

Tom and Walter Got Married

The following appeared as the first item in the "Talk of the Town" section of The New Yorker of 20 December, 1993; it was accompanied by a whimsical drawing of a wedding-cake decoration of two men in tuxedos. [Attendees at the Vermont Coalition of Lesbians and Gay Men Conference may recall that Tom Stoddard wasn't able to debate the topic of gay and lesbian marriage with Paula Ettlebrick because of the event described below]

Tom Stoddard and Walter Rieman went shopping at Tiffany's last month. The salesman was polite but distant. After asking him dozens of questions, after trying on this one and then that, they decided to buy what Tom had wanted

from the start: two plain gold bands. Tom and Walter took the rings home to their apartment, on the West Side, put them in a drawer, and did not take them out until December 4th, which is the day Tom and Walter got married.

One morning a week or so before the ceremony, we rang the bell of Tom and Walter's apartment. When the door opened, both Tom and Walter were there, looking flushed and concerned. "Walter's lost the seating chart," Tom said. "He's going off to work to search his desk." "All right," Walter said, grabbing his coat. "I'm going." Walter, a thirty-eight-year-old trial lawyer, was recently elected to partnership at Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, the first openly gay person to achieve this. His manner is solemn and intense, and he has a prodigious memory: he can retrieve childhood anecdotes, slights suffered long ago, the minutiae of legal decisions concerning people generations dead. Losing the seating chart for his wedding was not something that Walter took lightly.

After Walter left, Tom dropped onto an overstuffed couch and sighed. Tom met Walter at a fund-raiser on Fire Island five years ago, and they moved in together six months later, but the last few days, Tom told us, had been a whole new relationship. "A gay man getting married has so many things to worry about," he said, folding his arms. "Even the small things assume hidden meanings and are riddled with symbolism." Tom, who is forty-five years old, is a lawyer, too, but may be better known as an activist in behalf of gay rights. Last spring, before the big gay march on Washington, he met Bill Clin-

ton at the White House to discuss, among other things, the Administration's position on gays in the military. For six years, Tom was the executive director of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, but he resigned the post in January of 1992, in part because he had recently been found to have AIDS. "Now I reserve strength for choice battles," he said.

The next big battle, Tom said, is gay marriage. "It's just so emotion-laden, so tangled with convention, that it is bound to test straight people more profoundly than any other gay issue," he said. So far, no state government has legally recognized same-sex marriages--Tom and Walter will be classified as domestic partners by New York City--but around the country a growing number of gay couples are demanding legal recognition. The fight for such recognition has progressed furthest in Hawaii, where the state Supreme Court recently found the law barring same-sex marriage to be a form of gender discrimination and in violation of the state's constitution. Along with the issue of fairness--if a man can marry a woman, why can't a woman marry a woman or a man marry a man?--activists stress various rights and privileges that are denied to gays because they cannot obtain a marriage license: the ability to extend American citizenship to a spouse; the opportunity to file a joint tax return; the chance to qualify for a partner's health plan. "If Walter and I were legal, I could go on his firm's medical," Tom said. "And, considering my illness, that's no small thing."

Though the Hawaiian case has been returned to trial court, a number of legal scholars have predicted that the state



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