

Love rites

by Lee Lynch

How many of us have wished, at one time or another, for a means to formalize our loves, to publicly celebrate our bondings. Straight people may have something in their marriage rituals, may be adding a cement that strengthens the tie through a public demonstration of respect for the relationship and the lovers involved. On the other hand a ceremony may well, as its detractors argue, put demands on a relationship that weakens it. But for those gays who long to walk down an aisle . . .



Recently, my lover and I were invited to such a bonding here in Southern Oregon. It was a lesson to me in community as family. And in the community's power to affirm, to turn well-wishing into visible energy. I'm sharing it here for those who've never witnessed such a ceremony, for those designing their own, and for all you sensationalists who just love a wedding.

Rose, mother of one of the brides, had called us, pleased and proud. We were thrilled to be able to participate in this rural lesbian ceremony and on the big night donned the most traditionally wedding-like apparel we could invent. My lover wore her diaphanous, bright blue flowered caftan and pants combination. I, my thrift store chinos and black velour jacket, a new boys' size white shirt and a black tie with the word *dyke* blazoned across it.

The wedding was held in Elea's older farm house. She works a multi-acred ranch with Rose's help.

Now, Rose and Elea are a story in themselves. Rose has shown us a photograph of herself as a teenager. If I'd met her on a Greenwich Village street back then, I might have thought she was Beebo Brinker fresh from the farm. Except neither Beebo nor I had been born yet. Rose is at retirement age. She also was married. Because that's what one did back then more often than not. Over the years she had a son, a bright star in her life who was a talented writer and died in Vietnam. Fortunately, she also had Edna, a girl who seemed troubled, was more difficult, apparently, to communicate with.

Elea, who is Rose's age, married too, and the couples became friends. Moved out to Oregon at the same time. Rose and Elea owned a business and eventually became interested in metaphysical religion. They would do past life regressions together and kept discovering that they'd been close in other lives. Sometimes as a married couple. After a while it became clear to them that in this life too, theirs was the real marriage, not their conventional ones. They separated from their husbands and became lovers after thirty years of friendship.

So the wedding, in effect, took place at the parental home. And by this time, obviously, Rose and her daughter Edna weren't having as much trouble communicating. Edna had grown into a tall, strong-looking telephone

line repairperson vaguely resembling that early picture of her mother. When her mother came out to her, Edna, of course, admitted she'd been a dyke all along.

Among the guests assembled in the farmhouse were Pearl, author and Ph.D. at a nearby college. She wore a royal blue velvet gown with an elegantly embroidered bodice. Scottie, a retired computer chairperson, wore jeans and a crisp flannel shirt, her short white hair neatly combed into a butchy little wave. She'd arrive with Betty, the straight sister of a man active in the local gay organization.

Zintara, a tall, broad-shouldered, laughing young woman, wore a white Indian-style shirt and lavender scarf with grey cords and velcro-closure sneakers. With her was J.P., also dressed to the nines in red tie, pink shirt and jeans.

Jim, the official photographer who'd decorated the house opulently with forsythia, daffodils and wild plum blossoms, talked about his life. He'd lost jobs with the Forest Service (would he fondle young trees? Be susceptible to Soviet Forestry spies because he's gay?) and then as the clinical psychologist of a local school system also for being of the wrong sexual preference. Now he's exploring his spirituality, listening to his female side. He may not have any better vocational luck, but he finds great inspiration in feminist theology, which he sees as neither matriarchal nor patriarchal, but a blending of the best of female and male thought.

Edna and her lover Sharon, a Californian, were to be joined in a Metropolitan Community Church ceremony by Glenn Scott. Blonde, of medium height, with a stillness about him, Glenn had recently resigned as pastor of the local MCC chapter and was on his way to L.A. to become a student at Samaritan College. He hoped to go out to new communities later to build congregations. In his cream-colored cords, short-sleeved white shirt with reversed collar, he explained the rite he was about to perform.

"The Rite of Blessing," Glenn said in his soft, clear voice, "avoids the role model relationships in a traditional marriage. It's a model that works for gay people, encouraging us to make commitments to openness and honesty in our relationships. Its purpose is to affirm the relationship rather than lead people to make a lot of promises they can't keep."

He looked away to smile at those busily readying the living room for its new role. "Usually, the couple takes six months after a Rite of Blessing to explore the relationship. Then we perform a 'Holy Union' ceremony which is MCC's closest counterpart to holy matrimony."

The musicians signalled that they were ready. The guitarist wore a red shirt, black vest, black pants and black cowboy boots. Her lover Marty, in a checkered gingham dress, is deacon at the MCC. Both are also active in a fundamentalist Christian church where they are not out. Marty's daughter, in blue plaid western shirt and bandana neckerchief, was the singer. She cuts wood to earn a living, but also has her own, male, country western band. Her young daughter bustled about with a purple flower adorning her hair. "Are they ready?" stage-whispered someone and we all took seats in the living room.

While the musicians began "Could I Have This Dance For the Rest of My Life?" the brides entered, stately, with an excited radiance emanating from their nervous faces. Edna was resplendent in a brown, wide-labeled western-style suit edged in white piping. Her ruffled shirt protruded at the cuffs with light-catching gold cufflinks. She wore a brown western-style bow tie. Her lover Sharon was shorter, soft-looking, and her dark eyes sparkled over a herring-bone wool jacket and black slacks, a white shirt and short black tie. Rose stood beside Edna in a simple red velour top, grey slacks and white

necklace, while Elea stood next to Sharon in a purple velour top over dark slacks.

Glenn was on the other side of a long table decorated with a white cloth and flowers. There were more flowers behind him on his mantle. With a shy grin on his face he began to tell the story of this wedding day. Long before dawn that morning Elea had called them all to help pull a calf. Glenn had never been part of a calving before, but there he was, with the brides, the mother of the bride, Elea and Jim, up to their knees in mud, two pushing, two pulling "in order for that life to come forth." The cow and its calf would both have died, he said, just as a relationship can die without a life support system such as the one he'd been part of that morning. He likened the MCC rituals to that life support system. He urged Sharon and Edna to find their "best wholeness" and the rest of us to "send them energy."

The couple read a statement they had written in which they pledged to meet one another's needs, to love and not condemn one another.

"I love you," said Edna.

"I love you," answered Sharon. There were wet eyes around the room as they exchanged rings and the singer began "Let the Rest of the World Go By."

Glenn blessed the relationship; Rose turned to sprinkle rose petals over Edna and Sharon, saying, "I'm proud of you!" Elea then sprinkled her petals over them and all reached out to touch one another and Glenn while they prayed quietly.

Glenn sang then, closing the ceremony. The room became solemnly still until Rose laughed, reaching to hug her new daughter-in-law. In her western accent, Rose said, "I never thought I'd have such a *short* kid!" So the celebration began with laughter.

Champagne bottles popped and Sharon vowed to keep the first bottle of strawberry champagne forever. There, in the small

happy crowd, watching the couple open their wedding gifts, were Fundamentalist Christians, a Roman Catholic, Metaphysicians and followers of women's spirituality. Most of us were gay, but some were straight; men and women mixed comfortably. We were united in caring for this young couple's happiness and future. We were celebrating their love as openly as we dared, in ways gay people had to invent.

Pearl, my lover and I drove back in the dark through the monumental Southern Oregon mountains. Spring was beginning to make itself visible in the softness of the hills, in the smell of the air without a hint of frost. Questions went through my mind as fast as the telephone poles went past the car's windows. What had I just witnessed? What did it mean in my life?

If I didn't go through such a ceremony was my relationship with my lover any less? With one, would we stay together any longer? And what about Pearl, liking her single lifestyle? Was there no ceremony of affirmation for her?

Because it *had* felt good, that gathering of friends who brought gifts of love and luck to Sharon and Edna. Would it feel as good should my lover and I receive the blessings of our community? Wouldn't it be fine if our blood families would or could participate? And would we respect our love — love more deeply somehow — if we celebrated and vowed publicly?

But more immediately, what would happen to that night's brides? Would they make it to the Holy Union? It sure looked as if they would. Their happiness was very apparent, their delight in each other a joy to see. Then — is there a happily ever after for gay bondings?

Perhaps this public declaration will work for Edna and Sharon. How wonderful that such a ceremony can be a choice for them now, for all of us.

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