

SUPERB CHINESE FOOD THE HOTTEST KNICK NAILING NEWT

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# NEW YORK

In 1974, It Was Free Sex.  
In 1984, It Was Safe Sex.  
In 1994, It's ...

# MEAN SEX

S&M Culture Goes Mainstream

By Melinda Blau

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THE COMPUTER  
PROGRAMMER

THE  
ENTREPRENEUR



Claudia (left) and  
Orin/Oriana: They  
don't do the clubs  
as much as they  
used to. Too many  
tourists. Not  
enough real  
players.

S&M is suddenly everywhere: in movies, in fashion,  
and in the bedroom next door. Okay, two doors over

# Ordinary People

By Melinda Blau



WERE IT NOT FOR THE WHIPS, THE CANDLES READIED FOR A demonstration of waxing, and several devices designed to deliver electric shocks to certain sensitive parts of the anatomy, the first minutes of this mid-September Eulenspiegel Society meeting would bear an uncanny resemblance to a New Age support group. Over there, in the bleacherlike audience section of the Bond Street theater, a young ponytailed man in black leather pants jockeys his elbow on an armrest shared with a pretty

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAFAEL FUCHS  
FOR NEW YORK





**THE MARKETER**

Bob and Jesse (with tattoo): They're the glam newlywed duo of the S&M scene, the couple everybody would like to tie up.

S&M offers a safe haven for experimentation in the age of AIDS. Like "classy" topless bars and phone sex, it's essentially an ersatz experience.

ver pin through her nose, displays whips of leather, rubber, plastic, and deerskin, feathers for light tickling, a Davy Crockett-style fur tail designed to soothe the sting between floggings. First, she demonstrates; then others take turns with the whips. Rita, a "nice Jewish girl who grew up in Queens," is a careful teacher: Never hit the vital organs; don't wrap the whip around the body; aim for the shoulders or the sweet spot on the buttocks.

At another table across the room is Master Nathan, age 58, a longtime group member who, despite his leather vest, looks more like an accountant than one skilled in electric torture techniques. Electricity is considered a form of "edge play" by some in the scene because it carries a higher-than-average risk. Accordingly, Nathan reminds a woman strapping to her thigh a contraption doctors use to alleviate back pain (called a TENS machine), "It's best to keep it below the waist. You worry about shocks getting to the heart."

It's hard, frankly, to imagine switching places with any of this lot. For all the reassurances to newcomers that pain quickly becomes pleasure, it seems sensible to decline Tim's offer to be his next guinea pig. Still, seeing Bob, a handsome S&M veteran, do a flogging scene with a striking young woman—she is, it turns out, his twentysomething bride, Jesse—one can at least imagine the erotic appeal.

Bob cuts a dashing figure, one hand on his hip, the other holding a whip. Rhythmically, elegantly, and—yes—lovingly, he doles out stinging lashes interspersed with gentle sweet talk and caresses until

bobbed platinum blonde wearing a white T-shirt, baggy shorts, and Doc Martens. A fortyish couple hold hands—is she a schoolteacher? Is he a tax lawyer? And here are a professorial type in elbow-patched blazer, an aging garmento, an earth mother with frizzy auburn hair, and a somber mustachioed older man with a cane who seems to have wandered in off the street.

The young woman standing on the stage below looks like the quintessential girl next door, an effect made even more pronounced by her chirpy announcement that "tonight, instead of the usual lecture and demonstration, we're going to let anyone who wants to join in."

There is something un-New Agey, of course, about the list of forthcoming meeting topics (military techniques applied to S&M, selection and care of Victorian corsetry) and one of the evening's first "scenes," in which a frail-looking woman with bruised alabaster skin lies prone, is blindfolded, and has ribbons of hot candle wax dribbled over her body by a slightly built, rough-faced 58-year-old who calls himself Master Tim (most of the names in this piece have been changed). She's happier than one would expect to have Tim draw a sharp knife tip down her body and trail hot wax along the pencil-thin red track. And she's not even remotely displeased at the fact that throughout this half-hour happening, another dour fellow, known as Master D, stands with the heel of his right boot pressed into her left wrist.

On a table nearby, Rita, 38, a chunky woman with a long sil-

ver pin through her nose, displays whips of leather, rubber, plastic, and deerskin, feathers for light tickling, a Davy Crockett-style fur tail designed to soothe the sting between floggings. First, she demonstrates; then others take turns with the whips. Rita, a "nice Jewish girl who grew up in Queens," is a careful teacher: Never hit the vital organs; don't wrap the whip around the body; aim for the shoulders or the sweet spot on the buttocks.

**T**HE EULENSPIEGEL SOCIETY HAS BEEN HOLDING monthly evenings like this ever since it was formed in 1971 as a "masochists' rights" group (the name refers to a character in German folklore). If blacks, women, and gays could demand a place in society, the founders reasoned, why not us? The society soon expanded to include sadists as well. Today, members, co-opting a term of derision, affectionately call one another "perverts."

Membership has exploded in recent years; there are close to 600 members now, up from 200 to 300 in 1989. This boom is not limited to support groups like Eulenspiegel. Five years ago there were only three listings for S&M clubs and houses of domination in *Screw* magazine, says David Aaron Clark, an editor. (The term S&M is used interchangeably with S/M, D&S, and B&D.) Today, there are eleven, and countless individual operators don't even advertise.

The complexion of Eulenspiegel's membership has also

evolved. Mike, one of its founders, says, "The people who came here knew they were into S&M—but it was a concern, a problem. They felt alone. In the eighties, people began to come because they were just curious—they were exploring dimensions of their humanity. Today, they don't think of it as having a problem." (Surprisingly, it took until this past summer for the mental-health field's bible—the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*—to come to the same conclusion. Its latest edition is the first not to label as "pathological" S&M-type fantasies or behavior. And in another watershed of sorts, a Brooklyn judge ruled two weeks ago that bootlicking, dominance, and submission for money do not constitute prostitution.)

Given the city's ever-increasing heterodoxy, it is notable that the crowd at Eulenspiegel and the city's other S&M haunts is predominantly white and middle class (and by most accounts, largely Jewish and Catholic)—baby-boomer professionals with enough discretionary income to indulge in some trendy outlaw eroticism. This is no coincidence. In the mid-eighties, many S&M clubs were closed amid fears that they were promoting unsafe sex. In the last four years, many of them reopened but with explicit sanctions against actual intercourse. "The wider world of S/M practitioners has for some time been promoting a more hygienic image of itself, as a 'safe, sane, and consensual' sexual practice," essayist Sallie Tisdale writes in her new book, *Talk Dirty to Me*, "a motto designed to make the rest of the world relax."

But there's more than the embourgeoisement of an outlaw practice going on here. For the vast, vast majority of people who would never countenance a round with scrawny Master Tim, S&M may still seem an alien presence. But in fact, it's already everywhere: in fashion, on TV, in the movies, on the

best-seller lists, on magazine racks, on the Internet. Madonna, most agree, is S&M's first cultural ambassador. Her videos and controversial peep-show book *Sex* are widely read as post-feminist statements of control projected through images of dominance and submission. But she was only the start: See Heather Locklear in rubber on the cover of *Details*, where S&M has been a running subtext for years. Catch Gianni Versace's bondage-inspired creations from 1992. See also: Chanel, Jean Paul Gaultier, Thierry Mugler, and Betsey Johnson. Notice the theme of a recent promotional party for Mont Blanc and Seger's leather-goods division—invitations warned, "R.S.V.P. or you'll be punished." Or S&M plotlines on *Melrose Place*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, and *One Life to Live*. In the academy, the ideas of the late Michel Foucault (author of *Discipline and Punish*) continue to resonate in monographs arguing that S&M is an operative metaphor for all societal relations. And is it a mere coincidence that Newt Gingrich, the most authoritarian figure on the American political scene in years, was just given a mandate to whip the country into shape?

Then there's *Interview With the Vampire*, drenched in S&M-ish negative energy, and the key gross-out scene in *Pulp Fiction*, which follows in the grand tradition of S&M-as-outer-edge moments in *Eating Raoul*, *After Hours*, *Something Wild*, and *Basic Instinct*. And there's the late, unlamented *Exit to Eden*, Garry Marshall's woefully inexperienced S&M comedy this fall. On the nostalgia front, there's the sudden craze for those quaintish Betty Page S&M pinups from the fifties, and for the less quaint seventies fashion stylings of photographers Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin. And for the kids, there's Miss Piggy's recent leather look.

S&M fantasies flourish on the Internet. On CompuServe, for instance, of more than 40 discussion groups devoted to sexuality and relationships, the S&M group is one of the most popular. "It seems that a lot of people who don't necessarily

**S&M Comes to the Supermarket**

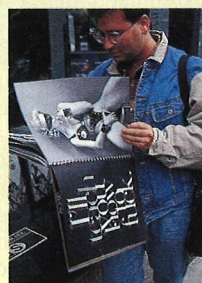
**Music**

Madonna's book *Sex* and her video for "Express Yourself" set the standard for post-feminism by showing the pop star as a randy submissive. The Material Girl, she seemed to be saying, was confident enough



**Ideas**

The late and wildly influential French philosopher Michel Foucault championed the Marquis de Sade as a political hero. Following de Sade and Nietzsche, he argued that all social relations—between people, between institutions, between nations—were about discipline and punishment.



**Fashion**

Gianni Versace shocked the couture community in 1992 when he sent Cindy Crawford (below left) and other models out in bondage getups. A surprising number of New York society types subsequently arrives at charity dos looking like extras from a Lina Wertmüller movie. Chanel, Thierry Mugler, and Betsey Johnson all continue to have similar designs on today's woman.



**Kids Today**

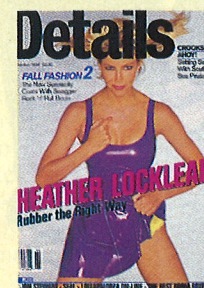
For young hipsters, the sixties were about long hair, the seventies about heavy-metal T-shirts, the eighties about looking like a crack dealer, the early nineties about flannel. Now the consensus generational rebellion is to stick a ring through your nose, your ear, your



bellybutton, your nipple, your eyebrow, any one of your other protrusions. Slap a tattoo everywhere else.

**Media**

Every month is sadomasochism month at *Details*, where the fashion spreads often feature high-cheekboned male models straddling red-lipsticked, barely dressed young women. RUB HER THE RIGHT WAY was October's cover-line come-on, offering up a rubber-clad Heather Locklear. In women's-fashion mags, photographers are rushing to reference the bondage-happy seventies glitz of Helmut Newton and the late Guy Bourdin.



**Hollywood**

S&M is finding its way into the most unlikely places. Garry Marshall took an ill-fated go at wacky B&D comedy with *Exit to Eden*, starring Dana Delany,



Rosie O'Donnell, and Dan Aykroyd. People thought it was really *coool*, however, when in *Pulp Fiction* the characters played by Bruce Willis and Ving Rhames found themselves tied up and gagged in a dungeon. Meanwhile, Roseanne has been known to show up in public looking like she's ready for some edge play.

Stimpie really loves it when Ren beats the stuffing out of him.



Photographs: clockwise from top left, Allen Tannenbaum/Sygma; Steve Granitz/Retna; Steve Schapiro/Savoy Pictures; Gianni Giansanti/Sygma; Alexandre/Sipa; center, John M. Mantel/Sipa.



participate are asking to join the forum because they at least are curious about the subject," says Gloria Brame, co-author of *Different Loving: An Exploration of the World of Sexual Dominance and Submission*.

S&M also breaches the hallowed bourgeois bedroom in other, subtler ways. "The woman who puts on a push-up bra, garter belt, string bikini, and pumps is in fetish gear," says Claudia, computer programmer by day, leather-clad dominatrix by night. "If she gives him a bath or he gives her a bath, that's dominance and submission. If someone pins the other person's arms down, that's bondage. Those are mild expressions, but they're still part of S&M."

Consider Michelle, a medical editor and free-lance writer. She and her lover blindfold and tie each other down, they slap and spank ("but I'm not into pain, and he'd never want to hurt me"), and they watch lots of porn. She appears more the over-helpful librarian type than the passionate, screaming sex kitten who totes a bag full of sex toys on weekend jaunts, dons *bustier* and thigh-high boots, and "does it doggy-style out the window so that everyone can see."

Although Michelle put her name on a sheet posted in Eve's Garden—an erotic boutique on 57th Street—asking for "people interested in S&M play," she wasn't sure she fit the bill. "I never actually thought of what we do as S&M. I thought S&M was gross and that it had to be painful. But Steve was just so into sex and really into me. So I wanted to do it all. But I wish people wouldn't think it's just about using pins and needles or putting hot wax on other people. I wouldn't do *that*."

**T**HERE IS A CERTAIN INEVITABILITY TO THE RISE OF S&M culture. It's an obvious taboo-breaking progression from free love to *The Joy of Sex* to *Last Tango in Paris* to Plato's Retreat to that lower-Manhattan S&M temple of doom, the Vault. And it is an obvious progression, too, for the heavily S&M-influenced gay-leatherman and grungy-biker aesthetics to seep into the straight world. So much so, in fact, that no self-respecting teen or recent college graduate will be seen on Avenue A without appropriately fetishistic tattoos or pierced body parts.

S&M offers an obvious safe haven for sexual experimentation in a time when genital penetration carries the risk of AIDS. Like "classy" topless bars, phone sex, and Internet shenanigans, S&M is essentially an ersatz experience. And unlike its seventies analogue—swinging—S&M entails less performance anxiety.

ety. And compared with death, a few hours in chains seems almost warm and cuddly. "A lot of people don't enjoy sex with condoms," Mistress Claudia says, "and they're looking for ways to replace the lost excitement of casual sex."

But there is also a less self-evident wellspring for S&M. The various tributaries of feel-goodism that have coursed through the culture are now reaching S&M's ramparts. Master Tim, who joined AA several years ago, says S&M fills a void left by drugs and booze. Other adherents portray it as a "spiritual" practice. Nora, a dominatrix, describes S&M as "an extremely positive life force surging through me." Other S&Mers talk of the joy of "being under"—the same terminology used by meditators to describe a desired altered state.

S&M also speaks to gender frustration. "It's the only way some men can allow themselves to step out of role," Claudia says. "And for someone like myself, who works in an office every day, it's great to walk into a room and have some naked guy crouch on the floor next to me."

For straight guys in the scene, S&M's highly stylized costuming offers the possibility of a new kind of hetero drag. Lonnie Barnes, the men's buyer for Patricia Field, an Eighth Street boutique that sells fetishwear, reports a huge increase in straight male customers in just the last two years. The Pleasure Chest and the Noose also say they're seeing more heterosexual male customers, as well as women buying leather for themselves and handcuffs for their boyfriends and husbands. Says Veronica Vera, founder of Miss Vera's Finishing School for Boys Who Want to Be Girls, only a bit hyperbolically, "For every woman who burned her bra, there's a man ready to wear one."

**D**OMINANT WOMEN ARE VERY MUCH IN DEMAND these days," says Jane, 40, a striking, no-nonsense blonde who has no problem getting a date on Saturday night. Jane is one of this new breed of squeaky-clean S&Mers—she says she's in it for the "empowerment." She had had only a passing interest in S&M until this past summer, when a friend sent her an article in *Redbook* about a Learning Annex seminar on "How to Dominate a Man." "I wanted to learn how to do that with men—how to train them, how to be on top of a situation." A few weeks later she called dominatrix Ava Taurel, who runs a "fantasy role play" agency in Manhattan, to ask about her workshops on D&S. Jane went to her first Eulenspiegel Society meeting two months ago.

"I'm only interested in being dominant. I did a little waxing and tried some flogging for the first time at that meeting—and I liked it." An actress divorced five years ago, Jane lives in New Jersey and commutes to midtown Manhattan, where she works at a posh hotel. "I didn't know what to expect at that meeting. I thought they might let blood. I thought they'd be scuzzy. But the people I met were, for the most part, articulate, intelligent, very nice people.

"There must be lots of people doing this in private. You know that riding store in Manhattan—Kauffman's? Someone at the meeting told me they sold 15,000 crops last year. You can't tell me there are that many horseback riders in the city." (The store's owner, Charles Kauffman, confirms that number "if you count wholesale," and cheerily advertises the fact that his store sells 30 or 40 types of whips, hobbles—devices to restrain horses—spurs, and saddles to non-equestrian clientele. "If people want authentic merchandise," he says, "they come to us.")

Jane knows she'll have no trouble finding submissive men to practice on. "Just a hint of it, and men go wild," she says. "At work the other day, I was mildly annoyed at this guy, and I said to him, playfully, 'I ought to turn

S&M's highly stylized costuming offers the possibility of a new kind of hetero drag. "For every woman who burned her bra, there's a man ready to wear one."



Master D, seated, with an unidentified "slave." "I'm the greatest friend certain women can have," he says. "I'm basically your typical Boy Scout."



Michelle has a monthly assignation with a born-again Christian from the Midwest. "I never actually thought of what we do as S&M."

you across my knee and spank you.' You should have seen his eyes light up."

Most guys, Ava Taurel says, want to be dominated, especially if they're high-powered dynamos at work. Ninety-five percent of the men who call her agency want to be "topped," says Taurel, a world traveler who speaks eight languages. She has kept careful records on the nearly 2,700 clients who have passed through her dungeon doors over the last ten years.

Private mistresses and dominance bordellos are a growing industry in New York. "There's a definite explosion on the commercial side," says *Screw's* Clark. "With all the houses and independent mistresses opening up, I wonder if there are enough clients to go around." Places like Paradise Lost, Angel Stern's Dungeon, Nutcracker II, and Leather Ladies charge men \$100 an hour and up for a chance to "bottom." "These dominance bordellos are like McDonald's," says Sal, a general contractor whose particular contribution to the city's multi-billion-dollar economy is to design and build dungeons. "You don't have to worry about getting hurt. They want you to come back."

Taurel's agency is, to extend the gustatory simile, more like, say, Nobu. Ten percent of the clients are lawyers; the rest are company owners, CEOs, and other professionals. For men, sessions are \$300 an hour with a dominant woman, \$350 with a

submissive, and \$100 to get half an hour on the phone.

Money wasn't a problem for Larsen, 70, a well-heeled New England-born WASP who used to work in publishing. Eager to conceal his identity, he tells me his story from a phone booth in Arizona—he moved to the Southwest from Connecticut with his wife after retiring a few years ago. "I've always been fascinated by S&M and cross-dressing," he says, adding blandly, "maybe because I was a bed wetter, and my mother made me wear rubber pants until I went away to prep school." Rebuffed by his wife, who does not share his particular interests, Larsen began ordering latex panties, girdles, dresses, garter belts, and stockings from a catalogue he shared with a co-worker who also commuted into the city.

Larsen describes himself as "pretty normal on the outside—a distinguished gentleman. But," he says, "I just have this bloody fetish. There's a woman inside me trying to get out. I usually had a girdle under the clothes I wore to work. In fact, I have a girdle on right now."

Larsen revels in the memory of Taurel tying him to the mast of his 37-foot ketch and whipping him. "Ava can get me to do anything," he acknowledges. "She's rough. I can take more whipping than anyone she's come across. Besides heightening all my senses, it makes me feel clean—mentally clean, as if I've



THE  
DOMINATRIX



Ava Taurel sits on a customer: Most guys, she says, would rather be dominated. It's a nice change from work.

"It's making me more aware of myself, my power," says a newcomer. "Things I would take in the past from a man I just won't take anymore."

had a shower. It gets the hostility out of my system."

Taurel, currently pursuing a postgraduate degree at NYU, makes S&M sound like a sexual *Outward Bound*, "a way of risk-taking, of overcoming something that you think sounds dangerous, yet isn't once you do it. It's like an inner conquest."

Her office near Carnegie Hall is more high-tech than medieval, amply stocked with an assortment of gear and equipment—and lots of mirrors. Closets in every room overflow with lacy red-and-black lingerie, latex, and leather. The "unthreatening" room is for beginners and cross-dressers who want "light to medium" S&M. The "heavy room" features a spanking chair, a bondage stool, stocks, other menacing-looking restraining and stretching devices, and a hydraulic lift for people who want to hang out for a while.

Mundane household items take on new meaning in this setting: a meat tenderizer, a spatula, a fabric marker with tiny spikes. . . . Taurel explains the tantalizing uses to which each of these once-innocent products of industry can be put as she empties a gigantic leather satchel she brings to her workshops. There's the standard fare, too—muzzles, gags, handcuffs, paddles, and contraptions for force-feeding, which can be bought locally at the Noose and other erotic emporiums. And some prized objects Taurel has scavenged on various expeditions—English canes, custom-made whips from California, an Israeli gas mask.

Her carefully guarded book, a coded chronicle of the fantasies her agency's mistresses have provided, is a testament to individual erotic tastes. No two listings read alike: "paddle and

whip, no marks; doctor/nurse session; light bondage & humiliation; suspension, maybe upside down; likes hoods & helmets; cock rings; nipple clamps; light spank over knee & massage cheeks; butt play; foot worship; likes nice legs; undress him, it's exciting; kissing feet when bound is powerful; might try lingerie; likes mistress in black lingerie, corset, black stockings, very high heels; spit on; verbal humiliation; he wears panties in session & is teased & ridiculed because of them; wants medium to hard caning."

Women are rare in Taurel's client directory—probably because of the high cost of fantasy, but also because women who like this kind of stuff can get it free. Any woman bold enough to approach a man while wearing a garter belt and *bustier* isn't likely to send him running.

Taurel can spot dominatrix potential a mile away. She found Jessica, a 32-year-old married artist, at a disco: "I could tell from the way she moved and how she held herself." Jessica, in turn, introduced Taurel to Claudia, who, after two and a half years under Taurel's tutelage, has begun to write a novel based on her exploits. And her most recent find, Alexandra, a winsome 27-year-old grad student from California, is a classmate at NYU.

"It is a kind of funky assertiveness training," says Alexandra—the blonde in Doc Martens from the Eulenspiegel meeting. "As a woman, I have a tendency to defer to other people," she says with the pedantic ingenuousness characteristic of so many in this crowd. "Learning how to dominate seems like a structured way of processing fantasies and developing communication skills in relationships."

**O**N A SATURDAY NIGHT IN SEPTEMBER, IT'S BUSINESS as usual at the Vault in the meat district south of West 14th Street. The Vault, which recently reopened on the site of the old Mars disco, is dank, sparse, and virtually indistinguishable from other S&M clubs. The juice-and-soda bar downstairs is open to the public. The second floor, for couples, and the third floor, for men only, are empty tonight. But in the fourth-floor room reserved for private parties, the Eulenspiegel Society is having a dominant men/submissive women gala—and the room, dutifully "decorated" by regulars who have arrived early to help out, is replete with chains and ropes, a sling, and numerous bondage devices. A spotlight shines down on a cross equipped with hooks. For women, it's ten dollars to get into the bar scene, five dollars for the Eulenspiegel party; men pay two to three times more at all the clubs. The early arrivals begin to drift in at around eleven, but neither room begins to cook until well after midnight.

Downstairs, the bar scene is reminiscent of the otherworldly saloon in *Star Wars*: Midwestern tourists in polyester and elegant slummers in tuxes ogling hard-core players, transvestites in various states of plumage, and sleazy weenie wackers—naked heterosexual men absently masturbating.

Claudia, the dominatrix from Taurel's dungeon, and Orin, a heterosexual drag queen who calls himself Oriana, arrive an hour late to meet me. "Oriana couldn't get her eyebrows on straight!" Claudia says with a guffaw. "He uses this black stuff that's like charcoal. And then, of course, he gets into the usual, 'Should I wear this? Should I wear that?'"

Once past a female bouncer who frisks everyone for contraband—an ironic touch—Claudia and Oriana act like two girlfriends cruising the action. It's hard to say whose makeup is applied more meticulously. "I'm not a transvestite. I consider myself a man *and* a woman—it depends on what I'm dressed in," explains the willowy six-foot-four (in heels) Oriana, resplendent in a kinky black wig, a black PVC jumpsuit, and

five-inch spikes. She sits cross-legged and demure at the bar—a sweet, smiling young Joan Crawford. Claudia, an attractive brunette, wears understated club chic—black miniskirt and corset, high-heeled platform boots, riding crop in hand.

"She has great clothes," says Claudia of Orin. No wonder. Orin's ex-girlfriend, whom he still lives with, is the shop manager of Dressing for Pleasure, a boutique in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, that is a one-stop-shopping mecca for upscale D&S-ers. Claudia and Orin met at the 1992 Dressing for Pleasure ball, an annual event—this year's was held last weekend—that attracts hundreds of cross-dressers and S&M players from all over the world.

"I'm wearing Orin's corset—it's the first time I ever wore one," Claudia says. "I kind of like bondage, so I'm enjoying the sensation." Tonight, Claudia's 24-inch waistline measures 22; some corset wearers, who submit daily to this kind of torture, have been known to "train down" as much as ten inches. "Why do you think Victorian ladies fainted so much?"

Claudia doesn't do the clubs as much as she used to. "Too many tourists and spectators, not enough real players. I get tired of fending them off. Thank goodness I have my crop with me tonight. When any one of those naked guys gets too close, I'll just hit him with my willie wand."

Claudia and Orin are particularly disappointed in the crowd tonight. In the center of the room, a man dressed in black undies and bra is being whipped by a stout, expressionless woman, perhaps a transvestite. In the catacomb of back rooms, men masturbate or sit back while transvestites do it for them. Claudia and Orin are bored. Maybe something good is happening at Hellfire—it's only a block away—or Edelweiss, a transvestite club. Paddles is having its slave auction, but "the ones willing to get up there aren't worth buying," jokes George, a fay foot fetishist who happens by and begs Claudia to allow him to kiss her boots.

At the party upstairs, a naked woman sits spread-eagled on a banquette in the corner, her numerous labia and nipple rings in full view of onlookers milling about. The man standing over her whips her thighs, her breasts, her genitals. No more than ten feet away, a young woman—naked, blindfolded—is in a sling, her hands tied above her, her head thrown back. A man in black leather pants whispers in her ear, whips her, and shoves a funnelli-like instrument into her vagina.

Here and there around the perimeter of the room, women sway to disco music while men keep time with their whips and paddles. Jane, the newcomer who had been to her first Eulenspiegel meeting only the week before, looks on wide-mouthed, all but ignoring the Yule Log-like tape loop of porno flicks playing endlessly on monitors overhead. The air, dark and heavy, is punctuated by sporadic screams and shrieks.

Tim—the waxer—an entrepreneur who has a Ph.D., comes prepared. Out of a large satchel, he pulls a succession of whips, each harsher and louder than the one before, culminating with a sharp-snapping buggy whip. His current slave lives in Washington and comes to New York on weekends. "A lot of my life has been about a power trip. The dominant role really turns me on."

No matter how distasteful they seem to an outsider, these men are not about to go on the defensive for whipping women. "A lot of women wound up feeling stranded by the women's movement," Master D says none too convincingly. "They wish they didn't have so much responsibility, wish they could feel like little girls again, wish that they could be taken care of by a strong, assertive, self-assured kind of man."

Master D says a therapist once told him he had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility toward women. "It's true. I'm the greatest friend certain women can have. I'm loyal, resourceful, helpful, chivalrous—basically your typical Boy Scout."



"Some of those guys were frightening," Jane says later, recalling the evening from a different perspective. "The women looked like they were enjoying it, but I think after a while these people get desensitized. I came home and took a shower."

The Eulenspiegel party wasn't her first time at the Vault. A few months earlier, with an in-from-out-of-town male friend who thought he had seen everything, she watched a man whip a woman who was wearing a collar and leash. "That night was even worse. It made me angry for days. I would have loved to tie that man up myself. I wanted to cut his balls off and smack the shit out of him."

"Maybe I would have felt different if it had been a dominant woman and a submissive man," she says, "but I can't understand the humiliation of men fully dressed and women without their clothes, their legs wide open for everyone to see. The Nazis did that to women."

Still, Jane has apprenticed herself to David, a dominant man whom she met at Eulenspiegel. She hopes he will teach her the ins and outs of being an artful dominant. But she sometimes asks herself, *What the hell are you getting yourself into?*

David, in his late thirties, runs his own business. He also runs with the wild crowd, he explains, because he "craves" spontaneity. "On an average night [at the clubs] I do enough physical activity to qualify as an aerobic workout. You don't just stand there and hold the whip," he says. "It takes a lot out of you. So I take a nap in the afternoon, eat a high-carb meal, shower, stretch out."

David is eager to share the secrets of his dark world with a beautiful neophyte. Like some of the other male "doms" in the scene, he exudes an unseemly arrogance. "We chatted, we negotiated, and she watched me play with other people," David had said in an earlier interview (without actually mentioning Jane's name). "I'm guessing that she's going to want to play with me one of these weekends."

He was right. Jane is now enjoying David's friendship, although they may have different intentions. "He would love to

David. "Those places attract people of the lowest common denominator. Some of them are just downright off—they're detestable. One guy walks around with a red spike-heeled shoe on his face. But others are like me. A good portion—especially the people in Eulenspiegel—are top-echelon. I don't think David is sick. I don't think Jesse and Bob are sick. And I've met at least ten other couples like them. They're loving toward each other, protective, intelligent. As wacko as this may sound, S&M is actually very healthy for a lot of relationships."

Jane's become increasingly adventurous and has begun to dress the part—cat suit, boots, crop—and walk the walk. "My first time at Paddles, I stood up on a box about three feet wide by four feet long. And within minutes, I had ten guys begging me to kiss my boots. Some I liked and let, some I didn't."

"I picked four. All of them were really nice-looking men, not GQ but very attractive. And very submissive. You know, this is a lonely city. You're standing on the subway with loads of people, but no one really touches you. These submissive guys beg to be touched. They'll do anything you want—shine your shoes, clean your apartment—and you know how you pay them? Say, 'Thank you!' And I have to admit, having a bunch of men want to lick your boots does wonders for the ego."

At Paddles later that night, she cozied up to a guy wearing colored plastic clothespins on a silver chain around his neck—an advertisement for his desires. After making him straddle a leather horse, she clamped his nipples. "He was in ecstasy." A woman watching her—a nervous but eager beginner visiting from the West Coast—asked if she could be next. "She was with a very rich man and his two slaves. I think she was auditioning to be his third. I tied her hands and blindfolded her. I used carrots for oral stimulation. She was going wild. I used ice, in her mouth and on her nipples. I had this woman in a frenzy. Then David and I flogged her. I was in total control over her, and she loved it. She was so grateful, she dropped to her knees."

With each new adventure, Jane feels herself changing. "It's making me more aware of myself, my

power. Things I would take in the past from a man I just won't take anymore. And believe me, there are men out there ten times crueller than anyone at the clubs. They use control in other ways—emotionally and mentally—without your consent."

The clubs are not for the faint of heart, but in Jane's view, some scenes are theatrically inspired, even brilliant. She describes one exhibition at Paddles in which three women shackled the wrists and ankles of a young man, naked except for black construction boots. The guy was "nice-looking," says Jane, the women dazzling—a redhead in a short red rubber dress and boots up to her crotch, an Asian girl in a PVC jumpsuit and five-inch heels, a third in leotard and boots. Jane later found out that each is a professional trying to drum up a private clientele.

"They took out a doctor's kit and put surgical clamps on his nipples and his inner thighs. Then they threaded pink string—bright-pink string, mind you—through the surgical clamps, up and down and around his body. Every so often, they would spank him. By the time they finished, he was in this huge pink spiderweb, and he couldn't move. It was painful-looking, but he was enjoying it."

S&M as performance art? "Yes, it was quite a production. They did it all slowly and methodically, and there was this gorgeous, eerie music playing—a cross between classical and Pink Floyd. It fit the scene perfectly."

Jane has discovered that, quite simply, "topping" is a turn-on. "It's almost intoxicating, like a drug. When I first met you," she tells me, "I had never done any of this stuff. Seeing that girl on the floor with the dripping wax, I thought, 'This is the sickest thing I've seen in my life.' But that was six or eight weeks ago."

"Some of the people are just downright off. One guy walks around with a red spike-heeled shoe on his face."

tie me up," she says, "but that's not going to happen. I know my limits. I don't feel good being subservient. That's an extreme of what we women have played for too long."

Submissive women see it differently. Nathan's live-in partner, Cynthia, for example, considers herself a feminist. "In most vanilla [non-S&M] relationships, someone is dominant," she reasons, unwittingly sounding like Catharine MacKinnon, "but it's usually taken for granted that 'I'm the man and that's how it is.' What I do as a bottom is my particular fantasy play."

Research suggests that thrill seekers might have depressed levels of endorphins and therefore need the heightened state of excitement to get high. Author Gloria Brame is quick to point out, however, that the "why" of people's erotic tastes "remains a mystery to all sexuality researchers." Especially to the uninitiated, Brame says, trying to understand S&M "is kind of like an anthropologist walking into a new tribe and trying to interpret things."

JANE HAS COME TO KNOW THE NATIVES. "WHEN I FIRST got involved, I felt a little on the sordid side, but I don't feel that way anymore," she says now, several weekends of club-hopping under her belt. "Maybe it's because I'm jaded—I'm a little more used to seeing women spanked." She is also convinced that however painful they appear, these are, in fact, consensual acts. "Some people truly enjoy being whipped."

But clubgoing does require a discerning eye. A bodyguard doesn't hurt, either, which is why Jane usually hooks up with

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