

COMING OUT STRAIGHT

SARAH CHAUNCEY

On my 17th birthday, I decided to become a lesbian. It wasn't the result of a long coming-out process, nor of a tumble with my best friend. I completely disregarded the fact that not only had I not slept with a woman, I'd never really wanted to. All the cool women around me were dykes, and dammit, I was going to be one, too.

I'd heard it over and over: feminism is the theory and lesbianism is the practice. And I wasn't about to be a bad feminist.

It's not like I even knew for sure what I was giving up. By the time I left high school, I'd only had one sexual experience. Flying home from spring break in Bermuda, my senior year, the boy I'd hooked up with for the week looked at me through five-beer eyes. "Wanna fuck?" he asked romantically. I shrugged, figuring it was time to get the "virgin" label off my back. We snuck into the airplane bathroom, my parents and his lacrosse team none the wiser (or so I thought). An uneventful deflowering was made slightly more interesting when the plane began to land mid-act. The stewardess began pounding on the door. I was bored. He was small as a gherkin anyway.

Four months later, I turned seventeen.

That summer, I was working as a canvasser in the Boston office of 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women. Every afternoon, I'd march emphatically up and down driveways around the outskirts of Boston, a clipboard in my hand, explaining the injustices of insurance company hiring practices to pink-slippered housewives who couldn't have cared less. When I wasn't out in the suburbs, I was sitting in the air-conditioned 9 to 5 offices, kicking back with my colleagues. Hanging around there, though, was giving me an eerie, unsettled feeling.

Many of my co-workers were lesbians, and their open affection made me uncomfortable. Secretly, I felt jealous of the community they had, and the comfort they seemed to have with themselves. My whole life, I'd never been a part of anything, and my self-esteem was just above that of a snail.

I had always been proud that I was a leftist, though--and these slight twinges of what seemed like homophobia were unacceptable. I confided my misgivings about my incorrect ways of thinking to Pam, a co-worker who seemed friendly. To make me feel less excluded--and also to teach me more about gay women--she suggested that I go with her to the Gay Pride Parade that weekend. That's how I came to celebrate my seventeenth birthday marching down Beacon Street, amid floats bearing drag queens and leather-clad women, walking among the less stereotyped folks on the melting pavement, dancing with friends to the strains of Eddy Grant and the Bronski Beat, and passing a joint back and forth.

"What a great community," I thought, as I inhaled a bittersweet mixture of pot and tar. "I think I'll be a lesbian." And that was that.

For someone like me, "coming out" didn't pose much of a problem. My father, a long-suffering liberal parent, simply cleared his throat when I told him, which was what he did when he didn't really know what to say. My three older sisters didn't react much either, only expressing slight confusion that just the week before, I'd been pining for a boy called Brian. As for my friends--well, having grown up in an academic community, I had no right-wing friends at all to scare with the news.

Actually being a lesbian, though, proved more difficult. Not that I had any trouble with the ideological part. An activist by nature, I was more than happy to spend my first year at Sarah Lawrence College getting arrested on civil disobedience actions--which was what "real" lesbians seemed to do. Gay or not, I would much rather stand in front of the library shouting "USA out of South Africa!" than actually attend my literature classes. A serious number of the dykes were stoners, and I liked doing bong hits with them after rallies. I didn't mind listening to Holly Near for hours on end; I loved not having to shave my legs. I had always been a feminist, and so it felt totally natural to hang out with lesbians, demonstrate alongside lesbians, talk the lesbian talk. What was more difficult was the physical side of things.

Maybe my weird ambivalence came across to other women. Maybe – more likely – I was too clumsy to make a successful first move. Whatever. The fact was, I couldn't get a date. Not until over a year after I'd come out did I actually sleep with a woman.

At one of 9 to 5's regional conferences – held at a Northeastern women's college – I met Amy. She was the same age as me: same build, same short-cropped, dark blonde hair. If I was going to go for a narcissistic stereotype, she was perfect. She was gutsy and brash – where I was insecure and needy – and I felt something. I wasn't sure what, but I knew This Would Be It. We sat in a lecture hall, listening to a woman with dark glasses drone on about the state of women and the economy. Halfway through, we snuck out and went back to the dorm room where she was staying, giggling about how bad we were for leaving such an important lecture.

Inside her dorm room, the pretense of a back rub fell away as we collapsed onto her creaky twin bed. My heart started to race, with what seemed like desire – and with fear. Amy kneeled over me, placing one hand on either side of my head. Her lips covered mine. I could taste the coffee we'd shared before the lecture, a taste that was sweet and also slightly stale.

I moved my hands towards her neck, and started to unbutton her shirt. I inhaled the scent of her neck, then the sweet coconut smell of tanning lotion. As my lips moved down to her collarbone, I got a mouthful of lotion that was distinctly less appealing than its aroma. Ick. I moved on. Further down, my mouth found her breast. It was softer and bigger than I'd expected. I put my lips over her nipple. Then, slowly, I licked it.

I had fantasized about having a woman's breast in my mouth, but truthfully, once it was there, I felt like a one-dimensional cartoon character, with a puzzled look on my face and a thought bubble that read, "Uh... now what?" And I wasn't so sure I liked the feeling of power that came with every flick of my tongue – I felt almost embarrassed to be the reason this woman was writhing beside me. After a panicky moment or two, I let her nipple slip from my mouth and moved upward for a kiss (*that* I knew how to do), pressing my body against hers. I started to move my hips and grind against the place where I guessed her clitoris was. From somewhere far off, I noticed that our two sets of large breasts were difficult to coordinate. You kind of had to alternate them, like cogs in a wheel.

Thank God she didn't ask me to go down on her, I thought a little later, when these strange, soft shiftings and wriggings were over. There was no way – *no way* – I was going to put my tongue inside a woman's wet vagina. Or dry, for that matter. Nope. The lesbian line stopped there.

The next morning, I was relieved as we walked out of the dorm, our pinkies intertwined. Amy was smiling. I had my first girlfriend. I was part of the in-crowd.

A week after the conference, I phoned Amy from the 9 to 5 office. When I asked what she was doing, she said, "Having sex." Not that I thought we were ready for a commitment ceremony or anything, but still, that comment ranked right up there with "Oh, burning you in effigy." "With who?" I asked in a way I thought was casual. "With a man," she replied. "Uh...why?" "To prove that I'm still attractive. Look, can I call you later?" Giggle. Click.

My mistake was that, from that episode, I learned to hate bisexuals. Looking back on it, I simply should have learned to hate Amy. I became even more determined to be a Really Good Lesbian. I gave up meat.

Since I didn't really want to have sex with women, I did the next logical thing: I got involved with a woman who was celibate, breaking a new record for lesbian bed death. Laura was my girlfriend. I was not her girlfriend. I didn't really understand, but given that we didn't have sex anyway, I figured it was just semantics. We spent every waking minute - and most sleeping ones - together, and neither of us poured a cup of coffee without the other's approval. She was mousy, scruffy with a big nose that held up coke-bottle glasses, and I adored her. We sat in the campus pub night after night, getting drunk and philosophizing. We smoked pot, hash and opium, went to Adrienne Rich poetry readings - even though I hated poetry - and shared Sunday morning bagels with shmears. We giggled about how stupid straight people were. And we didn't have sex.

Laura was gay, but she wasn't much of an activist. I, on the other hand, was wading deeper and deeper into the part of gayness I liked best: strikes and sit-ins. By the spring of my sophomore year, I was getting arrested in civil disobedience actions almost every other weekend. That March, I joined several hundred women who were blockading the Stock Exchange. In protest of what, I can't recall now. But I belonged, and I was doing something important. Sitting next to me was an older woman writer whom I idolized (and still do). With hard-earned wrinkles and a river of silver hair, Grace Paley was everything I hoped to be when I was in my fifties. She was straight, but none of the lesbians on campus would believe it. "Grace is too cool to be straight," they'd argue over beers. "She's gotta be a dyke." Straight women were seen as traitors, un-cool and useless to the cause of feminism.

Getting stoned after a successful demonstration was a tradition, almost part of the rituals of activism. And of Sarah Lawrence. I was a dedicated stoner, so I smoked more and then expanded my horizons with opium and – accidentally – PCP. Eventually, I spent so much time getting high that I didn't go to classes. You don't go to classes, you don't get credits. You don't get credits, you get asked to "reconsider your decision to be in college at this time." In the politest possible way, laissez-faire Sarah Lawrence was kicking me out. It was like being asked to leave McDonald's because you have bad table manners. I was numb, but not too upset. Some of my calm came from the drugs I was doing, but some of it was real--apart from Laura, there was little that I would really miss.

I wanted to start over, somewhere else--hopefully, someplace other than the Northeast. If I moved to another city, I figured I could start over fresh, and make everyone think I was the best lesbian who ever existed. So I tapped into my activist connections and came up with a job down in Washington, DC. By mid-July, I had what I wanted. I was living in a gorgeous Victorian house in Mount Pleasant (Major Lesbian Neighborhood) with three other women. The height of Lesbian Cool.

One of my housemates worked for *off our backs*, a radical feminist newspaper. I was promoting a leftist lesbian band. Another of the women who lived there--who phoned me once from her therapist's office to yell at me about something--worked in a women's shelter. Our phone was tapped, our mail arrived irregularly and frequently opened, and we discovered that one of the main people organizing El Salvador benefits – which I stage-managed – actually worked for the CIA, and was keeping files on each of us. If I hadn't found the files myself, I wouldn't have believed it.

I had the giddy feeling that I was living at the epicenter of feminist chic. Still, there were things I didn't like about Mount Pleasant. I felt constantly nervous around my room-mates, who sneered at me for minor political faux pas, like calling another woman a 'bitch' ("You're equating women with dogs"). Terrified that they would decide I wasn't a good enough lesbian, I was becoming loudly horny for girls: a lesbian version of the closeted gay man who overcompensates by talking about "hooters" all the time.

But the real downside of being in this hard-line household was the weird, almost conservative dreariness of the way we lived. Take Christmas, for instance. To "celebrate" the heterosexist-consumerist holiday, my roommates decorated an anemic tree with buttons bearing political slogans ("The future is female;" "If we can send one man to the moon, why can't we send them all?") and no ornaments. That was it.

The final straw came early the next year, in April. My house was a separatist house – meaning that men weren't allowed inside without 24 hours' notice. My father dropped by to visit me – my 80-year-old father. It was a surprise, so I wasn't able to give the requisite amount of notice, and my three housemates were livid. I hadn't been scolded that badly since I was in kindergarten.

I understood the importance of 'womyn-only space' – but this was my dad, not some frat-boy quarterback from Georgetown. I realized I would have to think things over. Once I started to think, I couldn't stop. I began to contemplate my other "crimes" – using deodorant (a tool of the patriarchy), buying coffee that wasn't picked by Nicaraguan rebels, admitting I thought a "sculpted labia" necklace was just a little...weird. I thought a little longer, and I got mad. Then I moved out.

The leftist band I'd been working for decided that they'd rather have a tour manager who could form a coherent sentence, something beyond, "Got any papers?" So they fired me, and I left that life behind too. I decided gay men weren't so bad, after all. They thought I was fabulous, and they didn't demand anything from me. I began working in the "world's largest lesbian and gay bookstore." I wrote music reviews for queer publications. I met Evan.

Since I'd started work at the bookstore, I had had crushes on one gay male friend, maybe two. Certainly not more than five. But now, for the first time, I was dizzy in love. Evan was a real touchy-feely, tree-hugging, Birkenstock-wearing kind of guy – just my type. We had long talks for hours about everything – you know the routine. We'd have cheese-and-wine picnics by the river. We'd rush up the stairs to my bedroom, strip down to our underpants and give each other long, naked massages. He would press the base of my spine and explain how that particular spot could sexually arouse a person without their awareness. I was very aware. He would lift one of my breasts and let it flop, intensely fascinated. I'd trace a pattern through just the right amount of chest hair. I had never even realized I liked chest hair.

One afternoon, Evan recalled an article from his mother's Cosmo, about how women can tell if their breasts are perky by placing a pencil underneath. If the pencil stays, the breast is sagging. He asked if he could test my breasts. I laughed, and put a large book under my tit. It stayed. I explained to him that DD breasts just aren't "perky."

I liked kissing him. We'd kiss, once, twice, three times. That kind of pecking around before you start seriously making out. We'd gaze hungrily at each other, as though we were about to dive into each other's bodies. But we never did.

Eventually, Evan went back to his male lover.

The breakup of the affair with Evan--after five months of naked massages and no sex--sent me into therapy. Ah, therapy. Where all good lesbians belong. I told my therapist I wanted to deal with this internalized homophobia that was making me think about men and keeping me from realizing my true lesbian potential. I just *wanted* to be straight, I said. All my many...many... many attractions to men were simply internalized heterosexism, self-hatred, whatever. It never occurred to me to call it lust. While my straight-woman peers were out there dating, I was telling my therapist that I'd be the first dyke to "settle for a man 'cuz I can't find a woman." She just sat there quietly and looked very, very confused. Jung didn't have an answer for this one.

I decided it was time to have sex with a man.

I was working on *Woza Afrika*, the first festival of Black South African theater. Khaja was a star saxophone player back home. He didn't speak much English, and I sure as hell didn't speak Zulu.

Afterwards, he leaned on his elbow and explained that he had two wives and four children back in South Africa. "That's okay," I replied. "I'm a lesbian."

Khaja was, um, big. Not to reinforce racial stereotypes or anything, but we're talking nuclear banana. Sex with him had been painful – in my mind, though, this was a relief. Now I knew it: I *must* be a lesbian. Doing it with a man just *hurt* – it hurt so much I was sure it was wrong for me. So what if I still kept on trading gazes with the guys I worked with, or the earthy-crunchy male artists I passed in Adams-Morgan? Lesbianism was my choice, my ideology, my destiny. I had to date women. And for the next few years – weaving in and out of weirdly unsatisfying love affairs – I did.

Not until five years later, at drama school – when I'd moved to another city and another state – did I allow myself to start thinking that I might be fooling myself. It took time; it took some geographical distance. Perhaps most of all, it took drama school – an environment driven by sexual energies – to make me admit my yearning for men. Once we'd started rehearsals of *The Cherry Orchard*, the tortuous question of my sexuality suddenly seemed straightforward. Once or twice a month, at various blowing-off-steam parties, I found myself making out with George, a compact, soap-opera-looking actor with a squared-off jaw. I discovered that I liked the unfamiliar graze of his stubbled cheeks and the smell of his harsh sweat, mixed with Polo. George was officially "taken"--but after a while, I moved on to other men. When I did finally start to have straight sex, it was as though a dam had been unblocked. For the first few months, I allowed myself to be taken by practically anyone who wanted me – which had to do with low self-esteem, as well as making up for lost time. Still, it felt as if I was moving forward. I might be getting there awkwardly, but finally I was doing what my body wanted.

Two of my best gay activist buddies, Ron and Paul, kept on writing to me, despite my bizarre silence. I missed their friendship, and I felt guilty about not responding to their postcards. Finally, I sat down one night and wrote them a long, long letter. I wrote that I couldn't help who I was attracted to, that I felt I'd been living a lie, but I was afraid to tell anyone for fear of disapproval. In short, I was "coming out" to them. And I hoped they were still my friends.

Five days after I sent the letter, I got a call from Ron. His voice sounded warm, as if he wanted to hug me. "Honey, we don't care who you fuck, as long as it's good and we hear all about it."

After that--summoning my nerve--I began to call my old friends, one by one. It took me the better part of two years. "Coming out" was a humbling experience for me--but a freeing one, too. Some friends--men and women--have told me that they'd often considered doing an intervention on me. They had wanted to sit me down on their sofa--look hard in my eyes--and say: "Hon, we know your heart and politics are in the right place, but we think you'd be happier with men." As they often say with gay people, I was the last to know.

These days, I live in Toronto, I'm single and I date men (mostly heterosexual ones). It's been a while now that I've been able to separate my politics from my personal life. Thankfully, the landscape of the left has changed as well, and feminism is no longer the exclusive domain of lesbians – or even of women.

I consider myself straight, although technically my history makes me bisexual. I don't want to perpetuate the myth that lesbianism is a phase, or that all lesbians need is a good man (I haven't found one yet). And to call myself completely heterosexual would minimize everything I learned while identifying as a lesbian. Heterosexuality, I've decided, is a cruel trick of nature. Men understand men, emotionally and physically, better than women do; women understand women better than men. Those of us who date the opposite sex sit around bitching about how our partners don't comprehend us. I have a feeling that God (or Whoever) just sits back, watching and laughing.

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Originally published as "Closeted Hetero" on Word.com, January 2000

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