



Dedicated to helping LGBTQ people build and strengthen their families.

Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Hot Tub

Jack and I are sitting in a hot tub, aboard the Norwegian Jewel cruise ship on our way from Saint Thomas to the uninhabited island Grand Stirrup Cay, where we'll swim, snorkel and soak up our final rays of Caribbean sun. Mona is off having a great time with new friends, bouncing between pools and hot tubs. This is our first R Family vacation, and sharing the beauty of the Caribbean in February with hundreds of queer families has been fabulous. It's the last stretch of our journey, before returning to Miami. The air is warmer and seas are calmer than they've been, and we're enjoying a conversation with two women - partners and joint guardians of one of the women's biological grandchildren. Another couple is also in the hot tub – a man and woman, mid-forties. I assume that they were at the taping of *The View* when Rosie offered free R Family Caribbean cruise tickets to the audience.

A few days later, in Miami, I'll meet a gay dad and learn that Rosie O'Donnell's little giveaway caused quite a bleep on the blogosphere. A lot of folks had shelled out big bucks to enjoy a queer family-friendly vacation, and the potential of being joined by vacationers who would not have otherwise chosen to sail the seas with a bunch of queer families, except for the free price tag, didn't go over too well. While touring Antigua, my family met some courtesy-of-Rosie vacationers who coincidentally lived near Syracuse, and we had a great time, but my interactions with our hot-tub-mates - well,,,,,,,,.

It doesn't take long before the straight couple in the tub out themselves. Coming out of the closet is so easy for some folks. The wife tells us that they could have selected another cruise instead of this one. From my Miami source, I'll later discover that this option was a concession made by R Family Vacations in response to the flack Rosie received from disgruntled queer families - an effort to weed out straight folks who might not want to cruise with queers, but couldn't bring themselves to pass up a free vacation.

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The wife proceeds to tell us that she just couldn't choose another cruise over this one. "After all, it was a gift from Rosie and we love Rosie, regardless of her *lifestyle*." At this moment, I fantasize pressing a little rainbow button, propelling both husband and wife out of the hot tub and into the Atlantic Ocean. I watch them bob and gasp for breath while I raise my wand out over the seas and shout: "You have no power here. Now begone before someone drops an ocean liner on your heads."

But unfortunately our chitchat continues. One of the lesbian grandmothers shares that she's a therapist and feels that open dialogue is critical for change. Her partner sits and smiles, no comment. The straight husband shares that he was once involved with local Republican politics. *Where's that damn rainbow button!* I mention that I don't think it is solely the responsibility of gay folks to help straight folks get over their....I don't remember if I said homophobia or heterosexism or bigotry or stuff or horseshit, but whatever I said was met with disagreement.

The straight republican husband (SRH) feels that my approach is wrong. His position is that straight people should know more about gay families - to see, for example, the kinds of things that go on on this ship. Though, I might agree with him, I'd sooner chew glass than admit this to SRH on my free-from-the-heterosexual-gaze vacation. I don't have to explain, justify or prove anything. This is supposedly a safe space, like at Family Week in P'town where I turn into a queer Clint Eastwood roaming Commercial Street and leering at unsuspecting straight folk while thinking *Go ahead, make my day*.

I explain to SRH that it's about power, not about dialogue. The lesbian therapist grandmother (LTG) suggests that change is gradual. "Look how long it took blacks to bring about change during the civil rights movement." I reply, "It wasn't just dialogue that brought about change. It was demonstrations and boycotts and a media that showed pictures worldwide of little boys and girls being attacked by dogs and hosed down in the streets. Millions witnessed a very ugly side of America."

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SRH insists that not talking to each other is the problem. He says that during campaigns he was disappointed when blacks would shut down as soon as they'd discover he was working for a Republican candidate. I ask him if he thinks their response might have been a reaction to what's happened under the Bush administration. What's there to discuss when you know nothing will change? I think of a photo I once saw of a woman from New Orleans holding a sign: *It wasn't an Iraqi who left me on a roof to die.*

The conversation shifts back to putting an *acceptable* face on queer America for the benefit of straight America. SRW says that sometimes Rosie's behavior makes her cringe. I'm tempted to say that it goes with her *lifestyle*. LTG describes gay places and people that make her uncomfortable. She complains that these stereotypical images get the media's attention. I'm not about to let her comments sit unchallenged in front of SRH and his SRW. "And you can't think of straight people or places that make you uncomfortable?"

The ultimate blow is when SRW turns to Jack and me and asks if our daughter experiences confusion. The hot tub boils. Jack amicably answers that Mona has many women in her life. SRW seems relieved by Jack's answer. Of course, I should follow Jack's lead and let the matter drop, but of course I don't. I begin, "Your question presents a problem. What you call confusion, I call questioning." SRW responds, "My daughter doesn't know about sex. She hasn't asked me any questions." I snap back, with my head swaying (I learned the head-attitude from Mona). "Just because your daughter hasn't asked you questions, don't assume she doesn't know about sex. I bet your daughter hasn't asked you questions about race either." Stunned, the wife shakes her head. I continue, "Yes my daughter asks questions about having two dads and about being black and about being a part of a mixed race family and about being adopted. These are problems because other people make them problems. I consider it a strength that our daughter asks questions, not a sign of confusion." Then I turn to the husband. By now the thermostat on the hot tub has exploded.

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"You keep reiterating that we need open dialogue. But what I'm really hearing you say is that queers must continuously explain our lives to straight people. We have to convince straight people that we're acceptable. Like any gay man, I grew up around a majority of straight boys and men. You might be surprised to hear that I want you to convince me of something. I know how straight boys and men discuss girls and women. I've seen too many girls and women mistreated by straight men. You must convince me that I don't need to worry that my daughter might grow up to be straight."

I don't mention, however, that I also worry that my daughter might grow up to be queer. In other words, this LGBTQ father worries about his daughter, just as, I assume, SRH worries about his daughter, but unlike LTG, I don't want to devote even a moment of my queer-friendly vacation to discovering the common humanity I might share with straight republicans who on and off of this boat enjoy privileges that they don't (or won't) even acknowledge. And I'm pissed that I'm feeling so defensive.

I compose myself, joke a little, and even tell SRH&W that I'm glad they're enjoying their vacation.

I've dialogued and demonstrated and educated and agitated more times than I can remember, and I'm sure I'll be doing it for the rest of my life, but sometimes I just want to forget all the labels and acronyms and enjoy my family – no explanations needed.

Dear Rosie,

For all I know, the lesbian grandmother therapist may still be floating around the Caribbean, engaged in a meaningful tête-à-tête with the straight Republican husband and wife. For many of us, however, the appeal of R Family Vacations is, if only for the moment, to move in a space where heterosexism doesn't reign. Of course straight folks are welcome, but straight folks who share our hopes, not straight folks who tolerate our *lifestyle* for a price.

Sincerely,

Vince

PS – Aside from the hot tub "dialogue," it was a great vacation.