



SECRET IDENTITY

Marriage is full of unknowns but one of the most shocking ones is finding out your spouse is gay. By EMILIE DINGFELD

ANNIE TULK'S LIFE WAS THE KIND PEOPLE ENVY: AT 18, she married her high school sweetheart, a man who was kind, affectionate and a loving father to their two children. The couple was the best of friends and had a great sex life, too. Nothing seemed amiss until, after two decades of marriage, she found her husband sitting at the dining room table, distraught. "What's bothering you?" she asked. "It will pass," he answered. "What will pass?" Tulk prodded. Her husband responded: "I'm gay."

"I was devastated," says Tulk, a psychotherapist in Mississauga, Ont. "We were such a demonstrably affectionate, happy family. If my husband was coming out, so was I. I'd been a wife for almost 24 years, so who was I now?"

While Tulk felt alone, she's not. A union between a straight spouse and one who is gay, lesbian or bisexual—also referred to as a mixed-orientation marriage (MOM)—is estimated to affect approximately two million American marriages (Canadian statistics are not yet available). It's nothing new, either. Oscar Wilde's marriage to Constance was turned upside down when the writer was jailed in 1895 for his homosexuality, which was a criminal offence at the time in Britain.

Fast-forward to 2015, and there are several high-profile people changing sexual gears—and they're not shy about it: J.Crew president and executive creative director Jenna Lyons separated from her husband of nine years in 2011 and fell in love with family friend Courtney Crangi; and *Orange Is the New Black* writer Lauren Morelli split from her husband of two years and pursued a relationship with *OITNB* actor Samira Wiley (she recounted her "awakening" in an article for mic.com). Now-retired basketball player Jason Collins was the first-ever American professional athlete to come out; in his 2013 *Sports Illustrated* article, he explained: "I thought I had to live a certain way.... I kept telling myself the sky was red, but I always knew it was blue." And actor/activist Maria Bello came out to the world as a "whatever" when she published a piece in *The New York Times* detailing her relationship with her best friend, Clare. When Bello told her son, Jackson, that she was romantically involved with a woman, he responded: "Mom, love is love, whatever you are," she wrote.

Outsiders often criticize the straight spouse for being in the dark, but the harbingers are often not what the media portrays ("He's so handsome *and* dresses well. He must be gay"). "Sure, you can usually look back and find some little sign," says Tulk,

61, who co-founded the Straight-Forward support group and wrote a book called *Annie's Story*. "But when you don't have that knowledge, you don't see it—absolutely not."

The ultimate shock is the fact that a large portion of gay spouses weren't clear on their sexual orientation either: According to a 2002 study on MOMs, 38 per cent of the male study subjects didn't know they were gay before marriage. The reasons why people might suppress their true feelings range from fear of rejection to pressure to conform to religious ideals. One isolated instance is seen in TLC's controversial new show *My Husband's Not Gay*, which explores Mormon men in Utah who don't identify as gay, despite being attracted to men.

The thing is, these men are often just as torn up as their wives are—they might lose their home, their families, the life they love. Steven, *53, is quick to defend men who come out to their wives. "A lot of women, I think, have this idea where they say, 'Well, that's great. You've come out, congratulations,'" he says, much like how Julianne Moore's character seemed in the film *Far from Heaven*. He was in that precise situation 10 years ago, when his marriage ended: He had begun dating his wife in high school ("It was love at first sight," he recalls) and only started questioning his orientation several years into the marriage. "[Many of] these men don't see themselves as being gay or hidden gay. They're in love with their wife and are often still sexually active with them.... But they have these other attractions going on. So it is not black and white."

And the same goes for men whose wives come out as lesbian or bisexual. In the Golden Globe-winning show *Transparent*, the main character's daughter, Sarah, has an affair with her college girlfriend behind her husband's back. "You're not allowed to do this, you know," her husband says. "I don't know how not to," Sarah responds. University of Utah professor Lisa Diamond attempts to explain this conundrum with her book, *Sexual Fluidity*, which theorizes that female sexuality ebbs and flows over the course of one's life.

Navigating a MOM becomes infinitely more complicated when there are children involved. Joan, *48, was determined to be the rock for her two young kids when her husband of almost 15 years came out. She credits meditation with helping her

dig deep, ultimately deciding to co-parent and keep the family together for as long as possible, while telling their children the truth. "Whenever I've felt anger toward him, it's been softened by my understanding and compassion," she says. "Gay individuals marry a straight partner they love because they want a normal family life, but their fear of being judged by society leads them to make this choice." Though Joan's husband promptly moved out, they convene regularly for dinner and attend school and sports events together. "It's confusing to some people—are they together or are they not together?" she says. "I shield myself from what other people think. What's important is what's good for all of us here, myself included."

Most MOMs end in separation or divorce, but some couples stay together—often because of financial dependence or to raise young children. Yet others choose this path because their relationship is still pleasurable, and many times that's due to the fact that one spouse identifies as bisexual rather than gay or lesbian. "Bisexuality is different," says Carlyle Jansen, founder of Good for Her, a sex education shop in Toronto, and a counsellor for couples with sexual issues. "A lot of people think that means you need to have a partner of each gender.... I know lots of bisexual people who want to be monogamous. If they break up, they might end up with someone of the opposite sex to their partner. More and more partnerships are now having open relationships, straight, queer, bi.... Hollywood gives you one version of what a family is supposed to look like and there are many other options."

Dr. Christian Jordal, a therapist in Philadelphia who did his thesis on MOMs, agrees. "I advocate that couples can stay together if they elect to do that," he says, noting that doing so comes with a period of mourning for the straight spouse. "I've heard of couples who stay together for upward of 30 years, sometimes with an open marriage on one side." Some couples bring a third person into their relationship as a partner and/or a sexual partner, he adds. Not unlike the fictitious power couple Frank and Claire Underwood in Netflix's *House of Cards*.

Since gay marriage was legalized in Canada in 2005, the number of same-sex marriages tripled between the census period of 2006 and 2011. Perhaps this is a sign that as sexuality is further explored and accepted, the instances of sexual repression will decrease and with that, so will the shame and stigma experienced by all parties involved. Steven recalls a time when he told a gay man about his marriage and his son. The man asked, "When did you realize you had made a mistake?" Steven was floored. "What do you mean? I had a loving marriage with a beautiful wife and a beautiful son—that's not a mistake."

Tulk wouldn't change a thing, either: "People come into our lives for a reason, a season or a lifetime. You can't be attached to the outcome. Just love, live whatever and enjoy it." □

“Gay individuals marry a straight partner they love because they want a normal family life, but their fear of being judged by society leads them to make this choice.”

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARTHUR BELEBEAU/TRUNK ARCHIVE

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED