they might be beaten up or killed. There was no safety for Lesbians anywhere.

A handful of downtown art students and other young Lesbians, bonded into a fierce, drama-prone band, partied, and sometimes vacationed together, successively loving, then betraying, cherishing, and abusing each other in wracking succession. From time to time I joined them for coffee at Day's Deli on Spruce, the Harvey House on Broad, or The Oak Lane Diner, back when it was open all night. These women, along with an assortment of writers, artists, and lefties, frequented the South China restaurant in Chinatown where my family and friends also enjoyed an infrequent dinner out. And when Philly's first Middle Eastern restaurant, The Middle East, opened, we all went there too. For Italian food the girls convened at Dante & Luigi's in South Philly.

Mike recalled their crowd: "We loved each other, but we had such a terrible, terrible,

time with each other. We were cruel one minute, loving the next, and we were bed-hopping the entire time. It led to a lot of anxiety, a lot of sadness, and sometimes physical confrontation. It was a teenage thing, but in our day, you couldn't suffer out loud. So we built our own family, and it was the only family we could suffer with. We suffered together." The family celebrated the holidays and birthdays, frequenting clubs like Pepe's and the Blue Note, where they'd go to see Nina Simone or Philly native, Billie Holiday. When Billie died in 1959 they took it hard, meeting together and mourning as a family would. Nina's music was familiar to me, but Louise first got me to listen to Billie, the tragic icon who touched this hard-boiled, volatile community of Lesbians the way Judy Garland affected their gay brothers.

Both boys and girls flocked to see Jeri Southern, a "cool" jazz stylist, Chris Connor, and Frances Faye ("Gay, gay, gay"), another popular entertainer who performed her playful routines on the homosexual club circuit of the day. Frances Faye records could be found in the collection of every gay man in Philadelphia. She wore heavy pancake make-up and, "looked like John Wayne in drag with a voice that could flatten the redwoods."

Lesbian culture fascinated me, highly seasoned as it was, with worldly in-jokes, codes, and bawdy wisecracks. No party was complete without a tale of local characters like "Little Gin" or "Big Gin," who was so drunk one night that she sailed over the top of a car on her Harley and tore up her leg, which was why she limped, interrupted by interjections of, "She was so drunk that . . ." and ending with a big laughs. These women laughed, always on the edge, always at risk.