



Gay Valentines
cont'd from front page

category "romantic masculine" was one a gay man could use. I did not see any specifically "romantic feminine."

These rather bland generic cards generally do not appeal to me. I went over to the chain import store, where they have a more offbeat selection. The valentines had not been put out yet, but a salesperson opened the carton for me to look through. I was surprised and disappointed to discover many of the same cards I had seen at the chain book store, and not much more. Perhaps the import store does not pay much attention to seasonal cards compared to the general ones.

Looking further for more sophisticated cards, I went on down Church Street to a local cards, stationery, party and wedding invitation store. Again the valentines would not be out until next week, and this time the clerk did not offer me a preview. I looked over the long wall of cards for any clues as to the preferred style in this store, and they ran the full gamut from rude and crude to the most sugary sentimental.

For those who want a valentine that is as out of the closet as they are, Peace and Justice is the place.

Among the comic ones by Mik Wright were the only cards I had seen so far that specifically referred to gay folk, e.g. "Quit sulking Sarah. At least you didn't find him with a good looking man." Maybe among the twenty card companies the store uses will be some that have valentines for lgbtq customers. If not, then certainly the merchandise needs to be in the

wholesale realm before we can expect to see it in the stores.

For cards specific to our community, the place to go is the Peace and Justice store. When I went down there they were still doing inventory and did not have valentines out yet, but they pointed out the civil union cards made for them by a local woman. There were at least five racks with same-sex cards on them. For once, the straight ones were probably a minority. Plenty of nude same-sex couples available, though I never quite understand why the raunchiest ones are postcards, which must travel without envelope through the mail to the delight of the postperson and the mail snooper. Anyway, for those who want a valentine that is as out of the closet as they are, Peace and Justice is the place. ▼

Fran Moravcsik was pictured on the cover of last month's OITM and lives in South Burlington.

In Search of Queer Valentines

Lynne Barton finds a card for "Someone Special" in Rutland

I'm on assignment to take my lesbian self to local card shops, ask for gay and lesbian Valentines Day cards, then document the ensuing dialogue. I know that I will *not* find any actual gay/lesbian Valentines Day cards, but I'm looking forward to the consternation my queries might cause.

As I examine the Valentines Day card display at the only drug store in West Rutland I'm reminded why the idea of celebrating this "holiday" is something that makes me bare my teeth in a silent growl. I go along with the commercialized glitzy glimmer of obsessive shopping at Christmastime, at Easter purchase and look forward to eating *very* stale yellow peeps. But the Valentines thing is much more personal. Those card companies are trying to manipulate and control my relationship! They're trying to make me say I love you in a certain way, on a certain day and I resent that! I will *not* cooperate - I have *never* given my sweet woman one commercially made valentine, nor have I ever said "I love you" on Valentines Day.

Strike One

The cards stand in rows splashed with pinks and reds, roses loudly simpering, cartoon animals speaking canned verses of love. It is organized in sections labeled "Wife," "Husband," "Someone Special," etc. No "Alternative." No "Gay." No "Lesbian."

I wait in line to inquire after gay/lesbian valentines. I remind myself to be nice; the woman about to wait on me is probably not paid enough to deal with customers who ask uncomfortable questions.

I politely say, "I'm just wondering if you have any gay or lesbian Valentines Day cards?"

She says, "I don't believe we do. Umm ... we don't ... we don't handle the cards? ... Hallmark comes in and puts them up."

"Hallmark does it?" I ask.

"Well, uh, yeah, the people from the card company. So we don't order them or do anything with them."

"So you don't even order ..."

She interrupts with, "So I wouldn't..."

And I finish, "the categories?"

"No! We don't do anything. They come in, they take inventory, and they put 'em up."

"They put up what they see fit," I say, modulating my voice away from its confrontational tendencies.

"Right!" She says, and "So I *don't* think we do ... but ..."

"I looked. That's why I'm asking. Can you get them?"

"Like I said" she says. "We ... we don't order the cards! We'd have to talk to ..."

"We'd have to put a *special* order in?" I ask, encouraged.

"Well" she says, "We'd have to see if they even... *mmm* make 'em. And where ... they'd haff ... to get 'em and how much they cost. Yah know. Umm, your best bet would be to talk to the manager, but she's not here right now."

"When *is* she here?" I want to know.

"She's supposed to be here now," she says, shrugging a shoulder.

I thank her and walk down the card aisle toward the Valentines for another look. I notice a card in "Someone Special": two seem-

ingly genderless penguins holding flippers, waddling on a wavy beach. Maybe this could work? They *are* kind of quirky.

Strike Two

At another drug store, this one in Rutland, I look through the display of Valentines and see it's just like the one in the first store, though they are links in different chains. So, I'm sure the company will avoid responsibility about the kinds of cards they sell too, but my resolve remains solid.

"I can't find any gay or lesbian Valentines cards. Do you have any over there?"

"Um ... I don't think so ... I don't know ... they wouldn't have it under that title?" She rounds the counter towards the card display. "What would they have it under?" she asks herself. "I'm tryinta think what they would ... you know what? I put 'em up, but I don't know if we ..." She looks at me and grins. "I don't know if Hallmark got liberated yet."

"Actually I heard that they were!"

She says, "Well you know what it is - I think the bigger cities? ... might be more targeted for those kind of things. But, as far as that? ... no. I don't think ..."

And I, pointing to a section tag printed with "Mother," ask, "So they would just be with one of these red tags?"

"Yeah," she says, "under 'Someone Special' or somethin' like that. And if we *had* it, I'm guessing that ... certain ... titles like that? are being targeted at the bigger area stores. Maybe some of the New York stores or somethin'. But I, um, but I notice our, our summer promotions are coming in. We're getting lot more *Hispaniiic* ... and I don't think it'll do good in Rutland cause we don't have that big of a population but ..."

"Do you like, pick the categories that you want to have? Or they just send you what they think is gonna work?" I ask.

"I think the district managers and managers in Hallmark must get together and see what sells in certain areas? But, me personally ..."

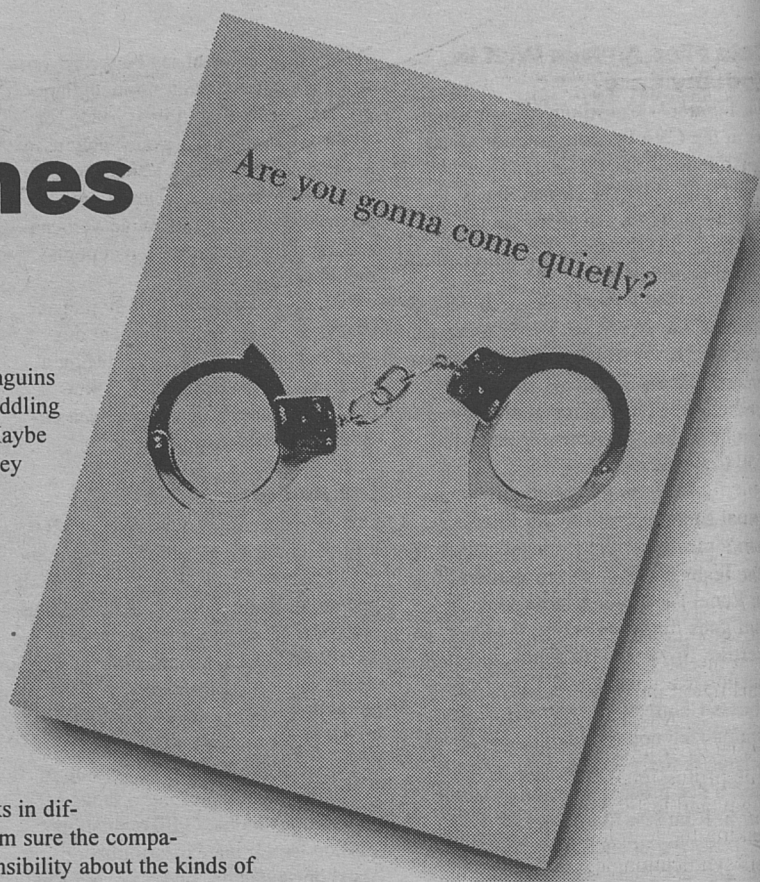
"You personally ... you don't do that," I say, nodding my head knowingly.

"I mean, I can make suggestions, like customers'll come in and ask me and if it is available she might try to get something in ... but if there isn't a big market for it in your area they don't consider it worth the money. Try a bigger - I mean a store ... with a bigger population. I would say some of the New York stores."

I notice that same penguin card and pick it up. On the inside it says, "We just look cool together Valentine!" and know my sweet woman would like me to say that to her. I replace the card. If that one has possibilities for queerness, then maybe there are others here too. But all I find are more cute genderless animals cartooned and photographed, all cuddling and lovey. Uh-uh.

And A Screwball

Well now. This is the art supply store that I've



patronized for years. The owners cater to me - giving me discounts and special service. I suddenly realize that I don't want to conduct undercover surveillance during a conversation with them. Besides, I'm scared to ask the G-L question. The only consternation here is mine. So much for fortitude. I loop the strap of my leather bag around my shoulder, shove it behind me out of the way and head for the card display.

These are not Hallmark cards. The label on the back of each one says "Zero Gravity, Recycled Paper Greetings." They are organized just like Hallmark cards, though. No "Alternative," "Gay," or "Lesbian" category.

I look in "Someone Special" and find a pink card with a photograph of handcuffs and the question, "Are you gonna come quietly?" "Here's one!" I say out loud to nobody. I'm shocked that I've actually found a queerish card. Inside, it says, "or are we gonna wake the neighbors?" Well!

Encouraged, I look for more. In fact, I pick up cards in each category, even in "Husband." The next closest card to queer I find is in "Friend" which shows two cartoon women dancing and singing and wishing happy Valentine's Day "from one living goddess to another!" Kind of lesbian, but *not* very queer. There must be a loose queer cannon designing cards at Zero Gravity.

I take the handcuffs and the goddesses to the checkout counter and buy them. Standing in line, I think about my capitulation and about the other places I could ask for Valentines Day cards, but feel the weary resignation that sometimes descends when it seems like change takes too long. I know the work involved to get us a real category in any Valentine display will involve much more than confronting clerks in small stores who say they don't even order the cards (usually). My endurance dissolves like unfired clay in a rain-storm leaving me with a pool of muck to clean up. I know I ought to go back to the drug stores and press those ladies about special ordering our cards. Next year.

On my way home I stop at CVS and get the penguins. I'm keeping them, the goddesses, and the handcuffs out of sight in my sock drawer. I'm kind of embarrassed that I bought them. Maybe I'll give them to my sweetie who is, after all, "Someone Special." Maybe I won't. Maybe I'll start a collection of Queerish Valentines. ▼

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