

**QUEER**  
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Cameron had always suspected that he was queer. Now, at age 11 he had no doubt. A single sighting had proven it. His heart had pounded and not only his heart.

But let us start at the beginning. Ever since the 1980's genetic engineering had proceeded apace despite its bad name among the luddites. True, international law had restricted its application to non-humans and the law was enforced rigorously. But the design had changed the natural world irretrievably. The scourge of insects and their parasites had been effectively eliminated. Grain and vegetable productivity had been multiplied by a factor that had been unimaginable.

In the wake of this productivity, human population burgeoned to a precarious limit. The problem then became how to live in a totally urban world. The solution was communal. Family structure was dissolved and replaced with longhouse dormitories. Fear of a cataclysmic population collapse resulting from irreversible depletion of resources mandated strict segregation of the sexes - in all matters.

What were formerly seen as natural urges had to be contained, yes, even suppressed. So, homosexuality and lesbianism became not merely the norm, but obligatory. It wasn't that far a stretch. Their values had gone from public disgrace to acceptance to praise in a matter of a single generation. Now they had not only the upper hand but the only hand.

So, Cameron knew he was in trouble the moment he saw her. How had this come to pass? Despite all changes, boys would still be boys. The pack had snuck out on a raid of the girls' quarters of the female longhouse. The boys went to punish and beat the girls. But, of course the girls screamed and went to tattle on the boys the moment they detected trouble. The boys fled and were not caught. No punishment was meted out for such winked-at behavior when the report reached the men.

Cameron had gone even though he bore the girls no ill will. In this he saw himself different than the other boys. And when they broke into the longhouse, just seeing her was the most exciting, enticing, alluring vision of his life. All he wanted was to entwine himself with her. Could there be any other boys who felt like he did? He could not risk confessing. The men and boys made it clear that deviant behavior and even feelings were not tolerated. Cameron knew all too well that life was rendered unbearable for the offenders. Perhaps that was why the suicide rate was so high among adolescent boys and especially young men. The girls fared little better in this environment.

Cameron snuck over to the female longhouse alone several times over the next year in the remote hope that he would see her again. He prayed that she could have the same deviant feelings. But he always failed to make any contact, and getting caught would be a disaster. So, after that fruitless year, he gave up these forays.

Then life became truly dismal. He dreaded the approaches of the other boys and even more so, those of the grown men. Inside, he was convinced the situation was unnatural. Oddly, amidst all this repression there was no censorship, so he knew that during the vast pageant of human history, what would be called normal relations were those that occurred between the sexes. And he also knew that reproduction almost everywhere in the animal and plant world still required the joining of male and female 'seeds'.

Several years later the unimaginable happened. A grand war, a scourge to end all scourges, broke out on all fronts around the globe. Bombings were so indiscriminant and massive that the Earth caught fire. The skies darkened and the air became acrid. Under the sunless gloom the harvest largely failed. Communications ceased. Facilities and infrastructure were shuttered. Cameron had long known fear, albeit of a different kind. For the first time now, he knew hunger.

As autumn deepened into winter, cold added to the misery and suffering. Little had ever been stored so it didn't take long for famine to set in. People began starving, then dying. Some of the little seed had to be saved for next year's crop, on the hope that there would be a next year. It was guarded vigilantly.

In mid-winter the bombings ceased. Late in the winter the darkness thinned to a thick, ugly haze, so that on the best days the sun could cast dim shadows. Communications recovered in primitive manner. Electronic communication was irretrievably lost. News, which now took the form of rumors, was spread by the few daring travelers. But there was great consistency to the rumors. The war had taken an immeasurable toll. Some large regions were totally depopulated and all had suffered cataclysmic declines. Cameron's region suffered less than most but still, in the half of what remained of the men's longhouse there were 10 empty beds for each that was occupied.

When spring came it was clear that desperate efforts would have to be made just to survive. In hard times, cooperation trumps competition. The surviving men and boys were compelled to visit the women. The women too had suffered unspeakable losses. All would have to work together, regardless of sex, to rebuild.

Cameron was too emaciated, ill, and debilitated to notice any of his new companions. In the plowing he overextended himself and was bedridden for several weeks. Spring passed into a beautiful summer. The air had much greater clarity and the lake, with its clear, deep waters would have been wonderful to frolic and swim in if anyone had had the energy. When Cameron recovered enough to return to the fields he became one of the weeders and debuggers, for every grain that could be harvested was precious.

The harvest was abundant. The Earth had recovered first and then the people began to recover. More had died awaiting the harvest, of course, but the survivors now began to fatten. As the blood returned to his face, a new surge of dormant feelings welled up from Cameron's depths.

The winter was dedicated to rebuilding a single longhouse. All worked together and Cameron was roused by the proximity of the girls. He worked up the courage to get close to them and found that such mingling was not unique. It appeared that the holocaust had reignited long proscribed feelings, which were now not only winked at but almost encouraged. In this

tentatively joyous crowd Cameron rediscovered his one time secret love, and she had blossomed as had the spring.

As spring ripened into summer the lake called out. Cameron joined a group going for a swim. The water was so blue it seemed that if you put your hand into it, your hand would come out blue. But, of course, it came out clean. Cameron swam into the depths where the water was bluest. He began to tread water, gazing at the cobalt blue all around. But a sudden splashing struck him from his reverie. It was his mermaid. She surfaced a foot in front of him, facing him with a look he had never seen before but instinctively understood.

Cameron did not feel queer at all.