

JJ & Alex - Storytellers for Scarborough Stories

JJ & Alex's story is about their experience of being queer in Scarborough.

Content warning: Transphobia & homophobia

Alex: My mum always had this sewing box.

My dad made it for her.

Inside were odds and ends and bits and bobs.

Grandma's knitting needles were medieval swords.

A piece of wedding veil, a wig to wear.

Each layer new things to wrap imagination 'round.

Grandad called me free spirited as they watched me play and grow,

Learning who I was before I knew myself.

JJ: The first time I saw someone like me, on the TV, they were chased down an alley and assaulted. That stuck with me...but why? I was always a tomboy.

Wanted to be a boy. Then teenage years came, and with that a desperation to fit in. So out came the dresses, and skirts, and dream matte mousse in a colour three shades more orange than me, leaving tide marks on my skin.

Being raised in Norfolk, a county that hated difference but loved a farmer boy, meant being openly ... me wasn't a choice.

Young Person: It felt normal, it felt natural, it felt normal because it was natural.

At 8, I told my parents, that Alice at school was my girlfriend,

They said she can't be because girls have to date boys,

Later Aunt Helen, took me for a lemon top on south beach,

She always knows what to say, before I've even said it.

When I told her, she said;

"You can date girls or boys. The world is wider than the sea in front of us.

Most of the ocean hasn't even been explored. You've got so much more ahead of you. How exciting is that."

A: I really didn't know myself until I stepped on London turf.

J: Moving to London at 20 for drama school, felt like my world would open up, like the closet door was swung open.

A: A northern kid let loose in adult chaos.

J: But the only costumes inside were for roles I was never meant to play.
Generic woman.

A: An endless stream of culture and limit testing.

Andy Warhol exhibitions.

Clubs that are exclusively queer.

Falling asleep on the night bus. And waking up in the bus station.

J: I should have been Romeo not Juliet.

A: Experiencing what true love really meant.

J: And like that ill-fated pair, I fell in love with the wrong person, who couldn't see past the painted-on smile that didn't reach my eyes.

A: Surrounded by people who knew me as much as I then knew myself.

YP: At School, no one gets it, especially the teachers. When lockdown happened, it felt like a break, I'd open up my phone and explore. This screen my only window to an ocean a world beyond the shoreline.

8 to 60 second bursts of community

"Let's watch this together, you're in my bubble"

A text from Aunt Helen with a picture of an online pride.

The virtual gathering of the people I want to meet. People like me.
When Scarborough opened up again, the town felt small, and I felt alone.
Thrust into a changed world around me and inside.
But where were those celebrations that I'd seen online in my little northern town?

A: The pull of the North brought me back.

To a seaside town with old world charm.

J: The world closed down. And my closet, my world opened up. And pushing past all those dresses, I found me. Trans masc. Nonbinary.

YP: Aunt Helen cut my hair short.

I loved the way it made me feel.

Until some kids at school spat slurs and words that burned.

A: But soon the technicolour had faded.

“Bit early to be looking that gay”

Dark clouds loom over the Castle on the cliff as the waves of new reality crashed over me.

I let myself closeup and packed away the colour and spark that once reigned free.

J: Found a scattered round the North community.

A: Until a chance meeting in the street from a face I'd nearly forgotten.

J: As well as finding a twin flame in my old supervisor from London days.

YP: I ran all the way to south beach

Catching my breath.

Remembering lemon tops with Aunt Helen.

A: One Summer Day,

J: My birthday

YP: Two people stood side by side.

Two adults like me.

A: Holding hands,

J: Before we took a breath

YP: And screamed joyfully spiriting into the sea.

A: Only for you would I run into the freezing North Sea

J: Only with you would I swim in murky waters full of pee

YP: Laughing. Fearless.

Into an ocean unexplored to me.

A: The waves. A cold blast.

J: Against the strong shield of who we are

J&A: Together

YP: Maybe I'm not alone in Scarborough.

I legged it home

Opened Facebook messenger and typed frantically to Aunt Helen and online

friends.

Words poured from my fingertips like waves crashing against the harbour.

My phone started to buzz.

We exist.

Not just within the screen.

Was I going to find myself on these streets that I grew up on?

Is there no escape 'til uni comes along?

The memory of those two people,

Running into the sea

Authentically themselves

Makes me believe that maybe I can too.

J: The first time I left the house in my binder, on Brid south beach, a man poured a bottle of water over my head. A cold blast. A cold laugh. I've been lucky for the most part, except for one. Walking up from Aquarium top on the phone to her: 'I just don't know how to talk to you now', after not speaking to me for months. I nodded and laughed, as tears silently fell down my face and she whittled on. I came up to your front room. And cried on your Chesterfield. You asked if you could touch me knowing that when I cry, I don't always want the claustrophobia of tight arms.

A: And I told you,

"I see you. And those who really know you do to."

I saw the technicolour was fading.

Away from all that made us visibly proud.

I know too well it's hard to block out that voice,

That makes me lesser than I am,

Our reconnection balanced those thoughts,

Our chosen community talk and listen.

And now we constantly remind each other of our worth.

I'm proud of who I am again and all the things that make me, me.

I've popped the black and white bubble to let colour burst back in.
To be born a certain way and not know how to thread the pattern together,
Well, that's okay!
We're on this journey together.

YP: Do I want to leave this town the way that I grew up?
Where is there to go before you turn 18?
I want to be accepted in the real world
Not just in front of a screen that's so far been my only window
How did those two people manage it all?
How can I be the person I dream to be?

A: An often-asked question.

J: An urgent request for safe space to be true to identity.

A: The first time we stepped into a room of young queer and trans people
They told us they didn't have a safe space

J: Neither did we when we grew up

A: We did it as adults,

J: We did it in community

J&A: We did it together

J: What can we do to change this in Scarborough?

A: To work with the young, adults in their own right,
To create a space that's safe to grow,

J: Knowing that you're not just one part of the sea
But a whole ocean

A: A creative

J: A performer

A: An activist

J: A writer

A: A genealogist

J: Your adult child

A: A sibling and a son

J: A comedian

A: A glorious drag queen

J: A warm hug

A: A listening ear

J: A unicorn

A: A constant learner

J: A teacher

J&A: Part of the LGBTQIA+ Community

YP: Aunt Helen said

The world is wider than the sea in front of us
Most of the ocean hasn't been explored

J: Our young people's stories in Scarborough,
stretch from Scalby Mills to Holbeck Hill

A: In black and white Scarborough feels small
But in this town, there is a community,

J: A prism of refracted light, a rainbow of endless possibilities.

A: A whole community stood side by side.

J&A: The strong shield of who we are together.