



## Not Love, Actually

The Chevy Chase woman had the perfect marriage—except for one thing

**I met my husband-to-be** when we were both students at Middlebury College in Vermont and he asked me to be his lab partner. I used to joke that I was the ugliest and therefore the smartest girl in the class, and that's why he chose me. At the time, I never guessed the truth.

He was good-looking, intelligent, had a great sense of humor, and we became friends. His family was from San Francisco high society. His aunt's house in the Pacific Heights neighborhood was the set for a Fred Astaire movie. Not the world I was from—I was a Foreign Service brat. My mother was British; my father, from upstate New York, the son of Italian immigrants. They met in London during World War II and married in Paris in 1947. Theirs was quite a love story.

I was born in Nuremberg. My father was in the Army, working at the trials,

and later he joined the Foreign Service. I grew up in Athens and Rome and went to high school in Vienna. As a child, I spoke German, Greek and Italian. I liked that life, and Europe was very safe in those days. When I was in high school, my parents thought nothing of letting me go out with friends in Vienna and come home at midnight by myself.

My freshman year of college I attended the University of Maryland in Munich, but when my father was posted to the Philippines, I transferred to Middlebury. I graduated in 1970, the spring Kent State happened.

It was a time of great upheaval, but a lot of social attitudes had not yet changed. When I went to visit my parents in Manila in the summer of 1968, my mother cried when I got off the plane because I'd gotten so heavy. It was her opinion that I'd

never get married and never have a good job because of my weight. That summer, right nearby, the Vietnam War was raging. It was the year of the Democratic Convention, of Martin Luther King Jr. and RFK, the riots in Paris and the Soviet invasion of Prague, and yet my parents were focused on my physical being.

Looking at photos of myself from then, I looked OK. But they put me on a strict diet, with pills—amphetamines—and got me contact lenses, dental work and bought me new clothes. When I came back from Manila, my hair was bleached from the sun; I must have looked fantastic. My lab partner took one look at me and asked me out.

We got engaged in January 1970. I realized that our intimate relationship wasn't like that of other couples I knew, but I didn't have anything to compare it



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## story of my life

to. He was my first. He'd hold my hand when we walked places, and we were very good friends. But was I madly in love with him? Probably not. Did I think I'd never get married? Probably so. We married in 1971—June bride, the whole thing—and went to Europe on the *QE2*.

We had some good times. We traveled around the world, and every year we went to Bermuda. But he'd never touch me. I don't believe my parents suspected he was gay, but unfortunately they both died young and I can't ask them. My husband and my mother were very close. I have a memory of being with my parents in Sicily, in this beautiful small town, and seeing my mother and my husband walking up ahead, peering into the windows of antique shops. Hindsight is so very clear.

By this time, I had a brilliant job. I worked for the State Department for 33 years and became director of management policy and got lots of accolades and awards, including one from Colin Powell when I retired.

My husband worked in all sorts of different government agencies, and then quit to "find himself" and became a travel agent. I discovered he was gay in 2003, when we got a home computer. I'd resisted getting one for ages because much of my work was classified and I was petrified of accidentally bringing something home I shouldn't.

Instead, I came home and found a printout of an email exchange in which my husband was arranging to meet another man for coffee. When I asked him about it, he was honest. I said, "How long have you known?" He said, "Since I was about 14." I said, "Why did you marry me?" And he said, "Because I didn't want to be [gay]."

Even then, I thought we might stay married. We were in counseling, and the therapist asked me what I wanted. No one had ever asked me that before. I turned to my husband and said, "I want to be loved, honored and cherished as I have done for you for 33 years." And he said, "I don't think I can do that." So that was it.

I found out in April, and he moved out in November. Getting a divorce was the right decision. I've been far less lonely alone than I was with him.

I was lucky to find the Straight Spouse Network. I'm not a joiner or a group person, and the longer I was married, the more isolated I became, so it took me awhile to go to my first meeting. But there was instantaneous acceptance and understanding. I'd never had that kind of support before—not in my family, in my marriage, in my job. I want to emphasize that it is not an anti-gay organization at all. And the hope is that with the end of "don't-ask-don't-tell," there will be fewer people needing it.

Finding out that you are married to an LGBT person is devastating. You never get over it, but you find ways to get through it.

I was in denial about my personal health for a long time. Then in February 2013, I was hospitalized with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, anemia, congestive heart failure and about 27 other things. I was getting weaker and weaker. In August, I had surgery for sigmoid colon cancer. I am now cancer-free and have lost 60 pounds. And I've stopped smoking. I'm doing wonderfully.

Straight Spouses has enabled me to feel validated as a woman. Though I have never questioned my intelligence or my articulateness, I have always questioned myself as a woman. But I've learned, through meeting other straight spouses who are men and talking to them honestly, that I am a woman. I'd love to be desired passionately, but at the moment I'm just grateful to be alive. ■

*Carolyn Segal Lowengart lives in Chevy Chase and is featured in the documentary I Thought It Was Forever, which was screened at the Reel Independent Film Extravaganza in Washington, D.C., in October. Kathleen Wheaton, a frequent contributor to the magazine, lives in Bethesda. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.*