

4.3 How Can Love Be Wrong?

Benedetta, Italy & UK

Looking Back, I Always Knew

How do you tell a twelve-year-old girl that the butterflies she feels for her best friend aren't wrong? That God's love doesn't come with conditions? That she doesn't have to hide who she is?

My name is Benedetta, and this is my story.

I was born in Italy and when I was ten years old, my family and I moved to San Cesario, a small village in the south of Italy, where life moved slowly under the bright sun. I don't come from a stereotypical family; I have seven siblings, so including me, there were eight children under one roof! We were loud, messy and inseparable. My mum was a single child and growing up, she always shared with us how much she wanted a big family. She was anchored in her faith, which she practised devoutly. She raised us with values that she lived out every day – kindness, selflessness, love, respect and a sense of providence.

Due to our involvement in the local catholic community, our lives were intertwined with the rituals of the Church. Sundays were sacred, filled with choir rehearsals, Easter plays, community events, and prayer. The church wasn't just a place of worship; it was an extension of our home. In this small village, everyone was involved in the community and everyone knew everyone – especially the elderly folks, who knew our every move. This tight community was where I made my closest friends, where I sang and laughed and prayed. In that small Catholic community, I felt embraced.

I was twelve when I started to think that something was wrong with me. As a girl, I was expected to act in a certain way, to be quiet, to help around the church and at events, and to be good in school. But something changed. It could have been the onset of puberty, but something was definitely changing. It started slowly. At first, I wanted to spend all of my time with my best friend and the time that we spent together was always playing in my head. Her laughter stirred something in me that I couldn't name. I was twelve, too young to understand the difference between love and friendship, yet old enough to know I was feeling something more. That strange blend of affection and fear settled inside me and unsettled me at the same time. What was wrong with me?

More time came by and more, I was quietly drowning in questions no one seemed willing to answer. *"Why do I feel like this towards another girl? This is not ok, all my friends have crushes on boys, why don't I as well? I need to conform. I will look for a boyfriend"*. I asked God to fix me, to take away the feelings and I begged Him not to let anyone find out. My attempt to find a boyfriend didn't sit very well with my mother. The idea of me having a boyfriend was not in her picture for me at this point – so can you imagine if I told her exactly how I was feeling towards Jessica?

Years passed, and I became an expert in hiding. In 2010 we moved to Rome to be near my grandparents. I always had a special bond with them. But as we moved, we had to start in a new place and where was the best place for us to start but the Church? The new church welcomed us, and I was really looking forward to making new friends. Unfortunately, there weren't many girls of my age in the community, so I decided to get involved in volunteering, Girl Guiding and the Church Choir.

I was sixteen when I fell deeply in love with a woman. Her name was Lucrezia and she was absolutely gorgeous. She had blue hair and the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. Time passed by and I started making friends outside church, but I still attended church because I enjoyed being involved with the community.

Coming out, Coming Home

One day, I finally plucked up the courage to speak to my mum. I still remember the saliva getting stuck in my throat as we went out for a walk. I spent minutes finding the courage to open the conversation with her and between all the different scenarios in my head, the only one that made sense was: *"Mamma, I think I like girls"*. With this sentence, she looked at me and stayed silent. I did not know what to expect. After a couple of minutes that felt like an eternity, she said: *"Ok, do you want to talk about it?"* This felt like the happiest day of life, when she uttered those words. I finally didn't have to hide anymore. I told her about Jessica and Lucrezia and how much I loved her hair and that I hoped one day to be able to tell her how I felt about her. My mum calmly listened to me and then she started to ask me specific questions such as: *"Who would bring the masculine energy to the relationship? You? I can't see you doing that."* At that point I was very confused. *"Masculine energy? What does that mean?"* I really didn't know how to reply. She then proposed that I went and spoke to our priest, who had dealt with many teenagers over the years and probably had more experience than her in such matters. She said it with love in her eyes, but it felt like betrayal. I knew what it really was to her – a confession she hoped I'd recant on.

So a few days after that, my mum and I went to church and I sat across from him in the sacristy, heart heavy and trembling, not really knowing what I was going to say. I told him I thought I liked girls. I didn't have the language for it. At the time I didn't even know the word bisexual. He listened quietly, then smiled gently, and said it was a phase, that he had experienced a similar journey when he was a teenager and that growing up gave him clarity. He said to trust the process, as I was probably confused, that I should pray and not act on it, as it would pass.

But it didn't pass. What passed was my trust in the one place that had once felt like home.

Hiding my True Self in the Military Community

For a while, I stopped asking questions. I tried to follow the script instead, as that seemed to be the only way that I was going to be accepted. When I was seventeen, I met the man who would later become my husband. At first, he seemed the perfect fit. He was a soldier, he was grounded, and he told me that he loved me for who I was. I told him about my identity, nervously. He said, *“It’s fine, you’re with me now, it doesn’t matter.”* At the time, I thought that was love. Looking back, I understand what it really was – convenience disguised as acceptance, a quiet dismissal of my truth. We got married. We built a life. I became a Military Spouse. On the outside, I looked like every other young Christian wife – smiling, involved in community life, raising children, showing up. But inside, I was still invisible, still playing a role that had never been mine to play. He didn’t have a faith and he never took my beliefs seriously. With time, I wasn’t only hiding my true identity, but I was also hiding my faith, for fear of being misunderstood and laughed at.

Then we moved again, this time into the structured, silent world of the military community, where tradition and roles form the foundation of these institutional structures. Being a wife meant being part of a quiet sisterhood, and everything outside the norm became the basis for a joke, or subject to suspicion. I tried to speak about who I was. I tried to make space for my truth. But the responses were always the same:

“But you’re Married to a Man, so you’re Straight now, Right?”

They never understood that identity wasn’t erased by circumstance, that being married to a man didn’t cancel out who I had always been. As years passed being part of the military community, I tried to find others like me. I couldn’t be the only bisexual woman among the spouses out there. I simply wanted someone to chat to, who was going through – or had gone through – a similar experience. At times, it really felt like a cage. You could meet other spouses and mothers for coffee mornings or toddlers’ groups, but there was no space for LGBTQIA+ people. The British military states it is inclusive, but I personally never felt included. I’ve always felt a natural connection to people in the LGBTQIA+ community, likely because of my own identity, which was trying to take root within

me, but I lacked the tools and guidance to let it take root. Years passed like this: smiling outside, aching inside, ignoring who I really was.

All the Colours I am

In 2019, I enrolled in college and met a lecturer who changed everything for me. She was unapologetically bisexual, unapologetically herself. She became a role model, a living example of how identity and faith can co-exist. Watching her live without fear gave me the courage to reintroduce myself to my faith, but this time, I made a promise to myself that I would not hide who I was anymore.

Beginning my university studies in Sociology not only brought me clarity but also helped answer questions about the social dynamics I had personally experienced. It is also where I had the opportunity to be my true self. This is where the gap between my husband and grew even wider and eventually, the marriage broke down. It broke down for many reasons. And when it did, I fell apart. All the guilt I had buried resurfaced. I had said vows. I had promised to be with him forever. I tried to repair something that had broken into a million pieces. And now, I was walking away. *“Was I sinning again? Was I breaking another sacred rule? Is this the right path?”* Now years later, I can say that it was. Even if I couldn't see it at the time. I remembered the phrase I'd heard so many times growing up:

“Forgive seventy times seven.”

But what if the person you're forgiving never really saw you?

What if the forgiveness you needed was your own?

How could I teach my children to live truthfully, to love freely, if I was still shrinking myself to fit someone else's vision?

After the separation, I entered one of the darkest periods of my life. I pushed everyone and everything away, including my faith. I was angry – at the Church, at myself, at the world that made me feel like I had to choose between my faith and authenticity. Then one day, a friend brought me to church again – the Church of England. Up until this point, the only church I have even known and experienced was the Catholic Church. I remember sitting back, not expecting anything and

asking myself what I was doing there. But someone approached me, asked how I was doing, and for the first time in twenty-six years, I told the truth. I opened up. I wept like a child. It wasn't about answers. It was about being heard. Maybe that's what healing looks like – not being fixed but being heard.

Being in the UK gave me the freedom to breathe, to explore and wear my identity with confidence without the fear of being picked on, of being verbally or physically abused on the streets. To speak without fear. In many parts of Italy, the bisexual identity is still not widely accepted. Many bisexual women report feeling more vulnerable to harassment or assault due to their dual identity. Even with this new chapter in my life, I know that if I was to return to Italy and say these things out loud, I would still be met with silence, mockery or worse, abuse. My mum still thinks it is a phase, and although I know she loves me with all of her heart, there are still some battles I choose not to fight. My mother still struggles to accept who I am. I don't think she ever truly will. But I know she loves me. And that love, however complicated, matters. I've learned not to seek validation from those who only love the version of me they can understand, because at least now I finally understand myself.

In Italy, bisexual women often find themselves caught between two pressures: the suspicion of greed and the discomfort caused by men who feel entitled to sexualize them. Misogyny and stigma walk hand in hand. And in the place that was once my spiritual home, I still hear the echo of that priest's words. I remember him saying, *"Don't act on it. Or you'll end up in hell."* But I no longer believe that hell is where love lives.

Faith, Love and Everything in Between

Three years after my divorce, I met someone. He's Christian, like me and bisexual, like me. From the outside, we might look like a typical heterosexual couple. But our story, our bond, is built on a deeper understanding, on a shared truth we both had to fight hard to embrace. We see each other. We live in that in-between space that many don't understand. But it's our space; it's honest and we understand it. It is also in this in-be-

tween space that we empower each other to be our best selves. Before him, I had never even imagined that couples like us could truly exist, let alone thrive. What strikes me most about him is his gentleness, his honesty, and the way he pours intention into our relationship every day. I sometimes wonder, *"What is it that he has, that so many others didn't? What shaped his way of seeing the world?"*

His experience with bisexuality has been very different from mine – less shame, more acceptance – but we meet in the middle. Together, we try to bring awareness about what our love really is – not an exception, but a possibility. He understands me in ways no one else ever has, not despite our identities, but *because* of them. In him, I have found the kind of partnership I once thought was impossible, and a kind of faith that doesn't deny us, but welcomes us in. For the first time in years, I don't feel ashamed or afraid to talk about my bisexual experiences and how I lived them. The questions I once had about the possibility of being attracted to both sexes became something I could finally discuss with someone else – someone like me, who understands the struggle of accepting the fluidity of love.

I am a woman of faith. I am a bisexual woman. I am a mother. I am a survivor. I've spent a lifetime reconciling my truth with my beliefs. And I've come to this truth. This is my truth:

- a) God never asked me to be less. The Church did.
- b) I don't belong to the Catholic Church. I belong to God.
- c) He has never stopped loving me.

As a bisexual woman and the mother of two young daughters, my greatest achievement will be to show my girls that they are loved for who they are, and not for who others expect them to be. In our home, we talk about faith, but we talk about it on our terms. We speak about God, not through the lens of an institution that, in my view, has for centuries oppressed women and marginalized voices like mine, but through the lens of respect, compassion, freedom, and acceptance. I am a positive, vibrant person, and I am endlessly grateful for every experience that has shaped me, even the painful ones. They taught me resilience. They taught me

grace. But most of all, they taught me never to deny my true self again. Ever.

Love, Always Love

When I was younger, I believed that love had to possess certain criteria. It was necessary for me to transform myself into a different person in order to gain acceptance from God, my family, and my community. I had to become someone quieter, the smaller of the two. But now I see the truth – love, genuine love, does not require you to be less than you are. It requires you to grow. Even though I am living my truth today, I am doing so not only for myself, but also for the two young children who call me “mamma,” to let them know that they are never too much, never too different, and never too anything to be loved just as they are. I want them to know that they are never too much. I want them to see a woman who has not allowed fear or shame to prevent her from experiencing joy. I would like them to understand that religion and honesty are not adversaries; rather, they are travelling companions on the same path.

This is only one of countless stories out there. But if sharing my story means that just one person out there feels less alone, more seen, or a little bit braver, then every moment of suffering, perplexity, and quiet submission has been worth it and my story has served a purpose. If you are someone who is going through a path of self-discovery, I want you to understand that there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. If you are reading this, I just want you to know that you are loved and the story you tell is worthy.

Faith is not about conforming to a pattern established by centuries of fear and silence. For me, faith is to about connection, compassion, and the courage to continue showing up as yourself. The way we love is not determined by any specific institution. Before the walls of any church were built, love existed, and it will continue to exist for a very long time. Because God is the source of love, and God is constant in His actions. You are not alone and you are not damaged. You are loved profoundly and unconditionally.

I have not yet fully figured out who I am. I am still learning and I am still healing. But for the first time in 28 years, I am not terrified. I am not hiding and I try in my own small way to make a change.

This chapter reflects the personal experiences, memories and interpretations of the author. Names and identifying details have been changed or omitted for privacy.