

# When the Beard Is Too Painful to Remove

By JANE GROSS

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**THEY** spend decades denying their sexual confusion to themselves and others. They generally limit their encounters with men to anonymous one-night stands and tell all manner of lies if their wives suspect.



Kathy Osborn



David Lee/Focus Features

**PLAYING A ROLE** The movie 'Far From Heaven' featured Dennis Quaid and Julianne Moore as a couple struggling with his homosexuality.

They consider themselves to be devoted husbands, conscientious fathers and suburban homeowners, and what typically brings them to the point of crisis in their 40's, 50's and even 60's is their first emotional connection with another man.

For gay men in heterosexual marriages, even after the status quo becomes unbearable, the pull of domestic life remains powerful. Many are desperate to preserve their marriages — to continue reaping the emotional and financial support of wives, and domestic pleasures like tucking children in at night.

The demand for support groups for gay, married men, as well as traffic in Internet chat rooms, shows that so-called "Brokeback" marriages have hardly disappeared, as many experts assumed they would, even in an age when gay couples, in certain parts of the country, live openly and raise children just like any family.

Leaving a marriage and setting up housekeeping with a gay partner is not what most married gay men have in mind when they join a support group, according to Stephen McFadden, a clinical social worker, who runs such groups in Manhattan. Instead, Mr. McFadden and others in the field say, their clients generally start out committed to the opposite goal.

Even after a pained awakening or acknowledgment of their sexual orientation, these men want to save their marriages, Mr. McFadden and others say, either by lying, promising their wives they will not have sex with men or persuading them to accept their double lives.

Yet, such arrangements succeed for only “a small percentage” of couples, Mr. McFadden and other therapists said, but the stubborn attempt often makes these men unwelcome or uncomfortable in support groups for gay fathers, which are easy to find but largely the province of men who are long divorced.

One support group member, Steve T., is a Long Island doctor, married to his high school sweetheart and the father of three school-age sons. He said he felt the sting of judgment when he tried a group for gay fathers. “They thought my desire to stay married was part of my denial,” said Dr. T., who would do almost anything to keep his family together and his suburban lifestyle intact, even after telling his wife that he is gay.

She is his “best friend” and the “perfect co-parent,” said the 44-year-old doctor, who agreed to be interviewed on condition he not be fully identified and his secrets thus revealed to relatives, neighbors and patients. He enjoys the social life of a popular suburban couple, adores his in-laws and wants to live in the same home as his children.

But he also wants to continue a love affair with a man like himself: married, with children, a lawn to mow and a comfortable life. And until a few weeks ago, Dr. T. said, “this was working great in terms of getting our needs met and not disrupting our families.”

Dr. T.’s wife had agreed she could live with his sexual orientation provided he didn’t act on it. So he lied and said his homosexual relationship did not include sex. But she wasn’t fooled and forced him to move into an in-law apartment in the family home, a way station to a more formal separation.

This development has left him stunned, one moment sympathetic to his wife’s position and the next disbelieving that they can’t work it out. “I love her, but she wants me to be in love with her,” Dr. T. said. “She wants to be my one and only. Everything we have will be at risk if, God forbid, we divorce.”

Data on these marriages is scarce and unreliable because of the various ways of defining “gay” in demographic research. Studies in the 1970’s and 80’s, using inconsistent methodology, found anywhere from one-fifth to one-third of gay men were or had at one time been married. All the therapists and gay men interviewed for this article assumed that percentage would be far lower in today’s more accepting society.

But Gary J. Gates, a demographer at the Williams Institute, a research group that studies gay issues at U.C.L.A., blended data for The New York Times from the 2000 Census and a 2002 federal survey of family configurations, and found that the percentage of gay men who had ever been married could be as high as 38 percent — or as low as 9 percent — depending on whether respondents were asked their sexual orientation, whom they had sex with or whom they found attractive.

Of the 27 million American men currently married, Mr. Gates found, 1.6 percent, or 436,000, identify themselves as gay or bisexual. Of the 75 million men who have ever been married, 1.8 percent, or 1.3 million, identify themselves that way. But, in both cases, when the men are asked about behavior if they have ever had sex with men, not what they consider their sexual orientation, the number of men who have ever been married doubles.

The sort of arrangement Dr. T. hoped for — a proper marriage and one or more relationships with men on the side — is not unheard of. Cole Porter pulled it off and so did [James McGreevey](#), New Jersey's former governor, who left office, and his wife, in 2004. Mr. McGreevey, 48, has spent the last year writing a memoir, "The Confession," to be released on Sept. 19, and recently, with his new partner, Mark O'Donnell, 42, moved into a Georgian mansion in Plainfield, N.J.

THE specter of AIDS has led to a formal and presumably safe way for gay married men to have it all, known as a Closed-Loop Relationship. Instead of risky promiscuous sex, a married man has two "monogamous" relationships, one with his wife and one with another man, usually married. Done according to the rules, enumerated on Web sites and online support groups, all four parties agree to this setup.

"It's an approach which people hoped would be a compromise solution," said Michael, the Web master of [www.marriedgay.org](http://www.marriedgay.org), a site based in Manchester, England, who declined to give his last name out of deference to his wife, whom he no longer lives with. "But it's easier said than done."

Closed-Loop Relationships are anathema to Bonnie Kaye, the former wife of a gay man, who runs the Web site [www.gayhusbands.com](http://www.gayhusbands.com) and conducts "How to Come Out to Your Wife" workshops. "If they're too selfish to leave, I won't work with them," Ms. Kaye said. "If they love their wives, they need to give them their lives back."

Deception remains common. An unscientific survey of visitors to [www.marriedgay.org](http://www.marriedgay.org) found that more than half of the married gay respondents said

their wives did not know of their sexual inclinations. Of those, a slim majority were considering whether to come clean but a third said “never.”

Men who are forthcoming with their wives, and then divorce or separate, report surprise that what happens afterward is often vastly harder than the process of ending the marriage.

Scott W., 64, a retired school teacher and real estate agent, relieved his occasional need for homosexual sex with anonymous encounters on East Hampton Beach without quite labeling himself as gay or bisexual. Only when he fell for someone, who rejected him because he was married, did Scott conclude he had to divorce a woman he loved and had been with for 24 years. That process, as these things go, was without acrimony, said Scott, a former member of Mr. McFadden’s support group, and he remains close to her and his two grown sons.

But looking for love in late middle age, Scott said, is a frustrating ordeal. After a brief “slut phase,” he had “the naïve idea I’d find someone right away.” Instead, he has learned he is ill-suited, or too old, for gay night life. “They want to go out at 11 o’clock,” Scott said, “and I want to go to sleep at 11 o’clock. Plus, in those places, there’s too much noise and confusion.”

He eats dinner most nights at the bar of an East Side restaurant that attracts an older gay clientele. The conversation is lively, Scott said, but he hasn’t found anyone to date. Recently, a married gay man left his business card but Scott threw it away. He is not looking for a one-night stand.

Scott’s loneliness after divorce is common among middle-aged men, according to Dr. Richard A. Isay, 69, the first openly gay member of the American Psychoanalytic Association who himself left a heterosexual marriage about 20 years ago, when he was already in a gay relationship that he remains in today. Dr. Isay said he came slowly to understand his patients’ sense of isolation during three decades of practice, and therefore has modified his advice to gay married men.

“I beg them to take it slow because it’s difficult to find the substitute for the love and companionship of a longtime spouse,” said Dr. Isay, author of “Commitment and Healing: Gay Men and the Need for Romantic Love” (Wiley, 2006). “They must take that loss into consideration.”

The loss comes on top of the adolescent awkwardness of not knowing the social norms of a new world, described on the blog [www.comingoutat48.blogspot.com](http://www.comingoutat48.blogspot.com). Its

author, who identifies himself only as Chris, writes of changing his clothes many times before heading to his first gay bar, finding it empty and not realizing he had arrived too early. He writes of not understanding the sexual terminology in gay personal ads and looking for an “always gay” man to teach him what he needed to know.

In an e-mail exchange, Chris compared the experience to “living abroad,” where the “thrill of a new place” competes with “the deep loneliness” of unfamiliarity. It is not, he said “the existential loneliness of not knowing who you are and where you belong, but the loneliness of ‘What am I going to do this weekend?’ ‘How am I supposed to behave?’ or ‘When will the phone start to ring?’ ”

Even in the security of a six-year relationship with a man, John. J., 53, resists divorcing his wife of 30 years. “I am still so in love with her,” he said, speaking on the condition he not be fully identified because his parents, in-laws and colleagues do not know the details of his separation. “And there’s nobody else I’d use that word for.”

John said he had no moral choice but to leave his marriage once he “let the emotional aspect” of his attraction to men into his life. “That had been the realm of me and my wife,” he said. “So that’s the line of demarcation. The two, for me, are mutually exclusive. But divorce? I can’t imagine the finality of that. I have doubts all the time.”