

# How do you TELL YOUR PARENTS you're gay?

Comedian Sue Perkins, 43, talks to Catherine Butler about falling in love, coming out, and the inspiration behind her new sitcom, *Heading Out*



**G**rowing up, I was quite geeky. I spent most of my teens and childhood lost in my own world and thoughts. My younger sister, Michelle, was blonde and very girly and incredibly clever, while my younger brother David, was big, burly and handsome – I always felt like the thing made with the bit of plasticine that was left over. Saying that, we are an incredibly close family and I was a very happy child. At school, I was friends with the nerds, but also knew how to have fun, so I had a large and diverse gang of friends, and was never bullied.

**I was always plagued with shyness.** I still am – I've just learnt to cover it up. In certain situations, shy people can access a different part of themselves. That's why when I'm at work I can bellow and gurn as I do, but when I go home I am quiet and recessive. At heart, I'm quite an awkward soul. If I ever really like somebody, for example, I'm far too shy to talk to them, and if they talk to me, I go bright red. In fact, it's not been unknown for me to physically run away.

**Realising I was gay was a profound shock.** I was in a six-and-a-half-year

relationship with a boy from the age of 16. I loved him and we very nearly got engaged. Then in our early twenties, we broke up and I met someone and I couldn't even understand what I was feeling. One night, I was lying awake, unable to sleep, when I thought, "My god, I love this person, and she's a girl. That's weird." It's huge to think that you are heading down one track, and then discover you are, in fact, taking another.

**It doesn't mean that I don't find men very attractive.** Or that I don't take away the amazing experiences I've had with them. It does mean I can flirt outrageously and they think they're safe. They're not! I think men are gorgeous, it's just the balance has now tipped for me. That's why I don't like the label

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"gay." There are women in their forties who suddenly have a relationship with a woman, or men who suddenly fall in love with another man. I believe it's fluid. It's not like a club you sign up to as a kid that you are not allowed to leave.

**I've always wanted to write, but until now, I was too scared.** I've done little things in the past – sketches for shows such as *Absolutely Fabulous* – but never anything long that I had to stand by. For ages, I'd had

this idea for a comedy about a vet who is about to turn 40 and still hasn't told her parents that she's gay, and then at the end of 2011, it just flowed out of me.

**The worst thing that could happen is that it gets labelled as a gay sitcom because it's not.** None of the main >>

## personal story

Sue stars as a vet, Sara, in her new series, *Heading Out*, where her character endures everything from a surprise 40th to paintballing sessions



day I might like to foster or adopt, or at the very least mentor young people. It was a tough time, but you do get these little stumbles, and whenever I do, I'm very good at putting things in perspective. I had been living my life like a carefree teenager, and I suddenly thought, "Oh God, you're an old woman with the mindset of a toddler." Now I realise that I feel young and that's what counts, and so I'm going to carry on being an idiot.

**When you hit your forties, you don't think you'll meet new friends who will be meaningful for the rest of your life.** I've known most of mine for 25 or even 35 years: people from school and college, like Mel (Giedroyc) who is the better, sweeter, other strand of my double helix – I adore the bones of her. So you get to the stage where you think your friend dance card is full. But that's not true. In the last year, I've met two or three really good new friends in some really strange ways, and it's so exciting because it's rare to meet a proper mate. One in particular was a failed date, but we hit it off and now have become really close.

**I spent much of my twenties and thirties beating myself up, but in my forties, I found my confidence.** I think I just got to the point where I was so

exhausted with my battles of low self-esteem that I just gave up and thought, I have two choices: I can either carry on with this cloak of self-loathing, or I can shrug it off and see what happens. So I did the latter, and it was such a liberating thing.

**It's partly to do with accepting the ageing process;** I've never been a ravishing beauty and I've never got work because of my looks, but even I started to worry when everything began to droop and my skin got all wrinkly. But alongside the deterioration of the physical, you can take comfort in the elevation of the mental and spiritual, and now I can honestly say, yeah, I'm happy in my own skin – albeit slightly saggy!

*Don't miss Sue in her sitcom, *Heading Out* on BBC Two this spring. w&h*

character's experiences really directly relate to mine at all, other than the fact she is a gay woman. I'm very mainstream, and most of my friends are straight, so I just wanted to write something that was warm and funny, and about universal things that we all can relate to, like love and how awkward and painful it is, and how no matter how old we are, we are always slightly frightened of the disapproval of our parents.

**Coming out to your parents can be a painful experience – but it wasn't for me.** I was 28, and I rang them up and said, "There's something I need to tell you." Mum replied, "Is it that you're gay?" I felt furious. Sometimes you need a little drama and I think I felt robbed of that, but actually that would have been awful.

**They just wanted me to be happy.** And they are such deeply accommodating people that, although it was probably a shock for them at first, they made it very easy for me. It is a very fearful thing to do, because basically you are telling your parents that you are having sex and that's not something a heterosexual person ever has to do. But they are very cool – when we stayed over, mum would happily bring a cup of tea up for me and my partner.

**I come from quite a Catholic family,** but then, at 13, my parents said that I could

do what I wanted and because I wasn't a believer, I stopped going to church. They were very good at giving me a framework, but then letting me call the shots, which I really respect.

**I'm single now, which is unusual for me, but I really look forward to settling down.** My last serious relationship ended 18 months ago and having been with someone constantly since the age of 16, I was frightened of being alone. Actually, it's good, and I'm enjoying the perspective. But I really would love, one day, to be living in the country, growing vegetables, making jam and chewing over the kind of thorny issues you have to adjust to when you cohabit with someone. When I was younger, a long-term relationship sounded so boring, now I can't think of anything better. But I'm not anxious about it. The right person will come along at the right time – and sometimes if you're very unlucky, they come along at the wrong time.

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**I found turning 40 very difficult – it made me think about things I'd never really thought of before.** Like the fact I'll never have natural children. Not having a family of my own at that time felt very painful, and it made me think that one

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