

Coming Out: The Ripple Effect

by Mary Vermillion

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Magic Johnson is on TV at my second favorite bar, announcing that he is HIV positive. I admire his courage, so I tell my best friend that I think I might be a lesbian and that I'm obsessed with a woman on our volleyball team. She turns bright red and takes a long swig of Guinness. Things are changing too fast for her. Her brother was killed in a car accident a year ago, and since then we have spent almost every evening together. She is losing her haven, the apartment I share with my husband.

An old college friend visits and gives me a massage that can only be construed as sexual. I say that I am for sure bi—maybe lesbian. The backrub stops. I have misinterpreted her intentions. She is not like that. She had resigned herself to being homosexual, but then a minister laid his hands on her and drove it out. I ask if she is attracted to men. YES. Any particular ones? Well, no, not really. A week later, she sends me a book called *Healing the Homosexual*. I send it back with a note saying "I hope you find what makes you happy."

I tell the woman on my volleyball team that I'm attracted to her. She's flattered, but nothing happens. Then months later, she downs several shots of whiskey and makes love to me. She says

that it doesn't mean I'm a lesbian. I decide it does, and I leave my husband. A year and a half later, I leave her.

I mail a blurb to my ten-year high school reunion: "I am getting divorced and finding new ways to love." When I call a friend to share my cryptic brilliance, she says it sounds like I've found Jesus.

My sister is not surprised. I was wondering, she says, because you have so many gay friends. You gonna tell Mom and Dad?

A college friend tells me that she French-kissed a woman once. They were both really drunk, of course, and it was just that one time.

I call a friend from high school to ask if he's coming to the retirement party for our former debate coach. He says no and asks how my husband is. I tell him that we got divorced and that I married someone else. He politely asks for a name. Beth, I say, hoping he won't freak out. "You go girl!" he whoops. He and David are celebrating their second anniversary. They own a house together, and their gladiolas are the envy of the neighborhood. We laugh, and he makes me guess who else is "riding the bus." His younger sister. We speculate about other people from our past, shrieking at each name.

A friend from grad school congratulates me on fulfilling myself. She gleefully tells me that her husband is threatened by her career.

My old study buddy from Chaucer class says she was in a threesome once with a man and another woman. She sips her wine and looks at me expectantly.

I run into a woman I haven't seen in years. I am wearing a Pride Fest t-shirt, so I give her the condensed version: big changes, love my job, love my life with Beth. She honors me with a fuller narrative. She has gotten divorced. Since then she has bought and sold two houses. She is much better at buying houses and cars than her husband ever was. She became a grandmother, explored Ireland, and attended Clinton's inauguration. She quit her job as a secretary and became a union organizer.

Sometimes I worry how my students will react, but this one begins talking about herself. She was a surrogate mother. Nobody understands that it was one of the best times of her life. She and her six-year-old son got to live in New York. They were treated royally, and she became extremely close with the couple—especially the woman, who sends her a picture of the little girl every Christmas.

My dad drives three and a half hours to listen to me. When did you know? Are you with someone? Can you keep your teaching job? There is love and caring behind each question. He reminds me that he was in Korea. He never killed anyone, he explains, but he taught people to. He was an artillery trainer. When he left there, it was the best day of his life. What he doesn't say: he knows I have struggled to tell the truth about myself, and he wants to do the same.