

BETH ELLIOTT

**DON'T
CALL IT
"VIRTUAL"**



ENC Press

excerpt

The 48 Quintara bus, making its pirouette around split-level streets at the top of Noe Valley, let Valerie and Claudia out right at 23rd and Douglass before turning on 24th for its straight shot across the sunny bowl of the Mission District and then to Potrero Hill. “Is that it?” asked Valerie, pointing to the Victorian across the street, with the green velvet curtains halfway up the ground-level windows, and ferns hanging above that.

“Yes, that’s Puffy’s,” Claudia replied. “The women I know who go there say it’s everything they could want in a lesbian bar. And since I’ve been there with them fairly often, you have my word that it lives up to its billing.” She started to step into the crosswalk, but Valerie stopped her.

“Now, Claudia, you know that by lesbian I mean women who have relationships just with another woman, and aren’t in one of your Sapphic marriages with a husband and a wife, right?”

“Correct. They do exist; you’ll meet quite a few of them here.”

“And these are women who don’t just go out to bars with other women, but have a sense of social responsibility

that comes from being women and caring about people because they're women, right?"

"Absolutely. I brought you here today because Thursday after work is an informal cocktail hour at Puffy's for the Daughters of Bilitis."

Valerie cocked her head. "Daughters of Bilitis?"

"Huh?" Claudia replied. "They started in your century — my friends say it was the first lesbian organization ever, and it disbanded, oh, at some point late in the century and got started up again after Independence."

"Daughters of Bilitis . . . I think I've heard of that, but it wasn't late enough in the century that it was around when I came out."

"Well," said Claudia, "it's a very active and respected lesbian organization, and when you told me what you were looking for, I thought of them right away. And here we are. Shall we?"

Valerie nodded, and they crossed. She looked up at the sign above the front windows: BUFFY'S PUB — ESTABLISHED 1978. "Puffy's?"

"Buffy's Pub . . . Puffy's," Claudia confirmed. "It got that nickname pretty much right when it opened, so I'm told."

Despite the openness afforded by the windows, the door was solid wood with the traditional diamond window. Claudia swung it open and the two of them entered, to be greeted by a smiling woman with long, dark hair.

"Claudia, darling! How are you?"

"Just fine, Kate. How's the greatest bartender in San Francisco?"

"Alive and happy, it's another beautiful day." Valerie guessed from the way the two of them laughed that this was Kate's standard greeting.

"Kate, this is my friend Valerie. She's new in town."

"Pleased to meet you, Valerie. Welcome to Buffy's Pub. And please, do call it Puffy's — everybody else does."

Valerie went through her first glass of “fuzzy water,” as Kate called it when she said it was on the house, and was into a second by the time Claudia had given her the stories behind all the knickknacks and memorabilia on the walls and back bar. The sheer volume of Puffy’s lore was overwhelming, prompting her to sum it up by saying, “It’s all very collegiate.”

But now Valerie heard women’s voices in animated conversation outside the door. When it opened and a sizable group of women walked in, she noticed they were all neatly dressed, whether in business suits or shirt dresses, or in slacks with crewneck sweaters over oxford-cloth shirts. Most of them wore at least lipstick, all had earrings, and there was not a hairdo in sight that could be classified as any kind of dyke cut. It was as though the Preppy Handbook had been in a collision with Rubyfruit Jungle and won — the flirtatious but friendly conversation sounded right, but this looked all wrong. These women looked so upper-class — how could they be lesbians and members of a lesbian rights organization and have that much privilege, much less flaunt it in their dress?

She tried to key in to words and phrases that would give her some idea of what kind of social-justice work these lesbians of the future were doing, but the closest she could pick out were mentions of charity balls, dinners, and museum openings. What was this new Daughters of Bilitis — a queer version of the Junior League or something? Oh, no — someone was mentioning the Junior League, and someone else was saying that maybe they could let the Junior League work with them this time . . .

Of all the ironic turns of her lesbian future, surely this was one of the cruelest. She had to get away and think, and so she tugged at Claudia’s sleeve. “Um, Claudia? I need to use the restroom? Where would that be?”

“Oh, there’s one that way, in back, and more upstairs.”

“Thanks.” The all-purpose excuse for an escape had

4 worked again. She went toward the back, but found that a room and porch there had been converted into a smoking lounge done in art deco; peering through a window, she saw two women in dresses with scarves draped over their shoulders put down cigars to wave to her. She smiled nervously and waved back, then looked around for the stairs. Upstairs, in what had formerly been separate flats, she found another deck and a dining room with a Sunday brunch menu posted.

Nearby was a bathroom, and she ducked inside, sat on the lowered lid and breathed deeply until she felt a little less apprehensive. Did nobody live simply in this century? How could they have such affluence without corresponding poverty? When she'd asked Claudia where the poor and homeless were, Claudia had shrugged her shoulders and replied, "In the States, I guess, where they've got semi-collectivism. Our system seems to work better. They still ask us from time to time to help pay for theirs." And Valerie had never dared ask for further explanation. Still, even in a more affluent society, why weren't lesbians showing everyone else how to live in a less materialistic way? Something wasn't quite right about what she was seeing.

And as she wandered around upstairs, it also both comforted and bothered her that the women she encountered were so friendly toward her. Comforting, because of the complete lack of cliquish bar attitudes; disturbing, because fitting in among these women made her think she must be reeking of privilege, which was wrong.

She felt more than a little guilty when she caught herself admiring the establishment: the living room and parlor converted to a dance floor; the authentic old Wurlitzer jukebox retrofitted for DVDs and some amazingly fine-sounding speakers; the holographic tabletop video games interspersed with vintage Ms. Pac-Man consoles; another room with refurbished classic pinball machines, the kind with mechanical score displays. She assumed that any

woman could come here and enjoy this, because she and Claudia had just strolled on in, yet the way Claudia had talked about Puffy's indicated that it wasn't a usual hangout for her despite her being known here. But she knew being here was something other women of her own time didn't get to do, which meant access to Puffy's was privilege. In other words, unless all lesbians could come here, regardless of income, appearance, or — and she'd never had to make this part of her political analysis before — temporal mobility, letting herself have fun here would be wrong. She knew logically that she wasn't oppressing other women by taking advantage of a unique opportunity collectively created by women as a part of their AIDS activism. Still, it felt right to monitor her level of enjoyment out of a concern for equal access to women's space regardless of ability to travel through time.

Besides, the way these women dressed, and the resource-intensive class privilege it represented, were incompatible with the simple living in which a progressive community should be engaged. She hadn't worked as hard as she had in her own time just so women with no activist track record could waltz in and take advantage of "lesbian chic." And this was lesbian chic writ large enough to obliterate and make invisible her own lesbian experience, politics, and culture.