

Episode 3: on the down low

*Oprah: He blew the lid off the secret sex world, now - the fall out.
Were you lying to me then?
And six years ago he wouldn't show his face. Now -
If you don't wanna be on this show, this won't see the light of day -
Next -*

[Theme Tune]

Ell [in American accents] Welcome back to another episode of Life of Bi, I'm Ell Potter
Mary: and I'm Mary Higgins, and this is the podcast where we uncover all the secret
bisexuals
Ell: This week - we're going On the Down Low

*Oprah: Imagine finding out your soulmate - the man you share your life with, and you bed
with - is sneaking out and having sex. With other men.*

[Gasps from Oprah's live audience]

Mary: That was Oprah, as seen on Oprah - Ok I'm gonna stop doing the accent now
Ell: I'm gonna carry on
Mary: the clip is from a 2010 interview she did with J. L. King -
Ell: scandal -
Mary: author of 'On the Down Low'
Ell: sedition
Mary: A Journey Into the Lives of Straight Black Men Who Sleep with Men'
Ell: SEX

Oprah (to an audience member): Uh huh. I see her eyes.

Mary: here the video SMASH CUTS to a white woman in the audience
Ell: eyes wide, hands on face
Mary: she looks shocked, bemused - and utterly delighted
Ell: she looks like she only just realised that an anus can be used for sex
Mary: here's an extract from the book in question, read by Matthew Jacobs Morgan

J L King (Matthew Jacobs Morgan):

*I spotted this brother from my pew, ten rows back. His broad shoulders seemed to take up
two seats. His physique was not burly, but the definition of his muscles was noticeable even
through his light wool suit. Every time he turned to smile at his wife, I noticed the dimple on
his right cheek. I was new to this church. I made it my business to introduce myself to him
after the service. When our eyes locked, I knew. He looked at me just a little too long.*

Ell: Newsday called it the "new book girlfriends have got to read"
Mary: One reviewer said "this book has folks buzzing like a tree full of cicadas"
Ell: Another called it "a good read"

Oprah: There are two words for this: it's called Down Low, as in living on the Down Low, it's a dirty little secret that we talked about six years ago on our show, and we talked then to J. L. King, a husband and a father of two, who was living on the down low ...

Ell: King and Oprah are sat together on a sofa

Mary: and here the video cuts to the original Oprah interview in 2004, 6 years earlier

Oprah: Do you not consider yourself gay?

J. L. King: No I don't

Ell: King is in a large grey suit, small oval glasses, perfectly trimmed goatee

Oprah. You don't,

J. L. King: No I don't

Oprah: But I can't figure that out

J. K. King: Yes but why do I - -

Mary: He sits up

J. L. King: Yes but why do I have to label myself, why do I have to put a label on myself to make you comfortable?

Oprah. OK I don't wanna be comfortable, I just wanna know what it is!

Ell: which means Oprah, you sort of do want to be comfortable

Mary: in his book King stresses that he's neither gay or bi, he's just a man who sleeps with men and women

Ell: some might call that bi, but J. L King doesn't

JL. In a black community if you come out and say 'I'm gay and proud' then automatically people look at you differently, they treat you differently, all of a sudden I become: 'Oh I want you to meet my gay friend, J.L.', 'I want you to meet by gay brother, J.L.', 'I want you to meet my gay father, J.L.'

Oprah. Ok and so that is the reason it's called / 'The Down Low'

JL. The down low. I don't want anybody to know, I wanna do what I do, and when it is my business, and it's none of your business what I do. It's wrong -

Oprah. Ok, ok - would Down Low also mean Denial?

[APPLAUSE & LAUGHTER]

Ell: Ok so obviously cheating isn't great, but Oprah is really going at him here, she's really pinning him down

Mary: there's a sense that it is her business, it's everybody's business what J.L. King and other men on the down low are doing

Ell: and weirdly, the reason is never mentioned in this clip from the 2004 interview but it is the AIDS crisis,

Mary: the AIDS crisis began in 1981, but AIDS is not history

Ell: The New York Times declared the AIDS crisis 'over' in 1996, but in fact AIDS related deaths would reach their peak in 2004, the year of J L King's interview with Oprah

Mary: That year, 3.1 million deaths were reported worldwide.

American Newsreporter: The CDC says nationwide African Americans account for almost half of all HIV infections each year, and more than one third of people living with HIV are black.

Another American Reporter: In the Deep South, the epidemic continues to ravage African American communities, the stigma around HIV has people to suffer in silence

Another American Reporter: People on the front lines say the rest of the nation needs to open its eyes.

Mary: King's mission, as he saw it, was to expose, quote, "the deadly secret that is fuelling a health crisis in the African American community."

Ell: at the time of publishing, one out of every 3000 women in the US were HIV positive, compared to an alarming one in every 160 black women

Mary: and there are of course a hundred intersecting reasons for this: access to health care, misinformation, & systemic racism to name a few - but another important factor, according to King, is that some black men are hooking up with other men behind their girlfriend's backs.

Oprah. Were you having unprotected sex?

J.L. Yes, yes.

Oprah. So when you hear Bridget's story....

Mary: here, the camera swings to Bridget, she looks disgusted

Ell: Bridget's just been interviewed herself, and the caption under her reads: 'husband gave her HIV'

Mary: because Bridget's husband was also on the down low - and this is why Oprah is so on King's back, this is why there's so much judgment behind her questioning: HIV has turned a private identity struggle into a public health crisis

Ell: and it's the bisexuals - or at least bisexual behaviour - which is seen to be spreading the disease from the demonised gay community into the 'innocent' lives of women and children...

Mary: But it hasn't always been this way, let's rewind for a second

[Cue fun Seventies Music]

E: Ah, the 70s. What a time to be a bi
M: Life's a rolling stone
E: a glam rock
M: an androgynous dream
E: everyone's shaggin everyone
M: there isn't a septum in sight
E: the glory days of Bowie, Janis Joplin and Elton John
M: But it's all about to change

[the fun Seventies music comes to sad stop]

Ell: the following headlines are quoted from magazines and newspapers published in the 80s and may be injurious to your health.

[News Jingle and newsflash underscoring, Mary and Ell speak the next lines like news reporters]

Ell: the potential role of bisexuals in heterosexual transmission of aids has been gravely underestimated
Mary: the figure of the male bisexual has become the bogeyman -
Ell: the AIDS spectre for women -
Mary: The epidemic's new bête noir -
Ell: A creature of uncontrollable impulses.
Mary: The bisexual is a homosexual posing as a heterosexual.

[Newsflash over]

Ell: Then, having villainised bisexuality for over a decade, the media does yet another 180 in the nineties & early noughties, and demands to know why young men aren't hurrying to come out.
Mary: In 2003 the New York Times publishes an article called 'Double Lives on the Down Low', by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, a self-identified white gay man who goes on a tour of the black down low clubs
Ell: He asks, 'How should guys on the DL be regarded? Whose responsibility are they? Are they gay, straight, or bisexual? If they're gay, why don't they just tough it up, come out and move to a big city? If they're straight, what are they doing having sex with guys in parks? If they're bisexual, why not just say that?'
M: Why indeed

Dr. Marcus Patterson: It's like for guys if you had a sexual experience with a guy, you're gay. Point blank. That's it. Close the door. Close the door. And way too many people feel that way, male and female, you know there's women out there who say: 'Oh he's been with a guy? He's gay! I don't wanna be with him, he's just gonna do that again, and then I'm gonna look stupid'

Mary: That's Dr Marcus Patterson
Ell: he's a clinical psychologist practising in Washington DC and Virginia, with a specialism in helping young queer people of colour

Mary: J L later clarified that anyone can be on the down low, but his book was very explicitly aimed at black men, and we asked Marcus why

Dr. Marcus Patterson: speaking as a black man and in the black community, there is a lotta pressure, a lotta pressure to conform and not be a punk or a sissy or soft or whatever these other nonsense adjectives are that are correlated with being gay, or being bisexual.

Ell: which gives us some clue as to why King drew a distinct line between sleeping with someone of the same gender, and queerness -

Mary: In fact the term MSM - men who sleep with men - was invented for people like King in the nineties, because HIV had revealed just how many men who sleep with men, identify as straight

Dr. Marcus Patterson: And manhood and masculinity that's historically in terms of the black community, it's been something that's been very very important because of our struggle in this country, and everything we've had to go through. You had to be the stalwart head of household. Strong, infallible. Stern. That strong guy, in order to protect your house. You had to be, in order to protect your family, protect yourself, from the world that's coming to get you.

Mary: Back on Oprah in 2010, J L King has another word for this pressure to be a man -

J.L. King: The fear, the fear, is what kept me on the down low, the fear of losing my family, the fear of losing my children, the fear of hurting my parents, the fear of losing my relationships with cousins and extended family and the church.

Mary: so the only way to preserve your reputation and fuck who you like, is to lie

Ell: yeah, King isn't really left with any other option

Mary: because there is no bisexuality, there's no sense of middle ground - the homophobic stereotype of gay men being like effeminate soft and sissy, means you can't sleep with men - even if you also sleep with women - and be a real man

Ell: so if you're a "real man" - and King would say that he definitely is - you can't be gay.

Oprah: Now I pressed J.L. every which way I could and he emphatically on that show six years ago denied being gay, he's back with us today and I hear you have something you wanna say

J.L. Well I'm glad to be back and -

Oprah: Thank you

J. L.: A lot has happened in my life over the past six years, the first thing is I have accepted the fact that I am a black, gay, proud, man and....

[APPLAUSE]

M: So what changed?

J.L. I met some very strong powerful gay men over the past 6 years, who almost took me through a "how to be gay" crash course and taught me, showed me that who you sleep with does not define who you are

Ell: King needed to find masculine gay role models before he could take pride in his sexuality; he's still careful though to separate his gayness from his identity - it doesn't define who he is

Mary: yeah even in his pride, King still resists the characteristics he associates with gayness, like being effeminate and weak

Dr. Marcus Patterson: It's remarkable - not remarkable, not even really surprising - how many of my gay male clients are bodybuilders, or at least are in the gym. They're not competing, they're freakin' ripped. Because they don't wanna look weak, they don't wanna be perceived as soft, they wanna be able to knock somebody out if they come for 'em the wrong way. It's a strength proposition.

E: But muscles alone can't prove you're a man.

J.L.: I didn't know that you can still be a gay father, you can still have -

Oprah. You didn't know there were gay fathers

J.L. I knew there were gay fathers, but when I grew up, in the churches I attended, I would hear every Sunday that God don't love you, that you are less than a man, that if you're gay you're a paedophile, you know I did not want to have that type of label on my life, I didn't want to hurt my family, and more importantly I didn't want to face my ex-wife.

Mary: King has a whole chapter on the black church - his first experience of being on the down low was with the leader of his church group, and he says that it's actually a really common place to cruise for other men.

Ell: In fact he describes how a friend of his, called Greg, actually had sex with his pastor. But the pastor still continued his sermons against homosexuality

Matthew Jacobs Morgan reading J.L. King's book 'On the Down Low': 'In fact, he started preaching even more about the subject', Greg said. 'I would sit there and listen to him condemn two men lying together, knowing the truth'.

Mary: King's very critical of the church in his book, but his anger stems from disappointment. The church should be a treasured part of his life...

Matthew Jacobs Morgan: For many of us the church is the anchor of our lives. The black church has been a central place for people to seek salvation and acceptance. The church has been the place where most turn when there is no place else to turn. It was the black church that helped usher in the civil rights movement and provided much of the support to rid our nation of Jim Crow laws. However, on the issue of HIV/AIDS, it's as if the church were in denial. The message of fire, brimstone, and damnation are not working

Mary: Christian, from last episode, had a very similar story didn't he. It's depressingly repetitive. Like I don't want to shit on Christianity but it doesn't give you much choice
Ell: No it's such a betrayal. And the answer is so simple: love is love
Mary: But back on Oprah in 2004... J L says it's not about love

J.L. It's not 'we're in love, let's get married, move together, have the perfect dog'

Oprah. Not even 'let's have any kind of relationship beyond sex?'

J.L. If I was gay yes, if I was a gay man I would wanna have a relationship with another man and play house, but when you're on the DL, all you wanna do is have sex. It's about gratification, not orientation.

Oprah. I got that.

Ell: It's frustrating, because you wanna be on King's side, but he's not exactly helping himself
Mary: no, I mean there's a version of this interview where J L King goes to Oprah like: 'look I can't help who I love you know, this is a part of me and it's a real struggle', if you wanted to seek forgiveness you could do it that way - but instead he's saying 'no it's just about sex' - which I sort of respect, cos sometimes sex is just about sex...

Ell: but unfortunately - and I think this is one of the reasons why this Oprah interview has needed at us for so quite a while - because everything he says in the 2004 interview plays into dirty stereotypes about bisexual people, that you're greedy, you're irresponsible, you're sex-mad

Mary: yeah and you're actually gay

[laughter]

Ell: exactly

Mary: it's a spicy cocktail

Ell: And crucially I don't think it's all J.L.'s fault

Mary: No no, but he does pour a huge amount of blame onto black men who sleep with men, and profits off it, which isn't great -

Matthew Jacobs Morgan (reading J. L. King): These men are selfishly risking the lives of their women and their families. These men lie and they cheat. They refuse to let their women go, but they also refuse to give up having sex with men, even when they could lose everything, including their own lives.

Ell: But he's part of a wider culture - and like that's how the papers were reporting it & Oprah is also playing into the drama like 'were you silenT or were you silen -' like that's why she's so fun to watch - she just knows how to sell it

Mary: Yeah well she's a storyteller, but the best story isn't always the truest one. And I actually think this interview with J. L. is actually a real steal because it's the second time she's had him on, so she can construct like a before and after, a story with a beginning middle and end

Ell: in the beginning, J L is a happily married straight man

Mary: in the middle, J L is a lying, cheating bastard - sleeping with men and women - and then he meets Oprah!

Ell: and in the end, he comes out as a gay man. And everyone applauds.

Mary: woohoo!

Ell: rightfully

Mary: cos it's a happy ending, it's a redemption arc. But also that's sticky, cos if coming out as gay is the redemption, then bisexual behaviour is the sin

Ell: or really it's lying that's the sin, and bisexual behaviour is almost framed as a lie in itself, because what strikes me is at no point in this interview is bisexuality ever entertained as a possibility, it's like: you like both?!?!? But that's not possible!!!! You must be lying about one of them!!!!

Mary: yeah it does make me wonder like if J L King had come out as bi, not gay - would anyone have applauded??

[laughter]

Ell: No! I don't think so

Mary: I don't think so: it's not a satisfactory ending, because bisexuality - in this story - equals chaos! So it can't be the end of a story, it's not a triumphant - it's not triumphant for Oprah if he just comes back and he's like 'yeah actually I was lying but also my sexual urges are exactly the same

Ell: Yes because there would be no transformation, and Oprah, and us watching it, we wouldn't get that redemptive arc

Mary: which brings us to how we understand our sexuality in the context of a lifetime. So Marjorie Garber wrote an amazing book on bisexuality, it's called *Vice Versa*, and she posits two ways of understanding it bisexuality, one is concurrent - meaning bisexuals are people who are sleeping with different genders at the same time -

Ell: at the same time eh?

Mary: at the same time, I mean -

Ell: technically difficult

Mary: define 'same time', but the other way of seeing it is sequential, so like, if you've slept with and/or loved people of different genders within your lifetime, then that's bisexuality

Ell: Yes which complicates this idea of transformation, if you're always transforming

Mary: cos there's no end to that story until you die

Ell: and hey, who knows what they get up to in the afterlife

[small sting]

Mary: after looking so much into the AIDS crisis, and the historic struggle between masculinity and queerness - we had to ask ourselves the question: is it harder to be bisexual man than it is to be bisexual woman?

Ell: We asked Dr. Patterson what he thought

Dr. Marcus Patterson: It's much easier I think, for women in the pop culture sense in here, to express their sexuality in that way and experiment or just come out as bisexual and live that lifestyle, where there's much more of a stigma for guys. It's like for guys if you had a sexual experience with a guy, you're gay. Point blank. That's it. And way too many people feel that way male and female. There's women out there who say 'he's been with a guy? He's gay, i don't want anything to do with him, he's just gonna do that again, and then I'm gonna look stupid'.

Ell: It's funny that the baseline assumption for all bisexuals is that you're just attracted to men.

Mary: Yes!

Ell: Speaking in binary terms: if you're a bisexual man, people think you're a gay man who isn't ready to come out all the way. But if you're a bisexual woman, people think you're a straight woman pretending to fancy girls to like be more interesting, or gratify the male gaze

Mary: yeah it's like we're all on a slide, all bisexuals are on a slide and cis men are waiting at the bottom

Ell: just patiently waiting for gravity

Mary: and everybody's clinging to the sides going NONONONONONO

Ell: it's funny though cos the historical baggage that bisexual men carry is heavy with homophobia, in a way that it just isn't with bisexual women, we're just not carrying the same baggage

Mary: yeah cos according to history, like lesbians didn't exist until about 10 seconds ago - so our baggage is more about the sexualisation of women in general

Ell: So it's almost like, whereas bisexual women have to constantly fight against sexualisation and say like 'we're not doing this to be sexy, it's about love', JL King in contrast is very clear in his interview that 'it's all about sex, it has nothing to do with love',

Mary: yeah and when he says that he is unfortunately reinforcing how the media often portray gay men. Like I think one of the things that made the AIDS crisis so dehumanising for queer people was the absence of love in how it was reported, cos like queer love and queer life was reduced to just irresponsible sex so that the government authorities didn't have to face the fact that they were letting people die because of who they loved

Ell: and like, one of the things we're trying to do here is find out about queer history and find our bisexual ancestors, but the truth is that there's just like this huge gaping hole in that history, thousands of our bi ancestors have been stolen from us.

Mary: yeah so we just have fewer ancestors, and fewer role models than we should

Ell: and fewer stories than we should

Mary: we're gonna finish this episode, by taking you a long long way back in time

Ell: back to Ancient China, in fact, in around 500 years BCE

Mary: a time where emperors regularly courted male lovers alongside their wives, where bisexuality, would you believe it, was the norm

Ell: and from this time period, during the Zhou dynasty, a beautiful story emerged

Mary: the legend of the Bitten Peach

[camp trilling sound, followed by daydreamy underscoring, sounds of tweety birds]

Mary & Ell: the legend of the bitten peach

Ell: once upon a time, there was a Duke. Duke Ling of Wei

Mary: and he had a lover

Ell: a lovely lovin' lover

Mary: Named Mizi Xia

Ell: One day Mizi Xia was strolling through a perfumed orchard with the Duke

Mary: suddenly, Mizi Xia's nostrils quivered, there was a particularly delicious scent in his nose, a scent more delicious than any of the rest

Ell: they walked further, before coming across a peach tree

Mary: the peaches hung heavy, pink and orange and gold

Ell: the Duke had to get back for an important meeting, but before they moved off again Mizi Xia quickly plucked a peach from the branch and took a bite

Mary: the peach was perfectly ripe

Ell: sweet and tender

Mary: the flesh not too soft

Ell: Mizi Xia closed his eyes and savoured the taste, it was so delicious he could hardly resist it and he went to take another bite

Mary: but then he stopped himself

Ell: 'Here' he said to the Duke 'have the rest of this peach, you won't believe how bloody scrummy it is'

Mary: and the Duke did eat

Ell: as he bit, his eyes rolled back in his head

Mary: and then the Duke looked Mizi Xia full in the face

Ell: 'how sincere is your love for me?'

Mary: exclaimed the ruler

Ell: 'you forgot your own appetite and think only of giving me good things to eat!'

Mary: now that's what I call lurv...

[Dreamy outro]

Ell: Sadly, aristocratic romance is pretty thin on the ground these days.

Mary: Aww

Ell: We just don't have no Dukes no more. Well we do, but they're all morally questionable

Mary: and ageing

Ell: and paedophiles

[laughter]

E: so how do you find yer own Ling of Wei now?

Mary: Have you managed to find love?

Christian: hehehehe! Yes, hahahah. Yes, erm. Ahem. Oh wow. Haha. On instagram.

Ell: hahahaha - great! Very modern

Christin: yeah. On iG.

Mary: hahaha amazing

Ell: that's so cool, do you feel like the internet is a good place to find other queer people

Christian: So, I do believe - especially for queer people - the internet is the place to be

[Pow! Theme Tune]

Mary: Next time on Life of Bi...

Daz: I'm on a side of tiktok called the 'alt' tiktok

TikTok audio of a young american woman: you're attracted to men though too right?

**retching sound* yeah*

Connie: I just wanna like to put forth a good message and um try and relate to other people

Audio of Ell and Mary attempting to learn a TikTok dance:

Mary and Ell: I'm bisexual

I like women and men - smack!

Mary: she goes duh

Ell: she like circles her arse then slaps it

Samantha: it took me 24 years of my life to realise that being bisexual for women is mostly just hatefully enjoying the presence of some men and then like being really terrified of women.

[Theme tune ends]