

SEPTEMBER 14, 1954

A wink across the room. A cigarette, placed in someone else's mouth. "Why are you wearing that, love?". "Get you a drink, my darling?". Dancing with hips pressed together. A challenge to a fight. Fingers intertwined. "You need to leave, now".

What memories I have of that extraordinary place! I feel uplifted and shaken, certain and perplexed, all at once!

I knew which street the club was on, so I waited until a short-haired woman passed, and I followed her in! She went down a flight of steps, then through a door. Even then, I was nervous, and watched while others entered, before finally gathering my courage and knocking.

Inside, it was like nothing I had ever seen. It was dark, with leather chairs, and music played while women danced - with each other! Leaning against the bar were - as I thought then - men in their waistcoats and cufflinks, each with a whisky in front of them. Later, when one offered to buy me a drink, I learned that they were women. I had not realised how much trouble I would cause by accepting that drink!

What happened afterwards I will not write, but here is what matters: I have found a place in London where girls like me can go and dance and be themselves. Tonight, I will get the train back to Keswick, and I am already thinking how I can bring that atmosphere back with me.

This is what I will do! I will invite my friends to stay, while my parents are away. About eight of them sounds right - none of the boys, of course! - but one or two more or less will not matter. We will play a game where we make a club like that, here in Keswick, for girls of our kind.

Ideally, we would take some time to prepare for this game. I would love to set up a room to be our club, with music playing and drinks to hand. We could bring costumes to wear: some would wear suits, some would wear evening dresses! But, no, it will not do. I can already hear Sara saying "No, Dilly, we must have little or no preparation". And so I will plan my game without preparation, although I hope Sara will not mind if we bring some hats or neckties to show who is dressed in a masculine way and who is not. Perhaps she will let us play some music too.

We will start by sitting in a circle, close enough to hold hands, but not yet touching. Going around the circle, we will each answer the question: how did you realise your desires were different from those of other girls? Did something happen at school, did a friend tell you you were different or did you read about girls like you in a book and want to find out more?

We will then go around the circle again and answer the question: who told you about this club, for girls like us? After all, we could lose our jobs if people found out what we were, and clubs like this are not advertised or talked about. So how did we each find out about it?

Then we will go around the circle again and say the names by which we are known in the club. For example: Dot, Johnny, Big Ann, Bristol Sheila, Pinkie, Jilly, Miranda, Cobb. This might be a nickname, a real name or a name we choose for ourselves.

Now! We will close our eyes, reach out and hold hands with someone else, then open our eyes. If we are holding hands with someone, that means there is something between us, and we will say what that thing is.

Without releasing any hands we are holding, we close our eyes again. If we think there is an attraction between ourselves and the one whose hand we are holding, we stroke their hand.

Finally, with our eyes still closed, we release the hand of anyone who we do NOT want to be openly in a relationship with. We open our eyes again. Anyone who is holding hands is openly in a relationship with each other.

Now, I will remind my friends about the roles commonly taken by those in the club. There are the masculine ones, who wear suits and ties: they tend to buy drinks, sit at the bar and ask others for a dance. (They are often protective of those who they are in a relationship with (beware who you offer a drink to, lest you be challenged to a fight!) And there are the feminine ones, in dresses, make-up and beautiful hair: they tend to wait for others to lead. We are not obliged to keep to those roles, but we will know they are expected of us.

Finally, each of us will choose one of the memories which I listed at the start of this diary entry: a wink across the room; a cigarette placed in someone else's mouth; "Why are you wearing that, love?"; "Get you a drink, my darling?"; dancing with hips pressed together; a challenge to a fight; fingers intertwined; "You need to leave, now".

We then play out an evening in the club. As we play, we each enact the memory we have chosen. We will try to make them happen in the order listed above, although we will not mind too much if the order goes wrong. In any case, our evening will end when someone is asked to leave the club. This means that the "evening" will last about an hour.

Oh, and I suppose I should write a rule for fighting. The rule will be: to fight someone, you both step outside the club, and decide who should win the fight. If you cannot decide, then nobody wins. In any case, the matter is considered settled. You both ruffle your clothes, re-enter the club and tell someone what happened.

SEPTEMBER 14, 1964

Was it really ten years ago that we first played this game? We have certainly played it since, many times, and had some wonderful and unexpected experiences! We have added something, too, and I will note that here.

After our "evening" ends, we all sit in a circle again. With our eyes open, we reach out towards two people to whom we are attracted. If two people both reach for each other, they hold hands. (If we are attracted to more than two others, then we are only allowed to choose two, as I remember telling Dorothy firmly once or twice.)

We then close our eyes. If we do NOT want to go home with someone whose hand we are holding, we release their hand. We all then open our eyes and see who is holding hands. And so we all know who goes home with who! (And, yes, Dorothy, it is entirely possible that more than two people go home together.)

Now, those who go home with each other lie next to each other, either on cushions or on the floor. This means they are now in bed together!

These people may pass each other notes to "do things to each other". At this point, I read out a list of suggestions: make cocoa, read a book, stroke their hair, kiss their neck, run fingernails over their skin, kiss their nipple, pin their wrists down, run a hand along their thigh, lick their clitoris in slow circles, put a finger inside their vagina, put a finger inside their arse, lick their clitoris with flicks of the tongue. Or people may make up their own things to do to each other.

I tell everyone that there is often an expectation that the masculine ones (that is, the suit-wearers) are those who "do" and the feminine ones are ones who "receive". I also say that nobody may talk when they are passing notes, but that, if someone is given a note that they do not want "done to them", they should scrumple the note up to indicate this.

SEPTEMBER 14, 1974

How strange it is to look back at what I wrote twenty years ago! I remember how much we learned from each other and, well, how pleasurable it was!

Now those friends have moved on. I sometimes hear from Dorothy, who is now happily married, but rarely from the others. I have new friends, of course, and I still sometimes visit the club in London. And the world itself has changed: even if girls of our kind are not welcome everywhere, we cannot, at least, be sacked from our jobs for being seen at the club.

Perhaps I will revisit the game I wrote above, with my new friends, to remind myself of how things were. But I would add something new.

After everything that had happened above, we would play another evening in the life of the club, but twenty years later. Some would play the same people, but some would choose a new person to play. Before we play, I would remind people how the world has changed.

In particular, I would remind everyone how roles had changed. There were still those who enjoyed taking the "masculine" or "feminine" role. But there were others who rejected those roles and refused to fit cleanly into either.

We would again choose, from my original list of memories, a Thing To Do that evening in the club. And we would play through the evening, as before.

And, at the end of the evening, we would go home with each other again, as described above. But this time, I would remind people how the roles had changed: it was not always expected that the "masculine" one is the "doer" and the "feminine" one the "receiver".

I would make one more change. This time, when we pass notes, we would be allowed to discuss what we wanted to do to each other.

Perhaps, when I next see my friends, I will suggest we play this game. I wonder what the club we create together will be like?

POSTSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR

This game was written for the Golden Cobra competition 2018. It aims to fulfil the following categories: “Best Game About Something No-One Writes Games About” (since, although queer games are becoming more common, games about lesbians are still incredibly rare) and “Best Game That Teaches A Skill”. The game also stems from a challenge by Karin Edman for people to write more games about lesbians.

The game draws on Jill Gardiner’s “From the closet to the screen: women at the Gateways Club 1945-85”, Rebecca Jennings’ “Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain 1945-71” and a range of personal conversations. Thank you to everyone who completed a survey about their sexual preferences for this game.