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Young Gay Rites

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS
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LAST NOVEMBER IN BOSTON, Joshua Janson, a slender and boyish 25-year-old, invited me to an impromptu gathering at the apartment he shares with Benjamin McGuire, his considerably more staid husband of the same age. It was a cozy, festive affair, complete with some 20 guests and a large sushi spread where you might have expected the chips and salsa to be.



Erwin Olaf for The New York Times
VASSILI & MARC: Engaged. Vassili, 24, and Marc, 24, still live with their parents, who for months didn't know about their sons' impending nuptials.



Photograph Erwin Olaf for The New York Times; Prop stylist Jeffrey W. Miller
BENJAMIN & JOSHUA: In their living room in Boston. Each 25, they were sweethearts in college and married soon after.

"I beg of you — please eat a tuna roll!" Joshua barked, circulating around the spacious apartment in a blue blazer, slim-fitting corduroys and a pair of royal blue house slippers with his initials. "The fish is not going to eat itself!"

Spotting me alone by a window seat decorated with Tibetan pillows, Joshua, who by that point had a few drinks in him, grabbed my arm and led me toward a handful of young men huddled around an antique Asian "lion's head" chair. "Are you single? Have you met *the gays*?" Joshua asked, depositing me among them before embarking on a halfhearted search for the couple's dog, Bernard, who, last I saw him, was eyeing an eel roll left carelessly at dog level. (At the other end of the living room, past a marble fireplace, *the straights* — in this case, young associates from the Boston law firm Benjamin had recently joined — were debating the best local restaurants.)

As the night went on, the gays and the straights — fueled, I suspect, by a shared appreciation for liquor — began to mingle, and before long the party coalesced into a boisterous celebration. Joshua looked delighted. And in a rare moment of repose, he sidled up to his taller, auburn-haired mate.


"Honey," Joshua said, "we may be married, but we still know how to have a good time, don't we?"

Benjamin, sharply outfitted in green corduroys and an argyle sweater over a striped dress shirt, smiled. "Josh is extremely social, and he keeps us busy all the time," he told me. "I think we may be proof that opposites do attract."

"If it were up to him," Joshua said, "we'd barely leave the house! We're actually a terrific team. He calms me down,

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AARON: Divorced from a man at age 26, he's now dating again, a man who is 50 ("I'm done with the young ones!" he says).

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Erwin Olaf for The New York Times
Benjamin McGuire (left) and his husband, Joshua Janson, at their home in Boston.

and I get him out at night. I'll say: 'Honey, this is what we're doing. Now put this on.' "

"I think a lot of straight married couples start hibernating at home once they get married," Benjamin said.

Joshua kissed Benjamin on the cheek. "No, honey, that's just your parents."

"No, that's a lot of people," Benjamin insisted. "I think. . ."

"And I love your parents to death," Joshua interrupted, "but it scared me senseless to think that if anything were to happen, if you ended up in the hospital, *your mother* would get to make the decisions." Joshua looked at me with a devilish grin. "I dare her to try! I'd say, 'Woman, get away from my man!' I'm 24, I've been with Ben for a long time and we've been married for three years. I think I've earned the right — the responsibility — that comes with that."

Benjamin chuckled. "You're 25."

"Oh, God," Joshua said, looking as if he'd just been sucker-punched. "I keep forgetting that I'm 25. I think I'm probably having some issues around that number. Am I desperately trying to hold onto my youth?" He grabbed Ben's arm. "Honey, am I a gay cliché?"

Benjamin shook his head. "You can't be a gay cliché when you get married to a man at 22."

JOSHUA AND BENJAMIN had each only recently come out of the closet — and certainly didn't have marriage in mind — when they became friends seven years ago during Benjamin's freshman year at [Brown University](#).

Benjamin first realized his attraction to men his senior year of high school, but at Brown he tried to put it out of his mind. He flirted with female students and played beer pong with his straight friends. When that became too tedious to bear, he slowly began coming out to friends. Soon he was dating other male students.

Joshua, who was a freshman at Curry College, about 40 miles north of Brown, had also recently acknowledged to himself that he was gay. But unlike Benjamin, he had long experimented sexually with boys. In high school, he was a gregarious presence who was beloved — and protected — by the school's popular girls. While many students assumed he was gay, Joshua insists he was "the last to know" about his orientation, even though he spent an hour or two each night in [AOL](#) gay chat rooms and, he says, occasionally had furtive sex with members of his high school's football team.

Joshua broke through his denial before graduation, but he was in no mood to settle down with Benjamin when they fooled around their freshman year of college. "I was like, 'Well, that was fun, but I'm going to the gay club to find someone to do that with again!'" Joshua said.

"And I was like, 'Well, we had sex, so I guess we're dating now,'" Benjamin recalled.

Before long, Benjamin's persistence paid off: Joshua moved into his dorm room. "It was all very lesbianish of us," Joshua told me. "It happened pretty quickly, and we did everything but rent a U-Haul."

(Joshua was referencing a longstanding joke — *What does a lesbian bring on a second*

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date? A U-Haul! — that is supposed to satirize the way some lesbians rush into cohabitation. The joke is sometimes paired with a second one about gay men rushing into bed: *What does a gay man bring on a second date? What second date?*)

Joshua and Benjamin were deeply committed to each other by the time Benjamin graduated from Brown in May 2004, the same month that Massachusetts began issuing marriage licenses to gay and lesbian couples. Marrying “seemed obvious and inevitable,” Benjamin told me, because he and Joshua had no doubt that they would spend the rest of their lives together. “It seemed silly,” he said, “not to get married when we were fortunate enough to live in the only state where we could.” (Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire and New Jersey have legalized civil unions for same-sex couples, while Maine, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington, California and the District of Columbia allow domestic partnerships. More than 40 states prohibit recognition of same-sex marriages from Massachusetts.)

Both of their families were supportive. “My parents didn’t have a problem with me marrying a guy,” Benjamin said. “Their only question was, ‘Aren’t you a little too young to be doing this?’ ”

“Oh, my parents said the same thing,” Joshua huffed. “But you know what I told the parental units? I said, ‘I don’t want to hear it, because at our age you were married and pregnant with us.’ That shut everyone right up, and soon enough our parents were fighting over who would get to pay for the wedding!”

IN 2004, when I was 28, CNN asked me to gather together a group of my Boston friends in their 20s for a short segment about gay marriage. The network wanted to know what young gay men in Massachusetts thought about our newfound right.

For nearly an hour, seven of us — five working professionals in our 20s and two college undergraduates — sat in a coffee shop and talked theoretically about what a young gay marriage might entail. In the end, most of us agreed that we would like to be married — just not yet. We still had a lot of living, and growing up, to do. While many of our heterosexual peers undoubtedly did as well, we were immune from the pressure some of them felt to marry. No one — not our friends, not our families, not the gay community — expected us to wed.

For the next few years, I didn’t give young gay marriage much thought. While thousands of gay men and lesbians in their 30s, 40s or 50s married in Massachusetts, none of us at the table that night did, even as several of us inched into our 30s. I assumed that marriage — what the gay playwright [Terrence McNally](#) recently called “the final civil right; the right to love as anyone else loves” — was a right appreciated only in gay middle age.

But then something strange happened. During a 10-day span last August and September, two friends of mine — Brandon Andrew, who was then 25, and Marc Brent, who was 24 — announced their respective engagements. Brandon called from his apartment in Boston to deliver the news. “You’re not going to believe this!” he told me, pausing for dramatic effect. “I’m engaged!”

He was right. It was hard to believe. Not only was the prospect of two Brandons marrying each other surreal (his boyfriend, who was then 24, is named Brandon Lehr), but Brandon A. didn’t strike me as the marrying type. Not at this point in his life, anyway. An outgoing, freethinking art student in his last year at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, he seemed far too busy DJ’ing at eclectic dance parties and breaking into construction sites for his installation art projects to worry about marriage.

Marc, a dental-office manager who still lived at home with his parents in a Boston suburb, didn’t call to tell me about his engagement. I learned about it instead on [Facebook](#), when, with little fanfare, he changed the relationship status on his profile from “In a Relationship” to “Engaged.” He had been dating his fiancé, Vassili Shields, who was then 23, for a year.

“Are you actually engaged,” I called to ask Marc, “or is that just your way of saying you *really* like Vassili?” He replied that he was, in fact, engaged. They planned to marry in a few months.

I didn’t know what to make of these engagements — or of my subsequent discovery that more than 700 gay men 29 or younger had married in Massachusetts through last June, the latest date for which numbers are available. On the one hand, I wondered why these guys were marrying so young. What was the rush? It seemed to me that one of the few advantages of being young gay men — until gay marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, at least — was that we were institutionally protected from ever appearing on “Divorce Court.”

But I could also relate to young gay men yearning for companionship and emotional security. Had gay marriage been an option when I was 23 and recently out of the closet, I might very well have proposed to my first gay love. Like many gay men my age and older, I grew up believing that gay men in a happy long-term relationship was an oxymoron. (I entered high school in 1989, before gay teenagers started taking their boyfriends to the prom.) If I was lucky enough to find love, I thought, I’d better hold onto it. And part of me tried, but a bigger part of me wanted to pitch a tent in my favorite gay bar. I wasn’t alone. Everywhere I looked, gay men in their 20s — or, if they hadn’t come out until later, their 30s, 40s and 50s — seemed to be eschewing commitment in favor of the excitement promised by unabashedly sexualized urban gay communities. There was a reason, of course, why so many gay men my age and older seemed intent on living a protracted adolescence: We had been cheated of our actual adolescence. While most of our heterosexual peers had experienced, in their teens, socialization around courtship, dating and sexuality, many of us had grown up closeted and fearful, “our most precious and tender feelings rarely validated or reflected back to us by our families and communities,” as Alan Downs, the author of “The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man’s World,” puts it. When we managed to express our sexuality, the experience often came booby-trapped with secrecy, manipulation or debilitating shame.

No wonder, then, that in our 20s so many of us moved to big-city gay neighborhoods and aggressively went about trying to make up for lost time. And no wonder that some of us — myself included — occasionally went overboard.

“The expectation for many years was that if you did any dating in your 20s, they were essentially ‘practice relationships’ where you did what heterosexual kids get to do in junior high, high school and college,” says Jeffrey Chernin, a Los Angeles psychotherapist and the author of “Get Closer: A Gay Men’s Guide to Intimacy and Relationships.” “But for many gay men, your 20s were about meeting a lot of different people, going out to bars with your friends and having a lot of sex. That has long been considered a rite of passage in the gay community.”

But young gay men today are coming of age in a different time from the baby-boom generation of gays and lesbians who fashioned modern gay culture in this country — or even from me, a gay man in his early 30s. While being a gay teenager today can still be difficult and potentially dangerous (particularly for those who live in noncosmopolitan areas or are considered effeminate), gay teenagers are coming out earlier and are increasingly able to experience their gay adolescence. That, in turn, has made them more likely to *feel* normal. Many young gay men don’t see themselves as all that different from their heterosexual peers, and many profess to want what they’ve long seen espoused by mainstream American culture: a long-term relationship and the chance to start a family.

“For many young gay men today, settling down in a relationship in their 20s — or getting married if they live in Massachusetts — will feel like a very natural thing to do,” says Joe Kort, a psychotherapist and the author “10 Smart Things Gay Men Can Do to Improve Their Lives.”

But with no model for how to build a young gay marriage, I was curious about how gay men in their 20s would choose to construct and maintain their unions. What would their

marriages look like? And would the expectation of monogamy, a longstanding cornerstone of heterosexual marriage, be a requirement for their marriages as well?

To find out, I spent time over the next few months with a handful of young married and engaged gay couples — including Joshua and Benjamin. All were college-educated and white. (A 2008 study of gay and lesbian couples in Vermont, California and Massachusetts — three states that offer some form of legal recognition for gay couples — found that “couples who choose to legalize their same-sex relationships . . . are overwhelmingly European American.”)

Although more than twice as many lesbians 29 and younger have married in Massachusetts than have gay men of that age, I chose to focus on the latter. The dynamics of lesbian and gay male relationships are often different. “Women — straight or gay — tend to want to settle down years before men do,” says Dan Savage, a sex-advice columnist and the author of “The Commitment,” about the same-sex marriage debate and his decision to marry his long-term boyfriend. Gary Gates, a demographer, who studies gay and lesbian population trends, adds that “lesbians are more likely to be partnered than gay men, tend to cohabitate quicker and are more likely to have children — which is a motivator to get married.” But what, I wondered, was motivating the first generation of young gay married men?

On a weeknight in October, I sat down with Marc and Vassili at the restaurant where Vassili used to work as a waiter. He recently told his former co-workers about the engagement, and two waitresses kept coming over to our table to congratulate the couple. Tall and boyish, with big lips and soft, round features, Vassili beamed with joy and scooted his chair closer to his preppy, dark-haired fiancé.

They met a year before in this restaurant. “I thought he was cute the first night he came in with his friends,” Vassili recalled, “but he had one of them climb through the window of the restaurant, instead of walking around and in the front door. So I yelled at him.”

“And I’m ridiculously stubborn,” Marc said, “so I wasn’t about to apologize. For the next month, it was basically a series of dirty looks the times I went in there.”

Vassili eventually broke down and asked Marc on a date to the aquarium. Other dates followed, and nearly a year later, while hanging out at Fritz, a gay sports bar, they decided to become engaged. As Vassili explained it, they considered themselves best friends and planned to be together forever. “So, why not get married?” he said. “I always knew I wanted to spend my life with one person. And I know I’ve found him.” Besides, they both want to be young dads. They plan to adopt before they turn 30. (Most of the couples I spent time with for this story said they eventually want children.)

There was no formal exchange of rings to commemorate the engagement, no romantic dinner followed by either of them on bended knee. They also didn’t plan on having a wedding ceremony. When I asked them why, they insisted that such formalities were unnecessary. “We don’t think there is any set way we have to do this,” Vassili told me. “We’re not following anyone’s model for how an engagement or marriage should go.”

That philosophy also applied, they said, to when they would break the news of their engagement to their families. Vassili said he wasn’t sure how his parents would react. “They know that Marc is my boyfriend, but my gayness is not something we ever really talk about,” he told me. “My guess is my parents would want to be at any ceremony we have, but I don’t know.”

Marc said he had no doubt that his own parents would be supportive. “My mom knows and loves Vassili, and one time she asked, ‘Why don’t you guys just get married?’ ” he said. “And I was like, ‘Well, maybe we will!’ But sometimes I wonder if they would be as excited, or as supportive, about me marrying a guy as they would be if I was marrying a girl. But I’m going to tell my parents soon. I just want to have everything planned out first.”

By that, Marc meant that he wanted to know the specifics of when he and Vassili would move in together before announcing to his family that they were going to marry. Both men were living at home with their parents (Vassili had recently moved back to save money).

I asked Marc and Vassili if it was wise for any couple to become engaged before testing their domestic compatibility. Why not live together for a year? The couple deflected the question with a *you-must-not-really-understand-the-power-of-our-love* look common to so many lovesick young couples. “We just know we’ll be fine,” Vassili told me, rubbing Marc’s back. “We love each other, and that’s all that matters.”

“We know we’re compatible,” Marc said. “We’ve thought a lot about household roles. I’m going to clean, and Vassili is going to cook.”

“I like doing laundry and ironing,” Vassili told me. “He likes yardwork.”

“I don’t think either one of us is really going to be the *wife*, per se,” Marc said.

Still, they insisted they would be “traditional” in one important way: they vowed to be monogamous. “I know that some gay couples who’ve been together awhile open up their relationships,” Marc said, “but we’re not going to do that. I mean, we wouldn’t be getting married if we didn’t plan on being monogamous. To me, that’s a fundamental and important part of marriage.”

It is for many young gay couples. Frederick Hertz, an attorney and mediator who co-wrote the book “A Legal Guide for Lesbian and Gay Couples” and who has helped gay couples of all ages negotiate prenuptial agreements, told me that young gay men get the most impassioned when talk turns to monogamy. “A very common thing I hear them say in my office is, ‘If he has an affair, he’s not getting any alimony!’ ” Hertz said. “That’s just not something I hear among older gay men, who often make a distinction between emotional fidelity and sexual fidelity. There’s an emerging rhetoric around monogamy among young gay couples. In that way, they’re a lot more like married heterosexual couples than they are like older gay couples.”

I SPENT THE FOLLOWING DAY with the Brandons. They met a year before on [MySpace](#), although this was a source of some embarrassment for the couple, who instead told friends they’d met “at a concert.” “I saw his MySpace profile and sort of e-mailed him as a joke,” Brandon A. told me inside the spacious, sun-filled Boston apartment he shares with his fiancé and another roommate. “I was like: ‘We’re both named Brandon. We’re both skinny white boys from California. We’re both gay. We both listen to indie rock. You must be my Doppelgänger. We have to hang out.’ ”

Like Marc and Vassili, the Brandons said they planned to pick and choose what elements of “traditional heteronormative married culture,” as Brandon A. put it, to appropriate. (He loves using words like “heteronormative.”) But the Brandons had different ideas from Marc and Vassili about what appealed to them about “traditional” marriage.

For one thing, the Brandons eagerly told their families about the engagement and planned to incorporate them into their married lives. Their parents responded, in turn, with great enthusiasm. Brandon A.’s mother proudly accompanied her son and his fiancé to a monthly “queer” night at a Boston club (I was there, too, and couldn’t quite get over the sight of mother and son on the dance floor), while Brandon L.’s mom, whom I met briefly at the couple’s apartment, demanded to know the couple’s “song.”

“This is so weird,” Brandon A. told me at the time. “I feel like I’m doing girl talk with my future mother-in-law!”

The young men’s mothers were delighted to learn the details of how Brandon L., a Ph.D. candidate at [M.I.T.](#), had proposed — after a romantic dinner, on bended knee, by a roaring fire, their “song” (“This Modern Love,” covered by Final Fantasy) playing on the stereo.

"I even got him a ring," Brandon L. told me "It was made of titanium," Brandon A. said, laughing. "He knew I would probably break or lose anything else."

The Brandons agreed that they would wait a year or two before marrying; they wanted to finish school before having a formal wedding ceremony. Unlike Marc and Vassili, the Brandons said a wedding ceremony was important — not as a "political statement" or "to get approval from anyone," but as a way to communicate their love to each other.

"Ever since I was 19 or 20, I knew that I would want to give myself over to one person in a formal way," said Brandon A., who had been in two previous gay relationships lasting more than a year before meeting Brandon L. "And it didn't even really matter to me if the politics of the world were going to bend in my favor so that my marriage was considered legal. Legal or not, I was going to have a commitment ceremony in front of the people who matter to me. I've always been oddly traditional about that."

But the Brandons suspected they were untraditional when it came to their thinking about monogamy. As they saw it, one enduring lesson of heterosexual marriage is that lifelong monogamy is unrealistic for most people — especially men. "Most straight people like to talk a great game about monogamy," Brandon A. said. "But what are they actually doing? Many of them have affairs at some point or break up because they want to sleep with somebody else. We're two guys, we're in our 20s, we haven't been sexual with that many people, and to pretend like we're never going to want to experience sex with another person until the day we die doesn't make sense to us. We're open to exploring our sexuality together in a way that makes us both comfortable."

Negotiating questions surrounding monogamy was a critical issue for most of the young married and engaged couples I spent time with. But so, too, was the larger question of how they would fashion their social lives.

Several couples lamented the fact that they had never met another young gay married couple. This left them without a model to help them shape or understand their own relationship, and it seemingly left them without anyone who could relate to their unique circumstance.

"I sort of feel like we're on this island out here by ourselves," said Anthony Levin, a 26-year-old account executive in Boston who met his husband, 23-year-old Daniel Levin, while both were undergraduates at the [University of Minnesota](#). (They legally married in August 2006 after moving to Boston, where Daniel was starting law school; Anthony took Daniel's last name. They were the only couple I spoke with in which one man took the other's name.) "That's probably the biggest difference between us and straight married couples," he continued. "They see other married people like them everywhere. We don't. It would be great to have young gay married couples who we could hang out with."

"I actually met one the other day," Daniel, who sat by Anthony on the couch in their apartment in Brookline, said matter-of-factly.

"You did?!" Anthony said, nearly spilling his glass of wine. "Did you get their number?"

Daniel hadn't. This momentarily crushed Anthony, who seemed to yearn to interact with other gay people — single or married — more than Daniel did. (Anthony joined Boston's gay flag-football league the previous fall, partly in an effort to meet other gay people.)

Other couples, like Joshua and Benjamin, had an abundance of gay friends of all ages and clearly reveled in having their cake (marriage) and eating it too (a social life that rivaled that of many of their young single gay friends). It was hard to keep track of the many social engagements the couple invited me to. There was a fancy Oscar party. There were many dinner parties, including one attended by their friend David Cicilline, the openly gay mayor of Providence.

And there were nights out at gay bars. "No one assumes we're married when we're out at a club with our friends," Joshua said. "Maybe it's because I look like I'm 12, but people see

my wedding ring and are like: ‘What? Is that a *fashion statement*?’ They just hit on us anyway, which, really, is kind of fun. I’ll flirt right back, and I’ll say to Ben, ‘Oh, look at the butt on that one!’ ”

For Joshua and Benjamin (and for several of the couples I spent time with), there is no use pretending they aren’t attracted to other people. “I think it’s healthy that we don’t have to lie about that like so many straight couples do,” Joshua said. “We’re also two gay guys in the couple, so we’re attracted to the same gender. We can both appreciate a hot guy walking down the street.”

But not all of the couples I spoke with were so open about men they noticed. “Pointing out a cute guy wouldn’t fly with us,” Anthony Levin said. Fortunately for him, Daniel has never had much of a wandering eye. “Flirting with guys, or trying to get attention from random guys, has honestly never appealed to me,” Daniel told me. “I don’t know why, but it’s just not the way I’m built. It came as no surprise to people who knew me well that I would be the type to settle down in a relationship. And I’ve never been attracted to some of the drama that I’ve seen in the gay community.”

WHEN I FIRST LEARNED that some young gay men were marrying in Massachusetts, I wondered if their marriages might be a repudiation of the gay world fashioned by previous generations of men — men who reacted to oppression and homophobia in the ’70s and ’80s by rejecting heterosexual norms and “values,” particularly around sex and relationships. Many older gay men would have scoffed at the idea of marrying and having kids. To many of them, their “family” was their network of close gay friends.

But most of the young married men I spent time with insisted their marriages weren’t a “reaction” to anything. They valued their connection to modern gay culture, and they weren’t interested in choosing between being a married man and a young gay man. They could be both, and they could make it work.

Still, it wasn’t always easy. “Joshua and I have had to do a lot of work around learning to communicate to each other what’s O.K. and what makes each of us uncomfortable,” Benjamin told me, adding that they have attended a couples’ counselor. “I think that maybe we assumed that because we’re two men, that we would think the same way about things or know where the other was coming from. But the way we communicate is so different, so that’s a challenge.”

Jeffrey Chernin, the psychotherapist, who works with both gay and straight couples, told me that gay couples tend to open up in therapy with less prompting. “Many of them are already used to talking honestly and openly about many issues,” he said, “because there is no assumed model for how their marriage should function. Everything is on the table to be negotiated. Nothing is taken for granted. Everything is talked about — from monogamy, to power dynamics, to domestic responsibilities.”

Most of the couples insisted they shared those responsibilities in “an egalitarian way.” While Joshua occasionally referred to himself as a “gay housewife,” other young gay married men bristled at the notion that they would fashion their domestic lives around heterosexual stereotypes.

“It never ceases to amaze me how many people will say to us, ‘So, who’s the woman, and who’s the man, in your marriage?’ ” says Jason Shumaker, who lives in a Boston suburb with his husband, Paul McLoughlin II, who is an assistant dean at [Harvard](#). They met eight years ago when they were 25, and they legally married at 29 (registering to wed on the first day gay couples could do so in Massachusetts). “I just think that’s the dumbest question ever,” he added. “Yes, we’re married, but we’re also two guys, so neither one of us has to be ‘the woman.’ ” (And “with no ovaries drying up,” as Paul put it, they don’t need to rush into having children. They plan to adopt in the next five years, once Paul finishes his Ph.D. in higher-education administration at [Boston College](#).)

During a break from opening the door to trick-or-treaters at their home last Halloween,

Jason and Paul — who wore matching lizard outfits — told me about the T-shirts they’d donned at the end of their reception. The front of Paul’s shirt read, “I Am the Husband,” while the back read, “I Am the Wife.” (Jason’s shirt had the opposite emblazoned on each side.) “It was fun to make a little bit of a social statement and poke fun at the idea that we would fit neatly into these heterosexual roles,” Jason said.

AFTER A FEW MONTHS of barely hearing from Marc and Vassili, I was starting to worry: could they be having premarriage trouble? (I knew the Brandons were fine. They regularly posted pictures of themselves together on their Facebook profiles and had even started a Facebook group, appropriately called “The Brandons.”) When I finally did hear from Marc and Vassili in February, they had good news. They had filled out the requisite forms at City Hall and were just waiting the three state-mandated days before collecting their marriage license. In the meantime, they were celebrating by luxuriating for a night at an upscale Boston hotel. They invited me to drop by.

When I did, I saw dozens of rose petals in the bathtub. Apparently, while they had been enjoying hourlong massages and a full-course meal, Vassili had arranged to have the hotel staff festoon the room with the petals.

“What are those doing in the bathtub?” I asked the couple.

“He moved them there,” Vassili told me, rolling his eyes. “He’s not very romantic, and he got embarrassed that you would see them.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m the bad guy,” Marc said with a laugh.

A few minutes later, I asked the couple how their parents had reacted to the news that they would soon be married. Silence filled the room. “You *still* haven’t told your parents?”

They offered many justifications, everything from “we haven’t found an apartment yet” to “marriages become a dog-and-pony show when parents and families get involved.” But in Marc’s case, I really couldn’t understand what the problem was. He had told me many times that his parents loved Vassili and that they would be supportive of the marriage. What was going on?

“I know my parents will be fine with it, but I want to do this myself,” Marc told me. “If I tell my parents, they’ll just want to get involved, and that will annoy me. I hate when people try to tell me how I should do something.”

Vassili nodded and repeated something I heard the couple tell me many times. “There’s nothing conventional about gay marriage,” he said, “so I don’t feel like we need to do this in a certain accepted way.”

Marc, who had been leaning back on a sofa, suddenly sat up in protest. “Hold on,” he said. “I think it’s *conventional*. Why do you say it’s not conventional?”

“I mean, there are more complications because we’re gay,” Vassili told him. “But the most important thing is that we love each other. We don’t need to have a big fancy wedding to prove anything to anyone.”

“I hear you,” Marc said, “but I think we’re kidding ourselves if we say that we absolutely wouldn’t want a ceremony where our families and friends were there and totally on board. I’m not going to lie. It would be nice.”

I had never heard Marc talk this way. Neither, apparently, had Vassili, who seemed perplexed by the sudden change to the couple’s longtime narrative, which they had used to justify not telling their parents and not having a wedding ceremony. “You would hate that,” Vassili insisted. “Wouldn’t you? You wouldn’t get up in front of everyone and give vows.”

“Maybe,” Marc said, “but it would still be nice to have the option. And I’d still like to have a party. It would be cool to get the coffee machine, the blender, all the stuff that straight

couples get when they start their marriages.”

IN 2004, [MTV](#) broadcast a documentary chronicling the lives of two gay couples — one male, one female — as they prepared to marry in Massachusetts. The male couple, Aaron Pike Shainwald and Stephen Schonberg, were both 22 when America watched them become the 44th same-sex couple to wed in the state.

Aaron and Stephen met two years before at Axis, a Boston nightclub (since closed) with a popular weekly gay night. Their first date lasted “three days,” Aaron told me, and nine months later they moved in together. They were both still college students at the time (Aaron at Brandeis, Stephen at [Boston University](#)), but as their relationship deepened, they were equally eager to formalize it. “We both wanted to get married and commit our lives to each other,” Aaron said. (Stephen declined to be interviewed for this article.)

A year and a half into the marriage, though, Aaron said they started growing apart. They went to couples’ therapy for a year, but soon Stephen asked for a divorce. “We really, really worked hard to save the marriage,” Aaron told me, “but he decided to move on. And it’s hard not to feel like a complete failure sometimes. People who saw the show still stop me on the street and ask how the marriage is going. Most of the time I just lie and say: ‘Great! Wonderful!’ Let me tell you, being 26 and gay and already divorced is *soooo* much fun.”

I met up with Aaron at Joshua and Benjamin’s house party in November. He arrived with his new boyfriend, an affable 50-year-old (“I’m done with the young ones!” Aaron joked) who also happened to be divorced. “But I suppose I went the more conventional route,” Aaron’s boyfriend told me. “I was married to a woman.” (As he spoke, I couldn’t help thinking of what Jason Stuart, a gay comic, once said: “Come on straight people . . . if you let us marry each other, we will stop marrying you!”)

Aaron lamented that he didn’t know any other young gay divorced men, so he seemed delighted when I called a few months later to tell him about George — 26, gay and recently divorced from his husband. (He asked that his first and last name not be used to protect his privacy; George is his middle name.) I suggested to George that he, Aaron and I meet to talk.

At a Boston coffee shop, Aaron and George bonded over their unique experience — “I thought I was the only one.” “Me too!” — and apologized for having a negative impact on Massachusetts’ divorce rate, which is one of the lowest in the nation. (The state doesn’t yet have divorce statistics for gay and lesbian couples. Though I’m not sure the numbers would tell us much. Many of the first wave of same-sex marriages involved couples who had been together for 10, 20 or even 30 years, presumably making them less likely to divorce than heterosexual couples who hadn’t been together as long before marrying.)

“The ironic thing is that I really don’t believe in divorce,” George told us at the coffee shop. Tall and handsome, with dark hair and angular features, he sat by a corner window and was still dressed in his work clothes — black dress pants and a dark blue vest over a light blue dress shirt. “I was raised Catholic, went to Catholic school, and my parents stuck it out. I tried my best to make my marriage work, but we both decided it couldn’t be saved.”

George was still struggling to understand where his marriage went wrong. He met his ex four years ago, when George was 22 and living what he called “a carefree postcollege life” in Northern California. George said he wasn’t looking for a serious relationship, but he fell in love with his ex (who was several years older) after meeting him through mutual friends.

“At the time I was thinking, Wow, I really wish I had met you eight years from now,” George recalled. “But I met him when I met him, and I wanted to be with him. I knew I had a lot of growing up to do if I wanted to make the relationship work, and I did. I grew up pretty fast.”

The couple registered as domestic partners in California (partly for the health insurance) and then moved to Massachusetts a year later, where they were married in 2006 in front of a couple hundred people in a church in the suburb where George was raised. Most of the attendees were family members and friends — some of his ex's extended family, George said, weren't supportive of the marriage.

"And in a million other ways we were constantly reminded that our relationship wasn't equal to a straight relationship, even though we were legally married," George told me. "Whether it was doing our federal taxes, or hearing that most states weren't going to recognize our marriage, or just not being able to walk down the street and hold hands without getting snickers or comments. Like many gay couples, I think we brought unresolved shame and deep-rooted feelings of unworthiness into the relationship. You don't even realize it's there sometimes, but it definitely affected us."

Both George and Aaron said they'd also felt an added pressure in their marriages to "prove to the world," as George put it, that gay relationships can last. "My ex and I really wanted to be an example to our families and straight friends that a gay marriage can work," he said.

Dan Savage, the sex-advice columnist, told me he worried that some young gay men in Massachusetts might rush into marriage as a way to have their relationships validated by their families. "Once, our relationships were only respected if we had remained together for a long, long time," Savage said. "Only longevity earned us some modicum of respect. Straight couples could always rush that validity by getting married. Now I just worry that some gay kids, desperate to have their gay love taken seriously, will wield their new marriage licenses and say: 'See how real our love is? We've only been together five months, but we're already married. You better respect us now!'"

George said he hadn't been looking for respect when he told his grandfather about his marriage. "When I first got engaged, everyone told me that he would 'just die' if I told him about it," George said. "But one day I walked over to his house and said: 'Listen, I'm getting married to a man that I love, and it's going to be your choice if you're going to be in our lives. I'm not going to make that choice for you.' He sat back in his chair and said, 'Well, I don't really understand, but do you love him?' I told him I did. To that he said, 'Well, I know love, so I want to meet him and learn all about you guys.' I still can't bring myself to tell him about the divorce."

The day we met at the coffee shop was a particularly trying one for George. Hours earlier, he signed papers giving his soon-to-be-ex-husband sole ownership of the house they had owned. "In return," he said, "I got some debt, a car and a painting."

"Wow, and all I lost in my divorce was my cat," Aaron said. "We hardly had anything, so it wasn't difficult to decide who got what. The cat's living with my ex on Long Island now."

IT WAS A BLUSTERY WEEKDAY morning in February when I tagged along with Marc and Vassili to pick up their marriage license at City Hall. Marc pulled the couple's Honda Accord to a stop at a red light in the city's South End neighborhood. Vassili sat in the passenger seat, sipping an ice coffee.

"We really wanted a [BMW](#)," Marc explained, but they settled on the Honda as an exercise in premarriage fiscal responsibility. "It seemed like the right thing to do."

"We did a budget the other day," Vassili said. "That was really scary."

"We definitely need to reel in our spending," Marc told me. "We need to stop going out so often. I mean, we're getting married today! We can't be acting like little kids, running around and spending money everywhere."

After parking, we trudged through the snow toward City Hall, a mammoth nine-level concrete bunker. Marc and Vassili often dress alike, and that morning was no different. Each wore stylish jeans, black dress shoes, and a peacoat (Marc's was brown; Vassili's

black) over a T-shirt. "We're the same height and have kind of a similar style," Marc explained as we passed through the building's metal detector, "so we're always wearing each other's clothes."

On our escalator ride downstairs to the marriage-license office, Vassili leaned into Marc and kissed him on the lips. Marc didn't fight it, but he smiled awkwardly when it was over. "Marc's actually gotten a lot better about not freaking out over public displays of affection," Vassili told me. "The first fight we ever had was because I leaned up against him a little too close at Starbucks!"

"Vassili is just so comfortable with himself, much more so than I am or probably ever will be," Marc said. "He's really comfortable in his skin. That's so endearing about him. It's probably one of the reasons I love him so much."

In the basement, Marc and Vassili approached the marriage license counter.

"I'll be right with you," the clerk told the couple. "You picking up something?"

"Our marriage license," Vassili said proudly.

"Gays here!" Marc quipped. The clerk smiled, and Marc turned to me. "This is so weird," he whispered. "We're actually doing this. It's starting to hit me that we're actually getting married."

The clerk eventually brought Marc and Vassili a copy of the marriage-license application they filled out on their last trip here.

Vassili beamed as he looked over the form, which had a column for "Party A" (Vassili) and "Party B" (Marc). (Before gay marriage was legalized in the state, the form listed "Bride" and "Groom.")

Feigning outrage, Marc grabbed the form from Vassili's hand. "Hey, why are you Party A?" he demanded to know.

"Because I'm the man, of course," Vassili said with a laugh.

"We decided to combine our last names," Marc explained, pointing to his typed name on the form: *Marc Harrington Brent-Shields*. "We thought about Shields-Brent, but that didn't sound right."

"Shields-Brent sounds like a verb," Vassili said. "It sounds like I'm trying to shield Brent from something."

When the clerk finished typing up the marriage license, she walked back to the counter. "Are you going upstairs?" she asked the couple.

"What's upstairs?" Marc asked.

"The city clerk. She can marry you."

"Does she like gay people?" Marc said.

"She loves gay people," the woman assured them. She looked at the document in her hand.

"Is that our marriage license?" Vassili asked excitedly.

"Yes, it is. Do you want it?" She started to hand it to him and then stopped, toying with him. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, please!" he said.

"Wait!" Marc said dramatically. "I think I'm having second thoughts."

The woman froze.

“He’s kidding,” Vassili said.

“Totally kidding!” Marc assured her.

The woman laughed, handed Vassili the license and wished the couple well. As we walked away from the counter, Marc, who had tried to mask his nervousness with humor, looked as if he might pass out. “I need to go to the bathroom,” he said. “I’m feeling lightheaded. Don’t get me wrong — this is very cool. But it’s actually happening. I’m actually getting married — to a man!”

We searched for the men’s room while Vassili accosted random people in the hallway and shared the news. “We’re married! We just got our license!” he said breathlessly.

While Marc splashed water on his face in the bathroom, Vassili told me that he hoped to persuade Marc to go upstairs and make it official. “That lady really wanted us to go upstairs,” he said. “I kind of want to make Marc do it. I mean, we’re already here!”

But Marc was adamant that he wanted to wait. “I just want to be sure we find the right person to marry us,” he said once he was out of the bathroom. “I don’t want to rush into this.”

What Marc wanted instead was something to eat, and he was relieved when we came upon a Girl Scout selling cookies near the building’s exit. He and Vassili bought five boxes and began devouring the cookies as we walked back to their car.

“You know what I figure?” Marc told me. “I figure that now that I’m practically married, I can start letting myself go. Isn’t that, like, the main advantage of marriage? I’m definitely not going to the gym anymore!” He looked at Vassili and laughed. “Will you still love me if I’m fat?”

“Of course,” Vassili said, wrapping his fiancé in a bear hug. “In sickness and in health. Until one of us dies — or, you know, until we kill each other.”

Benoit Denizet-Lewis, a contributing writer for the magazine, is the author of “America Anonymous: Eight Addicts in Search of a Life” and “American Voyeur: Dispatches From the Far Reaches of Modern Life,” both to be published in January.

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