

PORTIA

on anorexia, coming out and Ellen

Portia DeGeneres has come a long way from troubled young actress to successful, openly gay and happily married star, with an autobiography due out soon. Here, she talks to **Juliet Rieden** and we preview her new book.

My knees went weak and I felt like I was shot through the heart with an arrow," says Portia DeGeneres, recalling the most important moment of her life, the one that changed everything. It sounds like a line from a Mills & Boon romance, but their eyes literally did meet across a crowded room – actually, at a photo shoot in Hollywood. Though both were in relationships at the time, that was it, they had to be together. This is the moment when Portia met her wife-to-be Ellen DeGeneres and sparks were definitely flying.

"I never thought I would experience that kind of feeling, being a lesbian," says Portia. "That overwhelming

experience of seeing someone across a room and falling in love with them."

Ellen retells it in much the same light. "We were just supposed to be together," she told a US magazine not long after.

They'd actually met three years earlier, backstage at a rock concert, when Portia had plucked up the courage to buy Ellen a drink. "I thought she was the most amazing person I'd ever met," Portia recalls.

She weighed 76kg then, the heaviest she'd ever been, and she's still amazed to this day that Ellen didn't notice. "Ellen says she can't remember me being heavy. But then she doesn't see it at all. She just saw who I really was – she liked my brain."

Ellen invited her back to her house that night to party on with a group of friends,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRIAN BOWEN SMITH, STYLING BY KELLEN RICHARDS, HAIR BY JENNY CHO, MAKE-UP BY LINA HANSEN, MANICURE BY ASHLIE JOHNSON AT THE WALL GROUP. PORTIA WEARS KAI AAKMANN, PRPS JEANS, VALESKA NECKLACE, NEIL LANE RING. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEE.



"Unless you are truthful and honest, all kinds of things can go wrong in your life," says Portia DeGeneres who retains her de Rossi surname for work.

but Portia was still hiding her sexuality from the public and didn't have the courage to follow through. "I was too nervous," says Portia. "I don't regret it, though, because clearly it wasn't the right time for us to be together.

"We both really, really liked each other and there was definitely a lot of chemistry there, but it was a ridiculous thought for me to be closeted and terrified of being discovered, and then date the most famous lesbian in the world. It wasn't going to happen.

"I had such a long way to go before I could even be seen in public with a woman, much less be seen in public with *that* one," she adds, laughing.

Yet, by December 2004, things were very different. Both Portia and Ellen freed themselves from their relationships and a passionate courtship ensued. Next came a proposal from Ellen, complete with a three-carat pink diamond engagement ring. "Ellen knew that it was important to me to have an engagement ring and I love diamonds," coos Portia.

Then, on August 16, 2008, the pair jump-started their new life with a marriage ceremony on the lawns of their Beverly Hills home, with both mothers – Betty and Maggie – crying as their children sealed their love for all the world to see. Finally, in September this year, Portia legally adopted her wife's name to become Mrs DeGeneres. The fairytale was complete.

There's a lot of the fairytale princess about Portia, the pretty, gangly girl from Grovedale, Geelong, with fabulous long blonde tresses, who passionately pursued her dream to be "exceptional", nailed a career, first as a model and then as a Hollywood actress,

WEDDING DAY
Portia and Ellen's wedding day was "magical", taking place on the lawn of their Beverly Hills home, with family and close friends present.



and ended up winning the heart of adored American talk show host Ellen DeGeneres.

Yet Portia's road to happiness wasn't a fairytale at all. It involved a gruesome and lengthy struggle with anorexia, bulimia and crippling self-loathing. Fuelling that illness was a desperate suppression of her sexual identity, so stifling that she was prepared to kill herself rather than face a life of secrets and lies, and lack of acceptance from those she held dear.

And then, stripping the icing from that perfect wedding cake, is the painful irony

that three months after Ellen and Portia sealed their love, poster girls for a brand new world of tolerance for same-sex unions, the state of California denounced gay marriage. While their union remains legally valid, the state they live in has since legislated that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. As Portia would say, "Seriously?!"

I am in Portia and Ellen's home in Beverly Hills. Portia is sitting cross-legged on one of the huge comfy cream sofas in their living room. In her lap is Wolf, a fluffy white Maltese-poodle mix, who couldn't be less lupine, and opposite on another sofa lounges Mabel, a black standard poodle with an endearing habit of gently belching when she's at her happiest. The home, while certainly impressive, is not showy or grand. There are books everywhere and tasteful statues, art and artefacts conjure an aura of informed worldliness. This is a place of quiet contemplation, as well as domestic bliss. It is here Portia wrote the large part of her new autobiography *Unbearable Lightness: A Story Of Loss And Gain*.

The book is surprising. It is not only a candid account of the actress's dark descent into anorexia, but it also pulls no punches analysing her complex relationship with her

mother and long battle to come out of the closet. This is from a woman who has spent the majority of her adult life shrinking from public scrutiny. So why did she write it?

"It was about looking at my past and really reliving the struggle that I had with my sexual identity and with my eating disorders, because it really consumed most of my life," says Portia nervously. "I wanted to figure out what went wrong, how I got to such a dark place and how I got out of it."

It took Portia almost six months to complete the book and it wasn't an easy

"WE BOTH REALLY, REALLY LIKED EACH OTHER AND THERE WAS DEFINITELY A LOT OF CHEMISTRY THERE."

LARA PORZAK/GETTY IMAGES. PORTIA WEARS THE ROW CAMI, STELLA MCCARTNEY JACKET, PRPS JEANS, NEIL LANE EARRINGS AND BRACELETS.





Now happily married to Ellen, and a healthy weight, Portia's days of calorie counting and excessive exercise are well and truly behind her.

ride. "Ellen kept her eyes on me like a hawk. She was concerned that I might get into old eating habits, because at the beginning it was a little tricky and I definitely had moments of dysmorphia [a preoccupation with a part of the body]. I was sitting writing and I really could feel my arms were thick and I didn't have a neck – it was like my chin was attached to my chest. I thought, 'OK, here we go'. I shared that with Ellen because I wanted to make sure everything was talked about, I wanted to keep myself in check."

Today, at age 37, Portia is definitely "in check". She looks happy, healthy and a long way from the bag of bones ridiculed in the gossip columns at the end of the '90s for her skeletal arms and jagged shoulders. She's happily chomping on fresh corn chips and guacamole with thick chunks of avocado made by the couple's chef Roberto. But it hasn't always been this way.

Portia was born Amanda Lee Rogers in the middle-class suburb of Grovedale in Victoria. From an early age she had dreamed of having an exceptional life. "I wanted to travel and to have a very important job that paid a lot of money. I probably watched *Dynasty* too much," she jokes.

Portia's father had died suddenly when she was nine and with her mother, Maggie, forced to go out to work to support the family, a vulnerable, impressionable Portia suddenly became aware that they weren't the comfortable family unit she thought they were.

"I went to a boarding school and I was surrounded by all these girls who had more money than I did and who had travelled overseas and done all the things that I thought were terribly important. I thought that the only way I could compete with any of them was to be best in my class or to try to become a model or to stand out in some way."

She was bright, consistently gaining top grades, but it was modelling that attracted Portia. "Everyone at school

"I THOUGHT I PROBABLY WOULD END UP WITH A MAN, BUT I ALWAYS SEEMED TO FALL IN LOVE WITH MY BEST FRIENDS."

was reading *Dolly* magazine and pointing to the girls in the magazines. And at 11 or 12 years old, it was everything. I was tall, I had long blonde hair, I was skinny and my parents had always told me I was cute. So I thought, 'Oh, maybe I'll be a model.' "

Portia's mother supported her and agreed to send her to deportment lessons and to fund her portfolio shots, and by the age of 12, Portia had managed to get herself onto the books of a modelling agency. With modelling came Portia's first entry into the world of dieting. "By the end of my first year of modelling I truly, truly understood what it was like to feel self-loathing," she recalls.

Starving her body for days before a shoot and then bingeing afterwards laid the framework for the next decade of Portia's life. Throughout those early years Maggie offered her daughter diet tips, even resorting to appetite suppressant drugs.

"I don't blame Mum," says Portia firmly. "How could I blame my mother when everything in society was saying 'diet'. I can't possibly say that this one woman should have had it all figured out and could have taught her daughter a healthier way of living, a healthier way to build her self-esteem rather than to lose weight and look pretty. [Weight-loss pill] Duramine was very popular. We went to see a doctor to see if it was safe. The doctor said it was perfectly fine. Mum never thought it was a great solution, but it was a solution and I was really struggling. After my father died it

was a way for me and Mum to spend time together. We had a common interest and I was thin, but I wasn't model thin. I needed to diet in order to model."

Back at school, Portia started to get attention and not the sort she had planned on. "I actually found a Barbie doll in my locker hanging by its neck, like in a noose, with all of its hair cut off, with messages like, 'I'm going to kill you'. I'm not sure if it was jealousy, but I had definitely got attention from the older girls because I was modelling."

Then came the double whammy; Portia began to realise she was gay. "Between the ages of about 14 and 18 I thought that sexuality was a very fluid thing," she explains. "I thought that a lot of people were bisexual. I thought I probably would end up with a man, but I always seemed to fall in love with my best friends. And after a series of mini heartbreaks, I came to the realisation that if I was ever going to fulfil this fantasy in my head of running away with a woman and living in a house together, that woman would have to be a lesbian. Therefore I was a lesbian."

When Portia was 16, Maggie discovered *The Joy Of Lesbian Sex* under her daughter's bed and Portia was forced to come out to her mum. Her response is probably the most damaging thing that happened to Portia at that time and set her on a path to near self-destruction. "It wasn't great and I think that she really regrets how she reacted," says Portia, squirming a little on the sofa. As we speak, Maggie is living just up the road. A few weeks prior to our interview, she flew over from Australia and is hoping to move to LA full-time to be with Portia and her son Michael, who also lives around the corner with his wife and new baby. "She has since really grown as a person and is a lot more accepting than she was back then," Portia quickly adds.

"It was very confusing because she'd say, 'It's not what I would want for you, but OK, there's nothing I can do about it.' But then she'd say, 'If you want to

PORTIA WEARS JUAN CARLOS OBANDO DRESS, JIMMY CHOO SHOES, SAMANTHA WILLIS EARRINGS, LE VIAN RING.

talk, talk to me. Don't talk to anybody else.' So I had my best friend who was my mum and my confidante and I could talk to her about girls; but she was also telling me that something was wrong and I had to be ashamed of it, because I couldn't talk to anybody else."

When Portia moved to LA in her early 20s, to pursue a career in acting following her debut role in the Australian movie *Sirens*, she was even more certain that her mother's counsel was smart.

"I very soon realised that it wasn't a great idea to be a lesbian and an actress," says Portia. On the set of her first US movie, she met handsome leading man Mel Metcalfe. As Portia tells it, it was a choice between Mel and the girl grip. Surprisingly, Portia ended up marrying Mel. "I was attracted to him and I was absolutely thrilled," says Portia with a laugh. "I thought, 'Look at that - I'm straight! I've struggled for so long and I've found somebody that I'm attracted to and I am going to try to make this work. I will never ever think about being with women again.'"

They married at City Hall in LA and moved into a *Melrose Place*-style complex, with Portia's brother Michael as their neighbour. "It was really fun,"

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says Portia. "I was crazy about this girl who lived next door, but I still had a great time with Mel. My brother had just moved to LA with his new wife Renee, who he adored."

However, it didn't take long for cracks to appear and life took a surreal turn when Mel left Portia for Michael's wife Renee. "I didn't see that coming," quips Portia.



Despite her personal struggles, Portia's acting career has taken off since her role in TV's *Ally McBeal*. She has since starred in *Arrested Development*, *Nip/Tuck* and *Better Off Ted*.

While her personal life floundered, Portia's career was booming, with a fantastic role in hit TV series *Ally McBeal* playing drop-dead-gorgeous ice queen Nell Porter. Almost overnight Portia was famous and with it came the sort of celebrity scrutiny she found unbearable. Portia was already obsessed with her weight, but this new role in the spotlight catapulted her into full-blown anorexia. When not at work she exercised every waking minute, reduced her calorie intake to as little as 300 a day, and whenever she did indulge in a glass of wine, or binged on lollies or nachos, she vomited them right back up. She hired a

nutritionist to help her lose weight but instead of listening to her advice she lied about her food intake, even going to the pains - and they were excruciating - to create a false food diary to back up her claims. Portia was in trouble and her account in the book is brutally honest and horrific to read.

"It took a long, long time for me to think that I had a problem," she says today. "I was around 90 pounds [40kg] and I remember feeling very afraid of food, but I would dream about food every night. I didn't want to walk past pizza restaurants because that would make me remember what it was like to

PORTIA WEARS THE ROW CAMI, L'WREN SCOTT TOP, PRPS JEANS, JIMMY CHOO SHOES, M.C.L. BRACELETS.



SIRENS

In 1993, Portia made her first foray into films. The Australian production also starred Hugh Grant, Elle Macpherson (top) and Kate Fischer (above).



ALLY McBEAL

Nell Porter (left) was her breakthrough role in the US.



AMERICA'S PRINCE: THE JOHN F. KENNEDY JR. STORY
Portia as Carolyn Bessette in the 2003 telemovie.



BETTER OFF TED

In this 2009 series, Portia played the ditzzy vice-president of a large industrial corporation.

eat pizza, and I was truly afraid that I was going to be overcome with the urge to binge and that if I started bingeing then I just wouldn't stop."

This pilgrimage of pain came to a head when a frighteningly thin Portia headed home to Geelong for Christmas. The extract on the following page shows what happened. Portia's mother and brother broke down, convinced she was trying to kill herself. "I remember thinking, 'Why am I not feeling guilty for making my mother so unhappy?'" says Portia. "Then I realised it was the first key to unlock that conversation. 'I need to be gay, you need to be okay with it. I need to be able to come out, because if I don't I'm gonna be sick and die. So it's one or the other.'"

For Portia, anorexia was really about having to hide her sexuality and the battle was crushing her. "I felt like nobody understood what it was like to be me at that time," she says. "There was no gay actress in the history of acting. There was no gay leading lady that I could look to and say, 'Hey, that worked out for her, so of course it's going to work out for me!' Ellen came out the year before I started on *Ally McBeal*, and while it was really celebrated for a month, she lost her career very quickly after that. So I was watching her and thinking, 'Okay, now I really can't come

“ANOREXIA WAS MY FIRST LOVE, BUT IT HOLDS NO ATTRACTION NOW.”

out. She was the litmus test and it clearly wasn't going to work."

Ironically, when Portia finally got together with Ellen, none of that seemed to matter. "When I met Ellen it just didn't worry me anymore. Being that worried about my career wasn't as important as finding true love," she says, gazing out of the window onto the terrace where the couple married. "We had it here," she says smiling. "It was surreal ... so magical. The reception was out there and we put a long table beneath awnings. We had dinner out there and then we got married in the media room. It was amazing to see my mum teary-eyed. It meant so much to have her support me at my wedding after everything we'd been through."

Portia longs for more of Hollywood's gay community to come out and also for gay marriage to be legal again. When I tell her Australia's new female

prime minister has refused to back same-sex marriage, she gasps and says. "How disappointing."

Are kids in the future for this gay couple? "We've definitely thought about it and I'm keeping my options open, but I can't imagine Ellen and I having a child any time soon," she says. More possible, however, is a move to Australia. "I am dying to take Ellen to Australia," says Portia. "I've just been back and I felt that pull. I haven't felt that since I first left. But if I went back I would love to live in the country in a beautiful red brick Victorian farmhouse on a thousand acres."

As for calorie counting and exercising, Portia says she never thinks about it now. "I will never go on a diet and I will never for one minute of the day think about not eating something I want to eat ever again. Anorexia was my first love, but it holds no attraction now. I think it was the biggest waste of time. I wish I could get that time back. Writing this book was one way to try to make something positive of the really dark, wasted years." ■

Unbearable Lightness: A Story Of Loss And Gain by Portia de Rossi, Hardie Grant, \$35, is out on November 1.

Turn over the page for our exclusive extract from the book.

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Portia at the height of her illness: "I never actually looked in the mirror and thought I was fat. I remember thinking I have really thin arms, I can see my bones, but I still hate my thighs."

All of a sudden, I felt worthy of care. I was the one to worry about. Caring for a weak, sick child required a different kind of love. And in that moment in the driveway, I discovered that that was the kind of love I preferred.

... "Now, then." My mother glanced at me and then walked away, as if attempting to downplay the importance of whatever she was about to tell me.

"What's all this silly business with being skinny? Stop all this silly rot, all this carrying on and eat normally like everyone else, girl!"

A surge of anger bitter like acid flooded my empty body. *Silly? She calls your hard work, 'silly?' Why don't you show her what the silly business is all about, show her how silly you can be with your rot and carrying on. Get out of there, now! She doesn't care about you. She thinks you did it for attention. You're exhausting to her. She thinks you're gay because you want attention and to be different from everyone else and that's why you're thin. You're pathetic for trying to get sympathy. She's not concerned about you, she's sick of you.*

"I'm going for a run."

And with that I exploded out the door. I ran down the busy main street of Camberwell, narrowly avoiding cars as they were pulling out of their driveways. I picked up my pace and charged up the hill past the old people's home and the church and held my stomach tight and twisted from side to side as I ran down the hill towards the shops at Camberwell junction. If my Pilates instructor likened this movement to wringing water out of a towel, then I was wringing out all the acidic anger from my organs that became flooded with it when my mother dismissively called my hard work silly. I ran until I couldn't run anymore.

I stopped at the train station opposite the doctor's surgery where my mother used to work. I was watching my memories. I sat down on the wooden bench next to the taxi cab rank and imagined myself in a navy blue school uniform with permed hair, walking out of the train station and across the street to my mother's work, where I would wait for her to take me home. Why I would wait for an hour for my mother to take me home when home was only one more train stop away? Maybe it was because I could use the time to sneak off to McDonalds and eat fries and a vanilla milkshake, pretending I was waiting for someone to disguise my embarrassment. I was a model and so I could never go to McDonalds with my friends. I could never eat in front of anyone because it would be evidence. It would confirm suspicions that I wasn't helping myself and was unworthy of their sympathy.

As I sat on the wooden bench I became aware of how much pain I was feeling. I was not angry anymore. My mother's reaction was confusing and it made me wonder whether I had taken this whole thing too far. I wished I could just walk across the street to find my mother behind the desk in the doctor's waiting room, waiting for me. Then she could take me home.

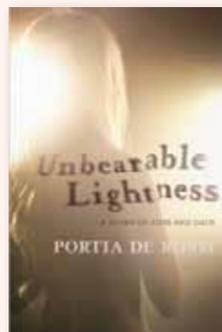


PHOTO COURTESY OF DAVIS FACTOR/DRPHOTOMGMT.COM

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT

"MAMA!" I GOT OUT of the cab and ran into my mother's arms.

"Darling." She pulled away from the hug and looked me up and down. "You're too thin!" She blurted it out in a way that seemed uncontrolled yet premeditated, like her nervousness had built with hours of rehearsal and had culminated in an explosive delivery.

... It was clear to me then that she was very worried. I was shocked. Did I look emaciated? There had been times when I looked in the mirror and thought I was too thin, but most times all I could see were the inches I still had to lose. If I still had fat on my thighs and hips surely there was nothing to be concerned about. But her reaction did make me wonder because worry was something that I had rarely felt from her.

... I took a deep breath and my eyes welled up with tears. I hated seeing her so uncomfortable, and yet simultaneously, it felt good. I had travelled thousands of miles in search of the opposite reaction, yet I suddenly felt myself preferring the one I'd received. Her concern felt warm, comforting. It seemed as though she was afraid of losing something very precious, and that something was me. ... I felt so happy I wondered if I had deliberately lost this much weight in search of that reaction.