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SPANKERS

My girlfriend had always had a flair for the biting put-down. As she stood at the threshold of the door to our rented apartment that fateful day, bags packed, she delivered her final volley: "Men," she said, turning to go, "are all puffed-up and full of forward motion, but they billow open behind like hospital patients with their smocks undone. You guys think you know what you're doing in life, but you have no idea."

She later became a lesbian. Well, good for her. But for some reason, as I drove to the recent Thunder in the Mountains Lifestyle Convention at the Denver Hyatt, on assignment for 5280, it was her words that echoed in my mind. Was my smock undone behind? Did I know what I was doing? The convention was exclusively for serious devotees of sadomasochism. I'm not a sadomasochist. Nonetheless, I had taken on this particular story in the confidence that it would be interesting, diverting, a touch titillating, even. Like most men, I privately prided myself on my sexual savoir-faire. I had good liberal views on the subject. Consensual anything was fine by me if it were done in the privacy of a bedroom. And yet, I had a twinge of unease. The website for the convention I'd be attending had boasted that this year's "dungeon" was doubled in size, and on its "staff" page featured a twinkly, avuncular looking gentleman with a beard whose bio proudly proclaimed him "the grandfather of American fisting."

Just how open-minded was I?

I parked my car at the Denver Tech Center parking lot and entered the Hyatt. The first thing I noticed was that all the desk clerks had odd, somewhat befuddled expressions on their faces. Clearly trained in impassivity, they were struggling with their detachment, and kept shooting one another knowing looks. And for good reason. Moving throughout a lobby more used to hosting Disneyesque tourist families and expense-account travelers were hundreds of people who gave the collective impression of attending a Mardi Gras for freelance Satanists. They swaggered forward in a wall of leather, lycra-spandex, chains and tattoos. They wore bespoke dog collars and had spike heels a foot high. Flesh was visible everywhere, multiply pierced and falling out of corsets or drooping behind chaps. A distinguished-looking white-haired gentleman was being docilely led across the central concourse on a leash.

To make things even stranger, these people, as they passed through the lobby, might have been attending a gunshow or an RV convention. There was something deeply calm and orderly about the event, which was sensationally at odds with the costuming of its participants. By the entrance to the inner section of the hotel, a kindly woman with the padded fat cheeks of the kindergarten teachers of my childhood was handing out red plastic bags bearing the logo "Butt Boy Dungeon Music". Other staff in headsets sat at tables piled high with literature and handouts. The vibe was that of a well-run a rock concert, with the difference that everyone in attendance got off on causing and receiving serious pain.

Once, years earlier, I'd written an article for a New York magazine on "Erotica for Women." At the time, I thought it might be interesting to have a man who'd read a lot of dirty books as a boy reading those designed expressly for women. My conclusions were hardly earth-shattering: written porn for women had more attention given to atmosphere, more credible plot-lines and realer emotional nuance—but it was the social embarrassment I recalled, now, hovering a moment, unsure, at the entrance to Thunder in the Mountains. I remembered receiving "research materials" forwarded to me at a rather upscale hotel in New Hampshire, and I remembered the sniggering disdain of the desk clerk, a waspy blonde girl, as she handed them to me. I didn't want a repeat of that kind of humiliation. And part of the problem facing me at the Hyatt was that I couldn't attend as a journalist—they wanted no coverage—and so would have to pass among the crowd incognito, unprotected by the shield of my press badge and for all intents and purposes one of "them".

First confession: I tried to back out. Looking out upon this middle-aged assemblage of spanking devotees, of caning fetishists and abasement-buffs, I lost heart. I called my assigning editor, with the hope of copping a plea and getting out of the piece. I wanted to get back in my car and drive back home to my beautiful girlfriend. I wanted to forget about all of this icky theatre. But as luck would have it, my editor didn't answer his cell, and so I took a breath, paid the 125 dollar entrance fee, and cast my lot with the freaks.

For a few minutes, tentative, I wandered in a kind of hallway that had been set up outside the "seminar rooms" where the action took place. I was trying to get my bearings, and did so by pretending to inspect the art show that had been arranged for the weekend. It took awhile for me to realize that the apparently abstract photographs on easels were in fact images of male members stretched by metal and rubber hardware into something resembling batting machines. On another wall were what appeared to be pastel-framed documents, dense with writing in their center and decorated around the margins. They vaguely reminded me of the old-fashioned Jewish marriage scrolls called "megillot". In this case, the literature informed me, they were "commissioned tributes for your dominant." The one I began reading was entitled "Dad's contract for his boy."

My bearings were by now anything but established, but I decided to plunge in anyway and try the first seminar room. The sign on the door read "impact play", and as I entered, a balding forty something man was explaining to an appreciative crowd that "the strike zone must always be supported with the other hand." He was talking about punching people, it dawned on me. The man then called for volunteers, and of the many eagerly raised hands, chose a mousy woman in her thirties. "Slap yes," he said, raising his hand to strike her, "but hold the face with the other hand to avoid whiplash."

I ducked out before he had a chance to whale on the poor lady, and strolled a bit uncertainly down the corridor and into a larger seminar room entitled "electroplay." I knew that Bondage and Discipline enthusiasts break down into dominants and submissives, or "doms" and "subs", the first obviously interested in doling out the pain and control, the second in passively receiving it. And I knew as well that, according to a Kinsey report published in 1990, between 5 and 10 percent of the population regularly indulges in sadomasochistic activities. S&M is an increasingly mainstream phenomenon, reflected in explicit and veiled terms in many of today's more edgy ad campaigns (ranging from Diesel jeans to Bud Lite), and studied as part of the core

curriculum in many undergraduate Psychology courses. Below the theoretical storms raging on its nature, origins and implications, people continue to practice it for the age-old reason, of course: it gets them off.

I knew all of that. But nothing, not even the most persuasive statistics, prepares one for the shock of stepping out of a warm summer's day, the Rockies sparkling in the distance, and into a room where a trim, attractive 40 something woman is lying naked on a bed with her body filled, and I do mean filled, with electrodes wired up to a stack of boxes sporting knobs and dials. Her name was Sybil, and, as she explained calmly to the crowd, "I discovered my path was humiliation. The spirit moved through me, and it said, 'bash the ego'. And by the way everybody," she added, "I'm still a bit groggy from this morning's genitotorture session, so bear with!"

The crowd, tickled by this confidence, chuckled easily. Sybil laughed too. Sybil was toothy, pleasant, good-humored and apparently "normal". Then what was she doing lying on her back naked in front of strangers, and wired up like an FM radio? Before I had a chance to ponder this question, her bearded husband Mitch, to whom she referred as "my Sir" took over. Mitch had the burly affable look of a grade-school shopteacher, and he charmed the crowd with a smooth patter that alternated pithy bits of advice, ("in electrical play, never above the chest") with funny throwaway lines ("one of the problems with electrical boxes is they come in horrible pastel colors"). He turned up the juice while Sybil, delighted, screamed in agony.

The audience was rapt, and I took advantage of their distraction to give them a quick once over. Ranging from their thirties to fifties, they were all white, obviously well-off, and for the most part, it must be said, less than blazingly attractive. Not to generalize, but pain as a sexual choice does not seem to conduce to good looks. About half the crowd was in leather. But the real surprise was the high percentage of Middle American dowdiness: of big beamy women in stretch slacks, large glasses and beauty parlor hair, and of men running downhill in the Kenny Rogers mold, with long country-and western silver tresses, beards, and big bellies. It might have been a Jeff Foxworthy show, I told myself, except that it was not.

When the initial session was over, and Sybil, satiated, lay on bed in a half-swoon, Mitch took questions while hooking up his next little demonstration. A man in his early 70's wearing a "Vaginatarian" t-shirt leaned forward and raised his hand. "What's the deal with electrical play while wearing bionical hips and knees?" he asked.

It was time to go. I shut the door on Mitch, Sybil and the happy voltage-hounds, and wandered upstairs to the vendors section. What's a convention without shopping? In this case, the sales area was large and bustling, and confirmed what the crowded attendance at the festival had already told me: bondage is big business. There were vendors of whips, of floggers and canes. There was the Kinky Medical corner, with speculums and other assorted instruments which seemed lifted directly from the movie *Dead Ringers*. In one booth, a large gentleman was bent over while being whipped against his bare buttocks by the proprietor, a specialist in "quality leather restraints". A resounding crack of rawhide against flesh sounded out, and the gentleman hitched his pants back up, nodded with a look of dreamy satisfaction, and proffered his credit card.

There were lots of knives, and of mock-combat gear for sale, (is there a merge, I wondered, between crypto-militaristic white power types, and the subculture of spankers?). The "Pony Play"

ranch specialized in making something called “wildfire hooves” which were apparently used by that subset of the B and D world interested in having women dressed as ponies, realistic down to their Edward Scissorhands footwear. Beneath a bright banner, Achilla Products advertised its vast array of bondage-tending adult toys with the slogan, “We Aim to Pleas.”

My head whirling, I walked away, got back in my car and drove home. As I drove I pondered the information I’d gleaned from glossy pamphlet of the National Center for Consensual Sexual Freedom, given me inside my “goody bag”. It was full of chipper, wholesome sounding citations testifying to how wonderful the life of pain could be. The organization’s website, continuing in the same vein, cited a 1998 Playboy poll reported by a Dr. Marty Klein, which stated that 18% of men, and 20% of women had used a blindfold during sex, and that 38% of men and 48% of women had been spanked with erotic intent. It then went on to say: “We do not know why people are heterosexual or homosexual...We do not understand how people develop a particular eroticism. We do know that no one has found any characteristic in childhood history, birth order, etc, that is more common among SM practitioners than the general public.”

Clearly, they were attempting to place their particular persuasion in the entrée column of the menu of contemporary sexual life. I was all for that, for many reasons. But why did I suddenly feel so grateful to get my kicks in the old-fashioned way, without shackles, dildos, or the particular welt-inducing tool called a “single tail” whip? Why did I feel that I’d dodged a bullet in being of that sexual predilection known, with a touch of tender condescension by spankers, as “vanilla”? These questions had no easy answers. I slept badly that night and was back early the next morning.

The second day of Thunder in the Mountains had a more relaxed, around-the-campfire air to it. The attendees, most of whom were staying at the hotel, had probably had dinner together. They had probably compared notes on bruising and striking and strangling each other, and afterwards, buoyed by these chats, had committed group hijinx in their suites at night. A palpable air of fraternity and fellow-feeling reigned. I would see this in action when I attended my first—and last—workshop that day. It was entitled “medical play”, and it was about as far from the sweet, fumbled innocence of the childhood version of playing doctor as it’s possible to be.

Behind the swinging doors of the designated room, a large hospital stage set had been erected. Several beds covered in surgical gauze were laid out, and five “nurses” in skintight latex white miniskirts blazoned with red crosses over the breasts were prancing around on stiletto heels, wheeling in cabinets and tidying up. We hundred or so spectators were sitting patiently in their our chairs, uncertain what to expect, when the head nurse entered from stage left. Stocky and mannish, she looked and spoke a little bit like Frau Farbissina of the Austin Powers movies. “How many of you love suturing?” she asked sternly, as hands shot up all over the room. She then delivered a brief lecture on the joys of the subject, her voice growing warm with the pleasure of her own mastery. She explained that there were over 40 kinds of sutures, and discussed the typical types of injuries, of blood contamination, and of “blood play” available to those so disposed. As it had since the beginning of Thunder in the Mountains, the dry, detailed matter of factness of the presentation made the sensational mundane and obscured the facts—which in this case were that she was talking about getting your rocks off by putting stitches in someone’s flesh.

When her presentation was done, it was time for the theatre to begin. A girl was brought onstage. Dumpy and androgynous, she seemed faintly in a daze, and remained so as she was

expertly stripped naked by the nurses and placed in gynecological stirrups. The audience quickly learned that she was the “slave” of one of the nurses, and as a gift to the nurse was going to undergo some spectacular pain. Frau Farbissina was now barking out that smelling salts would be available for those in the audience who felt faint.

I stared at my little reporter’s notebook, held unobtrusively between my knees, and I gripped it as one does the safety bar of a roller coaster while in front of me, without anesthetic, and apparently for the sexual thrill it provided to the audience and her “dom”, the poor woman was slowly—but here, dear reader, the screen of propriety must fall between me and what happened next. I’ll limit myself to saying that twenty minutes later, when it was over, and the tottering, still-grimacing subject embraced her nurse-master, the audience oohed like skating fans watching someone nail a perfect triple axel.

Everybody has their limits (as the “motivational dominant” had explained to the crowd in a workshop on “pushing the limits” a day earlier). Everybody can be broken. I was broke. I could nearly hear the shattered gears jangling in my head as I stood up to go. I’d had enough. This particular little “seminar” had speared right through my liberal sexual outlook and touched a place inside that made me feel soiled and ill. That night there was going to be a “sex party”, held off premises, as a last bit of valedictory whoopee for those not yet gluttoned on the previous two days, and I’d briefly—very briefly—thought of attending it for the cheap thrill and the material it would provide. I decided then and there that I would not. I wanted it to be over, and it was.

As I left the hotel lobby and walked into the daylight, I experienced the same shock you receive when you leave a matinee movie and rejoin a sunny afternoon in progress, with pedestrians moving about their lives in utter ignorance of the strange places you’ve just travelled in the dark. In this case, the darkness was not visual; it was rather internal, and of the heart. I tried to admire these people for their honesty in bucking the social stigmas and facing up candidly to what it was that aroused them. I tried to have large, noble thoughts about how nice it was that they were able to worship their particular strange god amidst so many fellow-parishioners, and do so in an atmosphere of safety and hygiene. In many past ages, I knew, they would have been killed for their sexual choices, but here they could eat good food, drive good cars, frolic in upscale metropolitan hotels and torture one another to their heart’s content while granted the full statutory protection of the law. This was good, wasn’t it? Of course it was. Then why did I feel so rattled?

Two answers suggested themselves. Either I’d simply reached my gross-out limit as a non-spanking heterosexual male, or I was afraid that part of myself might actually be in danger of getting off on the previous two days of consensual mayhem. Like most people, I’d invested real time and energy in maintaining distant, somewhat formal relations with the darker edges of my own personality. Perhaps I simply couldn’t afford a dip in the boiling hot-tub of Thunder in the Mountains for fear that some inner reserve would melt away permanently, and I’d find myself liking it. Was that it? Was it that I simply wasn’t brave enough to be the equal of my own appetites?

Maybe that old girlfriend of mine was right and men really were tied loosely behind. Maybe we really didn’t know what we wanted. I tried my best to put that idea out of my mind, and think positive, foursquare hygienic thoughts. But I found myself driving the rest of the way home at top speed, as if to outdistance something that was gaining on me.

Eli Gottlieb's new novel, "The Face Thief," will be published by William Morrow in April 2012.