

Motherhood is ingrained in my older sister, Susie. It is at her core. She used to say that if she couldn't have children of her own, she would adopt – or steal – one. At 23 she married Pete, an Army medic, and they quickly had three – Emily, Tom and Edward – creating around them her version of a suburban domestic idyll. At various times a rabbit, two cocker spaniels, Em's wily guinea pig, Melchizedek, and latterly an elderly chicken, lived in the kitchen, which was also the backdrop to numerous family get-togethers. After our parents died when I was in my early 20s and she was in her 30s, her house became home for me and our three other siblings. I was married there; she considered my first child to be her fourth. Nurturing an extended family was so much part of her life plan that she once sent a huge dining-room table back to John Lewis on the grounds that it wasn't nearly big enough to seat all the grandchildren she would one day have.

Em, now 34, Tom, 32, and Ed, 28, turned out to be personable, good-looking and academically blessed, the kind of effortlessly slick offspring other parents rave about. Two went off to Cambridge (Tom and Ed). One has a PhD (Em). Two are gay (Em and Ed). One is straight (Tom). Their sexuality is as irrefutable as their brains or

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OUR FAMILY OUTING

The realisation that two of her children are gay threw Susie Williams's ordered world upside down. Her sister **Caroline Scott** describes their difficult journey. Photographs by **David Spero**

Susie Williams at her Wiltshire home with her children Edward and Emily





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their deep Welsh colouring; it is their normal, but since homosexuality is not the norm, having two gay children is something that Susie, 56, has revealed cautiously, to a world that is not quite ready.

The Williams children grew up bang in the middle of middle England. For 28 years Pete worked as a GP in a large medical practice in Wiltshire. Susie is a prescribing nurse specialising in diabetes, and a pillar of the local community; she is as adept at flinging together a lasagne for an elderly patient as she is at dishing out contraceptive advice. Urinary tract infection? Prostate problems? Gout? In our family no subject is too sensitive or too embarrassing to be dug out and shared. Well, no subject, that is, except this one. 'You may think you know how you'd react,' she says carefully, 'but you really don't. I have come to the conclusion that throughout life we take some things as given. The majority of people have healthy children, the majority have heterosexual children, and you assume you will, too. I've learnt to take nothing for granted.'

Em was a wacky and spirited child. Small and tenacious, she had a passion for diving into rivers and tackling the most nauseating fairground rides. At first Susie felt very close to her, but then, when her daughter was about 13, she suddenly felt that she had lost her. She can't put her finger on why, but she remembers Em generally whipping up a drama in the house that eclipsed both Tom and Ed. 'We didn't communicate well at all,' Susie says. 'I remember a holiday in the Lake District one Christmas when she was about 15 and so truculent that I was really glad to put her on a bus home halfway through because she wanted to meet a school friend, and I wondered then if there was a lesbian element to the relationship.'

There was no announcement from Em that Susie can remember, and no discussion; it was more a gradual dawning, and with hindsight she feels that she let Em down. 'At 16 she fell in love with her best friend. I thought it was a crush, but it wasn't. She loved this girl profoundly. Maybe I was in denial, I don't know, but I couldn't deal with it, and I still feel terrible about that. Pete was so much better with her than me. He used to take her to a place in Swindon to talk to a counsellor.' This is the man who made Susie furiously angry over the years because he felt unable to tell anyone that their children were gay – not his golfing friends nor his mother and sister. 'I have told them all,' she says. 'Not because he's ashamed – he just doesn't have the emotional vocabulary, yet he has supported them in a completely different way.'

Ed points out that for Pete to 'come out' as the father of gay children would not have been a natural step because he doesn't operate in that way on any topic. 'Mum needs to discuss things over and over in great detail, whereas Dad processes things on his own. It wouldn't occur to him to talk about this with his friends, but it never crossed my mind for a moment that he was actively not telling people.'

Going through it once with Em made the journey with Ed somehow less traumatic. In a way the

seeds had been scattered throughout his life. Tom, four years older, was an action man, constantly in motion; he built dens and tree houses and raced around the garden on his bicycle, while Ed lay on the grass so that Tom could leap over him. Ed, a sweet, gentle, good-natured little boy, still couldn't ride a bike at the age of 11, and I remember Susie desperately wanting him to. Why? 'So he'd be the same as everyone else. So he wouldn't be gay, I suppose.'

The teenage Ed was captivated by Will Young on *Pop Idol*, which, Susie says, 'felt like a big tree being planted in my head'. A few weeks later she came across a copy of *Attitude*, a gay magazine, while putting clothes away in his cupboard. 'I remember feeling physically sick. I took it outside to Pete, who was cutting the grass, and we looked at each other, dumbstruck. There wasn't really anything to say. When Ed came home I think I said something along the lines of, "Is there anything you want to tell me?" He was absolutely furious. And I knew I'd crossed a line. He hadn't decided whether he was gay or not and he certainly didn't want to talk about it.'

She gave him a book on sexuality, written for teenagers, which she thinks he probably threw away. Having not got to grips with it herself, she

didn't feel she could tell even her closest friends. 'The isolation,' she says, 'was indescribable.' Her biggest fears were around other people's reactions. 'I thought people would judge my children. That Ed would be frightened to be himself. That he would never

find the love of his life. I was haunted by the idea that he'd die alone. It was a very difficult time.'

Ed finally came out aged 18 to a few friends on a school Spanish exchange, and Susie decided she was 'sick of sitting at dinner parties listening to vaguely homophobic jokes and not saying anything'. She says, 'I thought, I am not going to be ashamed of my children, they're the most wonderful creatures – I made them – and if I can't support them, who will?' She began by telling a couple of people at the medical practice where she had worked for 23 years. 'It was all right, actually. I knew they'd do the job of telling the rest.' Once she had got her head around the fact, it wasn't so difficult after all. 'Ed and Em started bringing people home; delightful, ordinary, lovely people, and I stopped thinking about them in terms of their sexuality.'

Tom, married now, with a six-month-old son, lives around the corner from Ed, and the two are good friends. He talks about fairness and equality – he genuinely can't understand why anyone's sexuality should be an issue, but he's quieter on the subject of the verbal drubbing he was given by other boys on the train into school in the morning. Instinctively he felt it was not something to burden his parents with, since his siblings already seemed

to have used up all the emotional oxygen at home.

Susie has been appalled by the number of Ed's university friends who are still unable to come out even to their own parents for fear of being judged or reviled. It's a reaction that she cannot understand. 'It upsets me hugely to think children are growing up ashamed of something that's so much part of them,' she says. Both Ed and Em have, she says, taken her on a massive learning curve. 'And I'm a better person for it. It has made me much less

tolerant of people who have prejudices of any kind.' When Ed split up with his boyfriend recently and telephoned, crying, she was ready to drive up to London to fetch him. 'I love them – it's all I've ever done, but I'm a far better mother now than I was when

they were younger.'

To be fair, Susie got over her mother-of-the-bride fantasy quite quickly. 'Believe me, I've worn this path bare,' she says. But she still finds Em's appearance tricky, and make-up remains a sticking point. 'She doesn't do anything to make the best of herself, which I don't understand, because she's beautiful.' She pulls a face. 'I am getting better. Put it this way, I don't put mascara in her Christmas stocking anymore.'

At five Em was conscious of thinking the older girls at school were beautiful, yet recognised that this was something she couldn't say out loud. At 11, and at an all-girls school, she told some friends on a school trip to Alton Towers that she thought she might not get married. 'I think I said, "I may end up with a woman." I was ridiculed all the way home.'

The news that Em was a lesbian took off. 'One girl was particularly vocal in her dislike of me; she used to write EMILY IS A LEZZER on the blackboard, and she'd kick me and throw my pencil case out of the window so I'd be late for lessons.' Her first sexual encounter was with a penfriend of the same age called Anna, whom she met through an advertisement at the back of *Select* music magazine when she was 15. 'She lived in Birmingham and we wrote to each other a lot. She came to stay once, and although nothing was said, Mum clearly knew that there was more to it than just friendship, because she made a point of making her sleep in the spare room.'

Susie, she says, was the sort of mother you could talk to about anything. 'She'd remember who was in my class and who said what. She has always been like that, just very plugged into my life.' The problem was, Em didn't want

to talk about anything. 'I just didn't want the hassle of explaining, and I think that must have driven her mad.' Confusingly, Em also had several boyfriends – 'circumstantial', she says. 'They were friends who happened to be boys.' But it was enough to give her mother hope that lesbianism was a passing phase. For a long time Susie managed to say all the right things. 'So it was a real shock when I came out properly at 17 and she

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seemed completely devastated. I felt I'd ruined her life. I think she had a picture in her head of where she fitted in – organising my wedding, having the relationship with me she'd had with her mother – and it was as if everything she'd hoped for was gone.'

Both she and Ed, she recalls, neatly fitted all the stereotypes surrounding the gay child: 'With Edward, it was just screamingly obvious – walking around with a turban on his head after he'd had a shower and spending his pocket money on moisturiser... I was always up a tree. We were like walking cliches, but I'm not sure Mum and Dad saw it that way.'

'This was Mum's battle. I went through a phase of buying Burton menswear, and she found that very hard. I felt that as a model of femininity I was a disappointment to her, and I think that's something she's only recently dealt with. She could cope with having a lesbian daughter, but not with having a daughter who 'looks' lesbian.'

A low point was Tom's graduation in 2002, when Em says everyone was convinced she had shaved her head in order to ruin his pictures. 'I ended up wearing someone else's skirt, and Dad went off and bought me some shoes because the ones I was wearing were deemed inappropriate.' She can now tell this tale with a smile. Everyone has, she concedes, come a long way since then. 'Mum has done it all on her own without talking to other parents of gay kids, and I admire her for it enormously.'

Both parents have helped her through the traumatic break-up of a four-year relationship. Em has a child with her former partner, and is in the midst of court proceedings over residency. 'They accepted her fully as my life partner and as a daughter. I couldn't have got through the past few years without them.' She suspects the things they worry about now are less to do with her sexuality, more to do with other factors in her life. 'They'd like me to work in a more secure field [she is a youth programme officer for Forward, the Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development in Bristol]. They would like me to be in a long-term relationship. Mum would like me to have another child.' Her father, she says, does not emote. 'It's just the way he's been brought up. He shows his support by checking I've got oil in my car and filling it up with petrol. He's completely steady and unflappable. For quite a while I thought that they were faking it, and maybe they were, but we're past that now. They accept who I am 100 per cent, and I know they don't care what anyone else thinks.'

Edward's south London flat is immaculately furnished and extraordinarily neat for a 28-year-old with a hectic social life. 'Typical gay man!' his sister says, laughing. But Ed is also a man whose approach to life is rigorously structured and orderly. He is the sort of gay man that society has somehow deemed 'acceptable' – sophisticated, elegant, stylish. 'I'm a trier,' he says. 'At work and with my appearance. And that might be to do with wanting to present myself in a certain way.' Home, he recalls, was an extremely conservative, if tolerant, environment. 'A completely heterosexual world. Apart from my sister I didn't meet another gay person until I was 18...' He describes



a kind of 'grey area' between childhood and adolescence. 'I was 15 before my voice broke, and although I wasn't interested in girls, I just thought I was a later developer.' But there was a constant interior dialogue. 'I'd say to myself, "Quite clearly, you are gay." Then, "No, no. It's just part of growing up."'

Em is six years older than Ed, so he was largely oblivious to what was going on with her. 'And I would still say that being brother and sister unifies us, rather than our sexuality, which isn't really relevant.' As a teenager Em was noisier

and more complicated. 'She thought Mum and Dad were against her, but my impression was that they were rather dazed and confused and hadn't got a clue what was going on. Knowing I had to go and tell them the same thing, I wanted to keep quiet until I'd sorted it out in my own head.'

Ed was 17 when he bought the copy of *Attitude*.

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'I was so scared, my hands were shaking,' he says. He hid it in a backpack at the bottom of his wardrobe. 'In the car a couple of days later my mum said, "Edward, you know you can talk to me about anything, don't you?" And I just

thought, “Oh, crap.” I was mortified. I knew she had to have been looking for it, and it felt like a big betrayal. I couldn’t handle this myself, so the last thing I wanted was to talk about it.’ Ed retreated, refusing to be drawn on the subject, but feeling progressively more isolated. ‘When you’re straight, the whole world is your dating club. When you’re gay, you don’t think like that. Falling in love with a straight boy is so crushingly heartbreaking, you learn very early on to shift your world view. I had this fear inside the whole time, this horror at the prospect of being found out.’

A year on he told a few friends at school. ‘My heart was pounding so hard I could barely speak, but actually they were very supportive and it was a huge relief.’ The only bad experience he had was selling ribbons on World Aids Day, when one boy said, ‘I think Aids is a good thing because it’ll kill off all the gays.’ ‘It was an atrocious thing to say and I should have reported him, but I wasn’t as confident as I am now, and somehow I felt I had to take it.’

He remembers his father saying, ‘Ed, whether you’re gay or straight, we love you just the same.’ ‘Hearing that was enough for me. He never referred to it again – to the relief of both of us!’ But Susie, not very good with boundaries where her children are concerned, ‘kept picking at it like a scab. I felt she was repeatedly trying to push me into meeting girls. In retrospect I don’t think she was. She was just trying to help, in a ham-fisted

way. We have talked about it lots since and I completely understand. No one wants something for their children that will make their lives more difficult. But when she brought it up again for the Nth time, I said, “Why would I talk to you, when you’ve violated my trust?” I had a bit of a rant. I think she was quite stunned and she apologised. And that was the beginning of our relationship again.’ He can see now that, just as he was navigating uncharted waters, so were his parents. Is he conscious of the journey he and Em have taken them on? ‘Very much so, we talk about it a lot. And I know how hard it has been. I’m aware that they have had to “come out” themselves. They have had to say to their very conservative friends, some of them slightly homophobic Army types, “There’s something I want to tell you.” But you can’t turn to your child for support with that. You have to find your own way.’

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He points out that 15 years ago his parents were pretty stuffy and uncomfortable around homosexuality themselves. ‘And look at them now. In terms of them being loving parents with an almost infinite capacity to adapt, they’ve been amazing.’ After studying medicine Ed now works in management consultancy and makes a point of telling people – or rather doesn’t avoid telling people – that he is gay,

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because, he says, ‘to do otherwise is to deny who I am.’ But he rarely walks down the street holding hands with another man – ‘their choice not mine’ – because so many young gay men are not out, either at home or at work. ‘That’s a

massive issue for me, because not being acknowledged in public makes me feel awful and rejected. But if your own parents are ashamed and can’t cope with it, what message does that give you?’

A few years ago he went to a screening of the film *Clapham Junction* (about the homophobic murder in 2005 in south London of Jody Dobrowski, a 24-year-old assistant bar manager). ‘The idea that someone could hate me so much for being gay – just for being myself – that they wanted to kill me, hit me like a train. It took me a long time to get over it. My family environment has been so supportive, I’ve lived in a safe bubble all my life.’

Ed is most like his father; measured, rational, straightforward; even so, he thinks his relationship with his parents is unusual. ‘Last year I had a birthday party in my flat and I invited friends from work, from university – and Mum and Dad. They were having such a good time, they didn’t leave until 1am, and so many people said, “I can’t believe your parents are here,” because they wouldn’t dream of inviting theirs. The fact that we’ve had to work so hard at our relationship means we’re much closer – and not just as parent and child, but as friends.’ ■