

A Game of Telephone, Cheesy Girlfriends, and Suicide Attempts
by Leslie Heiden

"Coming Out" is a strangely appropriate term for the process a person has to venture upon in order to come to terms with his or her own sexuality. For me, being a lesbian is something that is constantly inside me, a true part of me - the way that eating and breathing is a part of me. Coming out seems to mean sharing that part of your being with the people around you - this is a never-ending task. At least, that has been my experience. Entering high school, I was terrified of people finding out, even though my mom already knew. Her response was "Well, sweetheart, that's one humongous 'duh'," but I still feared the people who - and I was well aware of the fact that they existed, even at fifteen - would not be as understanding. By the time I left high school, I was a valedictorian with her sights on college and law school that also happened to be a very proclaimed lesbian. It was funny how having everyone know my sexuality automatically associated me with some strange myth of the "mysterious lesbian" and never with anything that I had accomplished in high school. I wasn't Leslie the valedictorian; I was Leslie the lesbian. I wasn't Leslie, lead attorney on the Mock Trial team who led her teammates to the region finals. No, I was Leslie the lesbian.

I also found it mind-boggling how "coming out" in high school can be like a bad game of telephone (you know, that dumb game you play at slumber parties when you're a relatively small child?). My coming out in high school went something like this:

"Summer, I think I'm a lesbian."

"Really, I always kind of thought that you were." We were kissing at the time.

"Summer, I think that I love you."

"Really, well you really just aren't my cup of tea. Besides have you met Mark? He's this really wonderful guy..." We were curled up together on a weekend getaway that we took to Santa Cruz.

That was it, with a broken heart and a need to justify my existence, I set out to come out to the world. Now, here is where the game of telephone became a gigantic nuisance in my life:

"Deena, guess what? I'm a lesbian."

"Really, well you know that I don't care."

"Hey Michael, guess what? Leslie's gay."

"Really? Wow, that's totally cool, I wonder if she'll let me watch."

"Hey Rick guess what? Leslie's a dyke and she's had a threesome with a couple of girls at Fresno State."

"Really? Wow, I wonder if they taped it."

"Hey Steven, guess what? Leslie is a lesbo and she had this orgy with some chicks in our math class, I heard that one of them is pressing charges for rape."

"Hey Dan, have you heard about Leslie? She's a total pervert. I heard she raped some girls in Trig class and some other woman is pressing charges for molesting her daughter, can you believe that?"

"Well sure, she's a fag right?"

Meanwhile, I was sitting at home studying for my United States History Advanced Placement exam and trying to write an essay on Hamlet. Of course, nobody had the courage to come face to face with me and confront me on anything, but I knew what was going on - the way that people were looking at me, the whispers behind my back.

It wasn't completely horrible though, after some long talks, embarrassing questions and some tears, my friends mostly accepted me as "normal" and I grew even closer with my male friends because I was now considered "one of the guys." Summer and I worked it out too, and though she wasn't gay and wasn't capable of loving me like that, she is closer to me than a sister today. So, I was able to stand up a graduation, proud of my accomplishments and happy to be who I was - excited about going to college where, as everyone had always told me, I was finally going to be able to be open and I'd finally find someone who would love me and who I could love in return without any shame or fear... Well, you know what? They were wrong. College wasn't the place where I could finally be myself. No, it was like starting over at square one.

I moved into the dorms and realized that I was face to face with fifty some girls who didn't know me at all and had no knowledge of all the battles that I had to fight in high school just to be able to be left alone about my sexuality - that is to say nothing about being open and accepted as Leslie the human being - not Leslie the Lesbian. I went to classes, and except for a few vaguely familiar faces from high school, nobody knew there either. I went to the first meeting of the Smittcamp Family Honors College (the scholarship program that blessed me with a full ride scholarship) and 75 faces that not only were clueless about my sexuality but turned out to be (on the majority) conservatives who had no tolerance for homosexuals who "flaunted themselves" (which basically meant, any homosexual who didn't keep their sexuality to themselves). College, at first seemed less like the haven for homosexuals that I had been promised, but a place that was even less inviting than high school to difference. (I have to say here that, of course, a lot of this was a lot worse in my mind because of my fears, but that didn't make it any less terrifying).

Scared to death of intolerance and homophobia, I found myself back in the closet, a place I never expected to be once I got to college. During this first semester of college, I felt lucky to have Jennifer and my other friends from high school to lean on and my mother for support. I wouldn't have made it very long without them supporting me... even if they were supporting my silence. Some days I would go to class and the issue of feminism would come up and someone would make some off color joke about "Nazi Lesbians" or some other issue related to homosexuality would come up and everyone would stifle laughter (it isn't the politically correct thing to do to laugh out loud at a prejudice joke, mind you. One must instead smile inconspicuously and laugh under their breath or the truth about their homophobia might be exposed. God forbid a bigot be labeled a bigot!). I would feel an overwhelming desire to stand up and proclaim my sexuality at the top of my lungs just so that these people would know that the stereotypical "faggot" that they have in their head is not the way that we really are. But I was too tired to fight the fight again. I couldn't go to each person in my surroundings and try to make them understand me and have a more realistic view of what it meant to be gay. I might not wear makeup but I do shave my legs, I have no desire for men sexually, but that doesn't mean that I want to be one. Yes I like to play pool, but I don't play softball. Yes, I do think motorcycles are cool but I can't answer your questions about engine repair. I don't wear Birkenstocks, drink tea, eat granola, or have a million cats...

and I don't fit into any other stereotype that you can think of either!

That was when I met Jessica, a girl who melted my heart and actually turned out to be a lesbian too. She was so intelligent, and funny. She has an amazing talent for the clarinet and music and it will take her far in life. Her beauty and her hands awed me while she played. During one of her performances, her fingers moving so fluidly and confidently over the instrument, that glow in her eyes that showed the happiness that she felt, and the feeling that I had in my heart as I watched her just shine up there on stage - that was when I knew that I was in love.

With Jessica is where my coming out story for the beginning of my college career, begins to take shape. With Jessica, the first person I had ever met who was truly a lesbian, I felt a new kind of confidence that I hadn't ever felt before. Not only was I no longer alone in the world as a lesbian, but also I had someone who was attracted to me and who cared about me. I was more willing to come out to the world then, than I ever was before. I wanted people to know. I wanted people to look at this amazing woman who was my girlfriend and know that she picked me, that I was happy with her and that she was happy with me - I wanted, finally, to be proud of who I was... only Jessica didn't feel the same way. She convinced me that the closet was the only place to be and we kept our relationship a secret as long as we could. I started to feel dishonest and dirty and I knew that no matter how much she cared for me, Jessica was ashamed to be seen with me. She was afraid of her sexuality and she didn't want it to come between her and her music career. Hence, in case you haven't guessed, as my heart was blinded by love, I stayed glued to the confines of my closet.

It was hard to breathe in there. It was hard to know that the whole world pulsed around me and somewhere there had to be a community of gay people who would accept us for who we - Jessica and I - were. I wanted to step out, become visible and try and find the ones who would accept us and, eventually, the ones who would celebrate us. Because of Jessica, I had to make a choice between love and my pride so I swallowed my desires to let my flame burn brightly (excuse the pun) and did my best to be content to have Jessica by my side, even if she would only be there in private. I ignored the way that her being ashamed of me made me feel, the way that hiding made me feel, the way that she would jump away from me as if I was the plague when someone would come into the room, or the way she would never stay the night because she was afraid that her parents would call while

she was with me or how she would never let me stay with her because she was afraid that her roommate would come in unannounced. I tried to ignore the fact that I was someone's dirty little secret and I tried to convince myself that if I could just endure it, the situation would pay off because Alicia would see past her shame and realize that she was just as in love with me as I was with her.

Its funny how we can lie to ourselves.

It went kind of like this, although I don't remember it exactly:

"Jessica, I really really like you and I'd like to spend more time with you."

"I think that we need to take a break, we need to just be friends for awhile."

"What? But I love you."

"Well, I'm sorry."

"Tell me why."

"I have to work out my own demons."

"Demons?"

"I just need to be single for awhile."

"If you just don't want to be with me then just tell me, don't make stuff up."

"No. You're the best person I've met in a really long time, and, out of all the people that I've dated, you've been the best... I just don't want to be with you anymore."

I thought it was a bit ironic. My first girlfriend realized that she didn't want to be with me and she dumped me, this one was saying that I'm a really good person and really good girlfriend, and she dumped me. Will I never catch a break?

The next day was when the realization that the shoulder I had become so dependent on for support wasn't there anymore. Jessica, the reason I had kept my sexuality a secret and for whom I had given up my sense of pride and dignity, didn't want me. Once again, I was the only lesbian in the world. At least

that was how it felt and that was when the depression set in. Bottom line, I was ready to kill myself because, without her to love and without any gay friends, I suddenly felt eternally alone. I tried to kill myself, or I at least thought about it seriously for a long time. I spent five days crying, with my friends babysitting me while I slowly lost my mind. It just went on vacation for a while and more than anything else in the whole world, I didn't want to be me anymore. Turning to the only place I thought I had to go - in a moment of true need and desperation - I called Jessica and told her what I was going through. She told me that my depression and suicidal thoughts made her "question my personality" and she just wasn't attracted to me anymore. We could be friends if I wanted to, but that seemed to translate into "I don't really care about you anymore, if you want to be in my life, it is up to you - but since I don't care I'm not going to try." Oh, and on top of that, she was dating again.

The last blow to my ego was when she told me that my depression left her with "a bad aftertaste." What is it with women and me who say things like that? For my first girlfriend I wasn't "her cup of tea." Now, for Jessica, I "left a bad aftertaste."

As I write this, I'm out of the closet. So only thing left to understand about me to know all there is to know about my coming out story is how I got from the brink of killing myself to being an out-and-about lesbian? That's an important question. I realized that coming out wasn't simply the act of telling everyone or having everyone know that you're gay, although that is an important part. However, if that was all coming out meant, then a person would never make it out of the closet without being forced back in - a person has to face situations, repeatedly in their lives, where the other people do not know that you are gay. It happened to me: I thought that I successfully came out in high school and that, after fighting that war, it would be smooth sailing. I found that college presented me with the same challenges as high school did and I had to face telling everyone all over again. Coming out means that you are comfortable with yourself. You know that you are a homosexual and you no longer feel like you have to hide.

I'm still trying to get over Jessica, but I don't feel like I need her anymore to justify my lesbianism or myself. I don't need anyone to tell me that it is all right to be gay, because I know that already - really, I always did. I need affirmation, not justification. That feeling, to me, is at the heart of coming out. Coming out means that you don't feel like you have

to bury a really big part of yourself deep inside anymore and that you don't have to be afraid of what others are going to think. I accept that some people aren't going to be comfortable or tolerant of my sexuality, but that's okay because I accept them for who they are. If I want respect for who I am, I have to have the courage to not only be honest with everyone that comes in and out of my life, but I also have to give respect to each of those people despite their reaction to me. If I want respect, I have to give it as well.

As far as relationships are concerned, I don't feel like I have to be in one to be with someone to be worth something anymore - I realized that I have so much more to offer than that and I don't need anyone else to be around to remind me of that fact. I don't want to need a relationship anymore - I simply want someone who wants me and I want her. I've had two disasters, one where I wasn't the appropriate "cup of tea" and another where I left a "bad aftertaste." So, for now, I'm just going to wait for the one who looks at me with a sigh and simply says, "well, alls well that ends well." I guess college was the place where I could be myself after all.