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There's a certain cloying claustrophobia, growing up in Wales. Every trip to Tesco seems to trigger an infinite parade of familiar faces: your therapist, your primary school teacher, that one family friend you've always called 'auntie'. This enclosure only seems to grow more restrictive for those of us who grew up queer. The experience of growing up somewhere so heavily tinged with the remnants of industrial masculinity creates an overwhelming system of categorisation. Simply, you are either 'one of us' or an 'other'.

Growing up bisexual is strange and confusing; it seems to occupy a space of utter incomprehension. Traversing the binary of sexuality seems to alienate both queer and cishet people alike, even more so in a space where ideas and attitudes towards sexuality can't exactly be categorised as progressive. Acknowledging your same-sex attraction whilst being completely unexposed to any positive or tangible representations of it and being constantly reminded by those around you that you 'have a boyfriend', doesn't allow for much self-expression. I always felt like somewhat of a zoo animal at school. I think I was the only openly bisexual person in my year group. I never announced it but delighted in dropping the bombshell on classmates who simply couldn't comprehend the fluidity of my sexuality. But it left me exposed to prying and often deeply invalidating questions: how could I possibly know if I'd never had sex with a woman? But I had a boyfriend? Doesn't that make you more likely to cheat?

It almost feels as though there's a dichotomy. I'm incredibly privileged to have grown up feeling so welcomed and unashamed, my family have always made me feel accepted. Age 8, my gran and great gran took me to WOW bar in Cardiff for lunch. My Catholic education had definitely osmosised a homophobic undercurrent into me and with hushed whispers I questioned whether they knew 'what kind of bar this was!!' My great-grandmother, clearly a shining beacon for gay rights, shut me down with a curt 'I don't care what happens here, they do lovely sandwiches.' Coming from such a warm environment, I sometimes feel I'm ill-equipped to handle homophobia, I forget that people actually think and behave in that way and the smallest comment can cut deeply.

I didn't start dating girls until I was 17. Naturally, the first girl I dated lived in a village, around 50 miles away, with fewer inhabitants than my secondary school – not sure a love story could get more Welsh. We spoke recently about her experience of growing up queer in such an isolated, rural community. She spoke about how "amazing" her close friends and family were but the larger ecosystem felt and still feels less safe: "I often get shouted at by people from my old school when I'm at my local, but until recently I didn't fear physical harm for being queer. After being sexually and physically assaulted on a night out, I had to be taken to the hospital by the police with a broken nose. I have never felt more uncomfortable and unaccepted by my community." We never experienced any real harassment when we dated but shout out to the man who intently watched us kiss and made weird comments on a Great Western Railway service. Hope you're getting some action now!

I had my first girlfriend at 18 and it felt as though a constant sense of apprehension came included as an unwanted free gift. Conversations suddenly included a survey

of whether or not I felt safe, and I began to hesitate before using the word ‘girlfriend’. Family members’ refusal to acknowledge her as a romantic partner, with their insistence on referring to her only as my friend, left a sour taste. Let’s just say that I’m still wondering how many gal pals buy lilies for each other before a picnic on the beach. I count myself lucky that I never experienced harassment. Sure we couldn’t walk down the street holding hands, without every Brexit voter in the vicinity beginning a crusade to crash their car in the hopes of converting us with their homophobic glare, but I never felt truly unsafe.

Although, I’ve never truly felt unaccepted. Bisexuality has this tendency of being seen as some sort of a phase, a cheeky little stint you’ll grow out of when you find the right man. Despite me not dating a man for well over two years, the undercurrent of expectation that I would pack my woke little jaunt in, threatened to sweep me away. I also feel that there’s an expectation of how queerness should look, particularly for women: whether that’s dyed hair, Doc Martens, an undercut, or a septum ring. I’ve always felt alienated by comments that I ‘look hettie’ as if queerness is some one-size-fits all costume we don the minute we come out. Queer people are honestly some of the worst perpetrators; my most alienating experience at Heaven hasn’t even come from the straight men who now swarm there (a different conversation for a different day) but someone standing next to me in the crowd who impertinently asked, “what are you doing here?” and seemed completely taken aback when I replied “…I’m gay?” Being bisexual sometimes feels as though I’m caught in a cross-current, that there’s an onslaught of invalidation from both sides. My older gay colleague will tell me I’m “only gay when it suits” whilst my sexuality is incessantly seen as some sort of open invitation for a threesome.

Moving to London was truly freeing. For the first time, I didn't feel that I had to remain on high alert when holding a girl's hand out on the street because I saw couples who looked just like us. I had a majority-queer friend group and not those who told me they could no longer hug me for fear I'd 'get turned on' (still unsure of how best to explain to straight girls that they aren't quite my type). Being able to spend time with other queer people in queer spaces is so affirming – I never feel more alive than when I spend my nights dragging all of my friends to Dalston Superstore or when dancing to Charli XCX at Heaven until 4am. The move, for many reasons, helped me feel that I could breathe. The irony of breathing easier in the smog isn't lost on me either.

Coming home for summer, nothing much has changed. It still rains more than it does in London and I still feel somewhat less comfortable expressing my sexuality. Although, part of me resents my own characterisation of Wales as the small-minded backwater, it is true that I experience far less explicit homophobia in London than at home.

Demonising my community or writing them off as 'uneducated' is at the bottom of my agenda. For the most part, the hillside keeps a warm welcome and hospitality remains an integral part of Welsh culture. From my own experience, these communities are often the most willing to open their hearts and minds to the unknown, but it's important to recognise media manipulation in practice. In recent years; the closing of the mines, the recession, Brexit vote, and increasing austerity have worked in the favour of a media who happily point to exactly who the working class should blame. However, I've always wondered how the feelings of

emasculation, which followed the closure of traditional industry, affected perceptions of ‘otherness’ amongst the working class.

Queer identity has always found itself entangled with femininity. Disdainful attitudes towards queerness are often based upon connotations of this demonsied femininity – for instance, gay men are so often seen as effeminate and a lack of this quality leads to the questioning of their queerness. Perhaps it’s because this femininity is directly juxtaposed with the traditional masculinity of Wales’ primary industry for so many years, coal mining. Coal mining as both an industry and way of life produced an acute familiarity with those around you. These small, close-knit communities that developed through necessity – whether due to geographical constraints or the need to support and be supported by those around – simply do not allow for the introduction of outsiders, ‘the other’. Couple this with an ignorance towards or reluctance to acknowledge the queer members of these communities and you’ve bred the perfect storm for the specific brand of homophobia which coloured my childhood.

I really think that my preconception of homophobia’s intrinsic link with these small, often closed-off, Welsh communities remains the basis of my own issue. There’s an assumption – and often reality – that people who grow up in close-knit and unfortunately close-minded communities cannot always break the generational cycles which perpetuate prejudice. As these communities have broken down and people moved away in search of opportunity, in light of the mine closures, their members have grown more accustomed to living alongside those whom they may never have encountered previously – e.g. the queer community. I spoke to my friends about this and Kristyn rightfully reminded me of the story which inspired the film,

Pride. “One of my favourite gay history stories is of LGSM (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) supporting striking miners in South Wales and receiving support in return. I absolutely think such solidarity has influenced the attitudes of a lot of working-class tradesmen towards queer people.” The film is based upon a very real collaboration between a queer group in London, who sought a common ally in the face of Thatcher’s brutal policies, and South Wales trade unionists. The group travelled to the Dulais Valley, wanting to distribute funds they raised on the streets of London. Although initially met with some hesitancy, this unlikely partnership contributed to the Labour Party’s commitment to protect gay rights in 1985, the year which followed the miner’s strike.

In my experience, it’s frequently my peers and not people of my parents’ or grandparents’ age who hold disdainful views of homosexuality. My sister has experienced homophobic abuse on a scale I didn’t know existed within our town and age bracket; in her words, “everyone at school is either openly homophobic or they’re gay, there’s no real in-between”. Her bravery is something really inspiring to me; at fifteen, she is so self-assured, so unbothered by the homophobia directed her way. Her ability to remain confident in her own sexuality is a quality I hope she clings to steadfastly.

Niamh spoke of her confidence for the future of queer youth, whilst acknowledging that: “I come from a place of privilege to be able to say that things are getting better because, for many, they aren’t and they’re still being treated as second class citizens, based on their gender or sexual identity.”

Though the future of queer youth in Wales is somewhat uncertain, the Welsh Labour party has launched an action plan which commits the party to its goal of 'becoming the most LGBTQ+ friendly nation in Europe'. The government reaffirming its commitment to LGBTQ+ youth seems a far cry from their reality. Will this commitment tackle the socioeconomic factors which so often lead to using marginalised groups as a scapegoat? To ensuring the protection of queer spaces? A comprehensive education plan in schools to tackle the kind of verbal abuse my sister receives on the weekly, to prevent another attack happening to someone like Catrin?

Where do we go from here? I don't see myself relocating back to Wales anytime soon, although the inability to find a decent Welsh cake in London does test me. Against all odds, I still have hope. For me, if one person can see and experience positive change then it's proof that things are moving, albeit slowly, in the right direction. I have faith in the Welsh Government, definitely moreso than Westminster, to deliver on this new initiative and improve the experiences of the queer community in Wales. We must never forget the importance of reflecting on our histories – particularly the positive stories such as that of LGSM – learning from others, and seeing where we can improve; how we as individuals can improve the lives of our own, even if the majority of Wales' queer community now lives in East London. It is only through looking at our past, that we can correct our future.