



DINNER TABLE DISCUSSIONS

Pack it up Love, Simon – adults can come out too.

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As I meandered upstairs following the scent of freshly made quesadillas, I noticed that my mom had set the table for dinner.

My heart sank.

To some, setting the table for family dinner may not seem out of the ordinary, but in my household, a set table is a surefire sign that there is going to be a serious conversation. Growing up with a single mom who works late at her multiple jobs and a younger sister, we spent most evenings recapping our days from the couch eating late-night takeout while engaging in casual and hilariously inappropriate banter.

I went through all of the possible scenarios in my head as I filled our water glasses and placed them on the table. There were even coasters, which fed my anxiety beyond belief.

The first thing that came to mind was that she was sick. Or maybe she lost her job? Was she getting back together with my dad? Ha — definitely not. The cold sweat accumulated as I waited for the impending news.

My sister glanced at me with a look that perfectly encapsulated my inner monologue of concerns. *Shit — she felt it too.*

Finally, my mom finished cooking her famous cheese quesadillas and took her seat at the table.

Does she have on makeup? I thought to myself. It seemed like she had even put effort into her appearance at our typically casual family dinner, which was a very alarming breach of our big-t-shirt-no-pants dress code.

She cleared her throat.

"Girls, I want you to know that you always come first," she began. "You know that, right?"

We nodded reluctantly as she started to speak again.

"I wanted to tell you girls that I've started seeing someone... I've started seeing a woman," she said quietly, shrinking into her seat as she uttered the last word.

We almost didn't hear her.

My sister and I simultaneously sighed with relief.

"Mom, are you kidding me? I thought you were going to tell us something bad," I said.

I felt so disheartened that she thought we were going to be disappointed or upset with her that she had found someone to be with, and had found out something new about herself that she had not been able to explore when she was married to our dad. She hadn't been with anyone since she had left my dad five years prior and we had been worrying that she was holding herself back from finding companionship and romance on our behalf.

Thankfully, we were wrong and she found someone — no matter her sexuality, we were simply happy that she was happy.

Although she was relieved we took the news well, she worried about what people in our small town were going to say, and how people would react at the elementary school she taught at if they found out.

It was then that we realized she didn't really want us to tell anyone because she didn't feel comfortable or safe outwardly expressing her identity. She didn't owe it to anyone to let them know that she discovered she was also interested in women, but I also felt so proud of her and wanted her to feel comfortable sharing this part of herself

with others when she was ready.

When friends would ask who the woman at my house all the time was and I would say my mom's "friend," it felt weird and forced because anyone with half a working brain cell could tell that she was more than a friend.

One night, I called a trusted friend of mine to catch up and mentioned my mom's girlfriend. The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

"That's so random and weird," she eventually said. I couldn't believe my ears.

The next time I spoke with this so-called friend, she let me know that she and her family discussed the matter and also thought it was "weird" that my mom was seeing a woman.

My face burned.

To no one's surprise, my dad didn't take it well either. Before my sister and I passed our driving tests (which was a miracle when it finally happened), my dad had to take us to and from his apartment every other weekend. Yes, I'm referring to the lovely divorce arrangements where every child loves to haphazardly pack a bag to accommodate each parent's respective weekend.

As if it wasn't awkward enough, my dad refused to ever meet my mom's girlfriend. He couldn't even

bring himself to set foot in our house to wait if we were running late when he picked us up. I told myself it was just too painful for him to meet my mom's new love interest, but I knew deep down that he was also confused and hurt by my mom's embracement of her newfound identity.

Oh — and let's not forget my super religious uncle's uncanny timing when sending my mom YouTube clips about saving herself in the eyes of Jesus after meeting her girlfriend at our family Fourth of July party.

If my family and friends couldn't pull their shit together to support my mom in her new relationship, even from a distance, how would we safely navigate the world of people who knew her peripherally?

I also didn't anticipate the fact that my straight teenage self would become instantaneously hypersensitive and attuned to discourse about queer, specifically woman-loving-woman

relationships. I wish I had always been aware of the harmful rhetoric surrounding relationships stemming from heteronormativity, but I developed an extra ear for problematic statements and would feel a heightened sense of rage knowing that these nasty judgments would be passed on to my mom if people knew.

In the hallway, I suddenly noticed whispers: "When is X gonna come out already— did you see what she was wearing today?" or some other wild and stereotypical commentary for a high school hallway.

While the harsh reality that not everyone was going to accept my mom was something that made me both discouraged and scared, I came to appreciate the household of acceptance that I had taken for granted my entire life.

Although our house may have been smaller and more modest than the rest in our town, with less fancy furniture and fewer gadgets to impress

friends and family with, my mom made our home the home. Friends of mine who did not want to tell their parents about anything from new developments in sexuality to issues involving drinking and other teenage taboos in our town would seek out my mom's perspective and support.

Having a parent come out later in life and shamelessly be herself in the face of adversity not only inspired me to advocate for people who are not as lucky to be able to do the same, but helped me weed out the people in our lives whose small-mindedness came to light.

In the years since my mom set the table to announce her new relationship, our table no longer has places set for the same people. Some places have been removed, and others have been added. But what's remained the same is our ever-growing love and respect for my mom and her kickass quesadillas.

