

Home for the holidays: Please pass the pillar of salt.

*Why should my love for another man be considered something from which "innocent" people must be protected? That's all it is: love.*

BY MICHAEL S. REED

**I**mpathize with those who run screaming from the Christmas frenzy. I join in the chorus of those who hate shopping and loathe Christmas carols. I have been called a Scrooge, a Grinch and all the other epithets reserved for those of us who face the world with a reasonable mind at this particular time of year.

Perhaps it is the sense of obligation that those



Salvation Army bell ringers clang into me while they stand there, ringing for the poor, as I bustle into Meier & Frank with my charge card squeezed in my hot little hand. Perhaps it is the knowledge that no matter how I try to budget, I will owe enough after the holidays to feed a small Third World country for a month.

Then there's family.

This will be the first year I bring a lover home for the holidays.

I told my mother that my lover would be coming with me to spend Christmas with our family this year. Accustomed by now to my habit of interjecting odd circumstances into her life, she hardly batted an eye. In fact, she wanted to know what kind of gift would be appropriate for him.

But then we began talking about the logistics involved. Since my grandmother will be there also, I wondered how to approach explaining my lover's presence. Mother maintained that Grandma needn't know anything, that my lover could simply be introduced as my roommate because Grandma is old and wouldn't understand. I theorized that maybe it was because she was old that she just might understand. That theory was received with one of those small, tinkling, skeptical laughs for which my mother is renowned. It was, however, a laugh I responded to by saying, "It's bad enough having to keep a secret life to strangers. My family deserves better than lies."

And once again I realized a vast, hurting gap between myself and my family.

She has said to me, "You're growing away from us." I can only nod. I know, I know.

How much simpler everything would be if — instead of bringing my beautiful man home for Christmas — I was bringing a woman I was to marry. We wouldn't have to face this gap. Or would we? A fiancée could present a whole new set of conflicts. The fiancée might very well resent the place my mother holds in my heart. In fact, it's a sure bet. My mother is a tough act for most women to follow.

The gap becomes wider all the time because of my growing intolerance of those who cannot accept me for who and what I am. Politics aside, it boils down to self-respect. I want to walk through this world with my head held high. I want to forget fear. There's not enough time to accomplish all that must be accomplished, so there is no point in wasting precious time by keeping secret that which is integral to my identity. Especially with the family for

whom — according to my mother — the adage of blood being thicker than water is something I should remember.

She has said that what goes on in my bedroom is my business and she doesn't understand why it's necessary to tell people.

I've heard the argument before. I've been told, "Well, I don't go around telling everyone that I'm heterosexual, why is it so important that everyone know you're homosexual?"

I feel the need to tell people I am gay simply because I resent the assumption that I might be a heterosexual.

And the point isn't what my partner and I do in the bedroom. The point is, we're gay, which is not simply a matter of sex. It is a matter of love. To present my partner as my roommate is an aching misrepresentation that devalues what we mean to each other. It implies that what we have is something to be ashamed of, to hide.

Why should my love for another man be considered something from which "innocent" people must be protected? That's all it is: love. It's waking up beside him and the fact that his is the first face I see in the morning and the last face I see at night. It's someone with whom I may dance, do laundry, fight with, and fix suppers for. It is, quite simply, someone with whom my life can be shared.

My mother is a beautiful, intelligent, compassionate woman. She has been there when I needed her. She has asked very little of me, and now she is merely asking for a peaceful Christmas. There is a part of me that wants to believe it is a reasonable request. And although she is not asking me to lie directly, she is asking me to just omit certain details. She would like my lover and I to behave as though we're roommates, not lovers (this, although specifically for grandmother's well being, would make her and my father infinitely more comfortable).

That means — in order to keep up a good front — we must kiss in secret, not hold hands, and be careful what we talk about. I have become less adept at deception, especially when my lover (who does not worry about these things) touches me and — in order to keep up the front — I move away. I do not like myself much when I do that. It does very little for my self-respect.

So the quandary I face, which continually pulls me farther away from my parents, is that — in order to be a dutiful son — I must provide a pretense in a place where it shouldn't be necessary. It makes Christmas an event which leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I hate to lie by pretending to be something that I'm not.

But, I tell myself, at least my mother and I still communicate. Many gay children do not have that luxury with their parents. I tell her how I feel, she tells me how she feels. Sometimes we hurt each other with the things we say. I place my gayness in a positive light. She believes it is a weapon I wield to cause pain. Neither of us is willing to budge. It doesn't, however, stop me from loving her, or her from loving me. Like any long-term relationship, it just makes the loving a trial sometimes.

So, I am torn. To be a dutiful child, I must give up more than a little self-respect. And I cannot help but thinking that if I give this one thing, I will be spending more than I can afford. It will mean I truly am a stranger in a place I once called home.

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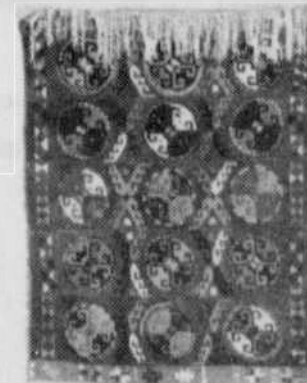
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