

What It's Like To Be Gay In Roanoke

Interviews With Homosexuals
Reveal The Closet Door
Is Still Closed

By Stefan Bechtel

Editor's Note: Homosexuals who agreed to talk to The Roanoker have been given fictitious names in order to protect their identities.

A couple of bumptious puppies are racing around the little apartment John and David share in Roanoke's Old Southwest section. A little fishbowl in a macrame noose revolves slowly, reflecting the puppies' destruction: they go wrestling across the couch, into the ferns, around the coffee table and back into the ferns. John, fresh out of the shower, seems utterly undisturbed by the commotion or by the anxious chattering of several mice in a cage in one corner of the room.

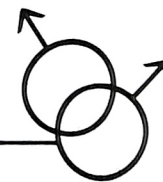
John, 32, is a slender, neatly bearded man who sits down in a rocking chair finally and holds his hands in his lap while he talks. During the day he works for a local florist and has lived in Roanoke all his life. David, his roommate, moved here two years ago from New York City, to work in local theater. He is 25, cool and articulate, with the devilish good looks of a born ladies' man. But though he fits the classic stereotype of the lisping, limp-wristed "queen" about as well as a lumberjack does, David has been married to John since shortly after they met in January 1976.

"We got a little flyer from this Episcopalian gay group with a form for gay marriages," David explains. "We knew a local clergyman who performed the ceremony. He asked us to keep the attendance down to 10 or 15 because the whole thing had to be kept kind of quiet. We exchanged vows and he blessed the event, which wasn't legal in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of our friends and each other, we're married. We're not bound by law or by convention, we're bound by our convention, so we just make it up as we go along."

"Before I was married to David, I used to cruise the bars a lot. But what David and I have together, I wouldn't want to share with anybody."

"Before I was married to David, I used to cruise the bars a lot," John remarks. "But what David and I have together, I wouldn't want to share with anybody. I tend to be a homebody anyway, even though David still likes to see other people."

The statement is flat and matter-of-fact. Their relationship seems to differ from more commonly accepted heterosexual bonds, whether of marriage or otherwise, in their



openness with each other about "seeing other people." One well-known meeting place for gays is Elmwood Park and the surrounding area, known in the parlance of Roanoke's gay community as The Block.

"We even go down there together sometimes," David says. "It's embarrassing, but we've stayed till dawn. There just aren't that many places you can go in Roanoke and really be yourself. After all the bars close, well, that's where you go."

The vice squad of the City Police Department has a different kind of parlance, and a different reason for being down on The Block after midnight. Though former vice chief Sgt. Jack Heath has denied that the vice squad has declared war on homosexuals, gays seem to agree that arrests on the charge of "Solicitation for Immoral Purposes" have been increasing in recent months.

"They'll never break it up," John says with a little laugh. "This crackdown on gay life has happened before. They tore down the Greyhound bus station thinking that would end the traffic, but it just moved. They locked up the men's room at Crossroads Mall for the same reason. In that case, I can see why people were offended. Nobody wants to go into a store or someplace and get approached by some queen."

"Lots of sordid things happen in the gay world, but there are plenty of sick straight people, too."

"You know lots of sordid things happen in the gay world, but there are plenty of sick straight people too," David adds. "I think it's just that this city isn't ready to accept gay people. Friends of ours are

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Transvestite performs in drag benefit show.

Photo by Stefan Bechtel

The Long Road From Man To Woman

The Horoscope, Friday, October 28, 10:30 p.m. (between the full moon and Halloween)

The place is packed. Festoons of crepe paper ribbons and multi-colored udders of balloons hang over the dance floor. The atmosphere is full of freaky celebration — dense, wild, a little rowdy. A big bearded man wearing cowboy boots, a shapeless black dress, a silver hard hat and a blonde wig which appears to have died by electrocution is prancing up and down the floor holding the microphone like a daisy. The spotlight winks in a little rhinestone pasted on one of his cheeks as he stops abruptly, mutters "Oh, pardon me," and doffs the wig to scratch the top of his head, which is almost completely bald. He looks up innocently as the place goes wild with wolf-whistles and cheers.

"Eat your heart out, baby! I'm not gonna get no fifty-dollar permanent!"

The crowd that's gathered for the show is as bizarre as he is: statuesque drag queens wearing elaborate bouffant wigs and full-length gowns float through a sea of smoke and faces — gay, straight, black, white, male, female and those who could pass for either one.

There are eight "girls" in the drag show, two black and six white, who lip-sync a succession of recorded Diana Ross talk songs, Peggy Lee show tunes and melodramatic torch numbers ending on one knee with expressions of grotesque anguish. "Misty Blue," "Did You Read the Morning Paper," "Pen In Hand" and even one called "I Love Being A Girl" are met with a chorus of hoots and applause and an unending

sauna bath of cigarette smoke. Periodically, people slip out of the audience to approach the "singer" for a kiss and return to their seats. The "girls" go on oblivious, unblinking.

A slinky black queen named Carolyn is the crowd's favorite. When she isn't onstage, she slips out of the curtained dressing room door to bestow roses on the "girls" who are performing. Some of them are amazingly beautiful. Several have gorgeous, slender legs, but there are moments when the whole thing seems ludicrously campy, like a bunch of kids shunted upstairs who've gotten into Mommy's closet. Sometimes it's a heavy jawline or a certain darkness around the mouth that gives it away, sometimes a square shoulder or the incongruous bulge of a bicep, or that moment of awkwardness when they raise their dresses to mount the singer's stool. None of them seem quite sure of their footing in high heels, and there are times when their dresses look ill-fitting and old-fashioned. In fact, sometimes the show seems in an odd way square, or at least the womanhood that is being parodied is without subtlety, crudely mimicked, a cliché.

Miss Gay California is doing a misty number, her nose up into the spotlight. A sibilant undercurrent of conversation rises around her, but she seems unaware of anything but the song. A leggy black queen wearing a shimmering full-length gown slit to the knee prances out onto the floor to hand her the mandatory rose. Miss Gay California holds it to her breast, gazing up rapturously into the face of some imaginary

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moving out all the time to Richmond and Norfolk where things are easier. But we have a pretty good time here, don't you think, John?"

John smiles and nods. The gestures seem odd though in light of the fact he was arrested just the night before down on The Block. Cruising down Bullitt Avenue on his way home from his mother's house, he caught the eye of a man in the park. (Unlike larger urban areas where homosexuals tend to communicate through stylized patterns of dress and behavior, which David calls "New York shtick," here in Roanoke gays recognize each other in old-fashioned ways: the "gleam in the eye", the double take, the "hi" sign, and other forms of sexual sign language any straight person would know about.) John cruised back around the block, stopped and arranged to meet the man in a parking lot. Later, when the two of them were sitting in John's car, John explained that he had a lover but the lover was working late that night. The man said he'd seen John in the bars. Eventually, in the course of loose and friendly conversation, John offered the man a joint.

"John, you're under arrest for possession of marijuana," the vice officer explained politely.

"He was really very nice about it," John says. "I mean as nice as you can be when you're busting somebody. The trial is set for December."

"I think they're supposed to tell you if they're vice if you ask them straight out," David says. "But you know that's a strange way to start a friendship, by asking somebody if they're vice. It's embarrassing."

(Actually, vice officers are not required to identify themselves if asked.)

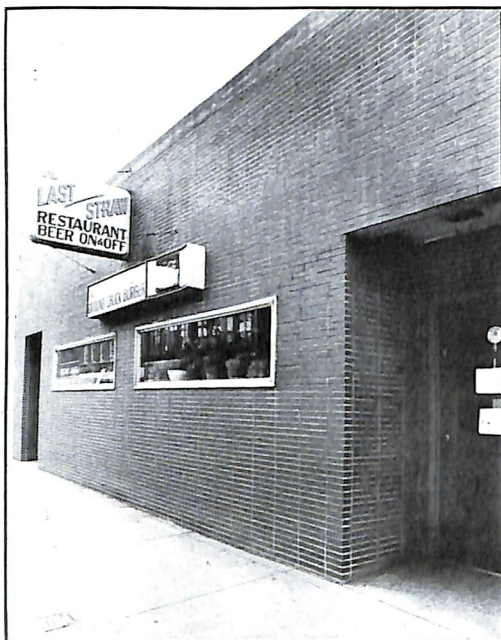
"I can't really understand who's offended other than the police department."

"I can't really understand who's offended other than the police department," John remarks mildly. "I mean, they talk about child molesting and all this, but straight people have to take the credit for most of that. And how many children are hanging round Elmwood Park at 1 a.m.?"

When the bewildered laughter dies, the talk drifts to the past. David says he got deeply into drugs for awhile, thinking magic would happen, that it would be all right to be gay. He explains that during a single week, he lost all desire to see any of the three women who meant anything to him, and hasn't been with a woman in the two years since then. "Why not? This is what I feel best with," he says.

John's experience was different: he is one of many who believe they were born gay, and have always been attracted to people of the

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same sex. "I consider my life normal," he says quietly. "This is what I want."

In recent years Americans have begun to hear from gay rights groups across the country, particularly recently, in response to Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign to repeal an ordinance in Dade County, Fla., which granted homosexuals equal rights to housing and employment. Though "gay rights" is hardly even an issue in Roanoke, where homosexuals are afraid

to fight individual harassment due to the threat media exposure might pose to their families, reputations and jobs ("Everybody's always up for promotion," one said), a group called FAIR (Free Alliance for Individual Rights) was formed in July of this year in response to Bryant's much-publicized and ultimately successful campaign.

On September 18, the *Roanoke Times & World News* carried a story about a proposed city ordinance to ban transvestites from appearing in public places. The ordinance, aimed at so-called "market queens," is an attempt to clear the City Market area of "men posing as women to sell sexual favors." The story stated that during the first eight months of this year, the vice squad used the charge of "Soliciting for Immoral Purposes" to arrest 77 male homosexuals, including the president of a large corporation, prominent doctors, a high-level federal administrator, a wealthy realtor and the organist at a local church.

The FAIR group . . . charged that the methods used by the vice squad constituted entrapment.

The FAIR group drafted a letter which was sent to the police department, city councilmen, the newspaper and news bureaus of local television and radio stations protesting the ordinance. They charged that

the methods used by the vice squad to make arrests constituted entrapment, asked who and what were being protected by the arrests, and expressed concern about what they felt to be violations of the civil and human rights of the gay population.

"What good is being done . . . by ruining the lives and reputations of the people who . . . are your next door neighbors . . . and, in some cases, are your children?"

"What good is being done," they wrote, "and who is being protected by publicly humiliating, embarrassing, and in some instances ruining the lives and reputations of people who teach your children, medically treat your wives, are your next-door neighbors, counsel your families, raise children of their own and, in some cases, are your children?"

Eight or nine members of FAIR, all male, are gathered in the living room at Roy's house. They are as diverse a group in appearance as in opinion and interest, ranging in age from about 20 to 45. Though most of them arrive in pairs, none fits the popular image of the effeminate hairdresser, the "swish," the "fag." This might be a Monday-night meeting of salesmen, barbers or CPAs.

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The entire gay community in Roanoke, much of which remains carefully hidden, is difficult to typify.

Roy, fortyish, dark and slender wrote the FAIR letter, and is one of those responsible for the group's existence.

"This group was officially born on July 10 in response to the feeling that a lot of gay kids needed it, and because of Anita. Gays are notoriously irresponsible about organizing, but Anita Bryant has done more to unite gay people across the country than any other single person. We're a civically oriented group. We'd like to donate to the United Fund, and we're trying to get lawyers and retainers now."

At first the talk revolves around the letter.

"One of the main things in the letter was the question of entrapment," says Gary. Forceful and talkative, he is in his early twenties and claims to have been "out of the closet since puberty."

"I mean look, if the vice used the same procedures in a straight bar, they would clean out every place in this town in one night. Imagine if you met a girl at Graffiti's or someplace, and she was coming on strong — eyeing you, acting very available, even touching herself suggestively — and you responded, and then she whipped out her badge and busted you. That's what the vice does in the bookstores."

"There was a case where the vice propositioned a guy at the Horoscope and actually took him to a hotel before he busted him," Roy interjects. "It was thrown out of court for entrapment, but believe me, less obvious cases happen all the time."

"Another thing we wanted to point out," Gary says, "is the incredible concentration of time and tax money that goes into busting gays. I think there are more squad cars around Elmwood Park than anyplace else in town."

"I'd like to talk about my lover to people at work or have his picture on my desk, but I can't."

George, who has been silently casting huge eyes around till now, speaks up.

"In that article it said there were three bars where straight people are made to feel unwelcome. Well, there are a hundred where gays are made to feel unwelcome. If they take those three away from us, what's left? I mean, I mean — that's what oppression is," he says. "It's having to hide, always being on guard, having this constant double life. People say, 'Why do you have to flaunt it? Why can't you just keep it to yourself?' Well, you see a man, wife and child publicly showing affection for each other and what are they doing? They're flaunting heterosexuality. I'd like to talk about my lover to people at work or have his picture on my desk, but I can't."

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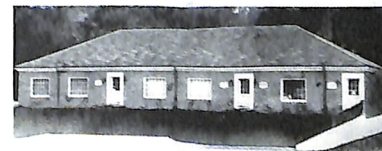
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"People see two gays holding hands and the first thing they think is, 'what do they do in bed?' " Gary says. "They see a young straight couple kissing and they think they're in love."

After awhile the conversation drifts into the kitchen, where Roy, wearing big flowery potholder gloves, is preparing quiche Lorraine. As the view through the oven window begins to disappear in steam, various questions circulate and are devoured like the eagerly-awaited quiche.

Are gay relationships less stable than straight ones? Well, there is probably more promiscuity among gays because there is no danger of pregnancy, and usually there are no children to protect. But then what is fidelity if only to protect children, someone remarks. Yeah, most gays who call each other lovers "trick out" occasionally, though there are instances of stable, long-lasting relationships among males. "A lot of gay relationships are based on friendship," says George, making vague circular shapes with his hands, "I mean, I mean if more heterosexual relationships were like that, fewer would break up."

Why do people feel so threatened by homosexuality? Someone suggests that the two main reasons are Biblical morality, which refers to homosexual behavior as an "abomination," and fear for their children. "I'd rather have my children taught by a known gay than a known bigot," someone says. It's just an unreasonable superstition, passed down by parents, someone else says.

George adds, "My parents didn't like Catholics and when I was a little kid I thought it was some sort of disease you could catch. When I found out it was just a religion, I was astounded! It's the same thing."

"All this hiding is making mental cripples out of half the gays in Roanoke."

How big is the gay population in Roanoke? No one can really say, since so few are willing to be counted. Guesses range from a low of 1,000 to a high of 5,000. Someone comments that it's easier for women to be gay without being noticed, since it's not as uncommon for women to touch, hold hands and even kiss as it is for men. If two women live together, they're old maids, but if two men do, the gossip begins.

How do you feel towards women? "I love women," someone says, "but I don't feel intimidated by them, and they don't feel intimidated by me." "Some PEOPLE intimidate me," someone else shoots back. Another points out that some gay men hate women, but "a lot of the ones who hate women the most act most like them. Lots of drag queens despise women, strange as that may seem." Others in the group feel that straight women feel more secure around gay

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men and that gays appreciate and understand them better than men who have other designs on them.

Even among themselves, there is obviously no hard-and-fast agreement on anything, no "party line," and few verifiable facts. In retrospect, the difficulty the courts have had in dealing fairly with a group of people as diverse as, say, all coffee-drinkers, seems a little more understandable.

The quiche is finally done. It is 1:30 a.m. As plates are passed around, George says dreamily, "I think all this hiding is making mental cripples out of half the gays in Roanoke. It's hell for minorities. You know, I like coffee houses, where you can just go and talk, but there aren't any. I'd like to meet somebody I could share painting tips with or just sit around and sketch with or something. I don't know. It gets lonely."

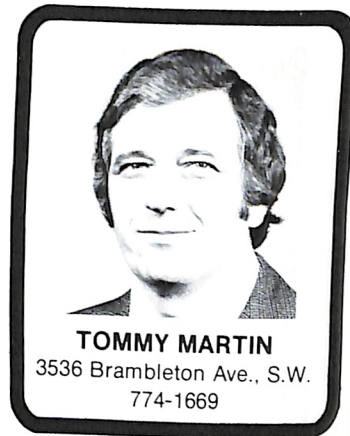
The American Psychiatric Association officially stopped listing homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder in 1975.

The nature and origins of homosexuality are imperfectly understood not only in the popular mind, but among psychologists as well. Though the American Psychiatric Association officially stopped listing homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder in 1975, still there seems to be little agreement as to whether homosexual behavior is learned or innate. A recent case brought before the Washington State Supreme Court illustrates the threat this uncertainty poses, particularly to parents. James Gaylord, a Tacoma high school teacher with an exemplary 13-year record, was fired in 1972 after acknowledging that he was a homosexual. The court ruled that though he was accused of no specific act, homosexuality is "immoral" and upheld the school's right to dismiss him. On October 7 of this year, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear his appeal, thereby tacitly upholding the state court's decision.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Gaylord case, aside from the hotly-debated moral issue, was the fact that he served as a "role model" for juveniles, and as such was a dangerous influence in the eyes of those who believe that adolescents develop a sexual orientation through environmental conditioning, rather than simply being born with one. Recent research on the subject has been ambiguous or contradictory, and it is this absence of clear, basic information that accounts in part for the ambivalence of court decisions dealing with homosexuality.

(A court decision based on "morality" or lack of it is equally questionable. The American Civil Liberties Union has said that "homosexuality, defined as the condition of being sexually and emotionally oriented primarily towards persons of the same sex, is a status or condition of being and as such cannot constitutionally be made a crime.")

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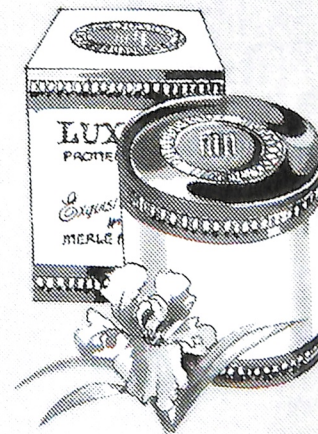


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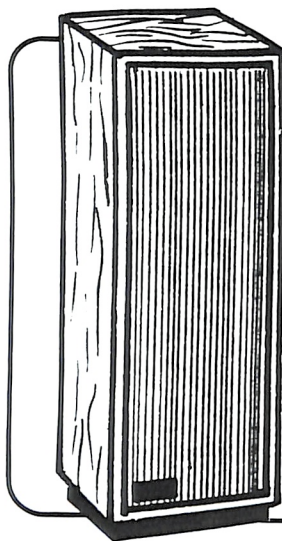
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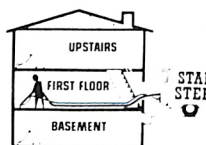


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In Roanoke, the ambiguity of standard legal proceedings in solicitation arrests begins with the word "solicitation." The distinction between cases in which a vice officer has been actively and clearly solicited by a homosexual for purposes of sex and those in which the officer by word or deed has lured or entrapped a homosexual is not clear. The Virginia Supreme Court defines entrapment in a manner which is extremely difficult to prove — that is, if the propensity to commit a crime did not already exist in the defendant's mind before his arrest. (In other words, if the arresting officer got him to do something he wouldn't have done otherwise.) If entrapment can be proven, (which is rare) the case is simply thrown out of court. A civil suit might be brought against the officer in such cases, but these are even rarer.

"I tell my men to get them good or not to get them at all."

"I tell my men to get them good or not to get them at all," says Sgt. John Barrett, present head of the vice squad. "He's got to TELL you what he's going to do, or make it clear in other ways, before we make the arrest. I mean there's nothing illegal about inviting somebody home to read poetry." In one case, the clincher was a kiss.

If it is determined that solicitation has actually occurred, judges in Roanoke generally take the case under advisement for 60 days, during which the defendant is asked to procure a letter from a psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, or sometimes even a minister, indicating that he has sought help and "showed progress." In a recent case the judge asked that the defendant, who was married and had children, "get himself straightened out, get back on the track."

It seems unlikely that "getting back on the track" is possible in 60 days, when it is questionable whether there can be any rehabilitation at all from a condition more complex than the courts are ready to recognize.

"The legal procedure implies that gays are sick, which I resent," one homosexual said. Even Sgt. Barrett admits that the arrest/trial/treatment routine is ineffective. "I realize that most of them are happy with their lifestyles and don't want to change," he says. "We're not trying to change them, we're not running them out, we're not going to bust the bars. My job isn't to make the laws, it's to enforce them."

Mike and Candice, who are old friends, are sitting cross-legged on the couch in Mike's apartment. On the table next to the door are two small framed pictures of young men in college T-shirts, and the walls are densely covered with pictures, including one showing a cavorting figure with the inscription, "I'm the most lovable pervert around."

Mike is a big, bearded man, 37, whose hands tend to fly away from his body like birds when he's talking. Candice is small and dark with a bright intelligence that often sparkles into laughter. Both of them are gay.

"I thought I was sick when I discovered I was in love with my best friend in high school."

"Like a lot of other gay people, I thought I was the only one in the world for a long time." Candice is saying. "I thought I was sick when I discovered I was in love with my best friend in high school. I was halfway through college before I actually had an affair with a woman, but I've come to terms with myself completely by now. I don't want to be straight. I want to be a lesbian. I can't be helped. I don't want any help, I don't need any help."

Are there many other gay women in Roanoke?

"There are lots of them — you'd probably be surprised. My friends are beautiful, intelligent people, mostly professionals — doctors, dentists, teachers, lawyers. I think it's true that women are less conspicuous than men, because we don't go to The Block, we don't cruise. Women are taught to be more touching and soft and emotional, too, so we don't feel so paranoid about expressing our affection in public. The only thing is that if two women go out for a drink someplace, they're labeled hookers or whatever, and then they have to deal with getting approached by some drunk man."

Do you feel you were born gay?

"Well, unlike a lot of my friends, I feel as if I had a choice, and I chose women. I dated in high school and so on. I've been attracted to men and have had good relationships with them, but my relationships with women have been so much BETTER. It's just easier for me to be with women, talk to women, love women — plus I've never wanted to be a mother. I'd probably be lousy."

"I myself am a true virgin," Mike laughs. "I've never been with a woman in my life. I've known I was gay since I was 10."



Both Mike and Candice were influential in bringing a group called GARV (Gay Alliance of the Roanoke Valley) into being back in 1970. For the most part, their efforts were unsuccessful and the group disbanded.

"There were eight people involved in trying to keep it together, but I think the whole idea was just a little ahead of its time. It died. We tried to become a non-profit organization, we tried to open another bar, but it didn't work. The basic idea was just to raise the consciousness of gays, but in the end it turned into a big social."

Mike tells the story of his arrest, which took place down on The Block. After a half-hour conversation with a man who got into

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his car after they'd initially made contact. Mike asked if he was a vice officer. "No! Are you?" the man said, appearing to be very frightened. Shortly thereafter he identified himself as just that, wrote out a summons and warned Mike not to come back, all very nicely. The court referred him to Mental Health Services, where the psychologist he talked to told him he didn't need any help.

"It's like, you get busted and sent to court and the court doesn't know what to do with you," Candice says. "I think the judges ought to be getting awfully tired of it, and Mental Health Services, too."

"A relationship, if you expect it to last, can't be based on sex. It's just the same if you're straight or gay."

Once again, the talk turns to something called "relationships," the current appellation for one of the most relentlessly sought-after, highly-valued, and elusive quarries known to man, whatever his sexual orientation. "What it all boils down to is that a relationship, if you expect it to last, can't be based on sex," Mike says. "There's got to be something deeper there — shared interests, friendship, love, or whatever. It's just the same if you're straight or gay."

Just the same if you're straight or gay — sometimes the parallels are uncanny. Even liberation, a term so over-used that the actual liberalizing of sexual mores in straight society is sometimes difficult to separate from the propaganda, seems to be surfacing in strangely transmuted form in gay society as well. "One thing you don't see so much of anymore is role-playing — you know, you be butch and I'll be femme," Mike says. "A few years ago, I think a lot of gays thought they had to, especially kids who were pretty new to it."

"I have a friend who's always going through the whole 'diesel dyke' routine," Candice adds. "She's always with these incredibly femme women and she thinks she has to be some kind of macho super thing all the time, ordering them around and all this. That whole thing seems to be dying down though. You see less drags in the bars, too. There's less pressure to play a part."

Candice sighs.

"I don't want you to use my name for this article — I mean my roommate told me I was crazy when I told her I was going to talk to you. But there are so many things I'd like my straight friends to know — even people I don't know — about being gay. I'm not 'out of the closet' as far as my straight friends go, or my family either, and neither are most of my gay friends. We're paranoid, scared, threatened. We don't want to jeopardize our jobs or our families. But we've got a right to live and work and have fun just like anybody else, you know?"



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