

Chapter 4: Analysis of Empirical Materials

An underlying principle of phenomenological research is the examination and analytic explication of experience (Drew, 1989). In this study, the goal was to identify and describe lesbian women's lived experiences of childhood sexual abuse, coming out, and the perceived interrelatedness of these two phenomena. I made choices in the design of this study beginning with the research questions, which were

1. How are experiences of childhood sexual abuse perceived by selected lesbian women?
2. How are coming out experiences perceived by lesbians who survived childhood sexual abuse?
3. Do lesbian women perceive any relationship between their experiences of coming out and childhood sexual abuse?

The research questions that were posed, informed the conceptual framework of the design which, in a real sense, can be seen as the inception of the analytic process. Focusing on the research questions as a guide, I made definitive choices in: (a) selecting the body of literature that was examined, (b) deciding on participant criteria, (c) choosing the interview format, (d) formulating the interview guide, and ultimately, (d) condensing essential personal meanings of the participants, and identifying emerging themes. In effect, the choices that were made not only informed the focus of the study, but also were an essential aspect of the analysis itself.

This chapter was organized in the following manner: (a) identification and description of all empirical materials used in the analytic process, (b) discussion of the purpose and significance of metaphor in the investigative process, (c) presentation of data analysis including:

1. Individual profiles
2. Analysis of individual profiles
3. Common themes that emerged from cross-case analysis.

Identification and description of empirical materials

Interpretation of the empirical materials in this study involved an internal dialogue within the hermeneutic circle, using interview transcriptions, metaphors, literature, and my notes and intuitions, to achieve inter-subjective reciprocal understanding between the participant and myself. The back and forth movement between the methodological elements in this study embodied the dynamics of the hermeneutic circle, and were identified and described in the following order: interview transcriptions, researcher's notes, literature, participants' poetry, profiles, profile analyses, and emerging themes. It should be emphasized that although these elements are listed sequentially, in fact, the nonlinear, interpretive process is more correctly characterized as a concomitant and continual movement.

Interview transcriptions.

I recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim; audible, nonverbal signals, such as laughs, sighs, pauses, and interruptions were also noted. Appendix D of this study comprises the complete transcriptions. The interview transcriptions became a primary component of the body of empirical materials that I could draw from, in order to analyze, interpret, and make meaning of the participants' experiences.

Researcher's notes.

The criticality of using reflexivity to understand the lived experiences of others cannot be overstated. I recorded my observations, as well as my affective and cognitive responses to those

observations. Exploring the dynamics of the “I-thou” relationship (Buber, 1970) through descriptions of details, emotions, and intuitions fundamentally shaped the results of the research. These descriptions became part of the body of texts used in the reflexive process, and are presented as part of the profile analyses.

Using literature to stimulate the reflective process.

In Chapter 2, relevant literature was critically examined for assumptions, biases, and conclusions, and discussed for the purposes of helping to articulate my perspective, knowledge, and credibility as a researcher. However, in the analytic process, relevant literature was used primarily in the development of profile analyses, as a way to keep observations, thoughts, and responses grounded and on point, in the same way that navigators use a fixed star to determine whether or not they are on course. It is also true that the investigation of the literature that was germane to specific personal or cultural issues, helped me to remain flexible in responding to the varied and surprising challenges that arose in the analytic process.

Poetry.

Rita Dove (1994) conceived poetry as “the art of making the interior life of one individual available to others” (p. 25). Poetry extends the individual’s capacity to communicate meaning; it arises from strong feelings, and also generates such feelings in the reader. Incorporating the poetry by two participants into the body of empirical materials, afforded me an unusual opportunity to tap directly into the emotional life of the participants. This contributed greatly to my ability to make meaning of their experiences of both coming out, and also childhood sexual abuse.

Profiles and profile analyses.

The stories in the profiles are in the participant’s words, but were crafted by me; they were, however, a compelling way to find and cohesively display events in a participant’s experience. The technique of using exemplars of dialogue, allowed me to present the participant in context, convey a sense of process and time, and helped to support specific points in the analysis. Each profile and its corresponding analysis, was developed deductively; phrases or paragraphs of interest were marked, labeled, and placed in categories that I assigned. Categories were developed based on the literature, and my experience in counseling lesbian women who were sexually abused as children. During the analytic process, both the profiles and analyses became components of the burgeoning body of empirical materials that were examined, further reduced, and analyzed. I made the decision to present profiles and their corresponding analyses in separate subsections, not only to highlight the significance of every analysis, but also to clarify the presentation.

Emerging themes.

In this phase of the analysis, I used inductive reasoning to identify central concerns, important themes, metaphors, and meanings that unfolded; subsequently, those themes, concerns, and so forth, were incorporated into the body of empirical materials for further scrutiny and reflection. Interpreting participants’ narratives, and understanding their lived experiences, involved subjecting the entire body of empirical materials to detailed examination of the circumstances, structures, and constraints that contributed to the participants’ world view. When the characteristics of a central concern, metaphor, or meaning made sense, with regard to theory, historical, and contextual information, my confidence in the assessment increased.

Finding metaphors

Often, we connect the term metaphor to poetry, but we are all poets of a sort, using figurative language to convey feelings and concepts that would otherwise be impossible to communicate any other way. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) reasoned that although phenomenological reflection is valuable in revealing the structure of experience, it could be enhanced by empirical research into the cognitive unconscious. In very simple terms, the cognitive unconscious may be considered as the mental activity operating below the level of conscious awareness; our knowledge and beliefs reside there, and they frame how we conceptualize all facets of our experience.

Our conception of the self is fundamentally metaphoric, and deeply embedded. We draw upon our bodies, our most primal source of sensations (i.e., taste, touch, seeing, etc.) to bridge feeling and thought. Conversely, commonplace metaphors that are used every day, without awareness, can be clearly reconnected through examination, to vital sources in sensation and feeling (Siegelman, 1990). The bridge between feelings and thought (abstract and concrete) is a two-way street. In this study, I pursued metaphors of body language, modes of speech, and personal environments, as well as those embedded in textual contents. Tracking a metaphor toward its source sometimes helped me to find new meaning and deeper understanding of a woman's individual experience.

Presentation of data analysis

In the course of analysis, I made a distinction between experiences that related to particular individuals exclusively, and those aspects of the experience that were relevant to some or all of the participants. My intention was to develop an interpretation of the interview transcriptions that not only reflected each individual's experience, but that also applied equally well across each account. The presentation is in three parts: (a) Profiles, (b) Analyses, and (c) Themes. The first two parts (profiles and analyses) reveal interpretations of the individual accounts of each woman's experience, with the purpose of illuminating the uniqueness of each participant, and in this respect they are connected. Each profile, however, is presented using the participant's own narrative, while each analysis reveals my own critical consciousness. The third presentation of data in *Themes*, attempted to bring to light commonalities of the experience, and comprises interpretations representing multiple accounts of the same experience.

Profiles.

Olivia

Background

My mother left my father when I was ten; there were four of us, and he raised us. I took my mother's place in the household. I was a chubby child, and I was bulimic as a young adult. If I gain too much weight, I get real paranoid-hysterical because I don't like the attraction of the body.

My brothers and sister and I are close. Renee, my sister, had always fought my battles. And I'm 50 years old, 52. And there's still this need I have, in the sense of protection. It doesn't have that emotion that you would have with a lover, but it has that other part. And we can build things together; we can buy together, so I get some of one and some of the other.

My father he didn't go to church. My grandmother was a Baptist; she was real heavy into God. My grandmother died when I was ten, or maybe I was nine. Once my grandmother died,

my mother left. And my grandmother would always come to my rescue. My father was afraid of my grandmother she was a protector. But now, for me God is; he makes things easy for me.

I hadn't seen my mother for about 12 years, and when we reconnected, I found out my mother was a lesbian, and I never knew that. I didn't know women could be lesbian. I was 20, maybe 19, I was at Howard, and my mother was living on Long Island with her lover. My sister found my mother. As a kid, I idolized my mother, even when she wasn't there, and I internalized her values. But when I saw her, I was angry, and I sort of freaked out. I really had no conversation with her. She never said, "I am gay." My mother died the next year. But there was something about their relationship that just wasn't said, and when my mother died, Marlene (her lover) wanted to have something to do with the arrangements, but we wouldn't allow it.

I had gotten married. I have a daughter Danielle who lives in Virginia. Her father was nice to me, but I had no perception about love. He was just kind to me, and he was older, and in a lot of ways, he resembled my father. But that whole sexual thing, I think I was frigid. Franklin had girlfriends, and that was okay with me. I always knew that wherever we would live I could bring my sister with me. Even though she was younger, she was like my protector because she would fight back. And I wouldn't fight back. So when I wound up with Frank, Renee, my sister, came to live with us. And that was okay with him, because then he could go out and do what he had to do. Franklin and I, we separated for about 5 years, and it was during that period that I was introduced to women.

I was going out with this girl Toni, and Franklin showed up after 5 years and he had heard I was living this gay lifestyle. By then, it was pretty much a lifestyle. I was 30. Franklin showed up and again he was nice, but he brought the Bible, and told me I was going to go to hell. I would think like the rapture was going to come, and I was going to be locked up in there, and I was going to hell. And all kinds of things were going to happen to me, and the whole thing was just freaky. Then he told me that he was my only answer. So, the next year we got back together. But the relationship wasn't like it was the first time. The sexual part of it was, well, there wasn't a lot of violent sex, but there was at his privilege. My compensation was that I could bring my sister. Renee was in New York somewhere, and he said Renee could come down and live with me again. I got pregnant and had Danielle at about 33. That's when Sara Lincoln, my first girlfriend, came in to the picture. We stayed with Frank for about six months. Danielle was 6 months old when my father died; it was November. I left Franklin by January and I moved to San Francisco, and stayed for about 9 years. I moved my sister out to San Francisco. My sister called me up one day and told me she was HIV positive and pregnant. I thought she was going to die, and I just wanted her with me. Throughout the years I have had sort of substance abuse problems.

Trying to feel comfortable about my sexuality

I think I was about 23 when I thought I was attracted to other women. I was asexual for a long time, through undergrad and the first part of grad school. Many women would approach me, and a lot of people assumed I was gay before I even acknowledged or even dealt with it. Before I left my father's house, I just was not sexual. I was out of the house. I was in graduate school already. Her name was Sara Lincoln. She befriended me. There were a couple of women [who approached me] but I didn't really know what the response [to it] was supposed to be.

At that time, I didn't like the whole thing around sex. I just didn't like the approaches from men. With my father, mentally I was so controlled, and he would always say don't let

another man touch you, so I didn't. And, I really didn't like sexual advances from men. My father would like to come in my face. So it was a thing where just the whole thing about a penis, the whole thing about it, I really didn't embrace. The biggest fears I have about someone finding out that I'm gay is this thing about going to hell, and their thinking that somehow I'm less than they are.

Franklin principally perceived that I was gay. He had girlfriends that were bisexual and he asked this one lady, Betty, and she introduced me into the life. But I wasn't attracted then. I really didn't understand; it was almost like I was stupid. One of her girlfriends was Sara Lincoln, and I guess Sara and I were more alike than Betty and I, in terms of work. She worked for the government, and I worked for the government, so we had a lot in common. I enjoyed talking to her. I just enjoyed her, but I did not perceive her as being gay. I didn't think this. She had boyfriends too, and one was bisexual. The crowd I went with, most of them were bisexual. Sara wanted to come over one day for dinner, so I said okay and we ate. We smoked marijuana; we were in the bedroom watching TV, and she touched me but I didn't move because it was comfortable. She continued to touch me and I thought in my brain that somehow, from that encounter, that I must be in love with this woman. So I became obsessed, but it wasn't that way for her. I was obsessed with Sara for about 6 to 8 months. Then [I met] Rachel ... a Jewish girl. Rachel was attractive, but she's domineering. She just led that friendship. I was living with her out in the wide open and we stayed together for about 3 years. I thought I was going to marry her. I didn't put the social restraints on what could happen, and what couldn't happen, and I brought her back home and introduced her. My father was alive then, but by then he was somewhat senile; he wanted to go to bed with her. When Rachel and I came back home, there was a conflict.

My sister is a heterosexual. Right now the HIV is manageable, because she's on meds. She works at Women's Collective, but even though, on the surface she accepts my sexual orientation, I don't think she likes to see it. So it's like having two lives. It's true it's just like having two lives. When I live away from her, I'm more comfortable in coming out. When I live with her, I'm just not sexual. When I go out, or go away for the weekend, and come back, my sister says in a conversation, "Like what happened." And I'm not comfortable. I'm comfortable talking to Dr. Marks about my secrets and what I do. I just don't talk. Most of my associates are women I went to undergrad with. They're really good girlfriends, but I've not even told them that I'm gay. We go back 30 years in a friendship. And they may assume, but I just don't say the word. Some people know, and some people don't know. I think I had a crush on Debra all during undergrad, but I never said it. You know what I mean? I've never said, "I'm gay." But then there's something about her that said, just be wary. But I never had the discussion of saying "This is who I am."

I think a thing that bothers me about my life is, when my mother died, and they read her eulogy, I didn't know her. And that was one of the things I think that disappoints me most. It's that idea to know somebody and not know them. My daughter knows I'm gay. I talk to Danielle because I don't want to die, and have no one not know me, especially not Danielle. Danielle's grown now. She lives in Virginia, and I have a granddaughter. Danielle is real different. She's ultra femme. She's ultra femme, real different. I talk to her everyday. She's one of my best friends. And I think Danielle knows me. And Danielle has courage. There was this thing that Amelia Earhardt said that, "Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace." Sometimes I

lack courage. And I think that's my battle, I guess. You know that courage to be who you want to be. I settled. I think I feel like I settled.

My two lives are separate in my case. I used to go to clubs a lot. Just lately, the last 2 or 3 years, I'm tired. I don't go to places to meet the women that I think I would be attracted to. I like intelligent women. Then my girlfriends like those I went to school with, and those I work with, it's nothing we've ever talked about. I just don't talk about it. But there's a degree of satisfaction of just being with another woman.

In the African-American community it's not socially acceptable to be gay, even today. I do this thing for National Council of Negro Women. I just finished this thing with BT [Black Television] called *The Naked Truth*. I was just a consultant. Part of the thing they are going to air is about down low men (definition on p. 13). But there are down low women. I'm gay, but I don't tell it. I don't go sleep with men, but I don't tell it. So when I had to speak about down low men, it was a hard thing. It's so hard. I don't know what they would think if they knew. When I was younger, I think I had more courage about that. I went to undergrad and graduate school here, so I had a history that some people knew me as not gay, and it was always assumed that I would get married to somebody, and have a child. As a child, I'd watch *Leave It to Beaver*, and *The Brady Bunch*. We would have that particular type of value. And in one part of my brain I still think maybe that's the way it's supposed to be. But there's this thing about men—they irritate me.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

It began before my mother left. But then it was mostly just grabbing my ass. I was between 6 to 8 years old. My sister would fight him back. When he tried it with Renee, she told my aunt, and they moved Renee into the house with them. But I look like my mother. My sister looks like my father. It was always okay to treat me that way. They called me Serena, my mother's name, when I was growing up. You could call me fat ass and it was okay. My father didn't particularly care for my brother Michael much. They're like worlds apart. My mother had a master's degree and my father had a sixth grade education. My father was a mulatto. My grandfather was white. My father was very fair: green eyes, wavy hair. My mother was from Barbados, very dark. When they came here to America, her aim was to get anything that was white as possible. But he wanted something as dark as possible. I'm the brownest. The Mason family doesn't like brown people. So again, it would be okay. My sister resembles them more. It's like this self-loathing. It's like I always wanted to be something that I'm not. If I could look like them—look like a Mason. It's all in my head. After my grandmother died, the Masons moved and all the four of us lived together with him. My father and my mother would fight violently; he was always threatened by her. My mother went to Hunter College, and he was always threatened by that. But his existence, his ideals and things and what she liked and what he liked were different. And they couldn't communicate. That I learned from them. They were attracted by color, or by looks. They liked the way each of them looked. But there was nothing to hold that. He would beat her. He would beat her. And when my grandmother died, and she left, he would get me up at like 6:00 in the morning, I would get to have coffee with him before he left, and he would tell me horrible things about her. Your mother wouldn't do this, and your mother wouldn't do that, and I'm your daddy and maybe you can do some of the things I wanted your mother to do, and that she should have done for me. And he would show me—it first started out—he would show me his penis. "Your mother didn't like that." She had lots of men." And he

would say that if there were white spots, calcium spots on your nails, they could tell the number of boyfriends you have had. And you could see how faithful he was because he didn't have any. But look at your mother's hands; she has dozens. And I would sleep with him at night. Most of it was that he would masturbate and like to come in my face.

I don't know if he ever penetrated me. I know he would lay against me. He would drink. He got paid every other week, and he would get drunk. And his male friends ... I remember one of them trying to touch me and my brother Michael—five of them, like it was an okay thing to do. But my father never said anything. Once I came on my period, when I was 15, then the sexual things would stop. We still had a husband and wife relationship. We slept together. I would cook for him. I would go to the supermarket with him. And I would discuss the bills. We would discuss what we'd get for my brothers and sister, or whatever. But the sexual stuff, he would rub my head ... and hair, but the sexual stuff would stop. It just moved into like we were like older married people, I guess.

I didn't feel I was privileged because he would beat me, holidays, birthdays, over simple things. Like one day it was oatmeal. I didn't like oatmeal. It was slimy to me. And he just pushed my head into the bowl of oatmeal. I think what I inherited from my father is fear. Remember I spoke about courage? Because speaking out is more or less courage. I was afraid. If you'd say something, he would slap you. We'd be riding around in the car and I'd say something, and he would put you out in New Rochelle. How do you get to White Plains? You walk. He would talk about my mother, but said I was different. And I thought because he would talk to me, and he wouldn't talk to my brothers and sister, I was different. He liked my brother Mark, my younger brother, but Mark is not his child. I think he knew that Mark wasn't his child. We would always hear from him about that. But there was something about him taking care of Mark. I think at some level, he loved my mother and I think he was thinking he was taking care of her child. And he was nicer to Mark than he was to the rest of us. He really never beat Mark. But he would take a broomstick, right here on my head; it finally cleared up. He split my skull with a crowbar and he didn't have to be drunk. He was just mean. He was just a mean man. When I was in the kitchen and he was beating me, my sister Renee was hiding, and she hit him from behind. But she would fight him. I just crawled up in a fetal position, and just let him beat me. If he'd do it, just do it.

How the abuse affected me

I went into therapy. I'm in therapy now. My doctor is Dr. Marks, and so she's a lesbian, too. I go there once a week. I've been going there for about 6 years. From my father's abuse, I think I had a breakdown. The first time I think I was institutionalized was at 12. And I was put into Bellevue. I used to shake and my teeth would shake. And people would come and touch me and I'd just freak out. And I think I stayed there for about a month. Then I came back home and my brother Michael just told me to go along with it, just don't make waves. Because he perceived they would separate the four of us. Or something worse would happen to me. So I just did what I had to do. And like Michael's thing was just don't make waves. I talk about the abuse with Renee. I think that abuse in the black community, is more of an accepted issue than homosexuality. I do think abuse is acceptable; so is wife beating, and children beating, they're common.

I still have an eating disorder. There is something good about living out here, and that is that I don't drive. My sister drives. And like I said, I don't particularly like NAAA, type of thing.

I think I'm work obsessed. My obsessions just take root in another way. Like if you saw my room upstairs, it's obsessive. You know, like 150 pair of shoes, and then I don't wear shoes. It's just a habit. But I'm obsessed. And paper, I've got paper everywhere, I write something, I have stacks, copies of it. So I still have obsessions. The disorder is compulsive-obsessive disorder, with major depression, and posttraumatic stress. Some of it is because I liked the women, or the company. Like Woodside Women's Hospital is the best place to heal. I just loved to go there. And I when had good insurance, you go for 30 days, they have 45 days' stay. I went there three times. I've been to Betty Ford's. There was a time they thought I was obsessed with just going to the places. I've been to lots of them. You know I think I've been to the best and the worst of them. And I finally grew out of that. But it would almost be like every year I relapsed, and I would have to go back there.

Franklin introduced me to cocaine. I used to smoke some reefer, but none of that was a problem. Franklin sold cocaine, and that whole thing that he offered. I like cocaine. Cocaine became a problem. It was substance abuse. I think one of the benefits of substance abuse is that nothing else matters, you really don't need. You don't eat, but you don't need. I have an emptiness in my life, but if I smoke coke, I don't worry about it. My work does a lot for me; I can't have courage, so I work. And my sister does a lot for me. We built this house, and it's done a lot for me. But I have a need. If I smoke coke, I don't have that need. It supersedes the need for another person. You can honestly live alone. When I was a child I used to sit in my closet. We had an armoire, and I would go and sit in there, and turn off the light. I would sit there in the dark, and the clothes and the objects in the closet, I would talk to them. They became my friends. Cocaine became that armoire. You know. You have it—you really don't need. And that's the part that I haven't really got past. How do you get past that hole? Right, there is a hole. And the courage, and that's what Dr. Marks talks about, like doing things, go here Olivia, go there, take those steps, go past your front door. But to change while there's this hole here, to take those steps—some days I don't have that. With cocaine, I don't need to. I can live very isolated. And you don't need anything at all. You don't feel. You don't feel. And you can be okay. There's no secret because I'm not heterosexual, I'm not homosexual; I'm not any sexual.

Now I don't let a man get that close to me. There's always that thing about getting close. There's something about my demeanor that says we have a boundary. Like with me and Patrick, the man I work with. He wouldn't say and we never discussed my sexual preference. I think some things are known without discussion. It's nobody's business, but there is a way of carrying yourself that no one would ask. And it becomes a thing that is not up for discussion. We just had the kitchen redone; [Renee] couldn't get the water to turn off last night. So this guy comes, and it was like this thing that he's supposed to do this, because he's here. But it's not his house, "Please have a seat." And the guy for the furnace was explaining to me how to bleed it. He's here and he's asking [questions]. "It's not your place to ask questions. Excuse yourself." It becomes that way, adversarial. And it's not that I mean to be adversarial, but it's like that's what I am.

Thinking back about my sexuality

I relate my sexual orientation to my abuse to a degree. Did my father ever penetrate me? Well, I went with a girl once; she liked toys. I really don't want you sticking anything up in me. We can make love, seven different ways, without that. I think I like women because making love is different. You can hold a woman. I really don't like penetration. And this particular woman, there was something about making love to her which was similar to a man. And I just didn't like

it. I really don't like that. I've wondered if I wasn't abused, maybe I wouldn't be gay, but looking at my character, I don't think so. I have a friend Jeffrey, and he's an idiot. He really perceives in his mind, that [I] haven't been fucked right. He would say, "that's a real pretty woman, why is she gay?" He could see an ugly woman being gay. Like all lesbians are ugly, or fat, he really thinks this way. "Do you know what a lesbian looks like?" Yeah, he would know a lesbian. He would know an HIV person. He's an idiot. That's the same thing when they talk about this down low, and knowing by sleeping with someone. I learned that from my father it becomes operational. You can go through the motions if necessary. I've had male lovers. I can go through the motions, and it doesn't mean anything. "Did you come?" "Sure!" You know if that's what you want to believe. "Sure." "Was it good for you?" "No, not really."

Sheree

How I see myself – and others

I do feel very independent, except for needing some physical help once in a while. I do feel like I obviously still have some issues to work out. But overall, I do feel complete - alone. I very rarely feel lonely. I'm not seeking partners. I tend to be polyamorous anyway. I prefer more than one person in my life when I can. It feels like natural to me. It feels like I'm forced into being monogamous with people, because they have a lot of fear and jealousy and all that. If I get lonesome then I usually need to be monogamous with them. I just feel it's my natural state. Sometimes I have to force myself to make connections with other people. I have very good friends and good family. My sister is good family; my sons and I are close, but I have to force myself to call them or visit them, because I know it'll end up being something I don't want it to be. It's not when I initiate. I just like being alone a lot.

I have a leftover houseboy. That's what I call him. When I was doing domination, there was a boy that used to come around to see me and I sort of adopted him. It's not a sexual relationship. It's more of a mother-son kind of thing. He's 20 years younger than me. And he has some psychiatric disabilities where he can't function on his own. I found him literally in the street. He can't take care of himself, so I take care of him. And I would say that our relationship is close, but more of a caretaking role. And he drives me crazy, but he also helps me, as I'm getting older and fatter. I'm having more trouble getting around and lifting things and all that, so he picks that up for me.

It's always hard for me to imagine that other people have responsibility. I always go to myself first, always. I have learned over time that it doesn't have to always be me, and I have some very supportive friends that I can reality check with. But my experience is, whenever I get really angry, and really upset with somebody, I pay. I'm still afraid to be angry with people even though it happens quite a bit. One of my issues, one where I need to grow in, is accepting that my anger can be justified and can be expressed appropriately, and in ways that it doesn't alienate other people from me. Because I can be very good at alienating people when I get really pissed.

I'm a Buddhist. I don't take it terribly seriously, but I do find that the truths and the path of Buddhism have meaning in my life. And really, my religion, my spirituality is about compassion and sometimes that's very real for me, and sometimes it's not at all.

Most women think about sexuality in terms of expressions of love and intimacy, and spirituality and have difficulty separating out the sensation, the physical—physicality of it and

the emotional part of it; they also feel that those feelings have to be legitimized by feelings of love and tenderness, and all that shit. One of the things that I think is special about me or different is that I separate that out, for better or worse. I know when it's about sex, and I know when it's about love, I feel like I've claimed a sexual subjectivity and autonomy and that what I've chosen to do sexually, has to be for me. It's nothing I can do for someone else, nothing I can give to someone else. And there's a part of me that feels very good about that and there's another part of me that wonders, since there are so few women who feel that way, is there something wrong with me that I can do that. Most of the time I feel that, "No this is okay, this is good." As I'm getting older, especially being fat again, I'm very much aware that I'm not a hot chick anymore. I'm no hot babe right? And that is hard; it's hard getting old as a woman on many levels, and one of them is the sexual aspect. And it seems so ironic, because at this point, I have the capacity to probably enjoy my sexuality more than ever. But there are fewer opportunities.

My background

My parents are atheists. They were die-hard atheists, political atheists. It's funny because now my mom's the head of her small church in her town and she doesn't believe, and nobody knows that. It's just that's all there is to do in the town is the church, so she got involved and got pushed up to a leadership position. She's still an atheist, which is crazy. I don't know. I don't know how she does these things.

One thing I'm happy about is my father is now an old lonely man and in a lot of pain and nobody respects him anymore. It's his punishment. I mean he brought it on himself. He's isolated himself, no friends, no love. I've always had this fantasy of waiting to be old enough to kick him down the stairs in his wheel chair. My mom, she was well socialized in the 30s and 40s and she's not going to leave him. She is the best thing that ever happened to him and I don't even think he knows it. She's a wonderful woman. Yeah, I love that woman.

The messages I got were I was a nobody; I shouldn't have even been born; and I was nothing but a problem to him; everything about me was wrong; that there was no way to please him; and that it was all my fault. I was bad. I was bad. As I got older, he started calling me a slut, and started using sexual language as well. When I was about 15, 16, he basically thought my behavior justified getting in the legal system, having me put away, which was absurd; I mean I skipped school a couple of times. And then I left home at 16, 17. I don't remember exactly when, I just left as soon as I could get out.

I left home at 15 and I moved in with my boyfriend at the time. His parents were very cool. I didn't realize what a good deal I had. They were communists. They were like really like cool political people, and they basically said, "Just don't get pregnant." I got very tired around the age of 25 of trying to live a different kind lifestyle. I decided to try it the traditional way, and so the first man that would marry me, I married, and then I got pregnant. Almost immediately after I had a baby, I realized that I was bored out of my mind. I have to admit I went into the whole marriage thing not intending to. I don't even think I intended to follow through.

I did 8 years of graduate school but I never got the doctorate. I never finished. It was in Sociology, Sexuality and Gender. I got the education, I was teaching at the college level—Women's Studies, Sexuality. I got a lot out of it. No piece of paper, but incredible knowledge and experience. I'm very happy I went and I don't regret leaving.

Experiencing coming out

I know when I was six, my girlfriend and I had a lot of sex play, and my mother was alarmed and wouldn't let me see her anymore when she found out. When I was twelve, I knew that I liked looking at my girlfriends undress, more than I should, and I felt guilty. When I was around nineteen, twenty, I realized that I had sexual feelings for women that I wanted to act on and I had a string of romances. But the sex wasn't very hot, and I was disappointed. I thought it would be hotter. I didn't really fall in love with a woman until I was about thirty, and then I felt madly in love. And I've been with women since.

I wasn't a totally committed lesbian until I was 30, when I really fell in love with a woman. Before that I was playing around. I had my first lesbian experiences around 19, 20, as an adult. But there were even some times when I identified as a lesbian and still had some attraction for men. But just during those couple of years. And even then, I thought of myself as bi. My identity changed over time. I've always been very out. And right now, I'm so out that it's not even an issue anymore. I don't even think about how people might respond. I don't even think about that. It's not a factor anymore. For me being lesbian was a positive thing to be.

I know that we tend to reconstruct our lives through the present, and try to make sense of who we are now, by saying, "Oh I didn't realize then, that that's what that meant," that kind of thing. Although I identify openly as a lesbian, and my primary attraction is certainly about women, sexually and emotionally, I also have thrown away the identity issue. I usually just say to people I'm just queer. I'm just queer as you can be. I'm just very, very queer. I just say I am very queer. But I'm comfortable with lesbian.

I just think that at different times in my life I've tried to find an identity by going back and focusing on different things in my history up to that point. There was a point when I thought I was straight, when I was a teenager, then I was sure I was a lesbian. For those years, when I got married, I was bi. Then I fell in love with a woman and, oh my God, I'm really a lesbian. Then what am I doing topping men? What is that about? And I can't fit that in.

Experiencing homoprejudice

I don't think I've ever had negative feelings except, when I told my mom, when I was about twenty that I was with a woman at the time; she said she was going to throw up, it made her sick, and then I felt bad. Because somehow I thought she would not have that negative reaction. I felt bad that she felt bad. Actually, I feel like I've always had a consistent pride in being a lesbian. It hasn't been an issue. But I've had to deal with some pretty intense external factors: I did have a son when I was 25. I gave temporary custody to his father while I went to school and took advantage of a scholarship. And when I tried to get him back, I couldn't because I was a lesbian. So I lost my son, custody of him, which was very painful. At that time, in the eighties you just couldn't get your kids back, the way you can now. I got to see him on weekends, but I didn't have any control over the quality of his life, and I just saw a lot of things happening that broke my heart and there was nothing I could do about it. At the time, I was partnered with a Methodist minister, and she had to be incredibly closeted, because she would have been thrown out, so that complicated everything.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

I tend to minimize my abuse experience like most folks do. It wasn't that much, but it was it was really profound. When I was little, my sister and I were both sexually abused, molested by my grandfather, my mother's stepfather.

What I remember about that was being angry with my sister because she told my mother and everyone was so upset. So I remember being very angry with my little sister. But we are talking about 5 years old, I mean very, very young. And I remember my grandfather going into my underwear and fooling around. That didn't affect me as much as my dad. With my dad, he made me very, very uncomfortable. He was a very narcissistic kind of man. I mean in terms of like classic DSM-IV narcissist. We didn't exist for him as real people. And he would find ways to come into the bathroom, when I was using the toilet or in the tub. He was always looking at my breasts, and made me very uncomfortable. I couldn't use the word breasts for 5 years because he had used it, and just made it dirty; he just made it awful. What happened was a single incident, but I had come out of the bath and I had a towel around me, and he stopped me in the hallway and he said, "I want to make sure you're clean." And I said, "I took a bath, I'm clean." I was 11 or 12. He said let me check, and he took the towel off and basically ran his hands all over my body. I was just totally mortified and ashamed, totally mortified and ashamed. It still gives me total creeps and chills. At that point, as far as I was concerned, he wasn't my dad. I began to really hate him. I didn't care much for him before that either. He was pretty sadistic and also beat us a lot. Lots of difficulties along with the emotional degrading, and then ultimately, out of everything, this was worse than the emotional and physical; this was really bad. I didn't tell anybody about it, because I think I just couldn't believe it. I kept trying to figure it out. I remember saying to myself for years, "Oh, he was just trying to see if I was clean." "Dads do that, you know." Then, when I was about 25 I went to a workshop that a woman did on sexual abuse, and the memories just flooded back. It was like right there. You know, I remembered it. I remember saying to a friend, well my dad, at least, he never raped me or anything, but he did touch me. And then it was just as if it had happened yesterday. I mean it was like I remembered the whole thing very clearly. And not much later than that, about 5 years later, I was taking a course in domestic violence, and as [the instructor] was talking, I suddenly realized that I had been abused on all these levels. It was really hard to believe that I could connect that. One of the first things that happened was I was incredibly angry at my mom, because she'd never protected me, and I love her dearly, I still do now, but she made her choices very clearly, to stay with him instead of protecting me. Also I had very difficult teenage years, and I was also very sexually active, which everybody says is part of abuse stuff that you become sexually promiscuous, but I always enjoyed my sex. I always enjoyed it, in a way that I never felt like I was behaving disrespectfully towards myself. It never felt like acting out. It felt like something I really wanted to do, and enjoy, and despite what people were saying about sex and girls. Shortly after that, I went to therapy to talk about it and deal with it, and I just got very depressed, very depressed. I had a really hard time, and I finally told my sister, and my sister got very angry with me. She's a year and a half younger than me. She said, "There's no way that happened. Dad would never do that." And I'm like, "Look, it happened." And she said, you're just crazy. You're making this up." Why would I come out in the middle of nowhere, why would I do that? I was trying to get support from her, from another person in the family, and also, we had both been victims of abuse from my grandfather, so I thought she'd understand. What she did instead is she called my mother, and my mother called me hysterical and called me every name in the book. She said, "Your father would never, ever do that. You have a sick twisted mind." About a year later, I tried to kill myself. I just got so depressed. I cut myself off from my family because I felt that not only did they not believe me, but they were also supporting him. The first thing that happened after

that phone call with my mom, was I thought for sure my father was going to come and kill me. I turned off all the lights and I hid in this closet. I just sat there and hid until my partner came home. And it was just like I was a little kid again. I felt like I had no safe place. So my parents and I didn't talk for about 5 years altogether and my family and I, we were just totally separated for about 5 years, based on that, then I started missing them. I've brought it up a couple of times since with my sister, and she still can't handle it but she's not nasty anymore. My dad's a petty tyrant. He's a little bastard. He's 74 now, and he's just as weird now as he was, he's just an awful man. There was a lot of hitting, punching, kicking, and belt spanking to point where I was in extreme agony. It was also totally unpredictable. It had nothing to do with my behavior; I knew he felt pleasure in it. I knew that. I knew he enjoyed doing it, and that was also very upsetting to me. And my mom would just disappear. She just wasn't there.

But of all the things that happened to me, that one day, when my dad touched me, that was the worst part of my childhood. I never wanted to be with him alone afterwards. I mean I did everything I could to never be alone in the house with him. And I don't think we ever had a moment alone since. Even today, when I'm sitting in my mom's house, and my dad is there, I'll get up and leave the room. Because there's no way I want to even engage with him as a person. And I'm the only person who sees it that way. For a long time, I accepted the family's verdict, that I was the crazy lady. But I'm not. It took me a long time.

I understand how adult men would have the desire toward younger girls or children, young boys too. I can understand why they have that desire, because sometimes I have that desire. But to act on it is the most horrible thing you can do to a person. And I wish there was somehow that the men, or the people who would do these kids, I mean their own kids especially, if they could just realize the effect that it has on the kid. Like a rapist who kills his victim, and for what, an hour for a sense of control, or pleasure, or whatever it is he gets out of it, he destroys a whole life. It's the same thing on another level. Whatever my father got out of it, he did some really major damage. And what did he get out of it. Ultimately what, I don't know.

How it has affected me

I recognize that emotionally I'm not the most stable person in the world. But I also know myself very well. I know I have limitations, suffer from anxiety, and I understand why I would feel anxious. And considering everything that has happened to me, I've done amazingly well, to get as far as I have. Every once in a while it feels like its all going to crumble under my feet, but I've made it so far so good. And I feel like it's really amazing I've gotten as far as I have.

I was seeing a therapist, but unfortunately things went terribly wrong there. The therapist was good, but I was referred to a psychiatrist for anti-depressant medication and the guy gave me an MAO inhibitor, Nardil, and put me on the highest possible dose, and I had a manic episode, where I was actually psychotic for about a month. I had to be hospitalized again. He wasn't monitoring me well. As soon as I got off the Nardil I was fine again. But I completely lost faith in myself because it took a while to figure out that it wasn't me and that it wasn't normal state. That it was the medication that pushed me to a manic phase and I hadn't had it before or since.

Long lasting effects of the abuse

I still engage in self-injury, cutting and hair pulling, scab picking, and it's obsessive-compulsive. I mean it's like I can't control it. And my doctors give me increasing medication to deal with anxiety; I do deep breathing; my sister said "Try an ice cube on the skin to, you know stimulate instead of scratching." But that's my deep secret. I cut myself a lot because it feels so

good. It's like a pain that feels good, and that's actually been since I was 15 and I've never stopped, and it's never changed. That's embarrassing for me.

Sometimes I feel I'm almost like two people. There's one part of me that is very warm, and kind, and compassionate, and caring. There is another part of me that feels like an actor behind a façade. And I feel like really I have no feelings, and really bottom line, I don't care. Sometimes it worries me, like maybe I'm a bit of a sociopath or something. Somehow I think that my mother and my father's personalities, they're both inside here. I've never done anything you know terribly wrong or immoral, nothing that I couldn't live with. I mean real wrong. But I've always wondered if I'm capable of it. I just worry about that part of me that's really shut down, and with that is distrust, a little paranoia, I have to really catch myself when I start thinking that there's more than one person who's working against me. My God, it's like "No, people have their own lives to live." See I've got this on a cognitive level. It's the emotional level that's really hard. The other thing is that I've really enjoyed acting as a dominatrix, and giving pain, especially to men. Making them suffer. And I get incredible arousal out of it, incredible, but no real feelings. Maybe that's one way that I've coped. I haven't played much lately, but I used to quite a bit.

I won't have sex with men. I put them into a state of submission and powerlessness and I give them pain. It's erotically charged. It's totally consensual. That is very separate; like a separate box in my life. I just realized one day that I really enjoy it. I mean guess why? It's not a hard stretch. I really enjoy literally having men underneath me begging. And the weirdest thing was that, afterwards, they adore me you know. I get all this incredibly positive stuff from them, and I was just being a cruel bitch, I really am. It's a safe place to play all this stuff out. I like it. I also dominate women, which I enjoy. It's much more erotic, much more erotic and much more sexual because I can participate. But I'm always the top, never the bottom; never the bottom.

I think it's safer to keep the two parts of me separate. I have to be really careful. I work with all guys and I have to be really careful how I speak to them, especially not to call them boy, especially because they're all men of color. I have to really put a box there. The part of me that's the warmest, and actually that I feel best about, is being a grandmother and a mom. Yes, there are feelings there, and they certainly are very positive and wonderful. I feel that's the part of me that's most nurturing. And there's this other part of me that I don't know what the potential is there sometimes. There's amorality there. It's my dad. Maybe I inherited some of his narcissism or sadistic stuff, but when I'm in that other space, when I'm being really, really sadistic, the words that come out of my mouth are often my father's words. But it gives me satisfaction.

Reflections on coming out and abuse

One of the hardest things for me is that my sexual fantasies always come back there [to the abuse]. No matter what, they always come back to that point and I hate it. I hate it. It can be the fantasy of a man doing that to another girl; of me doing it to a girl. I would never actually act on the sexual feelings, but they're very powerful. And anytime I'm having sex, if I want to orgasm, that's where I have to go back to. And I after a while, I said, you know what, that's the way I am. That's what I fantasize. That's what makes me hot. It makes me really angry at him, but that's what makes me hot. So I learned to accept it, and go with it finally.

I thought about why I'm queer. I thought about it a lot, especially because a lot of people who are into the power exchange scene like to look at their childhood as the root. But what I learned over time was that no matter what side a person was on, they have the same stories, or

different stories; they weren't positively correlated. So what I came to believe, and what I believe now, is that there's really no accounting for desire. Enjoy it. That's where I am. Desire is neither good or bad. It exists and there's no point in analyzing it. In fact, people used to bore me when they started to analyze their sexuality. I don't want to hear it. Does this make you what? Does it make you ... then enjoy it.

I often thought that because I had a relatively positive relationship with my mother who was warm, and it was really difficult to live with my father who was a bastard, it was natural for me to feel safer with women and to form those relationships with women. But it doesn't really explain the sexual element, to me anyway. It doesn't for me and at this point, I'm really not sure it's important. I really don't know. I really don't know. And I decided to stop analyzing it quite some time ago and I don't think about it.

Marina

Family life

My stepfather came from a Prussian family, which is not to disparage all Prussians, or Germans, but in that house, *alles muss perfekt sein*. I say it in German because it has more of a meaning in German – “Everything must be perfect.” That was the attitude I grew up with. My stepfather was also mentally controlling of my mother. Apparently he wasn't terribly interested in her. I mean they never had a close or a warm relationship. I mean his goal was to get to me. My mother was totally out to lunch. My stepfather had this thing about table manners, “Chew with your mouth closed,” “Use your knife and fork this way.” It was this constant derision; one should not expect a 7-year-old child to have perfect, regal table manners. That was just a constant struggle throughout my childhood. And the amount of food was always a big thing for him. After he started abusing me, I ballooned. I absolutely needed those physical layers of protection, padding. So I was a chubby kid and he was not happy with that. He was always trying to control what I ate.

Every year in school I would start off a straight-A student and by February, be failing. I would just sabotage over and over and over again, and I didn't even want to do it. Of course the environment didn't help. When I was in middle school I pleaded with my mother to put me in a different school because I was so tortured there; it was just awful. I could expect to be physically abused on a regular basis, and to be called all sorts of names. I was just never sure what was going to happen, when. In the beginning of seventh grade, it must have been September, that this boy just came up to me and yanked my pants down. Nothing was ever done about it. And this is just what I lived with. I was a safe target because I was quiet, I was bookish, I was awkward, very introverted. I just wanted to be left alone. I was always very, very grown up. I had to grow up fast. I mean I was always really, really grown up and the things people my own age were doing seemed so stupid in light of what my life was like.

Before [my mother] married, he lived with us for about 2 ½ years, at which time he was raping me a few times a week. I don't know if he wanted to turn over a new leaf, or I just outgrew his tastes, but the abuse slowly tapered off. After a while, the abuse just became mental torture. I don't know, I think I may have just outgrown his age preference.

Of course, I always banged my head into the wall on various occasions. I remember in third grade just being so utterly frustrated at myself. I couldn't hold the pencil right. I had these muscle spasms in my arm. And I couldn't do anything at that point. I couldn't think straight. And

the teacher was an absolute horror the way she laid into me. I was just frustrated one day and I started slamming myself in the head with the palm of my hand, which is exactly how he hit me. He liked to hit me in body areas that wouldn't bruise. Above the hairline, the cheekbone, forehead, those places. He was not going to leave marks. And I must have sat there for about 4, 5 minutes slamming myself in the head. The teacher just looked at me like I was from another planet. I mean no concept that, "Hey there's something wrong with that."

I remember in *The Courage to Heal*, talking about disclosing as a child. And the fact of the matter is, I did! Just nobody knew how to listen. I had hallucinations in my room, as a small child. I'd see creatures walking around my room, and all these awful things, and I'd tell my mother and she'd say, "It's just your imagination, go back to bed." I lived in the basement, which had wood paneled walls so it had all this sap tone to it. All the patterns that could pull themselves out of these things were phenomenal, phenomenally awful anyway. So there was no place I could turn to try and go to sleep. I was terrified of the dark.

I've always had a very uncomfortable and awkward relationship with my [biological] father. He always went out of his way to make me more aware of his sex life than I would want to be. He would use me as an excuse to see various women. On the nights when I slept over, I would hear him having sex with some random person. My father always had this thing about being a progressive parent. He had way too much pornography lying around the house. I had access to an open liquor cabinet from the time I was 11. I was practically an alcoholic by the time I was 12 and I would say I was fairly dependent on it at that point to get through the day. When I drank, I didn't feel like I had to worry about being different and keeping up a façade. I could just put on some loud music and drink and be comfortable for an hour, before I had to go home to my mother and my stepfather. I remember coming across my father's marijuana when I was 11 or 12, and I just felt so disappointed. I don't know why. I should have expected it. I was really upset by that, and I always shied away from [it]. I never felt like I could entirely trust it, whereas alcohol was something that was around. My mother's family is Italian, so I was around wine a lot." From the time I was 11, if we were at a meal, I would always have a sip of [my father's] drink, and his advice was just take it easy. It was un-demonized. It wasn't something verboten, so in a sense, it was very easy for me to walk away from later.

Experiencing coming out and coping with internalized homophobia

I must have been fourteen when I had homoerotic feelings, and it just scared the hell out of me. I grew up in complete denial of what was going on. I had an editor in my head, and I just said, "NOPE, I didn't think that." Then pushed it out of my head. But then when I'd sit around with my friends and they'd start talking about which of the boys they thought were cute, I was just very, very, quiet, and I just couldn't relate. I was not attracted to boys. I felt there was something horribly, disgustingly wrong with me. And I had to hide it, and, between the two of those, it wasn't such a great combination. It was always in the back of my mind and at the same time, it was always something I would push away. I would say no, no, no, I don't think that. It was quite funny. I'd come home from high school, at 15 or 16; take off my combat boots, put on Indigo Girls and say, "Gee, where do I fit in the world? I know I'm not a lesbian, can't be."

When I was 17 or 18, I started coming into the city for music prep every Saturday. And that was such a relief to me. I went from being a Long Islander, to a New Yorker. And suddenly, everything was really safe. So by the time I was 19, even if I wasn't ready to say I'm a lesbian yet, I was comfortable with it, and comfortable with the idea of experimenting. I had my first

same-sex experiences around 18, 19, even though I was still in denial. “I’m not a lesbian, I just sleep with my friends. You know, it happens.” Granted, I’ve never even touched a boy, but you know, “I’m straight.” I just wanted to be normal, whatever that means. I was used to playing the part of the good daughter, and doing what I had to do, and I wasn’t going to step out of that.

So it wasn’t until I was 22, that I really said, “You know I’m a lesbian.” At this point, I may as well come out and admit it. By then I was familiar with the resources and the community. So it wasn’t so scary. I remember the first time I came down to the Village. I was in Barnard at that point and I came down to the Village. I was just terrified, being completely acculturated to the Upper West Side, music school, Barnard, and then [I’m in] this entirely different neighborhood—WORLD, where the streets don’t make sense and, people are—well when you first come here, you’re in culture shock, you think WEIRD. And I was thinking, “Oh my God, this is going to be a large part of my world now, and this is really scary.” And it was like speaking a foreign language for a while. After a while you figure out where you are going and I think that helps. Just knowing the layout of the streets. Just to know the lay of the land a little bit. And when you wander up Greenwich Avenue, and suddenly you’re in this maze, I mean emotionally, that was exactly how I felt.

I am just out. I didn’t come out of one closet to go into another, and then selectively sit in closets; it’s rather cramped. I’m fortunate to live in New York, which is an accepting place, and the only people who are stigmatized in New York are the people who have an issue with it. So I feel very lucky with where I live, and the kind of life I have. I’m not working at this point. I’m in a behavioral therapy program dealing with some of the ramifications of the abuse. I’ve never been able to function on a normal level. Something I’m just starting to get angry about. But, I don’t come out immediately to people. I noticed every male psychiatrist I’ve always had has said, “So what’s your sexual orientation?” I’ve always said, so how is that relevant to my treatment? And just on principle I will not answer the question, but over the course of the first few weeks I will. I’ll come out when I get comfortable, it’ll be of my choosing, at my moment, and with who I want, and when I want. I don’t see how that’s the least bit relevant to treatment.

In terms of participating in the community, Barnard has a very active community, which is really nice. I mean it’s got to be the most accepting place on earth. It’s also nice because it was one of the few places where I could flirt with a butch looking woman and she would get it, “Oh, you’re queer, you’re not a straight chick flirting with me.” I was so incredibly frustrated; I don’t know what I have to do, tattoo it across my forehead or something? So that was really nice. And I was very involved with my studies. I had some friends, some of whom were lesbians. I did have a few lovers, and it just wasn’t the main thing on the agenda at that point, because schoolwork was so paramount, but it was certainly part of it. And it really profited me to be in that kind of atmosphere.

I was 22 when I finally came out. I met someone and it was just time, I think. I can’t say exactly when I came out to myself, but somewhere along the line, there was this gradual easing into not so much a definition, but a shorthand label, and getting comfortable with that. With my mother, when I first came out to her, she was a deer in the headlights. After I reassured her that she would still have grandchildren, she was pretty much okay. It just takes some getting used to. And there were times where she was upset. And mostly I said look you have to deal with this. I have my own stuff to deal with. With my father, having had a really weird relationship, I just said to him, “You should know, I’m a lesbian.” And he said, “Well, I kind of figured.”

I didn't think my mother would, but of course the fear in the back of my mind was well is she going to disown me? Is she going to be one of those parents that just can't accept this at all? I was afraid she would think of me as a deviant. That was a big fear.

I refuse to believe that who I am is a product of my experience. I am who I am. This is how I was born. If sexual abuse created lesbians, the human race would have died out a very long time ago. So I refuse to even listen to that kind of hypothesis. I think it's junk. People ask me that question, and I give them the same answer, that there would be no straight women. I mean I know some lesbians who aren't survivors, well then, how do you explain them.

Experiencing homoprejudice

Sometimes I feel like a fish swimming against the current. I feel very frustrated with some of the people I know who are rather religious and say, "Well, I hate the sin and not the sinner." Well you know what? Go jump in a lake. I feel incredibly frustrated that I'm automatically perceived as heterosexual. That I find incredibly frustrating. I'm not much of a drinker, but I will go to the bars, just to be out, and to be some place I'm comfortable. In this community that's always been half of it. So I resent that. I resent the way men will aggressively flirt with me and try to get my attention, and the pedestal they put me on, and their utter stupidity and docility. They really bug me. Well I say about men, I'm not fond of the whole death camp thing, but I think the concentration camp model really has some things to say for itself. If we could just put them all somewhere. I don't have relationships with men, period. As far as I'm concerned, they do not exist. I mean I will give them a chance, but so few of them live up to the most basic expectations.

I have one close male friend that I like and respect as a person. I'd love to have more, but 90% of them turn out to be not worth my respect. My friend doesn't look at my breasts. He is happily married, has a very functional relationship with his wife. He understands that I'm a person.

I grew up on Long Island, so it was very difficult for me [being lesbian]. I mean I heard homophobic slurs at least 25 or 30 times a day. I got called dyke, lezzy, more than once, because I wouldn't date. And, let's face it, I'm pretty, so I'd get asked out and, "No." After a while it got better, but I got fairly gay-bashed a few times. I was in complete denial. And I had to learn how to fight, just survive at that point. I was very depressed. I was the quiet kid in the back of the classroom who never did any work. Smart, but just never did any work. The teachers would always say, "Well if only you would just apply yourself." If I felt physically safe, maybe I could do that. So it was a very unsympathetic environment.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

I've gone through talking about this so many times and have had so much good therapy that it's not as horrible any more to talk about. My mother's one of those women who feels she needs a man to be complete, or at least felt that way for a long time. In fact, it wasn't until I told her about what happened that she was really able to evaluate that. I would describe her as being a very naïve person for most of her life, very Pollyanna-ish, very easily manipulated. I think that's what attracted my stepfather to her, as well as me, my being in the picture. At first he was just very nice. And then as it got closer and closer to him moving in he got too nice. And I didn't know how, but I knew something wasn't quite right. It was almost too intense. Then after he moved in, which was the summer before I started first grade, things started going downhill from there. I mean he's ex-military so part of his whole thing was to fuck with my mind. And that was

deeply important to him, for obvious reasons. So I didn't quite believe the bad things he was saying about me when he first moved in but you know, by a few years later—sure.

He was very possessive of food. I kind of ate at his behest. Still and all, I was still blamed for everything; I mean he really laid into me. I don't remember exactly when it started. August, before I started first grade, I know that. He was very violent from the beginning, he was very cunning, very good at covering his tracks, he was good at hitting me in spots where he knew it wouldn't leave marks: he knew how to cut off my hair without leaving marks. I mean he was a smart son of a bitch. He always made sure to do the laundry. It was one of his things. I remember him showing me the combat knife that he saved from his army service. I mean the thing must have been about the size of my head. And that was before he started hurting me. I mean he was showing me that and his medals, and I felt kind of special that he was showing me these things. And this is probably the hardest [emotionally] thing to remember—I was reading *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson. It's a very funny book about the Appalachian Trail but there were two women who were found one morning in their tent with their hands bound, their throats slit from ear to ear. When I read that I started shaking and I got this strange buzzing sensation throughout my entire body, and for about ten minutes I could barely breathe. And soon after that, that's when I remembered him raping me at knifepoint. I thought I was going to die. And I wanted to. I wanted it to be over. And I never remembered what happened in the morning when I woke up. I was just completely numb from the waist down. I, theoretically, should not have been able to walk. I had this horrible secret though, and I had to go on with my life, and my life depended on it, as far as I knew. So I just went through school completely numb, completely dissociated. They thought I had a learning disability, whereas the year before I was considered to be exceptionally bright. I could not complete any work, I could not learn to hold a pencil. I could not run in any conceivable, in any recognizable way. I mean I was just out of my body 99% of the time. And at the school, the teachers were not perceptive or sympathetic to that in the least. I mean, they thought I was lazy, or absent-minded, or stupid or something. So I just got yelled at a lot. And I was just deeply uncomfortable, and I did not have friends at school, obviously. I was extremely quiet. I always liked to be by myself. And it was actually, strangely enough, a relief to come home, because at least I didn't remember what happened at night. I used to get the hell fucked out of me. Why would I be relieved to come home to that? I had no idea what I was coming home to, complete traumatic amnesia. No clue. I just paid as little attention to my body as possible. I have several different memories of him. I remember waking with him on top of me. I remember waking up with his tongue down my throat. I remember waking up with his prick in my mouth and not being able to breath, and asphyxiating, almost to the point of suffocation, almost to the point where I was going to pass out. I remember vomiting immediately after that. I remember this incredible weight on top of me, and being totally helpless to do anything about it. I remember being in the shower and not feeling a damn thing, and washing blood off my legs, and I wouldn't stop bleeding. It felt like it wouldn't come off, and even after I'd stopped bleeding, I was still scrubbing, and I felt like I couldn't get it off. And I felt just horribly filthy. I would always take the longest showers. I would get in trouble for staying in the shower for half an hour. I'd get in there and I'd just stand under the water and try to get clean and get out of my head at the same time. I was extremely afraid to be out of my mother's sight. I remember anybody coming up behind me would scare the hell out of me. I remember having to bend over to pick anything up for any reason was terrifying. I remember him forcing me over and just

raping me from behind, and I cannot do a thing about it. Well needless to say, I don't have sex in any of those rear positions. We just don't go there. I mean, the few times we have, I've just had these awful flashbacks and flipped. I don't believe in hell, but I hope there's one for him. If I could – if I was sure I could get away with it, I swear I'd kill the son of a bitch, in a heartbeat.

Trying to heal

I only remembered who hurt me when I was 23. I went through a process of having really intense flashbacks, and just an awful, awful time of it. I withdrew from school. I had too much time on my hands in retrospect, but in a way I needed to just wade through shit. I was in the hospital for about two weeks, in August of 2002. I was just feeling really suicidal and hopeless, and in the beginning of August, I found a really good trauma specialist. If not for her, I don't think I'd be here. I didn't trust anybody, but I trusted that I could trust her and that she would be able to help me get to some place better, because she said she could. I didn't believe it, but I believed she believed it. When I got out of the hospital (age 23), for some reason, I guess it was because it was so much more real to me, that was when I started with parasuicidal behaviors.

I first told my therapist about the abuse. She specializes in gay and lesbian issues, and she didn't understand the process of memory, or the process of how a child survives these things. Fortunately, she understood she was not qualified to help me with this [and although] she didn't have anyone to refer me to, I found Jeanie, and she was really helpful.

My therapist was the first person I told [about the abuse], and my friends in school. They were incredibly supportive, deeply, deeply supportive. I didn't want to tell my mother in the beginning. I was furious with her and didn't want to have any kind of contact with her in any way. We never had a good relationship. I was always angry with her. I was absolutely furious with her when she'd do something absentminded or naïve. I never quite understood why I would just fly into a rage if she did something stupid. She's not, not always the sharpest knife in the drawer, so I didn't want to tell her. I did write her a letter, though was I wasn't intending to send it to her. She went away on vacation, and I was having an awful time. I was incredibly dissociated. I was having affect storms, and these intense bouts of self-hatred. I was having these body memories, and heaves, and all sorts of things. I dissociated as a kid, and I have trouble understanding this myself: I didn't know what a desert was, but I found myself just kind of absentmindedly wandering around one. Physically. My body was where it was. The rest of me floated out of it and would wind up in odd places. I also met my grandfather who died before I was born, and he prevented me from dying in a sense. They talk about a tunnel with a light. Well guess what, it's there. He stopped me, and he picked me up, and put me on his lap, and I understand this is him. He picked me up, and put me on his lap and said "Little one, it's not your time. You have a lot to do." And he held me until it was over. Of course these are things that we can't logically explain in a scientific manner and yet there they are. But at that point in time, I wound up, although not in the same intense way that I was as a kid, but in a desert. And how comfortable that was for me, and comforting. So at that point, I was really distraught; I was out of my body. So I wrote my mother this letter. The things I said in it were first of all, this is what happened: Your ex-husband raped me, and I don't remember exactly what happened, but I remember he wasn't nice about it, and I remember he was violent. This is what I need from you. First change your last name to something, anything else. Second, I don't ever want to see you cry about this or be upset about it. I have my own stuff to deal with. I can't handle your shit. Third, don't bring this up, unless I bring it up. I don't want to discuss it, and I'll discuss it on my own

terms. So she came back from vacation and said “Marina, what is going on?” And I said to her, all right. Here’s this letter, but don’t read it until I’m out of the house. And I went to a friend’s. I actually had a very good time that night. I stayed out till three in the morning. But I didn’t want to see her in any upset kind of space. I didn’t want to feel responsible for hurting her, upsetting her. And after that we started to really bond in a way that we never could before. I mean she thought about the ways that he manipulated and abused her, although nowhere near what happened to me. And we started to really enjoy each other’s company, and to really be friends. For the first time I’m angry about what happened to me. This is brand new for me. I’m angry with the situation, and I’m angry with her for not doing a better job of being a parent.

I haven’t cut myself in several months. I wouldn’t say never again, but I haven’t done it in quite some time. It made me feel relieved; deeply relieved. I grew up with this whole idea that I was this awful little girl who had to be punished. I still feel like that, but nobody’s there to hurt me anymore. So I crave that release that comes with someone finally cracking me outside the head. It’s like okay, at least it’s here now, and it’ll be over and then at least I’ll be safe for the night. So it was just that anticipation. It was intolerable.

How my abuse affected my coming out

The messages I got from growing up in that environment were that I could not and should not trust my own senses; that they were not accurate; that I did not have feelings; that they didn’t exist; that I was not worthy of caretaking, or love, or kind treatment; that I was horribly, horribly deficient and would always be so; that the only thing I was good for was sex. The list just goes on and on; that I was stupid; that I’d never amount to anything. Not being able to trust my own impressions, I would have been out very much sooner, probably 14 or 15, because I understood I was attracted to women. And I understood there were other women in the world like that. So it was a matter of not being able to trust what my body was telling me. Of course, it’s a common theme.

How I cope with stress

This is what I’m learning how to do in this program. I am in the process of learning how to cope with normal stress in healthy ways, as opposed to dissociating or cutting, or slamming my head into the wall, and it’s difficult.

My problems and my hopes

I’ve always pushed people who were interested in me away. I’ve been afraid to open up and to be vulnerable. To date I’ve only had one serious relationship. I’ve always had a difficult time being comfortable being sexual and I’ve not been able to have really good relationships, or even terribly satisfying relationships. I’m incredibly insecure. I need a lot of reassurance; I don’t know if that’s ever going to change, but that can push some people away.

I’m still trying to get out of the depression that I’ve lived my whole life with. I never expected to live to be 10 years old. I was shocked when I turned ten, I didn’t expect to be here. I still have trouble with a lot of basic tasks. I tend to miss appointments. I tend to pay my bills late. I tend to have difficulty finishing tasks. I tend to have difficulty doing some basic tasks. Those are all primary. And I’m furious that I have to deal with these things. I remember the sense of buoyancy I had before this, and the way I was able to just do things. I had energy; I didn’t want to lay down all the time. I can’t imagine ever getting that back. I’d like that. I’d like very much to finish school and to have a career. I’d like to be financially independent at some point. I very much want to move out of the city. I would like to get married, which, as of today, I can legally

do. I want to get my MSW. I think I might like to work with other survivors. I'd also be interested in working at a college setting, because I love that atmosphere, and I really like working with teenagers. I feel like if something positive can come out of my life experiences, it's not a complete waste. There's some kind of meaning in that suffering.

Kitt

My family

I'll go over the whole story because it is kind of a weird situation. I was about 15 months old when I was adopted. I was told this story by a family friend who happened to be the friend who abused me. He told me that my first father, my adopted father was actually my biological father. I've never looked this up so I don't know if it's true or not, but it can be. My mother couldn't have children. So I was adopted for whatever reason. I was born in the back of a station wagon. My family lived in Virginia until I was 7. I don't remember a lot of stuff. I was an only child. I lived by myself, and so I spent a lot of time in my room and stuff. I just remember always being like very lonely, and I didn't have a lot of friends. There were some kids in the neighborhood. I have birthday pictures, but there are only one or two kids there. The other thing that I remember is my mother and father fighting pretty much, and a couple of times and it being physical. I don't remember a lot. I remember some good times and pretty normal stuff other than that. My father traveled a lot; went away a lot, and was gone a week or two at a time. I had just started second grade. A week or two into it, he went on a business trip, he was always on a business trip. I was out in the driveway, when he was pulling out, and he said I love you, I'll see you Friday. Well, when Friday came, they repossessed the house, and half the furniture. Then my grandfather helped my mother make a down payment to buy a house in town.

When we lived in town, my mother worked one time for a furniture store, one time she went back to business school on the weekends. Somewhere, after that happened, she had a nervous breakdown, and spent some time in the mental section of a regular hospital. It wasn't like a special mental hospital. My mother had other mental breakdowns when I was a child. She was married three times and it was usually caused by some marital situation as far as I could tell.

She wasn't accepting of me. I loved my mother, but we had a very uneven relationship and so we were never close. Over the long haul, she had a terrible temper; she would come in and break up my stuff and yell at me. Every time she saw me, she was always correcting me about something. I could never live up.

Then she met my second father, who was actually a cousin of my first father. They had the same last name. He was in the Navy. He lived in town, and they were dating at that point, and he went to the Philippines; that was his last tour and then he was getting out. So he came back when he got out, they got married, and he got a job in the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. He would come home weekends. It was that kind of thing. I don't remember how long like that sort of went on. In my mind it was a couple of years maybe. I remember once I, the only memory I really have is he was a nice guy; he never bothered me. I really got on with him well. I don't have a lot of memories. He was working as a civilian for the Navy and they had something for him to do in California, so he went out there for work. He would call us every week or so, and then finally it happened that he didn't call for a while. So my mother called there, and a woman answered and I think she asked for my dad, and she said he wasn't there. I think my mom said,

Well who are you?” and the lady said, “I’m Mrs. Shelley”. We finally found out that he married this woman, and he was a bigamist. There was a divorce, needless to say, and another mental breakdown. That one was the one where she took some pills, drank a lot of alcohol, she put on all her jewelry, and the rescue squad came and got her. Then she came back.

In between breakdowns, when she had a job during the day, she would go to it. Otherwise she was a night person. She would sleep on the weekends, or other times, or when she didn’t have a job, she would sleep during the day and stay up or go out all night. There was a kind of a mis-connection; we never had lot of contact. My grandmother basically raised me. There weren’t a lot of family dinners, and all those kinds of things. My mother would sort of appear, she was home most of the time, but we didn’t intersect that often. When we did, it was often sort of blowing in, having a rage and breaking something of mine.

She probably met her third husband not long after she came out of the hospital the last time. I’m not sure how they met. He owned a wood yard in Potomac. We had a house in Potomac, but not like Potomac where the big houses are, but the address was in Potomac. He also owned this piece of land, and basically, what he would do is buy firewood, like trees and trunks, and cut it up, and deliver it as firewood. Or people could come and load up their trunks. In the non-firewood season he would do other things like repair fences. He had his own little business. And after they got together, basically they would stay here during the week and come home on the weekends. And I lived with my grandmother. And this was during the last 2 years they were together.

Being teased and tormented – my school years

I guess I was always an awkward, backward person. People said I was ugly. I wore glasses since about fourth grade, so that was a reason to pick on people. I didn’t have shabby clothes, but I probably didn’t have a lot of designer things, so maybe that was a thing. When I was younger, my grandmother used to make my clothes and some of them were quite nice. That was when I was really young. I never really had a hygiene problem, but people would make fun of me. My last name was Shelley and they used to call me Smelly Shelley. I wasn’t smelly; they just called me that. My nickname was Kitt, until I got rid of it. I was never Charlotte. I became Charlotte when I came up here and I couldn’t stand Kitt. My mother insisted on calling me Charlotte Elizabeth; my family called me Charlotte Elizabeth. Hardly anybody else ever called me Charlotte. It was mostly Kitt. As I developed and got into high school, it became Big Tit Kitt. So I went from Smelly Shelley to Big Tit Kitt.

Basically, I wasn’t good in sports. When I was like in intermediate, junior high school age, I spent a lot of time by myself reading and stuff. When I got older, like the last couple of years before my twelfth grade, in the tenth and eleventh grades, maybe even a little bit before, I lived my life with my two best friends. One was a year older than me, and one was a year younger than me. At different times, one was infatuated with someone who was not interested in her, and that guy I ended up dating. Then the other friend had two boyfriends and shuffled back and forth, between them, but her parents were a little stricter. I was always was involved in creative ways of making sure that she could spend time with her boyfriend by going along, or facilitating. Again it satisfied my need to be nice, and help people. Then maybe people would like me; because I was dying for someone to like me.

I did okay in school, but I only did well when I was a senior in high school. I can’t say like someone called me this, but somewhere in my head, I got the idea that I’m not smart, I mean

I have a low IQ or something, so I never even tried to work hard. What happened was Lauren, a camp counselor in the Girl Scouts was the first woman, other than my grandmother, who paid any attention or showed interest in me. I was just so taken with her, it was almost like hero worship, and I just wanted to impress her, so I was just trying to do my best, and she was very encouraging. Before that, school was pretty much of a struggle, between being picked on, and me thinking I wasn't very smart.

The prelude to coming out

I became pregnant when I was in college with the guy from high school, even though he doesn't admit it. I'm sure it wasn't my stepfather. I went away to college for a year, but I used to come home on the weekends frequently. And we would go out. It was more than companionship. It was an intimate companionship. It was similar to the other relationships in that I wanted the companionship, but I figured I had to put up with the other part. I didn't think about protection. No one ever talked to me about sex, not really, other than in the Girl Scouts; we saw that film that's sponsored by Kotex. That was basically the sex education, and they gave us a little book.

I didn't tell anybody [I was pregnant] until, that is I didn't show a lot until I probably was 6 or 7 months pregnant. There was a discussion of keeping the baby or adopting the baby. I made a decision on my own to not to have an abortion. Part of it was I don't think I could have done it anyway; but the other half of it is you would have to tell somebody to get help, which I didn't feel comfortable with either. I think I had finished with my stepfather before I ended up being pregnant. I think I was finished with him in that summer and this happened in the fall. But it was pretty close together. It was actually both sort of back to back; it was right about the same time. It could have been even simultaneously almost. At that point I had dropped out of college. The last couple of months of that, I basically stayed with my mother here. And then the baby was born and she went up for adoption.

Experiencing coming out

I had some crushes on teachers at school, both women. But I think when I was in the last year of high school, or first year of college, I was sort of attracted to some women, and I made some close friendships with some people at Girl Scout camp, and we sort of stayed friends within that circle. It wasn't sexual. But it was very intense, hugging and kissing. On a couple of occasions we would all end up in a sleeping bag, but I was aware of those feelings.

The first time I wanted to be with a women, I was about was about 19 at the time. It was around that time period that I went to a camp reunion. We decided to have a reunion at the camp in December of the following year. So everybody came up there. I was corresponding with some people, back and forth; when I came up to reunion, we all stayed in the big dining hall. During that reunion, I developed a friendship with one of the CITs (Counselors in training), and actually we were sort of friends at camp, but I wouldn't say she was the closest friend I had made that summer. So it was kind of interesting that we ended up sleeping next to each other. And then at some point during the weekend, on one of the nights, we some how ended up holding hands and then snuggling, and she sort of became my first lover.

The story of when I actually started to come out [to others] is really strange. I didn't come out to my peers or my coworkers or anybody until my relationship, which was 11 years long, ended. We were very closeted. The only people that knew were some other gay people and most of them didn't live in our State. We did no gay stuff. I can't say that people didn't suspect. I'm sure that some people had an idea, but we were in our own little world.

I started to come out after she left me for a man. At that point in my life I was still a very shy, self-conscious, person. She was older than me, and was the more dominant one. She made more money, and I was a very backward person, and was not really expecting it. I thought my life was over. I was very depressed. At that point, I had probably worked at least 9 years at the job I was in at that time. I worked for a university. I made some pretty good friends there. I didn't have any gay people friends, so those were the only people I could think of to turn to. I knew people were going to know that something was wrong because I was a mess. So it ended up, I came out to my boss and a few people at work. It was very hard, but I was lucky. Everybody was really great, really supportive.

All I did was cry. I was still depressed for six months or more after that. First of all, I started to think well maybe I'm not supposed to be gay. I did have that little second thought there for a while. Then I looked in the *Washington Blade*, and first thing I did, I looked for a lesbian support group, and found one. I felt I needed some kind of spiritual experience so I looked in the paper for what kind of gay churches there were. I started Catholic services for gay and lesbian people. I started becoming friends with the men and eventually I became friends with the women. But it's a little hard. Women are very hard sometimes to make friends with; it's just sort of a weird culture.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

When I was in high school, I had a crush on a gym teacher, and an English teacher at one point, sort of between tenth and eleventh grades. Then I actually had a crush on my CIT director. I was in eleventh grade. Somewhere in around that time, I got curious. I thought, what is this happening, so I did actually get some books out of the library, but unfortunately at that time, most of the things you could get were like these scary psychology books and you'd see these pictures of people getting shock treatments. So I said, "Nah, this is just like a little phase thing I'm going through. It's natural for teenagers to do these things". I just sort of shoved things aside. I never really had any boyfriends but I ended up dating one guy for a little bit at the end, who was actually very interested in a friend of mine, but she never was interested in him. For lack of anything else, we sort of got together at one point. But again, I think part of it was related to forcing this other kind of relationship, thinking that's the way it should be. I think he was a very nice and shy young man like me, and we talked a lot. So it was more for the companionship as much as anything else.

When I first went to college, I had a roommate who I didn't really realize until well into the semester, was also gay. But before I got to know her, I did spend some time being careful about what I said and what not. And there was a gay student's organization on campus, and I was sort of interested in that, and I would conceal the fact that I would go to these meetings.

I think part of it was I was still in this thing of well I'm not sure yet. The other thing was, it was just a very taboo thing at that point. I grew up in a small town, and I was going to college in a similar sized town. It wouldn't occur to me to go somewhere and seek out a counselor or a therapist, so I just tried to struggle with it myself. Even while I was in that year in college when I went home on the weekend, I was still sort of seeing this guy. I was thinking that that might be the way to go. I enjoyed the companionship, but the other piece just wasn't near as exciting as when I spent time with other friends.

Before I came out to my family, I was worried, because I was living at home at that point, and I was worried that I would get kicked out. Actually, I didn't come out to my family. My

mother found out by going into my room and stealing my diary. Unbeknownst to me, my mother showed up unexpectedly while my girlfriend and I were in my room, sitting on my bed, just talking and laughing, and listening to music. At one time, I had replaced a cracked glass panel on the door to my room with contact paper. And while we were sitting on the bed, my mother took a scissors or knife and began to cut a hole into the contact paper, and I guess she saw us. At that point we weren't doing anything that was inappropriate, but I guess since she had read my diary, she knew what was going on. She started yelling, so we ran out of the house. We just got in her car and took off, but we didn't know what to do. I had a close friend from camp who lived in Pennsylvania, and we drove there. So I really didn't come out, unfortunately, and of course my biggest fear was realized. My mother called the Girl Scout office and told them, so I couldn't get a job at camp anymore. She blamed them for making me gay. After that fiasco, I stayed home for a while and my girlfriend went to college. One weekend that we picked for her to come down and visit me in my house, my mother shows up and wasn't supposed to show up. So again we were on the road. This time we had no car, so we hitchhiked to some place. We ended up going to Pennsylvania and living with a friend, and we did get jobs and an apartment.

My mom passed away quite some time ago. But at the end we reconciled. A couple of years before she passed away, near the end she had a breakdown and went into a hospital. A therapist called and talked to me. At that time, I was in a happy, healthy relationship. I was in my mid- to late-twenties. The therapist went back and told her that there is nothing wrong with me, and that it was she who needed an attitude change basically. I think that meant a lot to her coming from a professional. The next time when I came to visit her, she sort of accepted it. And before she died, she told my partner at the time to take care of me.

At the time that happened, I was involved with my former CIT director. It's kind of a weird thing that happened. Meg and I were living in Pennsylvania when my CIT director called us and invited us down there for an event that she was having. That's when this other convoluted thing happened. Meg and I had sort of split. When I came down to visit my CIT director and her partner ... this is the weirdest thing that ever happened in my life ... we just got attracted to each other's partners. So we switched partners basically is what happened and I still can't explain it. By that time, my mother had her breakdown while the four of us were sharing a house together. The four of us: me, Meg, my CIT director and her partner. That's when my mother had the breakdown; I was probably in my late 20s by the time we reconciled.

Experiencing homoprejudice

Some of the things that I notice being a gay woman in a hetero world are little pieces here and there. Like advertising, or when you fill out forms, the only choices are single or married. But the most striking thing for me that I've ever realized, and it may sound silly, is when I go to Women's Music Festivals. Rosie, my partner, and I have been to the lesbian women's music festival a couple of times and that is what I call a utopia world because they think of everything; people pitch in. There is something for every need that a person would have while they're there. They provide for counseling, AA, they make sure that older people, and people who are handicapped can get from one event to the other. It's just like you're in this little, lesbian utopia. But when you come back to the real world, that's when you get culture shock.

The only other time I felt that was the last march on Washington, when D.C. was taken over by gay people, if you will. As we were coming up the subway to Dupont Circle, there were

all these gay people, just cheering, and so it was like you were in a gay world. But you notice it in little things.

I've come to the point where I decided that I was just going to be out, and that was it, and there was no going back. So I became totally out at work and everywhere. But every once in a while, there's that little glitch. I got a new job and it was—you got to do it all over again.

Experiencing sexual abuse

When I volunteered to tell my story, of course I remembered experiencing sexual abuse by one person, but I had forgotten that it was actually two different people. The first one was with a friend of the family. My grandfather was a real estate developer and subdivided property into lots and sold them to people. There was one couple who bought one of these lots from my grandfather. When this couple bought the lot, they befriended my mother; they sort of became family friends. They bought the lot and the plan was to build a house there, but they did it on the weekends, because they weren't retired yet. I called them aunt and uncle, even though they weren't. Aunt Jane didn't come up all the time. I think he was either retired or semi-retired, so he had more time to work on it, and I think she was still working full time or something. He would come in and get me. Sometimes we would do something fun and then we would end up back there. I think it was in Junior High School; I was about 10 or 12. That's the first time that I can remember, and I'm not sure this is the first time. But I have this connection with it because it was my birthday, and I wanted a bike. It was a boy's bike. My parents did not want me to have a boy's bike. I don't think they had enough money to buy that particular bicycle anyway. But I wanted a bicycle, and I wanted a boy's bicycle. And they weren't going to get me a boy's bicycle period, even if it was a cheap or used boy's bicycle. I had my eye on one in the Western Auto Store; they had the banana bike. It had a banana seat and it was candy apple red, with this seat that had these sparkles in it. It was a five speed with a stick shift. That's the bike I wanted. Well, my aunt and uncle bought me that bike. And after that, it was on that day he started sort of touching me, and stuff like that. Eventually, he would just have me masturbate him. It lasted until I was in college, until I was 16, 17, and didn't have the occasion to see him. After a point, when I got older, I felt really bad about it. I felt I was torn. I remember at one point, I was going to try and avoid him, and eventually the families just sort of drifted apart naturally. I was torn because he paid attention to me. And I was an only child. I didn't have a lot of friends. I was very self-conscious. I was ridiculed in school all the time. I was ugly; I was stupid, and on and on and on. He was nice to me. He paid attention to me. He talked to me. So I felt this was something I had to do in exchange. And then I got old enough to realize that this is not right for me to be doing.

I think I was somewhere around 15. I remember consciously trying to sort of avoid him, to cut it off some way, but my way was to sort of avoid being alone with him. I wasn't the kind of person, and I still have a problem today. I still have to work on this, saying no to people. I was never physically hurt or anything like that. It was sort of repulsive, but it wasn't that bad. So I just thought it was something I had to do, sort as a favor, and I would also get treats and things. He told me not to tell anyone, especially Aunt Jane. The thing is when you're younger they make it like a game.

The reason why, in my head, I discount the second time is because it started when I was seventeen, and it went on for a year, or a year and a half. I feel as though I was old enough and that I should have just never let it happen. I should have somehow screamed my head off or

something. It was my mother's third husband. And the same thing, it started with the attention, the buying stuff, and then all of a sudden, I find myself in this situation and I didn't know how to get out of it. So I just went along with it. I knew my mother would never believe me if I told her. So again, it ended up being something I just did. He started out by you know, touching me, and everything. And then he'd want me to touch him. He wanted me to do oral sex, but I just didn't do that. It was in my senior year of high school. That last one, that last one was, I know I remember consciously it was during my first year at college. I think there was like one weekend where I came home.

It was kind of strange, because sometimes I would think, well since I'm participating in this maybe I'm not gay; but then on the other hand you realize that well I can never say I ever enjoyed any of it. I guess I was at the age where I was old enough to think that there was something different because if I were developing right, maybe I should be enjoying it. So I'm thinking maybe that does mean I'm tracked this other way. There was this back and forth thing. And I think maybe that's some reason why I didn't cut things off sooner because I was struggling with trying to figure out my own sexuality. And that's the hardest one to talk about because I was older the second time, and that's why I blame myself.

When it stopped, the good thing was that I was away at school. We didn't have much interaction either. So that was the thing. Because it still would have been hard to say no. It was funny. There was never a lot of conversation between us to begin with; we could sometimes sit. I would go up there and sit in the kitchen and listen to music, and sort of just hang out at the table and not really talk to him, but just be there. We talked some, have a glass of wine or something, some kind of alcohol. We wouldn't get drunk or anything, but we would have a couple things to drink, and just mellow out

Some ways I think the abuse affected me

The first person I told about the abuse was probably a girlfriend. I think I eventually told my mother, but it was much later, like near the end. She probably wouldn't have believed me. I probably could have told my grandmother; she doted on me, and she was the sweetest person. But I always felt that she was from a different generation. I would have done the world for her; we were very close, but I never felt like I could talk to her about anything. I never talked to her about what was going on between Meg and me. She sort of intuited it. She didn't care what you'd do because what you do is nobody's business. She was worried about the consequences.

Looking back at coming out and my abuse

I think coming out was so hard because it was almost like I was struggling to let go of childhood. Maybe that's not the right word; it was reaching back at the same time as trying to go forward. There was this other piece, I did not intentionally forget, this but I forgot to mention something. When I spoke about my first experience having been with Meg, it was actually not with Meg. It was Laura, my CIT director. What happened was, I was in college and it was in the fall, and we had this break weekend or something. We were still close friends. I was still very much enamored, I guess, because she was a lot older than I was. At that point, it was more like a big sister/little sister relationship. There was actually a young woman, a little younger than me that also they had the same relationship, although looking back on it, I realize it probably was problematic, even though they never did anything sexual. But there was an attraction between the two, it sort went beyond friends. I think that had things been different, they might have acted on it, but then again that would not have been great idea because she was underage at the time. We

termed the relationship at that point, big sister/little sister. I was calling and writing a lot, and I had this break weekend. Either I asked her, or she invited me or I said, "Can we get together?" In college, if you want to go somewhere, they have this ride board. So I found somebody that was going up there and I got a ride with her to a certain point and Laura picked me up from there. We spent the weekend together and basically, she made a pass at me. It was an encounter just for that weekend. And then that was sort of the first one. That was when I think I really realized that I was gay. But unfortunately at that point, I was already pregnant. I don't even know if I knew. But I'm sure it was very close together. The fact that I thought it was stupid that I allowed myself to get pregnant went through my head. Once I realized that this is where my attractions lie, it was still very much not a thing I could act on, especially where we were living. It still was a little troubling if I was going to be a celibate person or was going to be ... where do you meet other people. I was confused. Even when I was starting to acknowledge that I think this is where I was, what my nature was, I was still always terrified that somebody would find out. Would I get arrested or sent away? It was more the legal thing. It wasn't so much the stigma or making fun; no one would have wanted that, but I was more afraid of being arrested. That fear was very real to people who were afraid of it. That's for sure. I mean when you think of it, more than likely, the police aren't going to come into your home for no reason. The only time you could get together with someone was in a certain place and so you had to take advantage of it. Like when Meg and I one time, we had somehow saved up some money or got some money and we were spending the weekend together near her college. We had rented a hotel room. And the following morning, even though we hung the sign out, the maid still sort of opened the door. I mean we weren't doing anything at that point, but it would scare the shit out of us. Because you just never knew when ... we were always afraid like a roommate might come in or something. That's why we started going to my house and other places, because my college roommate would go home for the weekend, and we would stay in the dorm room. One time we were there, somebody slipped us this note under the door. It was some kind of a vague thing that they knew what we were doing, or something like that. I can't even remember what they said, but it was enough to scare us into finding someplace else.

I think it's natural, or at least it seems natural, for one to wonder if your having bad experiences with men at that young age, that you would be turned off by that, and that's what sort of causes you to go off so far in the other direction. That may be true for some people. But, personally I don't think that's where I am. I've had some great male friends, and it's like a whole experience. You can't divorce the sexual part from the being that one person is, and some people are strongly attracted to people of the opposite sex. There is something that's like, you can do this, and you can function, and it's okay; but this is like wow. It's just like there's a connection, it's beyond just the sexual part of it. Being connected with a woman is not simply sex. Recently I went to a talk by an ex-gay person, who was saying that homosexuality is caused by a relationship in your family that's gone awry, usually with your mother. That if you didn't have a good relationship with your mother, so now you're seeking a relationship with another woman. Well, in my case, I didn't have a good relationship with my mother, but I don't believe that's why I'm gay, and I don't believe that these abuse things are a cause. I think it's my natural orientation. People that are straight might have had terrible relationships with their mothers, but they're still straight, or their mother, or their father, or whoever. Sometimes I understand that there may be some people that experienced abuse, and I can certainly see why they would not

want to have anything else to do with men. Or if women abused them, not have anything to do with women. But, in my experience, I don't feel like that's the reason. I think it's nature more than that I'm trying to escape something. I just feel like I was born that way, and it's natural, something that's inside of me, not a like an escape. I think for some people, that may be what happened. But it bothers me that people think that there's something wrong, that something happened and that is the cause of this.

I think that if I weren't abused I wouldn't have tried to do everything to please somebody. I think it made that worse. I wouldn't be surprised if that's how my mother justified it. In the end, I mean several months or so before she died.

Her death was particularly hard. Because my second abuser was her husband, and I really was her daughter. This is semantics, but I never really considered him my father. The ending of her story was that she found out that I had this abusive relationship with my last stepfather. But I also feel like I never really liked him, it's kind of weird, I can't explain it. I was pushing that piece of it away, at least the father piece of it. I never felt like that was our relationship. But anyway, she also found out that he was seeing other people and that's what caused her to come to this area to stay with my grandfather and pursue a divorce. That's when she had a breakdown, and went into a mental hospital. Then she became physically ill, and was transferred, and had some more problems before she passed.

Tess

My family

My family is from New Orleans. Consciously, my parent's relationship is not one I want to emulate in my life because my father gave the appearance of being a good provider, you know he had status. He had a good job; he had his own company; he was a lawyer, he had a lot of prestige, he was brilliant, and he had a great mind. He could argue with all kinds of people; he could also be charming and this was outside the family home. My mother also gave that appearance of being this beautiful, refined woman, caring, who cared about her children but there was this stuff, this miserly quality, there was something in the sense that she didn't have enough, she never had enough. My father would give my mother money for us, for the kids and my mother would take it for her uses, like to go shopping, like this weird stuff going on. I don't necessarily remember a lot of affection. I remember that my father didn't seem to be accountable in the relationship. He would regale my mother with stories about his clients who were stupid, who were low-lives, who were all these people I wouldn't want to be around. I had no interest in being a lawyer; you got to see the worst in human beings, the worst of humanity. But that was where his head was. Everybody was stupid; my mother was stupid; he always had these assessments about everything. My teachers were stupid, you know like all this intense frustration. He was denigrating everybody else, and my mother just sort of took it. I guess the word now is enabling, but also powering or just fueling that. She did not make him accountable. The same way she's not made my brother accountable for his actions. My father physically abused him. There were these bouts of bats and all kinds of things. I think the last time my father assaulted me, my brother protected me, and had to leave the house because my father was going kick his ass.

The siblings I have, that know about, are the ones I grew up with, two brothers and a sister. And then there are two sisters through one woman, and I think one brother through

another woman. I don't have contact with the two sisters no, although the oldest girl was around him, around his office, she worked in his office. And the other half-brother was paralyzed. My sister took me to meet him; he was shot. There was another brother that was shot and killed. And my father dealt with all this stuff by himself. It was just a control I guess. I mean I saw it as sickness, but I guess this whole thing is like control.

I grew up a Southern Baptist, but I went to Catholic Schools so it was like heavy ritual in the Catholicism and Mass and all the constant ceremonies and things. And then on Sundays I would have Sunday school, and Southern Baptist preaching, the three-hour sermons and stuff. Although my mother is Southern Baptist, she was a lot more liberal than I expected her to be. However, her parents are Southern Baptists, no smoking, no drinking, and no cursing. I mean on the farm kind of thing.

As a student, I was interested in what I was interested in. I mean during the growing up years, I did what I had to basically get by. I didn't do the passion stuff, and I wasn't even figuring out what my passion was and following up on it. The only constant in my life has been music, being a musician. In the past few years that's become my commitment. Before that, I was working in silly administrative kinds of jobs as a manager in advertising, outsourcing and blah, blah. I mean really things that had nothing to do with my real interest. And I think it was the same thing with school. I studied philosophy and psychology and that was cute for a while. It was stuff that I was interested in but—Hegel, who cares; Kant, who cares and that behavioral guy, Skinner, I hated him. So I just lost interest and I didn't finish.

I was at Boston University, a big behavioral place. But philosophy, the philosophy department was cool. I was not a very good student with stuff I wasn't interested in, and I also had trouble with finishing. I got a lot of incompletes. When I was in LA I studied music formally, but I had to stop because I had to get back to work. I was a pretty decent student with that. I mean I got really good grades, I did really well.

What my life is like now

Now I live in a in a queer arts collective. I moved in there this past November because I couldn't afford my rent. I couldn't pay because I lost my job. The company I was working for shut down. Actually, it was good because I hated it. I hated that whole thing. However, I've been having trouble with consistent employment and being able to support myself adequately. So I moved in there, and I'm around people of color, mostly people of color, and people who identify as artists, and sort of outsiders, politically, you know more of an anarchist. It's also kind of crazy, like its okay to scream at 2:00 in the morning, to walk in and be excited, and all of that stuff. The collective has number of events; other organizations will come in to rehearse and use the space because it's a huge loft space. Also a lot of visual artists live there. And then we'll do exhibitions and have parties and things like that. I belong to a social group that does different things with each other, usually women of color, lesbians of color, women of probably my age and older. I mean it's like trying to maintain like an opening to know what's going on, but I'm not part of the fabric necessarily. I'm not necessarily intimately part of the day-to-day running of those things, with the exception of living in the collective, because I have my own agenda in terms of doing the creative stuff and needing a lot of space and time around that stuff.

Experiencing coming out

When I was about six or so, I had a sexual relationship with another girl. I never really looked at that, but what I remember is that we would like mess around in the bathroom and she

and I would lie on the floor and she would lay on top of me. It was like this thing that we did every afternoon or something. And then I think my little brother busted us. He actually climbed up a ladder and looked into the bathroom window. I don't know if I got in serious trouble about that, or I don't even remember if an adult was aware of it, but it was like a blackmail kind of thing. It wasn't a big deal. I mean it was, I don't know for me it wasn't a big deal, it was like yeah, so what. But we didn't hang out after that. She was my next-door neighbor and the next thing I remember about her was that her there were a lot of sounds from the house next door like knocking. Her mom was in this abusive relationship and had come to our house to get some help and I remember, she was really beat up in face and stuff. And I remember this girl Clarissa had a lot, a lot of anger behind it, a lot of anger. And we never hung out or talked after that so I don't know what happened to her. So that's sort of like this whole mystery kind of thing.

I became aware of my sexual preference for women I think in my early 20s, which would be about 20 years ago. Actually it was in high school, and also in grammar school I would form these alliances with other girls, but I never sexualized it. I considered myself pretty asexual. I guess I always had the attractions that I was always definitely more drawn to girls, and that was acceptable as companions. The sexual stuff took off actually when older women would approach me. I was fascinated by or attracted to their energy. That became real when I was a sophomore or junior in college.

In my first experience with a woman, I had taken a sabbatical from school. I came back home and I was hanging with these gay guys, you know like in theater, artists, doing that whole thing. They were very open about their attraction to other men. And every night they would go to these bars try to pick up guys. So it was around that. The woman scene there was sort of circular, I mean it was really hidden to me. With my first experience it was like WOW. I mean this woman was really coming on to me, I mean she was really out there and just like who she was, and you know real, and really apparent that she liked women. I liked her energy and I liked talking to her, she was a complete flirt. For me it didn't really cross over, because I didn't have a political or feminist platform. And eventually I started doing the reading about the feminist movement. I got grounded as a feminist and from that developed more of a lesbian mind frame, mindset, and paradigm.

What became really important for me was to have it as fluid as I needed to be. So much of the literature at that point, women's literature didn't incorporate my color. Then I got to like some of those writers, and then it was okay. I felt very isolated still. I mean it was either the party scene, you know the bar scene, or the artist scene, and with the few women I could interact with, I never felt really satisfied with their intellectual or ... I always felt like things were always a compartmentalization, either race, education, or interest in terms of academia or philosophies, straight or gay, so I've always felt like needed to cross lines.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

I dated men. I mean I remember it was something I worked through. When I was 17 and I was hanging—living with one of my friends. We were musicians and so we would get *carte blanche* to go to hotels and hear jazz bands play. I grew up in New Orleans, so there was this accessibility very early on, and at that point the drinking age was 18. I was a musician. I played the guitar at the time. I was playing the band scene, and I could do all this exploration and stuff. I had a lot more freedom in the arts scene. My friend and I both got hooked up with these two guys who were hanging out at the same hotel. We were there to listen to music. Both of these

guys were talking to us, and it was this role, and it was very unsatisfying, emotionally unsatisfying, and I had this sense that I need to get this over with. So I had sex with this guy who I wasn't particularly attracted to and it was like so disrespectful and dishonoring of my sexual being, my sexual nature. It was just like wow. I had to look at that as a traumatic thing; that was a choice that I made just to get-this-over-with. That kind of concept, like some initiation or something. I don't know; it was really bizarre; I just wanted it over. I didn't want to have that mystery or whatever. It wasn't sacred or sacrament, it was really fucked up and weird.

I always felt like I was always hiding, in some form or fashion. I remember the first time I made love to a woman, and it was like that. It was all this energy—it was just this really wonderful, intense experience. I would have these patterns where I would go home to New Orleans and have all these wonderful, magical experiences and then I would go back to school and be absolutely miserable. I didn't really pursue trying to chase people, or chase women or men for that matter. I just sort of had sexual relationships with men and fell into friendships that were very intense and asexual, not sexual but I would eventually have the sex with men. Or put myself in situations that didn't really honor me. I was not finding people I was attracted to. I would fall into these making out situations, these sexual situations, and it was not responsible at all. In retrospect that's what I guess my behavior was, really disrespectful to my spirit, and to who I was drawn to. Then the people I was attracted to, they were unattainable to me. I didn't out myself as being attracted to them. I tried to stick with the safe kind of platonic sharing kinds of things because I think I was afraid that if I told them I was sexually attracted to them they would run off, and I wouldn't have the emotional attachment to them, or connection with them, which to me was more important, or most important.

Even people who were coming forward, I'm still reluctant to chase her; I'm not aggressive. Those are not the correct words, but I'm still really reluctant, even now in terms of saying, "I'm really attracted to you, let's work this out, I'd like to get to know you." I'm just learning those things now. Like okay wait before you get physically into someone. Just respect and get to know someone and build up the trust, for myself, not so much because of somebody else's expectations or whatever people say. But I'm just learning this stuff.

Before I came out, I was most afraid of ridicule, not being taken seriously. And I guess also being ostracized from my family. I came out really late, and I was involved in my second five-year relationship. I was in my mid-30s maybe and my mother's reaction was, "At least you won't get pregnant." And I'm like, "Ma, I have to work at getting pregnant, but I can still get pregnant. Hello." That was kind of it. It wasn't a big deal to her, whereas, I had all this energy behind it, and all these expectations, and it wasn't a surprise to her. One of my exes said to me, "Oh she knows, why don't you just come out?" I guess she already had enough time to go through her freak-out or whatever she did, by herself. Or it didn't matter to her.

As far as coming out to my friends, there's some who know, because I spend more time with them, or because I'm very cautious in developing the trust. I sort of task and try to get a feel for where they're at, what their concepts are about homosexuality. And if they are pretty liberal and open, I'll open up and let them know. But on the other hand, being from the south, it's like don't ask don't tell. That's a Southern kind of mentality, man. I mean again looking retrospectively, that's so not honoring, or being authentic actually which I'm totally seeing that being the problem. But for a long time, I've lived with it being either one or the other. I can sort of hide like that, and thinking about it, it seems like a lot of internalized homophobia. This is like

a total survival mechanism. It's about I'm here, I'm queer, fuck you motherfuckers! It's all about hide and be safe; there's such a level of violence, especially in New Orleans. You hear about people getting shot and killed, beat up for whatever reasons. And this is like that whole level, that whole thing of being in fear. It's very palpable to me even now. And then too, to get to witness the violence, like when somebody finally blows their top, you know to witness that. My family, my father was very abusive to children. Physical and sexual abuse were just like rampant and the fact of seeing at the age of 4 or 5, seeing my friend's mother beaten up, and my parents attitude. I think they kind of cordoned us off, cordoned my brother and I off, because we were really young and witnessing that. So I didn't hear how a man can do this to a woman and what happens to this man, and then he's back, and all that interplay is just a whole mystery.

I'm also not out necessarily professionally as a musician and sometimes especially when I do audio-visual tech work, where I'm loading trucks and often times I'm the only woman, and really needing to be asexual. If it's 3:00 in the morning, and we have all this work to do, and I'm around with a group of men, some I know, some I don't know, so it's just like okay let's be real. There's that whole thing, so I'm not out. Musically sometimes I'm out and sometimes I'm not out. You know it's funny, I've met these women musicians and I later found out they were gay and we didn't make that an issue. I am actually out with my lyrics, but right now, and I think this has a lot to do with my with being a survivor and the abuse stuff, is I've tended to be support—like bassist—so that means I'm not performing my own stuff or I haven't performed my stuff. I'm working on a recording there's a level of you know like Joan Armatrading—songs without pronouns. I understand those, it's just like all this intensity and yes it's like a painting and you fill in the blanks.

I met this woman 10 months ago and at the time I was following the 12-step program and not becoming involved in a new sexual relationship. We've been continually talking about all the problems of coming out and working through all this stuff. She's also an artist, that's the element we share. In the past two weeks I have this intense experience of really interacting with something in a romantic way. We laid the groundwork in terms of learning about each other and getting to know each other. This is the first time I took my time to become intimate with somebody else. What surprises me is how much more safe it feels being in women-only spaces, or lesbian bars or lesbian spaces. We've been hanging out with friends, other lesbians in queer spaces. It feels so much more secure, how bizarre it feels to walk down the street holding someone's hand, you know another woman's hand. The subway, all of that stuff she's into that, and it's not something I would initiate. I would just hide. That's something that's like wow to look at. I see how important touch is and then to not do that because of fear.

I am becoming aware how male identified I can be; I never labeled it. Like how the men are going to like this, or relate to this, or not relate to this. There's that concern too, if somebody is assaultive, whether be it verbal or physical. Because in some of these neighborhoods, maybe not on the West Side, here it'd be fine, it'd be no big deal, but you know like Bed Stuy or Harlem.

One of my exes, who I was in a 5-year relationship with, my immediate family knew who she was to me, but not the extended family outside of that, or like the friends at family functions. Looking back on that now, it's just like what is that? You know it's just like that is so disrespectful and dishonoring to the relationship. I recognize that now, but at the time I was not shaking the boat. So many people in my family, especially my extended family has this fucked

up attitude, this fucked up homophobia. And I just played into that because I didn't want to offend them. There's the sexuality, the physical intimacy with someone else privately and then the physical intimacy outside of that, say in public spaces. And then there's the physical intimacy say in the familial sphere, or the personal sphere that is not necessarily queer. Queer community spaces are so much more key and important to me now than they were before, because that's where my sexuality is sanctioned. That's where my relationship is sanctioned in that space, but not necessarily with my family, not formally. Not that they would ever say anything. My nephew commented that he couldn't tell I was with my partner, because it wasn't in front of his face. And so my reaction to that was damn, next time I will have to make-out in front of him. Because it's like no, no, that's just not right.

Experiencing homoprejudice

What was really cool was up to about high school, the Pastor that we had was gay, and then he passed away. I never heard homophobia, I wasn't conscious about hearing homophobia and it was known that this preacher was gay, and he was cool. It was like my family, the whole church really liked him, and loved him, and apparently he did a lot of good work. I mean it wasn't a conscious thing. And then there were the guys in church; the guys in the choir who you know were very ... could be very effeminate. They were great singers and that was it. Then of course when AIDS hit ... I'd gone back a number of years ago and I just found out that these guys had died, and the sense of mourning around that. But the lesbians though, the lesbians though, in the church were pariahs almost. There's one who is considered to be a lesbian. There was this woman I remember who had held my hand, I must have been under 18. I think my father made some comment that she was a lesbian. That's how they said it, "She was a lesbian." That was something to stay away from; I needed to be careful around her because I wasn't clear about how that would impact me. I was a real asshole. I remember college, early college and some of these women were coming out, some of my friends were coming out and I was just like, "Ooh, what's that about." I had this intense attraction to one woman who was amazing, just really beautiful, and I just split. I didn't even know what it was like to be sexually attracted to someone you know. Later on I was really into her, but then I didn't do anything about it.

The gay guys were accepted, but the lesbians were most definitely not. I mean the guys seemed to be a lot more open and much more out. I could tell what was going on. Maybe it's a black thing, the whole thought of strong black women. When I came out to my brother, and it was early on, he said, "Well that's why you're not connected to me." As in, I wasn't falling into the patriarchal pattern. As though I challenged him, or threatened him is a more appropriate way to think about it. Because I identified as a lesbian, I threatened some kind of male order that he needed for his own stability or something. As though I lived in relation to who he was. That's what my family was, is about. The stuff that's going on with my family now, that's out, that's become apparent, it's very much about the male order being maintained.

I just remembered that when one of my lovers was in town, we were having a meal in Harlem, and how this woman looked at us. We were feeding each other; she is a very affectionate woman in public. I remember how that made me feel: not wanting to be despised like that, or not wanting to be looked at like that. I was very clear about that, however, here's somebody I'm sharing a meal with. Most of the time people have been really cool, and that's been okay. But just to get hit with that disdain. Intellectually, I know that it threatens their cultural ideas of role gender, and actually when I was walking the streets with my lover, holding

her hand, wherever we were, it feels with her that we are being revolutionaries. We are being warriors. But we're just lovers, damn it. So I do have a lot of fear about it and it might be originally from the grand patriarch. My father was the only male that's assaulted me, and for a child, that's a paradigm. I mean where else would you come up with that, I mean where else in my experience would I ever come up with that? My brother and I fought. We reenacted, we did a lot of reenactment. It was really ugly. And at one point I made a decision never to do that with him again, because it was not someone I wanted to be. But I never had a sense of being in fear like that with him. I mean even when he said it doesn't feel like you're connected to me, it was as though I wasn't threatened in the same way. It was more like there was some kind of sympathy in his suffering that I felt. It was something like a misplaced ... I don't know what that is. I'm not clear what that is.

A friend would blow me away because she had this vision of me working through this sexual abuse stuff, and imagined me hooking up with a man. And the reason I'm a lesbian is because I was sexually abused. Why has my sexuality got to be in relation to a man's? It's like that overarching patriarchalism. It's a belittling thing I think, and again, the need to control. That's something people have asked me, do I think I'm a lesbian because of sexual abuse. I can't even answer. My answer has been I don't know enough; I can't answer that: maybe, or maybe not. I think that with women, with lesbians especially, there's such a disappearing of experience and validity. Gay men can be the stereotype queenish, effeminate kind of thing, and there is not necessarily such a difference in power, and what is societally sanctioned and not sanctioned. With women though there's this intensity and the comfort of being in women-only spaces and having that respect and feeling really safe and secure and all of a sudden you can walk around. I was at a woman's festival and you can walk around topless and it's no big deal. And people can walk around completely nude and it's no big deal. It's that sense of freedom. And how you always have to hide. It's going to be hot here in the summer and we're going to be stuck with wearing tee shirts because some men might attack us. I think for me the whole thing of somebody defining, why I have a visceral attraction to another human being—male or female—is fucked up. And that makes a lot of sense.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

A lot of my abuse history is centered or was triggered by my niece's disclosure. She said that my brother, the one who's a year younger than me, raped her when she was 4 or 5 maybe. My sister and my niece were living with my parents, and my brother lived with them as well; he raped her three times. He threatened her; if she said anything it would get worse. He actually started hitting her, and so when the sexual abuse began, she told people, Carl is hitting me. So we asked Carl if he was hitting Arie. And there was this bullshit, and Carl would deny it and that would be it, the end of the story. And this child went unprotected in the house and he was following the same path as my father. There have been memories that have come up like the need to be silent. One of the things he did was put his fingers on his lips and then gesture as if he was slitting his throat. I understood what that meant.

I was triggered when my sister described my brother assaulting my niece, or molesting my niece. Actually molesting fits under that whole inappropriate, completely inappropriate behavior and she witnessed it. She told me about it years after she witnessed it. The abuse was obviously on my head, and I recognized it and, "Oh, my God, that same thing happened to me." It was like this whole mystery was uncovered because my mother did not see it or perceive it. I

see now that she would block it. I see now my reality, my emotional spaces, and my emotional states weren't validated. I'm still going through that whole thing of disappearing. So I remember, my body remembers. I'll have these body remembrances and occasionally I've gotten some flashbacks.

My feeling is something happened there and I know that my father was in it. The body also remembers a lot of the physical abuse. We got hit a lot, and a lot of it was about squelching the spirit. A lot of it was the whole discipline thing. A lot of it was sanctioned because it's a black family. There's this joke, people turned it into a joke. You get your ass kicked, you get a spanking, and that's supposed to be good rearing. It shows love and all that other stuff. I have a lot of frustration and rage about it because I recognize now it as being so unnecessary. It was absolutely lazy, and it just totally got into my parents. It's sick that my mother allowed this abuse to happen and that she sanctioned it. It was as though she would sic my father on us if we were out of control with her, or challenged her. It's kind of extreme because she's such a nice lady, a nice southern woman, so refined. But it was just like madness. He was out of control and he also did things to hide. He would hide his level of his abuse from her. And we were keeping it secret along with him. It was real, real, real oppressive.

What I'm remembering now is my mother's father. My grandfather eats first. I mean there are these kids, these babies, these women, and my grandfather eats first. He says the blessing, and he eats first. That's the kind of parenting she had. If there was abuse in her household, my mom doesn't disclose it. She's on lock-down dude. She is so on lock-down about her stuff. And that's how all of this madness could perpetuate.

I looked into the 12-step, Survivors of Incest Anonymous, and I found out they met at the LGBT Center and I started going there. I go really consistently and started meeting other survivors. It took a while to get the intimacy with talking to other survivors and even talking out.

I don't talk to my brother. I talked to him when my niece disclosed. I talked to him once and he came back with this threat about disclosing family secrets. I've not talked to him since. However, my mother still talks to him, and in fact talks to him in front of my niece as if everything were okay. My sister has a twin bother and I talk to him sporadically. There's been a whole disconnect in the family. His wife told me they were going to visit my brother, the other brother, I think this weekend or sometime in May. And I didn't even know what to say. So I grappled with how am I going to deal? In fact it's becoming more obvious to me, to cut the people who are not taking sides. It's become this amazing conflict with me. You know like okay this is my problem. "Mom, this is untenable, this is an unacceptable situation and I don't want to deal with you. I really have a problem that you have a solid relationship with Carl and you have not encouraged him to turn himself in and make it right with this family." And to me that's what my mother did with my father. It's like he had these secrets. My father told me that I had a half sister in D.C. It was kind of a crisis situation, and he wanted me to give her some of the money that he'd sent. He asked me to keep this confidential. So he enlisted me in his stuff. And I kept the secret until years later. My mom was in total denial and would not acknowledge it. She told me this, and I was just like "Mom, no." I'm not having that; this is madness. So that's when I disclosed the truth. He was very sick; he was in a nursing home and she confronted him then and he disclosed to her the other kids that he had.

Laura

What my family is like

In my household everything generally goes either really good or really bad. It's never been in between yet. Right now things are pretty good. My mom is 48. My dad is 49. My sister is 14 and my brother is 8. I'm 24. My parents had me when they were 21 and 22. And Christy and Andy didn't come along until they were 35. So there is this big space, big gap.

My mom and me have a very strained relationship. We barely talk. My girlfriend Donna and me live in our house, in the basement. My mother doesn't approve of her. She doesn't approve of my life, and of the gay lifestyle. I think that's pretty much what's getting her, at this point. She has a mental illness, and she's not all there to begin with. So, she basically disapproves of everybody else. She's not the greatest person. I'm pretty close to my dad now, even though he wasn't there for me when I needed him. We've gotten past all that, and now we both work together. I'm with him pretty much night and day. I still go out to the stores with him like I did when I was little. So we're pretty close.

My father was very strict. I got hit, but nothing that was going to kill me, or hurt me real bad. Now my father and I talk about everything else but the abuse. He asks me how my relationships are going. He took Donna to the dentist, because I didn't feel like going. So he took her for me. She doesn't drive, so he does things like that. My sister knows about my lifestyle. She understands it pretty much for what it is, and we get along so-so. She's at the difficult teenage age, so no one gets along good with teenagers. But we're okay. I get along pretty good with my brother. He's Mr. Athletic. He likes to run around and act like an idiot, and I go out and I do it with him. But I took care of him when he was a baby. That was my responsibility. I would help take care of him; change his diapers, feed him. So I helped out big-time with that. We're very close, me and my brother. But he doesn't know anything about my lifestyle. He just thinks Donna's a cool person and she goes with us. He doesn't understand anything. But he goes out and plays in the street with her.

When I was eighteen, I was working, I was going to school, I was paying my own tuition, so they actually let me cut back on the things I was doing. I would just be responsible for cleaning my room, and doing my laundry, that was about it. So everything got cut down. Now I don't do anything. I just clean up my apartment in the basement; I cook my own dinners; my girlfriend and me alternate doing the laundry. We just maintain a very working relationship that way. Because she is unemployed right now, she'll do most of the work before I get home. On the weekend I'll help her with everything else.

It feels like this is what you have to do. It's not because I have to, because my mother told me to do it. It's because I know I have to do these things; or else I know I won't have any clean laundry come Monday morning when I have to go to work. Or I know that at midnight I'll probably be starving, if I didn't eat at seven. These are normal things now. It's not because someone is telling me, it's because I know I have to do them, but it doesn't feel like work to me. It's true that my girlfriend does most of the work right now, but I know I get too tired when I get home to do it. By the time I get home from work, it's between 5:30 and 6:00, on a good night. Most times I stay late, to catch up or do other things. I'd rather be at home, but we don't have any children.

My brother and sister now have no responsibilities. They have nothing to do. I mean my sister is responsible for cleaning the kitchen, when she decides to do it. Sometimes her room

looks like a disaster. That was sometimes true when I was 7 or 9, before I could control it. But when I was a teenager, my room never got that bad; my room was never dirty. They could walk in there at any time, find the bed neat, stuff was all dusted; my room was immaculate. Nowadays their room looks like a bomb hit it; clothes everywhere, clothes hanging from the lights, and that's how they are. I'm really pissed about that, because I had to maintain everything. And if I didn't maintain it, my butt was grounded for two weeks. So if I ever did anything wrong, I was in trouble for it. That was it. I came home one day late from being out with friends, and I was grounded for 2 ½ weeks. I had no bicycle privileges. They said "Nope it's revoked." Then when I hit 18, I saw that they couldn't really stop me.

My parents brought me to counseling when I was either 13 or 14 because of a letter. I hated writing. I never do that now. That's when they found out I had issues, so I quickly stopped. I had written a letter to a boyfriend and we had written back and forth numerous times. I was fourteen. We never did anything, we just wrote back and forth. My sister saw it in my drawer, and she pulled it out and she brought it to my parents. She didn't know what it was. She thought it was a piece of paper that she could screw up on me, and my parents read the letter and they both freaked out. Then they made a counseling appointment with Joan. Ever since then I don't write. I only write if had to for school. I only write down things that I absolutely have to, like for my next doctor appointment, and stuff like that. The letter, I think only came up in two sessions and that was it. But that was when all the other stuff came out.

[One issue] was like I'm doing everything in the house and they didn't feel I was doing enough in the house, things like that. My therapist Joan used to call me Cinderella. That's exactly what she used to call me. Because I used to cook, I used to clean, do the laundry, help take care of the children, maintain my studies, and did my after school activities. I was never late; I was always on time. And she said I had the Cinderella syndrome.

My father was very strict and if things were not done properly, you heard about it. I remember one day there was one dish that came out of the dishwasher, and it was [dirty]; that's it. I was whipped and totally grounded. He was really strict that way. He will punish you. Now he's not so strict anymore. [but] he is [still] the one that carries the heavy stick in the house. He's the one you don't want to screw with. Cause he will punish you. My mother doesn't care about anything. You can do what ever you want. She doesn't care. She used to be worse. When I was little, she used to literally go through my laundry. Go do this; go do that. She's still that way in a certain respect but then again she can't take care of herself anymore. She needs to be reminded to take her medicine. That's not something that I should have to remind her to do. You're 48 years old; you should be able to remember to take your own medicine. It's worse now. I think it's much worse now. I was only really happy a few years ago after she got her medication straightened out. It's horrible. She accuses people of doing things, and she's the one doing them. She goes on the Internet and has a cyber chat with people. She has phone sex with people. She says, "Oh, I'm only having fun." And then she accuses everyone else of doing it. Her whole life is there. It's hard for me. That's what I'm going to Joan now for. I can't get deal with my mother.

I make enough money so that me and Donna can really live on our own. But financially, I know my father can't do it. He would have a big time problem. I know he can't do it. It would be real hard if I left. He says "You don't have to be here." I know I don't have to be, but I know my father would have big problems if I left. It would be really hard if I left. It killed him the first time I left. So if I left, it would really be hard. My father now really tries hard. I tell him now that

I'm 24, I can drive myself, but he still takes me to the doctor once a month. He takes me to the gynecologist and he'll sit in the waiting room, and he'll come in. And he does the same for my mom. He takes me for my shot once a month. It's his way of making sure I would go. When I'm in the office, he thinks I'm a computer person who knows everything. Then when we leave the office he's like "I think you should do this," and that would be it.

Everyone in the family drinks a little too much. I think everyone's an alcoholic. There is only so much alcohol you should consume and they all surpass it. If you give them a case of beer, everything will be polished off in an hour. My grandfather is a recovering alcoholic. He's the only one who actually admitted it and has gone to the meetings. He hasn't had a sip of anything in years. My father when he's upset, he'll drink. When his mother died, he sat there and drank with everyone because everybody was upset. Irish and German are dominant parts of my background, which is why everyone in my family is an alcoholic, because of the combination.

Describing my life

I completed high school. I was an all-honor student. I didn't goof off in school, I didn't go to too many parties, I went straight by the books, athletics; that's pretty much all I did. I was number 13 out of 1400 kids. Then I went to college for 2 years. It was a really long 2 years. I never finished. I went to Suffolk. When I eventually left, I had a 3.98 grade point average. I was in all honor classes. In high school I had calculus, and environmental studies and physics.

I worked at camp when I was 16 years old till I was about 18. It was fun. I did all sorts of stuff. I got paid garbage money, but I had a good job at the camp. I worked at JC Penny's for 4 years. I was going to be a business manager until I got fired because of cutbacks and layoffs. Last one hired, first one fired. I was employee of the month. And now I work in an insurance company; I am working with my father, and I handle one side of the business completely on my own. I've finally gotten the system, so there isn't that much work any more. It's still enough to keep me busy though, forty plus hours a week. I get into work about 8:30 in the morning and I leave, I can leave at 4:30 but I leave closer to 5:30. I usually work about 35 hours a week and in the summertime we only work 33, but I still work forty hours and I get paid overtime. It's a good job. I work very hard. Just yesterday I was working half the day on stuff that I brought home from my job, so when I go in Monday morning I can just work straight through with my father. It never really looks up and it never really looks all the way down. I used to unload trucks, and I used to just work really hard at it. Just constantly doing it. Never, I was never late. I very rarely missed a day of work. That's how my ethics were.

I did sports until I couldn't do them no more. I eventually killed my knee doing all those sports, and all I can do now is ride a bike. That's about it. I just pushed and worked. That was where I was. I was at work more than I was at home. I used to work when people were on vacation. I was like the first one to say, "I'll work the extra hours; I'll come in; I'll work all day." There was one time I worked from seven in the morning till ten o'clock at night. And then I went to bed. I got my hour for lunch; I got my hour for dinner, and went home.

I can tell you that I have a very small group of friends. I don't trust very many people. It took me a long time to get into a relationship. I didn't have my first relationship until I was almost 17. There are very few people I would hang around with or who I'm friendly with. It showed in high school. I mean I was in the athletic and the sport clique, which was almost one section of the school, and I didn't talk to three-quarters of the class. I had my eight friends that I talked to and I stayed with, all the way up from elementary school. The same eight people. To

this day I talk to at least two of them. Now it's different because college stopped the closeness but now there's only three left.

Experiencing coming out

Ninth grade is the earliest I can remember feeling attractions. I pretty much knew by the time I was in high school that I didn't want to be with guys. It just didn't feel right. I tried to push it away. I didn't want to act like it. All my friends were straight. I had one that I thought was gay so I sheered away from it. I really didn't become involved with any other women until I was in my second year in college. I was about 19 years old when I first became involved with a woman. I was real scared at first. She was my first girlfriend. She lived in Michigan, and we had met on the computer, of all places to meet. I was in a relationship at the same time with a man out in New York and it just wasn't going right. He was very pushy, very shovey, and always trying to do things that were just not acceptable. I started looking elsewhere, and I always had these feelings, but I never acted on them. And I was on a website in a chat room, talking with other women who had been in a similar situation. And the women that I eventually got involved with, we began talking about the losses that had happened in her life and stuff that had happened in mine, and we just kind of clicked from there. Bad experiences and losses are what brought us together. Her boyfriend at the time committed suicide, and I had been abused. So between that, it kind of drew us together and we were helping each other through some stuff.

Right now I'm in a completely married relationship. I am wearing a wedding band and an engagement ring. We've been together a little over a year, about a year and 3 months now. We have no children. I can't get pregnant and she refuses to get pregnant. So we will have no children unless we adopt. That was unfortunate when my dad took me to the doctor, and he said that I can't get pregnant. Donna and I have a nice working relationship. I come home, we cook dinner together; we do laundry together; either she'll wash and I'll fold, or vice versa. We alternate making the bed. So, it's a nice working relationship.

I asked my father if she could come stay here, my mother left the house for a couple of days. She was missing in action. Don't know where she went, or why she left. She left, and my father was taking up the responsibility of the house. I was working so he would get all my salary if worse came to worst, and he said yes, she could come in. For a time being it was Donna, me, and my sister all shared one bedroom for about four months, until my mother got really upset. She thought that we shouldn't be doing it, that we shouldn't be sharing that room together. Even though we were not doing anything in front of the children. Now we're in the basement. Donna did all the renovations in the basement. She laid the floor down; she hung the shelves. She did everything; she painted. And all I had to do was buy the furniture. That's pretty much where we stand right now. It's pretty good right now.

Our sexual relationship is pretty good. I am satisfied most of the times. Before a month ago, it was really fine, now I feel somewhat tired, which is normal. [We have sex] more times on the weekend than during the week, because during the week I'm exhausted. We do [it] on the weekends. But we're very affectionate. We sit and we lay on the couch together, we watch movies, we hold hands all day. That's pretty much how it is. Unless we're out in public, then we just walk side by side. And on the train, we don't hold hands. We just sit next to each other and we talk the whole way. There's nothing I can't tell her, which is nice.

It doesn't bother me too much, being a lesbian woman in a heterosexual world. Pretty much I get along really well with everybody. I don't flaunt it, at work; I don't flaunt it at home.

I'm very reserved in what I do. I don't sit down and hug my girlfriend in front of the kids. Sometimes I'd like to and sometimes no. I won't do it because I still consider them little kids. I think if they were like fifteen or sixteen, I might, but I'm very reserved. I don't want to flaunt that. I don't think it should be flaunted, even in a heterosexual relationship; it shouldn't be flaunted in front of children. They don't need to see that. I'm very reserved with all that kind of stuff. I don't flaunt it in front of anybody. [Everything] is behind closed doors, or shades drawn, or keeping real quiet. I don't need other people knowing all of my business is how I look at it. Just the people that it really matters to, they're the ones that have to know. Everyone else I don't care.

Everybody in the office knows that I am. They see the pictures on my desk, of my girlfriend and me, they see pictures of us hanging up on a little board that I have in my office. Everyone knows. But it's not something I can go around and brag about, or get involved with. I don't get into all that activist stuff. I went to one gay pride parade by myself out in Michigan. But that was it. I don't know if Donna has. I know recently we haven't done anything. But she used to go to things, but her family stopped her from going. Her family lives down in South America. I didn't meet them, but they know I exist. I talked to them. They're a little sketchy too. But they live down in South America, so not a problem. It's out of sight; it's out of mind. Pretty clear.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

I became a lot more accepting of my sexual orientation. In the beginning, I was denying it all over the place. I was thinking this is not what a person should be. It's wrong for another woman to kiss another woman or for a guy to kiss another guy. I thought that was very wrong. That's the way I grew up. It's the way mom and dad taught you. And that's the way the church said to be. So I really believed it was wrong. But I kept having these feelings and these problems. I know for the longest time I didn't even tell Joan that I had these problems. I didn't really tell her until I think I was twenty when I told her that finally. I eventually got more accepting of it. I actually flaunted it a little bit, somewhat in my parent's face. This is what I'm going to be and you can't stop me. That's how it was.

I worry about my brother and sister. Are they going to grow up the same way, and in which way? Are they going to be gay, or are they going to be straight? I'm more concerned about my brother than I am my sister. My sister is very boy crazy. I was never boy crazy. I think she's more likely to get in trouble first and she would have problems. My brother, I see it in him. He says he likes girls. He's too little to like girls. He likes to play with the boys. But every time I see a gay man, it resembles my brother in some way. I really feel that my brother could be. I'm not so sure he would be, but I worry about him. I know it's harder for a gay man than it is a gay woman. For the guys it's a little harder. So I worry more about him maybe being gay more than my sister. But you never know.

They don't know why you are that way, if it comes from how you live, or if it's in your blood. I was the first one in my family, so I pretty much assume that it's not because of heredity. It's more how you live. You just don't pop up and become gay like that. Everyone else in my family has been married for 20-some-odd years. I really don't think it's in your genes if you're going to be gay. I really think it's how you live your life, what you choose. But you really worry about your brother. I am very worried about my brother. Because I just see the way he is, he's very, very wimpy. Boys tend to be tough; he's into all the things that I feel he shouldn't. He

plays with dolls. It really doesn't mean anything. My sister is very into makeup. I was very into sports; I was very much a tomboy when I was little, and I still am. I am the first to admit it. I will never change. I will never wear a skirt or a dress unless it's for work or if I have to. I would rather go out and romp in the mud than anything else, than go to a fancy meeting or anything. I would rather look very casual and very laid back.

I didn't come out to my friends. I didn't come out to any of my high school friends until just recently. That's when I found out that all of them were gay too, so it didn't make a difference. Everyone was just really happy, hunky-dory. Everybody was accepting. Of my college friends that I hang out with, only one, my best friend. She knows. She's cool with it. She got married; she has two kids. I would like to say that I'm married, but I won't.

I didn't talk to my friends about my stuff and they didn't talk to me about theirs. None of them, as far as I know, had any major problems. The only one that had something happen was that my friend developed cancer in the knee, which they just cleared up a few months ago. That was the only life-altering experience that she ever had. She was the only other one. Everyone else came from decent backgrounds, and none of them have problems.

My whole high school class is weird; three-quarters of our graduating class was gay, or they're bisexual. It was the unspoken word, but we never said anything in high school. I was at the dinner with five of my friends, and we just finally all said, you know this is my lifestyle. I had my girlfriend with me and my friend had his boyfriend with him, and that's when we really finally knew who was what, and no one had ever said anything in school. Everyone was so afraid. They just all wanted to do the right thing.

I don't know what kept us from talking about it. I wasn't comfortable saying it. Even changing in the locker rooms was difficult. Because if you find someone attractive on the baseball squad, you don't want to go up to her and say "Hey, good game" and then do the wrong thing. So I used to bring my uniform to school, and change in the bathroom to avoid any physical look or contact with any other person. That was how it was in high school. After your game, you should go into the locker and change; I used to just bring my stuff home and change when I got home; and shower at home. I wouldn't even go into the locker room. That's the way it was all the way through high school, each gym class I would change in the bathroom. The kids in my classes seemed like they were all very straight people, and that none of them would change. There was one couple that thought they were going to be engaged, and the whole high school really believed it. And it turns out the guy in the couple is the fruitiest of all people. He killed himself in Smithtown somewhere. But that's actually the way it went. You never know.

I did a lot of stuff to hide it. I used to walk around the school with my boyfriend, hand in hand. We used to stand at the locker and kiss, come over in the morning and ride the bus together. We were inseparable. Turns out we were just best friends. There was nothing there. We were always together hand in hand. That's how it was in high school. Well at least for that last year of high school. The previous years I didn't date. I was into my own thing, which was work and school.

When I first came out, I didn't tell my father first. He was the last to know. I told my mother first. And my mother went around and saying, "Oh, whatever you choose to do, we're going to support you," and "You'll be fine," and "No one is going to disown you." But that was the first thing they did. Everyone pushed me aside. I was purely responsible for stuff on my own. When I told my father, he didn't know how to deal with it. So his way of not dealing with it is

not talking to you, and not going to places with you, and not doing things, and that's exactly what all of them did. Everyone just really pushed you away. That was my worst fear, and it came true. And then eventually we worked out this stuff; we were able to eventually get through that.

The experience that affected me the most was when I was finally able to get it off my chest. I held it in for over 5 years that this is the way I was. Getting it off my chest ... was the best. I knew when I was in ninth grade, and it got more and more clear when I went through high school. Then when I got to college, I fully well knew it. I was totally aware of what I wanted, and what I didn't want. In college I was attracted to a teacher. That fully brought it out. That was the absolute point. I kind of knew it, but then in college it solidified it.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

I was young. I was young. I was 7 when it first started and I was 13 when it finished. It was a next-door neighbor. We had just moved out from Queens and I got to know this guy very well. He was 13 and I was 7, so there was about 6 years between us. It started out very slow. I would go out on paper routes with him, drop the newspapers. He used to ride his bike; I used to take my scooter. We used to hang out at a friend's house down the block with a couple of kids on the corner; we used to play ball in the street and then it slowly turned into more and more.

First it was hanging out, and then it was coming into his bedroom, and laying on the bed with him. He didn't touch me at first. Probably a couple of months after that, we used to go to the garage and work on the bicycles, changing tires and pumping up the air and stuff. He grazed me one day and it just felt awkward and the next day the same thing happened. And the next day he grazed me again on my rear. And then one day his hand was sliding in my shorts and then it just took off from there. The activity increased. More and more stuff was being done, longer periods of time. I did see him until he eventually moved to Florida. We were still hanging out and my parents said, "What a nice kid." You know, to a certain extent, I didn't really know anything was wrong until I got older. By the time I was 13, I had had sex with him. He had physically forced me to be with him while his friends watched.

The first person I told was Joan, my therapist when I was about 15 years old. I didn't tell my parents until I was about 16, because we were working on it just individually. Joan told me that it wasn't my fault, and that I didn't ask for it to happen. It's something that just happened, and that the person who did it was a very sick person. Everybody still loves me. It doesn't change who you are. And then we eventually, we called my parents and we told them. No one showed me any support or concern. They just said it happened. Like what do you want me to do about it now? It's 3 years later, what do you want me to do about it now? And then in the car on the way home that night, it was very quiet, and nobody said a word to me and they just let me be. They just left me alone, didn't say a word. The next day was school. I was real hurt. I didn't know how to deal with it. And I was doing stuff that I probably shouldn't have been doing, but I was doing it.

I think that by their not acknowledging it, I thought it was all my fault, in the beginning. I thought that I had done something wrong. And so despite everyone telling me it wasn't my fault, I really believed it was my fault, because I didn't have enough courage to speak up when it was happening. So I really did feel it was my fault. And that's pretty how much I felt. And that's really when I began locking myself in my room, and not talking to anybody, and keeping very quiet. I didn't want to tell anybody what was going on with my life, because then they'd figure

everything was my fault. So I kept it real quiet. There are days sometimes at home I feel that way too. I feel I might get blamed for something, they'll say, "Oh, it's your fault."

My friends don't know about what happened when I was younger. Only one does. And she's been my best friend for years. When I wasn't at home, I was at her house. She knows pretty much everything about me growing up. I don't tell them too much stuff. I don't tell any of my friends more than they need to know. I tell them what they need to know, that I'm happy and healthy, and that's all they need to know. We'll go out, we'll just laugh it up, we'll drink when we go out, have a good time, just talk about what we did today; how the weekend's gonna be, that's pretty much it. We don't talk about anything else.

Effects of abuse

After I was abused, I never felt normal after it had happened. I always felt like I was different. It felt like it changed everything. I'd always been into sports but, after it happened, I threw myself into it. I like totally went into it full out and it kind of worked out some of the anxiousness that I had. I went out for all the sports and I threw myself into my schoolwork. I didn't spend that much time with my friends. I stayed more by myself. A lot of the times I would hang out with my father. I didn't get along too good with mom. That was bad more times than not. Eventually my brother and sister were born, and then I just kind of locked myself in my room and I wouldn't come out, I didn't socialize. I wore black all the time. It was hard growing up. And my parents didn't accept what happened. Until this day they really don't believe that anything happened because it took me so long to tell them about what had happened. It's like the forbidden thing, we don't talk about it at home, we don't mention it; no one in the family knows about it. Except for my parents. So no one talks about it. My current girlfriend knows everything that happened. You know, she knows it bothers me still. There are things that, there are little signs that she sees and that she tries to help me through. But there's not too much you can do.

I played a lot of sports in high school, and all through elementary school, I played a lot of sports. I was in a lot of academic clubs. I didn't want to go home by myself. I always had a baby sitter until I was probably about 14 years old. I didn't start coming home by myself until I was almost 15. They gave me a key when I was in I think, eighth grade, so that I could go home by myself. But several times I didn't spend it by myself, I would go to a sitter's house.

I drank. I cut things. I cut myself a couple of times. I would starve myself for some time. I would eat and throw up. I used to do damage to the house. Take a knife and cut furniture up. I know when I was really angry and I started really lashing out, I took a match and threw it in front of the refrigerator. Afterwards it was put out, but I threw a match and it could have caused potential damage, but luckily it didn't. I had problematic issues with food. That was a big one for a while. I had lost so much weight that it was disgusting. You can see it in my graduation pictures. I'd always been heavy, not extremely, but it would show in my face. They would make dinner, or I would make dinner, it was on the plate. I would run into my room, throw it in the garbage can, come out a half hour later with an empty plate. Put it in the sink and knock off to bed. That was it. That I used to do. Always kept myself isolated. I always kept people pretty far away. I'm pretty much the same way. I tell people what they need to know, and when they need to know it. Not too many people know things.

My parents have a bar down in the basement, and there was all sorts of liquor. So when no one was around, I would fill up a sports-water bottle with vodka, or something like it, and keep the bottle around. No one ever knew I was drunk because I could tolerate the liquor so well.

So, that didn't last too long. I thought it would really take my mind off of it. And I knew that it really didn't. I've seen other people in my family who are alcoholic and I saw what it did to them. So I quickly stopped that one. Now I only drink unless it's social, and it's normally not to the point where I get drunk, and start falling over.

I did what people in my family don't do. Everyone else, like my aunts, and stuff, they're open and they're happy, and they're always hugging and kissing. I was the one that was always on the outside. I didn't want no part of being hugged or kissed. I was just, "Leave me alone." When I used to go to a family function, I used to sit over here, and my whole other family was on the other side of the room. That's how isolated I was from other people.

The drugs I did was just the normal teenage stuff. Marijuana, E, tried it once, to see what it was like and then quickly discovered it wasn't for me, and then dropped it. I didn't like any of it, so I stopped it. I just worked really hard in school. Still do it now. I don't go to school now, but hopefully I will soon. Joan still tells me I should go be a doctor, but I finally got that out of my head. I won't do it. Now I'm going back to school for insurance. So that profession is right now.

I used to get real mad. I used to smack my sister up, push her. Not to the point where I really hurt her, but you could see that I was really pissed at something. And a lot of the time she would just say the wrong thing at the wrong time. That would set it off, and I'd go, "Get the hell out of my face," I would curse and swear; push her, smack her, and then used to get in trouble for slapping her. So [I would] walk out the door. They could never find me. But I'd come back and unlock the door and go to sleep. I never went to spots where they thought I would go. They looked for me a couple of times, but they never found me. I didn't want to be around anybody.

I used to take a knife and just kind of dig it into my arm. But I never cut really bad to make any bruises or scars. I used to think about it. I knew suicide, you could kill yourself or mess yourself up, unless you did it a certain way. I didn't want to kill myself. I was angry. I wanted to get all the anger out, and the aggression out. I was running a knife up and down my arm one day, and it didn't hurt. And I began to do it a little harder and it still didn't hurt and I pushed it in until it started bleeding. Every day I would do the same thing over and over again until I could feel it; I couldn't stop. To this day, I can still do it and I won't feel it until it's too late. I haven't done it for 4 or 5 years. I'm pretty happy now. I have a partner for life. We're pretty compatible. We get along very good. A few times we want to kill each other. Now I'm pretty happy.

Reflecting how the abuse affected my coming out

I know now that the abuse isn't my fault. I know it's not my fault anymore. I still think about it occasionally. There will be something that will trigger it. Normally there's not so much that triggers it. The only thing that really triggers it is rain. That's when it is the worst. There was like one day that it really bothered me and that day really sticks out in my mind. It was thundering and lightning and it was the worst day in my life. That always sticks in my head. But I really think that the abuse really made me not want to be with a guy. It was just so painful, and hurt so bad, I didn't want to be touched by another guy. Then, I was touched by another woman; and that's when it felt great, not bad or dirty, that's when it felt right.

I used to think if I wasn't abused, I wouldn't be gay, for a long, long time. Now I'm coming to understand that I chose, I'm choosing to be this way. I could be with a guy and I would probably be very unhappy, and live my life the way everyone thinks it should be. It

doesn't have to be that way. I'm living the life I want to live right now. If I change my mind in 10 years, and want to go be with someone else, I have that choice.

I really feel that if I wasn't abused I probably would have been with a guy forever. But because I was, I think that changed my view on it, and made me open to the possibility of being with another woman. That opened it up. Now I want to be with another woman. It's not the abuse, but I want to be with another woman. I went through an evolution process. I thought it was this, and now really it's because I really want to. Not because I was abused.

Phia

Describing myself

I'm not shy, but I am probably suspicious of people. I had to work through a lot of that, but I'm much better now, much more trusting and risking. I'm a stage actress, mostly with The Philadelphia Shakespeare Festival, but *Rhinoceros* is my current project, and I'm hoping to reopen it Off Broadway this fall. I am also the mom of nine cats; I'm allergic to them, but they are mostly outside when it's nice. I write poetry. I like to work out at the gym. I'm a gardener, and I hike in the woods when it's not too hot. When I'm working, I come home and ... have a glass of wine, which I definitely use as a drug, but not really in a bad way. It just helps to have a glass of wine to deal with stress.

I only came out 2 years ago at 47, and the sexual abuse was typical, and not overt. My mother was an unusual sort of abuser. My therapist is J.F. who specializes in women coming out later in life. I'm not sure if internalized homophobia affected my healing at all. I began the healing process before coming out 2 years ago. Also, for whatever it's worth, I still share our home with Arthur, the man I've been with for 14 years. We are no longer sexual, and he is dating women too. Arthur's first wife was a lesbian; it came out pretty early in their relationship, but I guess that's pretty amazing and interesting. He is my family though, and totally supportive of this shift, and we are still best friends. We decided to do this our own way and have always been nontraditional. Most of the few women that I have had relationships with in these past 2 years have understood the situation and not been threatened by it. There is no need to be.

I always thought I was an atheist, but I also felt I had spirituality. I ended up becoming a pagan, which I realized I always was. I live by nature and cycles of nature and honor the female energy. There is not some divine savior outside of us, but it's all the same energy, Buddhist in a way, but no dude to worship, you know no dude with a big belly.

My background

My parents were devout alcoholics basically. There was no spirituality; there was just misery and money. We went to Sunday school, and it was Episcopalian. They told me all I had to do was to make it to confirmation, and the day I was confirmed, I was out of there. That was it. I never bought any of it. My parents ran with the waspy country club crowd and they were all a bunch of drunks for the most part. But, you know, covered up and with class until you get behind closed doors.

My mother drank gin from 11:00 in the morning on. I never knew that was odd. I just knew that she had a couple of personalities, and I knew which time of day to stay away, and which time of day to poke my head out. I was the youngest of three girls and we all had different fathers, but my father basically raised all of us, or didn't raise all of us. He was mostly gone, traveling. I just found out that he was in the CIA; he died in November and I found out he was a

spy. My mother was just somewhere between *Mommie Dearest* and *Sibyl*'s mother, horrible, miserable, and she would get very violent. My sisters were a lot older than me and they were beaten and there was a lot of trauma around the house. She just took her misery out on them basically, and I kind of kept my head down. In the house, she was pretty horrible, but outside she would play golf and socialize with her friends.

My mother was really unattractive and scary looking, kind of like an unattractive male, and she and my father did not have much of a sexual relationship. I used to hear about that all the time. They would fight, I would hear them fighting in the kitchen. You know my mother would be screaming at him for being impotent which was really awful. She was just a ball buster, literally. When my father was home, he would just drink until he kind of passed out. He was always quiet, just did his paper work and drank and they watched the news and went to bed. But it was a horror. My father didn't talk. He just was a typical spy profile apparently. He was perfect for it. I started to realize that I was the mirror in the family and they hated me because all I had to do was look at them and they knew I saw right through them. I was the one who stood up and told my mother she had a drinking problem. She did not have a drinking problem you know. She had no problems. She used to threaten to hit me when I was an adult, in my 20s and then she'd walk out of the room. So I left, and I was blamed as the black sheep who left the family, but I left to survive and it took me years.

One message I got from growing up in my house was don't piss off the matriarch. We had nightmarish scenes at the table with food. It was a really bad scene; my mother would cook, she actually liked to do that, but she would make really horrible things and make us eat them. Meat that wasn't cooked, I'm a vegetarian, she ruined meat for me. It was raw, rare and also if there were chops, she'd make us eat until I would gag. She would make me sit there for hours and hours, and I'd be crying and throwing up and my sister would hide her food. In fact, I remember her getting caught. My mother found food in her underwear drawer. I don't know what my mother did to her in the other room, but it sounded like torture. My dog helped me out. He would sit by me and I'd give him stuff.

I think my sisters got the brunt of it and by the time they left home, I was bigger, you know physically. She couldn't really physically abuse me. My sisters still live in the same town and raise kids and have abusive husbands. One of them tried to molest me when I was 19, and has since molested an au pair and is divorced from my sister. The kids are a mess, except for my nephew, and they are all either bulimic, use drugs, alcohol, or are just emotionally fucked up. It's really sad, because my sisters are both alcoholics now.

Before I began therapy, I didn't know there was anything wrong. I didn't know my mother was an alcoholic until I left home at 19. A neighbor of ours in our winter place in Vermont told me that my mother was alcoholic. Another really weird thing was that whenever I would get close to a woman friend of my mother's, or a counselor, my mother would accuse them of being lesbian. Either she was jealous that I sought out support that she couldn't give me, or maybe she was a lesbian, I don't know.

I was a good student. I was a lonely student because I was really fat when I was a little girl, and I was teased unmercifully and tortured at school. So I had a great dual life—at home and then at school—where kids tormented me until about fifth or sixth grade. Then I became the most popular girl on the block. It sounds a bit schizophrenic. When I hit puberty, I lost a lot of

weight and I became athletic, go figure. I was clueless as to what was going on. I didn't understand it, but I rode with it because it was a lot nicer than the other way around.

I went to private school until ninth grade and I really excelled, I really did well. I could have gone away to private school for high school. I don't know why I didn't, but I decided to stay at home and go to public school. I really have no idea why I did that. I don't know why I didn't want to get out of the house. Things weren't horrible at that point, but they became horrible.

I went to college in Wisconsin, and then, when I was 23, in graduate school, I ended up in a hospital. It was a really horrible experience, because they had me on those old medications and I wasn't really functioning. I ended up running away from the hospital to avoid ending up in a state hospital.

I kind of recovered and got my life back over about 6 years and then I was fine. I went back to school for an M.S. in clinical social work at Columbia; and I got my degree in 1984. I did theater and social work at the same time. I ended up getting a job in an after-school program in a cultural center, teaching kids acting and poetry and stuff. The boss was a really close friend and mentor, and he got me into therapy. He was bit older than me and he dropped dead suddenly. It was the week I was going to move to Philadelphia. He had a 2½-year-old little girl and he dropped dead at the tenth anniversary of this place. He got out on stage and announced the show and went back stage and dropped dead. I was immobilized unless I was with the kids at the center, or dealing with the funeral.

A friend of mine came down from Stroudsburg to stay with me to help me pack. I was sitting on all these boxes and I couldn't do anything. That night we slept in an old house in Seacliff. My friend and I were asleep on a mattress on the floor and, in the middle of the night, she woke up and all of a sudden this woman in full American Indian garb came into the light. My friend sat up, she knew she was awake, and pinched herself. The woman put her hand on me on the bed and said, "Take care of her," and then backed off. The next day, she told me about it, she was so blown away by it.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

I don't know if what [my mother] did was sex abuse. It wasn't like she was having sex with me. It wasn't quite overt and I am still not 100% convinced, but I want to be. She told me she did it for health reasons and I felt there were worse moments in my life. My mother used to give me enemas on my father's bed. I remember having stomach aches and maybe in those days that's what they did, but they probably weren't arbitrary, I don't know. I remember being completely humiliated through the process, and she would leave door the open. I remember being on my father's bed and she'd make me get on my hands and knees and she would give me an enema and it would really, really hurt. And I would be crying and my sisters would be on the stairs, on the landing looking down into the bedroom and laughing, and she didn't stop that. I would cry and she would make me stay there, and then she would leave and tell me I couldn't move until she came back, and I was in agony. I felt so ashamed and embarrassed. I don't know how many times it happened. And it felt like—it felt like rape.

She was big on leaving the doors open everywhere; there was no sense of privacy for me. We would go to a clothes store to try clothes on and she would leave the dressing room door open. I would cry for her to please close it and she would say, "It doesn't matter, nobody cares." There were a couple of other things that my mother did, memories that stick out. One was being

checked for vaginal infection. I was all of 11 years old. I probably told her I was itchy. So she had me lay on my father's bed—again my father's bed—and she put her hand up in me, her fingers, and a flashlight and I still remember laying there. I was frozen and I wanted to scream and I was mortified. And I didn't know there was anything wrong with it. I still need to be convinced that that's not appropriate behavior. I can tell myself that she should have taken me to the doctor, that's how you make sure if you want to check your child. You don't do it yourself. It just felt horrible to me. And when I first had my period, I was in the den where my father was doing paper work. He wasn't facing me and my mother was watching TV and she said well, let me see your pad. So in the den with my father doing paper work, she made me take my underpants off, to look at my pad to see how heavily I was bleeding. She didn't want to get up; she was drinking and watching TV. It wasn't any better when my father was home. My father didn't help. He would just sort of leave the room when she was screaming and yelling. I remember, I looked at him and asked him to help me and he would shake his head and walk out of the room.

She used to cut all my hair off, take my hair and twist it. I didn't want my hair cut, and I would cry and she would grab my ponytail and twist it and drag me into the bathroom and cut it off while I was crying in front of the mirror. I'd be crying and she'd tell me to be quiet, and that I had to have my hair cut. She made me look like a boy, which confused me. She just didn't want me to have long hair, and she used to say I wasn't feminine, I wasn't pretty and I would never be able to wear feminine clothes. She made me wear tailored clothes and men-kind of things. I felt really embarrassed about that.

How the abuse affected me

Things just all started piling up in therapy and I started having symptoms of being sexually abused. I have posttraumatic stress syndrome from the trauma and the violence and stuff. My hands started breaking out, and for a couple of years they were covered in blisters that would itch. It finally calmed down as I was dealing with it. I have a lot of confusion as to whether that was sexual abuse or what. But all the things she did like that, had to do with my sexualized areas. So you know in the past 10 years, as it started coming up, I got extra help.

When I was in ninth grade, I bordered on anorexia; I would starve myself, but it stopped. Oddly enough in the last few years, I started behaving like that again. I just wanted to try it. I would eat and then make myself sick after. I haven't told my therapist and, in fact, lately I've been thinking of telling her. It's not an issue; I was just playing with it. It was very sporadic, and I haven't done it for a while. I'm not sure what it was. But I really went through a thing when my mother died 11 years ago. She didn't tell me she was going to die, and she made everybody in my family promise not to tell me. And then when she was dead, my sister called to tell me, and I went through a really bad time at that point. That's when I found out I had posttraumatic stress, I would wander around the house at night, looking for predators, and the whole kind of soldier syndrome. I was pacing the house all night; I was terrified and I couldn't stay alone until very recently, even though we have a security system. When Arthur would go away, I'd have to go stay with friends; I couldn't fly. It was a really bad time when she died. All these things got triggered.

I've always startled easily and I never knew why. I didn't sleep at night because I was afraid. I used to have that as a child. It wasn't just insomnia, I was terrified. I would lay on my

mattress with the lights on, I couldn't move, I was afraid to step on the floor, because somebody was under the bed. I used to think John F. Kennedy was under there, too. But he was dead.

There have been times in my life, pockets where I abused alcohol pretty badly. So I've always had to watch it. I was unhappy. I used to drink and then it would stop. It wasn't like I needed to drink all the time or anything. And it just wasn't a problem, like now I enjoy a glass or two of red wine. But I've never have a problem with it. I don't get drunk anymore, I don't control it and it doesn't run my life.

When I was abusing alcohol, it just numbed me. It would also give me permission to hurt myself. I would drink and then I would cut myself, my wrist, with a piece of glass usually or a knife, and I was just having so many feelings at the time, I was in my thirties. It was terrible. I felt terrible. I mean part of me felt relief from the pain. The emotional pain became physical pain. I remember I would like the physical pain better than the emotional pain. I just couldn't stand it anymore inside.

When I was 23, I ended up in a hospital. I was in graduate school in acting, but I was so miserable. I was so depressed and so unhappy, and I didn't even know what was wrong with me at that point. The accumulated effect of my family finally caught up with me. At the time I was in a play about a mental hospital, *Marat ... de Sade* and that didn't help. It was a really horrible experience because they put me on those old medications and I didn't want to be on them. I wasn't really functioning and I ended up running away from the hospital to avoid ending up in a state hospital. I remember in the hospital I would save all my meds and put them in my night table, really visible, like I was playing with [dying]. I went around and broke all the glass lanterns around the property of the hospital with my hands. I wasn't even trying to hide. I just smashed them all. I took a piece of glass and I went into the woods, and I started—I remember it was raining—and I started to cut and I wasn't even hiding that. It started to bleed, but I didn't cut deep enough. I didn't know about cutting the vein at that point, and I still have a scar. The therapists were so stupid. I put my hand in my raincoat pocket and they never knew I was bleeding, and they never checked me there. So I messed with it. I think cutting myself was a way of saying I have control over my pain and if I want to die I can, but I must have such a survivor in me because I never can never quite get to that point.

The depression that ended up really lasting with me started about 5 years ago when I finally dealt with a lot of anxiety and terror and fear in therapy, a lot of trauma in my life. A lot of those things were high anxiety things, so the adrenalin kept the depression at bay. I really had good help. I've been very lucky all along.

Since being with women intimately I have had what appear to be flashbacks, re-experiencing things from my mother and crying, but one new one came to me. It had to do with a female pediatrician examining me, and it being inappropriate. It has come up twice now during sexual intimacies with two different women I was seeing. It seems like what is happening is that I am in a safe enough place for this to happen. I was not afraid or upset by the women I was with at the time. I felt closer to them, and they were very supportive and loving. I hope, though, that it will not be a pattern. It's upsetting to go through for me, and I'm sure for them. It's probably a good thing that I'm currently single.

Experiencing coming out

I'm just so newly out, I'm just trying on my lesbian shoes and I'm having fun with it. I love it. All the places where I am in the world don't care about my being lesbian. If my family

was still alive, I would dread telling them, but I wouldn't tell them anyway because I don't have any involvement with them. In the neighborhood we haven't come out, just because we're still living together here, even though it's Chestnut Hill and supposedly a liberal area. But this is the conservative branch over here, with money, and we're kind of the freaks of the neighborhood already. The people who see my bumper stickers are probably figuring something's going on you know, those crazy pagans. To me sharing and coming out is for people that you care about, and I don't feel like I want to share with them. So in my work, or with my friends, that's where I'm out. If the closer neighbors were to come out and ask me, I would tell them.

Coming out wasn't an intellectual decision. I had feelings all my life about women and about every 10 years I'd develop a serious crush. I mean I didn't ever feel like a repressed lesbian, but I'd get waves of feelings about it, attractions, and not really do anything about it. But I also had strong feelings of wanting to meet a guy. I always liked men and I always enjoyed my sexual contact with men. I met my guy when I was 35, and we've been together for 14 years. Some people say maybe I'm a bisexual, and I say no, I'm not bisexual. I don't want to have anything to do with a man, sexually. I have no desire for that. Once I allowed myself to experience a woman, I felt like I had come home.

About 5 years ago, or so I developed a crush on a woman I was performing with—on stage. She was a lesbian. It really was profoundly strong for me and I ended up telling her, and she chose to not pursue anything, probably because of my situation. Nothing happened until I met the woman that I first got involved with and then all hell broke loose for me. A woman friend came see the show. I hadn't seen her in years and I always had a crush on her. We got involved, and we kind of fell in love with each other and then she just shut down, and shut it off and that was that. I kind of went off the deep end with things because I knew it was very serious for me and she really broke my heart. So I decided that was coming out for me, at 47. I was with her for three months, and we kind of went back and forth with the relationship. Then she just cut it off, and I had a really rough time about it. I was in a lot of pain. I didn't realize what kissing a woman would do, in terms of turning my world upside down. I had never even had an experience as a girl. And once that happened, having a sexual experience with her, everything in my body knew that that's where I wanted to be. I fell completely head over heels in love with her and she got really scared.

She couldn't do it, probably because I was with Arthur, although she never said it. I knew it was really strong, because when she decided not to pursue it, she was very upset because she wanted a friend and I wanted to have my first lesbian experience. I had a very, very, very bad reaction, and I really plummeted. I have some history of self-injury, and I did that, so I decided it was time to tell Arthur, but I didn't tell him who it was because I was still in this particular show. I went to a diner with him and I told him and I was crying, and I said that I love you but I have these other feelings, and he just looked at me and he said, "I've always known that." I had no idea that he always knew that, so we just decided to take it a day at a time, and see. We talked about having a more open relationship. We're also Pagan, and we're pretty open-minded that way, although we've always been monogamous, and honest about our relationship, and promised that, if we were attracted to someone else, we would say so. Just having that off my shoulders was enough for several years, and I didn't do anything about it, but I continued to get help and talk about the issue.

I got help seeing a lesbian therapist who helps women who come out later in life. For 2 years it's been wonderful, and it's been horrible. Because I've been dealing with my life here with Arthur, as I know it, and he's really been my first family that has been meaningful and happy. I feel like I found myself, but I fight off the possibility of losing all this, so we're trying to do it our own way and not separate. At this point and he's dating women, and I'm dating women, and we're much happier and that's it.

Reflecting on my sexual evolution

I was very sexual when I was young. I loved the boys. I didn't lose my virginity until pretty late; I was 19. But I was sexual, everything but intercourse; not oral sex but making out with boys and fondling, from about 13 on. And I got my period when I was 11 and so every opportunity to be behind a bush with a boy, I was there. I didn't really feel it was being promiscuous, I think I was just a teenager messing in the bushes.

Then I went to college and in my junior year I became very promiscuous. I slept with everybody, any boy who would sleep with me. I felt sexual, I wanted to have sex, and they were usually my friends. They were all in theater, and all straight at that point. So I would just sleep with them, have sex with them. It felt good. It was physical for me. It was mechanical. I liked the whole thing and I probably would have liked to find a boyfriend, but it was really hard for me to find someone I wanted to be with.

It's weird because in my 20s, after I got out of the hospital, I had a boyfriend that I didn't really feel so in love with. But I had one of those decade crushes on a woman who I was in a writer's workshop with. And I came right out one night, and I knew I wanted to sleep with her, have sex with her. I loved her. And that was really the first time. I remember that night, that feeling I had of being with her. And I don't know why, for me it didn't just happen progressively. Why didn't I then go look for another woman? I didn't. I went and looked for men. Maybe it was because it was too risky. I never really thought of that before. Maybe I was afraid I would be rejected; I remember that night thinking I can't become gay. I can't be gay because I can't let my family know after coming out of the hospital, because they already think I'm crazy. They already hate me and it would be too hard. I remember thinking that. But at that point I guess I was bisexual. I liked men and I wanted to be with men. So I think I must have just shut it off and then never thought about it. I always wondered, well why didn't it progress, and it didn't until my thirties, until the next decade, when I had a crush on that actress [5 years before].

That was so strong that I thought, "I can't shut this down." When she rejected me, it was the first time in years that I had cut myself again. I cut myself ... I took a knife and cut myself down my breast. I was in so much pain and I wanted to die. It happened when I came out 2 years ago. When the woman I fell in love with shut down, I did it again. I was down here in the kitchen. Arthur doesn't know this, but I took a knife and just sliced myself. I couldn't bear the emotional pain anymore. I wrote that poem [Appendix D, P(72)] and I cut myself. And then I told my therapist and she saw me several times a week and I got through it.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

Until recently, I've always had the feeling that it was happening to somebody right next to me. It's been a really interesting 2 years. I would go to women's events, I've had a couple of relationships, I've been happy with it, but I never quite felt integrated. Only recently, does it feel like it's happening to me—that I could let it in. Before it felt like it was happening to this person

right next to me over here, and you can't intellectualize yourself into it; it just suddenly all of a sudden it feels like it's me and not some other part of me.

I actually used to pray to be a lesbian. Even in the 70s and the 80s, I was so enamored of seeing two women together. My eye would go there, or a lesbian book store or anything ... women's music which I'm completely addicted to. Nothing ever seemed to hit me over the head hard enough to say, "Why do you think that is?" I loved it and I longed for it, but I also loved men, at least up until recently, and then it all came flooding out. Once I had an experience, it was like everything got released.

I guess I was confused about my sexual identity when it first started. It didn't feel like confusion, but all I wanted to do was be with a woman. It felt confusing as far as my lifestyle, this is home, with this man, and my best friend, and that was confusing. I was not enjoying sex for a while; my whole body would freeze up. It was clear it was all transitioning. I felt kind of asexual and I'm a very sexual person. Or I thought it was that until I was with a woman, and then I realized it wasn't that. I just had no desire for heterosexual sex. It was a process; we often talked about it, and got through it.

I never really had any fears about coming out to anybody. I kind of announced it to the world. Everybody jokes about how I would go up to people and say, "Are you gay?" just because I was looking for people to talk to. I actually ended up talking to this one woman, and she ended up meeting me for coffee to just talk to me about coming out. She said she was bisexual which surprised me; I told her about my confusion and my worrying about Arthur, and asking what I should do because he was my family and that kind of thing. I was really confused about who I was. I thought that I was probably a lesbian, but it was just so overwhelming.

I haven't told my nephew though, it's not time yet really. He met Arthur and he kind of considers us his normal family, because his mother has followed the footsteps of my mother; my sister has followed the footsteps of my mother being a miserable alcoholic, and abusive. I know we'll tell him eventually, but we'll tell him when I'm ready and when I'm clear. He really likes Arthur, and he already had a hard enough time with the fact that I celebrate solstice. He's kind of conservative; I'm this crazy aunt, who he thinks is normal, and then when I tell him I'm a lesbian, he going to probably lose his mind for a little while.

Experiencing homoprejudice

I went out to dinner with my first girlfriend. Suddenly I was sitting in the chair and these people were talking to me and it reminded me of me, being in a chair, having dinner with my lesbian friends and totally accepting them and their being different. But suddenly it was me being different and it was like—"What? This is really weird." They are talking to me with just a little patronizing quality in their voice, "Isn't that nice, Holly has a new girlfriend." And I just felt, "God, I'm the one." I had done a lot of work with children, theater, outreach and stuff, and I used to hear on the news how people have weird ideas that homosexuals are pedophiles and wouldn't get hired to teach and I suddenly felt like oh my god, I'm a really great teacher with kids, people love my work, kids love me, and I could actually be discriminated against and that was the one thing that blew my mind. That I would be judged based on who I wanted to be sexual with in my adult life. And I thought of those parents; they are Catholic, and they would probably pull their kids right out and I thought how devastating that would be to me. And now I really understand what that's like for people. I mean I can imagine how it really is to be discriminated against, even though you're fantastic at what you do. It has nothing to do with my sexual preference, any

more than I would sleep with little boys if I was heterosexual. It's just so bizarre. That was the one thing that made me go, WOW, I don't know if I'm up for that, because I'm really out there about being out, because I tell everybody, everybody, except my nephew.

The things that have helped me get by

The last 12 years in some ways has really been great. I kind of created this home. There have been a lot of nightmares here, but there's been a lot of happiness in my life too. Having spirituality has really helped me a lot because in the last few years, there have been some of the most painful and difficult moments of my life. I feel I now have now a sense that I've never had before—that things would be okay. That the path will lead me, and that there's something out there, and in here that will help me through and see me through this.

A few years ago, I had an experience where, I mean I never did this before and it wasn't a dream, I went somewhere. I went to the coast of Massachusetts or somewhere in New England. I astral planed or traveled. It was clearly different than a dream. There was a white house, an old white house, and I walked up to the second floor. I knew exactly where I was going and there she was, in full American Indian garb, and she looked like the woman my friend had seen. She was sitting in a chair by a window. There was no speaking, there was meant to be no speaking. I just came over and sat in a chair right across from her, and she communicated to me telepathically, and I remember feeling all of this longing and love for her. I felt she just filled me, without her touching me or saying anything. And, in that way, she said to me you're going to be all right, and I felt, without ever even putting my hand out to hold her or anything, I felt all right; I knew I would be all right. And I got up and I left and that was it. So now, whenever I get on an airplane or have a really intense experience, I talk to her and I call upon her to help me instead of hurting myself. I call her, my spirit mother. I really believe she's there, so I feel a little better knowing that.

Emotional connection between the abuse and coming out

There is one thing that I always felt shame about and had to hide, which may be related to internalized homophobia. Since I was a little girl, I remember wanting women to hold me because I had such a horrendous mother and no contact that was positive that way until now. I'm still working on that, of wanting to be held and all that longing, and I really had to deal with that in therapy. Fortunately I have had two good therapists who are not afraid of that and don't have rules about not touching the patient. I have handled it really well, and so I can see it's getting better gradually. After I had a few years of that kind of nurturing and treatment, I came out. It was almost as if when I had those needs met, then I could find out who I was. I am still in therapy and feel some shame when I want to reach out and hug my therapist. If I'm in a really rough spot and I want her to hold me or whatever, it's still that feeling that they don't want to, or I'm ashamed of it, or there's something wrong with it. But I've had that feeling since I was a little girl. And maybe that's akin to being ashamed that you're gay, or afraid that you want contact with a woman, I don't know. It never felt sexual to me, until recently.

Homophobia didn't really affect me. Maybe it did. Maybe that night when I was in my twenties when I thought I can't be gay because I've already just come out of a mental hospital, and my family would totally freak. I don't know. I just couldn't deal with any more shit from them. And yeah, maybe I would have come out then. I know I wanted to sleep with that woman and then it all went away. The curtain totally came down. When it finally happened 2 years ago, the curtain came up. I realized I wasn't enjoying sex for a long time and I didn't know why. I

have no desire to be sexual with a man. Once I allowed myself to experience a woman, I thought I had come home. For me that was a long time, since I was a little girl, wanting women to pay attention to me because I never had a mother pay attention to me.

I don't want to think that my sexual preference at this point is from dysfunction, like "Oh well, Phia never had a good mother so" I mean there are other women who don't have good mothers, and they're totally straight. I've been tracing the whole line, and it's so interesting to see all of the little pockets where being a woman loving women, was so obviously where I was headed. Other people saw it. But I feel as hard as the 2 years have been, and as much pain as there's been in it, when the moments of being with a loving women, those moments, and finally integrating the person next to me into this person, there is this sense of such relief and deep happiness that I never felt in my life. I know I'm in the right place, and I'm excited, and I'm happy. I've had some upsets and some disappointments, weird experiences but that's going to happen. But I feel like I'm home and it's been such a long, tumultuous ride. Sometimes I think, oh I wish I had figured this out, but you can't figure it out any sooner than you can figure it out. I wasn't clear then, I think there were a lot of things going on for me. It happened when I was ready and when I was clear, and when I knew that's what I wanted. I think.

Leonie

Describing myself

I'm turning 28 in a couple of weeks. I'm a performer, and I mainly perform to gay people. That's my niche audience. I travel across the country performing to lesbians, and gay people. That's my main involvement in the community. I'm from Canada, so I went to Concordia University in Montreal. And I grew up in Toronto. After a show that I perform, I'll hang out with the people afterwards, socialize. I'll call up some friends on the phone. When I'm on stage it's a pick-me-up, I can ride for days after a good show, feeling really happy.

Writing lyrics is very stressful, but something I do to relieve stress. If I'm totally freaking out, I will just make up a song really quickly. I never finish the songs that I make up really quickly; finishing songs is really stressful; it's labor intensive. But I will just quickly express myself in eight bars, and then I feel completely better. If I can't sleep, and I'm if I'm crawling the walls, or I'm going to scream, or hurt myself, I'll just write about it, and I'll play the piano, and I'll create and express myself, and then I will be completely mellow afterwards. It's a gift for me. I think it's the only way I survived everything. I have been in the arts my entire life. My mom plays piano and sings beautifully. No one is professional in my family, but she has an amazing voice ... all the women in my family are great musicians, beautiful singers, play piano and guitar. Actually my grandfather was a visual artist on my dad's side. Not professionally, but he was good.

My family and me

My mom comes from Pennsylvania Dutch country, actually she's Mennonite; a couple of generations back, they were Amish, and now they are fundamental Christians. My mom married my Dad who is Jewish from Chicago, Jewish, very suburban, Midwestern, American Jew. And my dad's background is German, German Jewish, but no one was in the Holocaust that I know of. My mom is German too, the Mennonite, its all German, I mean she's totally anal, a totally compulsive cleaner, like that; and with my dad it's more that he has a short fuse. Not so much that he's obsessive, but that he is totally controlling. He has a problem with anger, yelling; he

never hit us, I mean except for spankings. But he yelled, he had a temper. Apparently a lot of the world thinks spanking isn't abusive, but I'd rather not do that to my kids.

My parents divorced when I was five, and lived in two homes and I switched back and forth for 10 years. My mom and my dad actually communicated a lot about keeping the same rules, things like that, with each other. My brother and I, I think were more each other's family because we were together going back and forth so we grew up together, more than we grew up with either our mom or dad. We understood each other more than anyone else in the world. We went through many different phases, like hating each other, but mostly we were very intimate, and we could talk about many things. But unfortunately it became too intimate. I don't see him or my dad anymore, so there's no communication there for me.

When I was 6 years old, my mom had a boyfriend and he lived with us for a year and he beat her a lot; I only remember listening and hearing it once, so I kind of don't have an awareness of it, but she told me that he did. I remember he beat me once, only once. He actually threw me across the floor and I had bruises all over my back. It was really intense. I'm not sure, I don't know whether he beat my brother or not. But I think he did beat him a lot and there are discrepancies of memories of my family, people who can remember that.

They broke up and my mother left him. But there were other strange things that happened: My brother stole something when he was 12, and my parents got together, [even though] they were divorced when I was 5. They all went in a room and whipped him with a belt as punishment. And he wanted to kill himself right afterward. Things like that [went on] that still to this day my mom says that wasn't abuse, that was just punishment. My mom has a very harsh edge. She would slap me across the face and so it's like, what is that? I don't know, but it's pretty mean to do, pretty harsh. Now I have a new step-dad, not the old one who beat us, he left.

I was really good in school. I got good grades—ultra—except for as an experiment when I was doing drugs, I decided to get bad grades, just in one class. I decided to not do well. I got a D, and I thought that was fun, and then I started doing well again. I always got good grades. I just talked a lot. I got into trouble in terms of behavior, but yet I charmed all my teachers so they liked me but struggled with me.

My mom and I have an interesting relationship. It's very complicated because she still denies a lot of things. But yet, she's a therapist and she's a very open kind of person, so in some ways we talk about everything and in some ways I hold back a lot from her. There are certain topics we decided not to talk about, except every few years we have a big upsetting conversation about it. So that's how it was as a kid growing up. In some ways my mom and I are remarkably close; the things I say to my mom people would think wow, and in some ways I hold back a lot, to protect myself from her denial and judging. Like she says that I have to take responsibility for my role in what my brother did to me, and that it wasn't abuse and things like that. My father and my brother are still inappropriate, so it's a matter of safety. My brother [used to touch] me, ... and he doesn't have good boundaries. He's been a pothead since he's 17 and he's 33 now so it's like he's not developed psychologically. He hasn't grown out of it. So I don't see them at all.

My mom started going to therapy, and about 2 years before that, she got breast cancer and realized that she was a mess. She decided to go to therapy and then she asked me if I wanted to go, and I desperately, secretly wanted to go for years. I mean I started doing pot when I was 12 and getting drunk. And I was really wild, I got suspended from school lighting fires in my

desk, some wild stuff, I was pretty wild. I was doing a lot of drugs too, but I stopped doing drugs when I was about 15, and I went to therapy.

Experiencing coming out

When I was 6, this girl and me would make out, and it was very sexual, I mean it was great. Like we would reenact these movie scenes and it was very sexual. So I look back on that and I say, “Oh that’s interesting.” I had a boy who I played doctor with, but I didn’t like it all. It’s just that he had gum, and I wanted his gum, and I wasn’t allowed sugar gum. I remember I had no feeling for him, but I just liked his toys, and trucks. At first [my same-sex attractions were] something that I wanted to explore, and I needed to experiment with women and see if I liked it. Also when I was 17, there was a boy, and he became my boyfriend and I liked him. But we had a non-monogamous relationship and it was like, “I need to stay open to women.” And I did like him, I loved him, but I don’t know if I was really in love with him.

My first [lesbian exploration] was when I was at college, besides my girlfriend when I was 6. It was actually with a bunch of friends and we were all playing spin the bottle and we were kissing each other, and we were a little bit drunk and it was fun. I ended up making out with this one friend of mine and it was a lot of fun. [But] I first had sex with a woman when I was 20 years old and she was older, she was 27 and it was nice. It was sort of a one-night stand I guess. I met her through friends of mine. I met her in a bar and then went home with her. I guess I wanted more from her, but she didn’t want more.

When I first came out to my family, my dad was very supportive because he came out as gay a couple of years after that. And he apparently had been a practicing bisexual the whole time I was alive, and had been cheating on all the women he was with. My mom said she guessed it [about me] and said that it’s not what she wished, but she supports me and loves me and it doesn’t matter. Now, she’s gotten over it, and so it’s cool.

There are a few ways of looking at it, how I see my day-to-day life as a lesbian woman living in a predominantly straight world. There is harassment just walking down the street, in this neighborhood especially, people calling out and commenting on my hair and things like that. I get that daily. Other than that there are wonderful things about it too. I do feel like I have a community, and as a musician that’s a great thing to have a community, although poor, to support my music. I think it’s also a neat place to be. I mean, I think it’s sort of the time of the gay people. There’s sort of a revolution happening. So I think that’s exciting in some ways it’s chic; in some ways it’s chic and some ways you’re still getting harassed. It’s kind of like it’s cool to be black; black people are cool, wow do jazz and hip-hop, but they’re still oppressed. Both of that, but at the same time it’s fun to feel cool and feel like you have a voice that’s being listened to right now. I think especially lesbians are writers right now. There are so many lesbian writers, and I think there’s basically a lesbian cannon exploding of writers. If you go to any lesbian open mike, there are brilliant writers there. And I think there’s a whole thing going on that I don’t think people know about, or recognize because you don’t normally recognize minorities. I hope it mainstreams like black jazz, like jazz did, but I really feel like there’s a renaissance of lesbian writers right now. I hope it will carry over. I think it’s exciting to be part of that. It gives you a purpose.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

I guess I had my first crush on a girl when I was 13, but I didn’t think anything of it, because I had read that Ann Landers column, the one where she says that it doesn’t mean

anything. Then when I was about 16, I really loved the Indigo Girls, and I realized that I was obsessed with them, and I realized it was more than just a musical love, and that I had crushes on both of them. I realized that maybe I was attracted to women, so I declared myself bisexual. I said I was bisexual and then, when I was about 22, I decided I was a lesbian. But if I look back into my early childhood, I see that I would play doctor with the girls. I liked the girls more than the boys. If I look back now I see it, but I never thought about it.

I mean [there were] subtle things. This one teaching job I did, there were no problems, and in the end they wouldn't rehire me. They said nothing specific; there's something weird about her. Well I think that's because I'm gay and have spiky hair and I feel different. I mean what does that mean? I mean there was nothing specific.

I feel most comfortable, and most relaxed, and at ease, and most [myself] with women. And I'm very comfortable with straight women, as long as they're comfortable with me being a lesbian. Except sometimes I feel they can flirt and it's confusing. Whereas a lesbian who is your friend, if you're just friends, and she knows how to have boundaries, maybe, although it still it gets confusing at times. It's very confusing. It depends, some straight women sometimes don't know. They just want to treat you like another straight woman, but it's confusing when they're taking their shirt off in front of you and I'm like okay don't do that to me, it's really confusing. I know you're straight so I keep telling myself that, but my eyes see your naked breasts and I don't want to see that because it's just like I thought we were supposed to be friends; it's hard. But at the same time it can be hard to be friends with lesbians because you're both lesbians and so you kind of think is this person interested in me? And sexuality can run into any relationship. Straight guys, too. So I guess it's like that everywhere. But I'm most comfortable around women. [But] sometimes I really enjoy hanging out with guys for like one night. It's totally different and sometimes its fun to be the only lesbian in a group of guys, or straight people, women, too. Sometimes I find that refreshing.

Experiencing homoprejudice

I never want to disclose to people that I'm a lesbian. I teach in the public schools and I don't feel like I can come out there. I'm a contract worker, so I don't have steady work and I'm very easily fire-able. It's happened before, and it can happen like that. And I'm an outsider in their environment. I just go once a week for a certain amount of weeks. People can be very suspicious of outsiders, plus my hair is red and spiky so. I teach music and that's different and scary for a lot of teachers to do the arts and play art games. I really wish I could come out there, but I can't. I don't feel like I can.

I've had trouble in terms of a lot of harassment being a lesbian. One instance is that I was in a theater company and I was the only lesbian in the company. I was the first lesbian they'd ever met, and there were two guys in particular who couldn't let it up and had to make a lot of comments. One guy actually harassed me continually. He would touch me, touch my breasts back stage and would just make really inappropriate comments, and one day he just freaked out and yelled at me, which is very abusive. I really think it had something to do with being a lesbian. It's not something you can pinpoint or prove. But I think the fact that I'm a lesbian made them want to target me; I just feel that happens all the time. I get harassed all the time. It's just weird, men relate to you differently, they either think you're another guy and they can just crack these things about women in front of you, or they're trying to get you in bed; a lot of men are very weird around you. They're threatened, so I feel that as harassment.

I've been kicked out of sports bars in the middle of my set. The owner told me to leave because my lyrics have swear words in them, and we talk about 9/11, we talk about abuse, we talk about other things, and I've been literally kicked out. I don't know why. So I've had that. I guess it's on the edge of safety. It's sort of on the edge.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

Well we might as well talk about the whole thing and go chronologically. I had a baby sitter when I was 4 and he yelled at me, actually told me I was a lesbian. He was the one who started molesting me when I was 4. But I think it didn't end until I was 8, because that's when I told my family about it. And so he would molest me. He would lie on top of me and he was trying to do something with my vagina, I don't know. I was not letting him there. And he would be on top of me. He would baby sit and, every time he came over, he would do this, just lay on top of me and touch me all over, and things like that. I only remember the last time, and I remember saying when I was 8, this has been going on for years, but I don't remember any of the other times, except the first time which is when he yelled at me and told me I was a lesbian, and went into another room with my brother. My brother was there all the time. He went in a room with him and then locked me out. And I was alone and being yelled at. So I remember that. I don't remember anything in between but I remember remembering that I just hated it, and it was gross. I remember hating him as a baby sitter and always telling my parents I don't want him to baby sit. But he was a very close friend with my brother. He was kind of young. My brother's four years older and he was just a couple of years older than my brother. I remember the last time because I yelled for my brother to come, I was screaming. And then my brother came and he yelled at me, he just screamed at me and told me I was lying, like right there, he just yelled. My dad got his mother, who had been the housekeeper. They used to live with us, and she came and then she denied the whole thing and yelled at me and told me I was trying to kill him [the perpetrator] because he had this rare disease. I was 8 years old, and I had to demonstrate what he had done with my doll, which to me was like the worst thing ever. And there was a police officer there too. Not that they were filing anything, but just that he was a friend of my dad's. She just yelled at me, and she had been my housekeeper, too. But my parents believed me. I don't know what order things happened in, but my dad started becoming very inappropriate sexually with me when I was, eleven or twelve. There was hardly ever any inappropriate touch although there was a little bit. It was more comments, things he would say about my body, and the ways he would tell me about his sex life and things like that. I became sexually active right around that time, very quickly. I was making out with boys when I was twelve. I mean I was really into boys. I was very boy crazy. I had a boyfriend when I was 13, and I started having sex when I was 13. That relationship was actually very positive though, I mean it was enjoyable. He was great. The only thing was, he was a drug addict, but he was very sweet.

My brother started to come into my room and lay on top of me and he would have a hard-on when I was around 11. So I was getting it everywhere. It was as if there were no boundaries in my family. I think my brother got his behavior from my dad; he mirrored it from my dad. He learned it from my dad. There was so much craziness in our childhood because we also had this stepfather who used to beat us up physically. So I think there was just so much abuse. We were both experiencing that. I think my brother was lonely and didn't know how to have boundaries.

I think all my friends were sexually abused. I don't know about the boyfriend I had when I was 16, or the boyfriend when I was 13, we didn't talk about it. But the boyfriend I had when I

was 17, he had been sexually abused and that's a big reason why we had such a great relationship.

How the abuse affected me and my relationships

One way my abuse affected me is the way I relate to people; I'm very careful about who I let into my life. I'm very careful. I would much rather have no one than have people who are going to put me down in any way, even though it's very subtle. So I'm very sensitive and I really can't tolerate anybody mistreating me for a second, and I don't want them in my life. I'm very sensitive. I think I also have a gift, in that I can identify abusers or creepy people very quickly, like in a minute. I'm struggling a lot with the way I relate. My mom tells me that I don't relate to people well; that I expect too much of them. But then my therapist says that my mom expects too little from people. I don't know, maybe sometimes I lose my temper with people if they're mistreating me. It's not that I will be mean to them, but I will tell them exactly how I feel. I really get really upset if I'm being attacked in any way. It's hard for me to handle and it's probably related to my abuse, I'm sure; but then I don't know. I'm trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do. Maybe it's okay to yell at them, maybe it's appropriate, I don't know. But I think it might get me in trouble at work with my supervisor.

I want to talk about how the abuse plays into my life with my sexual partners, because it's really big; it's just really intense. I was just in a relationship for a long time, and I just needed to talk about [my abuse] a lot, and sometimes stop having sex because I was feeling threatened. It took a long time to build up trust with her. I just think that's important.

There are some things I told myself about my abuse [that] I still struggle with all the time, especially with my mom telling me that it's my fault; that I have responsibility. It makes me feel that I'm exaggerating it, and what happened really wasn't abusive, that's what my mom would tell me. It makes me get obsessed with images of me hurting myself, I've never done it, and I don't think I ever will, but I get completely obsessed like a broken record or a movie of slitting my wrists. And that's why I stopped seeing my brother because just being with him made me completely overwhelmed with feelings of wanting to hurt myself, because his boundaries are still not good. And so I couldn't take it. And then to have the whole denial part in it just made me feel like I was crazy, so I might as well hurt myself. [If you asked me] did you ever hurt yourself, I would say no. But then [you] wouldn't know [that] I am obsessive about it, and that would go undocumented, and that's, I think, interesting. Humans are so much more complicated.

When guys touch me it really freaks me out, and I don't know how to deal with it. My friends say you should say something to them, but it just feels so awkward. I just don't trust, and in order for me to have a good friend that's a guy, we would have to actually have to have a relationship, and he would have to ask permission before he touches me. But most of society doesn't work that way. So I find it very, very, very stressful actually to be with men, because I just don't feel comfortable when they touch me. Or if they're straight, they sometimes ask me questions like, "What's it like to be lesbian?" or things like that. I don't know; it's just hard.

I have no fear of authority; I just have no fear of them, no matter who it is, if I feel they're doing something wrong to me, I will tell it and express it. I have a hard time, and I'm not sure, but it seems like most people in this society put up with a lot of stuff. I can't do that, and I feel like it gets me into trouble with getting hired and stuff. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to deal with it differently or what. I don't know where the line is; when do I want to work, or when do I have to put up with it. I don't know.

Emotional connections between abuse and coming out

When I first came out, I struggled for a lot of years; I wondered if I am gay just because I was abused by men. I just struggled with that for a long time. I struggled with that and I kind of wanted to be queer, but I thought is this just because I was abused by men? So it felt really difficult for me to feel at peace with it. Then my friends told me to stop worrying about it, so I just stopped one day. I realized that there are a lot of straight girls that I know, who have been abused by men. I struggled with it for a couple of years. I kind of always thought about it, and felt real bad. I think my dad and my brother think that's true, and with that guy in the theater company, that guy who called me a lesbian; maybe he picked up on something.

[To] have a one-night stand with someone ... would be shutting down a part of me that needs to trust somebody first, and it feels like a big issue when I'm dating people. I wonder who's big enough to be able to process this with me, because if I'm going to be sexual with them, there needs to be an open dialogue; who's big enough, who can I trust, who has their shit together. I need to find someone who's open as well, who can handle it. Some people are uncomfortable being vulnerable. [My therapist says] abuse is part of all of it. Abuse weaves into everything, so she says of course you would feel that way. I get a huge amount of affirmation from her. I get a huge amount now, [and also] from my mom, and she's my only family and it's really hard.

Finally, I just want to say that the abuse issue comes up a lot in every day relationships; and it's hard to know how it comes up in your other relationships. It's really hard to know when it's something coming up from your past, or whether because of your past, you are particularly aware about something; whether you're right on about something, or let it slide. It's very hard to know because in the end you just are who you are.

Harriet

What my family was like

I did have a nuclear family. My parents actually emigrated from England in 1957, and brought my brother and sister with them. My father was trained as a chemist, but he worked as an engineer, so he made a good living. My mother started working part time when I was about 9. She worked as a costumer at a theater, a children's theater. She got me involved in that. And she also worked as a florist and eventually became a designer over the years. [My parents] liked everyone, but they'd talk about you behind your back. They talk about everybody behind their back. My brother, they talk about him; they talk about my sister, they probably confide about me with my brother. I know they do. Goodness knows what they say. From things that my brother has said to me like, "Oh you've done such terrible things to mom and dad." I would like to know is that coming from him or is that coming from mom. There was a lot of that, sort of twisted around things that were said in very significant times that didn't make a lot of sense.

I had one brother and one sister. My brother is 8 years older than me, and my sister was 6 years older than me. It was almost like having another set of parents. I got a lot of baby-sitting. I was very definitely the baby. My brother has always been kind of detached in a way. I don't know how you'd say this, extremely independent; he stayed to himself a lot. My sister and I were extremely close, emotionally. I felt pretty protective of my sister. My brother and I sometimes played around, but his whole sort of philosophy of life was just ignore it, don't worry.

There was a period of time my parents had tension, from the time I was 10 to the time I was about 15; they sort of played with being divorced. I especially remember when I was 13, my mother told me she was definitely going to divorce, and that she wasn't even going to try to get custody of me. She sort of assumed that he was going to get it. I was extremely upset; I told my brother and sister about it, and my brother's reaction was basically to ignore her. I guess he thought she'd never go through with it or she was being dramatic. I guess he saw it maybe from his older point of view.

I felt I needed to take care of my mother, emotionally. I did a lot of counseling type behaviors with her. She went through a shopping period; she was a big shopper. When I was in junior high school, we used to go shopping three times a week after school. I spent a lot of time with her, doing things with her. And then with my dad, he's also very quiet; he's very reserved. He doesn't really discuss anything very much, politics, religion, and his feelings. He would go away on business. So it was usually me that spent a lot of time with my mom, kind of being her friend type of thing.

My sister and she actually were very close. My mom is extremely perfectionistic, and somehow my sister became the same way. She became the ultimate perfectionistic student. Straight As, everything, all the activities, she was just the golden child. I just did everything on my own, my own way. I was always very independent minded. People could tell me things, my parents would tell me things—do things this way, or do things that way. But I always had to process it through myself. So until I came up with that conclusion or something else, I wouldn't do it that way.

My sister had a drug problem. Everybody knew because she outed it. She was classic in her cry for help. She was in college, but she was the one sitting there saying I'm an alcoholic, I have a drug problem, I'm in trouble. She—this is really lovely—was a garbage head. This term basically means that the person does anything and everything, and whatever they can get their hands on. From what I understand, with her, the biggest thing was alcohol. Cocaine was around at the time. She said she abused a lot of over-the-counter pharmaceuticals. I got the feeling that when I was around, she was sneaking off and taking pills.

My mother sent her to a clinical social worker and asked, "Should we put her in rehab?" He said, "That's up to you." It never happened and she ended up dying. I think part of me then said, "There's something here that's really not right." I guess it says it to everybody. But a lot of people hear of young people dying all the time, and it doesn't make sense to anybody, so they don't try to make sense of it. But to me, I knew there was something. It said to me, "There's something about it; I know that there's something behind it." My sister was 22 when she committed suicide. I was 16. She had just come out of university. I was just starting my junior year of high school. My brother was out and gone.

My life growing up

I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, in a suburban area, in a house. We moved to ... New Jersey. Actually my parents live in Cherry Hill, which is a pretty affluent, suburban area; it was the same thing, a lot of big houses, big modern-type houses.

I didn't like going to all those new schools at all. Actually I did pretty well when we moved to New Jersey, because the school I went to turned out to be a highly academic geared school. When they interviewed me for what classes I would take, was quite something, because I had to prove to them that I didn't need to be put in remedial classes. The man assumed that,

because I had gone to school and been raised in the south. I was so angry with him. I said, oh no you're not going to do this. I said I went to a very good high school and you have the wrong attitude, really. I had a lot people say very funny things to me like, "Why don't you have an accent?" And certain things were weird; I was sure everyone was so much smaller; everyone was so much shorter. There were a lot of Jewish people, which I wasn't used to. People were very into what ethnicity they came from. Which was new for me, because when I was growing up, I mean we had a lot of friends in my family who were English, but that was unusual to sort of have an ethnic community. When I went to school you were either black or you were white. That's what it was.

I slept walked. If we were in one of those family situations, away on vacation, and had to share a bed, no one ever wanted to sleep with me, because you'd get beat up. I rolled around and thrashed around so much, and I used to fall off bunk beds regularly; I never wanted the top bunk. I slept walked off of a bunk bed one time. Apparently you still don't want to sleep with me because you'll get kicked or something. I dream a lot. I slept a lot. I sucked my thumb until I was 7. When I was in first grade, I had to take a change of underwear because I would sometimes wet my pants. I can sleep. I always have been able to sleep anywhere, anytime. I've always been a really heavy sleeper. My family used to take me on camping trips from the time I was an infant and it was no problem. I always slept.

I made friends. I was nervous. I didn't make it with the popular crowd. I was fortunate in that a girl in my grade lived three doors down from where I moved into, and she came over the day I moved in. She was Canadian originally, and she got me through. This was another thing: I had to walk to school, which was new for me because we always had bussing when I was growing up. Every morning she'd come pounding on the door, and get me out the door on time, and march me through the snow. I had to buy snow boots, which was new. By the end of the year I was pretty much adjusted.

We went back to North Carolina when I was 16. That was the bad part, having to switch back and forth. Because I couldn't decide what I wanted, or who I wanted to be, what I liked anymore, or what influenced me anymore. When we moved back to North Carolina, my parents offered for me to go to school there, and I turned them down because I wanted to go to the same high school that my brother and sister had gone to. In the long run, it might have been better for me to have gone to a private school, but who knows.

In between hospitalizations, I lived in a residential program because when I would go home, my parents would say, "We can't deal with this, you have to go live somewhere else." So they put me in a residential program, or I would go [to the local] hospital, which I did regularly. My mother would come to hospital and she would say to the social worker, that I can't come home and you have to find somewhere else for her to be. Social workers would say there's really not anything; I mean there's not. I was in one group home that I actually ran away from. There's just not a lot of stuff out there. I was hospitalized sixteen times. I was hospitalized sixteen times for depression and suicidal ideation, and one time for an attempt. I feel like [now] I'm leaving the system. I'm going back to life, as most people know it. It's been hard to explain for a long time. It's been a lot of little bit jobs; it's been a lot of hanging on to somewhere to live, losing a lot of friends; a lot of friends going on with their lives.

What my life is like now

Honestly, sometimes I feel that I'm done with therapy. The therapeutic goals that I have written down with my therapist are to talk about the childhood abuse, and then the other ones are more life, career, job, and economics. I feel that I'm on the other end of the spectrum of leaving the mental health system. I had no idea when I started how time consuming it is; I had no idea what it was about, or that I would get involved in a system. I thought I was [just] going to go to therapy.

Financially, I get by on disability. My situation right now is I'm brushing up on my computer skills to go back to work in the fall. I have worked full-time, not a lot, but I have. My goal really is to work full-time and also, when I can, I really want to go back to school. I've had a lot of part-time retail jobs in my life. I don't want to do that anymore. I got this place, which is the first time I've lived alone without a roommate, or girlfriend, or anything. I've been here seven months and it's really great.

My caseworker and I had to come up with a plan, mostly to make sure that everything is coordinated. I see a therapist and a psychiatrist, if I have any problems. I have bipolar disorder and I take Depacote. It helps a lot. I took antidepressants for 10 years and they were wrong. They were the wrong things for me to be taking. I tried lithium but it wasn't so great, but the Depacote is good. Now I might have some kind of hormonal stuff going on too.

I belong to the Y down the road, I like to go swimming a lot, and I really like the Internet. I got very addicted to some things on the Internet. I go out to the park walking; I like that sort of thing a lot. I have a bicycle, but I fell off. All I can say is it's not just like riding a bike.

I'd say of people that I socialize with, that it's probably about 50/50 split between gay men and gay women. But I really don't know a lot of gay men. I used to go to a support group in Philadelphia for people with depression and bipolar disorder that was all gay, but the majority of the people there were gay men or transgendered. I felt like an old throwback, a 70s lesbian. I was just not hip enough or something and then I had an argument with the group leader and I just stopped going. Primarily, for some reason, the men are a lot more networked. They have the bars, the clubs. [Even] when I lived 30 minutes from New York, I never went by myself or with [other] people.

Experiencing coming out

I think I first thought that I had same-sex attractions when I was about 14. I think younger than that, maybe ten or so, but I didn't really formulate it as sexual, because I always had female friends. It was somewhere around there.

I first had sex with women when I was in my early twenties. I had a couple of crushes on women when I was nineteen or 20, and I went out with a woman when I was about 23, who claimed she was bisexual, and I slept with her. And then, when I was 25, I had started a lesbian relationship. Mostly I felt curiosity. I wanted to know what it felt like, because I had dated men. I had one significant sexual relationship with a man, but it was more sort of succumbing to pressure. I had a relationship with a man who was going out with other women. New Year's Eve would roll around and I would find out he had a date with someone else and that sort of thing.

Experiencing internalized homophobia

By the time I started a lesbian relationship, the woman I was attracted to was definitely overtly lesbian. She approached me. I sort of looked the part. I was very frustrated by that time. I was waiting too long, and so I actually just wanted to know what a relationship was like. It was

very pleasant. She paid a lot of attention to me and that was something that was different from former relationships. They were non-monogamous. She paid a lot of attention to me and it was actually quite a while before actually we had sex. I mean I know when I initially met her we kissed, but then it was about 6 months before I slept with her.

At that time, I had been trying to come out. I had told my brother, when I was 20, that I had these feelings, and several of my long-time childhood friends were not surprised. My brother told me not to tell my parents. On one hand I felt angry about it, on the other hand, coming from my brother, I was not surprised. He's very, almost protective of my parents. He's told me that I've done terrible things to my parents by the way I've lived my life. I think I took it as though he didn't want to deal with it. And there was always this sort of overhanging feeling of "Oh God, what's she doing now? Maybe this is something that'll pass." So I always took as what was going on outside of me. But it was invalidating; it made me feel like, oh well, maybe I am just being silly or something. But I think it also increased my frustration level because I had been conscious of the feelings for a long time, but then things happened in my life. We moved several times when I was in junior high and high school age, and I changed schools a lot. Even when I got to university age, I changed schools a lot. It just became socially very, very difficult. I wanted to sort of get on this path of just being normal, being 14 and growing up, and it just seemed like I kept having these things coming in the way. And then I think that's what made me sort of succumb more to the role of being them. It was kind of a way of fitting in, because that's what you were supposed to do. I was actually at a very bad point in my life, a very low point in my life when I met my first girlfriend. And by that point, there was almost this thing in me that said, "Oh what the hell, what do I have to lose?"

My parents had to face my coming out when I got in a relationship, my first relationship. I don't remember actually telling them, like coming out and saying, "Hi, you know I'm a lesbian", though I think I did. I think before that, I did tell my mom I had feelings. There was this girl that I really liked and I told my mom that I loved her, and my mom said, "Yeah, but she doesn't love you the same way," which was true. Because I'm pretty sure that girl was straight.

Experiencing homoprejudice

My mother was tricky about accepting my orientation. She worked with a lot of gay men, so it wasn't a big deal to her. But then, on the other hand, I think it was different because I was female. Also my brother is married and has 2 children. My mom said to me one time, "Well I figured that's all I'm going to get for grandchildren." It's as though because my sister died, and my sister was straight, I think she just wanted somebody, some girl, some daughter, to have the big white wedding, and the husband and the babies and the whole nine yards, and I can't do that. I don't want to do that really. But then I think they don't know what to think. They don't know what to view it as. They don't realize that I could have a big white wedding. Or they don't realize what it means. There's no format for them to put it in. If I had been 16, and gone out with girls, and taken a girl to the prom, I think they would have been completely fine. They really wouldn't care what gender, as long as I was doing something they could understand. I honestly think they always knew that I was gay. But it was another thing where it was, let's just sort of not pay attention to this, or sweep it under the rug, or we'll just see how it goes. Because I think they had no way of knowing for sure. When I was a kid, that's just the way it was. When I was growing up, North Carolina was pretty traditional. Boys and girls went on the traditional dates and it was all very laid out like that. It was all just assumed, this whole life was assumed for you.

Maybe the only thing my parents knew was that I never fit into that mold. I never fit into anybody's mold.

My mom, she's made all kinds of comments. She's been all over the map with it. "It's not normal," she's said that, "It's not normal." "Gay people aren't normal." My favorite one was, "We don't care if you sleep with her or not." That was my favorite one. It was like, "Sleep with her if you want to, we don't care, but we're not going to pay attention to it either." I mean that was really weird comment. The other thing was they really wanted me to date somebody who was class, professional. I had a major relationship with a woman who was in recovery from serious drugs. I used to tell them things about it that probably scared them half to death.

I got called a few names sometimes, at home. But at school, when I was growing up, I got teased a lot. I didn't have a lot of problems with dyke or people yelling at me like that. These kids on the school bus used to call me Mars, because I would space out if I was intimidated. I actually had to have my mom take me to school because I developed stomach problems. I was the kid, that if you were a bully, I was an aha-bully-her kind of kid.

At my last job I worked at a school for kids who were severely disabled. At first, I didn't let anybody know that I was gay, because I felt like I was protecting myself. Then, when I did let people know, I felt like I got a lot of backlash. On one hand, I think there were people who really didn't approve of people being gay. And then, on the other hand, there were people who didn't approve of people being gay who wouldn't let you know right off from the beginning, because there were quite a few lesbians who worked there, especially in managerial positions. Around here, in the area that I live in, it's pretty closeted. I don't worry about it too much. I go out with my friend and we look pretty lesbian I think, I don't know. She's sort soft-butuh looking and I'm kind of femme looking, and sometimes we go out and feel like people are making comments, or they're making indirect comments, or they're looking at you. Sometimes it's possible to get kind of paranoid, to feel like there's an underlying reason. I had a problem with my neighbor and the apartment manager really gave me a hard time about it. Part of me felt that he didn't like me because I'm a lesbian. But then on the other hand, there seems to be a pretty visible lesbian population in Bucks County. I think a lot of people are getting used to it and they just accept it. Most of the straight people I'm close to accept lesbians. I know that they have that attitude. Then there are people I have to deal with doctors, mental health and whatever. I just let them know, and I don't worry about it. Most people I've found, in professional capacities like that, they're fine, they don't give me a hard time. Sometimes they don't get it. But they don't give me a hard time either. Like my therapist, I don't even know how many lesbians she's treated in her life. It seems it's mostly neutral. I don't get a lot of hostility. The only hostility you get is the real macho Pennsylvania dudes; the truck driving kind of red-neck kind of guys. But it almost seems it's more towards women and what they don't want to see. They don't want to see a woman who's loud, is assertive, and who isn't going to bow to a guy. It's not really [directed] towards homosexuals, per se. I feel there are men who want to boss women around. The majority of gay men that I know ignore you. You're just ignored as a population; you're just ignored. We get called *girls* a lot. That I think is just hysterical. Because we'll go out and they say, "Hi girls, how're you doing?" And here we are, I'm 33 and it's not like we're teenagers. What would it be like if I was out with a guy. Would it be "Oh, hi girls?"

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

The sexual abuse was something that I suspected for along time, but I only had just remembered it to know for sure that it happened, this past January. What I know for sure is that it was my father. I know it occurred when I was six, because I remembered that specifically. I am fairly certain that it happened for a good period of time around that age, 5 to 7 or something like that. What triggered my memory is that my sister committed suicide. She was a person, who even my therapist said, "I can't believe she committed suicide." I mean here was a girl who supposedly had it all on the ball. Had it all going for her. She had a prestigious degree from a university. She'd done very well in everything she had tried. She was pretty. She had all this going on for her.

I was first hospitalized for depression when I was 20. I actually dropped out of school and as soon as I dropped out, what happened was I went to the EAP [Employee Assistance Program] at my father's company, and they sent me to a psychiatrist who immediately sent me to hospital. They said I was in really bad shape, and was going to need long-term, intensive help. It all happened really quickly. I was in school; I had been suffering from depression for years, and it wasn't a secret; I had been going to see a counselor. I don't know what triggered it, but I started having these really intense nightmares. They weren't about sexual abuse. The problem that I was having initially was that I thought I was seeing ghosts. I called my mother from school and I said, "I've got to come home." My parents had just moved houses, and she asked if I would hold on for a couple of weeks, then she'll be there, and we'll sort it out. Well, I said no, I can't hold on. I came home and when I went into hospital, the psychiatrist called her and told her I had to be in the hospital; my mother was furious with me. I knew then, before I came home. I said to myself, I've got to know; there's something here I've got to know. I'm not going to be able to change whatever is, but I need to know what it is.

I've been diagnosed with everything, except for schizophrenia; well not everything, but I've been diagnosed with a lot things. I asked the psychiatrist "Are you thinking that I have multiple personality disorder?" She said "Yeah." And I'm like okay. She said, "Is that all you want to know?" "Yeah, I wanted to know what you're diagnosing me as." There are fashionable diagnoses, or something like that. They like to diagnose certain things at certain times. At that particular time, it was the 90s. I was living in this residential program, and I had a roommate who was going to the Psychoanalytic Institute in Philly when it was opened; she was going through full-blown treatment, for full-blown multiple personality disorder. She had been through all this and she would come home and change personalities, and the whole thing. I guess the whole trend of that was starting when I was leaving school. I saw a show on television about it. I saw it and I was like, oh my God; it just really disturbed me. I called and said I have to talk to you about this, will you talk to me about this. What's wrong with me? All I knew was I was depressed. When I was in the hospital, I was in this unit where everyone was psychotic anyway, so who knew what was going on. Time was kind of meaningless in that kind of environment.

The thing is that I went through the mental health system for 10 years, and I brought the abuse up. Abuse is the sort of thing that they don't want to talk about, or they don't want to believe you. I was told so many times that just because you're saying this, or it's happening to you now doesn't necessarily mean this happened in the past. I was in a program that was run by the State of New Jersey; it was a team: a psychiatrist, a clinical social worker, case managers, and nurses. I said this happened. And I still don't know whether they think it actually happened.

Sometimes I think there were psychiatrists who thought that it had happened, but they didn't want to talk to me about it.

I'm just surprised at how people are not direct about childhood abuse. Even when I was in the hospital, this last time, and I was saying I'm having these very specific memories, and I went in the hospital and I said, "I'm really not sure if I'm making this up, but it seems real." I don't want to say something that's not true, even though I've made allegations in the past. I even accused my father of it directly. The counselors all say "You don't have to talk about it, you don't have to talk about it if you don't feel comfortable. You don't have to talk about it." They're being sensitive and they're being nice. But I got to the point where I see an individual therapist who I have, and I like, and have a good relationships towards. And then I got to the point where that's what's left to talk about. But she's like, well you don't have to talk about it until you're ready. It just seems like it's still the big taboo. That's all I can really tell you. I have memories where I know it definitely happened. It's a very weird thing to think about because, for me the image of my father, is that he's a very respectable man. And he's not a sleazy guy. He doesn't even seem to be the kind of person who would victimize anyone; he's usually a sympathetic person, if someone's ill, or if people are going through tragic circumstances, he is very sympathetic. The only thing I can relate to with him is that it is a power thing. A power thing and maybe a sex thing, like with my mother maybe. When I was growing up my mother was kind of tight, tense. I can kind of understand her situation, from her perspective. They emigrated, and maybe there was part of her that said I should go back to England. Go back to England to do something about what's going on. Because I really feel that she knew what was going on, it was almost as if she didn't have the support. She seemed that she was the kind of person who would be very, very ashamed. Her growing up, her whole history I know really well. She grew up in a family of seven kids and she was a major baby sitter for all her younger siblings, and she had an alcoholic father, and a mother who was sort of trying to do her best. There's this huge amount of shame attached to it, where it's like we should have done better. I should have gone back, but what was there to go back to? And there's this whole thing that everybody wanted to totally, totally, totally bury.

The first time I mentioned my sexual abuse, the psychiatrists and social workers, weren't validating my feelings. The first time was at the hospital in Summit, I was probably about 25. The only thing they had to say was, "That's a very powerful accusation." I said, that my dad had not denied it. He had not said, "I didn't do it." He said, "You can't say that." That was how he kind of denied it. I remember exactly what he said. He said, "You can say a lot of things about me, but you can't say that I molested you." He said that it's a really horrible, disgusting thing to say.

Strategies I used to manage my emotions

I drank. After Stephanie died, I started drinking pretty heavily. That continued for a couple of years I did that. I did that for maybe three years. I also smoked pot, but when I got a little more serious about college, and declared a major and all that, I cut down. But I did experiment with PCP and mescaline. It was not a good thing for me. It was kind of detaching. It was almost more of a social thing. It was weird, a lot of people thought that I was a person who did a lot of LSD, which I didn't ever. I don't know what it was about me, maybe the way I dressed, or I had really long hair, or my personality. It was almost like a social thing at school.

Some people's groups are really heavily into certain kinds of things, and a lot of the people I knew occasionally did hallucinogenic things.

After [Stephanie] died, I had a couple of incidents where I burned myself just around that time. Sometimes I've had times when I've had urges to cut myself. I've had times, extremely stressful times when I've taken knives out, and almost brandished them. Like, oh look what I'm going to do sort of thing. But I've not really done that.

You can see I'm pretty overweight. When I started therapy when I was hospitalized, when I was 20, I was 140 pounds. I started counseling therapy when I was 16, I was 130 pounds. I can't get through a day without sugar. I almost I think I replaced alcohol with sugar. I always liked sugar though: sugar and chocolate. I don't like alcohol anymore. It doesn't make me feel good and I feel depressed the next day.

Looking back on my orientation, abuse, and mental health treatment

My mother wasn't always very nice. Emotional abuse came more in just sort of the confusion, the not being very clear. It scared me a lot in treatment, that there would be a lot of confusion between my orientation and the abuse. I was afraid. There are all kinds of things people can say why you are gay. When I came out to my mother, she told me it was because I was bitter about men. That was her first reaction. And the only way I could make her come around was by saying, "Look, I could be killed for this," "People will take my job," and bring out these really extreme things to make her sympathetic. So I think if I wasn't abused, it might have been less scary, and I would have maybe felt less influenced by the power of men.

But then, on the other hand, I felt maybe I survived because of being a lesbian. All I know is, it definitely should have been easier to come out. And I don't know really what the connection is. I attributed it to moving, but then again, part of the reason we moved was because my father had a nervous break down, and had stopped working for 6 months. Part of the deal to start working again was moving. When I got sick, he started telling me that he was having paranoid delusions. He thought people at work were talking about him, saying things about him, that they didn't like him. In a sense, they were out to get him, stuff like that.

When my sister was 20, she reported having been raped when she was 18. She called my mother. [My father] had the breakdown. I was 13, and then we had to move. She called my mother and said the guy who took her to the prom had raped her. This supposedly was the basis for her depression. I don't know, but supposedly the thing that triggered my dad's breakdown was something going wrong at work. I think it would have been a lot easier for me to come out if things in my family had not been so confusing. It would have been safer, to just be who I was and not feel like I have to fight everything off or worry about how I'd be perceived.

I know there's not a lot of research on this topic, and I really hope that this would be something that would get out there, that a lot of therapists would read, because there are a lot of therapists who don't know very much about lesbians and homosexuality. Most therapists I've met don't have anything against it; they're not judging, but they just don't have any idea; or they don't have any education. And you don't want to go to a therapist and have to educate them, or I would hope that people wouldn't have to spend a lot of time in therapy, and that's time wasted.

Jasmine

The story of my family

My mom is a prescription drug addict, and so it was a very crazy childhood. My mom was high a lot. My sister took drugs. My brother dealt drugs. It was just fully dysfunctional until this day. I don't know how I survived it, but I think, because I was able to go into fantasy a lot and dissociate and be in my own little world; that's what allowed me to survive. There were no connections between people; healthy communication, there was none.

It was very stressful, and lots of anger, lots of rage. My mother was from an alcoholic family. She was abused by a boarder that they had in the house; she never talked about it, but [told] me later. My mom was very troubled and never went into therapy. She just continued to take drugs until this day to get through it. She never took responsibility for her healing or her life. I feel like wow, even though this is a small, little world that I live in, it's still better than her world, but I want a lot more than what I have now. I don't want to base my stuff on her.

My parents divorced when I was 8. My [biological] father really wasn't in my life. I can count on one hand how many times he took me out. I would go to his house and I would try to save him, because he was alcoholic. I was 11 years old and I already knew what Al-Anon was. He really wasn't in my life at all. That's why I don't understand how it happened. He didn't try to be closer to me, when I got older. It was just like you don't exist. That's how it was when I think back at it. I remember a Thanksgiving that my sister had him at her house. I was stripping then, I was about 22, and I walked in. I was in some kind of leather stripper outfit, and here I am a baby, 22-23, god knows how I must have looked; and yet I was really this baby inside. I remember how he stood in a corner, sat in a corner the whole time, and didn't even say hello to me. I always sensed there was something a little too weird. I never did anything to him; why would he treat me like this? My sister said he's sick, and he's like this to everyone, which he sort of was. After all those years of not drinking, he became very reclusive. I wonder if he remembered doing that ... abusing me?

I started to do drugs when I turned 15. Before 15, I was really a good kid. I was an A student, Drama Club, and kept myself out of the house by being so involved in school. When I became 15 or 16, I just started hanging out with my friends and taking drugs, and living a promiscuous life style. I don't know how many men I was with from the age of 16 to 18. The rest of my life has been sort of celibate, like all or nothing type of thing. In my late teens is when I went to bed with 30 guys in those 2 years. I just kept having sex. And my sister dealt into prostitution as well, so we think something probably happened to her as well, but she hasn't owned it.

I remember my father always protecting me. My brother used to totally tease me, and [pester] me when I was little, and my father just going after him, yelling at him, screaming. When he started drinking, he got abusive, physically to my mom, but she got out early enough that I didn't see a lot of it. I feel like my father was a very genteel kind of soul, and very smart, very, very smart and couldn't channel it anywhere. My mother married him on the rebound and didn't really love him. The alcohol changed him and I think a lot of whatever happened to me happened because of the alcohol and not because he wanted to hurt me. I know enough about him, the little time I spent with him, and what I remember was that he was not bad, and he was not really evil, it wasn't intentional. It wasn't you know ... he fucked up. My father committed

suicide in 1991; that same year that I found out, 13 years ago, I was 27. I just turned 40 so I'm not really so young.

Experiencing coming out and internalized homophobia

When I first became attracted to [girls], I was very young, and that was probably in grade school. But I think I totally repressed it. I was attracted on some sexual level, but I just felt closer to women. The way I was with men was just always performing for them. I was trying to seduce men, at a very early age. But I think that the deeper feeling I felt was with women, at a very early age. But I totally, totally repressed it where I sort of went against the mark, and I started not liking women at all, and being friends with men, like befriending men more.

When I got out of college, my roommate and I moved in together. I was about 21 when I started acknowledging my bisexual feelings, but I didn't act on them until a year later. And then it was basically just experimenting with women. I think the initial attraction was to women's bodies. Then I started acting on it and sort of dating women; I say sort of because I didn't really commit to it, I was just going to clubs and bars and picking up women and just being promiscuous. I [didn't start] dating women [until] my mid to late thirties. In my early twenties I was just acting out, but that's what I did with men too. I just acted out with sex, and it really had to do with the incest. So I wasn't really acknowledging the deeper feelings, I was just lusting.

My first experience coming out was when I was 22. My roommate and I were very, very close, but we weren't lovers. I was screwing around with every guy in college, [and so was she]. I put an ad in the Voice, and I get all these responses from bisexual girls, and my roommate found [them] threw them all over the room and moved out on me, and said that I had betrayed her by not telling her that I was bisexual. Of course she ended up being gay. So it was traumatic because I didn't tell her, and she was my best friend. I didn't want to tell her. I wanted it to remain a secret. Then she abandoned me, and then she left me. So it was really hard.

Trying to figure out my sexual orientation was very confusing for me. Because I did feel like I liked women more than men, but I also felt that I wasn't being accepted by the lesbian community. The only mentors I have or know of as lesbians, were these butch gym teachers that I had, and I was always very feminine looking, so the community per se rejected me. They said, "Oh you know, you're just going to abandon us, and you're not really gay." So I was not trusting my heart feelings then. And I was feeling that it's probably just a phase. But I knew inside too that I wanted to delve deeper in it. But I was in and out of the closet for years, for years and years and years, my 20s and 30s.

After I sort of came out to myself, as a bisexual I started dancing, stripping, dancing topless, almost as if I was trying to talk it out of myself. I'm able to interact with men, but only as a seductress. And only in a power-control thing, where I am on a stage, they cannot get near me, and I am seducing them. But I was also out during those times, too. I was sort of seeing this girl, I remember, and she used to come see me dance, but I was so confused. When I was dancing, I was not dating. I was not having sex at all. It was a release to dance and that was my sex, because I love dance, and I've always loved dance. When I look back at it now, that was definitely my way to be intimate with men. Now I'm in a dilemma in therapy because I do want to conjugate [sic] with men. I do want to have healthy relationships with men. I like men a lot. I feel like that they fill a void in me, because I didn't really have a father growing up. He was alcoholic; he was not around, so I want to make amends with men. Just this past Tuesday, I went into [a strip club] and asked if they need a dancer. I still feel that's my only way to relate.

My half-sister is bi as well. I came out to her first, when I was in my late twenties. We went to Fire Island together. But she wasn't close enough to my mom yet. My mom had put her up for adoption and she found my mom and we ended up like totally clicking and becoming best friends almost. She was the first one I told and that was in my late twenties actually. My brother said, "What the fuck happened? You were always so into guys." He was defensive about it and doesn't understand it. And doesn't really want to understand it. But I give him what he wants too, and so I tell him that I'm not sure, I'm not really gay, and maybe if I found the right guy. I'm still am in denial about it. I still have homophobia. And my sister, I give her the same spiel, too. My sister's cool she's like, "Jasmine, whatever makes you happy." My mother and sister, all the women in my life have always ... were never ashamed to say, "I hate men." Even though they're with men. I was constantly conditioned with that.

I guess when I had a relationship with my first girlfriend, I came out to my family. I might have told my mom in my mid-thirties, even before I started dating her, that I was bisexual, and that I could be lesbian. My mother was like whatever makes you happy. If a woman comes along and you fall in love with her, and she falls in love with you, fine. So she was very cool about it. My mom always had gay friends and she was very cool. I wasn't really scared about that. And now it's the same thing, but of course she still says, and I still say even though I basically have been with women only, for a very long time, that I still think a man's going to come. Like sort of knock on my door and just be there for me. I know it has something to do with thinking my father is coming back for me. I have a therapist but we don't get into the deep incest stuff, and I think I really need to do that.

So during that time when I was recuperating and healing, I was integrating more of the bisexuality into myself. I wasn't really dating or anything. I was doing a lot of spiritual work. So I came out as a bisexual at these retreats but I was still feeling that man is there for me. There is going to be a man for me that's going to just take me off on his horse.

Experiencing internalized homophobia and homoprejudice

The way I view myself, as a lesbian living in a hetero world, is that I don't test myself. I might challenge myself daily when I walk outside; I have an image of myself as a stronger woman that doesn't need a man. But I think that's my warrior's nature, and I've always been a warrior, and thinking of myself as one. But I think it goes hand in hand with the gay woman pride. I'm a very loving person so I don't try to think of myself as just gay, but I try to communicate and converse with everybody. In this neighborhood there are some gay people around here; I befriended this gay guy in the building. But it's safer [in this neighborhood] and it makes me be able to hide more. Whereas, if I lived in the city, I think I would be challenged more to be out more, as a gay woman; maybe, maybe not. But here I know that I can still sort of not have to be out as much.

I do experience negative feedback. I mean on and off a lot, till this day. The pizza guy down the street, who I know since I'm 16, the other day he came out and goes, I think it's disgusting, you know women being with women. And he knows I am. So that really hurt me because I consider him a friend. I mean I know him for along time. So I get it here and there, and it's like "Oh, so do you think it's because you got raped?" I'm also a rape survivor, and they say that's probably the reason. And "Your probably really not gay," which is goes on in my head, and the reason I'm gay is cause I got raped. My father raped me, and my brother used to emotionally abuse me. So I'm still not grounded in it at 40.

I still have those questions all the time. There's still that dilemma and confusion. I go back and forth. One day I'm gay, and another day I'm doubting it. But it goes hand in hand with the incest. It's stressful, I feel I should know who I am, especially at my age. I have done so much soul searching, and I've been to many workshops. I'm basically a counselor without the degrees, on some level. But I've done so much work. I still don't know. It's still a journey.

Most of my friends are gay, so I am out in the community. I have been out in the community since I'm about twenty-seven. So I have been out, but inside what goes on is that I'm also living here outside of the city and I still can play it straight. But I'm in the city every day, and then when I'm in the city I'm myself, and myself is I don't know I guess. I still don't want to label myself as lesbian. And I don't want to label myself as bi either. I don't want to label myself. I just want to be me, and follow my heart, and my heart knows exactly what it needs. I just hate the labels because then it's like labeling yourself—well I'm an incest survivor, and I'm a victim, and I just hate labels, but it confuses me. I want to be just gay. I want to just be straight. I want to be bi. I've been thinking it's safer not to label myself maybe. But maybe that's not true. Maybe I just want to put myself in a box so I belong somewhere.

Experiencing childhood sexual abuse

I had body memories [of my father fondling and touching me], and I couldn't get out of bed for a year, in 1991; that was only 13 years ago. My father committed suicide, and that's when the incest memories came, after he died. I've been in a hellish kind of life for 13 years, trying to figure out and trying to put the pieces together. What I have found and pretty much, pretty much believe in, not a hundred percent, that it happened when I was about 3 or 4. There was a very good chance that my father was the perpetrator; he fondled and touched me. I don't remember much of him, but what I do remember was I had this love for him, that I continue to have until this day, which is just so deep. It's such a deep love. I remember being very, very close to him at a very young age and screaming and crying when he went to work. I found out about it from body memories, and I'm not sure, but this is what I was feeling when I was in bed, with these body memories and couldn't get out of bed. I was helpless. I was like a baby. With these body memories, I would also smell vodka, and my father drank. So I would have the sense of that smell, and that he was coming into the room in the nighttime, in my crib and touching me. It happened when I was, I say 3, but it could have been before 3.

I was raped when I was 15. I was doing heavy-duty drugs. I turned from drama student, honor student, child actress/model when I was a little girl, perfectionistic, and anorexic/bulimic type in Junior High. I got into high school and went to the extreme opposite. I started taking drugs, Quaaludes, Tuinols, angel dust, everything, the whole gamut except for heroine. And coke, I really didn't like. But I got in with the wrong crowd. I guess the crowd was like my family. I started going to clubs; I was so desperately looking for love, and a boyfriend, per se.

[One day] I was given a mickey [e.g., GHB] in my drink or something; I never drank alcohol, but in my seltzer. These eight guys from Brooklyn took me out of the club, and they took me into Bedford Stuyvesant, and they left me in an alleyway. They robbed me. I was in a one-piece spandex outfit and when I woke up, the top was down, so I don't know if they raped me or not. I was in a stupor from all the drugs, and disconnected from my body and I started walking down this block. I walked to the corner and it was all black people and they looked at me, and they were laughing. I said, "I need to get a cab, I was just raped." They said, "Girl, you ain't gonna get no cab comin' in here in this neighborhood." So I stuck my finger out, and an

older black man picked me up in a station wagon, a grandfather type. I started crying hysterically, and saying, "I just got raped, please help me get back into the city," and he goes "Oh dear, get in the car." He took me to a parking lot and locked the doors and took a knife to my throat. He told me if I don't do what he says, he was going to kill me. So he raped me. He sexually ... he fucked me, vaginally, in the car. I thought he was a nice old man. But he was drunk. He was drunk as well. And I was scared of him, but he was so drunk that I knew that he wasn't going to hurt me. And he raped me. And it happened real quick. Then I got him to drive me into the city to the club I was at. I was actually dating the owner of this club so I went into the club; I was in shock. This whole thing is like one big dream. I ran into the club screaming, crying, "Oh my god, I just got raped!" I told the guy to stay in the car; he was trying to befriend me after and I was playing along and saying, "I want you to meet my brother, he works at this club; just wait here for five minutes, I'll be right back." So all the bouncers got him, they took him out of the car, and they beat him up badly. The cops came and stuff but I never prosecuted. My mother said they're going to make you look like the whore, and that you caused this and blah, blah, blah, and that was the end of my life. After that night, I dropped out of high school. I ended up taking my equivalency and going to college, but that really was the ending of my life. 14 years later, I found out about the incest and how everything is connected, because he was an older man. I always thought of the station wagon, as the family man and drunk, like my dad. There are too many things that connected, that make this not real. I just don't understand why I wasn't aware of it until after he died.

But this definitely happened. It's more concrete, whereas the body memories is like I don't know. And then therapists also say, well that maybe it's fantasy that this happened; there's a special relationship. I've heard therapists say that to me. I don't think of my rape as child sexual abuse because I was trying to be older and I didn't think I was a child at that age, I did not look like a child.

Some effects of the abuse

I was not able to hold down a job, since I was stripping, which has been 20 years, a very long time. I'm on disability, still. Which is about 5 to 6 years I'm on that. I cannot function basically. Basically, I can't hold down a job. Basically during the day, I'm so dissociated I can't get out of the house. Dissociation's been a big thing for a long, long time. I mean I'm a trillion times better than I was 5 years ago. Ten years ago I was waking up at 5 in the afternoon, and up all night and I couldn't sleep. I would stay awake at night and walk the streets, go on the subways, and ride the subways, in the middle of the night.

I was sleeping all day and dissociated at night and feeling like I was living in hell. So now I only have my incest days, where all the days are like total hell. I call them my incest days, when I feel a memory or something. But, thank God maybe they come once a month, whereas, 10 years ago, it was every single day. And I couldn't go into therapy even, I was so out of it. I didn't feel at all like I was in my body. I also worked a lot on past life issues and stuff. I felt like I was walking in a dream; that I was here, but I wasn't here. I worked through a lot of past life stuff, but, for 10 years, I wasn't here and I don't know what happened to my 30s. I go through so much depression. I had gone to so much therapy; I'm 40 years old and I really don't have a career, and I really don't have anything that I thought I would have by my age. I identify with a 28-year-old now, because that's where I am in my life. I don't know what happened to my thirties. It's like I slept. It's like I was sleeping. I cry about it always in therapy because I wasn't

here. Where was I? It's really hard to integrate all that. So now I feel I'm healthy enough where I can begin a career. I can start doing the dreams I just forgot about during this whole incest recovery, which was basically a death, a death for me.

I don't know how I survived it; when I look back, I was so disoriented. I was able to meditate for hours after I woke up, without eating, and that was used for meditating; that was used to center myself because I knew that I wasn't here. I was here, but I wasn't here. The eating just made me feel so much worse when I would eat. It would ground me here, and I would feel, oh my god I'm in hell. It was horrible, I just want to write about it one day, but I don't have words for it. It was just blackness. The eating was done when it was late enough and quiet enough, that's when I was able to eat; and I was alone. This corner of the room is where I used to live. This was my little corner; I did a lot of healing in this room, and I did a lot of channeling and stuff. Basically what saved me was my ability to learn about energy. I was doing Reiki then, and learning Reiki, and any kind of healing work. I was reading a lot and doing a lot of healing work.

I wrote a play, and I worked on it for 4 years, day and night, from like 25 to 28. When I moved here, I burned it. My therapist said that was like a suicide. And there were 72 songs; it was all about my resurrection and that was supposed to be my career and my passion and my dream and what I wanted for myself when I was child, to be a successful playwright. It came to me, it came through me; it just came through me and I threw it out. I threw all my writing out. And I kept on saying all I need is the minimal stuff and I will turn into this phoenix from letting go all of my all my old stuff. I felt like I had this Jesus Christ thing, like I was Christ. I still feel we are all of us God. But I really felt the grandiosity of it and that I would be the savior of the world. It felt like hallucinations a lot. But, at the same time, I felt there was communication, too. I also felt my father's spirit pushing me always to acknowledge the incest.

Emotional connections between orientation and my abuse

The thing is that I don't believe I would be gay, probably. Well I have this fantasy, if I had a good daddy, I wouldn't be. But I have to think about it also, if I think about it more deeply and then think about how I did feel attraction at a very early age, and appreciate women's bodies so much; I don't think that has to do with my father but I think I've connected it so inside that I almost blame him for it. Like something's wrong with being gay, again that homophobia, and he did it to me.

Until this day, I'm not confused about the incest so much, but more about not owning my sexuality or sexualness; and how hard it is for me to stay present in sex; how I've either been celibate or promiscuous, there hasn't been any in between. My long-term relationship ended about a year ago, and I'm just about okay, I can date again. I have so many problems it could be a topic for another hour, me still wanting to seduce, being the aggressor on some level, and then feeling like I'm getting abused during sex, not being healed for me, and wondering if it will ever be healed for me. Not being able to have sex without a joint, without smoking or feeling comfortable with it and that it's two extremes. Feeling that I am the whore, or I am the nun. So you know the incest and the gayness being totally black and white for me. And maybe that is why perhaps I'm bi, because there is that black and white there. There is that middle ground. And thinking whether I'm in reality or fantasy in my life. Am I fantasizing still about that white knight in shining armor coming, whether it be a man or a woman. Is that a fantasy for me still, am I still 3 years old? I have grown on many levels emotionally, but I still feel the time of my

incest; I'm still there, inside, and I think that I'll always be there and can I get beyond it? I still question. Because I still do things. My therapist says I don't want to grow up. But of course, I feel like I do because I've always dreamed of having a career, and of loving my career, that's so important to me. So I don't know about me not wanting to. I think it's more of like, can I? I still go through days of baby talk all day, and regressing and wanting to stay curled up. I will go into that baby talk and talk to Izzy like I'm 3 years old. So I'm still really disjointed in a lot of different ways that I've worked on integrating for myself, but I don't have a helpful therapy. I think I've integrated on an adult level, but the 3-, 4-, 5-, 6-, 7-, 8 year olds, they're still in me and they're still acting out inside.

Summary.

The subsection Profiles comprised a first person account of each woman's experience of childhood sexual abuse. Each account represented a distillation of interview transactions between the participant and myself. The subsection that follows, Analysis of Profiles, is an in-depth study of those accounts, and includes my personal experience in the interpretive process.