

BLURRED *lines*

For writer Anna Hart, the label 'bisexual' doesn't tell the full story. For her, it is about love, not sexual preference

Three years ago this month, I was with my new husband, Sean, in a dancehall in Glasgow, wearing a short 1960s wedding dress, surrounded by our friends and family. Many women spend their teens and 20s dreaming about the finer details of that big day when they marry their soul mate but, for most of my life, trying to picture my wedding - the venue, the dress, the first dance - was a pointless exercise. Because the most important thing, the person I'd walk down the aisle with, remained blurry; I didn't even know if they'd be a man or a woman.

So on my wedding day, as well as trying to get my head around being a wife, I had to get used to another word: bisexual. It's a label I'd fiercely resisted for most of my 20s, when, if you'd asked, I was more likely to say I was gay. But there, having just pledged to spend the rest of my life with a man, in the presence of my ex-girlfriend and now-friend, Lola, I realised that I couldn't avoid this label any longer.

The thing is, I've always been proud of knowing my own mind. By the time I started university, I knew I preferred Blur to Oasis, Fitzgerald to Hemingway, second-wave feminism to third, Mae West to Marilyn Monroe. When I first started dating gay women, I worried the b-word made me sound wishy-washy and weak or, worse, like I was hedging my bets. So during my 20s, when I was dating a woman, I called myself a lesbian, even though this was only a half-truth.

Bisexuality is easy to make invisible: to the outside world, a same-sex couple looks gay and an opposite-sex couple looks straight. Few people think to question it. Now I have a husband, I can 'pass' as straight. But I don't want to. I've finally accepted that whatever its connotations, bisexual is the only label that

comes close to describing me. Still, you don't get to just come out as bisexual once; I do it virtually every day. It might be a colleague asking me if I find Piper and Alex's love affair in *Orange Is The New Black* 'believable' (A: Yes); it could be a dinner-party conversation about student exes (A: All but one were women); or it might be someone asking who I travelled south-east Asia with at 23 (A: My second serious girlfriend, Lola). To look at me beside my husband, you'd think I'm as straight as they come. So I need to work a bit harder than most to stay truthful.

Looking back at my early teens, all the signs were there: a wide-eyed adoration of certain female friends, as many pictures of Justine Frischmann as there were Damon Albarn on my locker door. But back then it never seriously occurred to me that I was gay - because I fancied boys. I had my first serious boyfriend at 16, a floppy-haired indie kid called Kieran. We went out for two years and he was my first love. Because bisexuality wasn't a word in my vocabulary and I knew I wasn't gay, I can honestly say it came as a surprise when I found myself, age 19, kissing a gorgeous red-headed girl in a Pixies T-shirt at a raucous student party in Glasgow's West End.

Mia was a friend of a friend, although we'd never met before. She shared her red wine with me and, as we sat on the carpet with our backs against the radiator, it dawned on me that she was the most amazing, alluring person I'd ever met. It wasn't

Memoir: Anna refuses to dismiss her past or hide behind convenient labels

LOVE STORY

confusing, though. It really was simple. I wanted to kiss her. It was impossible to believe that anyone, man or woman, could look at Mia and *not* want to kiss her. Ours went the way of most first kisses: I tentatively leaned in a little, she leaned in some more, I moved closer and then she very gently kissed me on the lips. 'I was hoping you'd like girls,' she said. 'I guess I do,' I replied.

Everyone else was drunk, so nobody noticed that, over in the corner, my sexuality was quietly changing forever. We didn't go home together that night, but I went to her place for dinner the next day. Like any sensible gay woman, she groaned when I admitted I'd never kissed a girl before. 'Are you a straight girl out to break my heart?' she said, one eyebrow raised. 'No way!' I said. 'I might not be gay, but I'm not an *idiot*.' We fell hard and fast, and soon I was spending as much time in her freezing basement flat as in my own, shared digs. I loved dancing with her at gigs, I loved watching old movies on her battered leather sofa and I loved being in bed with her. Physically, we were similar, but she was a little older, far feistier and more confident. Naked, I thought she was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. Somehow she must have found my shyness and awkwardness equally attractive: we would cut short nights out to run home together and get into bed with a bottle of cheap red wine. But even though it felt right to be with a woman, it didn't make my memories of being with a man feel *wrong*.

She introduced me to her (mostly gay) friends, and I introduced her to mine, as 'my girlfriend'. Some friends were surprised, but these were relatively new acquaintances, it being only my second year at Glasgow University; plus, plenty of other people were coming out as gay. Except the thing is, I wasn't, exactly. I knew I was perfectly capable of desiring men (I still had the odd crush on a male lecturer or DJ). I resolved to wait until I knew for certain what I was before I shouted about it, so I came to an uneasy compromise, describing myself as 'gay when I'm going out with a woman, straight when I'm going out with a man'. To my parents, I kept quiet, mainly because I didn't want to put them through this particular conversation until I knew exactly what to say about my sexuality. Coming out remains

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a very difficult, brave and potentially traumatic decision. But getting back in the closet? That's just lame.

When Mia and I broke up (after a long summer apart, the usual snuffer of student relationships) we stayed Myspace friends, but never saw each other. I stopped going to gay clubs (even though they were always the most fun) and even had a short, unremarkable fling with a guy. Then I met my second serious girlfriend, Lola, at a reggae club. Physically, I can't say I have a 'type'; Lola was a petite brunette, Mia a curvy redhead. But both were equally charismatic, popular, funny and headstrong. I loved them, and I loved who I was around them. I was honest with them about my experiences with men, and occasionally they'd voice concerns that I'd wind up leaving for a guy. They shouldn't have been; I was never, ever tempted to cheat on any of my girlfriends. The stuff that broke us up was circumstance, exam stress, and my selfish instinct to run off alone to a far-flung corner of the world every summer.

Lola and I went out for nearly a year, and by this time a lot of people assumed that my limited experience with men was simply a blip on an otherwise exemplary gay record. I wasn't so sure. Of course, the honest way to describe my sexual past (two girls, two guys) was to say the b-word, but my gay friends dismissed this truth as a lie - it is rarely a welcome label in most gay, lesbian and transgender circles. The general consensus was (and still is) that bisexuals are cowardly gays in denial, or fickle heteros trying to make themselves look more interesting. Gay friends assured me that I'd just been going through the motions, clumsily trying to fit into a heterosexual world.

I didn't argue, because the word 'bisexual' didn't seem worth fighting for. In fact, I hated it. I believed that university was all about working out your own opinions, and mine were staunch: a politics and literature student, I was a feminist and attended anti-war demonstrations. It was a cruel irony that I couldn't make up my mind between men and women. I envied my gay friends' certainty. I wished I was gay. Or straight.

I also avoided using the b-word because of an unexpected 'bi-product': the straight world thinks it indicates a recklessly licentious sexual hedonist, who'd do anything, with anyone, anywhere. Some straight people I knew (not friends, exactly) talked to me differently after they'd seen me with my girlfriend, assumed I was unshockable, that I must be into porn, that I was the best person to ask about threesomes. The truth was that I was an unerringly monogamous and painfully shy Northern Irish teenager with a religious upbringing, not remotely interested in no-strings sex. I was in it *for* the strings and was mortified by my new and wholly undeserved reputation as a thrill-seeking sexual libertine.

There are also those who believe that bisexuals are just straight women 'lezzing it up' for the lads. I never got more unwanted male attention than when I went out with women, which angered me - as if my relationship was some sort of seedy show. I've heard all the disgusting lines you can imagine, and worse; men offering to 'show me what I was missing' or claiming they could 'turn' me. Once, cuddling Lola in the freezing cold of a bus stop, a lecherous old man told us, 'You girls could make money from that.' I got into a lot of arguments with drunk men in bars; I punched one guy for leeringly filming me and Lola on his phone. I became angrier >



'I got into a lot of arguments with drunk men in bars; I punched one guy for leeringly *filming me and Lola* on his phone'

and a more outspoken feminist, because my eyes were fully open to the everyday sexism out there on the street, just waiting for a girl to hold hands with her girlfriend.

Lola and I broke up just before I moved to London for my first job at a magazine, and for nearly five years in my mid-twenties I was pretty much single. I was working hard, and playing harder. I had a brief fling with a man ('Boys are easy,' I'd tell my friends. 'Pretty much any boy will go home with you; but you need to work harder with a girl'), followed by another brief fling with a girl. Occasionally I'd get lonely and wish I could meet the right person, but then I'd wonder where in my hectic week I'd put her. Or him, I suppose. I'd definitely have bet on it being a woman, though - my most meaningful relationships had been with lesbians.

Then, at the age of 27, I met the man I quickly realised was going to be my husband. I was visiting Glasgow from London (staying with Lola and her new girlfriend, both good friends) to attend a surprise 30th birthday party. Sean's was the only face at the party I didn't recognise; he'd come to Glasgow after I'd moved to London. We danced at the club, then shared a taxi to a wild, all-night afterparty at a flat, where we sat, again with our backs against a radiator, and talked until 10am. I loved the way he was serious but not above making stupid jokes; outdoorsy but still fond of a drink and a dance; and gentlemanly yet unwaveringly liberal. From across the room, Lola gave me a wink and a smile. Sean didn't know my history, but most of our friends assumed I was a lesbian, since they'd met me through Lola and had never seen me with a man. So I'm sure they were surprised when we left together - but not more surprised than me. Sean was as masculine as they come, a tall Scottish sound-engineer with a beard. As we walked through the park, he asked me how I knew everyone, and I replied, 'Through Lola, my ex.' He raised an eyebrow, but that was it. 'I've always had plenty in common with Lola,' he said. 'She's got good taste.' He slept on the sofa, and the following evening dropped me off at the train station, but not before promising to come down and visit me in London the next weekend.

I'm always asked what it was like having sex with a man after seven years of women, which is annoying in itself - my sex life isn't fodder for a *Sex And The City*-style discussion over brunch. The truth

is that one man varies from the next, just as much as men vary from women. Each of the six lovers I've had in my lifetime was a different story, different dynamic, different sensations. What surprised me was that I adored Sean's masculinity just as much as I'd loved my girlfriends' femininity. I wanted to nuzzle under his beard and I found the muscles on his arms fascinating.

You might imagine that I'd go for boys who could be girls, and girls who could be boys. In fact, it's the most womanly women and the most manly men. And I loved the contrast between our bodies; I got to feel like the small, soft one for once. I vividly remember the first time I showered at his place, gazing at his bathroom shelf like I was in an exotic foreign supermarket. I was used to pastel-hued bottles of Olay, The Body Shop, Clinique and Mac, stuff I could borrow. Sean's shelf was all shark greys, lurid greens and comically macho brand names. The shower gel I borrowed was strangely musky, not fruity or floral; all day long when I sniffed my wrist it was a reminder that I really was with a man. But the main difference with Sean was that it felt like I could do this forever.

Lola was at our wedding; she's the only ex I call a close friend. I asked her if she ever guessed I'd wind up with a man - if she could see something in me that I couldn't, if she doubted my lesbianism. She was silent for a moment. 'I've always been 100% sure I'd end up with a woman, but I knew that for you it would come down to the person,' she said. 'I knew if you fell in love, you wouldn't let their gender get in the way.' I heard on the grapevine that Mia's friends weren't so positive: 'Another one bites the dust,' was one lesbian friend's response.

Some of Sean's old school friends and workmates do sometimes ask, 'Are you not worried she'll leave you for a lezzer, mate?' But as he once told me, 'I find it reassuring that you've been out with girls as well as boys, and still like me best. Because if you prefer me to the boys *and* the girls you've met, I know you must think I'm something special.'

I'm lucky, I know, but I probably wouldn't have fallen for a guy who would find my identity problematic. He never has any reason to doubt how much I love him. As for my parents, I did eventually tell them that I'd been in relationships with girls a couple of years ago. There was no great Hallmark moment, it just wasn't an issue, for me or them. As I'd been at university in Scotland and they live in Ireland, I would only have bothered bringing someone over to meet them if I thought we were going to get married anyway.

Sometimes I wish I could redo my 20s knowing what I do now; that my final score (loving two girls and two guys, total) would make me unequivocally, statistically bisexual. I'm not more into men than women, or vice versa; it's a dead heat. My teenage love affair with a boy wasn't a blip. If I'd known that then, I'd have been much more self-assured, and I'd have had no choice but to call my sexuality by its proper name. Still, better late than never.

Today, even though I look straight as a ruler to the outside world, I make an effort to keep my bisexuality visible. I refuse to retreat into gender-neutral pronouns like 'they' or use the sly abbreviation 'my ex'. If someone tries to neatly write off my past as a time when I was 'experimenting' or 'confused', I tell them no, I was in love. With a man, then a woman, then another woman, then *the man*. This is what bisexuality looks like. We are right here. ●



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