



The Risk Not Taken

J. E. Knowles

How beautiful is your backside.

It's the oldest "chat-up line" in recorded history, as I learned from an eager Egyptologist on my second trip to London. That second trip was my classical period. The first trip was mediaeval and Renaissance, which is how I came to think of my personal history of London as a triptych. Because this trip, the third, I'm finally in the modern period, the now.

I met the Egyptologist on my second trip. Her name was Buffy Bradshaw, and I never saw her without a hat on. This was probably my fault. There was a time, perhaps just that one night, when Buffy would have been glad to let her hair down for me, and more, but I was hesitant in those days, at all the wrong moments. I would rush headlong out of a Tube car, failing to "mind the gap," then hesitate on the escalator, impatient behind those standing on the right, not quite willing to commit to walking on the left. Dizzy with disorientation, emerging from the great depths of the Northern line, I would feel about London as Dr Johnson described it: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of living."

Only I was a woman, and so was Buffy, and that was fifteen years ago. Fifteen years is no time at all on the scale of ancient history, but it is in the life of a modern woman and, above all, of a queer. I understand not everybody likes that

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term, but we were academics then, all queer studies and queer history, “we’re here, we’re queer and we’re not going shopping.” My Egyptologist, hat firmly planted on her head, would lead me by the hand through the grounds of her college or the masses in Hyde Park, where we readied ourselves for the Pride Parade. It was twenty-five years after the Stonewall Rebellion in New York. Here in London, we were protesting the unequal age of consent for gay men. We were also protesting Section 28, which outlawed education about homosexuality, calling it promotion.

Or at least I thought that was what we were protesting. “Here, carry a sign,” Buffy urged me and I proudly hoisted my poster, something about the tax code. Hers was about immigration. I didn’t know what was wrong with Britain’s tax or immigration policies, only that they must be unfair and, probably, homophobic. After all, everyone was against us. If you were queer, you were hated, and you had to chant slogans and watch *Absolutely Fabulous* with all your might.

A lifetime, fifteen years.

The first time I saw Buffy Bradshaw, she was looking for her mail in the porter’s lodge. I saw her from behind, but even so I noticed her hat and its jaunty angle. She rummaged through the “B” box, muttering hieroglyphics or something to herself. If I had had the words that Buffy later taught me, I would have thought, silently, *How beautiful is your backside*.

She stood up, abruptly, which is how she did everything, and beamed at me, an envelope held aloft. “Foreign stamps!” she said. “I love getting a letter with

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foreign stamps.” Then, as an afterthought, she introduced herself. Although we had never met before, I was struck by Buffy, not least by how she said that, “foreign stamps.” It seemed that where the letter came from, the symbols on its outside, were more important than who wrote it or what it said inside. And I came to see that this was true of Buffy too. She was a symbol of herself, and she left clues that an astute anthropologist, at such a close remove, would easily have picked up.

But I wasn’t an anthropologist, nor am I particularly astute. So when Buffy asked me for coffee, that’s all I thought we were having. And when, over said coffee, she explained that she was single, and bi, and that there was a “Bop” on Friday with the LGB Soc and wouldn’t I like to go, I heard the *B* in the Soc and explained that I really didn’t know how to Bop, any more than I knew how to interpret hieroglyphics. But I thanked her for asking and said perhaps we could do something else another time.

Then I went away and thought about her backside, her profile, understanding Buffy the Egyptologist in only two dimensions. I could not read her signals; they were as opaque to me as the Renaissance paintings I’d failed to interpret on my first pass through London, as a consequence of which I’d switched to classics. Why I thought a period even longer ago in history would be easier to understand, I’m not sure. Perhaps it was the abundance of cute classicists with promisingly short hair, many of whom did their bit to put the *B* in LGB Soc. They wore skirts and talked about their boyfriends. Everyone still smoked in those days. I was not certain how to be a dyke in that environment.

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But Buffy was a shining star of the Oriental Studies faculty, and she did not give up. She actually had a job sorting antiquities, which was unusual because there were still student grants at that time; the English had not yet taken on the American habit of mortgaging students' futures for a dubious degree. I went to meet Buffy at work once, and saw her colleague, a man of imposing physicality (I was instantly jealous), picking up tiny pieces of ceramic and labelling them. Buffy, barely five feet tall under her hat, went by with a filing cabinet on her back and a fierce look on her face that said "I lift heavy furniture!"

I loved her. I knew it in that instant. But I didn't say it, and nothing in my behaviour throughout that autumn said it either, though I allowed her to hold my hand everywhere, even in Marks & Spencer. I never asked her out. I waited to see what she would do.

And sure enough, one December day she asked me to dinner; she was cooking. This was something. I'd never been asked to a woman's house for dinner, never mind that I was only twenty-one. I didn't even realise women our age *could* cook; somehow I'd made it by on rice and beans, a bit of pasta, whenever I wasn't eating in college.

And I'd never been to Buffy's place. How did this work? Did she share her kitchen with dozens of housemates? Would they all pile in at exactly the wrong moment, filling the place with tuna smells, drinking my Portuguese wine? The bottle of wine, disgracefully cheap at the off-licence, was all I could afford. I knew nothing about wine and am not certain how I knew I was supposed to bring it. A hostess gift was one of those fragments of etiquette I'd picked up somewhere, half a social

skill, with which I bluffed my way through life.

Buffy's bedsit was a room with a sink, two floors above where the kitchen was located. There was a bath and toilet on yet another floor. No shower. She wore trousers, and I didn't see an ashtray. Two unusual clues that sent me confusing signals about her sexuality: butch? Oral? I didn't know what to make of it, so I smiled and handed her the bottle.

It was too cold to take off my jacket. Someone once asked one of the Arctic explorers "What's the coldest place you've ever been?" and he replied, "A British bedroom."

"I'm sorry, I didn't have time to cook," Buffy said, in a way that meant she wasn't sorry at all. I realised I had no idea what she could have spent her day doing. I knew very little about her, and had the disconcerting feeling I would still feel that way, if I knew Buffy Bradshaw for the rest of my life. Which I had some desire to do.

She'd got Chinese takeaway instead. It smelled of garlic and lemon grass. She offered me chopsticks from the bag and, since I didn't want to venture two floors down to the kitchen to look for a fork, I did my best to eat with them. I am not the most delicate person; I would have been hopeless at her colleague's job, with the tiny artefacts. Buffy ate quickly and neatly, pausing between bites or sentences to look at me intently over her chopsticks, as though there was so much more to say.

We talked. About what we were studying, in that joyous way of young scholars, not questioning why we were learning things or whether it would ever

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pay the bills. About the age of consent and Section 28. Sex hovered around the edges of our conversation, a political act, the ghosts of Wilde and Orwell making ironic comments over our shoulders. Buffy told me that she used to drink more, and be Catholic.

We sipped the Portuguese wine, more for warmth than for taste, but the room continued to feel chilly. Buffy announced that she was going to change out of her clothes, and emerged in a dressing gown, still wearing her hat. I should have removed it, heard what she wasn't saying. Instead, I took my leave, as awkward at the door as I would have been in bed.

She did not return subsequent calls.

And so I'm back here, on my third trip to London, committed to the present, to finding what I've lost. In my mind, of course, Buffy is still twenty-one, and has the same expression on her face as the last time I saw her: half smile, half hurt. It's not her face I see, though. It's her beautiful backside I see in every crowd, a haircut like hers, a youthful scholar hustling by, though both of us have aged.

Or has she? I don't, after all, know if Buffy Bradshaw is any longer living, or at least living in London. For all the Web-based ways we now have of connecting with one another, I have never felt so isolated. And Buffy is a cipher. She can't be Googled. We could, for all I know, be on the same train, even the same platform, and never connect with one another, she too busy peering into a tome on Egyptology, I peering into the wasted years of my life.

There is a sign on the Underground now that says, "Do not take any

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risks.” I don’t remember that sign from fifteen years ago. We have become risk-averse people, all too aware of the dangers of subway cars, of white-water rafting, of going to bed with a girl just because the night, and we, are young. Buffy was not the only risk I’ve failed to take.

I regret every single one.

J. E. Knowles



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