Outer Appearances

After **Bruce Shenitz** has a straight-acting identity crisis in the heart of Chelsea, he asks what it really means to "pass" as gay.

NOT LONG AGO I WAS having coffee in New York's Chelsea neighborhood with a writer I'd occasionally worked with via e-mail but had never actually met. During the course of our getting-to-know-you's she suddenly looked at me and asked, "So, are you gay?"

I was momentarily taken aback. After working at *Out* for three years, I'd assumed that when anyone found out what I do for a living, it counted as an automatic coming-out. And now a fellow GLBT-er was checking on my credentials?

"Of course, I'm gay. Did you think I wasn't?"

"I honestly didn't know. You could be a straight man working for a gay magazine."

True enough. *I'm not a gay editor, I just play one in the magazine industry.* It happens all the time in the performing arts, of course: Look at *Will & Grace.* Or the entire cast of *Angels in America.* But the conversation set off a chain of questions in my mind. After spending the first half of my life occasionally wondering if I was "too gay," had I now reached a point where I wasn't gay enough? And what does that even mean?

While most gay people still spend at least part of their lives in the closet, this conversation got me thinking about the notion of "passing"—playing the role of being straight, whether you're trying to or not. The term, which originally applied specifically to light-skinned African-Americans who lived as white people to escape oppression and gain at least the possibility of racial privilege, is now routinely applied to other groups as well. Almost all of us have had the experience of sitting on a plane or in a doctor's office when we encounter someone who simply assumes we're straight. They may ask → *(page 107)* if you're married, or they may

WHO'S THAT GIRL? THE BILLY TIPTON TRIO IN AN UNDATED PHOTO. TIPTON (CENTER), AN ANATOMICAL WOMAN, PASSED AS A MAN FOR MOST OF HER ADULT LIFE.

AP WORLDWIDE

Passing can have a heroic dimension: Women throughout history have donned trousers to become soldiers and escape society's limita-

drop a homophobic remark for some reason, but whatever the case, you suddenly realize that without intending to, you've been passing. (A recent nonfiction book, *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are* by journalist Brooke Kroeger, takes a look at a wide variety of passers: gays passing as straight, blacks as whites, and whites as blacks.)

Gay people have often relied on imperfect analogies with other groups in order to understand our position within the larger society; theorists have compared the position of gay people to that of African-Americans, women, Jews. While African-Americans (of both genders) and women (of all races) have occasionally passed as white or male, the similarities between gays and Jews may be the most telling. A fairly large number of both groups have had at least the theoretical option of passing. As a gay secular Jew, I've done my share of passing, usually by omission rather than active effort.

Today, most people would think of passing as a personal tragedy, one that results from a lack of self-understanding and often leads to even greater degrees of self-deception. While we all put on various kinds of social roles to get through the day, passing is different: It requires the denial of some piece of oneself that most people would consider essential. If you think about the classic metaphor of gay liberation, "coming out of the closet," it suggests the unleashing of pent-up energy that explodes when the closet door is opened and the authentic identity is revealed: There is a surge of power for the individual who can now "live in truth" and a simultaneous jolt to the society that is now forced to see what it had pushed into dark corners. Activists have suggested that if all gay people suddenly developed, say, green polka dots on our foreheads, a lot of our problems would be solved, because we would be made visible; our presence everywhere would make us more common and less threatening, while our sheer numbers would suggest the strength available to us if roused—or pissed off. When the AIDS pandemic provided the visible signs of disease and confronted mainstream society with the reality of just how many gay folks there are, it sometimes led to more acceptance and integration of gay people. (Despite initial fears that the disease would become a modern-day "mark of

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Cain"—or a couple of infamous suggestions that HIV-positive people be branded or tattooed—one of the enduring memories of the era is those Day-Glo yellow rubber gloves that the Washington, D.C. police donned to remove ACT UP protesters from the White House in 1987. Eventually, it was intolerance and narrow-mindedness that became stigmatized.)

Passing, though, can actually have a heroic dimension. For example, thousands of women throughout history have donned trousers to become soldiers and escape society's limitations; other women who've passed, from Barbra Streisand's Yentl to jazz musician Billy Tipton (a woman who lived most of her adult life as a male), were able to rewrite their lives by taking on the new role. In his novel *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth explains why protagonist Coleman Silk, an African-American classics professor, passes for much of his life as Caucasian and Jewish: "The objective was for his fate to be determined not by the ignorant, hate-filled intentions of a hostile world but, to whatever degree humanly possible, by his own resolve. Why accept a life on any other terms?"

Additionally, the successful passer can be a fly on the wall, a sort of spy on one's own life. A woman I once knew, who was usually very up-front about her mixed black and white ancestry, was often assumed to be Mediterranean or Middle Eastern. It never ceased to astonish her to hear what Caucasians would say about black people when they assumed that she was white, a type of experience most gay people have had at some time in their lives. Hearing those kinds of comments is a recipe for bitterness and anger, but it can also be a source of strength when it leads to greater understanding of one's life. In Nella Larsen's classic 1929 novel *Passing*, Brian Redfield takes note of that power after his light-skinned African-American wife becomes upset when she realizes that she has been taken for white: "You, my dear, had all the advantage. You knew what his opinion of you was, while he— Well, 'twas ever thus. We know, always have. They don't. Not quite. It has, you will admit, its humorous side, and, sometimes, its conveniences."

Starting from the idea that there's power in both hiding and revealing, I have my own modest proposal for those of you fortunate enough to live an out life: Experiment from time to time with being in the closet again and see what you can learn about the world around you. As you blend into the background, think of it as a sort of underground operation to find out what's going on even in seemingly friendly pockets of goodwill. It might be horrifying or heartening, but it will almost certainly be revealing.

Of course, we don't need to go underground to find out what the rest of the country is saying about us, especially with all the discussion of same-sex marriage. And I certainly don't think anyone should be forced into closets of any kind. But it may be worthwhile to step back and quietly observe just what people make of us when we're not actively reminding them of who we really are.