

## WHEN GAY IS THE NEW STRAIGHT

“Quick, I’ve got to write a poem. Give me your pen.” Nancy springs out of the front seat of her car. She yanks a black marker from my hand, nearly breaking my fingers. Not that she notices. She’s interrupting her own wedding vows to scribble on an empty coffee container, overcome by her need to compose. She doesn’t look like the bohemian type. She’s dressed in khakis and Gore-Tex, a regulation Chap Stick dyke if I’ve ever seen one, but of course, clothes don’t *always* make the person.

I should know. I’m dressed in a white, flared polyester jumpsuit with a chunky belt, Elvis in his Las Vegas period. My outfit is a perfect facsimile of Elvis’s Chinese Dragon suit, covered in intricate beading designs that I sewed myself. A white scarf ensnares my neck and a gold medallion nuzzles my chest. Unlike Elvis, I keep my chest shaved. There are limits to what I will do for this job. In a former life, I lived in Toronto, where I partied too much and worked as a corporate temp. Now I live in Sudbury, a city that resembles the cratered surface of the moon, a wasteland in which vegetation has been decimated by logging and acid rain. I impersonate the King for my job, performing

weddings for my Uncle Joe's drive-through wedding chapel specializing in elopements. At \$99.99, his wedding ceremony is cheaper than going to city hall.

I have a slight resemblance to Elvis. I have his dark, expressive eyebrows, a fullness to my lips and softness to my cheeks, sparkles of femininity that in my twinkly days made me a man magnet, but have turned to puffiness now that I'm on the wrong side of thirty. My Uncle Joe, in his heyday, was a better impersonator. Now he's too old to be Elvis, even in his bloated, coke-addled days.

Sylvie, the "groom," a short French-Canadian woman who has selected black jeans and a long-sleeved white shirt for her big day, gets out of the car to inspect the plastic garlands of flowers surrounding my booth, the Crystal Wedding Chapel. Two kids remain strapped in the back seat, faces and hands twitching as if they have Tourette's, calling to Nancy, clearly their biological mother, no doubt from an earlier heterosexual union: "Mom, I want to go to Burger King! Mom, he stole my toy! Mom, do you have to write a poem?" The kids are delegates at an attention deficit disorder conference.

I glance at my watch. I have another couple booked in a quarter of an hour. Fridays are always busy. I hope Nancy is writing a haiku. Her need to write reminds me of the men (and they always seem to be men) who aim video cameras with the intensity of a sniper, taping weddings and the kids' birthday parties I also do. When recording your experience is more important than having your experience, something is wrong. I'm not sure why, but this videotaping feels like gathering evidence for a future cover-up.

Nancy waves her poem in the air and announces she'll read it before she and Sylvie put on their rings. I suggest that the two of them might want to get back into their car

first. My tone must have been off, because Sylvie whips her head around at me like a terrier catching the sound of an intruder. Nonetheless, they get into the car, Sylvie opting for the driver's seat. Nancy puts one hand on her chest and reads her poem in a singsong voice: "You give me love that burns / A sunbather hopping across hot sand / Your hand enters / canyons of my desire / Our journey of love transcends time and place." Sylvie watches her with the smitten benevolence of someone who is whipped as hell.

"I pronounce you partners in life," I say. They are my first same-sex couple, now that marriage is legal for gays in this province. I redrafted the standard vows with care, made sure every sentence was inclusive. When gay marriage first became legal, I was actually quite sincere in looking forward to marrying gay men and lesbians. I thought it might be an opportunity for me to be more sincere generally, as if all that was wrong was not the ceremony itself, but my exclusion from the process. I wanted to stop watching the groom, thinking, Yum—what a waste: I wanted to stop trashing the bridesmaids' dresses in my head, and making them over with my own, much improved designs. Yes, even though this is a drive-through, there are still often bridesmaids. I thought I might be moved for a change, but it doesn't happen. As I watch Nancy slip a silver band over Sylvie's finger, I think, *Just Assimilated*. What will happen to desire when gay becomes the new straight? Am I being bitchy, or is it just that my first gay customers are such a tiresome cliché?

In the afternoon, I get a call from a babbling woman. She wants to book a wedding. The problem is, she twitters, she isn't sure her boyfriend will agree to marry her. She pleads to propose this weekend.

Honey, if you gotta pop the question, it ain't gonna

happen, I think.

“He’s always said his family is the reason he doesn’t want to get married. Because they’re Finnish, they’ll insist on a huge, expensive wedding with relatives coming over from Finland, and we’ll have to eat rye bread and herring. So I thought . . .” She pauses for a breathy titter. “What if we just elope? I mean, his family can’t be mad at him forever. Especially if we have a baby. I mean, my boyfriend really wants kids.”

I reach for the appointment book. “If you want a quick and dirty wedding, this is the place.”

She giggles again. “Well, I hope it’s not dirty. My boyfriend is Mr. Clean. His apartment is spotless. And you know, before I started seeing him, I never bothered ironing my clothes. But he irons everything. His jeans. His T-shirts. Even his underwear. And he folds them. Now I iron everything. It takes a lot of work, but it does feel nice against your skin. Do you know what I mean?”

I close my appointment book. “The chapel is perfectly clean. But this is a drive-through. You don’t get out of your car. The ceremony takes only five minutes.”

“That’s okay, so does he.” She pauses. “Was that too much information?”

Before I can stop myself, I chime in, “Not at all. My boyfriend’s a preemie too.”

Silence. I guess I went too far. Coming out as a queer is a bad idea in the blue-collar land of fag bashers and fundies.

Then she says, “Is he also Finnish?”

There are a fair number of Finns in this part of Ontario. “Uh, yeah, he is.” The horrifying possibility that we might have the same boyfriend wavers in front of me, but I dismiss it.

She continues, “My boyfriend’s a big fan of Elvis. That’s why I thought of you. We met you when you performed at his twin nephews’ birthday party.”

I hold the receiver a little away from me, staring at it as if it’s a nuclear device about to detonate. I remember the twin boys from that party two years earlier when I couldn’t keep my eyes off Otto, a short man with an ass worthy of a ballet dancer. He had shaken his blond hair from his eyes to look at me, and then looked away when I checked him out. But I knew that we sang in the same choir. What I can’t remember is his girlfriend. Tracy—that’s her name—left no impression, was totally beige. But I know Otto will marry her.

After work, I meet Otto at a motel just outside town. This is what we do on Fridays during the horizon of afternoon and evening, our illicit but predictable cocktail hour. Otto likes to watch porn on cable television while I play with his tits. He pretends to be bored and indifferent while I pinch his nipples to pinpricks, lower my mouth over his dick and suck it until he moans.

Today I suggest we talk, which baffles him. Otto switches tactics, gets aggressive. While I remove my watch, he grabs me and orders me to bend over. When I protest (while wiggling my ass against his hard-on), he pushes me into the green chenille bedspread. He unhooks my belt and peels my pantsuit down. He likes me to wear my work clothes. He steps away, smacks my ass with the belt. Not having my attention makes him mean, and he starts talking to me in a way that would normally make him cringe. I get so hard that I don’t even need to touch myself when he slips his wrapped cock into me. He comes fast, as usual. But

he surprises me by being ready for another round after I come. He slides both his hands over my nipples, flips me over, and jerks himself off on my stomach. I lie back with my limbs gripping the bed, a quiet starfish, not chattering to him about my clients as I usually do.

“Is something wrong?” he asks. He hazards a guess. “Has your father gotten worse?”

My father has Alzheimer’s. I moved up north to help my Uncle Joe look after him. My mother died ten years ago in a car accident, so it was my Uncle Joe who first noticed something was wrong with Dad. Joe came home to a flooded house after my father fixed a faucet leak for him. My father was a handyman who could repair anything. He had made his living as an electrician.

I tell Otto that no, things are better with my father because he forgets that he forgets.

Otto nods. “Like retarded kids who don’t know they’re stupid.”

Otto is so up north. He doesn’t know better than to say “retarded” or “Indian.” Yet he doesn’t hate people who aren’t like him. A bit of hostility towards the Swedish for historical reasons, but that’s about it.

“I married two dykes today,” I say.

Otto stares at me. “You can do that now?”

“Don’t you read the papers?” I ask, knowing he doesn’t. I don’t even know why I’m being so catty. I’m not in love with him. I don’t want to marry him and persuade a member of the opposing team to inseminate for cash, or adopt a litter of Children’s Aid kids with fetal alcohol syndrome. What bothers me is that the question of taking our relationship to another level never comes up, even after two years of clandestine meetings in motels and one weekend in a city four hours away where we went bowling together

and shared chicken wings in a family restaurant. I've never had sex with anyone for a longer stretch than with Otto. Shouldn't passion count for something?

I continue, "I thought I'd be happy for them, but I didn't give a fuck." In the whole time I've been working at the chapel, only one couple touched my heart: a hunky Italian boy barely out of his teens marrying an older Aboriginal woman who made her living singing country western in the bars. Their desire was like a comet tearing a hole in the sky.

Otto isn't listening. He's looking out the window across the parking lot at the rocks, cracked and bleeding silt, dirt, and water. The city we live in was formed by a meteorite that seared a crater in the earth over a billion years ago. The debris and fallout material surrounding the crater became a rich mineral deposit. If I smash everything, will I be left with a gem?

"I think we should end this relationship," I say. Elvis has left the building.

On weekends, I look after my father because the live-in nurse gets two days off. I shower and dress my dad, brush his teeth, both his real ones and his partial dentures. I change his adult diapers. I show him where the cereal bowls are just as I did the day before because he can't remember. His brain shoots blanks; cell by cell, he's dying.

When my father was first diagnosed, he denied the disease. Then he got depressed, which he also refused to acknowledge: "Just lost some weight. Why you asking?" For me, his sequence of emotional responses was all too familiar because it was how he had dealt with my being a fag. When I was a teenager, he made me fix cars with him. I sulked and screwed the wrong parts together in acts of sab-

otage he pretended not to notice. His anger erupted when he and Mom visited me in Toronto and met my nelly roommate, who really was just a roommate. My father left my house before he could unpack, while an emotional self-discipline I never wanted swallowed my words, my hurt, because boys don't shriek, they rage, because boys don't cry when they lose. The aftermath? A crater where there had been a family of sorts, absence where there should have been presence.

These days, I have to remind him he is my father, and sometimes I just don't want to.

After I dump Otto, I drop by the mall to pick up a book for my dad on car racing. For some reason, my father can remember being a kid, and he's developed a fondness for what thrilled him then: fast cars.

At The Shirt Shack, I buy him a T-shirt that says, "Been There. Done That. Can't Remember." A T-shirt made for good old boys who have had a few too many. The vendor doesn't realize he has a niche market in seniors suffering from dementia. When I give my father the shirt, he chuckles. That's my cue; I laugh too. But then he cries, and I feel terrible.

"I'm afraid," he says.

I look at him, a scarecrow in his brown cardigan. He's slipping towards seventy-five, and his hooked nose looks like it's going to jump off the loose skin on his face. His hair is white tinged with yellow streaks, dog piss in the snow. We share the same build and features; I'm looking at my future. I pat his back, offer him a smoke. He puts his hand up like the sun is in his eyes. Recently, he's lost the desire to smoke. It's as if his adulthood and adolescence have melted away leaving me with an ancient child. It's the closest I will come to being a parent. It's the closest I will come to having

a domestic partner. Maybe it's the closest I want to be. It's not like legalizing gay marriage has made me want to go get married. It's probably a lot like legalizing pot: whether it's legal or not, you either smoke it or you don't.

On Monday, a woman turns up as I'm closing the chapel. I'm clad in my usual attire, ersatz Elvis, his King of Spades suit this time. The woman is wearing mismatched business casual from Goodwill and has dyed purple hair spun out like cotton candy. She looks like Cyndi Lauper's small-town sister who never left home. What's weird about her is that despite the getup, she isn't a teenager. No, she's closer to thirty, the unpopular office secretary that everyone wants to vote off the island and won't sit next to on United Way Pizza Luncheon Day.

The woman sticks her hand out. "I'm Tracy. We spoke last week. I just wanted to see you."

Before I can shake her hand, she starts crying, her liquid eyeliner striping her freckled cheeks.

"He doesn't want to get married," I guess. Otto's girlfriend. Heartbreak Hotel.

"I asked him if there was someone else. He said there used to be, and that's why he couldn't marry me. He said he could manage being bi. He could be my husband if he had a boyfriend, but he doesn't anymore."

"Tracy," I begin.

Tracy wags her finger at me. "No, I don't need to know the details. It wasn't too hard to figure out. There aren't very many gays in this town."

"You'd be surprised," I say. I hand her a Kleenex from a package in my pocket.

She wipes her smeared makeup, tilts her chin at me.

“You know, I didn’t want kids anyways. My sister’s kids are such brats. I don’t know how she stands them. If I’m at the mall with them for more than ten minutes, I fantasize about wacky Christians snatching them, kidnappers who wouldn’t interfere with them but who might teach them not to expect so damn much.”

I want to thank her for feeling the way she does, but instead I offer her a banality about not everyone being cut out for parenthood. It turns out a little goes a long way.

She sniffs. “My sister and parents feel sorry for me. They’re always telling me not to worry, that I’ll settle down and have kids, too. I want to tell them that’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Tracy, would you like to go out for a drink with me?” Tracy doesn’t realize it, but she needs to come out, too. She’s a born fag hag, strange and dramatic. I can’t help it, I like her.

Tracy’s eyes go slitty for a moment, carrying the suspicion people up here always have towards the unexpected. But even up here, some people realize the unexpected can be a gift, a geode in which sliced granite reveals the sheen of a gem. Tracy relaxes, gives me a tiny smile. “You’re on,” she says.