Heidi Asexuality and Disability

I’m Disabled. I’m queer. But you wouldn’t know it to look at me.

I’ve had mental health problems since my mid-teens, and now live with chronic anxiety and Depression (and suspected ADHD, although I can’t seem to get assessed for this). They’re very real and very hidden Disabilities: I’m great at masking it all with a cheery smile and upbeat persona. What you don’t see is the nauseating anxiety, the utter despair with no hope of it getting better, the panic, the exhaustion, the impulsive jittery energy that makes it impossible to focus, the mental white-outs. The only trace of them is when it gets too much and I call in sick, or, worse, end up in A&E.

I’m Asexual. Asexuality is probably the least known and most misunderstood queer orientation: it’s a lack of sexual attraction, rather than the existence of non-heterosexual attraction. Different people under the ‘asexuality umbrella’ may experience this slightly differently. ‘Demisexuals’ experience occasional sexual attraction after forming a deep emotional bond with someone; ‘aromantics’ experience neither sexual attraction nor romantic attraction; ‘homoromantic asexuals’ experience romantic attraction to the opposite gender but no sexual attraction to any gender … there’s lots of different shades of Ace! It’s often dismissed as ‘a phase’ or a symptom of an underlying disorder, or used as part of a discriminatory stereotype. Such as … Disability.

Before I knew about asexuality, I bought into those ideas. Everyone naturally experiences sexual attraction to any or all genders, so if you don’t, there’s something ‘wrong’ with you. Maybe it’s your hormones, or your development during puberty, or some underlying psychological trauma. Throughout my late teens and twenties I assumed that I was ‘straight’, but wasn’t experiencing attraction because of my mental illhealth, and that once I’d recovered from my mental illness, I’d start to experience attraction. I tried dating, tried working out to build a relationship, couldn’t understand why everyone else just seemed to ‘get’ how the dating game and attraction worked, felt increasingly depressed and infantilised because I couldn’t ‘grow up’ and find a partner like a ‘proper adult’, just like my mental health problems meant that I had to keep repeating years at university and struggle to leave home.

Of course, none of this was – or is – true. I’m not Asexual because of my chronic mental illhealth, I’m not a ‘child-adult’ because I’m Asexual, and my Asexuality isn’t a ‘problem’ to be ‘fixed’. My mental illhealth is hidden but real Disability, not an illness which I haven’t tried hard enough to recover from because I was too childish and didn’t want to grow up and be a responsible adult. My Disability and my sexuality aren’t linked; they’re two separate parts of who I am. I’m in a relationship, and not feeling any particular sexual attraction doesn’t make it less valid. I don’t need to judge myself against a fictional, heteronormative, ableist idea of what an ‘adult’ is and when you should have ‘achieved’ certain lifecycle milestones. If there had been better representation of hidden Disabilities, Asexuality, and of the diverse sexual orientations of Disabled people, I might have reached this point sooner. But I’m here now, and I can learn to live, and maybe even thrive, as an adult in my own, queer, Disabled way.