



*The Femme  
Mystique*

Edited by  
**Lesléa Newman**

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*The Femme  
Mystique*



edited by  
Lesléa Newman

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1995

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*For the Butch Who Stole This Femme's Heart:*

*Mary Grace Vazquez*

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## INTRODUCTION

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# *I Enjoy Being a Girl*

When Sasha Alyson first invited me to edit a book about femmes, I was both flattered and insulted. Flattered because Mr. Alyson had confidence that I could take on such a project, and insulted because he prefaced his invitation with the question “You do consider yourself a femme, don’t you?” I was indignant. How could he have even the slightest doubt? I racked my brain: had Sasha ever seen me without lipstick and heels? Finally I decided he asked me in order to be 100 percent sure, since — let’s face it — you just never know, and heaven help anyone who makes a femme *faux pas*. Even in the gay nineties, with lipstick lesbians reigning supreme, some women find it an insult to be called a femme.

Not me, though. I am a femme and proud of it. It took me years to embrace the term, though when I think about it, I’ve always been a femme. My nickname as a little girl was “Diamond Lil” because I loved to play dress up with my grandmother’s costume jewelry. I would clomp around her apartment in a pair of her high heels, a matching evening bag hooked on my elbow, my little body adorned with all the rhinestones it could hold. Who cared if my grandmother’s clip-ons pinched my tender earlobes? I knew even then that beauty had its price. My grandmother would dab some perfume onto my wrists and some powder onto my cheeks, and there I was, a five-year-old femme fatale.

Everything changed for me during adolescence, when my body began to blossom. Boys started to notice me and I didn’t like that one bit. For in addition to noticing my body, boys and men made it clear that my body was something they wanted. Somehow I had to make it just as clear that my body was not something I intended to give away. I did that by making myself as unfeminine as possible. I wore baggy jeans and shapeless sweaters or t-shirts. I did not use makeup or wear jewelry. My hair had no style at all and was in my face so much that, when I wore my tortoiseshell glasses, I looked like Cousin It of the *Addams Family*.

This fashion-free phase lasted through the early days of my lesbianism (I came out when I was twenty-seven). I looked like your basic dyke — jeans, t-shirt, sneakers — the only difference being that I had long hair, which I cut immediately. Then I cried for an entire year while I waited for it to grow back.

About this time I went to a lesbian party and saw *her*, my first butch. I kept staring at this woman across the room from me, who was wearing white

jeans, a black shirt, a man's white jacket, and a white tie. Needless to say, her hair was quite short (and perfectly combed). I kept thinking, *What is a man doing at this lesbian party?* And even though I was at that party to find a girlfriend, I couldn't take my eyes off this person who I thought was of the male persuasion. Finally the butch took her jacket off and I saw that she had breasts. Then I really couldn't look away.

But I still didn't realize that I was a femme feeling an intense sexual attraction for a butch. I thought she was the ultimate lesbian and that I should try to look like her as much as possible. Of course this didn't work; I looked ridiculous in a man's jacket and tie. A femme trying to look like a butch is just that: a femme trying to look like a butch. When I finally realized that I didn't want to *be* a butch, I wanted to *sleep with* a butch, a whole new world opened up before my eyes.

Still, it took years to cultivate the fine art of being a femme and grow into the ultrafemme that I am today. I had to go through a series of girlfriends who thought that wearing makeup, dresses, high heels, and lacy lingerie was buying into the patriarchy and oppressive to all women. Never mind that they were dictating the way I should look, act, and think — very oppressive, indeed. I finally found my butch seven years ago, or rather, she found me. She had recently broken up with her lover, and after about a year of solitude remarked to a butch buddy, "I'll never find a girlfriend. The only femme left in this town is Lesléa Newman." "So ask her out," my butch's friend said, and luckily for me, she did.

My butch is a would-never-be-caught-dead-in-a-dress type of butch. She wears no makeup, doesn't own a pair of heels, and has worn the same pair of small gold loops in her ears since the seventies. She'd rather die than carry a pocketbook; she keeps her change in her front pocket and her wallet in the back. She opens doors for me. Leads when we dance. Leads when we... Just the way I like it. And my butch enjoys the femme that I am just as much as I enjoy being a girl. Finding a butch to appreciate me was all that I needed to go wild. I began reading fashion magazines again and haunting the malls. My skirts got shorter, my heels higher, my nails longer, and my lipstick darker. Once I felt safe enough to be who I wanted to be, there was no holding me back.

One is never completely safe, however. One night I was out at a lesbian dance. My butch is a deejay and often I take tickets at the door while she plays. I was wearing a black minidress, mesh stockings, and a pair of heels. A dyke came to the door, looked me up and down, and said loudly, "Hey, is it Halloween? I didn't know this was a costume party." Since my butch was busy, someone else came to my rescue; a leather butch appeared and asked me to dance. When the song ended, she asked, "Are you married?"

"Very," I replied, pointing to my butch, who was glaring down at us from the deejay platform. The leather butch went up to my girlfriend and shook her hand. "You are one lucky woman," she said.

When I sent out a call for manuscripts for *The Femme Mystique*, I got hundreds of replies. Some women shared my story of being a femme until adolescence, only to give it up and then take it back again. Other women wrote about being tomboys and not discovering their femme side until later in life. I heard from femme tops, femme bottoms, high femmes, ultrafemmes, femmes who sleep with other femmes, femme-on-the-street-but-in-the-sheets femmes, furious femmes, former femmes, future femmes, and forever femmes.

Many femmes wrote about the frustration of being perceived as heterosexual, both in the straight world and in the lesbian community. Many femmes wrote about the pain of unhappy childhoods, unlike many butches who knew from an early age why they felt different. Many femmes wrote about the rage they feel when they are assumed by straight and gay people alike to be “just another pretty face.” And many femmes wrote about the joys of being a femme, the sheer pleasures of our sensuality and sexuality that make it all worthwhile.

Here are our stories. It is my hope that this book will offer an understanding of the many ways there are to be femme. I thank Sasha Alyson for entrusting me with this project and all the women who sent me their poems, essays, photographs, and stories. I would also like to thank all the femmes who came before me, gracing the world with their beauty and their bravery. And to all the femmes who come after me, I say this: each femme has her own mystique. Find yours, and never let anyone take it away from you.

Lesléa Newman  
June 1995

PART I

*The Loud,  
the Proud,  
the Femme*

Amy Warner Candela

# *Not What You Might Expect*

*I* am not heterosexual.  
I am not bisexual.  
I am not androgynous.  
I am not perpetuating a patriarchal, heterosexist paradigm.  
I am not lost.  
I am not a fag hag.  
I am not confused.  
I am not anti-feminist.  
I am not acting out internalized homophobia.  
I am not trying to look straight.  
I am not a closet case.  
I did not forget to change clothes after work.  
I am not weak.  
I am not submissive.  
I am not stupid.  
I am not in need of protection (very often).  
I am not on my way to my mother's house.  
I am not ashamed to be a lesbian.  
I do not do femmes.  
I do not do men.  
I am a lesbian.  
I would love to be a housewife.  
I shave my legs.  
I paint my nails and wear makeup.  
I wear dresses.  
I slow-dance and waltz.  
I prefer to be on the bottom.  
I sometimes like to be on top.  
I am an ardent feminist.  
I am strong and intelligent.  
I once played tee-ball.  
I enjoy flannel as much as the next girl.  
I hate asking for directions.

I only do butches.  
I am proud of who and what I am.  
I am femme.



Valerie Young

## *Femme in Your Face*

### *I*f the Pump Fits

There are as many ways to be a femme as there are shades of Revlon blush. I'm your basic wouldn't-be-caught-dead-in-flannel, has-anyone-seen-my-lipstick, throws-like-a-girl, sacrifices-comfort-for-style, wouldn't-remove-a-dead-mouse-from-a-trap-to-save-my-life, honey-can-you-open-this-jar type of femme. Am I a stereotype? I suppose so. Then again, I consider the expert application of makeup an underappreciated art form, firmly believe that accessories make the woman, and can't fathom why *anyone* would touch a dead mouse or endure the frustration of a stuck jar lid if the butch standing next to them is ready, willing, and able to do these things.

As a young lesbian I would have vigorously resisted this, or, for that matter, any kind of labeling. But over time I came to the liberating realization that "if the pump fits, wear it." Embracing my femme self did not come easily. Coming of age in a political, largely androgynous, lesbian community often meant choosing between being a femme and fitting in. I didn't have a clear enough sense of myself early on to understand the price of this little trade-off. For me, embracing the femme parts of myself began with appreciating my past. Looking back, it's clear to me that being a femme is not only who I am, it's who I've always been.

### *C*olor Me Pink, or Barbie Had Nothing on Me

In 1959 at the age of five, my favorite color was pink. The more pink, the better. At an amusement park arcade, I tossed a ring onto a smiling wooden clown and got to pick any prize I wanted. I chose an eighteen-inch statue of Jesus, not because I was a particularly religious child (in fact, my family didn't even go to church), but because it was covered with pink glitter. After much cajoling, my grandmother convinced me to turn it in for something more "appropriate." Reluctantly, I substituted my sparkling pink Jesus for a pink Kewpie doll swinging from a bamboo cane.

I coveted my friend Kathleen Carney's Easy-Bake oven, the kind that baked those miniature cupcakes by the heat of a lightbulb. Too extravagant a toy for my family of seven, I settled for the next best thing: hitching up one of my great-grandmother's starched aprons and getting elbow deep in Duncan Hines brownie mix. Before you dismiss me as a brainwashed Donna Reed wanna-be, I should confess that I failed miserably at sewing. One of my more humiliating childhood memories is of standing on a 4-H judging

podium watching helplessly as the hem on my turquoise jumper slowly unraveled before the judges' eyes. Perhaps wanting to ensure this little setback wouldn't result in one less future homemaker, they gave me a third-prize ribbon anyway.

So maybe I couldn't sew, but I could twirl and curtsy, curtsy and twirl in one of those full scratchy crinoline slips for hours. Was I socialized this way? Absolutely. Did I like it? You know, I think I did.

Unlike my more androgynous or butch friends who tell painful stories of being forced into all the compulsory "girl things," I really liked a lot of the girl stuff. Don't get me wrong: on some level I knew there were other options, even if they weren't always available to me. At our elementary school the playground was segregated: the boys could use the baseball field, football field, soccer field, basketball court, jungle gym, swings, and slide; the girls got the teachers' asphalt parking lot, and it was BYO rope and chalk. Okay, so maybe I learned to like jump rope and hopscotch and all the other girl games because there weren't a lot of choices. But there were a few nontraditional girls I could have chosen to emulate, one of them my sister Debbie.

One year older than I, Debbie was your daredevil tomboy type. She'd careen fearlessly down an icy hill *standing* on her toboggan, bodysurf for hours in the cold June waters of Cape Cod, and impale fat, slimy worms onto fishing hooks. Not me. As a child there were two categories of things I definitely did not like: scary and icky.

It's not that I couldn't get into building a tree house or a fort. To me the whole point of *building* a tree house was to have a new place in which to *play* house. When I played house I would transform a basement corner into a highly functional yet aesthetically pleasing dwelling for Barbie and all her anatomically exaggerated girlfriends. And once inside, Barbie and the girls had me to thank for always being dressed in just the right ensemble for just the right occasion.

In those days, if I wasn't actually playing dress up, my best friend Elaine Taylor and I were spending half the day walking up and down our street comparing details of our exquisite, imaginary wardrobes. "Today I'm wearing a V-neck black dress with three-quarter-length sleeves under a short-waisted leopard-skin jacket with leopard-skin high heels, black mesh gloves, and a leopard-skin pillbox hat." "That's *nothing*. Today I'm wearing a long glittery pink gown with short puff sleeves, long white gloves, sparkling glass slippers, a diamond necklace and earrings, a sapphire tiara, and a white mink stole with those little black dots in it."

Adolescence was probably the closest I've ever really come to at least *looking* androgynous. In the late sixties and early seventies, blue workshirts, patched bell-bottom jeans, construction boots, and headbands were the uniform of any self-respecting white hippie, regardless of gender. Trying to discern whether Paul was really dead or not or whether the Vietnam War was morally right or not didn't mean for a moment I'd given up reading girl magazines like *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*. I could lose myself for hours



*Baby Femme: Valerie Young, circa 1959*

eagerly ferreting out the latest makeup tip, pimple remedy, or fashion do's and don'ts.

With college came the disco era and I did more than my share of booty-shaking to memorable seventies hits like "One Nation under a Groove." Patched jeans were out; high heels, low-back leotards, and long flowing skirts were in. As I found my way to feminism (or perhaps more accurately, feminism found me) my heels got lower but the other femme accoutrements pretty much stayed the same. At age twenty-five, I came out.

### *You're in the [Lesbian] Army Now*

I found myself immersed in a strong lesbian community with a high level of political consciousness and activity. Already a feminist, a lot of the issues were not new to me, such as controlling our own bodies, gender inequities in job access, pay, and promotion, the epidemic of violence against women. I'd already gotten rid of all my "fuck me" shoes and was down to wearing just a little mascara and blush. But nothing could have prepared me for the relatively narrow range of acceptable behavior and thought that typified the lesbian community in 1980. It was like joining a club with a set of very precise and inflexible rules. The rules were unspoken ... until you'd broken one.

Not looking like everyone else was grounds for near expulsion. Desperately wanting to fit in, I spent my first few years as a lesbian agonizing over what to wear. Could lesbians wear leotards? skirts? lingerie? The "to shave or not to shave" dilemma had me rattled for months.

Not that coming out was *all* stressful. Much of the process was incredibly exciting. It had taken nothing more than one exceptionally long gaze from one exceptionally cute classmate for me to suddenly *get* the connection between my string of unsuccessful relationships with men and the deep affinity I felt for other women. With that one knowing look, my sense of self and the possibilities that lay ahead were radically transformed. Coming out was the equivalent of being emotionally born again.

It was also a time of intense sexual anticipation and anxiety. With the exception of one short-lived night making out with my friend Dianna at a seventh-grade pajama party, I'd never been with a woman. I alternated between fantasizing and worrying about the big moment, and I don't think I slept more than a few hours a night, functioning pretty much in a constant state of sexual arousal.

So much of what I remember isn't the emotional or sexual catharsis of coming out, but the intense anxiety of trying to learn and navigate the cultural nuances of being an acceptable lesbian. I hadn't been out more than a month when I joined a local lesbian softball team. A great way to meet other dykes, everyone said. The only problem was, this particular team consisted of a roughly equal number of athletes and separatists. The athletes were skilled players who liked to win. The separatists were tough, angry women with buzz cuts and no tolerance for men, straight people, or lesbians who didn't look like a lesbian should. Neither group had much use for a leg-shaving, mascara-wearing neophyte who hadn't stepped onto a softball field since high school. To say I was odd-femme-out is an understatement.

The ostracism I experienced on the softball field underscored my less-than-welcome reception. Before coming out, all my emotional support and validation came from other women. It seemed reasonable to assume that the lesbian community, women who loved women in the fullest sense of the word, would embrace one of its newest members with open arms. I was wrong. Ironically, much of my support in those first few years came from my straight female friends, including my roommate. This in and of itself posed a challenge since, at that time, it was taboo to even admit *having* straight friends, much less *living* with one.

But, as I was to soon learn, not nearly as verboten as carrying a pocketbook. After one game, the softball team went out for the ritual pizza and beer. I returned from the rest room to find one of my teammates swinging my pocketbook wildly and generally camping it up. Everyone was having a good laugh, and I took my seat expecting to be included in the joke. Instead the laughter stopped, my pocketbook was quickly dropped back onto the arm of my chair, and the group nervously changed the subject. I felt confused, humiliated, and both exposed and invisible. It was then I realized, instead of being included in the joke, I *was* the joke.

I see now it wasn't myself, but my femme style that was at issue. Even in retrospect, the distinction is a fine one, indeed. Although my butch friend Dawn assures me that real butches see feminine straight women and lesbian

femmes very differently, I can't help but wonder if some of the hostility I experienced was because I appeared to look and act the way women in general were taught to look and act. Perhaps my teammates saw me as a living symbol of everything they were fighting against.

Then again, maybe some of the resentment comes from the fact that the blatant femme can, whether she wants to or not, pass so easily in the straight community. Not that I've ever tried to pass. I'd just as soon invent some boyfriend as give up my earring collection. I just happen to visually fit. Because other lesbians can't fit, even if they try, they often bear the brunt of the most hostile forms of homophobia. The fact is, being blatantly femme in a homophobic world means we tend to get a better deal, or at least catch less shit, than our more stereotypically lesbian-looking counterparts.

Understanding doesn't necessarily lessen the pain. I look back at my softball experience and wonder: If I hadn't thrown like a girl, would my appearance have mattered so much? Would they have been less cruel if I hadn't been so afraid of those fast, bouncing infield balls? What if I actually cared whether or not we won the game, or had been willing to make a commitment to catching a fly ball by calling out, "I've got it" instead of "I'll try!"? Trying to compensate for these minor skill and motivational deficiencies, I played up the one thing I did have going for me: speed. I'd steal bases whenever I could, and always volunteered to pinch run for teammates with pulled hamstrings, but it didn't seem to help. The pregame stress and postgame isolation were becoming unbearable. I was about ready to quit the team when it happened.

### *My* First — but Not My Last — Butch

There was one woman on the team, a Winston-smoking pitcher with strong shoulders and a sure stride. That summer she divided her time between the Cape, where she lived with her lover, and the Valley, where she had family and friends. Consequently, she didn't get to games very often. I'd only seen her a few times and, like most of the team, she'd taken no particular notice of me. One warm June night, sprawled on the grass between innings, she suddenly rolled on her side and struck up a conversation with me. What was my name? What did I do? Had I lived in Northampton long? Was I going to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival? Wasn't it a beautiful night? After six weeks of ostracism, I was thrilled just to be making small talk.

Then a weird thing happened. Reaching across me for her glove, her arm grazed my stomach. As she headed back out to the mound, she suddenly turned, flashed me this big old smile, and I swear she even winked. Maybe it was my hunger for a connection on the team, maybe it was the way she hurled the ball over the catcher's mound or the way she'd joke with the catcher before sending a triple into center field, and then again, maybe, just maybe, it was those shoulders. All I knew was that I wanted her. Friends warned me that this woman flirted the way the rest of us breathed. Naive as

I was, even I couldn't miss the way her eyes lit up when she discovered I'd not yet been with a woman. Of all the softball fields in all the dyke leagues in all the world, she had to walk onto mine. It didn't take a seasoned dyke to know this woman was trouble. But you know, sometimes a little trouble is just what a girl's looking for.

You'd think that because I'm so femmy I would have understood something as obvious as being attracted to a butch. But at the time, I didn't have the context or the vocabulary to understand. Years later I realized that what I liked about her *was* her butchness, and that she was drawn to me for the very thing others had shunned.

Back then, I couldn't have told you why I was more attracted to Meg Christian than Holly Near, just that I was. Over the years I proceeded to get involved with a number of women who all fell into what I'd call the "athlete" category: a former college women's volleyball coach, a marathon runner who qualified for the Olympic trials, a recreational bowler. But back then, I don't think any of us really understood the femme-butch dynamic.

These days, I think I get it more than they do. In fact, to a woman, they'd probably deny any butch-femme attraction even existed. The attraction, they'd insist, was purely androgynous. Who knows, maybe it was. Who am I to tell them they're butch? Past lovers aside, it's become more apparent to me that there *is* such a thing as *femme sexual energy*, and that it differs qualitatively from what I have experienced to be *butch sexual energy*. Unfortunately that's about as far as I've gotten in my analysis of postmodern femme-butch attraction theory.

## **F**emme-in-the-Streets-Butch-in-the-Sheets

I'm too busy trying to just figure out sex itself. It seems to me that a lot of us, butch *and* femme, find it much easier to make love than to be made love to. Being in both ... well, positions, requires the ability to take sexual control one minute and give it up the next. I think this transition is a difficult one for butches.

They're not sure why, but my butch friends tell me they feel more comfortable giving than receiving. In fact, some can give and give and give and *expect nothing in return*, which can be a very handy quality for a femme with only a minor headache. The bad news is, some butches *won't let you give in return*. This, on the other hand, can be quite a problem for the growing number of femme-in-the-streets-butch-in-the-sheets types who've figured out how hot wearing the harness can be.

As for this femme, I've come to the conclusion that I want it all. I want an emotionally available soft butch with a strong ego and an even stronger back to carry me off to the bedroom, relieve me of my clothes in three, maybe four suave moves while telling me in shockingly explicit terms exactly what she's going to do to me and approximately how and when she's going to do it, until it's no longer clear whether my inability to breathe is from the anticipation of her promises or the accuracy of her touch.

Yet unlike a lot of just-do-me femmes, I also want that same butch to be able to give up the director's chair, or her ego, or whatever you want to call it, long enough for me to sneak up behind her while she's programming the VCR, or fixing the sink, or doing one of those things butches think they do so well. Without her even having to turn around, I will skillfully introduce her to a quivering, yielding, far wetter version of her former self.

## Femme in Your Face

Speaking of wet butches: after a brief but welcome period of sexual initiation, the softball pitcher returned to the Cape and her lover. I switched to a less competitive, less politically rigid team the next summer and proceeded to settle into some compromised version of my lesbian self. I began dressing down (at least for me). I became a regular at lesbian events. I made myself listen to Cris Williamson. I started calling all men "boys" (in retrospect, a very "white" thing to do). But even I had my limits; I drew the line at Birkenstocks and prided myself on the fact that I'd never worn a down jacket.

Years later, seeking a much-needed diversion from the pressures of being a doctoral student, I enrolled in a class at a women's martial arts school. Being too much of a Scorpio to say, "Yes, Sensei" while bowing before a woman I'd seen dancing only the night before, I wondered if maybe a yoga class would have been a better choice. But I hung in there, until one day when the sensei told us to drop to the wooden floor to warm up with a few push-ups *on our knuckles*. I don't think so. It was around this time that something shifted for me.

No longer intimidated by the opinions of other lesbians, I slowly moved beyond mere femme comfortability to a femme-in-your-face pride. It's like the way Queer Nation people feel about their queerness. Much as I hate to admit it, there's a part of me that gets a little charge out of shocking my more androgynous, political sisters by wearing a provocatively femmy outfit to the local dance club. And I have been known to go out of my way to look just that little bit extra femmy at the annual lesbian festival, half hoping for the kind of "fuck you — this is who I am" confrontation I *should* have had over my pocketbook some fourteen years ago.

Like most stances, this femme-in-your-face attitude is a mixed bag. On the one hand, playing shock-the-lesbians is one of the more harmless and fun ways for femmes to cope with criticism from other lesbians. But making a game of it doesn't negate the fact that reacting *in any way* to other people's intolerance in effect buys into it.

Tiring of yet another form of compromise, I now strive for ways to honor my femme identity, wanting a sense of dignity with enough depth, passion, and resolve to render me immune to any and all insults to my femmeness. I'm not there yet, but when I am I'll know I've reached the pinnacle. A true *creme-de-la-femme*.

Aiye Elena

# Words from Feminine Ass

## One Femme's Story

While all femmes are created equal, no two develop alike. There are no concrete characteristics of femme. If you looked in the dictionary under *femme* you would see my picture first, followed by pictures of other femmes in all colors, shapes, sizes, ages, physical abilities, number of earrings, hairstyles (borrowed, purchased, and natural), and so on. A woman is as femme as she says she is, not as femme as everyone else decides she is. That's how it is.

However, some definitions of femme have been shallow and insulting. Unenlightened masses of lesbians, bisexual women, and curious heterosexuals decided that femme was the opposite of butch (read: where there is no butch, there is no femme), that femmes were the girlfriends of butches (read: that femmes existed only as objects of butch desires), and that femmes were indistinguishable from straight women (read: passing and closeted), therefore not to be trusted, because they bought into patriarchal bullshit (read: co-opted and apolitical). Femmeness was defined by how much makeup was used and whether or not a skirt was worn. The femme was also seen as a passive recipient in the sheets, too weak, self-centered, or both, to give pleasure in return. In short, it was just a bunch of trumped-up crap designed to bring the Goddess down.

But I'm here to tell you: it's time that femmes stood up and were counted! Stop letting lesbian culture define us: let's define *it!* What about femme power?? Femme visibility?? Speak up! Let's break down the doors of ignorance and show them who we really are: the loud, the proud, the femme.

I didn't have to buy it: I was *born* with it: a full set of nails and an *en vogue* hairstyle, 1968 short and curly, *very* natural. And born at the right time, too: sun sign Leo, on a Friday night. Without a doubt, I was born to be femme.

"Feminine Ass" was the first nickname my aunt Val ever gave me. She, a raging heterosexual tomboy, could not understand why a perfectly healthy eight-year-old girl was totally disinterested in climbing trees, beating people up, playing football, and the like. Why I liked wigs and dolls and makeup and not that other stuff was beyond her. I got the impression that "feminine ass" was a backhanded compliment, not quite the venomous insult it was intended to be. I decided to stick with it and see where it took me.



As a preteen, I preferred tennis shoes to “training” pumps, jeans to miniskirts, a clean face to streaks of over-blush and runny lip gloss, and self-maintaining hair to a vogue cut and an ever-present hairbrush. But no one *ever* mistook me for a tomboy or a butch (identified me as a dyke, yes, but that’s another story). I wondered how everyone knew I was a feminine ass, without the usual identifying markers. I just watched and learned, as feminine asses are encouraged to do.

In high school I tried some makeup, training pumps, miniskirts, and hairdos. I loved the makeup counter at the mall and the latest fashions, and I was perpetually on a diet. I was the envy of my female peers, femme and nonfemme, because my fingernails grew without my effort or participation. I even wanted to be a part-time hairdresser (I still do!). But I still felt different; unlike my femme peers, I was simply not consumed, absorbed, or fixated. I was clearly not cut out to be an assembly-line rent-a-femme prepped up for the masses. I was just me. Maybe it was then that I knew that femme was from within.

In college, high femme fashion was mandatory for women of all sexual orientations. Women whose outward appearance could allow others to assume they were dykes, low femmes, baby butches, androgynous babes, or the like were shunned. I struggled to stay on top of the femme heap and conceal my inwardly budding dyke identity at the same time. Me, in pink lipstick! Talk about an eyesore — being African-American and Chicana, I’m really a *summer*, you know. Lord, it was a new low. I didn’t have time to find my true colors; I threw on anything to survive. Feminine Ass was like a freshwater fish (so to speak) in salt water. It wasn’t pretty.

*Finally*, the HomoGoddess was awakened and the shit was *on!* I looked around my newfound Lesbian Nation and saw that what I had considered simply my natural best was really Femme City! Other feminine asses were all around me. They ordered wine coolers and sparkling water instead of beers; wore earth-tone makeup instead of fuchsia (thank God); wore no makeup and long hair, or makeup and short hair, jeans and jackets, tube dresses, “pro” pumps, and flats. There was no end to it all; I felt I had come home.

But not all was pedicures and Donna Karan (translation from femme-speak: there was a problem or two). The lipstick lesbian debate was (and still is) alive and well, particularly in my then-town of Los Angeles, the Beauty Capital in Its Own Mind. The lipstick types were doing the talk-show rounds, while the androgynes and butches were left behind, or so it seemed. And of course, femmes were blamed for all the social ills of the Lesbian Nation. To hear others tell it, anyone caught dead within a mile of a beauty shop never did a damn thing for the Movement but reap the benefits. Femmes were posturing prima donnas with air for brains. It was ugly, to say the least. But now, through struggle, most is well again among femmes and their lesbian friends — thanks to the femmes, of course.

Today, I am a happy, healthy, low femme (God, we *gotta* work on these identifiers, really!). My nails are still naturally long (unpolished), and my hair is still (more or less) naturally curly and short, same as the day I was born. I generally dress in what is comfortable, no makeup. I occasionally get a burst of energy and attempt a high femme look, but these bursts only last a day at a time. As a visible, out, proud femme, I know that makeup, heels, and frilly clothing are not required, only a strong sense of self, a keen desire to be femme, and the power to pull it off.

Femmeness is as much a part of my identity as being a Leo, or an only child, or right-handed. It is the one part I feel I can create and recreate in *my* own image, not the images that have been thrust upon me; the part that is not the direct result of oppression and struggle but born of joy and celebration, a testament to the sheer beauty and wonder of being femme.



*Portrait of a Femme: Dr. Marjorie J. Hill*

Morgan Gwenwald

Raphaella Vaisseau

## *I Am Not a Straight Girl*

*I* am not a straight girl; I am a femme. There's a *huge* difference, even though it may not be obvious to the untrained heart or eye. If I were butch, or even androgynous, there might have been more obvious reasons for me to question how I fit into society. However, as a femme, I found it difficult to isolate and identify my own sexual identity. In hindsight, I realize how invisible, discounted, and alone I felt.

I didn't know I was gay until much later in my life. I did what my parents and society expected of me and married a man. Even the lack of chemistry between us didn't cause me to question my sexual identity, because I believed what my mother had taught me: sex for a woman was a chore and a duty, not an enjoyable experience.

I was raised in a very strict and sexist environment which trained me to be a wife. Lessons in how to be a good girl included the advice that it didn't matter what my interests were. When I found a boyfriend, I was supposed to discover his interests and study them in order to carry on a conversation with him, so that he wouldn't get bored and turn to another woman. I was taught that men were the authority, and their approval counted. A woman's purpose was to make men happy and help them do their work.

I tried to be a "good girl." In high school, I sensed the anger and frustration inside me but I didn't know how to express it. When my father insisted I go to college, I thought that was a ridiculous contradiction to the main purpose of my life, which was to get married. Why would I need a college degree for that? I found a two-year degree program in something that didn't interest me, just to get it over with. I'd already found the man I'd decided to marry, not because I knew what love was, but again, so I could get on with it.

As a child I did what I was told, to the best of my ability. I was not acknowledged for who I was or what I did, and was punished if I fell short of some perfect behavior I was supposed to innately know. An inventory was taken every night at dinner, during which my sister and I reported to my parents the events of the day (this was not required of my brother). If I'd gotten an "A" on an exam, or done something else right, I would be off the hot seat. I was never praised or supported.

In my family, even asking questions was unacceptable. How could I have known how to seek a different path? I remember listening to my sister try to express her identity. At the time, my sister had a crush on a boy. My parents

disapproved of him. I didn't understand it at the time, but in looking back I get the picture. My sister had large breasts, and an obvious sexuality. She wanted to show off her breasts by wearing tight sweaters. My father went into a rage, told her she was a slut, and sent her to her room. She never won those attempts to establish her own identity; I never tried. I watched my father break her spirit and decided it was safer to listen and follow his rules. I was focused on surviving and avoiding my father's rage, so the questions didn't even arise in my heart. In our home there was One God, One Ruler, and One Right Way: my father's way. Instead of protecting and nurturing my sister or me, my mother just sat there and watched. She supported and protected my father instead of me, and when my brother came along she supported and protected him, too. It was clear to me that women had no rights, allies, or power, and getting men's approval was the only way to avoid conflict.

As a grown woman, now a femme lesbian who stands up for herself, I've often asked myself how I could have accepted that repression without fighting back. To be fair to myself, I believe that if I'd challenged my family, I might not have survived emotionally or even physically. They wouldn't have allowed me to be different. This is part of why I think it was so hard for me to discover my sexual identity.

Many androgynous or butch women I know had an advantage in knowing early on that they didn't fit in. Some noticed that they looked different from other little girls; some had more boyish body shapes, features, or mannerisms; some noticed they didn't like to do things other girls in their neighborhoods liked to do, such as play with dolls and wear dresses.

Thus, even though many butches are denied the option to choose a different sexual expression than the norm, they may be more apt to figure out something's not right with the choices presented to them. I know at least one butch who wanted to play Tarzan, not Jane, when she was growing up. And she wanted girls to lean their heads on her shoulder, like in the movies, rather than lean her head on some boy's shoulder. She managed to convince her parents to let her wear an army uniform or a cowboy hat and holster for play instead of dresses. Her parents were in the theater and I guess more accustomed to costumes than most parents. Maybe if they had known why she wanted to wear the clothes of a man instead of a woman, she too would have been stifled in her expression.

As a femme-child, I didn't have the experience of looking outwardly different from my straight girlfriends, my mother, or the women I saw on TV or in the movies. I wanted to wear dresses, look pretty, and be feminine. At the same time I was strong, athletic, and smart. I didn't know any lesbians. In fact, I didn't even know lesbians existed. Homosexuality was not discussed in my family or among my friends. Even the actresses I saw in the movies or on TV portrayed wives and mothers. I don't believe I can be too harsh a critic of my little-girl self; even today, femme role models are very

hard to spot in the straight world, and choices for alternative sexual expression are not discussed with children.

When I discovered butch-femme sexual dynamics, a lot became clear to me. I learned that feminine isn't synonymous with weak, less than, or bad. I learned that chemistry is very real, and that I am a sexual being. In my butch-femme marriage I got validation for things I like doing, things I'd previously judged unacceptable or unfeminist. Whereas in my heterosexual marriage, I felt I had to fight for my equality because it wasn't given to me.

It took me a long time to know who I was and that my perfect mate was a butch. Yet the only person who can set the spark aflame for a femme like me *is* a butch, and who the hell is going to tell a pretty young femme to look for her dreams to come true in the arms of a butch woman? Certainly not the young femme's father.

As a young woman dating men, I knew something was missing. But instead of believing an option existed for me, I decided true love did not exist. Life was nothing more than simply gaining experience and doing a good job. Later I began my search in the lesbian community for a mate. Not knowing enough about diversity within our community, I began looking for a woman like myself, someone with similar goals and politics. Still no chemistry. It wasn't until I finally met and fell in love with a butch that life made sense for me, that I knew all that I had never been told.

It isn't always easy being a femme. I've been judged and rejected by lesbians in the community: butches judged me because I had had relationships with men in my past and because I didn't know I was gay all my life, and androgynous lesbians judged me because of my feminine appearance. Sometimes I've felt ignored and discounted by lesbians because I look straight. It was hard to know I was femme before I knew what a femme was.

Once I came to that awareness I was faced with incredible sadness, anger, and feelings of betrayal: at the patriarchal society, for the continuing oppression of women; at men, for playing along with the game and for treating me like an object available to them; at my parents, for not teaching me about individual choice and for not fostering self-esteem in me; at other lesbians, for not accepting diversity within the community by providing role models of all sexual identities; and at myself, for not knowing who I was from the start.

We need role models desperately. We need to stand up, get angry and fight, and be out for each other, so that each one of us doesn't have to continually reinvent the wheel. Claiming myself as a femme is as necessary for me as it is liberating. Knowing I am a femme is finally knowing who I am. I have found my sexual identity. I am not a straight girl; I am a femme.

Constance Lynne

# *Supercolliding over a Twinkie*

*Angry Musings from  
a Femme in the Deep South*

When I joined this club (or perhaps more accurately, noticed that I was a member), one of its biggest selling points was freedom. Great-big-letters-with-glitter-and-fanfare freedom; freedom to love women without fear of rebuke; freedom to look and dress the way I wanted without stares, or even worse, backhanded compliments (“How, uh ... sweet! I’d never think to wear my hair like that!”); freedom to speak my mind without fear of censure. I neglected to remind myself that the freedom to do a thing is not, and never will be, equivalent to feeling comfortable doing it. And true freedom is as rare and breathtaking as four-leaf clovers under snowdrifts. Simple lessons, you would think.

But now, finally, I *am* speaking out. Because I have learned that, even in this club, where we should all know to some extent the pain of being punished for behaving as though we were free in an unfree world, these freedoms we were promised are not absolute. They are sold to us in smiling-mouthed, red-ribboned packages of peace and hope. We are offered salvation from a world that thinks it has the right to torment us for our difference. But when the shine wears off, the dull reality sinks in: difference is still, far too often, a defect. There is still a code to be followed, and consequences for those who do not follow it. Take note, leathermen, drag queens, transsexuals, butches, bikers, and hyperfemmes. Shudder if you must, but you all know the unsettling sensations of isolation on your own turf. *You don’t even fit in here.*

I say this because last month I realized I was sneaking into my own home with the hypervigilance of a cat burglar because I was carrying some new aerobic workout videotapes. And I say this because I went to a party recently with about eighty other dykes and I was the only one there in a skirt — a turquoise miniskirt, no less. I was stared at, not altogether in a kindly manner, and told, “Oh! You look so, uh ... sweet!” And last week when my grandfather told me I was “getting a little chunky” and had better watch my weight, I felt two worlds of suspicion and intolerance slam into each other with the force of a nuclear reaction. One world’s conformity is another’s rebellion, and punishment, regardless of platitudes about acceptance and tolerance, is often swift. *There is no safety to be had.*

When I finally admitted that I was a lesbian so many years ago and let the implications of that truth settle ponderously across my shoulders, I swore that from that point on I would refuse to pretend that I was someone I was not. I also knew that I was in for at least one fight. My parents did not relinquish their dreams of my church wedding and grandkids without a few good swings. Those punches, thrown in the heat of battle, left me breathless and stunned with humiliation. Because there were no other weapons to be had, I shrieked at them with all of the fury and fear I felt. Out of my adolescent rage, and the gnawing sense that my own parents might actually abhor me, I screeched, "I don't care what you think! I don't care what anyone thinks!" I ran out the door, got into the car, bought more sweatpants, and sheared off my hair.

It was a lie, what I said to them. Lots of us say it, but few of us mean it. I didn't admit that, though, for several years, during which time I repeated the words like a mantra: *Don't care what you think, don't care what you think, don't care, don't care, don't care.* And I did believe it, until I met a woman with clear green eyes, broad shoulders, and strong hands that I watched knead bread for hours in the bakery. This woman changed me, and left me reeling.

She actually left me crying. As my mantra-lie exploded under the weight of her opinions, the shock waves shook tears from my eyes and sobs from my chest. We were playing cards together. I had dressed up the best way I knew how (yes, I did it for her, but even now this story is hard to tell; the admission of my own folly, even harder). I wore a soft green sweater to bring out the gold in my eyes, paid too much for a French manicure (the stylist swore because my nails were too short), and brushed mascara and lipstick across my face deftly, the way I had learned to do years ago when Mother said, "Here, you'll look better if you use some foundation to even out those blotches."

As we played out our hands, this magnificent woman of the green eyes coolly trumped my king and asked, "How can you stand to wear makeup? I couldn't do it. I'd feel like I was giving in to the men who tell us that we're not real women if we aren't thin and well coifed and..." To be honest, I don't remember exactly what else she said. But it was the standard lesbian diatribe against lipstick, hot rollers, and *Vogue* models, the refrain of which I continue to hear today from friends, strangers, and people who ought to know the price of conformity in any guise.

And I *did* care what she thought. I cared so much that I couldn't meet her gaze for the rest of the night, couldn't lift my eyes from the weight of her judgment of me, not even when we played partners in the next game and had to bid. We lost; the party ended early.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I am not completely dependent on the judgments of others for my sense of acceptability. Today I am wearing my hair long and permed into full curls around my face, tying it up in sheer, silken scarves. I often choose to be late for a date rather than go out feeling



“unfinished,” which some days means a little powder and Chap Stick and other days means a total makeover. I wear long silk skirts and fluffy sweaters when I want, and regard the word *pretty* as a compliment again. Still, I know I am regarded as a failure and even a traitor by many in this club because I suffer occasional self-recrimination for being a size sixteen instead of a size six, because I enjoy wearing miniskirts and stockings, because I apparently care about and conform to the opinions of the “wrong” people (people in that other world who label us unacceptable or unfit). They say I am selling out, catering to the patriarchy, being codependent on my mother and her opinions. Choose your descriptor, choose your chains.

Too often, the saleswomen of so-called freedom are more like the neo-conservatives and fundamentalists of the world, who say, “Do it our way or don’t expect any privileges.” They are not selling us the right to be who we want to be, they are selling us the right to be what *they believe* we should want to be. Sometimes, those rights are the same thing. More often, they are not. And when they are not, worlds may collide in a firestorm of indignation, embarrassment, and rage.

I want that freedom they sold me. I want the freedom to love women, passionately and overwhelmingly. I want the freedom to love them the way I want, whether I wear a lace dress or jeans, whether I wear press-on nails or no lipstick. I want the freedom to feel sexy at 170 pounds. I want to do aerobics without resorting to stealth maneuvers. And I want the freedom to be who I am, without embarrassment or fear. I want no exceptions, no contingencies, no caveats. And if our community cannot — or will not — grant that freedom, I, and those like me, the rebel-conformists if you will, will take it. We will even steal it if we must. They’ll be surprised at how fast we can run in those tight skirts and pumps.

Constance Clare

## *Femme Attack*

*R*acy group of young lesbians,  
Getting ready to go out on the town  
After a bookstore event.  
One says, "Wait, I want to put on my  
Lipstick."  
"Femme," another drawls slowly out her mouth: as  
Insult. Picked up by another,  
"Oh, so we have a femme here, do we?"  
"Femme" spat out as rancid.  
Picked up by another, "Hey, since when did you become a  
Femmebot?" in jest — in mockery.  
Laughter and righteousness swirl in the air.  
Where does humor end and disgrace begin?  
I'm walking past this group, putting books away.  
I walk quicker now, my head down,  
I want to get out of here.  
I expect this from the softball jocks, who look  
Disdainfully at me and my  
Best femme friend sitting on the bleachers  
Cheering for our butches.  
This crowd though,  
Young dykes, some newly out,  
So up-and-coming, so hip.  
Somehow, naive, I am caught, surprised.  
Ready to leave, I walk back by;  
The convicted femme has taken out her lipstick.  
It's a soft color.  
"Oh that's okay then, she's only  
Half a femme with that color!"  
Half-femme looks half-relieved as the group  
Half-acquits her.  
I turn to leave, I don't say good-bye.  
I assume they don't notice me — a  
Femme, in my dark purple  
Lipstick, short black  
Skirt, my butch lover in her

Leather, leaning on the counter, waiting.  
Walking down the street,  
My hand in hers, I tell her how that little scene bothered me.  
I tell her that tomorrow I will wear  
An old denim shirt, jeans that have holes in the knees, and  
Could I borrow her boots? I'll have to remember to wear no makeup,  
And buy a baseball cap to wear backwards.  
She smiles and says maybe she'll wear lace for the occasion.

Tzivia Gover

## Country Girl

An icy rain is falling outside, and I feel the chill seeping into our house as the last coals in the woodstove begin to die. My girlfriend had to leave early for work, so I am left to fill the woodpile myself. There are many things I would rather be doing: lounging by the fire in my black satin robe, polishing my nails, or reading a trashy novel, for example. But until someone ventures outside to bring in wood, there will be no fire. And the only someone home is me.

Reluctantly, I set out to get dressed. This will be easier if I think of it as dressing for an occasion; I like dressing up, after all. Layers would be appropriate, I think, as I pull open the top drawer of my bureau looking for layer number one. I bypass a black slip with lace trim, camisoles in cream, black, and lavender, and an assortment of panty hose, none of which would stand up to the task at hand.

I turn from my dresser and open a drawer of my girlfriend's bureau. Whit would have what I need, I think, and she does. I find a pair of blue thermal underwear, wool socks, and snowpants that will protect me from the three-foot-high drifts outside. I wrap a scarf around my neck to stop the cold rain from running down my back as I work. On top I wear a turtleneck and a sweatshirt. I hide my hair under a blue knit cap that once belonged to my brother. Before going downstairs to put on my rubber boots, I look in the full-length mirror.

*My God, what's become of me?* I ask my reflection. I look to the photograph of me that Whit keeps on top of her bureau for reassurance. In the photo I am wearing a black dress with gold lamé stitching and long twisting earrings that nearly graze my shoulders. That is the girl Whit brought over the threshold, I tell my reflection. A reminder, I suppose, that she — the me in the picture — is still the lady of this house.

This is not the way I imagined my life would turn out, living in the hills of western Massachusetts with bears for neighbors. The closest store has a gas pump outside and sells work gloves, fishing line, and chewing tobacco but none of the things I consider necessities. There's nothing silk in there, for example. Nothing with pearls.

I push through a pile of ice and snow as I ease the front door open, then shovel a path to the woodpile, where I pick up my axe. It is considerably lighter than the splitting maul Whit uses to blast huge rounds of wood into

small slices. I call it my ladies' axe, and that makes me feel a little better about owning it at all.

But nomenclature can't hide the fact that this is a sharp and lethal tool. Hoisting it over my head, I could pass for one of the teenage boys who occasionally drive snowmobiles over our property. How did a nice femme like me end up here, like this?

The immediate answer is easy and obvious. I fell in love with a butch. A real butch, which by my definition is a girl who isn't afraid of using a chain saw to cut our firewood. A real butch wouldn't dream of letting someone else change her oil (or mine, for that matter). A girl who wouldn't be caught dead living in the sweet, pink Victorian house in the suburbs that I always imagined one day would be mine.

I have to admit, there is more to the story than that. Even before I met Whit there was a little of the axe-swinging amazon lurking beneath my satin blouse and tailored skirt.

Sometimes I think of my life as having started when I tucked my first flannel shirt into threadbare jeans. It was the only outfit I could imagine wearing to one's own coming-out. That fashion statement back then meant I was finished with the definition of womanhood that said I needed a man and a brood of kids to be whole. This look, however, like the outrageous ensembles trotted out on the runways of Paris each season, was destined not to last.

I'd cut off all my hair, but I missed barrettes and braiding. Shopping was still the best way to make me happy, but there are only so many variations on plaid flannel. I polished my nails at night and wiped them clean in the morning, thinking fire-engine red was verboten for any self-respecting dyke.

Part of me was still the high-school senior who wore spike-heeled sandals and skintight, brushed-velvet, Gloria Vanderbilt slacks to parties. I still thought longingly of sets of skirts, shirts, and sweaters that we used to refer to as outfits. Although in those days I loved wearing my mother's gold charm bracelet, and at least five rings at a time, I never liked the societal accessories that went with ladies' fashion.

I wasn't a feminine girl. I argued with boys instead of acquiescing to them. I wanted to wed myself to a career, not to a man. I preferred bushy eyebrows over the pain of plucking, and thought shaving my legs was a waste of time. When I came out I went even further. I thought that, to be a feminist, I had to throw out the feminine, Gloria Vanderbilt slacks and all.

There had to be a way of being me and being a lesbian. There had to be a way of incorporating the girl I was before I entered this fashion-free world of lesbian culture.

It wasn't until I dated a femme that I figured out how misguided my notions really were. We both claimed to be butches, although the most intimate part of our relationship revolved around swapping skirts and steal-

ing each other's shoes like sisters. We spent long nights putting henna in each other's hair and giving each other green-mud facials.

She insisted she was the butch because, unlike me, she could hammer a nail without bruising her thumb. While that was true, hanging a picture was usually a full afternoon's ordeal no matter which one of us was in charge. I tried to prove I really wore the suspenders in our house by installing a light fixture myself. Of course in the end we had to pay a real butch to come by and replace the three-foot chunk of ceiling plaster that I accidentally removed. Neither of us was much good with cars; the local Automobile Association of America repairman was practically a member of our family. We were Lucy and Ethel on a madcap adventure.

Now I find myself in a relationship that is more reminiscent of Fred and Wilma. It suits me better, even though the feminist and the femme in me sometimes feel at odds. For example, my girlfriend insists that, when we tie the knot, I take her name. I refuse, calling her a chauvinist pig. But I don't argue when she holds out my coat so I can slip into it, or when she automatically sits in the driver's seat of our car.

Even though I complain that I'm living the lesbian version of *Green Acres*, I have to admit I've become, at least in part, a willing woodswoman. The untamed world outside my window, where we've found porcupines hiding in tree trunks and fox tracks in our yard, seduces the part of me that was stifled in the suburbs — the adventuress, the girl who wanted to prove she could do it all herself. The cord of wood I split is my answer to anyone who sees me in a dress and assumes they've gotten the whole picture.

Last night I got a letter from Whit's mother, who at sixty-five is as hardy as her daughter. My struggles with life in the country are a source of endless amusement for her. She loves to watch this Long Island native fumble with the woodstove, and she just laughs when I complain about the interminable drive to the nearest mall. Perhaps her favorite amusement is watching me pack a pair of pumps in a tote bag so the heels don't sink hopelessly into our dirt driveway when her daughter takes me on a date. When Whit's mother last came to visit, I showed her my ladies' axe and bragged about my woodpile. In the letter that followed, she praised me for adapting, finally, to my new home. "Country girl, I'm so proud of you," she wrote.

The compliment gets me both ways. I'm impressed, too. Who would have thought I'd last two winters out here where my femme friends will only visit between the close of mud season and the first autumn frost?

But the compliment also makes me worry. Have I defected? Have I gone too far? I am convinced that I have when Whit comes home early and sees me in my wood-hauling getup. Her cool blue eyes take me in, soot-streaked face and all. "You're awfully cute as a butch," she smiles.

"Really?" I ask, sensing that my worst fears have been realized. I'm a goner, for sure.

"Yeah," she says, real quiet. "Now go upstairs and put on something black and short. I'm taking you out, country girl."

Meg Mott

## Born-Again Femme

It's early March. The snow pushed up by the plow has an armadillo's shell of road dirt. By ten in the morning, the kitchen has been swept, the dishes are clean, and Alison has paid the bills. The slow day sits dully before us like the gray ice sculpture at the end of the driveway.

This morning's bathtime reading is a hot lesbian novel by Kate Allen. The steamy text is acting like a conditioner on my withered imagination. "Did you like the part with the bartender in the basement?" Alison is lying on the couch, reading Isabel Allende's *Of Light and Shadows*. She does not respond. I try again.

"Didn't you like those slick moves with Carla?"

"Uh-huh," she says flatly. I continue reading about swollen tissues and packed plastic. The language is titillating. I can't resist engaging Alison in this penetrating prose.

"Don't you think Brattleboro needs a leather community?" No response. I hear the sound of a page flicking to the end of a sentence.

"Uh-huh," she finally says.

For a moment I feel irritated. Why is she still reading when she could talk about sex with me? Luckily, I am distracted by Carla's interaction with the dildo. The heavily lubricated scene keeps me from being rude, March rude, when frozen gravel comes spewing from the mouth.

After Carla has her way with the protagonist, I put down my book and duck my hair under for the final rinse. Alison is quiet on the other side of the door. Isabel is holding her close.

The reflection over the sink of a damp shoulder and a loosely hung towel has a different meaning after this morning's read. My body has become a playground of possibilities; my neck, a slide for famished kisses, my mouth, a sandbox for flustered excavations. I imagine an excited recess in the damp spaces under my breasts when Alison turns another page.

There is a wooden chair in the kitchen, three feet in front of the window and equidistant to the engrossed reader, the perfect place to continue this morning's humidifying efforts. I put my squirt bottle of olive-and-aloe lotion on the kitchen table beside me. Alison reads an entire page before realizing what she is missing.

"Don't let me disturb you," I say, waxing the white skin cream into my left calf, which is conveniently propped on the kitchen table.

Alison is still clutching Isabel's well-crafted text, but her gaze is missing the page. She is smiling, inconsistently, the story line stretched open by her thumb.

"Good story, don't you think?" I ask, smearing a creamy line into the soft flesh of my thighs.

"What story?" Alison drops the book on the floor.

I stand up and slowly rub two palmfuls of lotion over my torso. My nipples stand up under the polishing and the skin over my hipbones starts to shine. Remembering the postures in Kate Allen's novel, I put one leg up on the chair. Alison is clearly pleased with the view.

"I'll be back," I say, tapping her on the shoulder as I pass a tongue's length away. I reach down and pick up the spread-eagled paperback. "You dropped something."

"Pick it up again," she pleads, but I go upstairs.

In the back of my underwear drawer is an outfit I haven't put on since I decided to be a butch. After seventeen years in a heterosexual marriage, I was tired of being an object. I wanted to be the active agent in this romance, the one who strutted down the street, who escorted my lover to the middle of the dance floor, and who brought her Kleenex after we made love.

"You're the butch?" my friend Tina laughed. I had just buzzed the back of my head and stiffened my hair into a spiked surface sturdy enough to hold a serving tray. "Sorry, Meg, you just don't have what it takes to be a butch."

I pouted and made sure she saw my hairdo from every possible angle. She kept laughing. "It's your face," she finally said.

I sucked in my cheeks and dropped my chin. "There, is that better?" I asked.

She laughed even harder. "Now what are you going to do about your voice?"

"I can change that, too," I said in a deeper, gravelly tone.

I find what I'm looking for underneath a roll of acrylic knee socks from ninth grade. Unrolling the tangle of silk straps and black lace, I step into a world I thought I had sealed shut with my divorce papers. I put on a pair of black-leather, short-heeled, pointy-toed shoes and wrap a black-fringed scarf around my head. I look like Theda Bara. I feel like Susie Bright.

Patchouli oil, found in an old travel bag, wafts out of the past and onto the skin behind my ears. It feels like old home day, as I assemble my paraphernalia of premeditation. I run a second line of perfume over my hipbone, increase the dangly effect with a pair of beaded earrings, and look up to see an old friend in the mirror. An old and happier friend. We like the idea of waking up our couch girl downstairs. We know that this time, the reward for our labors will be far sweeter than anything we ever got before.

Click, click. The unfamiliar sound of heels hitting the wooden steps announce a change in the late-winter's day routine. Click, click, through the



living room, the insistence of the rhythm subdued in the deep pile of green carpet. Click, click. The sound is higher on the kitchen linoleum. I march past my still supine partner and into the bathroom, leaving the door open behind me.

“Wow, you look great!” she says.

I nod, tapping a small pile of tooth powder onto plastic bristles. The mirror frames a dentally concerned sex goddess: dark eyebrows slipping under a black-fringed headdress; broad white collarbone spreading like a soccer field between two silk end lines; the soft-bristled toothbrush poised before my open lips. What the mirror doesn't show is the steep-angled cut of black ruffles that accentuate my hips. Two snaps at the bottom keep the ruffles of rayon close to my (temporarily) private parts.

“Too bad I don't have my garter belts anymore.”

We have lived together long enough that she can understand my speech through a baffle of mint-scented lather.

“You had garter belts?” she asks. I nod and spit the white foam down the drain. As I lean over, I notice a soft mass of cat hair and wood ash growing in the corner of the bathroom. The gray, amorphous cloud gives me an idea, a sort of revenge for her lack of interest in our earlier conversation.

Click, click. I parade past the couch and disappear into the pantry. Click, click. I come back with a broom and dustpan. She reaches out involuntarily on the return trip and I let her touch the black rayon that cascades along my hip.

I start sweeping the bathroom, kicking the rug out of the way with my sharp-pointed shoes.

“Why are you doing this now?” Alison whines. I keep sweeping, ignoring her protests. I'm still a little angry, and consider mimicking her earlier uh-huhs, but that path would only lead to bickering and pettiness and I am after a different sort of exchange.

“Don't worry,” I tell her, “you'll like this soon enough.”

“Virgo kinkiness?” she asks, her words a little slurred.

I keep sweeping until the billows of hair and ash form a pile the size of a small kitten directly in front of the bathroom door.

“Ready?” I ask, my back to her. I bend at the hips and reach down with the dustpan. The snaps hold, barely, and I hear her swoon from the sofa. I sweep the debris of late winter into the dustpan and click back to the pantry. Her face is redder than in previous passings.

To make a long and lascivious story short, suffice it to say I kept her attention all morning. I certainly got my way. She wore her long underwear bottoms and I lost my scarf under the living room couch. I still brought her Kleenex afterward.

Since then I have moved a few items forward from the back of my closet. The clothes still fit and I don't have to alter my voice. When Tina saw me in a tight skirt and fishnets, she didn't laugh. “Hey, you look really good,” she said, admiring my black rayon seams.

It's a little harder to negotiate the driveway in heels. The frozen tundra of sand and stone threatens to make a fool of this born-again femme. I find a certain consolation in knowing that, within a month or so, this tough, gravelly environment will be a thing of the past. Spring, with her deep-scented, swollen blossoms, is definitely on the way.

Deborah Filipek

## *The Way the Cookie Crumbles*

“If she’s androgynous, I’m femme,” said Andrea, my very butch lover of three years, after meeting another dyke couple in a straight bar in a suburb of Chicago.

We had been waiting for the entertainment for the evening to begin when Andrea scoped them out and said, “I’ve seen them around before,” meaning at a women’s bar, or some other lesbian function.

As usual, she said, “Hi, guys, how you doin’?”

“We thought we recognized you, too,” said Nancy, who looked really butchy to me with her workman’s boots, man’s haircut, and denim shirt.

After introductions, we sat at a table for two next to Nancy and Linda, her ultrafemme girlfriend, who had long frosted blonde hair, long red fingernails, and enough makeup to give Tammy Faye Baker a run for her money.

I ordered my usual tonic and a twist of lime, and Andy settled for a bottle of Sharp’s (no glass for her with another butch in our presence). “You all been here before?” Linda asked, folding her left knee over the right, showing plenty of plump black-stockinged thigh.

“Yeah, we thought maybe this was a bi bar or something, the way you walked through here with your arm around her waist,” Nancy said to Andy.

“Actually, Deb heard that this band was pretty good, but we’ve never been here,” Andy said, adding, “We’re pretty out.”

Nancy shrugged, and with a side-to-side shake of her head indicated she thought we were taking a risk by acting like a couple publicly.

“Linda’s femme, so no trouble there,” Nancy said.

Obviously, I thought, snickering to myself, mentally comparing my own femmeness to Linda’s. I was getting ready to come on to Nancy when she added, “I’m androgynous; we don’t want to attract attention to ourselves by looking or acting like a couple.”

I coughed immediately to stifle my laughter and being a fairly good actress, complained seconds later that there was just a bit too much of a lime kick to my drink.

My giggles under control, I flashed my toothpaste-commercial smile right at Nancy, ran my fingers through my curly blonde hair, and stared into her dark brown eyes so intently that, I swear, she squirmed, feeling her butchness from the roots of her hair to the tips of her toes.

I felt a tap on my right shoulder. Andy, well aware of my flirtatious nature, brought me back to the moment and asked if I wanted another drink.

"Once the ice melts I'm sure it'll be fine," I said, acutely aware that, though Andy was used to my flirting with other women, Linda, who was only an arm's length away, wasn't smiling as she had been only moments before.

I gave both Linda and Nancy an innocent look as I leaned closer to Andy, knowing she wasn't angry with me. Based on past experience, Andy found it kind of turned her on to know that, even if I flirted outrageously with other women, she was the one taking me home at night.

I half suspect that what made my obvious moves on other women safe for both of us was, I knew Andy was ready to glare menacingly at the object of my flirtation. Also, Andy knew that if a woman responded to my calculated maneuvers, my first reaction would be to turn to Andy.

It was on the drive home when Andy, who would rather let me get it on with Martina Navratilova than describe herself as femme, brought up the topic of androgyny.

At least the femme knew what she was, I thought, remembering her long hair, painted nails, and black miniskirt. "Everybody has their own idea of what those definitions stand for," I said.

"Like when you thought you were the butch a few years ago?" Andy goaded me.

"Well, yeah," I said, still a bit embarrassed about the naiveté I displayed after first coming out. "Compared to my straight girlfriends, I was butch."

"With perm, makeup, nail polish, and a penchant for flower-patterned clothes?" she kidded me.

"Yes, because it's not just what's on the outside, it's how you feel inside, too," I said.

"How do butches feel?" she asked.

"Pretty soft," I said, poking her tummy.

"You know what I mean," she protested, slapping my fingers away from her love handles.

"Okay," I said. "Strong, rough and tough, and able to do a man's job, including taking care of her woman, both in bed and in other ways."

"Is that how you felt when you thought you were butch?"

"Sort of, especially when I dated a woman who was more feminine than I was. I assumed the butch role, and she let me. Just like I let you."

"You *let* me be butch?" Andy asked, her eyes and mouth open wide in astonishment, trying to assess if my statement was in jest.

"The road, dear," I said, noticing we were nearly over the double yellow divider lines along Milwaukee Avenue.

Andy swerved back into the lane and shot me another quick look.

“Yes, I allow you to be the stronger one. The one who does the driving, who carries the heaviest bags of groceries when we do the shopping together, who picks the restaurant on a romantic night out.”

“How does a femme feel, then?”

“Sexy, pretty, and sometimes subservient to the butch, but it’s not the same as being subservient to a man, because we’re both women.”

“How’s it different?”

“Well, you still do your share of the housework, for instance, and if we had children their care would be more evenly shared than between a straight couple.”

The quietness in her maroon Hyundai (we’d nicknamed it the Flintstone-mobile) told me she was apt to agree with me on that point, and I laughed softly to myself when she pulled into a twenty-four-hour convenience store to buy her nightly fix of chocolate chip cookies, as if nothing we had talked about had changed a thing.

However her silence, except for the sounds of munching, told me she was untangling this web of news. I knew she was ingesting more than a midnight snack. I wondered how my perception of our relationship would affect us: Would she feel angry? Duped? Knowing Andy as well as I do, I didn’t expect a direct confrontation about whether she was the butch and me the femme, or how we should properly execute our roles. Instead, she brought up the topic in her own quiet way.

The following week I noticed that Andy didn’t get home in time to begin dinner as she usually did on the nights she didn’t go directly to school from work. That was her way of affirming her true butchness, of saying, “Cooking meals is femme stuff.” Hint number two came on our usual Saturday afternoon grocery shopping trip. I noticed she left the heavier bags for me to haul from the cart to the car, and from the car to the house. Again, without saying a word, she was telling me plenty. “If you’re so butch, you carry the heavy bags,” a more verbal partner might have said.

I was up to the challenge, and heaved the heavier bags onto my hips, pretending I didn’t notice their weight. I saw her look sideways at me, a bit guilty, I suspect, as she took care of the lighter bags with bread, veggies, and chips.

Back home, instead of unpacking the groceries in her typical whiz-bang fashion while I checked for mail and phone messages, Andy fled the kitchen for the mailbox.

I willingly played along, even hiding her weekly dose of chocolate chip cookies to add to the fun. I acted as though I hadn’t seen them, and didn’t bring up carrying heavy bags or putting the groceries away.

I thought nothing could come between her and her Keebler’s, but Saturday turned into Sunday without a word about the missing cookies. My thoughts drifted to earlier days of languid lovemaking, which we had used

as a truce-inducing balm when we first moved in together. I also didn't want anything to come between me and my weekly dose of woman-to-woman touch-and-shiver. Usually I didn't have to ask for it; it just sort of came my way, like the car, with Andy at the wheel, to the door of a restaurant on a snowy evening.

Besides my need to make love, I wanted to talk again about our roles and the way they could ebb and flow at our choosing. I also knew that the softness of our intimacy would assure Andy of her position in our relationship.

Locking the bathroom door, my red-lace and satin-ribboned teddy and the bag of cookies hidden under a towel and cache of magazines, I announced I was taking a bath and shouldn't be disturbed unless there was a fire.

Andy didn't stir from her prone position in front of the television, and merely grunted. She wasn't aware of the ambush I was preparing. My role as initiator was usually left to special occasions like anniversaries, when I would surprise her with a new battery-operated toy, or her thirtieth birthday, when I presented myself, naked except for a strategically placed bow, to my shocked, but ready and willing partner.

Our normal routine was she'd sit next to me on the couch and, dreamy-eyed, ask if I was in the mood. She usually batted a thousand since there was rarely an occasion I wasn't up to the deed. To keep her guessing, now and again I'd say I was too tired. Other times I'd request a back rub, secretly desiring a thorough body massage, one that ended in energy-draining orgasm.

As I emerged from my steamy bath, the scent of gardenia crept into the living room where Andy lay, much as I'd left her nearly an hour earlier. I stood just out of her peripheral vision, forcing her to turn 180 degrees to make out the flash of red to her right.

I was rewarded by a knowing smile, and after a few seconds of fumbling, I heard the click of the remote turning off the television. From the gleam in her eyes, I wasn't so sure it was me she wanted; I had tied three of her favorite cookies to the satin ribbons keeping my breasts enclosed in wisps of fabric. I walked seductively toward my prey as she sat up and called me to her with open arms. I knelt, straddling her thighs, placing my breasts and the cookies directly in front of her face. She held my hips in her hands and kissed down both sides of my neck. As she got to the cookies, she nuzzled my breasts through the red gauze and undid the red satin ribbons with her teeth. The cookies fell neatly into our entwined laps, giving her a dessert to enjoy after she finished the main course.

"Would you say that I'm kind of butch in my own way?" I asked Andy as she bit into the first of her cookies. Andy finished the cookie and fished for the other between the cushions of the couch before she answered. I perceived this as a combination of deliberate nonchalance, chocolate chip cookie deprivation, and sex-induced brain drain.

“In your own way, in certain instances, yes, I guess you are butch,” she said, while propped up on one elbow, holding her chin in one hand and preparing to put the second cookie in her mouth with the other. “But, at times like these, you’re very, very femme,” she said, putting the cookie between her teeth and moving forward to offer me a bite.

Victoria Baker

## Femme: Very Queer Indeed

I've tried to give up being a femme, since we are almost universally belittled, and because I get tired of being stereotyped as something I reject, but it has never worked. I am a femme, just as I am a lesbian. A dyke. Very queer indeed.

What is femme? It seems everyone has at least some idea of what is meant by the term *butch*. Lesbian writers use the term *butch* blithely, or they explain it by way of celebrating butch as a radical concept, revolutionary in practice, indeed shamanistic in nature. And I do not doubt the truth of that. However, every time someone holds butch up as the ideal for lesbians, I am left out, and I *will not* be dictated to about how I conduct myself socially or sexually.

*Femme* is an expression of difference, not merely the negative of an existing concept, not merely unbutch. If there were no perceived differences between lesbians, why would the concept "butch" be necessary? By using that word we admit that there is another way to be, that which I call femme.

When I was sixteen, in 1972, my family went to visit my mother's clan in New Orleans. Near the French Quarter one day, two people holding hands approached us, and I became transfixed. They were an interracial butch-femme couple, proud. The butch wore a man's white shirt, untucked, her breasts outlined by the fabric. My eyes kept tracing the triangle formed by the femme's carefully made-up face, the butch's breasts, and their clasped hands. As they got closer, the butch made eye contact with me and then said something to her lover. They both looked at me again and smiled. I grinned, staring, but then the butch glanced across to my father and carefully averted her eyes, a gentle tug to her partner's hand signaling, "Cool it." I turned, rapt, and watched them saunter into a bar called Vicki's, which is what I was called at the time. I heard my aunt saying, "...notorious bar," my uncle saying, "Vicki looks like she's been struck by lightning," and my mother saying, "Who, Vic? Nah." The edge in her voice scared me. I took a photo of the bar "cause it has my name," I protested. Loudly.

When I was ten years old I quit taking gym because I couldn't handle changing blouses in the room with the other girls. Twice, girls confronted me, demanding that I quit staring at them; I wasn't aware I'd been doing it. Finally the teacher (bless her) took me aside and told me that she understood I didn't mean any harm but it made the other girls uncomfortable. She said



that some people were different than others, and that was okay. As explanation, she pointed out that other kids were starting to form boy-girl couples, and asked me if I wanted that. I knew I didn't. I then became conscious of wanting to look at the other girls, and felt shame. My solution was to become asthmatic; my coughing got me excused from gym.

By then the teasing from my classmates was getting intense. One horrible child informed me that wearing green and pink on Thursday "meant you were queer," so if I did, everyone would know about me. I had no idea what queer meant, but I didn't like being intimidated, so I wore my favorite blouse to school the next Thursday, the one with the tiny pink flowers and green leaves all over it. Of course, the kids were all over me, but I wore it the next Thursday too, and the next, until they stopped.

Meanwhile my activities consisted of synchronized swimming; reading famous plays and biographies of women; competing with Ralph to be the best student in our grade; befriending the brilliant, strange girls; maniacal bike riding and roller-skating; singing in choral groups; and performing in all the talent shows. I loved makeup, characterization of all kinds, and swishy clothes. I remember asking my mother, after watching a ballet performance, if two women ever danced like that, one throwing the other into the air. I deeply desired to be thrown into the air by another not-a-boy, like me.

My family moved to the San Francisco Bay Area the year I was eleven. The next year, in seventh grade, my two best friends and I were talking and one of them started in about how she could hardly wait to kiss a boy. I was mystified but said nothing, to avoid offense. The other girl said she, too, could hardly wait. They turned to me and wanted to know if I could hardly wait to kiss a boy. I thought, got a picture in my head of being bent back in a "dip," and reported: "I'd kinda like to kiss a girl." They exchanged a glance and screamed, "Well, what are ya, *queer*?" I still wasn't sure what queer meant, but I became determined not to be anything so reviled by my peers.

During those years, the physical changes of puberty were scaring me, almost literally to death. When I was nine the talk began about the changes that would happen to me, about my body becoming a woman's. I refused to believe it could happen to me. I now knew I was not going to be a boy, indeed no longer wanted to be one, but I didn't feel like a girl, either. I would be a neuter, I believed, if I simply refused to grow breasts and body hair. About the time my body began to betray these beliefs, and breasts began to sprout in their uneven and humiliating way, two of my aunts were diagnosed with breast cancer. One died. I decided that my hated breasts were in fact cancerous and that they would have to be cut off. In eighth grade I finally told a friend about my imminent death; she told her mother, who told mine. My mom dragged me to a doctor, whose amusement at my conclusions was obvious to me. This heaped more humiliation onto me and how I related to having a body, and virtually overshadowed my relief at being told I was perfectly healthy.

I relate these experiences because there exist persistent untruths: that femme lesbians aren't real lesbians, that our next lovers are likely to be men, that we are unthinking dupes of the patriarchy, that gender alienation is the sole province of butches, that we escaped the derision of our peers in childhood, that we escape harassment on the streets today. When I tell you I'm a dyke, I mean it. When I tell you that I don't identify with any heterosexist model for women, I mean it. And when I tell you that I am making my own decisions about how I dress, how I act, and what constitutes authority in my life, I want that truth respected.

I now understand that what gets modeled in this society as female or male natures are actually representations of two different modes of being, two different kinds of energy. I believe we recognize these different energies when we use the terms *butch* and *femme*. I think individuals fall all along a continuum that runs from assertive to accepting energy, and that natural continuum should create a balance for human society as a whole. Instead there is an imbalance, because society values one kind of human energy over another, and has forced its individuals, on the basis of their genitals, into extremes of those energies. Thus, misogyny; thus, internalized misogyny. I believe butch-femme honors this continuum of energies as valuable, and necessary, and not based on genital structure. Terms I've heard used, such as *soft butch* and *femme-of-center*, refer to more mixed-energy locations on the continuum.

Experience has taught me that my energy, my way of being, is what is meant by the term *femme*. My personal energy, at rest, is located close to the accepting-energy pole of the continuum. I state this proudly, because I know and embrace the power of acceptance. This energy, which *all* women are forced into enacting, regardless of their true natures, and which they are taught to despise about themselves, is in fact just as powerful and capable and important as assertive energy. Indeed, because assertive energy is so over-used, the use of accepting energy can be surprisingly effective.

My political work is an example. I have learned, in committees, to state my position and allow everyone else to find their own. The process and outcomes I consider to be the best have been the result of allowing the fray to settle around me instead of fighting for my position. I have come to value the truths that a well-taken position eventually will be vindicated, and that my strongest position is a firm stance, rather than an assertion, of my will.

Another example of embracing accepting energy is allowing oneself to be sexually penetrated. I never could understand lesbians who tried to claim that real lesbians don't like penetration of their vaginas. One of the first things I did as a liberated teenager was to assert myself as a sexual being. Sex was the first, and for a long time the only place where I made demands and got what I wanted. Standard gear for me in my late teens and early twenties was a dress or skirt, a white cotton garter belt, and various leggings with no

underwear. This began because I got repeated yeast infections and found that letting my cunt breathe kept me healthier. But I also felt very powerful dressed that way. I never agreed with women who felt that I should only wear pants, so as to be safe from molestation. For me, feeling powerful and capable is my best protection; having my sexual organs open to the air, breathing and alive, contributed to that.

Anyone who claims that a woman who gets fucked is in a passive, helpless state is pretending that the vagina is a passive thing. Mine is not! When I want to be fucked, my cunt is snapping for penetration, and I can become quite persuasive about getting that need met. My cunt eagerly ensnares the penetrating object, be it fingers, dildo, hand, or whatever. The archetypal image of the *vagina dentata* (the vagina with teeth) reveals the power of female sexuality and the fear that power engenders.

So yes, lots of women like to get fucked, but this requires accessing their accepting energy. Most of the butches I've known have had to *find* that energy in themselves, their more natural state being an assertive energy. Some of these butches dislike accessing this acceptance, so they don't get fucked as often as they might like to. Some adore finding this energy within themselves because it feels so different and they enjoy the contrast. For most of the femmes I've known, being penetrated is being in their home energy and it can feel really right for them. And many of these femmes also like to fuck other women, to access that assertive energy in themselves; they also enjoy the contrast. Others don't.



I am a femme. I pined for women for more than a decade following that visit to New Orleans, agonizing for months at a time until finally I would write in my journal, "I think I'm a L-E-S...", only to begin the cycle again, and again. Some of my fears were the usual what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-lesbian kind, generated by a homophobic society. I also had another kind of fear, which was that being a lesbian meant giving up my flamboyance and my love of changing myself through makeup and costume. I was afraid that I would have to wear army surplus pants the rest of my life. And I knew fucking was important to me. If tribadism was controversial (as it was in the seventies), would I ever have wild, passionate sex again? That was quite a conflict. All my fantasies were about women, but it seemed as though being with women meant leaving my passions behind.

It was made clear to me by the lesbian community that my conventionally pretty features and hourglass figure were not considered lesbian enough (being pretty wasn't politically correct). And society told me I was too pretty to be a lesbian. So was I judged, based on the same societal norm, by both groups.

Being femme isn't about what I'm wearing, although it can be. I don't understand why a lesbian who wears a three-piece suit is considered a social radical, while a lesbian who wears a dress, her sexuality up-front yet unavailable to the heterosexual norm, is not. Why is it that only men get to be

flamboyant in order to be considered socially radical? From my perspective that is letting men have all the fun again.

No matter what I do I'm still a femme. My hair is currently a quarter of an inch long, I often wear "male" attire, and I am still femme. My lover sometimes wears a fluffy petticoat as a skirt, and makeup, and she is still butch. We deliberately take on other personae, gender-bend, and cultivate both butch and femme awareness within ourselves, but when we really look at what's happening we see that she is still butch and I am still femme.

I don't shave my body hair or use deodorant, and she does both. I refer to my black leather steel-toe logger's boots as my power shoes, and she tends toward black leather sneakers. Sometimes I strap on the dildo, and she spreads her legs and dances on it and makes noise with abandon.

Yet when we're through, the dew beginning to dry, we find our way home. Sometimes relieved and often amazed I discover, again, that she really is butch, and I really am femme.

PART II

*I'm Here to Flirt*

Chea Villanueva

*In the Shadows of Love*  
*The Letter*

December 1993

**D**ear Susan,

I'm sitting here listening to Major Harris singing "Love Won't Let Me Wait." It took me back in time, slow-dancing with you at Barone's Variety Room, the bar in the back alley on Quince Street. It made me remember how you felt in my arms. So light, so mine, how we fit together...

1973: Has it been that long? It's been twenty years since I walked into that Women's Center in West Philadelphia. I didn't want to go, but friends prompted me. It wasn't my style. I needed the bars that night.

Flashback: You sitting, legs crossed, talking with other women. You were the only femme in a circle of women too into their politics to admit their attraction to you.

And me — the only butch, too sure, I knew I wanted you.

You looked at me once, as only a femme can when she's hungry for only one kind of loving. I felt the electricity, smelled your perfume, knew I'd leave with you that night with the sureness that I loved you, that it would last a lifetime, that you loved me too...

1993: I'm sitting in a bar watching women I don't care about. Women who are so into their androgyny that they view me as a threat to their existence, banishing me to the door with their comments. "Is that a man or a woman?"

Flashback, 1974: I bought a new suit today, had my hair cut, and wore your favorite cologne. I surprised you by coming home early, with a dozen red roses, and a new dress for my baby.

You were in the bathtub soaking in candlelight and my favorite perfume. You pulled me into the water with you. Me with my dirty end-of-the-week workclothes and printer's ink.

We never made it out to the club that night. After our bath we dressed for each other, drank champagne, and made love in every corner of our apartment...

Has it been that long since I walked you to your car, and our lips met for the first time not wanting to let go, not wanting to admit we were in love already?

1993: I'm still thinking of you. Looking at old photographs of a young butch and her proud femme.

I bought you wildflowers and ice cream that day in the park. You held my arm and defied society's rules by insisting we get our picture taken in all our glory of us together...

I remember Friday nights getting all dressed up. You getting your hair done and filing those nails to a fine red point, knowing later they'd mark my back for keeping you up all night...

Remember the rush when we'd walk into the club, everybody's eyes on us. The perfect couple — the beautiful femme and the handsome young butch. Was it that long ago when I was twenty and you were thirty?

We had respect in those days. The feminists stayed in the coffeehouses, while we ruled the bars in our suits and dresses, slicked-back hair, heels and stockings. Who ever thought it would end?

Flashback, 1975: I remember you holding me against your breast as only a lover can do. Telling me you were dying. The endless trips to faith healers, doctors, and the strength in our love couldn't keep you with me just a little while longer...

Has it been that long since the night you were tired, and insisted I go play cards with our two best friends? Has it?

I remember the taste of your lipstick when I kissed you for the last time. Remember playing cards with an uneasy feeling that my life was changing, that the life I had known would cease to exist and be banished to memory.

1993: Has it been that long since love was innocent, when you took off my tie and hung my suit coat so carefully on a hanger, when you came to me smelling of jasmine and dressed in lace and satin?

It's been so long since someone cared to smooth my hair back, tell me I was handsome, tell me she was mine...

I fear I can't love anymore, fear I'm out of time. Does love like ours exist anymore?

Flashback, 1975: Such an eerie feeling when I walked into our apartment. I knew when I put the key in the door that you were so gone out of this life that I'd search forever and never find you...

Reading your letter afterward with the knowledge the tumor had grown and was causing you pain I could never heal. You loved me enough to send me away so I couldn't undo the rope that snapped your neck. Loved me enough to tell me one more time that you loved me...

1993: Has it been eighteen years since I stood crying in the rain, cursing the earth that swallowed you up?

Has it been that long since I slipped the gold band on your finger and exchanged vows in that church on Chestnut Street?

I still look the same. Maybe a few lines from a life filled with hardness. Same haircut, suit, tie, same cocky assertiveness when I walk into a bar, same hungry eyes when I look at a femme.

People like us are so few now — it doesn't happen often, but our youth lingers on in memories of smoke-filled rooms and jukeboxes...



Amy Warner Candela

## *For Charlie on the Eve of Our Wedding*

October 22, 1993

**T**omorrow we are to be married, and I am confident that it will be the wedding I have always wanted.

Every detail of what will become the wedding is precisely what we want; nothing is out of place. I will be wearing the most beautiful dress and the most beautiful veil I have ever seen. You will look gorgeous in your tuxedo. The flowers are exactly right. The ceremony will be perfect, because we created it together. Our closest friends and most of our families will be with us, just as we have always wished. The music is what I picked out as a little girl. We have planned and prayed and organized and practiced and crossed our fingers for months now, and I know it will all be worth it.

What is the reason that this is everything that I have wanted? You. You are all that I want in a woman. In my mind's eye, the wife I pictured never had a face. Then you came along, and the blank was filled. That butch dyke is you!

You already know why I am marrying you: I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to sleep with you every night and make your breakfast every morning. I love knowing that you'll be at home waiting for me after another very long day. I love knowing that every time I feel pleasure, it will be from your touch, your words, your heart. I love knowing that you always make me feel safe, you constantly protect me. I love knowing that no matter how hard it gets for us, you and I will never abandon our commitment. I will love being your femme wife.

I have always known these things, even before you proposed and put that diamond on my finger. But I want our commitment to be blessed. I want to share our marriage with the people we love, and I want to show the world that I am proud to take your hand. This is why I want to share a last name with you.

Amidst all of the chaos of the last few days, I found time to think about what it will mean to be your wife. It is going to take a lot of patience, thought, and strength. I'm afraid we will always have to face troubles from our own community. We will always have to turn away from the stares of our



*Amy Warner Candela, October 23, 1993*

so-called sisters. We will constantly need to defend ourselves. But I have never questioned that it will be worth it.

From the day we met, I knew that we were right together. I have never felt so comfortable, so completely free to be who I really am. From my core I am a femme. That spirit has always been there, repressed by androgynous pressure. You brought out the femme in me. Not only do you want it, but you cherish, honor, and respect it above all. I love you so much for that. I see the admiration in your eyes every day when I am dressed for work. I can see the joy and respect in your smile when we dance. I can feel your love and honor all over your body when we make love. I can hear the appreciation in your voice when you tell me how beautiful I look. And I sense your pride and adoration every time you defend me to the others. Thank you for nurturing and treasuring the femme that I am. I will do my best to do the same for the butch that you are.

I know the anguish that you have experienced as a butch. I cry for the pain that people have inflicted upon you. I try to dispel your fears of the simplest things: a certain touch, a trip to the ladies' room, a doctor's office visit. I wish I could erase the malevolence for you, just as you constantly comfort me. My sorrows have been different yet the same. I never fit in with the crowd. Assumptions are made about me every day, and expectations of me are great. I must sustain my inner strength; not just as a lesbian, but as a femme. I never knew that being a femme would be so much harder than being queer. We are both gender-benders: you challenge the straight community while I challenge the lesbians. We are both cross-dressers: you wear men's clothing, I refuse to even attempt the lesbian androgynous status quo. I am convinced this is why we are so perfect together: we comfort, and complement, and contrast all at the same time.

We must continue to defy the expectations of us. We can draw upon each other when we need to stand tall against pressure from the community in which we first found our strength and reassurance. Our wedding is a challenge to that community. How many times have we heard, "Are you both wearing dresses or tuxedos?" It's ironic that lesbians asked this question most often, and that we must explain and defend *our* freedom to the people who claim to fight for it.

Despite the obstacles, I come to you with love, with faith, and with the promise to give you all that is me.

*Amy Warner Candela*



*Lesbian Weddings*

Wendy Jill York

Celli Tiemann

## *Love Writes a Letter*

January 30, 1994

*M*y dearest Sarah,

It is late now, and I imagine you have already tucked yourself into our bed with the last of that novel you've been reading. At least two of our four faithful felines must be curled up at your feet. Do you miss me there beside you? I miss you terribly. While today marked the end of my first week away in this wintry city and the countdown of my last week away from our home, I find I am more anxious than I anticipated. I fear these last few days of meetings and business negotiations will seem like years. Perhaps I will have to resort to calling you three times a day to ease the ache of our separation. I do so want to come home to you, Sarah.

Marcus and I went to lunch downtown yesterday and spent almost the entire hour talking about Dave and you. He told me the infamous story of their first meeting: they had been introduced at a gallery opening, but had not asked each other out until a month later when their baskets bumped at the grocery store. Do you remember our first meeting? God, you were beautiful (you still are)! You walked into the kitchen at Angie's housewarming party, the only lesbian there in a dress. Of course, it suited you perfectly. That fabric swirled so enticingly around your legs, following your every move. From across the small room it looked as though liquid silk had been poured over your body. I held my breath for a moment, waiting for the dress to slide down your shoulders to the floor. And your strawberry blonde hair lay so softly against your neck and back that all I wanted to do was touch it and run my fingers through its length. Your skin was pale, your eyes were bright, and you wore just the right shade of green. What did you call it — light jade? You were a vision of softness, light, and smiles that night. I don't know how you always manage to look so good. Even when you run around the house on Sundays, painting a new wall or adjusting our ever-temperamental plumbing, you look like an angel in your torn jeans, old t-shirt, and ponytail. You always look like a woman. Remind me to make mad passionate love to you the next time you're in your grubbies with paint on your cheeks and arms!

I just thought of the day we moved in to that old house. Remember the way we initiated each and every room? The memory warms me even now. That's when we named our first stray cat, wasn't it? Peeper always did like to watch us! She must have gotten an eyeful that day. After that, I could

never doubt that I am a lesbian. I swear, Sarah, there is nothing more delicious than making love with you. All I have to do is close my eyes to feel the experience magically return. I will never be able to resist your soft, full-lipped kisses or your whispered entreaties. You bewitch me when you promise how well you'll come. And when you gently breathe in my ear and politely ask me to "fuck you," I am driven to the edge. I love the way you invite me into you. When I am fully inside you I feel drugged with a pleasure I had never known until we made love. The way you close around me, envelop my fingers, and the way you rock your hips to meet me — oh. It makes me so wet. And heaven help me when you come! It's then, when I feel you pulsing against my hand, that I become so much a part of you. I don't ever want to leave the home I've found in you, Sarah. I love you.

Damn, how much longer did I say before I return from this trip? I'm counting the hours until I can sleep beside you again. Picture the two of us, naked and warm beneath the flannel sheets. I can hardly wait to bury my nose in your soft neck and trace lazy circles on your tummy. What a wonderful way to fall asleep! I imagine you wincing at the mention of your flesh, but, honey, believe me when I tell you how much I adore the way you look and feel. Those ten pounds you are always wanting to lose are heaven to my fingertips. I can't think of anything more feminine than the curve of your hips and the fullness of your thighs. If I were an artist, I would paint and sculpt daily tributes to your figure. You would be my only muse.

According to the radio in my hotel room, it is well past midnight. Of course, I am not ready to stop writing you yet. This reminds me of our first year as a couple. That was a test, wasn't it? I don't know that I could be apart from you for six months now. Not for the sake of school, anyway. It was tough living on the telephone. Remember all the three-hour conversations we had in the wee hours of the morning? Your sister was upset because she thought she was missing calls from her boyfriends. Did she ever forgive us for talking so much? She envied all the letters I mailed you, too. She even joked about wanting to date women if they were all as attentive as you and me. You told her all it took was a little romance, a healthy dose of love, a spoonful of infatuation, a pinch or two of chemistry and potential, and the right lacy lingerie. What a recipe! And how wonderful you looked in that lingerie, too! I still carry a photo of you in that ivory silk slip you used to wear around the house. It's one of my favorite photos. In it your hand is poised on your hip, daring me to snap the picture. You didn't realize that your hand had pulled the slip so I could plainly see your pink nipples pressed against the fabric. Or had you planned that erotic pose for my benefit all along?

Anyway, we did manage to survive that last semester apart. You were marvelous, especially when my father died. I was so angry and bitter afterward — I felt completely inconsolable. Then you appeared on my doorstep out of the blue, and I fell apart in your arms. You told me you had called in sick, and had driven the four hundred miles between us because you couldn't

stand the idea of me being alone. And the first thing you said, once I had finally stopped sobbing, was that you must look awful because you had forgotten your lipstick. Sarah, I had never seen a woman look more beautiful than you did at that moment. The next morning I delivered five shades of lip color from the local department store to you.

Sarah, you mean the world to me. There is something so magical about you, something magical about us. You are everything I could ever ask for in a partner. I love the things you do, I love the way you move in smooth lines and curves, I love the way you get excited when I bring you home little presents. And I love the way your eyes smile when you show me the blooms in your garden. There is nothing as pleasant as watching you spend hours filing your nails into smooth arcs, or listening to the gentle voice you use to purr to our cats. And there is something else: I adore the way you make a beeline for long dresses and jewelry in our favorite store when we go shopping together. I have even grown so enamored of your collection of high-heeled shoes that I've caught myself trying them on when you aren't home. This must be love!

Will you do me a small favor, lover? When I come home at the end of next week, will you have some of those strawberry candles you like so much lit around the house? Perhaps you would start a fire in the fireplace, too. The first chance I get, I am taking you into my arms and making love to you for at least three days. It's time the house was reinitiated!

My love to you always,

*Lyn*

Carolynne Hyman

## Uncovering a Femme

It's midnight and I need to talk to you; tonight I need more than the feel of your strong arms around me. But with that sweet sleepy look of yours, how could I even think of waking you? Go on, sleep. I'll tell this to you later.

Our realizations about being butch and femme have definitely changed our relationship. What would the two politically correct dykes who met in Jan's class three years ago have to say about all of this? I thought I knew where I was heading, what my life was shaping up to be. The things you've given me are things I didn't even know I wanted: the praise of a touch, the safety of an embrace, the freedom of losing control. How it feels to feel beautiful.

When you met me I was hiding behind heavy black glasses, *the* dyke haircut, clothes two sizes too big. You didn't know what you were getting yourself into, or did you? Could you see something behind the glasses, something in my eyes? I'm not sure if that something even existed back then. My softness, my vanity, my sensuality, my femme self — all of these were born out of my relationship with you.

I came out nine months before we met. In that time, I moved from whispering the word *lesbian* to myself late at night to actually going to a lesbian club. Women expressed interest in me, but I met no one whose interest I shared. Then I saw you. In your black leather jacket, with those sweet, baby-faced dimples, you looked hard and soft all at once. I saw you watching me on the sly, and I knew what you were thinking. Your desire made me bold, and I looked you right in the eyes until you had to turn away.

That boldness only lasted as long as you were by my side. Out of your sight, all my insecurities came rushing back. During the week between our first date and our first night together, I was full of anxiety about what would happen when we had sex. I thought that sex with a woman meant that I'd have to go down on her, and there was no way I could do that. What else could two women do? But once we finally began kissing that first night, everything fell into place.

Actually, I shouldn't say everything. It was a slow process, breaking away from our assumptions and learning to trust in our true desires. It was hard for me to let go of the notion of reciprocal, you-do-me-and-I'll-do-you sex. I knew it wasn't what I really wanted, but what I did want felt too selfish to ask for. You told me that it was what you wanted too, and that what you loved best was acting on my body, but it was difficult for me to believe. I



couldn't trust your pleasure until my own sexuality had grown. Now I can give my body to you and use it to excite you. Now I can seduce you, tease you, submit to you, and give to you because I have learned to see myself as a sexual person.

For a long time I couldn't take your compliments seriously. Your expressions of desire and attraction seemed like what you're supposed to say to a lover. Not that you weren't genuine; I knew you believed every word you said. But I thought you were crazy with love. How else could you see me as beautiful? It was a massive shock to my system when I realized that you found me sexy. Before I met you I had never felt like a sexual person. I shut down that part of myself long ago and I've taken a long time to reawaken. From our first night together on through these three years, you have never stopped telling me how much you desire me. If you hadn't been there every night, loving me, fucking me, holding me as I cried, I never could have come back to myself.

You took to healing me with natural skill. Did you know that every compliment, every touch, made me stronger and more beautiful? Your love for my body encouraged me to see it as a place of pleasure and not shame. I learned how to use it to increase your pleasure. I discovered that wearing silky, lacy, and especially skimpy clothes made you react in a way that I loved. You showed me that other women would react too, and slowly I developed the confidence in my femme self to dress that way outside our home. You taught me to love the look in a butch's eyes, to notice the subtle shift in her manner when I walk by. And now I love to watch them watch, and you do too, though you put your arm around me to let it be known that I am yours. And I kiss your cheek to remind you, as others' heads turn, that my desire is filled by your arm on my waist, your strong body, your love.

Today as I walk around the room, watching for your lustful smile, remember the girl who once hid behind the closet door to change her clothes. Then pat yourself on the back: you've uncovered a femme.

Heather Lee

## *The Invitation*

*For Tanya*

**T**he note I send you says dinner at six. It will be so good to see you. I'll wear a long skirt and something that bares my throat. You'll wear your boots. You'll bring flowers. Coming up my stairs, you will pass one of my neighbors and give them a polite hello, wondering if they know what you have come for. When I open my door to your gentle knock, the smells that greet you will make you swoon. I will smile with approval, my eyes traveling your length to your face. *It was so good of you to come.* I will take the flowers and place them in a vase on the table as you close the door behind you. I will kiss you once, though I can see by the parting of your suddenly wet lips that you would like more.

I will prepare something baked and something spicy, maybe Thai food, with a thick aroma and a taste that is light, though biting, in the mouth. I will pour herbed wine. We will eat slowly; before we have finished I will light the candles. Perhaps I will turn the music a little lower.

Though you are unable to take your eyes off me, I will make the first move. After you offer to clear the table and I do not let you, I will come to you, still sitting in your chair, to straddle you there, reaching for your lips. *No, not so fast.* We will follow my rules, go at my pace. When I want to, and only when I want to, I will unbutton my blouse so you can take my breasts in your beautiful, beautiful hands. I fantasize about making love here, at the kitchen table, but I think that will come later. Tonight I will let your strong hands caress me, spreading slowly over my skin as your mouth claims mine. I am wearing a skirt so that you can slide your fingers up my legs, breathing hot into my mouth. *Leave the dishes until later.* Pushing me up against the sink, your hands on my skin are demanding now. But it is I who will lay you out on my bed and tease you with my girl thighs, my girl breasts; no one is the butch here. *Now, take your boots off.* The last light of the sun will reach us, exposed, as you gasp under my hands, reach for me, and pull me down into you. Are those your fingers or mine? You will reach to find out; they are yours, now, and your teeth. If you are not careful I just might scream. *The neighbors,* you will say, but I will not think of them. Bite me there ... and now there ... I will hold on and not let go, not now, *yes,* now. We will smell smoke as the flowers bend too close to the candle flame, as I am engulfed in your flame, as the sky blazes red in the flame of the setting sun.

Sandra Chan

*Femme '93*  
*A Femme-Butch Encounter*  
*of the Tender Kind*

**F**or the first time in my life I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is a woman. It came to me shortly before Christmas as a kind of revelation. I had been a dedicated feminist for over twenty years and certainly did not envision the Great Spirit of the Universe as male in any way, yet I stumbled over words like *Goddess* and cringed at services where they invoked God our Mother. But I am a doubting Thomasina no more! I have seen the light, and She is truly female. Not only is God a woman, She is a femme lesbian. And I can prove it! Only a femme would understand the importance of creating butch women like the one I met in a rainstorm on Nags Head Beach.

It was the final day of the annual October surf fishing tournament, and we were both there to cheer on the only all-dyke team. I was struggling to adjust the suspenders on the overalls on my neon yellow rain suit, purchased that morning on my way to the beach. I'd bought a size small, but at five feet nothing I still had about two feet of strap left over. I was standing there hooking and rehooking those straps for what seemed like an eternity. Suddenly I heard a voice from somewhere behind me with a distinctly southwestern Virginia accent: "Whatcha doin' there, cowboy?"

I turned to find myself face-to-face with the most beautiful butch dyke I'd ever seen. A real, honest-to-God, no kidding, butch-all-the-time butch. I had begun to fear that women like her had become an extinct species.

She was soaking wet from the top of her dark curly hair to the toes of her hiking boots. Her black shorts and white windbreaker offered little resistance to the rain and gale force winds. She was the most beautiful sight I'd seen in years. Her deep-set, brown eyes laughed as she continued to tease me. "You got enough material left over there for another suit, don'tcha think?" And then, "You're such a tiny little thing! If we don't put some sand in those cuffs to weigh you down, you just might blow away." From the smile on her face, I could tell she thought I was pretty darn cute, and that put a smile on my face that lasted all weekend.

Not long after this brief but memorable meeting I saw her climbing up the dunes toward a pickup truck with a couple of other dykes. I was sorry to

see her go. I had no idea who she was but figured that anyone *that* handsome was probably not single. I wondered if I would see her again.

The trip to the beach was my first adventure as a newly single dyke and reclaimed femme, and I was feeling a bit shaky about both.

Seven months earlier my seventeen-year relationship came to an end. We had never lived together, and at least half of those years had been as a celibate couple, so the official ending was somewhat anticlimactic. No dividing up the furniture or arguing over the record collection. No arguing over anything, really. As a couple, we were the very model of middle-class civility.

The catalyst that had forced me to confront my life was the reawakening of my sexual energy. Until it happened, I was unaware that I had buried my sexual feelings so thoroughly. The most amazing aspect of this reawakening was that it hadn't been sparked by anyone else; it was just me, myself, and I, feeling wonderful and alive again! Because there was no one else involved in my sexual reawakening, when I was faced with having to make a decision about giving up on my relationship I was able to do so with a clear heart and conscience.

With the reawakening of my sexual energy came the reawakening of my femme identity, and the recognition that the two are inseparable. The more I thought, read, and remembered, the more I understood what I had lost in disconnecting from my true self. So the radical-feminist-lesbian-separatist of the seventies had now come out (for the second time) as a femme.

When I first came out in 1965, just before my twenty-first birthday, I knew rather quickly that I was femme. I had no real understanding of what that meant, but I knew I must be femme, because, when I walked into those dimly lit bars and saw those grown-up tomboys hanging out at the pool table or leaning arrogantly against the bar, my insides melted like a plate of ice cream left out too long at a Fourth of July picnic. The butches looked so cool and sexy in their oxford shirts and crewneck sweaters, jeans or corduroys, and sneakers or loafers and crew socks. I was living in L.A. at the time and the butches there dressed in that casual, laid-back California style. With their shaggy, more natural haircuts, the young California butches looked like pretty teenage boys before they thicken into adult maleness. I wanted one desperately, more desperately than I had ever wanted a boy in my whole previously boy-crazy life.

I didn't have a clue as to what I would do if I ever got one of those beautiful tomboys to take me home, but my instincts told me I didn't have to know because she would. And I was right. When I finally did spend the night with one of those handsome women, it was everything I wanted it to be and everything my experiences with boys and men had not been: tender, passionate, and deeply satisfying in a way I had never imagined. Which brings me back to that Mystery Butch on the beach.

At the end of the fishing tournament, the lesbians celebrated with an after-hours party at the restaurant that sponsored the team. I must have

changed clothes three or four times before I was satisfied with my appearance. I had recently lost thirty pounds due to a severe case of rheumatoid arthritis. I was forty-nine years old, walked with a limp, and carried a cane, a set of circumstances not designed to make a woman feel her sexiest. I fixed my hair and the only makeup I wore was lipstick; I am half Chinese and my face already has a lot of natural color. I finally walked out of my motel room in a pair of cream-colored, cotton men's pants with a pleated front (I bought them because they reminded me of Katharine Hepburn in the thirties) and an oversized black silk shirt open and tied at the waist to show off a pale pink tank top with buttons up the front. I toyed with the idea of unbuttoning the top button, but decided to opt for more subtlety. One of my new push-up bras left just a hint of cleavage showing at the top of the neckline. Arthritis dictates that I wear comfortable shoes, so I chose my favorite Reeboks designed to look like the black-and-white saddle oxfords I wore as a teenager.

I was at the party for fifteen minutes before I realized *she* was there, hanging out at the pool table with a group of women, mostly butches. I slowly made my way to that corner of the room, pausing to chat with friends along the way, not wanting to appear obvious. When we finally made eye contact, she looked me over from head to toe, and the smile on her face told me how much she appreciated what she saw. She walked right up to me in her fine butch way, put an arm around me, and held me close against her body as she smiled that infectious smile of hers. "You make me feel like a Boy Scout, like I oughta be helpin' you across streets or carryin' your books or somethin'." I felt like a sixteen-year-old at her first dance. My heart was beating so wildly I could hardly think, but I managed to say something about being glad to see she had survived the storm. It was the beginning of an evening that will be forever etched in my memory as one of those perfect moments we are sometimes privileged to experience on this earth.

The Boy Scout had a great sense of humor: quick-witted, sharp, and refreshingly direct. We flirted outrageously all evening, tossing words back and forth like a couple of volleyball players. She teased me a lot. I had the distinct impression that I was being tested to see if I was some uptight bitch who was going to get huffy. I wasn't; I laughed more that evening than I had in a very long time.

There was one chair available beside a small table, close enough to the pool table to keep an eye on the game and who was up next. She sat down in the chair, put her beer on the table, and looked over at me with a wicked gleam in her eye as she invited me to sit on her lap. When I accepted, I don't know who was more surprised, the Boy Scout, me, or my watching friends, who had never seen me do anything like that before.

I sat down rather self-consciously, afraid I would feel too heavy and she would be sorry she'd invited me. But she shifted my body around and settled me so firmly and expertly that I was sure I was not the first woman to sit on her lap.

"You must weigh all of ninety pounds," she teased. "I feel like I'm holdin' a little child on my lap."

We finally exchanged names, and she kidded with me the rest of the night, pretending not to remember mine. I asked for her birthdate and was pleasantly surprised to find she knew something about her astrological sign, Virgo born in the Chinese Year of the Snake. She had just turned forty in August. The Virgo Sun would explain the kindness ever-present in her teasing. The Snake would account for her charm, which flowed like honey on a hot day.

When she asked how old I was, I held my breath for a long moment before saying, "Forty-nine." She looked me squarely in the eye and with sweet sincerity replied, "You carry it well." She asked what kind of work I did. When I said, "I'm an artist," she cocked her head and fixed me with that teasing smile. "An artist, huh? You ever hear the phrase artsy-fartsy?" I gave her back a cool smile. "I think it's used to describe people who are phony and artificial, and I am neither of those things." "Touché," she said.

I asked what kind of work she did and she explained that she put skirting around the bottom of mobile homes, that she had bought a secondhand truck about four years ago and decided to go into business for herself. She didn't have to explain that she was a person who would not be happy working for someone else.

She wanted to know if I made a living from my art. I said no I didn't, trying to find a tactful way to explain that my former spouse helped support me. She interrupted my struggle midsentence and with a butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth expression asked, "Are you tryin' to tell me you're a kept woman?" I said I had been thinking more along the lines of lesbian housewife. She said, "I prefer housedyke," and I agreed.

Our verbal sparring was interrupted frequently. The Boy Scout is a friendly, cheerful, extremely likable person who seemed to know just about everyone. But there came a time when there was a lull in the traffic and we were left alone for a few minutes. As I sat comfortably nestled in her lap, she looked me over again carefully and sweetly and then, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, she let one finger trace the deep curving neckline of my tank top, pausing at the center, lingering for an exquisite moment before reaching for the tiny white enamel heart hanging from a fine gold chain about an inch above that discreet bit of cleavage.

"That's so sweet," she said, "just right, not too much." As we did many times that evening, we looked very intently at one another, feeling something unexpected going on between us. And then we were interrupted again.

As the evening drew to a close, I retrieved my walking cane from a corner near the door and sat down on a nearby bench. I dreaded the ending of this perfect evening, and I did not know how to say good night to the beautiful Boy Scout, nor did I want to.

She spoke to a couple of her friends, then came over and explained that they would be continuing the party at what they called the Big House and I

was welcome to join them. I had a sudden attack of shyness and said that I was tired. She said maybe we could meet for breakfast. I said sure, but I had serious doubts that anyone from the Big House would be up for breakfast the next morning. Suddenly she reached down, gently lifted my face up toward hers, leaned over, and kissed me tenderly. She did it so quickly and easily I did not have time to think about the public nature of our surroundings. I was so shaken I just said good night, and left.

I saw her briefly on the beach the next day, when members of the Big House straggled out late in the afternoon nursing hangovers. The Boy Scout seemed in better shape than most. She approached me a little sheepishly at first, apologizing for missing breakfast. I told her I had not really expected her. She asked if I would be coming to the Big House that evening, and I said that I would. She spent the rest of the afternoon sitting with her friends. I spent my time wandering up and down the beach chatting with everyone, determined *not* to hang around her like a lovesick teenager, which is exactly how I felt. Later that evening she teased me about the way my limp caused me to swish my ass when I walked. I was pleased to know it hadn't been lost on her.

When I arrived at the Big House Saturday night, the Boy Scout was sitting at the dinner table finishing up a card game. I found a chair and squeezed it into a spot at the table directly across from her. I wanted to be able to see her face. I was feeling a little insecure, and I needed to know if she really wanted me to be there. Her face is an open book, so when she looked at me, winked, and smiled I didn't feel insecure about being there anymore.

When the game was over everyone else left us alone at the table. She made us a fresh pot of coffee and we chatted while it brewed. She poured us each a cup and added exactly the right amount of sugar and cream to mine. I confess, at that moment I thought the way she breathed air was absolutely perfect. We sat side by side at the table with our coffee, turning our chairs to face each other. The room was full of people, but she made me feel we were absolutely alone.

"I heard about what happened to you back in the spring. I'm really sorry, that must have been terrible. Do you mind talking about it?"

I assumed that one of our mutual friends had told her about the incident. I had never made a secret of it. In fact, I had talked about it with my friends all summer and thought I had gotten it out of my system, but her voice was so kind and she looked at me with such tenderness that I found myself telling the story all over again.

In the middle of my wonderful sexual reawakening and four days after my forty-ninth birthday, a man came into my house through a sliding glass door I had forgotten to lock, walked into my bedroom, and tried to rape me. Fortunately, I had gone to bed late and I was not asleep when I heard his footsteps on the carpet. I looked toward the doorway expecting to see my twelve-year-old Newfoundland. Instead there was a man I didn't know leaning over me. I like to sleep in the nude, so there I was, forty-nine, with

rheumatoid arthritis, not a stitch of clothing on, and all alone. I started screaming and swearing immediately, backing myself up against the headboard and hitting him as best I could. The whole thing lasted less than five minutes, but it seemed an eternity. He kept telling me to shut up, but I kept screaming and pushing him away. I'm afraid the only real damage I inflicted was a bite on his arm. That's when he began hitting me in the face. He hit me three times, with me screaming and fighting, and suddenly he just let go of me and ran out the door.

She watched me intently as I told my story. When I finished, she leaned forward and gently examined the fine line under my right eye where surgery had been done to repair the fracture caused by his fist. "It's healing nicely. It's going to look like just another laugh line." Her sweet tactfulness made me smile. And then, without being patronizing, she told me how brave I was and how I was much stronger than I thought. Then she told me how her brother-in-law had broken her jaw once when they were arguing over his abuse of her sister. We compared notes on getting hit in the face by a man's fist and agreed it wasn't much fun. As usual she made me laugh.

At the end of the evening she walked me to my car. As we stood alone in the driveway, she put her arms around me and held me close against her body, her face buried against my neck, for a long time. It was the most utterly and completely *comforting* thing anyone had done since the attack. Not to shortchange the kindness of my friends, but I had come to Nags Head still feeling wounded in some way; still wanting and needing something I could not define. But standing there in the arms of the Boy Scout seemed to heal me completely, wiping away every trace of that man and what he had done and what he had tried to do.

I came home determined to enjoy the memory of the Boy Scout at the beach and let it go at that; but she lives in a city only an hour away. The more time passed, the harder it was to get her out of my mind.

I called a mutual friend and asked for her address. I wrote a letter and she replied. I did an astrology chart for her and sent a book to go with it. She called to thank me and we talked for two hours. I continue to write letters. Occasionally she calls. I have opened a door and we have made a connection but she is cautious. Her relationship of six years ended a year ago and she is dating someone in her hometown. She cannot imagine us together; the superficial differences seem insurmountable. I cannot imagine us any other way; our deeper similarities call to me like the beat of my own heart. I feel like Sheherazade trying to weave a spell with my words, hoping to allay her fears and someday coax her to me. But however our story ends, the memory of that perfect weekend in Nags Head will remain in my mind. It was perfectly erotic, perfectly romantic, and perfectly beautiful. And I shall always be grateful to our wonderful femme God who so thoughtfully created butch women.



Lisa Ginsburg

## Ruby Red

Ruby made sure her tits were tucked evenly into her new lace corset before she zipped up her leather jacket. She knew she would soon be unzipping the jacket for the crowd and wanted her nipples to push out into the pointiest part of the bodice.

Her housemate stepped into the room and let out a low whistle. "Ruby Red, you've gone and outdone yourself this time. Where *did* you get that red leather miniskirt?"

"Isn't it perrrrfect?" Ruby asked, rolling the word off her tongue like a cat and running her hands over her ass. "Charlene lent it to me. She's marching this year, didn't want to wear heels."

"Damn, I hope this blind-date Mama of yours measures up to you. What did you say her name was?"

"Sa-sha," Ruby said with an exotic flourish and a lift of her eyebrows. She stepped into her black spiked heels. "Don't worry, she'll be hot. I can tell all by voices, and hers sounded like a tiger in heat over the phone."

Ruby took her silver snake from the scarves it was nesting in on top of her bureau. For the finishing touch, she put her hand through the middle of the spiraling silver. The snake coiled around her upper arm, its red rhinestone eyes peering behind her and its little forked tongue out tasting the air.

Ruby was pretty late by the time she made it to 18th and Collingwood. Most of the dykes were already on their motorcycles waiting for the signal to line up. A few had started their bikes in anticipation, and the gunning of motors charged the air with expectancy.

All Sasha had told Ruby to look for was her Harley and an "S" studded on the back of her biker jacket. Damn, there were a lot of bikes. Tough and flashy women in high spirits lined the streets before their joyride. Eyes were on Ruby Red as she made her way up the aisles of motorcycles: who was this hot chick headed for? Ruby was trying to glance on either side of her casually, as if she knew exactly where she was going.

One dyke with spiked hair and a leather harness over bare tits called out, "Hey, you looking for a solo?" and beckoned Ruby over to her bike. Ruby tossed her head. "Sorry, maybe next year." The dyke shrugged like it was Ruby's loss. Ruby smiled to herself, thinking there was her backup in case Sasha was nowhere to be found.

Halfway up the first block of bikes, Ruby was suddenly walking in the sun, out of the cool shade of buildings. She put her sunglasses on and feasted

on the sight of dykes lounging around with their jackets off, baring the fine curves of muscle, triumphantly naked breasts, elaborate tattoos, or pierced nipples.

Ruby almost forgot to look for Sasha. Then, up ahead, she saw the biggest baddest Harley around. She knew it was the one even before she noticed the jacket hanging from the handlebars with a big gleaming "S" to flag her down. The size of the bike thrilled her. It dwarfed the bikes on either side, made the 250s look like toys. The black and chrome were polished to a gleam and there was a rainbow flag flying from the top of the rearview mirrors.

The bike so demanded Ruby's attention that it was a while before she shifted her focus to the woman leaning on the seat of the Harley, her back to Ruby and an arm draped casually over one of the handlebars. This tall dyke with powerful broad shoulders had to be Sasha. She and the bike were obviously a team. Sasha was talking to a couple of friends. As Ruby approached Sasha from behind, she savored this first view. Sasha had black hair cut short as a boy's, baring her muscular neck and shoulders. She wore a red tank top that showed off the cut of her biceps and the rolling movement of her shoulder blades as she laughed and gestured to her friends. Her jeans were ripped and faded, and a red handkerchief poked out of the left back pocket. "Mmm..." Ruby thought to herself, "I like what I'm seeing."

Sasha's friends saw Ruby approach and nodded in her direction, so that Sasha stopped in midsentence and turned around. She broke into a big grin at the sight of Ruby.

"So, this must be Ruby Red." Sasha held out her hand and looked Ruby up and down.

Ruby took a hold of Sasha's hand and held it still. Ruby felt Sasha's strong grip more than returning her pressure, her wide hand wrapped around her own. Sasha's black leather biking glove had a well-worn softness which caressed the palm of Ruby's hand. "How'd you guess?" Ruby said, smiling.

"Well, I can't decide whether it's that flame red hair or those lips or even that skirt you have on. I know you didn't get that name for no ruby red Dorothy slippers."

"But I can *still* get us to Oz," Ruby said, letting go of Sasha's hand.

"Hey, don't forget, baby: I'm doing the getting. You're along for the ride."

"So, that's how it's going to be," Ruby said, but didn't argue. Sasha's friends laughed. One winked and nudged Sasha and another told them to enjoy their ride. They headed off to their own bikes, leaving Sasha alone with Ruby Red.

Sasha was about to say something, but there was a loud commotion of bikes starting up and heading into the middle of the street to get into parade formation. "Time for the show," Sasha said, grabbing her jacket off the handlebars and whipping it on. As Sasha swung her leg over the seat, the

spur on her boot flashed and Ruby saw that it was a pinwheel of labryses. Sasha stood over the bike, gripped hard onto the handlebars, and with all her weight bore down on the starter. A few more tries, and there was an explosion of noise and exhaust. The roar overpowered all the neighboring bikes. Ruby could feel the pavement vibrating with the engine. Sasha gunned the motor. "Hop on, she's getting impatient."

Ruby waited until Sasha was facing the front of the Harley before she swung her leg up to mount the bike behind her. Her miniskirt was so short, Sasha would have been able to see Ruby's little surprise had she been looking, and it was too soon for that. Ruby had on a pair of crotchless lace underwear she had bought for this occasion. The rhythm of the bike danced between her legs as soon as she sat on the seat behind Sasha. She hugged Sasha's hips tightly with her legs.

"Hey," Sasha said, "no need to grab on just yet. We haven't even started moving. And knowing this parade, we won't make it over five miles per hour anyway."

"Just practicing," Ruby said, relaxing her legs a little bit only to squeeze tight again, release and squeeze, release...

"Whoa, Ruby, you better save that. I have to concentrate on getting this bike in line." Ruby relaxed, content to feel the heat of Sasha's jeans on the insides of her thighs and the expectant heat of her pussy so close to Sasha's ass. Ruby entwined her fingers in the leather laces of Sasha's jacket, as Sasha kicked into first and swung into line.

They had to wait on an uphill slope before making the turn that would put them on Market Street at the head of the parade. They didn't speak, surrounded by the noise of engines, blasts of horns, and excited yells from the dykes on the threshold of leading the Freedom Day Parade. Ruby wasn't even looking around her. She was concentrating on the more immediate thrill of leaning her chest into the back of Sasha's jacket. Ruby unzipped her own jacket, so her skin could feel the warm rough leather and the sharp biting-in heat of the metal studs forming the "S," which had started baking in the sun.

When Sasha felt the pressure of Ruby's breasts on her back she reached behind her and slid her hand underneath Ruby's thigh. Ruby couldn't take her eyes off that hand, how strong it was, the knuckles jutting out from the fingerless biker glove. Ruby leaned against Sasha's shoulder, her head swimming, lost in the feeling of her cunt opening up with that ache of wanting to be filled.

Sasha's hand left Ruby's thigh suddenly, and before Ruby could figure out why, the Harley shot forward, with a sudden pop into gear. Ruby sat up and hung on. The bikes ahead of them were roaring around the curve and they soon followed. Once around the corner the scene opened up, with masses of people on either side of the wide street as far as they could see.

The crowds were already cheering and waving to the bikes ahead of them. Ruby was dazed from the dreamy sensations of her body. But cheers

of admiration soon had her smiling and raising both fists to the crowd. She saw women nudging their friends and pointing to her and Sasha. All along the way people ran out in front of them to snap pictures.

"I guess we're a hit," Sasha said after a whole group of dykes gave them the thumbs up and yelled in appreciation.

"Mmmm..." Ruby loved the deep huskiness of Sasha's voice. Now she pressed her pussy right against the heat of Sasha's jeans. When the bike sped up, Ruby's clit came down hard on the frayed seam running between Sasha's back pockets. Ruby let out a cry, arched up against Sasha's back, and wrapped her arms tighter around her waist.

"You sure like to ride close, don't you?"

"It's the only way to ride."

The parade moved forward slowly, with a lot of stopping and going, and often the bikes stood still for minutes. During one long wait, Sasha reached back to caress Ruby's hair. Ruby caught hold of Sasha's hand and put it to her mouth, nibbling on the fingertips and running her tongue around them. Then, suddenly, she pushed Sasha's fingers deep in her mouth and sucked on them.

Sasha exhaled softly, and Ruby felt Sasha rock her hips slowly back and forth. Sasha reached back with her other hand to grab on to Ruby's thigh. Ruby took her hand and guided it up under her miniskirt. Sasha's hand quickly discovered her surprise, as her fingers slid right into the warm creamy wetness of Ruby's pussy.

Sasha moaned and looked back at Ruby to find a playful smile and eyes glittering with desire. "I think we should find an alternate route." She brought her hands back to her bike and swung it out of the parade. Ruby hugged Sasha close, pressing her cheek to her shoulder, breathing in the heat and warm leather. Sasha gunned the motor, waiting until spectators opened a path for them so they could take off up a side street and leave the crowd behind. Ruby kept her eyes closed, giving herself entirely over to anticipation.

## Scarlet Woman

# Radical Femme

I stand five feet ten in my six-inch heels,  
My new red hair is blazing in the sun.  
Oh my sisters,  
Spare me your judgments.

Let me tell you:  
We are violated by those  
Who would contain our greatest spirits and  
Confine our largest passions  
Into the small image of chastity,  
We are raped by those who  
Would have us believe that  
Nice girls don't like sex.  
They harm us more, and harm more of us, than  
All the violence  
of meat shot on split beaver.

Have you given the Goddess your orgasm today?

I love all that is sexy of woman:  
Lean Atalanta with streamlined hips and  
vulnerable earlobes, poised for flight;  
Earthmother, abundant with flesh:  
tits and belly and ass,  
tremendous thighs and  
a clear brown eye stunning me with candor.  
A decorated Beauty with mascara on her cheek  
arches her back and clenches her fists,  
Eyes gleaming in the candle watching mine eager:  
Her muscles bulge as she wails her pleasure,  
Magnificent her passion.

Have you given the Goddess your orgasm today?

In six-inch spiky too-high heels  
I went to a party with too many men.  
I stood five feet ten and none of them  
tripped over me:  
I don't need to run when I can look them in the eye.  
When my new red hair blazes in the sun,  
I am not trivial.

I will wear my Self large and shiny,  
Loud and passionate like the idols of my youth:  
Mae and Bessie and Tallulah,  
Outraging women,  
Not to be ignored.

Yes, I stand five feet ten in my six-inch heels,  
My new red hair is blazing in the sun.  
Oh my sisters,  
Spare your judgments.  
Give the Goddess your orgasm today.

Hannah Bleier

*Excerpts from the (Unpublished)  
Sexual Autobiography of a  
27-Year-Old Femme Top*

*A*s a child I watched my mother dress and realized she was a sexual being. She would emerge from the shower soft and moist, wrapping a towel around her head. She would dry her arms, smooth lotion on them, and dust herself all over with powder. Then she'd slip the shiny red dress over her head, or sometimes it was the black one. She'd put dabs of Chanel No. 5 behind her ears, on her wrists, and between her breasts. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

It happened in the bathroom when I was nine. I found Grandpa's stack of *Playboy* magazines behind the toilet. The shag carpeting was royal blue, the towels were royal blue. A frosted plastic poodle decorated the shower door, and there were royal blue crocheted Kleenex box covers, a big gold crucifix over the mirror, and all those magazines. I looked at them and got excited, then felt sick and ashamed. I masturbated on the damp royal blue carpet next to the toilet.

I touched myself and I knew it was bad. I wonder if that's what brought the nightmares, horrible ballerinas with bared fangs dancing toward me in a circle suffocating me, or the man running running running after me through the mossy caves. I'd run to a precipice, he'd be after me, and I knew I had to jump. I'd wake up trying to scream and making no noise. My throat would be so dry, it would be minutes before I could make a sound, all the while knowing there was a vampire in the closet hanging next to my jacket, waiting.

I might as well have been wearing doll clothes: that white first communion dress, dressed up like a little bride of Christ. I wish they had prepared me to swallow the bodies of men instead of the eucharist, the body of Christ. It would have been a lot more useful in my future. I might not have been so scared, so ashamed not to know what was expected of me.

I remember the first time I had sex. After waiting all that time to take those poisonous little Ortho-Novums, he just stuck it in me like I was no one. His eyes were fixed on the wall above my head, and the bed, my grandparent's bed, smelled like Ben-Gay. I felt like sandpaper inside.

It was all about dick. His was so wide it hurt me. It commanded every sexual situation; it had to be satisfied. I was fascinated. I thought I wanted to be like him, but really I wanted to be like his big, wide dick: not caring if I broke the skin, who I hurt, or how it felt, only taking taking taking. I was sick of being taken; I was sick of taking it; I was sick of giving it away. He wanted me to be his mother, to absorb his deepest secrets. He needed me. But his dick needed no one; it was consistent, unyielding, painful, and so hard.

We were not having sex, we were staring at each other. We thought we should be having sex. We thought we should want to. Eventually we did, after the soup and sandwiches. Afterward the smell of his come made me feel like a foreigner, like I was in a place I didn't know, a place that bore no relationship to me.

I remember I had to tell him. I didn't feel good about not telling him; he was the first man who was my friend. Finally I said, "Every time you go down on me, I imagine you're a woman." He paused. I waited for him to crumble or explode. Instead, he smiled slightly and said, "Whatever gets you there, hon."

I finally admitted to myself that I needed sex with a woman, and among some of my best friends, who were lesbians, there was great rejoicing. I put on my nastiest black bra, creamy garter belt and seamed silk stockings, then covered everything with jeans and a t-shirt so I could stop at the gas station. I went after the femme who knew what she was doing, who could show me, who would open it all up for me. I had chosen her carefully. I loved her lavish body, the way she couldn't help moving sensuously, even when she was trying to be businesslike. Her hand would linger a moment longer than necessary against a wooden chair, her wide hip would make too wide an arc coming around that sharp turn next to the file cabinet. The woman couldn't help showing that she loved inhabiting her body, and I couldn't help looking at the way her large nipples got hard under her primary-colored silk blouses in the overly air-conditioned conference room. I'd also noticed the appreciation in her eyes when I showed up at the fund-raiser in a bustier.

When I arrived at her apartment she was mercifully direct. Rose candles burned, making an aureole of light around her red hair. She wore a gold slip, and when she sat down it rode up her big, round thighs. I blushed and she, the picture of good taste, pretended not to notice. She gave me wine and led me to her bedroom. Her skin was like gardenias. She tenderly stroked, and petted, and finger-fucked me through and around my lingerie. When I tried to touch her, she stood up. I smelled her cunt through the gold silk in front of my face, and I wanted to eat her. She moved slightly to one side of my face and bent forward so I could see her breasts kissed by gravity. She snapped off my stockings, her full lips curving in an uppity smile. I decided to defer to her experience. She laid me naked on her soft bed, spread honey dust all over my body with feathers, and then licked it off. When she licked my cunt, all my years of saying no to women melted into her mouth.



She tasted like honey, like fish, like life. She was so warm, and wet, and small, and so many shapes. The taste of her on my fingers was so slippery in my mouth, I couldn't believe I hadn't done this before.

What I really wanted to do that Christmas at the gathering around my aunt's big, fine, rosewood table in that split-level ranch-style house in the San Fernando Valley was tap on my glass with a fork. I wanted to clink my glass hard and, when everyone started to quiet down, stand up and yell, "Hey! I can make a woman come! How many of you can say the same?"

It was the wrong kind of relationship. So why was the sex so good? She lied to me daily, but no one had ever made me come like that. I believed her every word. I accepted her words the way I accepted her tongue, her fingers, her dildo into my body. I remember the blue rose tattoo on the back of her right shoulder. Sun never touched it because she always wore a black leather jacket outside, even in summer. She wanted everyone to think she was a stone butch, but she wasn't so tough. I remember how she looked in her kitchen with her ass to me, spread-eagled against her green wall oven, wearing a white apron and nothing else. I remember we wanted each other so much we didn't care if the kitchen curtains were open or who could see us. I remember ass-fucking her beneath the bow of that little white apron, holding her tight around her waist, watching the big muscles in her thighs strain. When I rode on the back of her cherry red Honda, I loved feeling her hard ass between my thighs. I remember hanging onto her, how she taught me to move with the bike. "Lean into it," she said patiently. "Lean into it." I daydreamed about buying her a Harley. She fucked me on the living room floor on Thanksgiving Day in a patch of sunlight coming through her window, and then I went alone to my family dinner with a pan of sweet potatoes she had made and a rug burn on my back.

Skin that tasted like salt from the sea — her sweaty throat after we danced for hours, sitting in the dark corner of the club next to the cigarette machine. I moved her heavy black hair away from her neck with my hot hands and licked the salt off the sides of her neck. I put my tongue in her ear, flickering it in and out and around the edges, letting my breath say, "I want you" but not forming the words. Her mouth caught my tongue and pulled me under.

Cigarette smoke all over her skin, nicotine in her pores. I ate her and she tasted like a cigarette. Eve menthol was always between us and I hated it, I resented it. I wanted to taste her cunt, smell her juices. She's the only lover whose smell I can't remember.

I remember when she fucked me in the cow pasture in Marin County. I came staring up at the blue sky into infinity and I thought, this is the way it should always be, ripping into the atmosphere, coming into everything in the world. These trees are my sex, this grass is my sex, this woman's holy hands are my sex. I sat up and cried and laughed and snot ran out my nose and she held me, she held me, she held me.

I remember her face when I moved the dildo inside of her. She was on the edge of something; I thought it might be terror. "Do you want me to

stop?" I asked. "No," she gasped. "No, fuck me." I did, slow and strong. I remember her face — something broke inside her and she let it rise up her throat, out of her mouth, out of her eyes, a word forming like lava. She spit it out, spit it out, then let it rush out, "Yeeeeesssss."

I laughed after I came. I came on all fours like some gorgeous wild animal, came with my sex streaming over her mouth, sweating and screaming. Then I laughed because I felt so much power in my body, surging through me, every sinew. I could do anything, and I laughed because to say anything else was absurd.

I am just coming out of the shower. I put the mirror on the floor, the full-length mirror. I take the snake out of her aquarium, let her wrap around my right forearm. She is restless, tense, and her skin is milky as she prepares to shed it for only the second time. A young red-tailed boa. I am warm and damp. I stand, spreading my legs over the mirror, and look at my cunt. I am beautiful. My cunt has so many shapes, myriad improbable shapes. The colors are warm pink and brown, the colors of living skin, skin ripe with purpose and energy. My hair is full and bushy. My asshole has two black moles just to the right of it. There is a bit of yeast around my clit. I look at all of this and I feel shameless. I clean the yeast away with a soft cloth, feeling the slight sting around my clit. I excrete. I feel soft and I sting. I breathe. I am alive. The boa contracts slightly, moving up my arm.

Anna Svahn

# *Iron Fist in a Velvet Glove*

## *Toward an Aggressive Femme Philosophy*

If you were to pass me on the street one afternoon, you might not realize I am lesbian. Someone particularly observant might draw an accurate conclusion from my short, buffed nails (although now and again I do fall prey to the seductive lure of acrylic nail tips). If you were really watching you might notice what catches my eye: every interesting woman who walks by, young or old, fat or thin, short or tall, butch or femme. Don't feel too badly if you don't recognize me for what I am. In a culture where people frequently assume their peers to be heterosexual, the more subtle aspects of femme lesbian expression are often missed, even by other lesbians.

I look like millions of other Western women. I wear makeup, pluck my eyebrows, and shave my legs. I wear short skirts and high heels more often than I wear work boots and overalls. I have been educated as to the finer points of cooking, cleaning, and fucking. I am a courageous, compassionate, and supportive lover, daughter, sister, and friend. And having been raised to believe that people fall in love and get married, I have been actively seeking my lifetime companion since picking up that first blush brush.

But while I may look like the average white-skinned woman in her thirties, I'm not. I may have an equally dysfunctional family, and make much less money than an equally qualified man in my position, just as she does, but I am not just like her because I am a femme lesbian. And as a femme lesbian, I lay claim to a disquieting heritage of role-defined sexual expression.

I say disquieting because, as a survivor of early childhood sexual abuse, I find myself highly resistant to the pliantly passive role traditionally associated with femme or feminine expression in Western culture. I do not accept the role of victim gracefully. Femme and feminine are seen to be weak, passive, and powerless, and I'm none of those qualities. I can't just lie there and take it. I have to be the one giving it, good or bad.

I refer to myself as an Aggressive Femme, an identity distinct from femme while still encompassing the form or style that is femme. Because for me, femme is about style and Aggressive Femme is about power. To the initiated, I am easily recognized as an Aggressive Femme: I don't look down, I stand my ground, my heels resound when I walk away knowing when enough is enough. Those who don't know are left in my dust.

It has been argued that in the lesbian community all femmes are in reality Aggressive Femmes, and that to modify the label somehow weakens the integrity of the distinction. I agree in part; to claim femme within a community profoundly ambivalent about seemingly heterosexual constructs is an act of bravery well deserving of notice and acclaim.

But to those who say I am blurring distinctions in a problematic way, I respond with the following: when the day comes that I am routinely recognized as a lesbian on the street by straight and gay alike, I will happily accept the label of femme, without qualification. Until that time, I am wary of anyone assuming I am a heterosexual woman with little force in or effect on my environment, based only on their perception of my personal style.

I like being feminine. I enjoy the clothes and the accessories, the makeup, the shoes. I like recreating myself every morning as I “put on my face” in the mirror. I love the feel of just-shaved legs against crisp cotton sheets. However, I do not like people assuming I’m bad at math or can’t drive a stick shift. And I will do anything, short of being butch, to counter the assumption that I am powerless in any way.

Besides, the label is not only for lesbians to use to talk about each other, it is so the rest of the world can acknowledge us as well. I have been out for all of my adult life, and I interact in the straight world every day. I am not a huge fan of invisibility. Straight people need to know that I am both femme lesbian and powerful. I am claiming space in the world as I claim my name.

But why not Assertive Femme? Wouldn’t it be less threatening while still achieving the same objective? No, because *assertive* is the word bosses use when they want their reluctant underlings to get the job done. *Assertive* is the word men use when they want their wives to tell them what they need in bed. *Assertive* is the word women use when they are afraid of their own power. The Aggressive Femme has no fear. The Assertive Femme can’t quite make up her mind. The Aggressive Femme knows.

## *A*ggressive Femme/Passive Butch

Is it any wonder that, as gay women at the end of the century, we find ourselves either overtly femme, overtly butch, or striving for something uniquely lesbian and somehow gender neutral? We seek self-defined power in the new social order. We look for ways of being in the world that most clearly express who we are and what we want.

There seems to be ambivalence in the lesbian community about the nature of femme and butch. Much in the same way that it is said that all femmes are Aggressive Femmes, it is bantered about that butches are really wimps. “Butch in the streets, femme in the sheets” is a cliché because it is so often true. And what it says about femmes — that they’re the ones who get done — is not something that I associate with my chosen lifestyle expression. Don’t get me wrong, I like to get done as much as the next woman, but I like to just do it, too.

There was a time in college when I would switch from butch to femme simply by selecting from the other side of my closet. Today I am more secure in my sexual identity. I don't have to advertise myself as available to a certain style of lover by carefully choosing the clothes I put on my body. I know who I am and who I want, and she's usually butch, always bright, and sometimes a little dangerous. I use my clothes to cover my nakedness and display my beauty, not to speak those words which can be frightening when uttered in clear dulcet tones.

"You, on your knees. Now!"

## **What Makes a Femme an Aggressive Femme?**

As I see it, the qualifying determinants for Aggressive Femme are, foremost, a feminine style of personal expression, the way she chooses to adorn herself. Second, an Aggressive Femme has achieved or is achieving significant goals as defined by her own personal agenda, whether consciously informed by her societal milieu or not. Third, an Aggressive Femme has possession of a power base exclusive of her relationship status. An Aggressive Femme does not need a Passive Butch to be an Aggressive Femme. She need only call herself one and she is one. And last, an Aggressive Femme gets the job done, whatever the job may be, without alienating those who are capable of assisting her should she need assistance.

Women do not have to be unfeminine, or anything else, in order to be powerful; we are powerful simply because we are women. We can bleed for days and not die. We miraculously bring forth life from between our legs. We must, however, act with awareness of our power, claim our strength and wonder, and claim our name.

Claiming Aggressive Femme with such vehemence as I have in this essay is empowering, and not only for myself. As I claim my name, I claim the right of self-definition for all women. As I empower myself, I empower every woman. Because real power, the power I know is mine and yours, is power from within, not power over. And we have a responsibility to embrace our truly powerful selves.

I warn you against quietly assuming that I am not a strong and capable woman simply because I choose to be an overtly feminine one. If you do, you are likely to feel the weight of my iron fist. But I won't chip or gouge your closed mind with arguments because I'll be wearing gloves of the softest velvet.

Susan Kane

## *Femme Fatale*

*H*ow did you know  
I had a weakness  
for dykes  
with short hair  
and broken hearts

for women  
who walk down the street  
like they have a right  
to be there

or maybe  
a baby butch  
bold enough to take  
what she wants  
without asking

BUTCH  
BULLDAGGER  
BALL-BUSTING  
D-Y-K-E

did I            scare you  
did they        hurt you

with those names?

Come here, honey  
let me show you just how  
*sweet*  
those words  
can sound

in the mouth  
of a woman  
who wants you.

Debra Bercuvitz

## *Stand by Your Man*

*With thanks to Kate Bornstein*

So here I am, a femme in North Carolina, sucking a woman's cock and wanting her to come deep inside of me.

Things have become more difficult for us since we moved here from up north. I left my lesbian community of eleven years, and it became evident to Kris that people basically always assume that she is a man. Southerners are more conservative: male and female roles are more strictly defined, and it is beyond anyone's sense of possibility that someone who acts and looks as Kris does might be a woman. She hears "sir" all day long, in every exchange. Last night we went to the mall. I wanted to try on this sexy little number for her. One of the salesclerks, addressing Kris as "buddy," asked if "he" wanted anything for himself, or if "he" was just there for me. Another commented on how good the dress looked on me, after looking to Kris for permission to compliment his woman. At another store, Kris didn't come into the dressing room area with me for fear of being hassled. We are never free of this; it permeates our lives, my life. I'm constantly aware of my femme privilege, of being an acceptable woman in the eyes of the world. While Kris does not refer to herself as a man in public, she does not correct people, and she often consciously chooses to pass.

I was so much clearer when she and I got together. I wanted a very butch woman and I found one. To some degree I created one as I really brought her out as a butch (what a femme thing to do!). Of course she was always butch inside, but didn't feel permission to express it. Then I came along and told her that I wasn't interested if she wasn't butch, and that there was no such thing as too butch for me. My identity as a femme was clear to me. But as Kris became more stone, then passed as a man, I realized that not only was I losing my external identity as a lesbian, but my own sense of myself became clouded as I related more to Kris's masculinity. Sorting out what is butch, what is stone, and what is transgender is extraordinarily confusing. As time has gone on, I've realized that I don't think of Kris as a woman in the ways that I used to. I am surprised on the occasions when she takes her undershirt off and I see breasts or when she gets her period.

I used to make love to her more. Not in the ways that I was used to making love to another woman. It was never even remotely fifty-fifty. My initiation was about being made love to, not about making love to her. There



From the collection of Debra Bercovitz and Kris Knutson

### *Debra and Kris*

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was often an element of servicing and usually sex was directed by her. Over time, after much stifling of ourselves, we began to call the dildo her cock. Our sex life became more and more focused around straight fucking. The more she identified with her male traits and less with her woman's body, the less I touched her in sexually intimate ways. It took me a while to realize that she was becoming stone, that she was totally focused on me. Obviously, the fucking was also for her pleasure; we would fuck long after my body could take it in a pleasurable way. But again this was the complicated sexuality of butch-femme, and of a stone butch at that. I caressed her pecs or her back, but not her breasts. I cried over the loss of not making love to her anymore.

Sometimes I think that I want mutually exclusive things. I want Kris as tough, hard, and masculine as possible, but I also want her vulnerable and womanly. I want her to make love to me in all of her masculine ways. I want to forget about the woman's body beneath the undershirt and boxers. But I also want to have my face and my fist in her cunt, my mouth on her breasts. I want her to switch back and forth, but I have no concept of what I am truly asking of her. I want to make love to her as I have to my past lovers, but I don't want to emasculate her. To clarify, she isn't totally stone. I do make love to her on occasion, and she says she wants it to happen more often. But even this is how and when and the way she wants, very circumscribed. It's not at my initiation, not the way I would choose to do it, and not very frequently. There was a time when it was more balanced between us, but



now it is about ninety-five to five. So while her identity is not stone, her reality is not far from it. I miss topping my partner. I miss totally dominating someone, reducing her to a begging mess. I miss reaching out and shoving my fingers into my partner's cunt. I miss spending half an hour going down on my partner. I miss caressing and really attending to my partner's body. Parts of me are satisfied as never before. And a huge part of my sexuality is about actively receiving pleasure from my partner, satisfying her desire to take me, own me, and use me. But it is not all of me, and I don't know if I have to give up the other part to be with a woman as butch as Kris or a transgendered woman who, in my opinion, does not totally relate to her own sexual woman's body.

I always make love to Kris as a butch, although part of me wants to take her and satisfy my own desires on her in a way so that neither of us is butch or femme. I want to top her not as a femme might top a butch, but as one woman topping another. Sometimes I make love to Kris's transgendered self, truly forgetting about the cunt under the cock, giving her a blow job with all the passion to please and satisfy her that I can muster. And then there are times when I make love to her butch woman-self: fucking her, but oh, so carefully, sucking on her biceps and fingers as much as on her breasts, putting my hand in her with absolute reverence for her vulnerability, praising both her emotional and physical strength.

Kris's power is what has always drawn me to her. It's so different from my own, and different from that of men. I envy the privilege that Kris assumes as she passes, and her desire for it when I am out with her and men do that male nodding thing with her. She has the ability to get along with men, particularly working-class men. People afford her a respect that they don't afford me. But I would not really want that; it isn't me. My power is exerted much more in my own world. I used to correct people when they called Kris "sir." It pissed me off, and I didn't want people to think we were straight. But I saw the way that they looked at her when I did so: the shock, disdain, anger, and revulsion at her queerness. Men were angry that somehow she could be assuming their male privilege, even when it happened without her trying. She feared being discovered and physically hurt. I became more protective of Kris and more invisible myself. *Invisible* is an odd word to associate with me because I am assertive and have such a powerful presence, sexually, intellectually, and just generally. I am very strong and very in-your-face with people, especially about being a dyke. But sometimes I do become invisible.

Kris has always done more writing about butch-femme than I have. Perhaps she has felt more urgency to find clarity. Or perhaps I play the "woman behind the man," supporting her through her struggles as mine remain unexplored. And yet it is the very issue of invisibility which is most painful for me. I am so totally a femme dyke, I couldn't be straight or be with a man. Then again, I am already dealing with the latter issue because of Kris's passing. I have always been invisible as a femme, and that has com-

pounded now that I am with a passing woman. Before, I was suspect as a lesbian. Now, people (lesbian and straight alike) assume that I am just straight. The loss and resentment and frustration get to me sometimes. I want to scream at people, "I am queer!" A passing butch and her femme are radical, they come full circle to straight. There is also a certain thrill for me in Kris's passing, how she walks that fine line. I love being out with her when she is in a suit and I am in something appropriately hot and slutty. But I don't want people to be looking at me and thinking, "het." I love the genderfuck, but I don't want it at the expense of my external orientation.

God, I remember the first night Kris wore a three-piece suit. The excuse was Halloween, but it was a private admission to me of a long-time dream. We went upstairs to make love, and as I slowly undid her tie and removed her jacket we both felt an incredible connection to the many women who had played out that same scene throughout history. We admitted to our fantasies: Kris's wanting to make love to a woman while she was fully dressed (in men's clothing, of course), and mine of being made love to by a woman in a suit. Finally we had each found someone who wanted what the other did.

Over time, we each became comfortable voicing other fantasies to each other and really coming into our respective identities. I am very conservative in what I respond to as butch, and I finally found someone who invited this: no earrings, no makeup, no women's clothing, a brush cut, all the superficial stud stuff! And I came into my femininity with her, into the full display of my seductive, sexy femme glory. One clear dynamic was my need to give, hers to take. But, of course, not in the straight way. My urgency was to give my body to her to use, to fuck, to get off from. Her need was to take me, to please me, to be the best. It is the brutality of mutual desire.

I love the way she pulls me into her to kiss her, one strong arm around my waist, a wide hand in the small of my back. I love the way I put my hand on the back of her neck, guiding her head to my breasts, a combination of maternal feelings and deeply sexual ones. I love the feeling of her cock through her jeans, pressed against my ass in the kitchen. I love the fact that she will always get out of our warm bed to get me a glass of water. I love being her island of safety in the world, that I want in her all that is reviled by others.

As a high femme, I exude sex, sexual energy, sexual desire, and sexual prowess. I am always aware of the calculated effect I am having on others. I know that those staunch butches who pretend they aren't looking are aching to take me, aching to have me turn that energy towards them, aching to have me want them with the desire that they see written across my face and body. I tease, aware of what I look like and how I move, knowing what fantasies my words evoke. I am always aware of the power of desire, both mine and theirs. Kris, bless her soul, knows how central this is to who I am, and trusts that it will go no further than the tease from a distance. I, in turn, am not interested in actually doing with others, I just love the play. I want to be

assured of their desire for me, and I want them to see mine for them. I want Kris more than anyone I have ever seen, and she knows it.

My desire for passing women is becoming ever clearer to me, especially passing women with beautiful faces. They are rare, but they make me ache with an incredibly primal intensity. I am beginning to understand that this is not necessarily Kris's battle that I am fighting alongside her as an ally, but my battle also. Perhaps Kris is not an anomaly for me. There's something about the fine gender line that they walk, the brave way they live as who they are, regardless of the consequences, that I relate to. Part of what pulls me to passing women is their rebelliousness, their flaunting of cultural mores. I, too, have always been a rebel. I have lived as a gender outlaw in my own right. As high femme I was never an acceptable little girl; I challenged everybody and everything. I fought and talked back and wouldn't wear dresses, but I also was not a tomboy at all. Maybe that is what draws me to passing women: they are a match for me. There is something about the way I am feminized in their presence, but not in a stereotypically helpless way; in fact quite the opposite. I allow myself to express my femininity outside of traditional cultural expectations and boundaries. As much as I bitch about the challenges of this life, it is probably very much what I want.

My politics are changing. Part of my mission was about trashing people's stereotypes about what lesbians look like. Now when I am with Kris, I find I have lost the capacity for my brand of in-your-face lesbianism; people assume we are straight and I don't want to expose Kris in any way by contradicting their assumptions. When I am not with her, I am checked by my knowledge of the deception we live. I can no longer recite the line of "lesbians are just like everyone else. See, look at me." Or "we don't do roles." If I say that, I deny my own reality, Kris's reality, and the reality of all of the other lesbians who don't look just like other women, or identify as women as some of us do. So my party line is changing. And, I find myself less able to use my feminine looks as a basis for changing people's preconceptions. I am losing the external visibility that I have with my partner, and I don't want to trample on the backs of those who are and look different. These are some of the many changes that I am undergoing.

*My desire, my passion comes from being femme to your butch, comes from knowing my power over you and yours over me. It comes from looking at your handsome beauty, at the width of your shoulders and the cut of your hair. It comes from feeling your hands on my neck, on my mouth, on my arms, ever insistent. It comes from feeling that my curves — my lips, my breasts, my hips, my ass — are there to meet your hardness, there to make you wild in your need for me. It comes from knowing the constant craving I feel, the boldness with which I make my needs known. It keeps me excited, wet, on the edge, waiting to be pushed or to throw myself over.*

Jaime M. Grant

## *Born Femme*

I've always been a femme. I knew I was a femme before I knew I was a lesbian. Growing up, I was a daddy's girl. In high school and college I attracted and was attracted to lots of boys and men, which was not so much denial as it was confusion from living in a hyper-heterosexist culture. There is so little literature that illuminates the femme erotic experience, we almost have to create ourselves from scratch. At the same time, we live under an overwhelmingly oppressive heterosexist conditioning that tells us that what we're attracted to is about *biological* maleness.

Today, I can't say that I have ever been attracted to men *specifically*. Rather, what has long been at the root of my erotic life is an attraction to qualities that this culture has artificially assigned to men and systematically suppressed in women, qualities like being hard-edged rather than soft, bold-featured rather than delicate. I prefer women who are somewhat reticent emotionally, and who appreciate a lover who is skilled at drawing them out. I generally prefer women who identify as the strong silent type: women who take care of business around the house and take extra special care of me on a date.

As a femme, I have always understood that it is my job to make it safe for my butch to express her attraction for me. In my first relationship with a butch woman I flirted, asked her up to my apartment to appreciate the view, and initiated sexual activity with soft, sweet kisses on her neck. It took her more than a week to feel confident that these advances were real, that I wasn't "just another straight girl trying to mess with [her] head." I never said anything specific about her reticence during this week of decision making, just kept up my side of the bargain and waited.

In my current relationship, my lover and I were attracted to each other from afar for over a year. I flirted with her shamelessly at a public benefit, asking her to dance and smiling into her eyes. We were both in non-monogamous relationships at the time, but after the dance I sent her clear messages through our networks that I wasn't ready to act on the attraction. She sent back an equally clear message that she was available, but that I would have to make the first move. Finally I showed up at her workplace, walked into her office, and said, "I'm here to flirt." Only then was the flag up, and the erotic dance set into motion.

One way I've come to understand my erotic life is that I am powerfully drawn by polarities. I am not the kind of lesbian who gets mistaken for her

lover. I am excited by the vastly different ways my lover and I visually express being female: she an all-cotton, angular, boy Gap ad; me a big, soft statement on layered silk and rayon. When people tell me my lovers look like men, I tell them they have a very limited imagination about what a woman looks like.

For me, the butch-femme dynamic is simply about yin and yang: opposites attract. Show me one hundred women and I am going to get wet when I see the butchest woman in the room. It never fails. Some women's erotic lives are built on similarity; they are hottest when their lovers function as some kind of mirror of their experience. There are couples who look sort of androgynous and alike or those where both women appear very traditionally feminine or both express their femaleness in very nontraditional physical ways. I think of butch-femme attraction as creating a window. My lover represents a place and a set of experiences that is completely *other*. By going there, and by letting her take me where she wants to take me, I go through a window that is created by a passion for difference.

As a femme, I have had it with lesbian-feminists and especially feminist therapists who have suggested that my erotic life is somehow less valuable or underdeveloped because I value butch-femme polarity. I thought feminism was grounded in the idea that I am the best person to construct an erotic life appropriate for me. Instead, I have consistently had a so-called feminist agenda imposed on me that calls me to abandon my erotic dynamic for one that is more "balanced" or "equal."

In terms of sexual practice I tend to be a top, or the person in control of what's going on sexually, but in my heart of hearts, I am a bottom from hell. I prefer to be dominated, directed, and taken. I am most empowered under the hands of a confident, directive butch whose greatest sexual fulfillment comes from bringing me to the point of totally losing it in bed.

Contrary to what straight culture and many feminists have suggested, I am not confused in this sexually submissive space. I am not looking for a man in a woman's body. Butch women take me to a sexual place that only two women can go to. When I get on my knees and lick my butch's toes, suck her dick, nuzzle her cunt, submit to her authority or push my sexual limits to meet her needs, I am submitting to a woman in a culture that punishes women for visible expressions of power. I am meeting a woman's needs in a culture that forces women daily to deny their needs. I am giving every ounce of my traditional female capital to a woman who this culture defines as undeserving, perverse, and unworthy. I am giving all I am worth to a woman who carries the queer banner every day by the way she presents her butch self.

On my knees, I am a femme "getting over" in a culture that tells me that women on their knees are powerless, debased chattel. I am on my knees living out my own fantasies of being a bitch, a whore, a wife, a virgin, but without a man around to exact the price. As a femme and a bottom, I get to submit without the shame and restriction of living under male judgment and

authority. I get to play wife and yet wake up a fully empowered lesbian partner, play whore and wake up in a lesbian relationship that rejects the virgin-whore dichotomy. This place, of being a femme on my knees, is no-man's-land. And this relationship with my butch is one where we take particular care of each others' wounds: mine carved of being a so-called traditional female subject to male attention and intrusion; hers of being a so-called revolting female subject to male outrage and stigmatization. I am in the most grateful place in my life when I can witness the soft, inner places in my butch that nobody else in the world gets to see. I bear it as a sacred trust that she shares herself with me this way, in a world that requires her to be so armored.

Every time my lover is mistaken for a man, I get a little thrill. I understand that her daily physical expression of herself is tantamount to treason. On the street, she threatens an order that has been established on being able to distinguish male and female so that it can reward and punish accordingly. She is a constant reminder to me that the revolution is in progress, and that, through our partnership, we are on the cutting edge.

Taking her arm on the street, she offers me the most visible lesbian space of my life. Alone, I get glommed on to the great heterosexual assumption that lesbians don't exist. Other lesbians pass me on the street without recognition; I am without community, without place. But alongside her, I am fully myself. I am a visible queer, a woman who dares to define my sexuality in an order that denies me that right at every corner.

And every time my lover is harassed as a woman who lives in opposition to her strict gender assignment, I am completely outraged. Her life is a particular kind of challenge, often bitterly addressed. A challenge mine will never present. I understand, as a lesbian who passes for straight in almost every public setting, that my lover does visibility work for me every day. She takes risks minute by minute that I am never forced to assume. She takes the anti-lesbian hits meant for all of us. She is a warrior-shero in the best sense of the word.

And at my femme best, I am her reward. When we occasionally pass as a straight couple, I feel connected to generations of passing couples who lived in cultures that suppressed lesbian identity so severely, there weren't even words for their partnerships. When we are recognized on the street as a queer couple, I feel thrilled to be the femme on her arm, the antidote to all those "ugly dyke" epithets. I am her solace, her jewel.

When this harassment comes from other lesbians, I wonder how we manage to keep going. I am constantly dismayed that lesbians, who have long rejected the idea that women should be limited by traditional stereotypes, will oppress butch women by suggesting that they should act *more* traditionally female, that they are somehow out of touch with their feminine sides. Recently, I was at a lesbian conference where the butch-femme caucus was dominated by women assuring a butch that she could "appear more feminine if she really tried." These women held such a distorted view of

butch-femme identity that they offered this offensive judgment as “help.” As a femme who lives with the relative safety of unintentionally passing for straight, I believe it is my responsibility to confront anti-butch lesbians about the real cost of this oppressive behavior, to lesbians and all women.

There is a rich, wonderful world of butch-femme relationships for those of us struggling to be ourselves. At times it feels like a heavy burden; then morning comes, and my lover tucks a crisp white undershirt neatly into her jockey shorts. I feel that warm thrill spread across my cunt, and I whisper a silent prayer of thanks that I made it here alive, and openhearted.

Tristan Taormino

## Bombshell

As I dig for quarters in the pocket of my leather jacket, I realize that I'm the only woman on the bus tonight. I strut toward a seat in the back, and one by one several of the men check me out. They think this dark red lipstick and these long, curly, perfectly coifed locks are for their consumption. I feel them staring at my fishnet-stockinged legs. It is ten at night and I could have gotten a cab. I might be in trouble, but when I return their gaze, they lose interest. I suddenly imagine that they all have ESP and they have read my mind (instead of my body), figured out where I'm going, and don't want to bother me. But I still expect to be followed or harassed by one of them as I dart off the bus.

I'm already late, so I walk past the club's main entrance and go directly to the back room door. Inside the back room, I toss my flowery dress on the bathroom floor and quickly change. I look in the little bathroom mirror to darken my lipstick. I can hear voices and music blaring on the other side of the wall, and it sounds like the club is already full. I'm still tense from the bus ride, so I massage my shoulders, stretch a little and get into the music. The club manager bursts through the door — in her usual abrupt manner — with Donna following behind, and sweeps us both out to the dance floor. I hear Felicia the DJ announce our arrival as I jump up onto my box, and that first moment of nervousness hits me in the stomach. I spin around and grab the thick metal chains at my side and peek at myself in the mirror. I'm anxious to get out of my clothes tonight.

As I loosen my tie, I scan the club for a reaction. I think about how I wandered in here three months ago for purely academic reasons: to interview butch-femme couples and get material for my thesis (ethnography, right?). I look to the other end of the club at Sharon, the bartender top I've been having an affair with all summer. I study that bleached blonde hair, those fuchsia lips I crave in my sleep, those piercing brown eyes, and that pierced pink tongue. She has fourteen years on me and ten more tattoos that tell each other stories on her body. My ivy-influenced upwardly mobile sensibilities are transparent to her, but that's not all she sees when she looks right through me. She's a chain-smoker with no other vices except tying me up and torturing me. She's busy pouring a drink and flirting with women at the bar. *"I knew the first time I saw you — that energy, the connection. You couldn't control yourself. You had this air of innocence, but I knew you weren't innocent at all. I could see that there were all these nasty thoughts in your head.*



*Nasty thoughts that I really liked the sound of.” All of a sudden she is behind me and she grabs my neck and bites it hard. She has lifted up my dress and she rips my fishnet stockings with her hands and I can feel how swollen and soaked I am for her as she slides the dildo inside me. She tells me how much she loves my dress, how I look like such a little girl in it and how much she loves that, how beautiful I looked at the bar last night. She tells me that she wishes she had a cock right about now as she pushes harder into me (why is it that all the women I end up in bed with have penis envy?). She wants to feel what it would be like to be inside me. She would fuck me harder than I’ve ever been fucked, she tells me, and she would come inside me (she is inside me). I tell her I give good blow jobs. She says she knew that already. She tells me I’m a good little girl as I bend over her kitchen table and feel the cold glass push against my clit. She fucks me really hard then slows down until I can feel every stroke and I start to scream in ecstasy and she slaps my ass and I just yell louder and grab for something, anything, and I knock over my research notes and the tape recorder goes flying to the floor and I wonder if it’s still on or if it’s still listening...*

I look out at many familiar faces, and the dancing sea of dykes is broken up by some fags and a handful of straight couples. I can feel their eyes all over my body. Is that man clutching his girlfriend just like those creepy men on the bus would have clutched me? Are they going to go home and have really good sex tonight? Am I part of their fantasy? How do their stares differ from the dyke stares? One of the waitresses walks by and glances up at me, surprised, I guess, to see me fully dressed and in boy drag. The music changes and I catch sight of the manager sitting down in the corner. This woman never sits down, but on my last night of work I guess she, too, is excited that I’m stripping. I throw my tie on my box as I toss my head back, run my hands over my body, move to the music, and flirt with my audience. At that moment Joe, my other new girlfriend, walks in. She’s looking as butch as ever in a backward baseball hat, bomber jacket, and some boyish flannel shirt. Kickboxing is one of her passions; girljocks is one of mine. I think about the people who look at Joe, thinking she’s just some teenage boy, and the ones who look at her and know exactly who — and what — she is and want to kill her for her clarity. Sharon doesn’t know that I’m fucking Joe. The club is getting crowded now, and things might even get more slippery, I think to myself.

Joe has never seen me dance before, and the look of shock on her face as I unbutton my crisp white button-down shirt makes me shiver. It only takes one seductive look from me plus my painted nails dragging across my bra to tease her where I want her to be, where I want them all to be. They can’t stop watching and I can’t stop being watched. “*You are a bad girl,*” said the dominatrix. “*You are a bad girl,*” said the radical feminist. “*You are a bad girl,*” said my mother. I take the shirt off to reveal a red satin bra that pushes my breasts into torpedoes, exaggerated versions of the originals. Only three women at the bar know the real ones underneath the masquerade. *Joe pinched my nipples hard as she pushed me up against her car. She slid*

*her hand all the way up my polka dot dress and teased my thighs (all this on our first date) after I told her I wouldn't call her because I had a girlfriend (well, actually two). One would beat me quite literally if she found out, and the other would do it emotionally. I told her I didn't have time and I wasn't interested. All this was in a deserted parking lot in I have no idea where at four o'clock in the morning when all I wanted her to do was fuck me with "Hit Me with Your Best Shot" playing on the tapedeck.*

The lights are making me hot now and I wish I was out of the suit pants, but I've got to tease just a little longer. Make them all wait for it, beg for it, that's what this femme does best, after all. I unzip the pants and all of a sudden my ex-girlfriend, Chris, appears below me. I haven't seen her in over three weeks since I moved out, since she kicked me out, since I got out, since it was all getting to be too much. She's the reason I'm even in this goddamn city to begin with, but I didn't exactly anticipate breaking up minutes after I stepped off the plane or, worse, the aftereffects and shell shock.

She's got a dollar bill in her hands. She wants my love. I mean she wants my pants. I don't know what she wants or why she's here. I see all the pain of this summer — the fighting, the torture, the lies — I see it all in her eyes, even though she's trying desperately to cover it up with her flirting. I am distracted for a moment by my real life and I don't want to be, because reality isn't as much fun as this is. I want to get away from her, but I'm trapped; I can't even ignore her because we're being watched now. She's trying to regain her lost control over me, but I don't belong to her and that makes her crazy. How ironic that once she could have me for free, but tonight she is a paying customer like everyone else.

Except Sharon the bartender. All Sharon has to do is talk dirty to me, spank me really hard, or catch me in the bathroom before I start dancing, the way she did the other night. *I strutted past the bar in hopes of gaining her attention, and minutes later she was pushing me hard against the wall in the back room and grabbing both my hands with one of hers. I felt the metal piercing on my tongue as she kissed me and smeared my lipstick. She slid my dress up and my panties down as she felt how wet I was for her. She likes me to be ready for her and somehow I always am. She started to fuck me right there in the hallway with no one around and I got wetter and more turned on. All I wanted to do was come all over her hands, and just as she felt me start to come she pulled her fingers out of me, let my dress fall, and walked away. "Later," she said. "Later. Patience is a virtue and innocence becomes you."*

Watching me up here with my cleavage in everyone's face, shaking my ass, and grabbing myself to the music doesn't exactly sync with her little girl fantasy. Perhaps that's the reason for the notes she sends over with bottled water periodically: "You're mine." Just a reminder, I guess, as if I need to be reminded. The bruises on my ass, her lipstick on my underwear, and memories of the other night are plenty. *She blindfolded and cuffed me, took me into the bathroom, and laid me on the cold floor. I heard her move around and then I felt the sharp points of scissors on my cunt. I must have jumped a little*

*because she slapped me in the face and told me to stay still, then began hacking away my hair. I heard the water running and felt the cream, and the razor scraping away at me, and then warm water running down my cunt and my thighs. She picked me up and brought me in the bedroom and laid me on the bed. She put her head between my legs and played with my clit with her pierced tongue and told me that if I was very, very good, one day I'd get to do the same to her. One day I'd get to touch her and make love to her, but not yet — "Don't get ahead of yourself, I'll tell you when I want you to, when I'm ready."* The bruises are temporary, but the marks — her mark — on me are permanent, at least for now. Sharon touches my body as if its sole purpose is to exist for her pleasure, as if she owns it. But her possession of me is on my terms. When women in the club look at me as if they want to possess me, I get a thrill (most of the time). Chris is still in front of me waving the dollar bill, so I take off my pants and the crowd goes wild as I reveal red satin shorts, fishnet stockings, and combat boots. The costume is turning her on, but I'm not sure how I feel about that. I want her to get out of my face and out of my space. This is my space, my place, my turf, not her apartment in West Hollywood with all her stuff and my suitcases. This is my place with my friends and my lovers and I want her out of here, out of my head, out of my life.

I start to sweat, perspiration running in a tiny bead between my breasts, when Donna suddenly appears on my box. This small butch is the other dancer for the evening, and the manager loves to put us together. Donna's got close-cropped jet black hair, and a perfectly muscled body which fits nicely into a boy's wrestling suit with combat boots. She's twice as wet as I am, and her hot, slick body slides on mine as we grind together to the music. She gets on her knees in front of me and shoves her face between my legs as I throw my head back and thrust my hips toward her; we perform the experience and experience the performance of the pleasure of each other. I'm enjoying myself, but I can't forget that I'm on display and the enjoyment comes from my audience of voyeurs rather than her soaking wet body. She's gone as quickly as she appeared and I'm alone again.

I catch sight of Joe, who's standing in the exact same place as when she first came in. She can't take her eyes off me. I look at her as I grab my breasts, and the dance floor gets crowded, but I don't lose sight of her. The waitress hands me bottled water with a note from Sharon that reads: "I hope you're pacing yourself. I've got plans for you after work. I want to blindfold you and lick you behind the knees and..." I feel myself start to get distracted, so I take a drink. The icy water running down my throat and the hot pink lights beating down on my face send me into a surreal state of drunkenness.

My head is spinning and I decide it's break time. I jump off my box; I have to push through the crowd to the other end of the bar until I'm outside in the cool night air. Before I go into the back room I scan the line of people waiting to get into the club. They're smoking and chatting, restlessly

waiting to get inside. I recognize a lot of them, and they all stare me down until I disappear in the back. In the tiny bathroom, I peel the red satin off my body and put on a black push-up bra. Then I slip into the black mesh jumpsuit with the zipper down the front that Chris bought me in San Francisco. I fix my lipstick and emerge from the back. Women stare at me as I make my way through the bar; someone behind me reaches around and shoves a dollar bill in my bra. I turn around but I see a thousand faces and I can't tell who just tipped me so forwardly. It's like anonymous sex without the risks — no complications for my ego or body, or hers. *She took me to the sex club where she knows everyone and she put me downstairs in that pseudo-dungeon and got all these girls together and gave me a whipping. Each sting of the whip made me hotter and hungrier, and she kissed my back and my ass in between. She was so mean and sweet and rough and gentle, I knew she was going to take care of me. Then she made me masturbate while everyone watched and I loved it, naked and touching myself in front of everyone. I was turning her on and seeing the look in her eyes and their eyes and hearing her talk about me to all those other girls. Making myself come with an audience — I was into that.*

I get back on my box to find everyone where I left them: Sharon at the bar, Joe on the dance floor, and Chris lurking about. Chris looks angry because I haven't been paying attention to her. I glance at the crowd below me and recognize a face dancing in a group: my boss from my day job at a prominent gay and lesbian nonprofit organization. I'm startled and slightly embarrassed as we make eye contact. He is out of his three-piece suit, slightly drunk, and enjoying his friends. This isn't exactly me in a skirt and blouse answering the phone, now is it? Or even me at a demo, hair tucked under a baseball hat, shouting something angry and queer? Nor am I the thesis student interviewing butches and femmes about their lives, diligently researching and theorizing. Or am I?

I realize that the evening will end soon because the club is getting uncomfortably stuffy and crowded and I'm wondering just where I'm going after this and who's going to take me there. As the lights come on, I jump down and make my way to the back room. I gather my things for the last time in that cramped bathroom. Exhausted, sweaty, charged, and glowing, I guzzle down the last of my water and catch sight of myself in the mirror. I've smeared my lipstick. As I re-enter the club I catch sight of Sharon's girlfriend, who has arrived to pick her up and take her home. Guess there won't be any blindfolding tonight as promised. Chris has disappeared. Joe makes her way over to kiss me. She announces that her friends are going to an after-hours club and she's going with them, that I was great tonight and can we do brunch tomorrow? Women pour out onto the street and I go with them. I'm dehydrated and one of my ankles is starting to ache. As I make my way down the sidewalk, a pickup truck passes by and slows down alongside me. It's one of the bouncers from the club, a real old-world butch who's been courting me for weeks. *Need a ride?* There's nowhere I call home

in this city anymore, so where she's going seems as good a place as any. But I'm sleepy and overwhelmed, and I shake my head and smile at her as the bus drives by. I remember I didn't know who was going to take me where tonight. Now I know, and I throw my backpack over my shoulder and run for it.



*Femme Bracelet*

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Morgan Gwenwald

PART III

*A Woman  
Wearing  
Red*

Teresa Mendoza

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## *Dyke on Heels*

*Y*<sub>es,</sub>

I wear heels  
and pantyhose  
and tummy-tuck undies  
I wear push-up bras  
and bustiers  
and sometimes falsies  
I wear lipstick  
and blush  
and eyeliner galore  
I wear false eyelashes  
and eyeshadows  
different shades  
about four  
I drench my body in talc  
and sweet powder  
and perfumes

And yes,  
With all this said  
I am still a dyke  
Just like you.



Jane Barnes

## *How to Dress Like a Femmy Dyke*

*G*o with a perm or a ducktail  
—low maintenance.

Heavy on the eye paint, a little hard.  
Blood-red lips. Develop a swagger  
in your fuck-me shoes, or wear  
expensive cowboy boots, the kind  
that go with gypsy clothes.

Get three holes in one ear  
and pour on the gold.  
Wear tons of Yes, the new perfume.  
Wear fifties coats with shoulder pads.  
If you get a little plump  
just pile on the frills.

Go to Prelude and order Kahlua with cream,  
or cream with anything.  
Dance up a storm.  
And if a scary dyke looks too long at you,  
start picking the polish off your nails  
or burst into tears and  
beg her to take you home.

Constance Clare

## *Femme in Hat*

**D**oes the hat the femme make?  
No, no, it's the femme that makes the hat.  
How many hats does your femme flaunt,  
Taunt you with?  
The purple sombrero tilted seductively — or is it the  
Smile that's seductive under that brim?  
Then there's the round red chapeau that always makes her  
Irresistible.  
The elegant burgundy fedora that you bought for her,  
She wears it when you look your most dashing.  
What about that floppy sun hat, shielding her face and  
Her long fine neck down to her shoulders that shiver when you  
Lick them.  
But, oh, don't forget the berets, one in every color  
Pulled down over her ears, down to her eyebrows when it's cold,  
Or perched, with wispy curls coming out, and she looks  
Wistful, charming, and oh so  
Innocent  
Until she takes off that beret and puts on the  
Black satin top hat. And then you know you'd better get  
On your knees.  
Your femme in that hat makes you quiver.  
Your femme probably has a hat for every occasion, or  
Maybe, if you're lucky, she makes an  
Occasion for every hat.

Pamela Gray

## *Victoria's Secret*

**W**e talked about it for weeks,  
how you would make me  
try things on, how I would  
do whatever you said, obey  
you inside the dressing room  
where you'd sit in a chair  
and watch me, saying *this one,*  
*now this one,* saying *turn around,*  
*come closer,* saying *put this*  
*on,* saying *take that off.*  
In bed we took turns  
narrating it: how I'd model  
a red silk slip, clinging  
to my nipples turning hard  
under your gaze, how you'd sit  
below me, catching a glimpse  
of my cunt, how I'd pull the slip  
off over my head, then try on  
a garter belt, a black lace  
push-up bra, my breasts  
spilling over the top, aching  
for your mouth, how you'd sit  
there, arms folded, refusing  
to touch me, how there'd be a knock  
on the wooden door: *how are things*  
*going?* the saleswoman would ask,  
*do you need anything?* how I'd tell her  
*we're fine,* how you'd tell me  
*bend over,* how you'd spread  
my legs with your thigh, then  
fuck me, there, in the dressing room,  
whispering, *don't make noise, don't*  
*make any noise.*

We never got there  
in the end, but maybe we didn't  
need to: just telling

the story got us off, imagining it  
over and over, conjuring it  
beneath your blue down  
comforter, my body opening  
wider to you as we made love  
in two places at once. I have it  
still, even now, that myth  
we created, that dressing room  
where you are always my strong  
sexy butch, I am always your sweet  
soft femme, and we are always  
wet for each other, lusting  
in secret behind a wooden door.

Terry Wolverton

## *Black Slip*

She told me she had always fantasized  
about a woman in a black slip,  
something to do with Elizabeth Taylor  
in *Butterfield Eight*.

She came to my house with a box  
gift-wrapped with gigantic ribbons.  
Inside, a black slip.  
Slinky, with lace across the bodice.  
She told me how she was embarrassed  
in the department store,  
a woman in men's pants  
buying a black slip clearly not intended for herself,  
and about the gay men in line behind her,  
sharing the joke.

She asked me to try it on.  
I took it into the bathroom, slipped it over my head.  
I stared at myself for a long time  
before I came out of the bathroom  
walked over to her  
lying on the bed.

That was the first time. It got easier.  
The black slip was joined by a blue slip  
then a red one  
then a long lavender negligee, the back slit to there.

I wore them to bed.  
In the morning she would smile and say  
how much she loved waking up next to a woman in a slip.  
The black slip remained our favorite.  
We always made love when I wore the black slip.

Once I showed up at her door late at night  
wearing a long coat  
with only the black slip underneath.

One night I cooked dinner at her apartment  
wearing nothing but the black slip  
and red suede high heels.

It was always the first thing to pack when we went on vacation.

And she used to make me promise  
that if we ever broke up  
I'd never wear that slip for anyone else.

I don't know where it is now.

Stripped of that private skin  
when we broke up  
I never went back to claim it.

I think she must have  
packed it  
given it  
thrown it  
away.

On bad days I imagine her  
sliding it over the head of some new love  
whispering about Elizabeth Taylor  
and waking up to a woman in a slip.

Or perhaps  
it's still there  
draped on the back of the door.

A sinuous shadow.

A moan in the dark.

Lesléa Newman

## *A Femme Shops till Her Butch Drops*

Do shop or not to shop? That is the question one lazy Sunday morning when Flash, the cats, and I are lounging around the breakfast table drinking various forms of cream (straight up or with coffee).

"I can't believe you want to go shopping today," Flash says.

I can't believe she can't believe it. Flash knows my fantasy vacation is a week at Mall of America. Flash knows my all-time favorite movie is *Scenes from a Mall*. Flash knows I always want to go shopping.

"But it's a beautiful day," Flash points out the window.

I agree. "It's a beautiful day for shopping."

"But you don't need anything." Flash tries a rational approach.

"Yes I do. I need to shop."

Flash doesn't get it. Butch that she is, Flash doesn't understand a femme's need to run her hands through racks of leather, wool, and silk. Flash gets no thrill from trying on trendy, overpriced, poorly made, age-inappropriate garments she has no intention of buying. Flash finds no joy in smoothing different colors of eyeshadow along the back of her hand with a tiny brush, looking for just the right shade. But I do.

"I'll make you pancakes," I bargain. "I'll do the dishes after." She's not impressed. "I'll let you have supper in front of the TV tonight."

"It's a deal."

An hour later we arrive at the mall, pull into a space, and I am off, racing through the parking lot with Flash in hot pursuit. "Slow down," she pants, grabbing onto the shoulder strap of my purse like it's a horse's rein. "We've got all day."

"No we don't." I keep up my pace. "The mall closes at five o'clock."

"But it's noon."

"My point exactly." I yank open the door to Filene's Basement and rush inside.

Our first stop is the shoe department. "Ooh, look at these." I pick up a pump as Flash groans. "More black shoes? Don't you have, like, seven pairs?"

"No," I say, indignant. I have, like, twenty-seven pairs. I have one-inch heels, two-inch heels, three-inch heels, Cuban heels, platform heels, mules,

slingbacks, and slides. I have black heels with ankle straps, black heels with cut-out toes, black heels with ankle straps *and* cut-out toes. I have black heels of velvet, suede, crushed leather, patent leather, and (though I hate to admit it) man-made materials. Not to mention black clogs, flats, sandals, loafers, moccasins, ballerina slippers, Jellies, and cowgirl boots. Flash is right. I guess I don't really *need* another pair of black shoes.

But these are so cute. They're soft leather miniboots with two-inch heels and a heart-shaped zipper on the side. It's love at first sight, and they fit perfectly. "Are you getting them?" Flash asks.

"I'll have her hold them." I nod toward the salesclerk and Flash shakes her head. I have been known to have dozens of salesclerks in different shops hold things for me for hours. Why? It leaves my hands free, which makes it easier to shop.

We leave the shoe department and pass a rack of pants, where Flash picks up a pair of tan chinos identical to the ones she's wearing. "Should I try these on?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, glad she's getting into the swing of things. We head toward the ladies' fitting room, but get stuck in a huge traffic jam at the Clinique counter.

"What's going on?" Flash asks.

"They're giving out free gift packages. You get a sample lipstick, eye-shadow, comb, body gel, and a cute little carrying case." My voice rises in ecstasy. "And all you have to do is buy thirteen dollars' worth of cosmetics."

"How is that free?" Flash wonders out loud.

I know it is useless to explain. "C'mon," I say, elbowing my way up to the counter. I buy a lip pencil and mascara which I receive along with my free bonus gift in a huge shopping bag.

"Isn't this great?" I am flushed with the excitement of the first purchase. Now the pressure is off; I know I won't go home empty-handed. "Let's go try on your pants."

"Never mind." Flash puts the pants down on a nearby rack. The poor girl is exhausted, but I have just begun to shop.

I drag her across the mall to Steigers, which is about to go out of business. Everything is at least forty percent off. I can barely contain myself. My fingers fly through racks of blouses and blazers at breakneck speed. And then I see something across the room that makes me tremble.

A black sweater. Not just any old black sweater. A beaded black sweater. Made of cashmere. With shoulder pads. A sweater's sweater. A dream of a sweater.

Flash states the obvious. "You have a black sweater."

Now of course I don't have *a* black sweater. I have dozens of black sweaters. I have a scoop neck, a V-neck, a cowl neck, a boat neck, a turtleneck, a crew neck, and an off-the-shoulder. I have a button-down, a backless, one that comes down to my knees, and another that's cropped to show off my navel. I have black sweaters with long sleeves, short sleeves,



three-quarter sleeves and Dolman sleeves. I have black sweaters of wool, cotton, cashmere, mohair, velour, ramie, and acrylic. I even have a beaded black sweater. But not like this one.

"Hold, please." I give Flash my Clinique bag. "This, too." She slips my pocketbook onto her shoulder and groans under its weight as I take off for the dressing room. Once inside, I fling off my blouse and throw it to the floor like some sex-starved maniac. Then I gently ease the sweater off its hanger, slide it onto my body, and turn around to admire my reflection in the mirror. The third button from the top is missing, but that's a minor detail. I am gorgeous.

I leave the dressing room in search of Flash. "What do you think?"

"It's you."

"Really?"

"Of course. Why is one sleeve rolled up?" Flash points to my right arm. I roll down the cuff and hear a tiny *ping* as something hits the ground. "Oh my God," I gasp. "The missing button." Tears fill my eyes. I am unspeakably moved by the kindness of some stranger, no doubt a tried and true shopper like myself, who cared enough to keep sweater and button united so that someone other than herself could completely enjoy the garment. Such an act of selfless goodness, especially in this day and age, momentarily stuns me and convinces me that all is right with the world. So much so that I shush the voice in my head that's telling me to pocket the button, show the sweater's tragic flaw to the salesclerk, and demand another ten percent off.

"Are we done for the day?" Flash asks, unable to hide the hope in her voice as she takes my package.

"Let me just get those shoes." We head back toward Filene's. "They're perfect for this sweater. All I need is a black skirt."

"Don't you have a black skirt?"

I shake my head because of course I don't have *a* black skirt. I have many black skirts. A mini, a maxi, a midi, and a midcalf that's slit halfway up my thigh. A velvet, a rayon, a leather, a wool, and one with three gold buttons going up the side. I also have a black pleated skirt, a skintight skirt, a suede skirt, and a linen skirt that came with a matching jacket.

Of course when we get home I must try on my new sweater and shoes with all these skirts and various black stockings (opaque, mesh, fishnet, sheer, seamed, seamless, lace) while Flash watches a *Laverne and Shirley* rerun on TV. During a commercial I pirouette in front of her. "What do you think?"

"Your seams are crooked."

"Fix them." I hike up my skirt and Flash drops to her knees to check my seams. All of them. Very, very slowly. And carefully. Lucky for us, it's an extremely long commercial.

Hours later Flash and I change into our pajamas and crawl into bed, exhausted but content. Just like any other typical American family after a day at the mall.

## Chrystos

# *I Bought a New Red*

dress to knock her socks off, spent all day looking for just the right combination of sleeve & drape, so I could actually knock all her clothes off She met me at the boat dressed so sharp she cut all the boys to ribbons

Over dinner in a very crowded queer restaurant I teased her by having to catch drops of food with my tongue, staring into her eyes, daring her to lean over & grab my breast or crotch & titillate the faggot waiters She sat back soaking me up, enjoying my teasing tidbits, for all the world not wanting to fuck me ever I knew better as she's kept me on my back all night since we met I began to pout because I wasn't affecting her enough to suit me & she hadn't said a thing about my dress Just then the waiter brought out dessert, a small cake she'd had decorated to say *Beg Me To Fuck You*, with pink roses all around the edge

I laughed so hard I tore my dress a little The waiter smirked I fed her roses from the cake, she licked my fingers so slowly I almost screamed Near us some blazer dykes were very nervous & offended, so naturally she began to make loud sucking noises Laughing, we left them to their girl-scout sex & went dancing, where she kept her hand on my ass & her thigh between my legs even during the fast ones Going home she pulled my thigh-top stockings to my knees & played with me I'd worn no underpants especially for her We were having such a good time she couldn't park & we laughed as she tried a third time & I blew in her ear almost causing a wreck

Then we started doing it in the front seat of her car, awkward with gear knob & wrong angles, until a cop pulled up & said sarcastically through the open window *Do you need some assistance parking, sir?* She flamed as red as my dress & returned to maneuvering the car instead of me

I was so horny I could barely walk in my matching high heels & she held my arm as we crossed to her place, pinching my nipple with her

other hand & smiling her grin of anticipation We necked on the porch to upset her nosy neighbors, who have twice complained about the noise I made coming Then she couldn't get the lock to work & we giggled as I stood with heels in hand, my stockings full of runs & a wet spot on the back of my silk dress almost as wide as my ass The door popped open so suddenly she fell forward & I tumbled after her, gasping I started up the stairs heading for her bed when she caught hold of my pubic hair with her hand & pulled me back onto her until I was kneeling on the stairs as she fucked me from behind & my dress ripped some more as she took me hard, kicking until I was upside down with my head at the door & leg on the banister Heat of her crotch as she came on me, my dress ripping right up the front as we laughed harder

The next morning her roommate said we were disgusting & we grinned with pride The cleaners cannot repair the sweet dress & looked at me very oddly but I went out giggling & made her a pocket handkerchief with it, sewing rolled hems & a discreet message along one edge *PLEASE rip off my dress anytime*

Lesléa Newman

## *Night on the Town*

When I step into my red silk panties and swivel into the matching strapless bra my butch bought me for Valentine's Day

When I slide on my black mesh stockings with toes pointed, sitting on the edge of the bed like some Hollywood movie queen

When I shimmy into my spandex dress that sparkles and turns over the tops of my thighs like a disco ball over a snappy crowd

When I puff on my pink clouds of blush, brush my eyelashes long and lush, smear my lips and nails richer than ruby red

When I step into my sky-high heels, snap on some shiny earrings, and slip seventeen silver bracelets halfway up my arm

When I dab my shoulders and neck, earlobes and wrists, cleavage and thighs with thick, musky perfume

When I curl my hair into ringlets that dip over one eye and bounce off my shoulder like a Clairol girl gone wild

When I turn from the mirror, pick up my purse, and announce to my butch that I'm ready to go

When I see her kick the door shut, hear her declare, "We're not going anywhere, tonight"

When I whine and say, "But we never go out," following her back to the bedroom, my lips in a pout

When I give in and let her have her way with me pretending that wasn't my plan all along

Patricia Dark

## *Underneath It All*

*P*leasure is a woman wearing red,  
who really wants you—  
to feel her passion.

Mystery is a woman wearing black,  
who really wants you—  
to feel her sensuality.

Love is a woman wearing purple,  
who really wants you—  
to feel her heart.

Freedom is a woman wearing nothing,  
who really wants you—  
to feel everything.

Jane Barnes

## *Blooming*

*I* wish you could be here to see my amaryllis  
bloom the first bulb I ever grew the  
first plant I ever had with an exotic name  
the kind you want to say of how am I supposed to  
know what that is? right now it's just  
this single fat green spear like one  
asparagus you remember those asparagus jokes  
I'm sure you'd probably say get that little  
boy weewee out of here and then I'd say back  
so refined but that's my amaryllis soon to be  
a big red trumpet or do I mean strumpet  
you know just like if I bought a femmy red  
dress with ruffles flashy and loud and then  
the amaryllis blooms I bloom and you bloom  
coming back and lifting up my skirt just in time

Jess Wells

## The Dress

So, I'm in the thrift store after work; I'm smudged up with ink and my back hurts from running a printing press all day. Shopping has been mildly successful: I've found a wool sweater from Italy, a shirt for my lover, and a 100 percent cotton bathrobe for myself. As I'm unloading my finds onto the counter for this dyke with a mustache and eye makeup to tally, I look up. There is this dress ... hanging there (my neck freezes in a tilted position) ... an incredible dress.

"Whoa," I say to the dyke, who has seen my mouth open and is grinning while she looks at my tags. "So ... how much is the dress?"

"Twenty-one fifty," she says. "It's a steal, believe me."

I look back at the bathrobe. Well, I'm glad it costs that much: I'm hardly going to spend twenty bucks on a dress.

But I can't take my eyes off it.

It's black. It's a work of art. It's a strapless, knee-length gown with a skirt like a pyramid, layers and layers of black shiny stuff (I don't know what you call it; I know cotton and I know flannel). Anyway, black and then another layer of black, and then gauze and net. Sewn onto the layers, in no kind of pattern, are these gorgeous hot pink poppies made of satin; little ones and big ones glowing in different intensities through the layers — not gaudy, mind you, "just a suggestion," as my mother would say. And then over the top of all of it and up the tight bodice to the breasts, is this black lace.

It's probably too small, I think, and besides, my 100 percent cotton bathrobe and such are all bagged up in front of me. It's time to go.

But instead, I say, "Here, will you keep these a minute?" and push the bag back. "I have to try on that dress."

Well, just then another worker takes the dress down for an older woman who is obviously buying it for someone else and there's a whole crowd of people standing around her because I'm telling you, it's a work of art, this dress. She's holding it up and women are fingering the layers and admiring the stitching. She's definitely decided to buy it.

Suddenly, I'm tapping her on the shoulder. "May I try it on?"

"Certainly, dear, go right ahead," she says, giving me a motherly once-over.

Now, let me tell you very clearly that I am a dyke. I am not a gay lady or a homosexual woman. I am a fucking man-hating dyke. I do not look straight or wear nice-girl makeup or sweet little suits or passable shoes. I am

a fucking spiky dyke. And this noisy dress, rustling even while it's cradled in my arms, is like a foreign object, like nothing I've ever touched before. I strip off my tank top, my sweat pants, fuzzy crew socks, and high-top Adidas. It probably won't fit, I think.

I slip it onto my naked body. I zip it up the back, very, very slowly. It's going to catch somewhere, this dress isn't really for me, I'm thinking.

It zips. To the top. And it's incredible, because that slinky material is lying in folds across my ass and I can feel the air rushing up to my cunt. There are these stays in the bodice that touch my ribs like fingers and I can feel the air coming down around my breasts, my breasts that touch against the sides of this lacy thing, pull away and then touch it again. I turn a circle and the layers fan out and slide across my ass; it feels like the tease of lifting the sheets up and laying them down again. What a dress. The top of me feels totally naked, even though I know it's not, and my cunt feels buried beneath this black lace, ass feeling a fabric that only it knows about. My cunt, in the middle of Seventeen Reasons Why Thrift Store, is getting totally juiced out.

Oh Goddess, I'm thinking, I could wear it to a Sleaze Dance, with fingerless black gloves and big ol' chains, nasty, nasty makeup and spike heels. I could surprise my lover with it. I would drop her off at the door, tell her it was bad luck to see my costume first or some such excuse, and she would complain and ask questions and try to have things her way as usual, but I would insist.

Then, about half an hour later, when I was sure she had made the rounds and was standing with a beer and two or three friends, I would come in. Not, repeat *not*, like a helpless femmebot. Like a bad-ass, no-games, knows-her-mind-and-will-tell-you-too femme. First I would just stand there, and let her wonder. Maybe I would just stand there altogether, and let her come to me. Or maybe, while all the heads were turning (because of the dress, now, I'm not fooling myself) I would stride across the dance floor in a beeline for that green-eyed woman I love, so that everyone would see who the one in that black dress was going to fuck tonight; everyone would see her frozen in her tracks, exposed, just like me. Standing in the thrift store dressing room, I can see her squirming. It's making my blood sing.

Now, I am one of those lesbians, who, unfortunately, was not born a lesbian; I didn't know at age five that I was queer. I spent (totally regrettable) years as a heterosexual, and it made me very uncomfortable with any amount of beauty I might have. I pull the dressing room curtain tighter around the door. Goddess, don't let anyone see me. As a straight girl, I was not beautiful, I was "intelligent." I didn't look hot, I looked "serious." Lace was out of the question; femmes are belittled, thought to be weak, stupid, and forget it, honey, that isn't me. This is a dress I wouldn't even have thought of wearing when I was straight.

But now it's safe. My lover isn't going to think me incompetent if I dress a little femmy, I think, fingering the strange layers hanging off my waist. Now it's possible to embrace ... well, more of my ... beauty. And this dress



is the hidden side of me. I know this in the dressing room from the flush on my face. The erotic power of this dress doesn't feel anything like the terrible memories I have of wearing skirts in the straight world. The air coming up my legs doesn't tell me that I'm exposed and unprotected in a world of men, but that in my safe world of sex with women, I choose at this moment to make myself vulnerable to my lover.

I don't remember taking the dress off; the next thing I know, I'm climbing back into my sweat pants and begging the woman, is she sure she wants to buy it? She is, and she does.

Then I'm striding across Valencia Street toward the gym to lift weights and practice my boxing. Only as a lesbian, I think: one minute covered in lace and nearly coming in a dressing room, the next minute charging down the street toward the punching bag.

On a folding chair in the women's locker room, staring at the tips of my high-tops and trying to calm my shaking hands, I'm amazed at how much I want this dress. I'm kicking myself for not insisting on buying it. I suppose if I hadn't been so struck with the dress's effect on me, I would have argued with the woman or beat her to the cash register. Or maybe I was thinking, "This thing is so powerful, take it away from me, I don't want to deal with it." Or maybe, "This thing is so beautiful, I don't deserve it." Like a first kiss, no dress will ever be quite the same as this one. My hands are not aquiver, or trembling even. I'm out-and-out shaking with the way I felt in that dress. Naked. Powerful. Vulnerable. In fact, so vulnerable that I think perhaps the scenario would not be me, striding across the floor like a tough femme top, but me — so raw that I would arrive at this imaginary dance at my lover's side and hold onto her arm, both of us aroused by my exhibition.

I move into the gym to the big bag. I think about all that black lace. As I cover my knuckles, entwine my fingers with the wide Everlast fighter's wraps, take a stance, pull one fist to my face, the other ready for the punch, I just shake my head and think, "Oooh, that dress."



*Workout*

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Morgan Gwenwald

Heather Hadlock

## Femmes' Day Out

Kelly turns twenty-five today, and my present to her will be a haircut at our favorite salon in the city. She knocks at my door, right on time, and I invite her in. She pays her respects to all three of the cats, who surge around her ankles to musk her shoes and the hem of her chiffon skirt. She does a little pirouette to show off the Chanel jacket she picked up at a flea market last weekend for twenty-five dollars — a bottle-green velvet number with bronze buttons that's cut to make her waist look no bigger than the span of my hands. I admire her at some length, and she gives an approving nod to my ensemble: shiny black boots, white ruffled shirt, and new crushed-velvet leggings.

"Teal," she comments. "What a surprise." I shrug, embarrassed: I can't resist teal. I'm trying to branch out, buy clothes in other colors, but I just gravitate toward it. I have to be careful when I'm getting dressed these days, because at five feet ten, it's all too easy for me to look like the Jolly Green Giant.

"You look great," she smiles. "And all I need is a Chanel haircut to go with this jacket. Are you ready?"

"I've been ready for days. Let's go," I reply. She's wearing a little extra makeup today, and that makes me laugh, because I am, too.

We always dress up for our pilgrimages to Russ. It's a bimonthly dose of glamour; we drive for an hour and deliver ourselves into Russ's healing hands. It costs fifty bucks, but as Kelly says, that's a small price to pay for self-esteem. It's cheaper than therapy, and at the end of a session not only do we feel empowered, we have terrific hair.

In the car, we pop the tabs on our soda cans and sing along with k.d. lang. "Isn't it amazing?" I muse aloud. "Jody says she doesn't see the fun of dressing up and going for expensive haircuts." My girlfriend, Jody, is proud of the James Dean cut she gets from our local barber and the speed with which she can slick it into place each morning. She always laughs at me when I stand in front of the mirror wailing about my bad-hair days.

"That's because Jody's not a femme," says Kelly, stating the obvious. "And remember how baffled you were when she spent over a hundred dollars on that beat-up suede hat last summer in New Mexico, just because a real live cowgirl had worn it to win the bronco-busting event in that all-women's rodeo?"

"That's true," I chuckle. "Different priorities, I guess."

The salon where Russ presides is a remodeled brownstone in downtown Philadelphia. Kelly finds a parking place and we saunter up the street, ignoring the businessmen hurrying past and the cabbies who eye us from their stations along the curb. We climb three stone steps to the oak door with its brass doorknob, and through the smoked glass oval window, the interior gleams softly, hung with dark green plants and wall-length mirrors. I sigh contentedly, just to be walking inside.

The receptionist greets us in a crisp British accent. "You're here for Russ?" she says, consulting a leather-bound appointment book. "Ah, yes. Take your coats downstairs, please, he's almost ready for you." Downstairs is a coat closet and a row of tiny dressing rooms. An attendant hands me a black silk robe, which I take into a cubicle. I shrug my shirt off and wrap myself in the robe, which whispers against my bare skin. I take off my long earrings, too, and tuck them into my wallet.

Kelly peers in and catches me touching up my lipstick. She gives me a wry look. I hasten to explain: "Without it, I'll look like a drowned corpse in the mirror while he cuts my hair!"

"Can I have some?" she says, laughing, and I hand her the tube. It's a new shade called "Honey Ginger." (I love the sensuality of cosmetic names.) It comes in a beauty bonus gift, where you spend fourteen dollars on one product and they give you a cute little box of other things along with it. There were two years of my life, right after I came out in college, when I didn't loiter at department store cosmetic counters; after all, wasn't makeup oppressive? Makeup was for attracting men, a sell-out to patriarchal consumer culture. I retired my skirts and stockings to the back of the closet, stashed my lotions and scented oils in a box under the sink, and concentrated on achieving a lesbian aesthetic.

But the women's community had its own standards of beauty, and I felt oppressed there, too. You were supposed to look wiry and athletic, but my women's studies classes couldn't teach me hand-eye coordination. My favorite position on the softball field is lolling in the bleachers with a cold beer. Brimming over with political awareness, my college friends and I told each other that looks didn't matter, yet we all tacitly strove to be that androgynous ideal: the short-haired woman with men's jeans hanging from her narrow hips and a t-shirt draped loosely across her flat, boyish chest. Unfortunately, my hips and chest were neither flat nor narrow, and that uniform made me look like a suburban housewife getting ready to clean her garage.

I struggled with this standard until I graduated and had to go back to makeup and heels for a temp job at an advertising agency. It was a secret thrill to be in clothes that didn't make me feel like a frump, but how would I meet women in straight drag? Fortunately, it wasn't a problem. My very first week in the office, I sensed one of our female clients checking me out during a meeting. I adjusted the neckline of my silk blouse to show a little more cleavage, and when she caught my eye, I winked. After the meeting she

cornered me and demanded that I have a drink with her. That woman didn't last long, and neither did the job, but I had discovered femme, and I never looked back.

Kelly clears her throat impatiently and snaps me back to the present. "Hello? Are you in there? Here's your lipstick," she says, handing it back to me.

"Lost in thought," I shrug, and tuck the lipstick back in my coat pocket. Suitably brightened, we head upstairs.

The shampoo girl leads me to a black leather recliner, and positions my head over her gleaming porcelain sink.

"Great leggings," she remarks, and I smile and close my eyes as warm water gushes over my head. Her strong fingers work every inch of my scalp, squeezing herb-scented lather through my hair. The tension in my neck and shoulders melts and flows right down the drain. When I open my eyes I can see the plump curve of her breast, and behind her a wooden cabinet with balsams and unguents arranged in neat rows. The lights in the stucco ceiling cast a golden glow.

She rinses the lather away and wraps a plush, scented towel around my head.

"Russ will see you now."

Russ's station is by the picture window, with a view of the park across the street. I watch the pigeons and passersby as he settles me into his chair, which is luxurious, like a chrome-and-leather reclining throne. Russ, as always, is dressed entirely in black. He pads back and forth behind me on soft, silent shoes. His dark hair waves back from his slim, poetic face.

"What are we doing today?" he asks, running his pale fingers through my wet hair, tilting my face gently this way and that.

"Make me fabulous," I tell him lightly. He assesses me for another minute, muttering arcana about volume and texture and shattered perimeters, but I'm not paying any attention. I'm drifting off under a nylon sheet that drapes me like a cocoon, the warm weight of the towel hugging my shoulders.

Russ's silver shears click decisively around my ears as he trims away with unassailable confidence. I trust him utterly. I watch with interest as he goes into a two-handed maneuver, drawing my forelock up with a fine-toothed comb and clipping some strands shorter than others.

"This is a volumizing technique," he explains solemnly. I nod, to show that I approve.

All too soon, he's finished with me. He caresses my hair with the round brush and the blow-dryer, shaping it with soft, firm gestures. I look in the mirror at my rosy cheeks and lips, my eyes shining gratefully under a gleaming cap of tousled brown hair. I am fabulous, I decide.

Kelly drifts over in her robe, her newly washed hair dripping around her shoulders.

"*Bella, bellissima!*" she exclaims, clapping her hands. She reaches out and ruffles me carefully. "Honey, you're gorgeous."

"Your turn now," I beam. A white-clad shampoo boy with cropped blond hair and a single gold earring is watching us approvingly, so I wink at him as Kelly takes her place in the chair.

"Great haircut," he murmurs as I pass him on my way back to the dressing rooms. "Can I get you something?" he lisps in a fluty voice. "Coffee?"

I nod graciously. "Coffee would be wonderful, thank you."

When I come back upstairs in my ruffled shirt, earrings gleaming in my newly exposed ears, he's waiting with a steaming mug.

"Girlfriend, you look like a supermodel," he tells me earnestly. The receptionist seconds him. "Lovely," she comments.

All this admiration makes me blush as I settle into an overstuffed armchair in the lobby. I love it. It reminds me of the night I met Jody. It was summer, three years ago, and I was out with friends at a gay club where I'd never been before. I was the only woman there in a dress. I had drifted through the crowd of women clad in baggy jeans and polo shirts, feeling like a traitor to the lesbian nation in my miniskirt and lipstick. Every woman but me seemed to sport the same shaggy bi-level haircut and discreet little gold earrings. *I must look like a goddamn drag queen*, I'd thought to myself wryly. *Or worse still, some kind of straight infiltrator.*

In that moment I felt somebody's eyes on me. The lesbian fashion police? No. It was a slim woman leaning against the far wall, looking as defiantly gendered in her neatly pressed button-down shirt and narrow tie as I did. My self-consciousness melted to a warm glow in the heat of her gaze. I couldn't say how it happened, but we ended up on the dance floor for a slow song. When I found that she could lead in spite of being three inches shorter than me, I was lost.

"I always wanted to meet me a girl who could do it backwards and in high heels," she murmured to me as we circled around the floor.

"Me and Ginger Rogers," I whispered into her sleek blonde hair. That was the beginning of an intricate dance that's gone on for two years now; a dance of playfulness and irony and the deep joy that comes when you find what you didn't even know you were looking for.

I'm still daydreaming about Jody when Kelly makes a grand entrance in the lobby, auburn hair rippling smoothly against the sides of her face.

"Do you like it?" she says coyly.

"It's wonderful," I tell her. "That forties' look really works for you." She tosses her curls theatrically and curtsies, then reaches out to pat my hair again. The shampoo boy and a slickly handsome hairdresser are watching us from across the room, and they give each other knowing looks when I tell the receptionist that I'll pay for both haircuts. Mm-hmm, their eyebrows seem to say, family. I write the check without even wincing while Kelly makes the rounds, distributing tips to Russ and the woman who shampooed us.

Waving to everybody, we leave the salon. For the boys' benefit, I drape my arm around Kelly's shoulders.

"Bye-bye," they call. "Come again!" Russ waves from the picture window as we start down the sidewalk.

We pause before a big window down the block to admire each other.

"You know," Kelly comments. "I think those boys thought you were my girlfriend."

I grin at her. "I won't tell if you won't."

"I could get into this urban lipstick lifestyle," Kelly sighs as we amble past shop windows displaying imported jewelry and glittery vintage dresses. We pick a Middle Eastern restaurant and seat ourselves at the bar.

"We'll have the hummus and falafel platter and two Rolling Rocks," she tells the bartender. He brings us two dripping green bottles and she takes a long swig of hers. I hesitate, then raise one finger to get his attention again.

"Could I have a glass for this, please?" I ask him sweetly.

Kelly snickers. "Such a belle."

"You're the one with the marcel wave," I remind her.

The bartender sets a tumbler down in front of me and I pour my beer into it. Kelly raises her bottle in a toast.

"Here's to lesbian chic," she declares. We salute each other — and our haircuts — in the mirror above the bar.

*A Latina Combat Femme,  
Her Shoes, and  
Her Ensuing Cultural Identity*

*M*y big feet have always pleased me. By big I mean the size of cruise ships. By pleased I mean that they are like a fun brain. Each brightly painted toe senses and writhes in its universe. I prefer my feet bare.

When I came out as a lesbian among gringas, a foot-related problem I had cleared up. I could never find normal women's shoes to fit my cruise ships. Besides, they're too wide at the front, too narrow at the heel, and one foot is bigger than the other. I dealt with my limited alternatives in a stigmatized way. Then I noticed the North American dyke foot style. They didn't wear normal women's shoes!

I emulated northern Florida lesbian foot gear and bought dignity in the process. I got Birkenstocks, athletic shoes, and combatlike boots. Adding my own flair, I dressed up with men's low-cut soft black leather boots zippered on the side and wore them with wide, flowered, Colombian, ranch-style skirts. My shoes reinforced my butchness but conflicted with the plastic flowers in my long hair and the painted pink on my lips. It was a contradiction my feet and I could live with.

Things got complicated foot-wise when I moved back to Miami and reintegrated with Latin culture. My identification as a combat femme within a Latina lesbian context didn't cut it, especially since the focus became the femme. Birkenstocks were horrid, sneakers were juvenile, and combat boots were *una exageracion*. I became lovers with a *macha cubana* who loves my lipstick and detests my footwear. We go to social events where normal women's shoes are the norm.

High heels, lipstick lesbians, and traditional butches play hardball here. Although there are a few androgynes, many Latinas deck out, accentuating roles. I found myself in a league where a gringa adaptation no longer fit. Daily furtive foot glances from my lover became a measure of my own disgust with the state of my cruise ships. I combed the yellow pages and interviewed big-footed women who crossed my path, begging for the knowledge that would properly place me under femme control.



I found out about a store that had big shoes for women. It was an hour away and my lover and I talked about going together for weeks, as if we were planning a long trip. I was afraid that I wouldn't even find any shoes there, because they only went up to a size thirteen. Or that they would be fuddy-duddy like the typical polyester clothes available to fat women. Or that I would be ripped off and humiliated and left to ponder a role reversal. If I couldn't find femme shoes, I would have to find a femme and kiss the butch who swooned me good-bye. Or I could go back to playing with gringas and drop this whole concern. I didn't want to do either. I wanted to play hardball like the combat femme I am.

One afternoon we headed to the big shoe boutique in the sky. It was full of normal women's shoes. They were more expensive than usual, but then it's unusual to have a selection. I was stunned to discover that my cruise ships, enlarged by my mind's eye, weren't even a size twelve. I found out that, due to a lifetime of never wearing women's shoes, my spread-out foot couldn't house many of them. Still, I had a few choices. I strutted for my lover, seeking approval accentuated with "*mi amor*." She liked the clear vinyl, black-tipped heels that smushed my toes. We settled on black, sequined, low pumps; dressy, golden, open-toed sandals; and casual, white, woven flats. At the last minute I couldn't resist a pair of pointed, red-heeled Zodiac boots with fringes on the side. I walked out of there like a cruise ship that stumbled and became a forty-foot yacht.

In a way, this gringa-Latina-foot connection seems ridiculous. But my fine-tuned cultural gauge clicks on as I embark on an unheralded liberation. Shoes are no longer a determining factor in my sexual, cultural, or gender identification. And I still prefer my feet bare.



*Maria and Margarita at Play in Miami Beach*

tatiana de la tierra

Jess Wells

## *Shopping for a Femme Definition*

I am shopping in that listless way you shop when you have nothing to buy. When the racks, the tags, the cut of the collar, and the tucks at the waistline are distractions for questions in your life. Today, these questions for me are about butch, femme, fish, broken hearts, and codependency.

The very fact that I am shopping sets my mind to rest that I am a dyed-in-the-wool femme. Every femme I know considers shopping a game of skill and a type of therapy. In counterpoint, I need not even mention the dreadful way butches shop, unless it is for appliances or stereo gear. Every butch I know shops only from necessity and would rather buy another item of exactly the same brand, make, and cut that they bought the last time than ever browse for something different or new.

On the other hand, I have a friend who is new to the concepts of butch-femme and is quite a middle-of-the-road type we call a "fish." She proudly proclaims that she is a butch who loves to shop. "A butch who shops!" a dear femme friend squeals. "Clone her!"

So as I sit with an espresso on the balcony of the food court watching the crowds below me, I know that definitions of butch and femme are, in each of our cases, a mixed bag of goodies like the shopping bag beside me. Every combination is unique, and every combination will contain an odd assortment of things that some would consider butch and some would consider femme.

"I'm a femme but my girlfriend is even more femme: she's completely useless around the VCR," a friend exclaimed, and I recount my own abilities with a Makita cordless screw gun.

"Well, I just don't believe in butch-femme," she continues. "Butches are so controlling. They like to take over. I just get into too many power struggles with butches." I dance all over the explanations of dominant femmes and submissive butches, but she is still not convinced.

Despite so many people's refusal to embrace the concepts of butch and femme as additional grist for the mill, I'm a great believer in my understanding of myself as a femme, aren't I? I wonder today. I had been safely ensconced in a long-term relationship with a butch who believed in it as well. It all seemed very clear: she kept the cars in good order, I was indispensable

for wardrobe planning. Then the relationship ended and despite the fact that my ex-lover has been a butch for decades, she's claiming to be making plans to find someone less femme. I laugh in disbelief, but I wonder, and my questioning surprises me.

Don't I still believe that a femme is more frequently a woman who was raised as a girl while a butch will more often recount memories of being a tomboy? Don't I still believe that a femme will pamper a sad face with favorite foods and little presents, while a butch will silently set about to repair something? Aren't I still convinced that butches are simply more reticent about their emotions and that a butch in a dress is a sacrilege to both the dress and the butch?

I was certain about femme identity, until my ex-lover started talking about the polarization of our relationship. Had I been doting because I'm a femme or a codependent? Do I like my women strong and silent because I can't cope with equality? Do I wield the indirect femme power of motivation and manipulation, and then nag because I'm too frightened of my own power to be direct? If I agree with my ex-lover about one thing, it would be about polarization. She thought she was protecting me and I thought I was pampering her. Instead, she had become the boss and had begun to think of me as a foolish child. I grew to see her as a grumpy parent whose wrath was to be avoided at all costs. Not exactly the dynamics for love, sex, and romance. Now I sit with a broken heart and plead with her to let people need her less, so they can love her more.

If this relationship didn't work, my heart says, then what is a relationship and what is love, and how on earth does butch and femme play into it all? I feel very lost, like a woman without a country. I don't know what my language is, how my transit papers should read, where I could call home.

Even femme drag has taken a rather sorrowful tone. The corporate version of femme drag got me into Silicon Valley and that was good for my pocketbook and long-term employment options, but it also took the joy out of femme drag. I used to think it was a sexy parody: lace dresses with big boots. Tight knit dresses strained by a lesbian's confident gait. I thought it would be a joy to wear garb like that to the office. For a while I went to work with my hair very short — a lesbo flattop — no makeup, but in suits with short skirts. I dared the world to figure it out. Then the shorter my hair got, the more makeup I wore. I was trying to "buy permission" for my hair by wearing eyeliner. Now that I'm nearly forty, I'm simply not pert enough to get away with things that are harsh or unbecoming — like razor-short hair with stripes and safety pins for earrings. Then I discovered even my punk-gone-New Wave look was starting to suffer. When we were vacationing in Michigan, my ex-lover exclaimed that lesbians tend to look more butch the older they get. I told her that femme drag is just too much work after a while. I used to wear outrageous jewelry and scarves with my suits, then just the jewelry, and now it's a chore to even get me to press my blouses. My internal reluctance at being an executive is showing all over my collar and sleeves.

When the weekends come, I wear jumpsuits with no underwear, and on Saturday can be seen running the dog with mascara still smeared under my eyes. Saturday night I just don't go to the type of places that used to put me in torn lace dresses with boots.

So here I am: tired, nearly forty with the joke of corporate drag that's been told so many times it isn't funny anymore. But I'm still a femme, and I know that I would identify as a femme even if I were a sporty gal in L.L. Bean attire, or age eighty-five and braless on the weekend. Femme is not attire, not something I can slip into this shopping bag. And shopping is not the sole purview of femmes, says my friend the fish. So femme attire and shopping fall into the category of confusing things in my life that are like my divorce. I can be certain that I am no longer married, but I cannot really explain why. Something about codependence, her anger, and my wanting a child. Just like femme is something about dresses, emotions, and displays of caring.

And just to make matters more confusing, I've met this blonde who wears lipstick. She's a femme, so the blonde and I are friends, or so I thought. It's the only category available for two femmes, isn't it? Not that it's a second choice: there's something very powerful about femme friends: Lucy and Ethel; Laverne and Shirley. It is an intimate, almost conspiratorial closeness. You tell a femme friend absolutely everything. Gossip is a form of bonding. You see, if men are taught the manliness of achievement, women are taught the womanliness of life's mysteries: unraveling them, guarding them, participating in them. It is our due and our duty to guard the mysteries of childbirth, of seduction, of love and communication. As femmes, then, rooted in the feminine, we are worshipers of the mysterious. So when I say gossip is a form of bonding, I mean that femmes bond by revealing the unseen, whether it's emotions or the true facts of hair color.

Then one evening, the lipstick blonde said she could prove that she wasn't a femme because she has always been drawn to women who were more femme than herself. She put her hand on my back to steer me through a crowded street and I found myself getting turned on. Would I fall into that category? I wondered hopefully. I wanted to snuggle into the crook of her arm. I felt protected. Suddenly, she didn't seem so femme anymore. Was that part of the definitions, then: a femme revels in the feeling of being protected and a butch is thrilled with the act of protecting? I started questioning the category in which I'd put the lipstick blonde. A butch friend of ours explained over dinner that butch-femme is a matter of sexual surrender. Then I'm a dominant femme, the lipstick blonde proclaimed. I tell the butch friend that I don't think butch-femme is about sex at all. It's about emotion. She laughs and tells me that of course I feel that way: I'm a femme. Either way, I could certainly see myself surrendering to this tall thin blonde with the lipstick, even if she is a femme.

Or maybe *because* she is a femme. It wouldn't be a tragedy to be with a woman who deals with her emotions flat out, like emotions, not like hidden

agendas ("I've fixed the sink," a butch says, meaning, "I'm feeling tenderly toward you") or something to be ferreted out like the stickers in the bottom of the cereal box ("Nothing's bothering me," says the butch through a drunken haze, "I'm fine.>").

On the other hand, the lipstick gal and I don't seem to have gotten very far and I wonder if maybe her concept of dominance does not include the tendency to make the first move like a real butch. (One of the most devastating pieces of news I've heard in years is that the vast majority of butches are passive in bed. Could that be true? Please Goddess, make it not be so.) Will we wind up — as I have been known to say before — two dancers, neither of whom leads, and so dancing very little?

The flirtation was joyous and the conversations were wild, until one evening when I got tickets to the opera. Facing each other over a lovely dinner, both of us confessed we had spent hours choosing something to wear. Both of us were wearing our finest.

"Tremendous earrings," I said, eyeing the big beaded and silver concoctions on her ears. And at that moment, the flirtation was over. You see, if I had been a butch, she would have held her head just so, maybe cocked it slightly to the side, and given me a little smile, all designed to add to the mystery. If I were a femme that she wasn't interested in, she would have replied in a heartbeat with something like:

"Oh, these? Made them myself out of an old sweater. Really easy. Buttons and Super Glue. Don't breathe a word."

Mystery unraveled, secret shared and secured.

But we're neither of those pairs, and so what ensued was an incredibly long silence. Quickly then, both of us bestowed compliments. But it wasn't the same. Both of us were vying for the role of the precious decorative bauble, but no one found our display of finery bold and intriguing. Neither of us was the subject of adoration. There was no butch to find us alluring.

Soon we agreed that the possibility of romance was not in the stars for us and I got a phone call from my lipstick blonde, exclaiming over a new lover. Her lover was very young, with a shaved head and big boots, a Generation X gal who spoke in terse sentences and drove a bike. A butch, you mean, I replied with irritation, and my blonde agreed. So much for her disbelief in categories.

Today, I finish my coffee and pick up my shopping bag, a jumble like the rest of my life when it comes to love, relationships, butches, and femme friends. I am a devoted shopper, though, scouring the racks for the baubles, the veils, the implements of mystery and seduction. These are gifts of tender nurturance I give myself while shopping for a self-definition.

PART IV

*How Lovely to  
Be a Woman*

Talin Seta Shahinian

*How to Tell  
If You're a Femme  
An Easy Quiz*

*A*nswer the following questions with a yes or no:

1. Do you spend inordinate amounts of time and money searching for the perfect red lipstick?
2. Having finally found the perfect red lipstick, do you then spend inordinate amounts of time and money searching for the nail polish to match?
3. Do you call your lover in to deal with the big black bug on the wall?
4. Is one of your most common utterances "Honey, could you please take out the garbage?"
5. Is your girlfriend incredulous when you buy yet another pair of black shoes, even when you patiently explain to her that they're all different styles?
6. Can you have a good time at the local drugstore for hours, while your lover is out of there in five minutes after buying mouthwash and deodorant, and waiting outside wondering what you could possibly be doing in there?
7. Do you know how to do a French manicure?
8. Do you keep your nails as long as you can without hurting your lover?
9. Do you believe there's no such thing as too much lingerie?
10. Do you go shopping even if you have nothing in particular to buy, and try on outfits you could never afford just to see how good you look in them?
11. Do you actually *like* dresses?
12. Do you have a special place where you hang all your earrings?
13. Do you love having long hair and wearing makeup?
14. Have you been perfecting your wiggle ever since sixth grade?



Scoring: Give yourself one point for every *yes*.

- 10–14: A Femme's Femme
- 5–9: An Androgynous Femme
- 1–4: A Butchy Femme
- 0: Sorry, You're Not a Femme

While this test is far from conclusive, and you don't have to have any of these attributes to be a femme, if you happen to recognize yourself in any of them you probably are, and if that's the case, celebrate!

Raven (Heather) Tompkins

## *Black Lace and Red Satin*

At one time I wanted to be a femme. At least, I thought I wanted to be what I thought a femme was. Coming out on the tail of the lesbian androgyny movement, femmes seemed the epitome of what a lesbian was supposed to be. Their femininity was obvious. They were in no danger of accusations of wanting to be men. When I compared my jumbled insides to their outsides, they were perfect and I fell far short. Femmes looked like socially acceptable women who happened to love other women. By those societal standards I felt neither male nor female, but like something entirely other and out of place. So I thought I wanted to be a femme. But a woman who feels like an adolescent boy when she puts on a dress is not a femme.

If I'd had the courage at that time to talk to a femme, I would have learned how skewed my perceptions were. I imagine this conversation: my nineteen-year-old, beatnik, baby-butch self having coffee with an older femme. A femme I'd watched in the bar for weeks before I'd gotten up the courage to ask her out for coffee.

Her dark hair would be cut close to accentuate the slope of her neck, or cascading across her shoulders so the nape of the neck was only a promise. She'd have a solid body with full curves. My eyes would follow the line of her hips in a straight-cut, black, knee-length skirt. Black stockings would caress her muscular calves, leading the eye down to a pair of black leather four-inch pumps. She would look me right in the eye as I sprawled across a wooden chair smoking furiously, and say, "But you're a butch. Learn to love it!"

The fated conversation never happened outside my head. But because there are writers like Lee Lynch and Leslie Feinberg, and books like *The Well of Loneliness* and *The Persistent Desire*, I did learn. I learned to love being butch, and I learned about butch-femme: the relationship and interplay between the two. I learned that I have a history and that butch-femme is a wondrous relationship and a balance of complements as old as yin and yang.

The more I talk to femmes and listen to their stories, the more my respect for them grows. On May 23, 1993, in a commitment ceremony, I stood in front of twenty friends and pledged my respect, love, and support for life to K'ai, a high femme. She helped me select the purple silk shirt and black leather tie I wore in the ceremony. I went with her to the fabric store to pick out the silver and black lamé that became the shirt she wore. The silver

elliptical shapes outlined in black shimmered in the light, like the skin of some mythical creature. K'ai made the shirt herself. It was gorgeous; sleeveless and close-fitting with a Roman style drape at the neck. The shirt tucked into a pair of black jodhpur pants, loose-fitting above the knee and pulled tight down the calves by three silver buckles. Until I slipped the silver band on her ring finger, the only jewelry K'ai wore was a pair of silver filigree, crescent moon earrings. Her feet were bare like mine. Our ceremony was held outdoors and K'ai radiated in the sunlight. There is nothing in this world as wondrous, intriguing, and sensual as a femme!

Walking through life with K'ai has given me the opportunity to see the assumptions that are made about femmes. K'ai is a dancer. For a while she performed with a lesbian lip-sync group. At rehearsal one night, a butch dancer who'd forgotten her hairbrush said to K'ai, "You must have a brush. Can I borrow it?" K'ai has a James Dean haircut. She has no use for a brush and doesn't own one. Yet because she's a femme, it's expected that she carries one.

This is a small incident but indicative of a larger attitude that both K'ai and I find infuriating. Many times I've heard butch women criticize femmes for their attention to appearance, makeup, and nail polish. Funny how these same butches are the first in line to pick up any femme who finds herself unattached.

There is an unspoken attitude that butch is somehow better than femme; that femmes are not real lesbians. When I was uncomfortable with myself as a butch, I criticized femmes. I mocked their makeup, heels, and anything I thought made them look like straight women. The truth is, I was jealous of something they had and I didn't. Femmes know how to integrate the aspects of being a woman that are hardest for me. They know how to be soft, tender, gentle, and compassionate without compromising their strength or identity as lesbians. I was terrified of my own soft spots. I hadn't yet learned that gentleness provides flexibility which brings true strength.

K'ai is full of surprises. She is a striking woman; sculptured face, long lashes, and beautiful soft curves. She is very bright and can more than hold her own in any conversation. She turns heads when we go out and I love it! It amuses me to see men watch her. They look, having no clue as to how uninterested she is. So it makes me laugh: I laugh, feeling both honored and proud that she is with me.

I love getting dressed up to go out with K'ai. She helps me pick out a shirt and knot my tie. I get to watch her put on makeup, her paint. She wears the brown eyeliner she bought because I like the way it accentuates her dark eyes. I sit on our bed smiling as I watch her dust light powder with glitter in it across her shoulders and the tops of her breasts. I like the way the tiny mica chips catch the light. Then comes the lingerie. Lingerie is a world unto itself, which K'ai introduced to me. Garter belts, lace, fishnet stockings, G-strings, and merry widows. I love the texture of silk and satin under my fingertips. I love how they look on K'ai and the way it makes her feel to wear them.

Last week I took K'ai out to the best Italian restaurant in town for her birthday. She let me pick out the lingerie for the occasion. As I fastened the dozen or so hooks on her red satin bustier I remembered the first time she wore it — on our honeymoon. Next came a pair of black lace, string-bikini underwear followed by black lace stockings. Over this K'ai pulled on a tight-fitting black cashmere sweater. The black leather skirt I bought her for Christmas and four-inch black pumps completed the outfit. She painted her nails candy apple red, or "come fuck me" red, as we refer to it.

K'ai's passion for lingerie and shoes borders on a fetish. I'm not much into shopping but for either of these items I'll gladly go along. Frederick's of Hollywood and Victoria's Secret are now two of my favorite stores. Frederick's in particular because the closest one is an hour away. Somehow the distance makes the excursion all the more enticing. I follow K'ai through the racks fingering lace, satin, net, and ribbons. My head paints pictures of how she'd look in everything I touch. I love to stand in the dressing room and watch her try things on.

A couple of stores down from Frederick's is the Wild Pair, home of killer shoes. I was with K'ai when she bought the five-inch black pumps with ankle straps and gold-tipped heels. The red heels were a birthday present to herself and a surprise to me. I love the way pumps sculpt the muscles in her calves and the way she takes my arm when she walks in them.

When we go dancing, people watch us. Because we are so obviously a butch-femme couple, because we dance dirty, but mostly because K'ai dances. I fall into my own slow rhythm and she dances circles around me.

She is studying to be a mechanic and has a day job in a garage that does ten-minute oil changes. I am so proud of her for not letting fear and stereotypes about what femmes do prevent her from pursuing a dream. She is as much femme in her brown mechanics uniform as in her black cocktail dress. Competence has its own sensuality. When she takes the car in for work, male mechanics frequently size her up and misjudge her. They see a striking woman in cowboy boots and assume she knows nothing about the car. It tickles me to watch them silently choke on their assumptions as she talks circles around them.

It is not K'ai's body that I fell in love with, but her strength, creativity, and soul. A pretty face and nice body are one-dimensional things without spirit. I'm attracted to deep rivers, not cardboard cutouts. K'ai is an ocean. Time after time I've watched her face her obstacles and conquer them. Time after time she's stood next to me as I've wrestled my own monsters. We grow together. I love her sense of adventure, her willingness to do new things and discuss ideas. K'ai is the only woman who's given me flowers, drawn me pictures, and written poetry for me. All this and she makes me laugh, too!

Thank you, K'ai, for being your beautiful, radiant, flamboyant femme self and for choosing to walk through this world with me. I love you.

Lois Fine

## Ode to the Femme Mystique

*For Carol*

Would that I could add those hours to my life  
Spent pondering the femme mystique in all of its manifestations  
For surely then I would live to be a ripe old butch.

Hear me now that this mystique casts its charms on many levels  
From the sublime to the spirit  
From the purest physical engagement to the deepest matter of the heart.

For it is with a beckoning finger that my femme has called  
And once so am I not held fast to heed her  
For though my mind may say what  
Yet my body brings me forth.

To stand outside her door full of all smells sweet and heavy  
And when asked the simplest question to lose sense of even my name.  
As when holding me with her potent eyes  
Or smiling at me in the slowest of satisfaction  
Can I be expected to know my own thoughts — although what would  
they be  
But that there is no place I would more like to find myself.

And such is the fate of the butch perplexed  
Left to wonder openly at how a resolve that seemed of steel  
Could melt under her soft and summoning touch.  
(For even those butches among us proud and protective of their selves and  
their scars, still might  
they let their knowing femmes touch them in places some would say had  
turned to stone.)

For the femme mystique has prompted butches to perform  
Unheard acts of ardour  
Untold feats of physical accomplishment which the bedroom walls  
Have begged to divulge

Unrecorded tales of brave and daring courage  
In manner of speaking and ways of dress.

So take heed ye butches out there  
That you may know her when she calls.  
Your femme will have this mystique in her favour  
Yours but to surrender.

Theresa Carilli

## The Care and Feeding of a Femme

The following are some tips to assist butches and non-femmes in the care and maintenance of their beloved femmes. Care and maintenance require knowledge and understanding of *femmeness*, here defined as a set of intrinsic behaviors that are unique to lesbians who resisted their socialization enough to come out yet have a proclivity toward feminine things—you know, those things your mother tried to hammer into your head about being a girl.

Let's take an example. When you were a child, did you have to sing "I Enjoy Being a Girl" at the local talent show, where you felt completely mortified, as you fantasized about that new toy truck you were going to get for your next birthday? Well, many femmes actually liked singing that song, and might even have fantasized about being Ann-Margret in *Bye Bye Birdie* singing "How Lovely to Be a Woman" in their teenage years. Let's face it: femmes have that understanding about being a female that many of us completely missed. They know how to apply makeup correctly, be polite in most situations, and walk gracefully.

Now, to begin with, to care and maintain femmes, you must know them. Many femmes grew up in fantasies of gallantry and pageantry. They prayed for knights in shining armor though they always selected the dud when playing the game Mystery Date (he was far more handsome than the dreamboat and his ragged appearance made him seem more adventurous). And, at one time or another, many femmes strove to be either beauty pageant contestants or nuns, both of whom possess heightened virginal charm. In the end, they chose adventurous and charming women who made them feel like beauty contestants and who scorned nuns. Let me make this simpler.

Part of being femme is knowing how to balance grace, poise, and beauty with spiritual sensuality. Femmes demand manners but adore the irreverent. You will make a great impression on your femme by being well-mannered in all public situations but highly irreverent in personal ones. Femmes cherish rudeness and vulgarity during those private moments. During courtship, however, you are advised to be polite. Only when you cross into that world of your femme's sexual fantasies might you consider sharing your irreverence.

Be advised, there are two things which femmes absolutely detest: sports and ill-conceived room decor. If you are a sports fan, you might consider suggesting your femme take up volunteer work at the local animal shelter on the days when key sporting events are televised. While she is being magnanimous, you can indulge in your unhealthy competitive drive. But believe me, femmes can tolerate sporting events far more than ill-conceived room decor. If possible, cultivate an interest in and talent for matching drapery, carpeting, and bedspreads. Be careful when choosing telephones, paintings, and lamps. Femmes pay particular attention to color schemes. Relationship deterioration could result from a color mismatch between the drapes and bedspread. By femme standards, a pin-striped duvet would clash with flowered curtains. Avoid putting a fire engine red telephone in the same room with a Tiffany lamp which has soft lime- and rose-colored glass. Heightened passion occurs in tasteful surroundings. Femmes feel more comfortable and relaxed as their eyes roll around a perfectly decorated room. Moments of complete sexual excitement could be dashed, however, if your femme suddenly notices that you've moved your Ringling Brothers circus elephant poster into a pastel bedroom.

Another noteworthy femme-lover tip: femmes are moved by dramatic interpersonal struggles. (Work this.) At an early age, femmes learn how to please others. From this experience they gain a profound understanding of human motives and an abundance of compassion. If ever you err in some way, just recall a moment of tremendous sadness in your childhood and explain the relationship between your faux pas and that moment. For instance, you might consider sharing the time your mother scolded you for breaking her only piece of crystal. Recall with great sorrow how your mother called you sloppy and unable to pay attention. Do this before bringing out your femme's favorite white t-shirt which you have accidentally washed with the dark clothes. Then, you might find yourself leading her to the bedroom where she can sob all over your New York Giants sweatshirt.

Now, here's a treasured tip most butches or nonfemmes can use: learn to cook. This way your femme can say, "I have the best of both worlds: a woman who knows who she is *and* who can cook." Since friends expect her to be the chef extraordinaire in the relationship, it will empower her to say to your company, "Oh, I wasn't the cook."

And finally, you must learn the difference between your household chores and those that are within her self-identity. Chores which can be completed in a few hours such as grocery shopping or laundry belong to you. They produce tangibles like food and clean clothes. Performing goal-oriented chores reminds you of your role as a lover. Any process-oriented household chore which takes a great deal of time belongs to her. You, for example, might be viewed by her as one of those chores.

Femmes love tasks which are never finished. Often you might find her vacuuming and revacuuming. The first time will be a genuine effort to clean



up the dirt particles you tracked in with your Dr. Martens while the second time will be to ensure that the nap of the carpet all faces the same direction. Femmes also enjoy washing dishes. They'll tell you they like to bathe their hands in the warm soapy water, but the real reason is that washing dishes gives them space, especially after sex or your diatribe about your co-workers. Let your femme make endless pots of coffee or tea. It will give her more opportunity to wash dishes.

Undoubtedly, the most beloved femme chore is using the dust mop to clean the ceiling. This appeals both to a need to express power and to be in a fairy tale. She can fly like Peter Pan, sending the mop briskly across the ceiling or feel sorry for herself like Cinderella, stuck cleaning the cobwebs while everyone else has gone to the ball. When she's finished dust-mopping, hug her. You'll seem like a prince. Remember above all, femmes love gallantry.

The above tips are intended to assist in the care and feeding of a femme. Following them carefully can ensure many years of happiness for both of you. Balance politeness with irreverence. Lie when necessary. Decorate carefully. Allow her to take space so she can do the things she does best. Remember: the more you appreciate her femme qualities, the more your femme will appreciate you.

Karen X. Tulchinsky

## *Women Who Make My Knees Weak*

**T**he first femme in my life was my Auntie Rose. When I was a small child she was young, beautiful, glamorous, and a little crazy. One time, when Aunt Rose was first dating Uncle Marvin, she raced into our house and begged my mother to let her take me out for the day. She wanted to see what Marvin was like with children. She wanted to know if he'd be a good father or not before she decided to marry him. My mother must have agreed because moments later I was sitting between them in the front seat of Marvin's 1957 Chevy convertible, my five-year-old legs stretched straight out in front of me, as we sped off into the streets of downtown Toronto. I looked from one to the other and then straight ahead, excited. I was out on a date with my aunt and her boyfriend.

Even at the age of five, I was a baby butch. As we drove, I studied Marvin, searching for clues on how a young man on a date should behave. He sat behind the wheel with his legs spread wide, so I spread mine, too. Whenever Marvin would turn to talk to my aunt, he would raise his eyebrows and smile at her from one side of his mouth. Sometimes he would slick back his hair with the palm of his right hand. I tried out all of his moves on my aunt, who laughed and ruffled my hair affectionately. The nails on her hands were long and painted red, and sitting close to her like that, I could smell her perfume. I turned to watch her as she crossed her legs, adjusted her skirt, and looked over at Marvin. They were talking about grown-up things which I couldn't understand, so I sat quietly, listening and watching. It was a warm spring day and Aunt Rose said she was hot as she undid the top three buttons on her sweater. Marvin glanced over and stared at her open neck, his eyes wide. The car in front of us came to a sudden stop, but Marvin didn't see. I tugged on his shirt sleeve and pointed. He turned his attention back to the road, said, "Oh my God!" and then slammed on the brakes. We all were thrown forward into the dashboard. My face slammed into the hard chrome knob on the built-in radio as we came to a stop just inches behind the other car. For a moment, we sat in stunned silence.

"Everyone okay?" Marvin asked, rubbing his shoulder.

"Oh my God!" My aunt stared at me. "Marvin, look what you've done!"

There was blood spilling from somewhere, dripping onto my pants. I tasted something salty in my mouth and my lip was tingling. Aunt Rose fiddled in her purse and pulled out a white lace hanky that she used to wipe my face.

"Does it hurt, honey?"

I shook my head. It didn't really feel like anything and I was enjoying the attention. As she leaned over I could see right down her shirt and I tried to imagine what it was about seeing her breasts that caused Marvin to forget he was driving.

"Her lip is split wide open," Aunt Rose snarled at him. "We'll have to take her back home now." My aunt pulled me onto her lap and, holding the hanky over my wound, she nestled me against her bosom and held me there all the way home.

When I came out in the late seventies, butch and femme were politically incorrect. My first lover was a femme, but after we broke up and I was on my own, I found others like her to be scarce in the lesbian world. There was a small dyke bar called the Village, under a strip joint in downtown Toronto. It was owned and run by an older butch named Jan. I was just a kid, barely over legal drinking age. At first Jan gave me a hard time because I looked so young, but after a while she got to know me and decided she liked me because I wasn't "one of those damn feminists."

"Always tellin' me what to think and what to wear," Jan would complain as she poured me another pint of beer from the tap, ashes from her brown filtered cigarette floating down onto the counter. "Hah! Most of those broads are straight anyway, or just came out yesterday. Think they can come into my place and act like they know the score. Where were they in the sixties or the fifties when I was gettin' my head busted up on Cherry Beach by the damn cops? I'll tell you where they were." She shook her head and blew smoke out the side of her mouth. "They were in grade school. They were married to some guy. They were havin' babies, and choosin' china patterns. Now here they are, tellin' me that I'm oppressin' them just because I know who I am and what I like. Damn feminists."

"Yeah," I agreed. Although I was too young to know what else to say, in my heart I knew she was right. Jan never let the feminists know how she really felt, because they represented most of her business. When she opened the bar it was the fulfillment of a longtime dream. She wanted to run a club that was for her and her friends, a place that was theirs, where they were welcome.

"Do you know why I called this place the Village?" she asked me once on a slow night.

I shrugged.

She laughed. "Course you don't, kid. You're too damn young. It's after *the* Village. You know. Greenwich Village in New York. First time I ever

went to a gay bar was in the Village. Damn if I even remember what the place was called.”

Jan was always trying to get her old friends, her butch pals and their femmes, to hang out at the Village, but they were outnumbered by the ever-growing population of flannel shirt, overall-covered, politically correct lesbian feminists. In a cruel twist of irony, Jan’s friends were pushed aside by the Birkenstock set. They just didn’t feel comfortable going to a club when at any moment some woman with long hair, khaki shorts, and hairy legs might start thumping her fist on the table accusing them of colluding with the patriarchy just because they were wearing a tie, or makeup and high heels. A few times a fight almost broke out when one of the butches was pushed past her limits and couldn’t take it anymore. Most of the time, however, they simply felt unwelcome and quietly slipped away.

“Ain’t much different than gettin’ yelled at in the streets,” Jan would say, shaking her head sadly.

The Village didn’t last very long. By the end of the first year, the owner of the building had figured out what kind of clientele the club was serving and refused to renew the lease. Jan didn’t have the energy to fight or the heart to carry on, and the bar closed down.

It was 1978 and I was a butch looking for femmes in a sea of androgyny. There was only one thing to do at that point. I took to falling for straight women. Cecile LaRoche was my first. I met her at a fag bar on Yonge Street. It was a small place that had been there for years. On weekends they had drag shows and a live deejay. The rest of the time, customers pumped quarters into the jukebox. Tired old queens, pretty young men, working girls, and all kinds of dykes drank beer, met with friends, and searched for someone new. One Tuesday night I was sitting at the bar on a high stool, when a woman in her midtwenties walked in and sat down beside me. She ordered a vodka martini, and when her drink was in front of her, she pulled out a cigarette and turned to me.

“Got a light, honey?”

I looked into her eyes. They were deep sea green, wide and inviting. I fumbled in my pocket for a match. As I held the burning end up to her cigarette she took my hand. Her brown wavy hair was long. It grew down her back and flowed lightly over her chest.

“Thanks, sugar.” She dropped my hand and removed her trench coat. She was wearing a short black dress with a plunging neckline. Her large breasts were only half-covered, exposing to view one of the most beautiful examples of cleavage my young eyes had ever seen. Seducing me and luring me back to her apartment was easy for her. I went along willingly for a night of passionate, furious, feverish sex. The moment we entered the dark apartment, she pushed me up against the closed door and jammed a stocking-covered thigh between my legs, hungrily devouring my mouth in hard, wanting kisses. I reached out and ran my hand up her thigh and under her dress, undoing her garters with trembling fingers. I could feel her hot breath

in my ear as we dropped to the living room floor and tore at each other's clothes.

At five in the morning she woke me from a deep sleep.

"Come on, sugar. Rise and shine. You have to go now. My husband will be back in the morning."

"Husband!" I shot upright.

"Yeah, baby. He's on a business trip. But he might be back early. So best be on your way."

I was out on the street within five minutes. "Shit! I knew it was too good to be true. Damn straight women," I grumbled to myself as I walked home to shower and change before work. After that, I put her out of my mind and went about my life, working in the day, going out with friends, and searching for a lover in the evenings. One night about two months later, Cecile was in the bar again. I ignored her, but eventually she came over to me and sat down. She pulled out a cigarette and held it out waiting for me to light it. I reached in my pocket for a match.

"Come on, sugar. Don't be mad."

I turned away.

"Come on, baby. We had a good time, didn't we?"

I shrugged.

"I didn't ask you to marry me that night, if you will recall. I asked you to come home and fuck me."

I turned back to her. "Why didn't you tell me you had a husband?"

She shrugged. "I didn't think you'd come with me if you knew. He's away again. Won't be back until Wednesday." She took my hand and put it on her left breast. I groaned and my breath quickened instantly. I was twenty-one and my hormones were raging. "Please, baby."

I grabbed my jacket and her hand and rushed her to the door.

Every other Tuesday for the next six months we met. It was always the same. I'd swear to myself it was over and then she'd come along and seduce me. I'd cave in and we'd go to her place and fuck all over the apartment in a frenzy, our passion a runaway train heading for the edge of a cliff. Out of control, beyond reason, skin against skin, lips and tongue, blood collecting in swollen clits and raw nipples. Dangerous sex, impulsive, voracious, breathless, out-of-this-world sex. The kind you read about in trashy novels, born of power, passion, and impending peril.

Then, before dawn I'd wake from exhausted sleep, throw on my clothes, and she'd kick me out, teasing me with her tongue and her gaze all the way to the door. It was romantic, exciting, explosive, and crazy, and I loved every second of it.

One Wednesday morning, in the early hours before dawn, the inevitable happened. Hubby came home early to find his wife flat on her back on the living room floor in a half-discarded black lace negligee with me on top, pumping away at her open pussy with my brand-new strap-on dildo. We pulled apart and jumped to our feet. I grabbed my jeans and t-shirt and

leapt into them. She reached for her black and red chiffon robe that lay flung over a chair and casually slipped into it. He shouted at her and called her names. She lit a cigarette, blew smoke in his face, and shouted back. He raised his arms above his head as he yelled and for a moment I thought he might hit her, but then I realized he was crying. He lowered his hands, covered his face, and stood in the middle of the room sobbing like a child. Cecile moved over and put her arms around him, pulling him close and talking sweetly to him, telling him not to worry, everything was going to be all right.

I found my jacket on the sofa where I'd thrown it earlier and quietly let myself out.

The next day, I swore off straight women forever.

In 1982 — wonder of wonder, miracle of miracles — femmes began reappearing in the dyke bars. It was a sight to behold. Something was beginning to change. A new generation of dykes were coming out. Women who had bypassed the seventies. Women who had lived through them and come clear to the other side. Women who just didn't give a damn anymore about political correctness. Women who wanted to be sexy for other women. For a butch like me, the world was opening up and femmes were pouring out. On a Saturday night I stood leaning against the wall in a local dyke bar, drinking beer and marveling at the women before me. Women in dresses, high heels, and makeup; long hair, low-cut tops, lacy skirts, and push-up bras. Voluptuous babes whose bodies I could actually see. And all of them were dykes. No husbands or boyfriends, no closet doors between me and them. Just babes — shit-kicking, lipstick-wielding, shapely, curvaceous, romantic, mysterious, sexy, flirtatious, seductive, tenacious femmes. Women who could make my knees weak with the toss of their hair, the swing of their walk, the sureness of their stance, the invitation of their gaze, and the soft round paradise of their cleavage. I knew I had died and gone to dyke heaven. I was the happiest butch in the world. I hoped it would last forever.

We are now in a whole new decade, the nineties. Madonna reigns supreme, k.d. lang appears on the cover of *Vanity Fair* with Cindy Crawford straddling her legs, and everyday there are more and more femmes to behold. To be held.

I haven't seen my Aunt Rose in over three years. Not since the winter my *zayde* died and we all gathered at Rose's house to sit *shiva*. I found myself watching her when no one was looking. Now in her late fifties, she has aged with the grace of a fine French wine. I watched her flow majestically through the house and I realized she was my ideal, the woman I measured all my lovers against. In my search for a girlfriend, Aunt Rose was always in my mind. Subconsciously, I compared women to her. It was her style, her magic, and her charm that they had to live up to.

Sometimes life has a way of coming full circle and everything, just for a moment, makes sense. The rest of the time, I'm content with simple pleasures. The click of high heels on a hardwood floor. A short black skirt over stocking-covered thighs. The sight of a bra strap peeking out under a red, silk blouse. Clinking champagne glasses with a beautiful femme. The scent of her perfume and the soft, sexy way she whispers in my ear. Lying in her arms, my face buried deep in her cleavage. The beating of my heart, the grace of her courage, the intensity of her desire, the curve of her walk, the magnitude of her pride, the nobility of her charm. The femme mystique.

Amiee Joy Ross

## *Sincerely, Poppa Butch*

*M*y father once asked me, "What is butch?"

I told him, "The positive of male and masculinity."

"Oh! I get it," he said.

I also believe it can be said about femmes, that they are the positive of female and femininity, too.

I just wanna say thanks. Thanks to all you femmes who make me wanna beg, beg to let me be your steel-toed butch. To allow me to be the strong demanding fucker I am, who revels in your pure femininity and in our strength together. Part your crimson-stained lips toward me, let me look into those kohl-painted eyes. Arch your sweet big hips into my thick crotch, letting me know that it's my big, black dick for you tonight and no one else. Take it because you truly love this sister-packing butch bitch. I know and you know that we're both size queens and proud of it. It's my dick and I bought her ten years ago for me but before we part ways I want to strap it onto you.

Stand before me with your hands on your hips, your dick jutting defiantly forward, eyes slit, breath exhaling slow and deep in front of my naked, hard-ass, boot-stomping self. I draw my hands down your curves and luminous skin, gently lowering and reaching with my mouth for my mamma's big cock to give her the deep, hidden high of having her big ol' poppa butch down on her humble knees, blowing her into another fucking world and loving it.

You know who you are with your red-tipped hands that make such perfect fists, sitting with your crossed legs enveloped in black stockings, tucked into come-fuck-with-me-if-you-dare boots. The smoke from your cigarette curls around your face, your eyes shaded behind a tassel of hair that escapes from your mane. It allows you to give guarded glances my way and make this poppa girl turn her head to drink in the sight of you and catch the smell of your femaleness.

I just want to say thanks to all you glorious, glamorous, fatal femmes fatales for making this butch proud to be a raging bulldagger and admirer of femmes.





*Pearls*

---

Morgan Gwenwald

Teresa Mendoza

---

*Amor*

**T**his woman  
She was everything.  
She reminded me  
Of a skinny guy  
I dated in high school once  
Except she had breasts  
And no noticeable facial hair.

This woman was a  
Fascinating creature  
A human chameleon  
Turkish  
Russian  
Sephardic Jew  
And at the same time  
Could become a Xicana in drag  
A Latina with a mission  
A lesbiana with a cause  
A woman in the struggle  
And she was butch

Real butch.

Before her I shied away  
From the butch-femme paradigm  
I said butch-femme  
Was an extension of  
The man-woman model  
That existed for the convenience  
Of heterosexuals  
So they  
Could understand  
Us  
On their terms.  
But when I saw her  
I wanted to be her woman

I wanted to be her *mujer*  
Her *ruca*  
Her right arm

Her one and only  
*Por vida*

Tagged on the door  
Of a bathroom stall.  
It was like that.  
Deep.

Real Deep.  
Tattoo on my back  
With her name deep.  
I wanted to be the femme  
And her be my butch lover.

I for once regretted  
My radical feminist stage  
Where I threw  
Most of my makeup away  
Most of my heels  
And sexy lingerie  
Because I wanted her  
Through any means necessary  
Lingerie, heels, makeup  
Whatever it took  
I was ready to use

And I had her until the day  
The words dragged slowly  
From her mouth  
Like an old, scratchy forty-five record  
Her voice became Barry White deep  
And slow  
Real slow  
And she said,

You just got so much power sometimes.

I looked at her short boyish haircut  
Her black slacks  
Men's shoes  
And the shirt

That draped over her small breasts  
And I thought of all the times  
Supermarket cashiers called her *sir*  
Or how I'd have to cling to her walking  
Down Santa Monica Boulevard

Boys' town  
Just so the boys would stop giving her  
That come-swallow-me-whole look.  
I mean maybe  
Just maybe she really feels  
Thinks, acts like a man  
And she really wishes  
I was Linda Carter so she  
Could ride me on her tricycle  
Like she used to pretend to do at five.

And maybe she really wants me  
To be her little woman  
Her wife  
To cook her dinner  
And fetch her shoes  
And call her *papacito*  
Instead of being simply a woman  
Who dresses comfortably  
Has her own mind  
Carries her own thoughts  
Has power in her sweat  
While I'm on top  
And she's on the bottom.

Maybe  
Just maybe then  
I do have too much power  
Hanging on to sexy lingerie  
Costly cosmetics  
And dangerous heels

Barbara Herrera

## *Always a Cheerleader, Never a Ballplayer*

To be a butch! To walk down the street and have men yell, “Dyke!” or “Butch!” What a feeling that must be. To enter a room and have everyone assume you’re a lesbian ... what a treat.

But, I’m not a butch. I’m a femme. A soft femme. A lipstick dyke. A passing lesbian. A frustrated woman-lover!

I’ve had those same crushes on girls that I’ve heard other dykes talk about. I remember Sherrill and the letters we shared during the summer she spent in Oklahoma: the “I love you, but not that way” disclaimers. I remember holding hands with her in sixth grade and being yelled at because we were too old to be holding hands. I remember we said we were not too old and continued to do so. I remember the feelings of tenderness, protectiveness, and delight I felt when she was near.

I remember looking at the tomboys with envy throughout junior high. They were good at every sport, were always team captains, and they did *not* throw like a girl, like me. Me. Soft, flabby, feminine, screaming-at-bugs-and-mice me, who giggled while talking about boys, read *Jane Eyre* and *Little Women*, and wondered, deep in my psyche, what was wrong with me.

High school hell. No dates. Again, watching from the outside in. Who are these girls who can take their clothes off in gym class without shame? Without embarrassment? Why aren’t I one of them?

I had sex with a boy at seventeen. A boy who, as it turns out, was gay. Big joke later in my life. We were both homosexual! I felt nothing — no fireworks, no bells, no orgasms — not even a spark.

But then the fantasies kicked in. I learned how to dream! Girls I knew, girls I didn’t know. We had *some* sex! Whew, that WaterPik, those girls, and I did have some sex. Sweaty girls after softball practice, fumbling with tiny bras trying to release budding breasts. Kissing. Warm, wet tongues inside each others’ mouths, teeth occasionally knocking into each other. I had the sensation of wetness all around me. Mmmmm .... My reality was stupid, meaningless sex with adolescent boys. Yuck.

Then my gay boyfriend and I started going to gay bars and I became a fag hag. I loved my place among the boys. I wore outrageous clothes: gauze dresses with ankle socks and pumps. I adorned myself with feathers and

stones. I was playing dress-up and being admired for it. I also didn't have to worry about having sex with these men. Life was safe with them.

Occasionally I would venture out to the lesbian bars, with my gay friends in tow, but I was always *very* uncomfortable. Can you see it? Me in jewels and feathers (and sometimes even those awful furs). The lesbian uniform of the day was jeans, flannel shirts, and tennis shoes or desert boots (remember those?). My friends and I would retreat back to our haven and I was sorry I couldn't find anyone female I could relate to.

Then came Kelly. I met her at a party. She was drunk; I was horny. We talked about what it would feel like to go to bed with a woman. Ambiguous. Covert. You see, Kelly was a femme, too. Skinny; tall; long, curly blonde hair. Gorgeous. After hours of convincing her it was time for us to try it, I found myself driving to my parents' house at five in the morning; talking fast, talking loud, windows rolled down, *anything* to keep a very drunk Kelly awake. I finally got home and got her naked — Oh God, I couldn't believe I was with a woman! I laid her down, spread her legs, and ate. I didn't have the slightest idea what I was doing but was having a great time doing it. I was high and orgasmic for a long time afterward. Each woman I have been with is not important, but from then on, I was attracted to butches with strong features, strong bodies, and strong personalities. Makes me swoon just writing about it!

When I was eighteen, after attending the first Gay and Lesbian March on Washington in 1979, I finally said that I was lesbian. The responses were all basically the same: "You'll outgrow it." "It's a stage." "You just haven't met the right man yet." I can't help but wonder how many butch lesbians have to endure those sentiments. I'm willing to bet that the majority of people who evoke those responses are femmes. Gullible, vulnerable, and hungry for affection, I eventually had sex with a few men. I also went into therapy to figure it all out.

At twenty, I met a cute seventeen-year-old virgin and thought I'd teach him a thing or two. I was also sleeping with another guy and trying to get into Kimberly's pants.

I got pregnant.

Horrors.

Kim split.

I had my child, got married, and he joined the Army. We traveled the world: Augusta, Georgia; Tacoma, Washington (where baby number two was born); and Frankfurt, Germany (where baby number three was born). Bliss began in Frankfurt two days after my baby was born.

I met Sarah.

If I could put her name in lights with twittering birds and floating hearts around it, it wouldn't be enough. A dyke who was seven months pregnant! She wasn't an out dyke yet; she was still married to That Man.

We were inseparable. For months and months we were joined at the hip. We played Spades, Life (where Sarah always married a woman), and nursed

each others' babies, all with our husbands sitting there, unable to stop this progressing love affair.

Did I tell you that Sarah was a dyke? I'm talkin' Diesel Dyke. She worked on diesel trucks for the U.S. Army. Oh my God, the best arms, muscles that worked their way into my body, into my very being.

We became lovers. Our husbands took turns watching the kids so we could be together. Sounds bizarre (probably was) but we *had* to be together morning, noon, and night. Sarah played softball. On the Army softball team. All women. Sarah was the catcher. There was a dyke behind the plate, on the plate, pitching to the plate, and on all three of the bases. There were dykes in the stands cheering. But there weren't many femmes around. I loved it! I was there watching my butch play softball. I just loved it when she would throw off her catcher's mask and go for the pop-up. Gives me goose bumps even now. I kept an eye on four kids under four years of age ... what a mom! Isn't that the way it is with femmes? Always the cheerleader, never the ballplayer.

Fast forward to San Diego. No more Sarah. No more Army. No more ball games. Boo-hoo.

Now it's my turn to explore my lesbianism away from the Army, away from my family. Just me and my sexuality.

A femme.

I wonder about butches. Why do they look like each other? Almost like they came from the same family. I have wondered if there isn't a butch race, except it apparently does not come from one's parents the way being Hispanic or having blue eyes or a big butt (all of which I claim) does. Or does it? Is it that recessive gene thing? Look at the butches. They have strong, well-defined jaws, and their muscles are more obvious. They swagger, even in childhood. In San Diego, I joined support groups. I asked how many self-described butches have been raped? None (that would say so). How many femmes? Quite a few, including this one. Why is that? Is the swagger protective? Does wearing tennis shoes save your ass more than heels or *huaraches*? Do butches exude repellent? Where can I get some?

I've also wondered about femmes. Why is it hard for femmes to come out? My support group experiences, while limited, were a Goddess-send for me. I saw that I was not alone. I found that many femmes come out in the gay (male) community as fag hags. I learned that my discomfort during lesbian bar excursions was not an isolated one. Many femmes come out in their late twenties and early thirties, sometimes after a heterosexual marriage and having kids. I learned that many more femmes had had sexual experiences with men before coming out than butch women. Why are lesbian mother support groups usually filled with femme women?

Why is it so hard for femmes to come out?

My supposition is that we do not fit the "typical" lesbian stereotypes; therefore we question ourselves more ("if I don't like sports, how can I consider myself a dyke?"). I know the struggle I had with my identity. I

*really* tried to be a good wife and mother. I'm a great mother and a lousy wife. I always felt that I didn't fit anywhere. I never could get it right.

Until Sarah.

Then all the puzzle pieces were there for me to work with. All at once, I understood the songs on the radio. I understood what people talked about on TV and in movies when they spoke of love and passion. After a marriage that was a farce, after leaving a man I didn't love the way he needed me to love him, after having three kids whom I love more than life itself, I finally got it.

I was home. I had discovered passion.

But I digress.

Now I'm this single, liberated lesbian in therapy, going to support groups in lovely San Diego.

Why, when I go to lesbian bars alone, do I feel like the dykes there think I'm looking for an experiment? Once I was tentatively flirting with this butch playing pool and we got to the part where I have kids. She asked how old they were and when I told her my youngest was two and a half, she said she couldn't even think about going to bed with me because I had been with a man too recently! I asked her if I should douche and then walked away. When I walk in the gay part of town, I am ignored and when I go with my kids, I am shunned. Why can't I "look" gay (whatever that is)? I wear a pinkie ring. I have a long braid on my left side with short spiky hair. I wear three earrings on my left side and two on my right. I always wear a Freedom Ring earring in one of my ears. I have stickers on my car: a rainbow flag and a black triangle. I have tattoos on my shoulders and my breasts. What more can I do to look gay? Why do I feel like I have to justify my looks at all? It's because I am not *seen* as a lesbian when I'm out alone or with my kids. I want to be seen, noticed when I walk by other members of my Family.

Being single is the worst isolation for a femme, this femme in particular. When I'm single, family members and even ex-lovers ask me if I will date men now. Even after several lesbian relationships since Sarah, people are still thinking it's a phase. Aaargh! When I'm in a relationship, I'm able to hold hands and kiss in public, stretch the boundaries, *feel* more openly lesbian. I wish I could find another way to be more radically lesbian.

Often, I wish I could be butch.

But then I wouldn't be able to wear makeup, skirts, or *huaraches*. I wouldn't be able to have dangling earrings, beads in my hair, all those things that make me feminine and, I'm sure, attractive to a butch.

A great debate is on as to whether butch-femme even exists. So many women say, "I just am. That butch-femme stereotype demeans us. It's an old-fashioned idea. It feeds into the heterosexual idea of who we are; one of us is the woman and one of us is the man. That butches really want to be men."

I believe that the swing away from *only* butch or *only* femme was a good one. It used to be we *had* to choose one or the other, and only a butcherier



butch could make a femme out of a butch. I like being able to flirt with my butch side. I also like being able to wear frilly dresses. I like being attracted to stone butches, lipstick dykes, and androgynous women (though my preference is still for butches).

When it comes to lovemaking, I love being a woman, neither butch nor femme. I used to be the do-but-don't-get-done kind of lesbian (femme-in-the-streets-but-ch-in-the-sheets), but with Sarah I got over that.

I remember the first time we had sex. I ate her like there was no tomorrow (and for all we knew, there might not have been). I pulled her shirt open, pulled her pants and white underwear down, and didn't even bother taking off her high-tops. And I ravished her vulva, her vagina, her clitoris. I soaked my mouth, my chin, my long hair, my fingers. God, she tasted good! One or two days later, we were together again and she said it was her turn. I thought I was too fat, and wanted to lose fifty pounds before she saw me naked. Bullshit. She stripped me naked, laid me on my back, spread my legs, and licked all over me and my fat, especially my wet. I had my first orgasm with a woman (not including all those years of fantasies with them). I remember doing what we named seventy-three. That's sixty-nine with two fingers each: two fingers in me (seventy-one) and two of my fingers in her. Seventy-three was amazing, a *true* spiritual experience: she on top of me, each of us licking, sucking, circling each other's vulvas, clits, with fingers inside, plunging in and out, sometimes hard, sometimes not. The experience was exquisite.

Butch and femme being neither butch nor femme. Just two women loving each other.

Ellen Bay

## Femme Moment of Truth

At thirty-seven, I met a lover who called me a femme. Me, a long-time, hard-core feminist, believer in androgyny and all things politically correct. At first I was shocked, almost insulted. What could possibly make her think that? Wasn't I wearing my jeans and boots that night we met? Now, she *was* butch, that was clear. And I was attracted to her, no doubt there. But me, femme? The idea threw me into a real tailspin.

So I did what any good intellectual feminist would do: I rushed out to buy the books on the subject. I had seen JoAnn Loulan's *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, and remembered that it was about butch and femme, so I grabbed that. Then I discovered Joan Nestle's *The Persistent Desire*, which I read from cover to cover the next week. Something was ringing true, and it scared me. I realized that a year or two before, I would never have bought those books. My intellectual judgments were too strong to allow open-mindedness. It took having an experience — overwhelming, real, undeniable experience — to open me to new ideas.

The major revelations in my life have always had to do with discovering a way to express what's been true all along. Finding the word *feminist* at age nineteen and knowing immediately that I was one. Discovering ways to give expression to my attraction to women. Hearing about "women's spirituality" and recognizing that I'd been a practicing pagan since I was a small child. Putting words to what it means to come from an alcoholic family. Somehow I thought I'd had all the major revelations about myself I was likely to encounter, but I started to notice right away that I was running headfirst into another one. I saw that this new lover was only naming what had been happening in me for a very long time.

In trying to discover whether this could possibly be true, the first thing I started thinking about was butches. Well, okay, so most of my ex-lovers were auto mechanics and such. Owned motorcycles. Had short hair and *never* wore dresses. Just coincidence. They never really called themselves butch; they never called me femme. I began to remember the truly butch women I had met, and how we responded to each other. Right away I could think of quite a few older butch women I had met at parties, and it did seem like they always picked me out of the crowd as a target for their gallantry and flirtation. I always felt an attraction for them, even when I knew I was only interested in being friends, even when they were thirty years older than me. Now that I think about it, I know they sensed something in me. And I in

them. Some chord struck, some recognition. I knew, but I never called it by name.

I asked myself what I like about butches. I answered: the decisiveness. Knowing what they want and not being afraid to go for it. The power, taking their power. The outward orientation, the physical presence. Yes, the aggressiveness. And the way they smile at me. I had to admit I was definitely attracted to butches.

The next thing I had to think about was dress and appearance. Although I realized that it's only a part of what being femme is about, it was very important to me. I knew it was an area I had been struggling with for a long time.

First, there was the slinky-nightgown syndrome. I realized that even during my most "androgynous" phases, there had always been a few of those silky, lacy, femme things lurking in my closet. This didn't seem that important until I realized that *I* was the one who wore them, never my lovers. That some lesbians wouldn't be caught dead in one.

I thought about how, as I traveled in lesbian circles, I had always admired the femme women, the "gypsy" women. The ones who came to lesbian events in their flowery skirts and earrings and sashes. The ones who made giggling references to sexy lingerie. The ones who were proud of their beauty and their bodies and didn't care what anyone thought about it. The ones with lots of dress-up clothes who went all out at parties and festivals. I had always admired them, and thought that must mean that I was attracted to them. And yet, they were never attracted to me but always related to me as a buddy, a girlfriend. On the few occasions when I did attempt sexual involvement with one of these women, it never worked. The chemistry just wasn't there.

As I thought about this, I began to wonder if it was not that I was attracted to them, but that I had secretly always wanted to be like them. I wanted to express what was in me that I saw reflected in them. As soon as I thought about this I knew it was true. I had never learned how to dress like that. I had gone directly into jeans and t-shirts as a teenager. As a young radical feminist, I never wore jewelry or makeup or anything that was considered attractive to men. When I was with men I never wanted to play that game, and with women it seemed politically incorrect. I literally never learned how to do it. I know many women are forced to do it and then reject it later. I know butches who resisted it and refused to learn it. But I actually never had the opportunity. And I was in my thirties before I could even admit to myself that I had always wanted to.

I think of myself in the bars ten years ago, wearing tight black jeans and men's-style white shirts bought in the women's department. Stylish boots, thin belt, a silver necklace at my throat, and my shirt unbuttoned just a little low. Sometimes a hat. I called it androgyny: leather and lace. I wonder now if people saw it as confusion. I'd hang by the dance floor, looking butch but not acting it in the least. I was waiting to be asked, to be swept off my feet,

but I'm sure I looked a little intimidating. My fear and shyness made me seem cold, aloof, unapproachable. All butched up but nowhere to go. I didn't know what kind of woman I wanted. I didn't know what kind of woman I was.

And then, there was the sex. The lover who called me femme was unabashedly butch with me in bed. She was the first lover I'd had that was truly "butch in the sheets" (what sheets? the sheets are on the floor somewhere) and I discovered what had been missing from my sex life all these years. Much to my surprise, I loved it. At first I told myself it was just her, just this special attraction. But then I realized I sounded like the woman who says "I'm not really a lesbian, it's just that I'm in love with one particular woman."

Of course there's some truth to the idea that it only works with the right person. In the past, I'd always been afraid of or disgusted by physical aggressiveness in women. I hated not being in control. But when this handsome, strong, sexy butch dyke picked me up and carried me into the bedroom, I loved it. I probably couldn't appreciate it in someone I wasn't attracted to. But still, it's time to own my part in it, my pure enjoyment of it.

Having my body respond all on its own in ways I hadn't thought possible was a real eye-opener. But if there's anything I've come to understand about sex, it's this: never think you understand it. I tried to describe it in my journal: "When she shows me the strength of her desire ... something happens to me that I've never really known. Walls go down. Something deep inside me comes out. A freedom of passion. An ability to receive. A willingness to let her take me anywhere she wants to go. An active submission. I envelop. We merge." I can tell that I have only begun yet another long journey of self-discovery in this area.

Seeking to explain what it is that I feel leads into the politics of it all. Reading the books and articles that are springing up all over now, I discovered that there had been a small revolution in the ranks when I wasn't looking. I guess lesbian feminists all over are coming to re-accept the butch-femme continuum, and androgyny is no longer mandatory. I'm not sure if I'm just part of the trend, or if everybody but me has already figured it out. Maybe some women are just starting to identify and say in print what I have been experiencing for years. But I was glad to find out once again that I'm not alone.

I've always thought of butch and femme as an important part of our lesbian heritage. I'd read enough about life before and during the Stonewall era to respect it as an honored tradition, part of our herstory. But I had never let myself think it had anything to do with *me*.

Why are so many of us embracing this now when we couldn't ten or fifteen years ago? I can only say what's different for me. I know that as a young feminist, I felt the need to reject everything associated with the oppressiveness of enforced femininity and pleasing men. In those days we thought that we were throwing off the shackles of patriarchy by rejecting the

symbols. I know now that for me, much of that was in reaction to men. After many years of not relating to men, it no longer seems relevant. I know now that lesbian butch and femme has virtually nothing to do with men and women or with heterosexuality. I know it in my body and in my heart, as well as in my mind. I know it from experience, not political analysis.

I have felt some resentment at the dictates of feminist politics that kept me from parts of myself for so long. And it's hard to listen to the women who still put down the expression of femmeness.

But I have finally found my femme-ininity, on my own terms. By discovering my own long and winding path through my lesbian life, I have found it in a natural way, as a natural woman and not a man-made one. And it feels wonderful to be home.

Ellen Grabiner

## *Plain or Peanut?*

**O**n the edge of the tub I sat, razor blade poised above its objective. Suddenly, it was as I always knew it would be. My whole life flashed before me, like coming attractions. These, though, were the high points of attractions past. Yet in the midst of this barrage, I thrashed in the throes of a much more urgent dilemma. Should I grip the razor handle with the full strength of my fist, or extend my pinky, ever so slightly, lending an air of grace and elegance to this momentous act? Would I now finally learn the truth? Was I, hadn't I always been, a femme? And isn't that why now, after twenty-three years, I was about to take razor to leg, and scrape away the thick, black, coarse hair that had called my shins and calves home? So why at this decisive moment was I tempted to shave like a butch? Would this confusion never end?

There was no turning back; I had decided. I was tired of being ashamed, tired of wearing long pants to hide what even I had to admit were unattractive, hairy legs. I was tired of wincing at the beach, when passersby shifted their gaze to my lower legs. I had been co-opted, peer-pressured right out of my feminist bravado.

I grabbed the soap and lathered up, the squiggly black threads all creamy white now. With the first stroke of the razor, images poured over me. One after another, they came, as the razor cleared a silken smooth pathway hugging the shin of my lathered left leg.

There I am, sitting on the bathroom countertop, watching my father get ready to go out with my mother. He shakes the can of Old Spice shaving cream, expels a dollop into the palm of his hand. The steamy hot water trickling from the faucet has already dampened his face, softened his whiskers. He pats the foam on his cheeks and chin, looking like Santa with a hook nose. Puckering his lips, twisting them to the left, to the right, he is able to create the perfect contours for the sliding blade. When the cream is swept away, there is, without fail, a nick that needs attention. My father tears a tiny fragment of toilet paper, sticks it to his wound. Inevitably, my mother reminds him to remove the decorative white spot before they go off to the dance—movie—canasta party of the evening.

On more than one occasion, I sneaked and smeared my own face with that airy, delightfully fragrant Old Spice shaving cream. Did I want to be like my father: warm, charming, funny? Of course. But didn't I also want to be like my mother: breathtakingly beautiful? Of course.

I watched her, too, but her ritual preparation was lengthy, sometimes spanning the whole day, sometimes even more. When she couldn't get a beauty parlor appointment on the day of the wedding—bar mitzvah—New Year's Eve party, she'd have to go the day before. On these nights, when she went to bed, she'd wear the red-and-white-striped hat with the little air holes which promised to keep her "do" exactly right. The flattened side she had slept on could be puffed up and it would look good as new.

Nails came next. I'd watch with rapt attention as she laid out her apparatus on the coffee table: tissues, cotton balls, remover, emery boards, ruby red polish. Soaking the cotton ball with the remover, she'd rub away the chipped and brittle remnants from last week's manicure until her nails were baby pink. She taught me how to file my nails, using the emery board, the rough side first, the smooth side later, finishing off the uneven, jagged edges. When she had cleaned and filed, she would unfold a tissue, placing it flat on the coffee table. She'd shake the bottle of polish, and with the brush applicator, slowly, painstakingly paint each of her perfectly shaped nails, never getting any on her fingers, always laying the thick red polish evenly, until her nails appeared to have grown out as red enamel.

Until they dried, my mother would sit with fingers wide apart, one never touching another, never leaving its imprint on the neighboring, tacky, red nail. She would sit patiently on the couch, her legs crossed at the knee, and wait. Until it was safe. When she finally continued her dressing and makeup, it was with her fingers extended slightly so as not to damage her nails. I was awed by her ability to twist open a jar, spread cream cheese, pull on her stocking, all with the fleshy pads of her fingertips, her nails never contacting any surface or substance. How did she learn to do this? Only when her piano playing was accompanied by the quiet click-click-clicking of her nails, did I have some sense that she wasn't perfect.

I couldn't wait to grow up, to be a lady, to be beautiful, to have long nails that I would polish shiny blood red. Yet as I glanced down at my adult fingers grasping the razor clogged with decades of hair, I couldn't help but notice how unlike my mother's hands mine were. Broad where hers were long, my nails were short, unpolished, tinted with blues and greens from my latest painting. Hadn't I wanted to be like her? Hadn't I suffered through her twisting my hair into little tight pin curls, jabbing my scalp with bobby pins (before they had those rubber tips) in an unsuccessful effort to approximate bouncing Shirley Temple curls? Hadn't I squiggled and scratched at the unrelenting coarseness of crinolines? Didn't I walk delicately so as not to scuff brand-new, patent leather, so-shiny-I-could-see-myself-in-them shoes? And the dresses: my favorite white one, dotted with delicate strawberries that blurred to pink as I spun and spun, skirt rising to an indecent height, unwittingly revealing panties.

Yes, of course I wanted to be beautiful, soft, feminine, but something deep and vicious in me recoiled. I didn't want to suffer, not enough anyway. I didn't want to touch my hair, gingerly, to see if it had mussed. I wanted to

hold my teacup's handle, my lover's breast, firmly with my entire hand, without having to maintain the distance of a fingernail's length.

So, you deduce, I wanted to be like my father. Well, of course. Who wouldn't? Wasn't it only in my cowboy boots, in my boxing gloves, in my blue jeans and flannel shirts that I was finally and ultimately me? No matter how much I thrill at my eyes when they are enhanced by shadow and mascara, at the satisfying click, clack, click of my heels on the walk, at the precision with which I punctuate the whole look, by choosing just the right earrings and necklace, I always feel like an impostor. I walk, move, talk like someone I am not. I can't wait to kick off my shoes, rub my eyes, and be me again.

Though I slide my legs into silken stockings, they mat and contort the black, coarse hairs. Damn, and I was doing so well. The image almost worked. It would work too, if I shaved my legs, wouldn't it? Is that why I sat there, one leg almost completely bare, only the reddened hair follicles betraying the secret unruly growth? Was I yearning to be a more perfect, less conflicted femme?

The question of whether I am a butchy femme or a femmy butch remains. Yes, there is the issue of which parent to emulate. But our gender identification? Is it not something more: a core reality of our being? Or is it more akin to a current flowing through us, fluctuating from day to day, from situation to situation, from relationship to relationship? Can we separate our sense of self, and our gender, from what we see, hear, learn, and absorb from the surrounding culture?

Riding on the feminist tidal wave of the seventies, I arrived at my debut already angry, with a strong bias against all that women were supposed to be, all that my mother was. I had sat in another bathtub, twenty-three years earlier, staring at my overgrown stubble and raging.

"Why do I have to do this when *men* don't?" I fumed and tossed the razor in the trash, along with my bra and makeup. I donned my workboots, flannel shirt, and overalls and wore my shame at having hairy legs as a badge of courage.

"I'm a feminist, I'm liberated, I'm a sister, and I'm powerful!" my furry legs cried. I alternated between lusting after my college roommates, who still shaved, preened, and slept with men, and pitying them for their backwardness.

Coming out was easy. Bolstered by the women's movement, I fell in love with a married friend and made a swift transition from experimenting, through bisexual, to lesbian. Six short months later I was a dyke. But those of us coming out in droves in the seventies had no roles. There were no femmes, no butches. We thought that was the ancient history of our repressed sisters, a fact of our unliberated past. We were all just wimmin, or wombmon, or wymin; we cut spiky hair, pierced multiple holes in our ears; we were beautiful, powerful woomun-loving-womyn.

Yet, as we listened to Alix, Meg, Cris, and Holly, slow-danced in new-found women's bars across our cities, joined softball and basketball teams,



worked on our motorcycles, and planned our demonstrations, didn't we check one other out? Didn't we whisper, "Ooh, she's so butch," and "She's not that butch," and didn't we squeal and defer, saying, "Let the butch take care of it?" And didn't we stick our tongues in our cheeks, just to make sure no one thought we were really serious?

Then there were the tests. We decided there had to be a way to tell. A definitive test for butch or femme. We began scientifically, gathering data on behaviors that varied in ways that we hoped would remain role-linked. We were able to isolate two behavior traits that seemed to give us clear, consistent results. We thought we had really stumbled upon something. We were going to be rich and famous. That is, until we compared our interpretations of our findings.

Both tests were simple and run on a broad cross section of the lesbians in the Boston area: our friends. In the first test, we asked, "Plain or peanut?" The results were astonishing. Split right down the middle, a full fifty percent chose plain, the other half, peanut.

"Great," my lover, coincidentally a butch, declared. "Let's write this up. Let's get it published. Butches prefer plain."

"What?" I argued. Deep in my heart I knew I was a femme, yet not being able to be outbutched, I had to prove my toughness. "That's ridiculous. Peanut M&M's are bigger, tougher to chew; butches obviously prefer peanut." In case it isn't abundantly clear, my lover preferred plain, and I, peanut.

"That's just not true. Peanut is for wimps, for those femmes who just can't stomach the taste of pure, unadulterated chocolate."

And so it went. Why no one was anxious to identify with the femme ranks was no mystery to me. After all that work raising my consciousness and coming to terms with my own conditioning, it was going to be a long haul before I freely embraced the behavior prescribed by the oppressor.

We could not reach agreement on the M&M test, so we devised a second test, and as you would expect, ran into the same problem.

"Fold or crumple?" we asked. When met with blank stares, we explained. "Do you fold or crumple your toilet paper?"

Once again we thought we were on to something. These results also split evenly.

"Butches fold, femmes crumple," my lover insisted.

"What could possibly be your rationale? The butch — tough, busy — has no time for folding," I insisted.

"You're wrong," she argued. "Folding is neat, efficient, economical. No waste, no muss. You femmes are always flamboyant, overdoing it, crumpling up yards of unnecessary toilet tissue."

We never could agree. But something had shifted. She *was* the butch and I *was* the femme, and all of our friends were either butch or femme. Everyone had a place and a role. It was similar to when I looked down and saw my naked, hairless legs, for the first time in twenty-three years. For just one

moment in time, they were clear and soft. There was no resistance as I rubbed my hands back and forth along my shins. But this hairless state was as fleeting as any certainty about gender roles.

Yes, my lover was butch, but who had to lift the dead mouse out of the toilet the night it drowned in the infested Windsor Street apartment? Yes, Rachel was butch; she repaired bicycles, and was an electronics engineer, but what about that sweet purse she carried slung over her broad shoulders? Louise was as femme as they come; she dyed her gray hair, manicured her nails, but don't get in her way on the basketball court. And what about in bed? What about the classic butch, who in bed becomes a femme fatale? And the femmiest femme around who transforms into a massive stud in the boudoir?

As I washed off the remaining hairs from my newly purchased Lady Gillette, the one with the aloe strip that soothes as it scrapes away stubble, I realized that this business of butch-femme was not going to be solved during one afternoon of leg shaving, not, at any rate, by me. I had too many unresolved feelings. And feelings, don't even get me started. Feelings are supposed to be in the femme domain, the place in which she soothes her tormented butch, leading the way for greater acceptance of the way of the heart. Well, throw this into the mix. What if the femme just happens to be a Gemini: good at analyzing, dissecting, and discussing feelings, but not so good at having them? And what if the butch is a double Pisces: a mush ball just waiting to happen? What does that do to your femme-butch balance?

That summer, the summer I shaved my legs, I wore 100 percent cotton underwear, my black satin boxer shorts, my Italian t-shirt, sweat socks, and my Avia running shoes. I slathered my face with Neutrogena Moisture, and hung my crystal earrings, the silver ones with the fairies, from my ears. I buckled my lavender fanny pack around my waist and wondered if anyone would notice my legs. It was weeks before my habitual feeling of self-consciousness dissipated with constant reminders that my legs were now just like everyone else's. Did I feel any better? Well, maybe a little more comfortable. And I did wear a skirt to Elaine's wedding. Did that make me clearer about being a femme? Maybe. And isn't it easier to be a femme, easier to pass as straight and not get called "sir" or "dyke" or "queer" on the street? Don't people mind less if you're a femmy dyke, than if you're a butchy dyke, because it's ultimately the gender role that must remain intact at all costs? It's when you push boundaries of gender that people freak out. Could I ever be brave enough to look as butch as I sometimes feel? Do I hide behind my femme exterior? And is appearance what makes the woman? Aren't there butches who look femme and vice versa? Perhaps shaving my legs solved nothing, but instead only served as a catalyst, to bring to light all the complexities for deeper, more accurate investigation. But it sure did feel purifying. And, in a strange way, liberating not to be tied to a decision I had made as a 21-year-old.

When September rolled around and I could safely stop shaving, I did. Now that winter is here and my legs are hairy again, am I less femme? I doubt it. Will I shave again when summer returns? Perhaps.

"Is this a problem for you?" my lover asked in bed last night.

"What do you mean?" I stalled for time.

"You seem upset by the fact that you're a femme."

"Well, I am. I mean, how am I supposed to know how to act, how to dress, how to be? Where are my role models, now that my role models are gone, gone?" I couldn't help breaking into song.

My lover, who says she's butch, has always been butch, has always known she was butch, looks me right in the eye and says, pointing to my heart:

"Who you are comes from in here, not from out there."

In my discomfort, not with the truth of what she says, but with how well she knows me, I turn away. Secretly, I am thankful to have found a butch who is not only femmy enough to be a match for this butchy femme, but who also shares my passion for M&M's. Plain *and* Peanut.

A.J. Potter

## French Fries and Fingernail Polish

So, I saw her in a Burger King. I know, I know. I shouldn't have been in the place anyway. But I *was* there, and so was she: a vision over french fries. Smooth, ebony hair like the classic romance novel waterfall, cascading over shoulders and back. Pale, angular face perfectly made-up. To the hilt. And as graceful hands lifted to lipsticked lips, the dagger nails glinted and hit me as forcefully as if they were scratching my cheek. Blood red perfect ovals.

So how come I fall for what I don't want in myself?

Now that is not entirely fair. I'm being a tiny bit hypocritical. I freely acknowledge that it is the elusive femme fatale quality I seek in others; it sucks me in and pulls me under and washes over me with smooth, sensual, candy pink waves. She who is utterly She glances at me over a water-speckled shoulder and plunges beneath the crests with fluked tail slapping the roiling surface. The salt spray stings my eyes, and though I've always hated deep water with the passion born of fear, the lure coaxes me out to dive and follow. Ever follow.

No, I do not argue that it is truly femmes that catch my fancy. My hypocrisy lies with that disclaimer: why do I fall for what I don't want in myself? The femme within me has always been the hardest to deal with. I've drowned her more than once and she resurfaces with amazing regularity.

My eyes widened as they focused and refocused over Mira's left shoulder. "Oh, ouch. Check it out."

Mira slid a subtle glance backwards. Her eyebrows rose and her nose wrinkled. "Christ, she's straight."

"You think?" That day my quarter-inch nails patterned the table with tiny hoofbeats as my gaze remained unwavering on the French Fry Vision.

"Come on. It's fucking obvious. She looks like a kept woman."

"Oh please. Just because she's not *your* type doesn't mean you have to write her off as somebody's mistress." Though I had to admit, in the floor-length, black coat she did look the pampered part. At least until the washed-out, placidly beige guy she was with settled across from her. I

snorted. "Well, you may have her pegged for straight, but if that guy's her keeper I'm Mother Teresa." Mira lost it. I narrowed my eyes and stared her down into smothered snickers. "It wasn't *that* funny."

"You as a nun? Oh, yes, it was."

Today I can trace with my rounded fingertip, with barely a millimeter of white nail, the rosy lines on my mental map that lead to my initial distaste for the classically feminine. The tomboy was my ideal in life and I worked at it with the fervor I poured into every success. I just never *quite* made this one. I had the short hair. I hated the dresses. I repudiated girlish stereotypes with an inborn feminism that originated long before I could ever articulate it. My poor dear mother adored all shades of pink, and from the time I could politely do so, I refused each and every one. I turned against lace and frills and shriveled with disappointment every time I read another coming-of-age book that implicitly defined maturing as accepting the dress and discovering the life-changing forces of eyeshadow and blush, lipstick and foundation. And yet...

"Why do you go for *that* anyway?" Mira asked with unconcealed distaste, trying to pull my attention back to the table.

"What can I say." I still stared lazily at the Vision, and answered her halfheartedly. "I want a woman that looks like a woman."

Wrong thing to say. Mira pounced. "And what does *a woman* look like, may I ask?"

"Oh, you know what I mean."

"Ha! You want a woman that looks like what men have decided women *should* look like. You are *so* shallow. You totally buy into this society's standards of female attractiveness. You swallow them hook, line, and sinker."

Well, she had my attention. "Don't you think that's giving men just a little bit too much credit?" My classic comeback. Mira rolled her eyes.

I made a valiant effort at the tomboy thing, honestly I did. I fished and biked and vilified all things feminine. I would not play with baby dolls, I had no desire to be a little mother. Ah, but my Barbie dolls. Well, they *were* safari guides and could kick Ken's ass at anything. I tried. But those fashions were amazingly seductive, and that hair ... And as it happens, sports just never quite worked for me. And I really didn't *like* getting my hands dirty.

Mira hunched back and sucked sullenly at the straw embedded in her shake.

"Come on, Mira. Can you honestly tell me you're totally immune to appearances? Looks? Beauty?"

"No. I just don't place quite so much emphasis on them, and I like to think I have a more inclusive definition of woman. I certainly have a broader definition of beauty."

“Okay, fine. I’m totally brainwashed, I’m completely at the mercy of the advertised culture of conspicuous consumption.” I ignored her muttered “At least you can admit it.” “I think a leg on a high heel looks sexy. I like Victoria’s Secret. Sue me.”

She lounged back in the corner of her booth seat to give me a clearer view of My Lady in Black and regarded me from under lazy lids. “I don’t suppose it would hold up in court.”

I suppose it was inevitable, with as many older sisters as I have, that the sway would occur with a vengeance. I was wearing three-inch heels in the fifth grade. My nails were the best in school. Long, sharp, lovingly shaped, carefully painted. I was so proud of the fact that my mother didn’t have any of those silly hang-ups about makeup on young women. She was simply very clear: if we were going to use it, we were to use it well. And we did. My hair grew out. Earrings appeared. Blue eyeshadow became a staple. I shaved early, thighs included. And yet...

I railed against the weight obsession of the family. Breaking nails pissed me off. I still reviled girlish stereotypes, and argued in seventh grade that women should be allowed into combat. A male classmate’s remark that women would be useful at the front, as bed warmers, fanned the flame that has burned behind my breastbone from as far back as I can remember. The fire scorching my throat that no amount of saltwater spray can dampen. My hatred for chauvinism was matched only by my deeper, more painful hatred of every woman who ever bought into the morass of self-denigration. (And who did I think I was denigrating with that hatred? you may ask. Ah, but I was so young and black-and-white. I hadn’t yet developed my love affair with shades of gray.) I fought the asinine comments of my male counterparts, and seethed at the cloying patronization that oozed from completely oblivious male teachers.

“What interests me,” Mira was speculating now, twisting french fries into bow ties, “is not so much what you find attractive, but how you can’t decide where you are.”

“Oh, I’ve decided. Didn’t you know? I’m a dedicated fence-sitter. Didn’t they used to call my kind kiki? Do they still? You know. It’s the Libra in me. Androgyny is the spice of life.”

And so high school descended and politics began to find solid ground. The art of makeup was perfected, not to mention the absolute *science* of walking down freshly waxed school hallways in pumps ending in skinny little death-defying points. My nails remained a positive danger. I wore miniskirts and nylons. The latter I grew to completely despise; the former I still adore. Unfortunately they tend to go together. The hair went short again, but the blow-dryer and curling iron were drafted into daily use. I tried mascara, but it itched. The weight obsession nibbled at the edges of my mind. My utter

plainness gnawed gaping holes in my gut. I slid into secretarial training and dressed the part. Simultaneously, I flowed into feminism and felt as if I had finally been poured into the correctly shaped container.

I altered my approach to makeup. First I moved to coppers, bronzes, rusty browns, and deep forest greens. No more placid blue Barbie brows and pink shell nails. Slowly, ever slowly, I began to use less and less, and to write it off as a bow to my sensitive skin.

As college began, the heels disappeared. Suddenly it was imperative that there be no artifice at all, and the eyeshadows bit the dust for good. The nails rejected paint, and the clipping began. Just as suddenly, with no real planning involved, the shaving ended. Period, no more. I don't believe I wore a dress for three years running. And yet ... the hair grew, and grew.

“Do you decide every morning which it's going to be?” Mira was half grinning, and tongued the straw again. “Butch today, femme tomorrow?”

“My hair won't cooperate with that scenario. I could cut it overnight but growing it is a bit more time-intensive. Jes' call me a butchy femme.” I twisted the said locks about my fingers and watched, transfixed, as the Vision's inky strands were brushed back absently, scarlet daggers a momentary sheen. For some insane reason the Clue game popped into my head: Miss Scarlet with the Dagger in the Fast-Food Restaurant...

I remember the initial confusion well, when the walls finally came down and I found myself completely intoxicated and infatuated with half the women in my Women's History class. I backfloated through a time of drifting toward the short short haircuts, the young women who could pass for young men. But whom did I dive off the deep end for? The utter She across the table with long dark hair and a figure like ... well, anyway.

I remember trying to write about this first woman I ended up with a mouthful of sand for, and finding the words unwieldy in my mouth. No wonder: these were classic definitions of female beauty, that which I had absorbed as male-defined and male-articulated. How could I use these words on her? And how could I fall for these traits? Where was this shallowness, this fixation on appearance, rising from? This obsession with *feminine*?

But the trend continued, and my tastes solidified. Lo and behold, it is femmes through and through.

“Just because men define something as beautiful doesn't mean it's not beautiful, you know.”

“Oh, I know. You're change-ing the sub-ject,” Mira singsonged. “I know you're perfectly capable of arguing all day about why you're justified in panting after her. But I believe we had moved on to the question of you?”

“I told you. There is no question. I'm just ... who the hell knows where.” Dropping my chin on my hand, I watched the white paper cup in Fry Lady's talons come away with an imprint of red lips.

"You're growing your nails, you're wearing eyeliner, you can't let go of that hair. I believe I've even seen a lipstick in that bag!"

"And I still don't shave and I still cross-dress and I still don't wear anything *but* eyeliner. And that lipstick has been used a total of three times."

"Details, details..."

She was right. Although I did end up cutting my nails again. They just get in my way. Damned inconvenient little suckers. But it's more than just the accoutrements. It's the attitude. It's slipping into the little-girlish aspect without even thinking about it. I cock my head, widen my eyes, change my voice, and free-fall back into a role that curls around me like my old smock dress decorated with the rose and peach and soft melon birds. I can be a different person literally in the bat of an eyelash.

And this other aspect rises up in relationships, too. I keep ducking her under but she breaks the surface again and again to gasp for breath and grin at me, with sparkling eyes outlined in waterproof mascara.

"A femme who's into femmes and hates being femme. You gotta admit, it's quirky." As she propped her feet on the booth seat, Mira's denim-covered knees interfered with my viewing pleasure.

"I wouldn't automatically categorize myself as a femme."

"Oh, I know," Mira grinned.

I sat a bit taller and shifted forward, trying not to be too obvious, but fascinated by the precise manner in which Those Nails cradled the indeterminate Burger King sandwich. "And I don't hate being femme."

"Of course you don't."

"I defy categorization."

"You do, indeed."

"What I hate is all this labeling."

Mmmm-hmmm, she can hold her breath longer than anyone I know, this other me. This inside girl who won't insist on being called Woman. Just when I think she's gone for good she comes back with a vengeance, and each time reasserts herself with a little more self-assurance. Looking me in the eye and saying, "I'm not going to put up with your being disgusted with me and embarrassed by me. You might as well love me, because I'm not going to leave you."

Maybe I'm just narcissistic. I look in the water and see my reflection and want someone who embodies my own internal diversity. Or is it confusion? Either way. Someone who understands.

Well, anyway, I'm working on it. Working to reclaim the hated feminine particulars. Because what are the pieces I despise so much? The vulnerability. Dependence. The neediness. Emotionality. The crying. The softness.



“I really don’t mind the idea of being a femme so much, you know.” I swiveled my head as Her Loveliness flowed to her feet and coasted across the room toward the door in a swirl of shadowy coat and hair. “I just need something to argue with myself about.”

Mira laughed out loud. “And you do it so well. Argue with yourself, that is.” Observing my angled line of sight, she clutched a theatrical hand to her chest. “I take it she’s leaving?”

“Bite it. I’m in pain here.”

And so My Lady of the Deep Water slices through the waves with her hair billowing about her face and shoulders, her hips and shimmering tail fin undulating. She turns, lifts her arms, catches me up, and presses her lips to mine, parting them with her tongue. Breathing into me she breathes life again into that girl lying in wait, teaching her how to breathe under water and survive the depths. So that’s how the little dickens has managed to hang on for so long. Both of me chase her as she breaks away with a twist of her tail, and plunges once again. Ah yes, we both know what we like, and we definitely like the same thing. No matter how we define ourselves, She floats before us with that air of danger, with that sheen of surface lure, with those unexpected depths.

Linda L. Wiggin

## *Stalking the Wild Femme*

I moved to Cape Cod in the spring of 1992. My marriage of six years had become about as exciting as a rubbery poached egg, and for the last three years of it, I had spent so much time watching women that I came home one evening and called my husband Donna instead of David.

I knew then it was time to move on, and I did: to tiny Provincetown, my dreams of long-haired, beautiful females (and plenty of sun) dancing in my head.

I have to admit, I feel uncomfortable with terms like *femme*, *dyke*, and *butch*. But if I had to pick the category that I am in, femme would be it. I have a deep voice and an aggressive personality, but I also have long hair, long legs, and I wouldn't give my lip gloss up for any person on earth. Except Kathleen Turner, or maybe Shannen Doherty, who would probably steal all my makeup and cigarettes anyway, as soon as we got out of bed.

I have always been in awe of feminine women. I have this fetish for long, silky hair; flat stomachs; and teasing, coy gestures. I love the feel of their hair on my own belly. I love it when they gently wipe mascara remnants off my skin. I love how proud they are of their femininity, and how they are able to assert themselves and take charge.

Sigh!

My first lover was femme, but in a gravelly, tough-kitten kind of way. She spotted me sitting at the corner table of a tiny Harvard Square diner where I was poring over a huge text on the Italian Renaissance. She told me later I had looked very serious and pedantic that day. Luckily for me, she saw something beneath the surface that was encouraging, and she sauntered over and introduced herself.

I remember looking up at her, and my stomach doing a slow, delicious flip-flop. Pamela was very blonde, and her clothes were very black. Her skin was soft and flawless, and she wore the meanest combat boots I've ever seen. Imagine a young Grace Kelly in leather and studs, and that would describe Pamela.

What made Pam a femme was not her looks per se, but the look in her eyes, and the amount of eye makeup she wore. It was also in the way she approached me. Bold but quiet, shy but determined. And the whiff I got of her perfume: Opium, and Opium only. I learned in future months never to put on perfume, because I knew I'd eventually be drenched with hers. And on nights it wasn't Opium, it was ... well, the only scent I know that is spicier.

My resistance was low that night, and the prospect of sleeping with — no, merely *kissing* — another woman got me so flustered I dropped my monster-sized textbook on her foot. That's where the combat boots came in handy. She didn't feel a thing, and she smiled as she brushed my leg while she was bending down to retrieve it for me.

I made more love with Pamela than with anyone else I've been with, before or since. We sequestered ourselves nightly in her small Cambridge walk-up, with its sinister-looking spider plants and photos of Bali. She made me homemade soup and bread; I ate it from her scented hand, her mother's string of pearls dangling in my face. I drank Drambuie out of her navel. She dipped fresh strawberries into my juices and ate them with painfully slow abandon.

We rolled around in our lacy underwear on her carpet, the Italian tile in the bathroom, and her huge brass bed. By the time we parted company months later, her goose-down comforter was stained in places too numerous to mention, and my thighs were permanently tattooed with Pamela's thick, ever-present eyeliner.

Living in P-town has yielded some, shall we say, flavorful experiences in my quest to find the perfect femme for me. Here in town, you can never tell who is straight, gay, or in between, so I have learned to be bold in approaching straight-looking, pretty girls.

One night in the middle of winter, I was shooting pool with some friends at the local straight bar and joking around with several men while I mopped them up at eight ball. This attractive woman began circulating among them, flirting with each one, until she had them all lathered up and loitering around her, buying her drinks. I stayed quietly to myself, glancing at her and smiling every now and then. I was wondering who the lucky guy would be.

But what happened floored all of us. While I was sitting at the bar, waiting for my turn, she came up to *me* and began to flirt! In a minute, we were giggling. In two minutes, we were touching each other and giggling. In five minutes, with all my male pals looking on aghast, she and I were kissing. I took her home and we had a juicy, jolly time.

Of course, there have been plenty of times I have lost out to butchy women and seen heart-melting femmes walk away when I thought I had them in my clutches for sure. I could never understand why they would flirt with me if their true preference was for truck-driving types, but then again, who understands the laws of attraction, anyway?

My butch friend, Cathy, ribbed me about this one night as we were sharing a pot of coffee at Friendly's.

"So, Lin, how many honeys have you been turned down by this week?" She laughed and offered me a Sherman.

"Only one that counts," I replied, accepting the cigarette gratefully. "Gayle said she wanted to go out Friday, but then she never called me back, and I saw her at Tracks with the scariest-looking woman in four counties." I shuddered, and we both shook our heads woefully.

“Cut your hair, babe,” Cathy advised me. “You’re too femme for that little femme. She needs to feel protected, not like she’s competing with you for the title of Miss Victoria’s Secret.”

“Shut up,” I told her. “I’ll *never* cut my hair, and that hair of mine will be resting on some hot woman’s butt before long. I guarantee it.” Actually, I was fearing that it might never happen again, but in dealing with friends like Cathy, a certain amount of bravado is required, and expected.

Cath could sense my anxiety. “Hey, Linda. Come on. You’re right. Those little femmy girls just don’t know what they’re missing. Besides,” she smirked, “I know you’ve got a little bit of butch in you. Don’t deny it.” She paid for our coffee, clapped me on the back, and strode off to her new girlfriend, who was a stunning version of my own fantasy girl: long blonde hair, fake lashes, tight miniskirts on a Saturday night. I was jealous, but it didn’t do me any good. Being jealous of butch conquests is the story of my life.

But all is not lost. Every cloud has its silver lining, and no clouds have been raining on my love life lately. I am dating this petite little babe who loves to make me up and let me brush the auburn locks that hang to her waist. Cathy — and those hapless straight men from my pool hall days — are the ones who are envious now. But that’s okay. I’m too busy to notice, as I spend most nights dancing with the woman of my dreams, our long hair swinging wildly as Melissa Etheridge urges us on.



*Tristan and Audrey*

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Jeminie Shell

Mary Frances Platt

## *Jennifer's Gift*

*For the bi-girl of my dreams,  
Jennifer*

*I*t's quite embarrassing writing a poem about your effect on me,  
after just one night and only a little loving.  
Meeting petite femmy you  
was like inhaling mountain summit air for the very first time.

I have lain with more than a few women.  
Beautiful women, attractive women, handsome women, cute women.  
Women whose beauty was seen by only a few.  
Never have I been with a pretty woman.  
I usually wear that sign with handsome butch in tow.

You are the femmiest woman who has ever shared my bed.  
Thin to my fat, small to my large,  
Ten to my eight on the butch-femme scale.  
The voices I thought had been exorcised long ago  
whisper loudly in my ear:  
What is she doing with you, one so pretty could have  
any butch on this festival land, why choose fat femme disabled you?

I hear your words and you are confusing me.  
I have disability pride.  
I've been learning to love my fat self for years.  
Sometimes my mirror reflects beauty.  
How can a femme desire a femme?  
This is shaking up my whole femme-wants-butch routine.

"You're so sexy, Mary Frances," she says.  
"I could look into your eyes forever," she croons.  
One night to come to terms with pretty femme on pretty femme.  
One night to push away the you're-not-as-desirable lies.  
One night to remove shock at being chosen by you.

Early morning after first night's love I exclaim,  
Do you know how many butches would kill to be between us two?  
The dreamtime healing and sleeping in your arms makes me know  
that it is not one but two pretty women,  
sleepy and satisfied  
who could set an army of butches' hearts on fire.

Perhaps now I understand why,  
throughout our poor and working-class dyke herstory  
butch women have put their lives on the line  
for the love of one good femme.  
Sweet feminine caregiving don't-take-shit-from-no-one femme women.  
You reflect me, and I like being on the receiving end of this stream.  
Have I forgone it all these years for fear of girl on girl competition  
when it wasn't even so very hard to overcome?

Not to worry, all you handsome ones.  
I will never not desire butch on femme.  
Will always want to be fucked senseless  
by the likes of boyish you.  
Will continually let my cunt make decisions  
my head should overrule.  
Femme on femme is not a threat to you.  
It's going home  
finding the bed warm and made,  
hot tea on the table,  
woodsmoke in the air,  
rose petals in the bath.  
It's a celebration,  
of the beauty and likeness of me.

PART V

*The Better  
to Kiss You with,  
My Dear*



## *Lipstock*

*I*'ve discovered lipstick,  
the endless reds and blues of lipstick,  
colors, shades, and hues of lipstick &  
all the ways to apply lipstick.  
As there's more than one way to obtain lipstick  
and a number of ways to explain lipstick,  
there's no end to the ways one can try lipstick,  
enhance lipstick, maintain lipstick.  
You should never feel that your lips must stick  
to one brand, one color, or style of lipstick,  
nor to one mere mode of applying lipstick.  
There are as many ways to enjoy lipstick  
as pairs of lips which employ lipstick.  
There are lipstick sonnets on rounded hips.  
Graffiti over striptease strips.  
Lipstick odes on lower lips.  
Lipstick braille on nipple tips.  
And smooth, unzipped limericks.  
There's dyke lipstick and fey lipstick,  
Cliché Lipstick, Risqué Lipstick,  
Lose-Your-Head Lipstick,  
Knock-'Em-Dead Lipstick,  
and Strangle-the-President-in-Bed lipstick.  
But my favorite lipstick is *your* lipstick.  
I believe it's a Christian Dior lipstick.

That bright heated tube in your right pocket's hip  
rockets red on the launch pad of your smooth socket slip.  
Makes my heart miss its beat like a radar screen's blip  
when it comes into range of your slick red sputnik  
which descends for the kill on my landing pad strip  
crashing down your lipstick on my unlipsticked lips.

There's a little known trick that lipstick can inflict  
which can place you at risk as a lipstick convict:  
it's a strong tendency to obsess and addict

for there's no surefire way to extract lipstick  
from the mind of a moll with exact lipstick  
that's been smoothed bit by bit like cement between brick  
by a glamorized dyke's hyperfetishized lips.

Karen Lee Erlichman

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## *Lips*

*Thanks to Denise Harvey*

I know,  
it's politically incorrect  
but  
I love to wear red lipstick  
bright red lipstick  
red like the first tulips of spring  
red like a succulent cherry pie  
fresh from the oven, steaming  
These lips are my most sacred and dangerous weapon  
and I adore them  
adorn them  
indulge them  
with whispered words of love  
cries of pleasure  
delicious treasures  
Inside these lips live the words of a devious mind  
my fierce heart  
my wicked passion  
Inside these lips live my teeth and tongue  
the better to kiss you with, my dear  
I keep a tray full of lipsticks at home  
a red rainbow from brick to fuchsia  
Depending on my mood  
I'll select a color  
face the mirror  
open my mouth ever so slightly  
and paint my lips with great delight  
I'll mix and match  
And nothing pleases me  
teases me more than to have my lipstick kissed off  
our mouths smeared with evidence  
like kids with our faces full of forbidden chocolate  
So I intend to keep on misbehaving

wearing my lipstick  
bursting red  
leaving my trademark kisses on my beloved  
in as many places as I can reach

Elisabeth Freeman

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## *My Bed of Roses*

When I first saw you, it was your ruby red delicious lips that caught my eye. Those precious lips, coloured like a ripe, red apple, just inviting me to take a bite. I wanted to lick them like a cherry Popsicle, to suck them into my mouth and never let go.

You pouted those red jewels so expertly that day, they protruded so eloquently as if speaking poetry to me. My mind was reeling, my heart racing, my tongue aching to touch yours between those lips. I remember the first time I watched you put on your lipstick. I stood awestruck behind you, drinking in your reflection as you carefully smoothed the bright red paint over those already bright red lips, puckering quickly afterwards and then inspecting with a hint of a smile. You knew exactly what you were doing with those lips, didn't you, so it will not surprise you in the least to know I fell in love with you for your perfectly adorned mouth.

You're so mysterious, so elusive and yet so spellbinding, I cannot look away. And your lips are even more divine when softly brushing against mine, lightly caressing; their feathery touch sends tingles through my body. How hot they feel against my skin when they eagerly search for my tongue, when they cover my face, my neck, my mouth with firm kisses. When I look at myself and see traces of your lips left in ruby red on my skin, I never want to wash them off, but rather leave them as your signature on my body. I can already see your sign around the house, a constant and wonderful reminder of your perfumed presence. I can see you on the wineglass, left in perfect replica; how delicate your stain on the fine edge. I envy the glass for a moment, hoping it shared the ecstasy that I feel when your lips rest gently on my edges. I see you in the tissue on the sink, a quick red smear and smudge. When I try dabbing the tissue on my cheek to transfer you there, I am reminded of your quick kisses as you leave, the lingering caress when you return. My greatest pleasure is to coax your lips to follow my body to all extremes, to watch them envelop my fingers and toes as you look at me, returning lust and intoxication in your own eyes.

Your lips form a perfect bed of roses for me to surrender and fall into.

Su Penn

## *Lipstick*

I pull my lipstick out of my bag. My lover is across the room. We're separated by music, smoke, crowds of other women. I roll the lipstick up from its tube, spread it generously on my lower lip, press my lips together, and delicately fill in the arches of my Cupid's bow with the pointed tip. As I recap the lipstick and drop it in my bag, I glance at my lover. She gives no overt sign of having noticed my slow touch-up, but her hand rests unobtrusively on her belt buckle. I bend to smooth my stocking at the ankle; from the corner of my eye I see that her fingertips are lightly stroking the inside of her thigh, near where I know the head of her cock is hidden in a fold of her black jeans. This is a part of our lovemaking. It begins in our separate houses with my lace underwear and her crisp white shirt; I can't tell you where it ends.

Watching my mother, I learned the right way to get dressed for a party without getting makeup on my nice clothes. After her shower, she left her dress for the evening hanging safely in the closet or on the back of the door until she had finished with hairspray, nail polish, and powder puffs. Of course, she put on her underthings, stockings and slip; it would be indecent to remain naked. She also slipped her feet into her pumps or high-heeled sandals, to protect her hose from runs and snags. Her white slip was a pale suggestion of that evening's dress, full or narrow where the dress would be full or narrow, slit up one side or dropping deep down her back. Her arms, shoulders, neck, and face were bare and clean.

Her hair lay tight and wet against her head, the lines from her comb visible. She stepped into the bright light of the bathroom. Her pumps clicked on the tile and her brushes and compacts of eye color and lip color clicked on the counter as she laid them out. I was breathless as I watched her lift the first jar: she would be beautiful when she left this room.

I learned this ritual from sitting in an easy chair in the corner of my mother's bedroom and watching her. I practiced it all through my teen years. In my bathroom, wearing my slip and heels, I curled my hair, running the hot comb or iron through it again and again, rolling the hot curls around my fingers. I loved the feel of the warm ringlets on my neck and shoulders, and then the shiver that ran through me when I pinned the curls up and the cool air hit the back of my neck again. I wore a pink demi-cup underwire bra that lifted my breasts from underneath, as I imagined I might hold them

in my hands to offer them to a lover. I dusted their tops with soft beige powder the color of my skin, the inner curves with blush a shade or so darker, to deepen my cleavage. The bra's clasp was in front, between the cups, and when I unsnapped it with two fingers, my breasts fell out, apples from an overturned bushel basket, loose gems from a velvet bag, tumbling out for my lover to catch. I practiced that movement over and over in my mirror.

I loved the greasy act of putting on makeup. I pulled all my colors out of the drawer, arranged them before me, opened all the compacts, and considered their contents. I was willing to make up, take it all off, and make up again to get it right. I sometimes spent whole evenings trying out new ways to wear eyeshadow and new lipstick colors. From magazines for girls, I learned to smooth foundation under my chin, down my neck, around to the back, and into my hairline. Its ending had to be a secret; no one should see the line. Powder followed, then blush in two shades: lighter on my cheekbones, darker blush below to create shadows, and under my jawline to define it. I brushed on eyeshadow in four stages, and dipped my eyebrow brush in sugar water. Once dry, it kept each shiny hair in place. I pulled my lower eyelids down and smeared eyeliner pencil inside, behind the roots of my eyelashes. I was extravagant; I wore lipliner pencil and two lipsticks at a time: the lower lip one shade darker to make it look swollen and pouty, like I'd already been kissing for hours.

Eventually, I discovered department store cosmetics, and stopped buying waxy two-dollar lipsticks at Perry Drug. I threw away my Revlon eyeshadows and the cheap plastic applicators with sponge-rubber tips that had come with them. In Hudson's Aisles of Beauty, the applicators for the blushes and eyeshadows were bits of soft chamois cloth on smooth wood or brushes sold separately. Some were made from real hair, like artists' brushes, and they were round, flat, angled, and beveled. There were tiny brushes for liquid eyeliner and huge soft brushes for loose powder. Loose powder! That was a revelation. I gladly abandoned pressed powder compacts, with their abrasive puffs and powder that clumped and streaked on my face and neck. Loose powder came in a beautiful widemouthed jar. I loved to unscrew its lid, plunge the brush in, tap off the excess, and brush the powder on with a light motion of my wrist, rapid and even, from my forehead to the top of my bra, where it felt tickly and sexy.

The lipsticks at Hudson's were heavy and greasy. They were meant to stay on for hours without drying, to soften and ease the friction of two mouths connecting. I loved those lipsticks. I could spread samples from the testers up the back of my hand nearly to my elbow, studying my skin tone, comparing the colors. Even the powder eyeshadows were moist, clinging to my eyelids like humid air. Cheap cosmetics were stiff and powdery; they flaked if I smiled, frowned, or talked too much. Good makeup was a soft veil; the weight of it pulled my eyelids to sleepy half-mast.

I learned to be sexy from my mother, leaning toward her mirror in her slip with a lipstick in her hand. My mother in her slip turned me on. I wanted to be sexy that way, my lipstick a challenge and a declaration: yes, I know I'm sexy. I dare you to look at me. I dare you to look away.





*Lipstick and Lace*

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Mary Vazquez

Pamela Kimmell

## *The Ritual*

The sound of her step on the bottom stair is my signal. I'm up and out of the tub, toweling dry and reaching for my robe, by the time her foot touches the top step. I hear the dressing room door open as I tie the belt. This is raw silk, rough against my erect nipples, preparing me. With three silent steps, I cross the dark hall, slip through the door, and slide into the dark corner chair behind her.

Already dressed in her simple, black, silk slip, she sits at the low dressing table, her back to me, her face lit. She ignores me completely. I settle in my seat so I can see all three of her reflections in the mirrors. She is intent on choosing from among the squat bottles of foundation. I love this step. Gals with nails hold their fingers straight, almost arched back, to grasp things with the pads of the fingers. Plucking a bottle with her right forefinger and thumb, she pinches the bottom with her left forefinger and thumb; twists and lays down the top; and takes the bottle between her right thumb and second finger, all in one quick, graceful swoop. Snapping the bottle twice, she dots the foundation on cheeks, forehead, nose, and chin, and blends it into her skin.

The brush box is next. I made it for her as my first creation with the Dremel tool she gave me. "Every butch needs a Dremel," she laughed. "Now make me something unique!" The three-drawer polished wood and inlaid agate box has an individual slot for each of her makeup brushes, plus a few extras. She said I could make a fortune if I made them to sell. I told her it was important to me that her box was unique, so I never made another. Selecting a small dauber and box of many eyeshadow colors, she gently strokes color on her eyelids, light under the brows, greens to set off her green eyes. Tonight is an exotic art show opening, so the eyes are dramatic. She is completely focused on this creation: I am but a watching wraith. Fingers still pointed, she lifts a slim paintbrush from the box. She strokes dark brown eyeliner on next with that amazingly steady hand. I always marvel at this point, remembering my own bungling attempts to use eye makeup during my hippie-chick days. Needless to say, I opted for the "natural look," as they called it then. She, on the other hand, has not presented a bare face to the world since eighth grade, and I can't get enough of watching her create exactly the face she wants the world to see.

She applies mascara to her lashes, lightly brushing first the right, upper and lower, then the left. Then she repeats the movement with another color.

Her eyelashes grow long, thick, and deadly. This femme knows how to turn those eyes into the power to compel me to do anything. Glad to be invisible, I draw my hands over my body, bringing out memories and sensations I relish in secret.

Opening the brush box once again, she picks up the biggest, roundest, softest brush. During one of our little games, I felt this brush all over my body, and it was exquisite. I cherish this memory as it shudders through my body. Now she twists open a small round box, and lightly dips, then strokes, a swish of color across her cheeks. She taps the brush against the leg of the dressing table, strokes her cheeks again, gently lays it back in the box, and picks up a thin paintbrush.

Opening her mouth, she outlines her full lips with a deep red. Then she twists up a slut red lipstick, and, with two almost nonchalant swipes, completes the perfect mouth. No matter how much kissing she does in an evening, she can always fix her mouth in seconds.

She stands and stretches, both arms reaching above her head. Slowly, her back still to me, she sits again, picks up and shakes out a filmy black stocking. Turning sideways, she gathers it up, never snagging it with her nails. In fact, she never snags anything with those nails. She tucks her right foot into the stocking, stretches her long leg out, points her toe, and smooths the stocking up to the garters. Zip-zap, they're fastened! After repeating these steps with the other leg, she stands, steps into the deep red, three-inch heels, then sits again. She studies her reflection carefully, intently. Then, with the ring finger of her right hand, she rubs her bottom lip. At that moment she looks up, catching me full in the eye, and says, "Don't you think you'd better get ready?" And she gives me that look, you know, the one that says, "You're a strange butch, but you're all mine, and I love you..."

I stand and walk over to her. Putting my hands on her shoulders, I lean down and inhale all the sweet, musky, makeup-y smells that surround her. I start to kiss that neck, those shoulders. She leans into me, accepts my kisses for a few seconds, then turns, grabs my chin, and says, "Plenty of time for that later." She's smiling, though. And she's right. I take her hand, kiss the palm, look deep into those eyes, and head to my room.

It takes me five minutes to dab a little Rain essential oil between my breasts, throw on my clothes and a bolo tie, and comb my hair. As I pull on my boots, I hear the hair dryer. I'm taking a last, quick look in the mirror when a soft, husky voice whispers, "Hey, handsome, do you think you could help out a lady?" She is breathtaking in her simple red silk dress. I love zipping her into it and, later, zipping her out of it. Turning around, she straightens my collar, leans in to fill her nostrils with the scent of me, then smiles and gives me a "lipstick kiss." Although our lips barely touch, I'm not allowed to wipe it off, even if she has left traces of red.

As we walk downstairs, she asks, "May I put my wallet in your pocket?" Sometimes I let her and I do tonight. Femme goddess that she is,

she still thinks purses are a nuisance. I hold her coat as she slips into it, then gather her into my arms for one last inhalation of her total sweetness. We won't spend too much time together this evening, because all our friends will be there, and we must schmooze. But I know that she'll come around to me a few times, to kiss me and growl, "I want you!" And I will just smile.

Corrina Kellam

## *Downstairs in the Ladies' Room*

Manda leans in toward the smeary bathroom mirror of the Firelight Bar on Pine Street. Carefully, she reapplies her cherry plum lipstick, pushing her lips out and around to survey the job. With the pad of her pinky finger, she smooths the corner of her mouth as Sal and Carol burst in giggling, holding each other by the arm to keep from losing their balance as they totter on their Saturday night heels.

"Manda," Sal calls. "Goddess, girl, I haven't seen you in ages! You must have broken up with that no-good Allison. She was too cute and mean for her own good. How are you?"

"I'm holding in there. How about you, Carol?"

Carol has been touching up her mascara with quick strong strokes. When she looks up, her blackened lashes have taken over her face, giving her the slightly humorous angelic expression of a masked geisha girl. "Still single. Can I borrow your lipstick? It's a great color."

As Manda reaches over to hand the lipstick to Carol, the stall door suddenly opens behind her, pushing her against the water-splattered sink. Indignant, Manda turns to face the woman who did it, then squeals "Vicki!" as she grabs her in a hug.

"Manda, what brings you out tonight?" Vicki smiles to herself in the mirror over Manda's shoulder.

"I'm just looking to get into a little trouble."

"Well, don't spend all your time down here worrying over your face or you'll need a sledgehammer to get it off tomorrow," says Vicki, teasing her hair up another half inch.

"Maybe we'll find someone to help her get it off," Carol nudges Sal. "And maybe we'll find you someone to replace that noisy machine of yours. I can hear it right through the ceiling."

Sal quips, "Nobody could do me better, let me tell you. The only problem is that I've got this little blister on the tip of my middle finger. See here?" She holds her left hand under the single pool of light so they can see the sliver of white skin. "It's there, half under the nail."

"That's good?" Manda puzzles as she smooths yellowish cream over a small blemish on her jawline.

"Serves you right for wearing fake nails all the time," Vicki retorts.

"You need a different kind, one with a longer handle," Carol says as she digs through her tiny purse for her atomizer of Ysatis de Givenchy. Once found, she sprays it on the bare skin of her neck, careful not to hit her friends with her signature scent as they all lean over one other for space in the mirror.

Vicki stands back on her tiptoes to see herself better as she sprays her hair in place. "Naw," she says concentrating on her blurred reflection. "You need to hold it looser, like this." She taps Sal on the shoulder and demonstrates with her can.

"If I don't hold my wrist straight my fingers go numb."

Carol nudges her with her elbow again and says, "Nothing wrong with that."

Vicki turns her head from side to side staring at her hair intently and says to no one in particular, "Do you like this new flip in my bangs? I like how it looks, but my hair keeps falling in my face."

Manda, reapplying her lipstick now for the third time, says, "It's cute. Just don't bounce so hard when you dance."

"How else will they notice my tits?"

Everyone laughs to their shadowed reflections as the door opens. A low-pitched "Evening, ladies" greets them, and all four look over toward the unfamiliar voice. The woman striding into the small room is taller than any of her admirers, even in their heels. Her white tailored shirt is pressed and buttoned to her neck. Her confident hands bear no rings. Her boots gleam in the soft light, showing signs of careful buffing. Her long legs are wrapped in tight, black pants held in place by a wide leather belt with an American eagle buckle. A wallet chain attached to the right front belt loop is stuffed into her back pocket, the resulting arc matching the curve of her shapely ass as she disappears into the stall.

Her dark eyes haunt Manda, who remains turned to the stall door with a lazy look on her face moments after it has closed. Carol grabs her arm and says, "Quite a stud, huh?" Manda quickly turns to her, mouth slightly opened, face flushed high on her cheeks in an exaggerated postorgasmic glow. Carol grins at her.

Sal, returning to her primping, sighs. "More like a dreamboat."

"Hoping she's motor driven?" Vicki says as she peels the polish from a chipped nail and whips out a bottle from her clutch for a quick manicure. Sal shoots her a scowl and gives her a friendly shove. "Hey, watch it," Vicki yells. "My hands have to be perfect, just in case."

"In case of what?" Carol sneers, brushing her long curls. "Your landlord showing up? I thought your motto was 'I won't touch that icky stuff, but you can touch mine anytime.'"

Sal and Carol burst into giggles again and slap hands behind Vicki's head. Vicki pouts at her reflection, likes the effect, and takes a little too much time for a proper comeback, so she just smiles wickedly at Carol and says,

"I don't need to." They laugh at her again, and Sal wipes stray makeup and tears from beneath her eye with the knuckle of her index finger.

Manda has wilted into a corner, trying to stay out of the light to hide her raging blush. Sal walks over to her and says loudly, "Really, honey, you can have her. I prefer blondes." The toilet flushes behind them as Manda assumes a mortified expression and Sal turns back to the ill-lit mirror.

The woman comes out of the stall slowly, hiding Manda behind the opened door. Vicki turns to her, holding her arms folded in front of her stomach to accentuate her breasts, her lips stuck out in a twisted grin of approval. She looks her down and up deliberately before resting coyly upon her eyes. The woman quickly looks away, leans over Sal, and confidently murmurs, "Excuse me," as she situates herself in front of the lone sink. She reaches over to the soap dispenser and looks up at Manda. Then she pauses as Manda's eyes widen and she nervously steps back.

The woman turns on the water and vigorously scrubs her hands under the warm stream. Vicki mouths to Sal, "Ask for her number." Sal shakes her head, a shocked expression on her face, and mouths back, "No!" Vicki looks at Carol and shrugs, then turns back to the mirror, slyly admiring the new woman's strong features.

Carol leans against Vicki and mugs at Sal, holding her hand low in a groping position behind the woman's back as she is bent over the shallow sink. Sal and Vicki can barely contain their giggles; air escapes their tight bee-stung mouths in sharp-sounding puffs. Carol glances at the mirror with a gleeful look to find the woman looking directly at her. She sobers up and leans back against the stall.

The woman finishes washing her hands and grabs a paper towel, grinding it slowly between her fingers. She tosses the damp ball into the small trash can beneath the sink, then runs her fingers quickly through her hair, pushing it back into place. She turns to Manda and says, "I'll see you upstairs." She slides between Sal and Carol and disappears into the hall outside. Vicki looks up from the mirror at Carol and Sal, and the three laugh out loud, an appreciative gleam in their eyes. Manda gazes longingly at the closed door, her back against the cold mauve wall.

Faithe Wempen

*Don't Call Me  
Lipstick Lesbian*

**D**on't call me lipstick lesbian.

I'm a femme.

I'm a femme because of the femmes before me,  
the skirted femmes in secretarial jobs  
enduring the men's crude words and touches  
to support butches too proud to go out in drag.

The femmes who took their lovers' arms proudly in the street  
when they could have passed unnoticed,  
knowing it might mean insult — or death.

The femmes kicked out of dyke CR groups  
because they would not cut their hair and wear flannel.

Don't call me lipstick lesbian.

I'm a femme.

Femme, as in butch-femme.

I love the quiet, solid woman in jacket and tie  
with short-cropped hair and eyes full of longing.

I love the strong forearms supporting her body  
as she thrusts against me, eyes closed in concentration.

I love dancing slow, my arms around her neck, head on her lapel,  
the melting of the stone.

Lipstick lesbians are somebody else.

Maybe they're the young femmes in tight black spandex  
writhing together on the dance floor under flashing lights.

Maybe they're housewives coming out together at forty,  
wondering how it could be happening to two *normal* women.

I hope they're not those straight women in men's porn magazines  
pretending to be hot for each other while the camera clicks.

But don't call me lipstick lesbian.

I'm a femme.



Lesléa Newman

## *It's a Bitch Being Butch*

Well, me and my friend decided we were too soft, ya know  
I mean cream puff and marshmallow was an understatement, dig?  
We wanna be tough, see  
We wanna be so cool  
you catch pneumonia just by looking at us.  
So one day we go out and buy ourselves  
some black muscle t-shirts and some tight jeans  
and we put on our sneakers and our headbands  
and our mirror sunglasses  
and don't we look mighty fine swaggering up Main Street  
with our thumbs hooked in our pockets  
our keys dangling in the breeze?  
Now I have to admit I felt a little naked  
without my Mickey Mouse watch, feather earrings  
and the cute little labrys I got at the music festival last year  
but my friend says we're too cool for those kind of decorations.  
So we start cruising up the street  
and we decide we need new names, ya know?  
So now I'm Velcro and my friend is Venom.  
We don't see any dykes to show off for  
so we go get some coffee and I make sure  
no one hears me order decaf.  
And as we leave the place I'm so busy being cool  
I don't even notice the sliding glass door  
is shut and I slam right into it  
spilling decaf all over my brand-new black muscle tee  
and Venom starts laughing so hard  
she pees in her brand-new tight jeans.  
Well, we cut out for home then  
and we pass some women sitting outside the movie theatre  
laughing and carrying on some  
but they sure do hush up fast  
and their eyes open wide  
when we turn the corner  
and they start wondering  
who are these new dykes in town?

And as we get closer  
one of them starts to laugh  
and another one says, "You look adorable,"  
and I say, "Adorable? Humph!" and they laugh even more.  
"I'm Velcro and this is Venom," I say,  
standing with one hip thrust out  
and my thumb pointing at Venom as if I was hitchhiking  
down some dusty road not giving a shit  
if I never get picked up.  
So they all start laughing some more  
except this one girl I've never seen before.  
This girl is standing there in boots and a black leather jacket  
with a tattoo crawling up her arm and across her chest  
disappearing inside her tank top  
where my eyes would sure like to follow.  
Well, this girl is as quiet and as cool  
as a cat stalking a cockroach  
and me and Venom almost choke on our gum  
when someone tells us she just rode her motorcycle  
here all the way from San Francisco.  
Suddenly me and Venom feel real tired.  
We're ready to go home and go to bed.  
"Do you sleep in baby-doll pj's?"  
the women ask us  
as we walk off  
their laughter tickling the back of our necks  
like a warm summer breeze.  
And when we get home Venom takes off  
her headband and rubs her temples  
and I get into bed with my big old teddy bear  
and we decide next week we'll really show them  
when we get all dressed up for the big dance  
in gold lamé gowns  
with high-heeled shoes to match.

Melinda Goodman

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## *You Think You're the Butch*

*Y*ou think you're the butch  
'cause you're tall and lean—  
with muscled construction arms  
that hold my hands down hard  
till I break your grip  
hug you close till you come inside  
slap your ass  
till my palms burn deep  
pour out of myself  
while you kiss my neck  
leave your suck print  
like I'm never going home.

You think you're the butch  
when your mouth curls at the corners  
like money on fire  
your eyes take flight  
glide like hawks on warm smoke  
currents of our laughter.  
My tongue works its hips  
between your long strong fingers  
making them shimmer  
making them bend their shaky knees  
till you claw off my lip  
while I swallow your mean streak.

You think you're the butch  
but I lay you out  
touch you wet  
make you wait  
take you slow  
defy the gravitational pull of your thighs  
right arm cradling your waist  
left pinky barely grazing your clit  
I slip the black bra away with my finger  
stroke your nipple still tender from yesterday

swear today I'll be gentle  
so gentle  
you hold your breast to my lips  
feed my circling searching tongue  
close my eyes to your steady beat  
thump like a woman with a hungry child  
bang yourself open  
like kitchen cabinets at ground zero  
casting every cake mix into the blast.

You think you're the butch  
but I watch when you cook  
humming a wordless worldless jingle—  
you swing your hips  
to the stir of the spoon

every time I  
lick the bowl.

Liz O'Lexa

## *Let Me Be the Femme*

**B**e the butch for me  
put your fingers inside me  
take the responsibility  
say you want me  
make me feel beautiful  
ask me if I want you  
let me tell you yes  
be the butch for me

You said what's wrong now is  
there are no more "gay" bars,  
no more women's bars.  
Today we have lesbian-feminists  
who won't take the responsibility  
for sex  
who don't believe in courtship,  
who don't believe in one who  
says no and one who says yes.

Be the butch for me  
put your fingers inside me  
take the responsibility  
kiss me with your tongue &  
with your hips & arms & belly  
let me feel all your strength  
let me submit to you  
be the butch for me

You said there used to be five  
women's bars here, all butch-femme  
and you stopped going to the bars  
when the last one closed.  
Now you don't drink and neither of us knows  
if we still remember how to dance  
'cause it's been so long.  
Can't we just try a slow dance?

Lock your arms around me  
I'll put my head on your shoulder  
and if we can't dance we'll grind

Be the butch for me  
tell me you have to have me  
read my mind  
say all the words I want to hear  
put your fingers inside me  
Let me follow your lead  
be the butch for me  
then let me watch you  
roll over on your back

The world I came out into attached  
the word "feminist" onto all lesbians  
—as if a lesbian was  
just another woman—  
roles were politically incorrect  
and the uniform of the day was  
a masculine crew cut and overalls, a butch  
who waited patiently for her butch beloved  
to declare their affections equal.  
We abandoned two roles  
for one,  
made our desire the very  
center of our beings, the very wetness  
in our cunts and lusty gleam in our eyes  
political.  
Where did we exile all our butches and femmes to,  
the ones who always knew the truth  
of their desires?

Be the butch for me  
be the one who says *I love you* first  
put your arms around me in public  
wink and smile at me  
tell me I'm yours, tell me you'll make  
it easy, promise we won't have to guess  
about each other's feelings  
put your fingers inside me and  
make me want you hot & strong & unambiguously

I know we'll wake up in the morning  
wondering all the usual things:

could we live together, would our cats  
fight, who'd pay the telephone bill and  
could this last forever.

I have to admit I want a partner in  
my life, an equal.

Her need must be as immediate and  
intense as mine.

She has to be able to look me in the eye  
and give me her whole heart

But I'd be ever so grateful  
if she'd be the butch for me  
when I need a lover to reach in and release  
my most wanton, lusty, giving self.

Be the butch for me, lady,  
and let me be the femme  
who gives in to your  
every desire

Angela Costa

*and all she ever wanted*

was to be femme to your butch  
and she would dress the part  
and her skirt would climb easily  
so that fingers could find their way

she liked strong arms around her  
she liked the whole hand inside her  
she liked that you would work  
hard enough to please her

she wanted to be wanted  
to even feel a little pain  
she wanted your hunger  
to stir her need to writhe

she wanted to play games  
to smell her flesh against your leather  
she wanted you to do  
what she needed to have done

she wanted to reach deep  
into that place within your mind  
to touch that single nerve  
that would light your darkest room

she wanted your will to power  
to ache for her surrender  
she wanted your mouth  
to romance her open wound



Kitty Tsui

## *A Femme in Butch Clothing*

I am fascinated by body parts. There's tits and ass. And ass and legs. Ass and thighs. Thighs in particular excite me. Hard, muscular thighs. Thunder thighs. Kind, open thighs. Rounded biceps and long forearms. And then there are lips. Full lips. Soft lips. Lips painted some shade of red. Or unpainted but flushed with blood from a long session of rough kissing. Lips moving down my inner thigh then up the length of my quadriceps. Lips wrapped around the dildo anchored in the crotch of my 501s. Teeth bearing down on my biceps. Teeth teasing my skin. Teeth sinking into my flesh.

Body parts. There's back and shoulders. Big back. Broad shoulders. Breasts that fill my hand. Dark brown nipples. Firm forearms. Unyielding knees that hold her legs open. There's the convex roundness of a stomach. The line of her neck. The curve of a cheekbone. The hint of a smile. The bulge of a biceps. The horseshoe of a triceps. There are soft, sweet toes, delicate ankles, a gently contoured heel.

I've been a practicing lesbian for over two decades now, and women still fascinate me. The way a woman moves. Strides. Struts. That certain look in her eyes. Sure. Seductive. Or shy but still begging to be taken. The way she flips her long black hair back off her face in an arrogant sort of way. Especially when she knows I'm watching her every move. And she knows I love watching her every move.

Let me tell you about my femme. She has long black hair and stands five feet seven in her stockinged feet. That's tall for a Chinese girl. Her nails are short but perfectly manicured. Sometimes she paints them a shade of red called Real Ruby, but only when we're going into the bedroom, not out on the town. Her breasts are soft, sweet as a ripe mango.

She wears plain white t-shirts, blue jeans, and Reeboks. And she has a black motorcycle jacket. A Schott. That's her uniform most of the time — when she's not at work, that is. She wears her hair long and loose. She likes to look at a man straight in the eye and toss her hair back in that certain way as if to say: I'm beautiful. I'm a lesbian. And you can't have me!

The first time I saw her she turned my head. I had attended a matinee performance of *Phantom of the Opera*. I was standing with a group of theatergoers all dutifully obeying the light, when a woman dressed all in leather strode confidently through the jigsaw of cars. Drivers stared; some gaped. But no one honked their horn. She was dressed in leather: leather shirt, leather pants, leather boots. Black leather. Now this was the middle of

summer in Chicago, not San Francisco! She looked cool — and very, very hot!

She glanced at me in the crowd of people and gave me a look that said: I know you know I'm one, just like you. She deliberately walked close and smiled at me boldly. I caught a whiff of her perfume. It was Shalimar, my favorite.

In my opinion, there is nothing so erotically charged as a woman dressed in leather. I disentangled myself from the crowd and followed her like a puppy. Halfway down the street, she turned to me and said, "Walk beside me. I know you're no slave. Anyway, what I'm looking for is a butch top or a butch bottom. Or better yet, a butch switch, but not a slave." Believe it or not, that is how we met.

It's hard to say exactly what my favorite body part is. My tastes seem to vary from woman to woman. Time to time. But I do like ass. Hers in particular. But really any ass will do. Spare and hard and tight. Large and round and pliable. In denim or in lace. In leather or in a harness. In bikini bottoms or a jockstrap. In flannel jockeys or silk boxers. Sears white cotton or Victoria's Secret lace. She doesn't always bother with panties. She knows that when I get excited foreplay doesn't exist. I like to get quickly to the core of things.

I like to watch her ass. Sometimes when we're out walking, I'll lag a few steps behind so I can watch the muscles move in her ass. Oh yes, I like her ass when it's up in the air. I like her ass when she's straddling my back. I like her ass when she's bent over my face.

Women fascinate me. The way they move. Moan. Smell. Smile. Sigh. The way they hold cigarettes. Hold my wrist. Cross their legs. Spread their legs. Lick their lips. Lick my cock.

My femme likes to play. She likes to wear leather and lace dresses. A garter belt and black seamed stockings because she knows I like them. Sometimes, on her way to the bedroom, she paints her face, and like a chameleon, transforms herself from femme to ultrafemme. Ordinarily she uses no makeup. She knows I like her face unadorned, just the way it is. She puts on her highest pair of stiletto heels and doesn't bother with panties.

I force her down onto her hands and knees, play with the breasts that are hanging down in front of her. I tease her ass with my tongue, torment her thighs with my touch. I like to enter her slow so she can feel every inch. I like to hold her as I thrust into her and fuck her good and hard the way I know she likes it.

Sometimes I tie her down spread-eagled on the bed. With leather restraints lined with lamb's wool. Sometimes I tie her up with leather thongs that bite. I strap on my biggest dildo and parade in front of her, cradling its weight in my hand. Sometimes I lavish her body with kisses until she begs me to push inside her. Sometimes I'll thrust into her with no foreplay, knowing she's as wet as ocean spray. I'll thrust my hips into her relentlessly,

until she screams and sobs and cries out my name. And when she explodes, coming to orgasm again and again, I refuse to let her stop.

I like that she's Chinese. We have a common language and a culture, even though she was born in the Midwest and I was born in the Far East. And I speak Cantonese and she doesn't. I like that I don't always have to explain, educate, or entertain. We share the same love for learning, leather, and food. Food is a very esoteric thing. And we Chinese have an esoteric farrago of food.

To name a few: there's *jook* and jerky for breakfast, *dim sum* for lunch and tofu with liquid cane sugar for dessert. Fermented black beans. Fermented bean curd. Squab. Squid. Conch. Oxtails. Oyster sauce. Fish sauce. Sea cucumber. Bitter melon. Winter melon. Peanuts and chicken feet soup. Steamed pork with *ham yu*, salted fish. Taro root and beef tendons. Sweet almond soup.

My femme is as skilled in the kitchen as she is in the bedroom. She can handle a blade as well as a fist. She can stir-fry as well as she can kiss. She can beat cream as well as she can unroll a condom.

We play in the kitchen as much as we do in the bedroom. The tiles on the kitchen floor can attest to that. I've fucked her against the wall, too, but it's easier if she's on the countertop. The easier it is on my back, the more endurance I have for her. You know that ancient book, the *I Ching*, says it best: perseverance furthers.

She fixes me chicken with shiitake mushrooms in her black bustier. Steamed rock cod with ginger and scallions. Rock salt shrimp. Southern fried chicken with country gravy. Pot roast melting in juice. Fried noodles in the nude. Steamed rice. We eat rice with every meal, white rice. She fixes me Earl Grey tea in the middle of the afternoon with homemade shortbread. Hot coffee in a glass tumbler, very Chinese.

She feeds me with her fingers. I suck the length of them the way I suck the flesh out of a crab claw. She eats ice cream off my chest, licks me in the places where it dribbles. She drinks from my mouth.

She is my femme in butch clothing. She wears 501s, leather chaps, workboots and men's shirts on the street. Cashmere, silk, or satin to bed. She knows the fastest way to undo my pants and the fastest way to bring me to multiple orgasms with her mouth on my clitoris.

She told me the first thing she noticed about me was that I was Chinese. The second was the size of my hands. I am the first. I told her it would hurt but she was game. Now she takes it like a man. Hard and driving. Deep and slow. I take her without hesitation. In full control. I stroke the core of her pleasure over and over. And I refuse to let her go.



*A Butch in Femme Clothing: Portrait of Kitty Tsui*

Jill Posener

Sharon Gonsalves

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## *Femme?*

I don't look like a femme. I'm a flannel shirt, jeans, and sneakers type, and except for my long hair you wouldn't have a clue. No painted fingernails or makeup here. I don't know how to walk in heels, I can't stand perfume, and I love my body hair enough to let it show defiantly all summer: poking out of tank tops, bathing suits, and shorts. How unladylike. Lifting weights adds muscle definition to my arms. I earn my living fixing computers. Nothing dainty or frail about that.

But when I put on my lingerie and lie down with my butch woman lover, I become a sensuous nymph yearning to be caressed. When I cover my breasts with a bit of black lace, I am a vulnerable passionate woman so hot for her I ache for her mouth, her hands, her face, her lips, and her tongue. When I put on a skintight, thong-back teddy, I ooze femininity all over her, entice her with my softness, my smile, my gyrations, my shyness, and my beauty. I beg her with my eyes, encourage her with my moans, and expose myself in ways she never dreamed of. And when she takes me to that place of passion and vulnerability, of feminine beauty and glowing heat, of lustful sensuality and total abandon, I feel safe and loved and at home.

PART VI

*Seventh*  
*Femme Heaven*

Jan E. Bevilacqua

## *Reflections of a Young Femme Dyke*

**B**eing a femme has its drawbacks; I have spilled face powder on my combat boots, and it ate up my morning. Then I see the hands of my butch holding doors for me, and I straighten my dress and smile.

She supports me. Not that she helps me in my endeavors, though she does, but that she holds me up and lifts me, and shelters me from the criminal world.

I slip my mittened hand into her cool leather glove and she keeps me from falling on the ice.

There are drawbacks. Not once have I been able to return the favor of defending her, but when she eyes me with her great, green eyes, I concede.

Not long ago, she fought for me. An acquaintance called me femme. He said I couldn't find a man. He said he could take her, he'd know how to take her. I called her up and she smiled; she changed into her denim shirt with the sleeves cut off, and her cowdyke boots, and she grappled with him in play while I cowered in another room. When I emerged, he smirked and I must have punched him. He shoved me back, still smirking. She filled in one instant with rage; she pinned him to the wall, and the voice that hissed, "DON'T YOU HIT MY GIRLFRIEND," was not the one that murmurs, "Yes. Baby, yes."

There are drawbacks, but I lie in my butch's arms, and I draw out the hot hot love from her chest and her legs, and I waste all my lipstick with kisses.

### II

My instinct told me that you wanted to be fucked, fucked slow and hard and then faster and faster, but always deep and always as only a woman can.

You are a butch and the stereotype is that you are the one with the cock, you exist just to fill up my body with anything hard, you are much too tough to open up your cunt to anything this little femme could give you, but I will never allow it. I would never let you give up begging for my fist inside you, for more, for more, for all, and you know that it is only with the utmost respect that you dare to bow your head, allow the slightest touch, the smallest finger, to go in me where too many men have gone before.

I would never stand for it. You know that. You have seen the look on my face that says Absolutely Not and the one that says Yes ... the one that says Yes.

And it is only of late that you have allowed me to touch you as a femme would like to touch, to bring you to the place that can only be reached by way of the touch that is barely motion.

Until the dykes, I never knew what it was to be a woman and not just half a boy. What separates man from the animals is still under debate. What separates us from lesser women is wholeness.

### III

I fought for you tonight. My neighbors called you ugly, coyly hinted that I may have erred, and I got them on their backs and fought them like a femme: I scratched them. I bit them. I said, "I can't believe you're so shallow. I simply can't believe."

Yes, I can take what they give to *me*. But when they get to my butch, I refuse.

So I told them precisely how many times you have saved my life. And I thought of you, with eyes that have so many times been shattered by just such as them, and how long it has taken you to glue together the fragments of your heart into something to be saved for the next such as me.

In the meantime they moved on to your being bisexual, how you play your cards on both sides of the table, you with spots and stripes and anything that has limbs and a pulse. And how they know something about you that I don't know. I said, "Oh, do you mean..." and I told them their precious rumors back in their face, took the punch line away. I think that was when the picture came to my head of you crying like a tiny child in my arms, remembering what one such as them had done to hurt you. I think that was when I aimed for their balls.

I have never erred in loving you. I love the solid sound below the soft leather of your boots, how you wear a tie, and how you pull on your leather gloves. I love what I see in your glued-together eyes when your tongue and your unwavering fingers have made me come until I cry for your mercy.

I know that only with a butch could I taste the subtle difference between the pride I feel on the arm of your swaggering form and the triumph of being the one to make *you* cry out.

Have I ever been mistaken about you? I mean, since the day you bent low to sweep up a feather from the ground and offer it, saying, "Because there are no flowers"? My only mistake came the time that I thought, "I can never love her. She is much too male."

I had not yet slipped off the leather and the denim to see the strong, soft, hard, wild, gorgeous woman beneath.



#### IV

I wonder sometimes if I'm really a femme. If this all hasn't been an illusion perpetrated by her biceps and the knife in her belt.

I wear makeup, it's true, but not much. And somehow, putting on a dress over my unshaven legs and lipstick rather than aftershave makes me feel more like a dyke. It's the juxtaposition that does it. By dressing femme and going out on her arm, I become empowered. Like a butch.

— And I wear, day to day, little that would bring the impression that it is I who lie vulnerable to her leather-butch whims. My men's jeans are the same as hers, my flannels alike. My hair is shorter, and my boots make the same solid sound on the floors of the places we go to show each other off.

But she says that however often I show up in a tie that I have asked a male friend to fasten, I will always be a femme, her femme, and she knows she will find — beneath my sport jacket — black lace.

I think of my one ex-lover, the woman I never once fucked, never touched below the heart, and whose kisses were closer to tiny coins, rare and polished and precious. I think of her face looking up to mine, so much like a child as I carried her things for her, and stroked her; how for three months an unspoken fence was between us: an egg that she held in her softened hands, and which I was terrified to touch, for it would break her. She had been smashed and disregarded by the uncles that her mother kept bringing home, by the monsters who had taken her childhood, her body, from her. So I held her like the fragile thing she was; I never touched below the heart.

While nightly I was dreaming of opening her to my hands.

And I wonder if I'm really a femme, if what I want isn't really to kiss the hand of a blushing woman and then sweep her in my arms till the sun sets on the trembling lips that have been the outlet for her coming.

And then I see my butch and the motion of her eyebrow that says to me, "You are all woman and I am better than man," and I blush and unfasten my boots.

Bree Coven

## Terminally Femme

Whenever I meet someone new and it is disclosed that I am a lesbian, the reaction is usually the same. "Oh, you don't look like a lesbian." What does that mean? Because I wear makeup and dresses and have an admitted aversion to mice and mechanics, even my politically correct lesbian friends tease me about being "terminally femme." I used to battle the shame of being queer in the straight world; now I find myself battling the shame of being femme in the dyke world.

I walk down Christopher Street in Greenwich Village and see two women holding hands and kissing. My immediate reaction is to smile at them with sisterly pride. In return, they glare back at me. "What are you looking at, straight bitch?!" Honest to Goddess! Dismayed by this and other experiences of femme discrimination and invisibility, I did what most nineteen-year-olds do in the search to find themselves. I rebelled. I chopped off my hair, pushed my flowery dresses to the back of the closet, donned a leather jacket and combat boots, and set out to prove myself a "real" dyke. Marching topless with the Lesbian Avengers and shouting at the top of my lungs at the Dyke March, I felt like a true radical and almost succeeded in purging myself of my femininity.

Still, a lingering wistfulness for my inner femme stayed with me. When I laughed along with the bar dykes scoffing at the glamorous pre-Stonewall femmes whose painted faces shone in the sun at Gay Pride, I felt like a traitor to my sex and my self. But the part of me that craved acceptance won out. I was sick of being dismissed as a frivolous femme, only a tiny step above the ever-repressed straight female. I wanted, for once, to be part of the gang, at least with my own people.

Then, appropriately enough, came Independence Day. I was on a Fourth of July women's cruise when I saw *her*. She was a handsome butch who looked strong and sure of herself in her tank top and had that sexy little attitude butches have. She stood tall, lean, and confident. It was clear she felt comfortable in her own skin. She knew who she was. I recognized the very mannerisms I had been imitating. Only on her, since she wasn't trying, they fit. I sensed there was a lot to be learned from this woman.

In an uncontrollable burst of spontaneity, I felt my left eye wink in her direction. She smiled a half-smile, flipped the hair out of her eyes, and ambled over to ask me to dance. Halfway through "I'm Every Woman," she leaned over and told me I looked pretty. I didn't know how to respond. I

wasn't sure that political, nineties dykes were supposed to look pretty. But she made me feel good with her hands around my waist as we danced, and it felt natural to let her lead. I allowed myself a slight ladylike blush and simply said, "Thank you."

As the night wore on, I realized her self-possessed butch persona was not an act and I couldn't help feeling that mine was. She must have sensed it, too, for she said, "There's a lot going on underneath the surface of you, isn't there?" I nodded, too confused to respond aloud. But there was no need for words.

The handsome butch led me by the hand to a quiet breezy corner of the boat and gently but firmly placed her lips on mine. My stomach dropped somewhere down around my knees, and I felt like a schoolgirl being kissed for the first time. That was when the top layer of my tough-but-trendy-young-dyke veneer began to melt. It wasn't quite as sudden as the fireworks exploding in the sky, but since that night I have never been the same.

The very next week, with a little extra time and money on my hands, I went to Bloomingdale's to buy some socks, and ended up perusing the lingerie section. For a lark, I purchased a lavender lace-and-satin teddy.

That evening I answered the door for my date in full femme regalia. I felt I was taking a risk with the lipstick and mascara, but the glow in my butch's eyes made it worthwhile. Like a gallant knight, she scooped me up and carried me off to the boudoir. Her whisper in my ear — "Sweet princess" — made me feel like the heroine of my own fairy tale. Every kiss and every touch brought me closer to my feminine core. As the sensuality of my womanhood emerged, my femme self was reborn. I burgeoned into a new me. A more genuine me. A me that first learned to accept, then embrace, my femmeness.

There were other instances, too, of course. The lazy Sunday morning when I tiptoed out of bed early to make her a breakfast of French crepes with strawberry sauce, only to surprise myself with the revelation that I liked to cook as much for me as to please my lover. And the afternoon she confessed that she liked the film of my scented powder on her sink, I delighted in sprinkling it all over the bathroom, surrounding us both with fragrant clouds of Coty. Then there was the eve of my birthday, when she presented me with that tight, little crushed velvet dress and took me out dancing: her in her suit and tie, me with earrings and heels. I took staunch pride in our appearance as a couple. Snug and comfortable in my dress, I no longer envied the suit and knew that, different as we were, we complemented one another. I felt my womanliness radiating in her presence, surrounding me with a warm feminine aura, and I drew strength from that. I found my own self-confidence; not a borrowed butch confidence, but a genuine joy, wonder, and power in being femme. The love my butch inspired in me set me free and taught me how to love myself. The desire to nurture, to comfort, and to love came as much a part of me as my own breath. These were my natural acts, rediscovered.

In time, I learned that I could keep my newfound femininity without giving up my strength. In fact, I came to know a new kind of strength, the strength of self-acceptance and knowing my own power. For me, true gay pride was the crystal-clear December morning when I was able to look in the mirror and like what I saw, inside as well as out. I didn't have to make excuses. I didn't have to pretend. I didn't have to worry about being lesbian enough or feminist enough or woman enough. I just had to worry about being me. And that turned out to be the easiest thing to be. It took the love of a true butch to release the beautiful femme just waiting inside.

I am easing back into my body now, re-entering my self. I am able to take pleasure in my rediscovered femme-ininity without judging, discrediting, or taking myself less seriously. My hair is growing out again (I have missed the feel of its waves down my back); the flowery dresses have come out of the closet; and I no longer feel it necessary to masquerade whatever a lesbian is supposed to look like. There is room for me now in this community and when there isn't, I will simply create room. This year I will march at Gay Pride under a homemade banner that shouts, "Lipstick Lesbian and Proud of It." And should I run into those two women from Christopher Street who laughed in the face of my femininity, brushing me off for not fitting their stereotypes, I will speak up. For just as nothing could keep me from loving women, nothing can keep me from loving the woman in myself. It's been a second coming-out: first as a lesbian, then as a femme. Now all the pieces are in place and I am beginning to feel whole once again.

You say I don't look like a lesbian. You're wrong, I do. I look like a femme. A fabulous, flourishing femme.

Bree Coven

## *Confessions of a Young Femme*

*I* live for these nights  
far from the neat politeness of day  
when fresh from her shower  
in tank top and towel  
my butch comes to me  
eyes flashing  
and places down the glass  
her signal to me

I climb aboard her sinewy figure  
and allow myself to be carried  
to the edge of the bed  
and placed gently there  
though we both know full well  
I could walk it myself

I tease her  
tickling her chest muscles with my hair  
tasting the callused tips of her fingers  
tracing the outline with my tongue  
before finally placing her strong hands  
on the roundness of my waiting ass

I please her  
I can tell  
when I lie back  
and open up wide to receive the gift of her pleasure  
I take her in and seize her fingers  
swallow her hand  
her strength  
only to release it all again  
freely flowing from me

with a dewy scent  
and some strength of my own

If I'm good  
and I usually am  
I will then be allowed  
to ease the towel aside  
against the slim boyish hips  
and kneel before her  
to stroke and suck where I know she is hardening  
just for me

It takes a woman indeed  
to coax sound from a stone  
a woman indeed  
to make my butch blush

It is at this time  
in my woman lover's arms  
that I feel my strength the most

Constance Clare

*Sweet Layers of Femme  
Cream: Bottom to Top*

I'm a femme bottom: and my butch has my arms above my head with her long and sculpted arm, wide hand holding my wrists so it almost hurts. She's looking down at me, saying, *Don't move, you little baby*, as her other hand pushes my dress up and finds me warm and creamy. Fingers slide around and in and around all over and I stay barely still but I have to moan. Then I feel my arms being stretched as she whispers, a little mean, *If you don't shut up I'll have to stop, so take it, still and quiet like a good baby*. I catch my breath, feel my legs getting pushed open wider, more fingers all over me, pushing into me deeper and faster. It hurts now but I can't move or cry or she'll stop and I want to be so good for her. She's fucking me seriously now and I'm almost crying and I'm almost there. Then all of a sudden, in the middle somewhere, she starts making love to me. She's a little softer maybe and her eyes are deep into mine. She's loving me intensely and I'm on the edge and feeling so filled as she says, *Okay, my baby, come for me now*, and I do.

I'm a femme top: and my butch is undressing when I push her down on the bed, climb on top, and rub my velvet covered pussy all over hers. I rub my pussy around on her open thighs, up to her breasts, let her smell my creamy wetness for a second before sliding down again. Her cunt is so wet and open, I just slide my whole hand right in, curling up my long red nails into a fist. I sit facing her, push her legs open wider with my high black pumps, the tiny heels digging into her thick thigh muscle. I'm pumping in and in, slowly and deeply. She wants to lie back and close her eyes but she's staring at that one heel, long and fine and pressing into her skin, and then at my other hand, my nails sinking, making tiny curved marks around her breasts. But now I want her to lose focus, lose her grasp. Everything goes a little harder, a little deeper, faster, more now, as she falls back, crying out. I slow, and lighten, to tease. She opens her eyes, pleading with me, and I smile softly, then suddenly give her all she can take. Halfway up my forearm into her, she comes wildly, wet spilling everywhere, even squirting out onto my velvet leggings and fine black pumps.



*Creamy Femme: Portrait of Constance Clare*

Theresa C. Thadani



## Femme in Progress

One day, about six months into my relationship with Winnifred, I found myself annoyed because she didn't want to come to the fabric store with me to pick out curtain material. She kept making all sorts of excuses, finally saying, "Do you really want to make curtains? Wouldn't you rather just buy them?" "No," I said firmly, "I'm going to make them." Her face took on a pained look. "I never thought being a lesbian would be like *this*," she said. "The problem with you butch dykes," I said furiously, "is that you have no respect for femme women."

It wasn't exactly a fair comment. Winnifred, just coming out, had no ability to defend herself. Butch? Femme? The words didn't mean much to her. But the remark hit home, and she meekly came along to the fabric store and fervently agreed that the yellow print would go just beautifully in the bathroom.

Eight years later, we haven't finished teasing each other about this incident. Once, while making love, Winnifred disengaged her mouth from my body long enough to say, "I just want you to know I have the utmost respect for you femmes."

Why did I say that to her, all those years ago? To get what I wanted, certainly. To give her the word *butch* so that she could know there was language to describe her life. To lay my femme vulnerability on the table. And also, I must admit, to reassert my membership in dykedom. I was saying: *I know these words; I am teaching you what it means to be a dyke. Don't tell me lesbians don't sew curtains.*

I'm not someone who has always known I was a lesbian. When I was coming out, I was plagued with doubts. I worried that I was deluding myself, romanticizing lesbianism because I was fed up with men. As a heterosexual, I had been butch. I think this was a kind of defense against the power imbalance I felt in those relationships. I thought my somewhat belligerent approach to sexual relationships would naturally spill over into lesbian ones. In fact, I thought at the time that my butchness with male lovers was a sign that I had really been a lesbian all along. But once I actually called myself a lesbian, I felt at sea with the persona I had created. I wasn't like other dykes I knew. I've always loved clothes; suddenly that wasn't cool. I was once at a lesbian dance where — I swear — I was the only person present not wearing

a man's vest over an Emma Goldman t-shirt. My oldest sister came out several years before I did, and I modeled myself on her androgynous look, but it never felt right on me. I always felt the "real" lesbians would be able to see right into me and dismiss me as not a real dyke. Once, in a terrible depression, I thought I would have to go back to men, because I made such a terrible lesbian. Although I always swooned at the sight of a really cute butch, I didn't know there was a word for what that made me.

When I realized there was a name for the kind of dyke I am, I finally felt authentic as a lesbian. I had not failed some kind of test of true lesbianism: I'd just been trying to be the wrong kind of dyke. Calling myself a femme makes me live inside my own skin. Accepting myself as a femme means accepting myself as a lesbian.

## II

One day in the midfifties, my mother was walking down Fifth Avenue in New York, when she was stopped by an obviously embarrassed Irish policeman. He told her not to walk south on Fifth, but to take Park or Lexington instead. When my mother asked him why, he hesitated but finally replied that he had guessed she was Jewish. This seemed to be the cause of his embarrassment. Once they had gotten that out of the way, he went on to explain that there was a group of Hasidic and other ultra-Orthodox Jewish men outside the Israeli embassy protesting Israel's decision to start allowing autopsies to be performed: this is against Jewish teaching. The protest had started out peacefully, but the crowd had worked itself into a frenzy and begun stoning women who looked Jewish but did not have their hair covered in the prescribed manner. My mother took another route home.

Flash forward to the early eighties. I am almost twenty, and I am in the middle of a long, stupid coming-out process. I shave my head several times during these years. Each time it is almost a religious act: a friend bending over me as she wields the razor, various people offering advice. I imagine the traditional head shaving of a Jewish woman who is about to be married, the women of her family gathered, gentle, loving. Only in my case there's a twist: I am marrying lesbianism. I am withdrawing from the privilege and the oppression of heterosexuality. A feminist Jewish and Jewishly feminist act.

My mother cannot bear to look at my shaved head. It makes her think of the camps. So I buy a big scarf to wear when we're together, which reminds me uncomfortably of the tradition of married women keeping their heads covered at all times. When my grandmother visits one summer, I wait until she's left to shave my head again, because I know it would upset her, too. After a while, it becomes too difficult to negotiate these particular emotional straits. I give up shaving my head and wear my hair short, dykey, a badge of community and identity. I wear it that way for ten years.

Flash forward again, to last year. Without my noticing, my hair gets longer than I usually let it. One day I catch sight of myself in the mirror and

see a Jewish woman. I am excited: wearing my hair long brings my nose into prominence, makes my darkness so much darker. I see this as a way I can combat Jewish invisibility. You have to understand: I live in Vancouver, where the idea of Jewishness never spontaneously occurs to anyone. I let my hair grow long and suddenly become invisible as a lesbian.

I want it every way, you see. I want to look like a lesbian, a Jew, and a femme all at the same time. But if nobody in Vancouver knows what a Jew looks like, and few people (even lesbians) know what a femme looks like, what's the point? Who is this for, anyway? I wonder if my need to look like what I am arises from the fact that I have a remarkably WASPy name, so WASPy I sometimes want to change it. I think of all the Jewish last names changed for purposes of assimilation. I think of the Yiddish first names changed forcibly upon arrival in America. My grandmother, like thousands of Jewish women in her generation, was renamed Rose by some Irish-American bureaucrat at Ellis Island. I think of the Jewish last names lost, as my mother's was, by marriage to non-Jews. Then I think of the Jewish grandfather whose name I don't want because he sexually abused me. There are no names for us, as Jews, as women.

Maybe naming myself a femme is the closest I get. The word itself conjures up exactly what Jewish women aren't supposed to be, especially in families trying to climb the class ladder. *Femme* makes me think of sexual flamboyance, of the loud, pushy, obnoxious, in-your-face Jewish woman who is supposed to tone it down for the Gentiles but won't. Calling myself a femme is both a rejection of good-girl femininity and an embrace of Jewishness. Accepting myself as a femme means accepting myself as a Jew.

### III

My body has become my adversary lately. I have a back injury that has gotten a lot worse this past year. I've been confined to bed for days or weeks at a time. I consistently act stupid about this, getting out of bed as soon as I can hobble instead of waiting for my back to really heal. I am never out of pain now, even while asleep or drugged with muscle relaxants. I plan carefully for every act of every day: when I can take the pills because I don't need to be too alert; when Winnifred will be available to carry my school books up or down the stairs. Being injured consumes so much psychological energy, I can't believe it when people don't know I'm disabled.

Once at the university a classmate saw me using the automatic door-opening button meant for people in wheelchairs. "Feeling lazy today, eh?" she said. And though I answered as politely as I could, explaining that I'm not strong enough to open the doors, there was no doubt in my mind that to her my physical weakness is a character flaw.

In a funny way, this is a lot like being a femme. The invisibility of my disability is similar to my invisibility as a lesbian, since most people assume I'm straight. But I also think there might be an answer for me in femmeness, a way to think through the shame and humiliation of my imperfect body.

Even before I became disabled, my body was a source of constant shame in this same way. One winter I started going to the gym regularly, but the local community recreation center offered too many opportunities to run into people I knew. At the gym, what do you talk about but your body? Even before my injury, I could only lift weights for a few minutes at a time. "Quitting already?" someone would invariably ask as I left the weight room. Or someone would ask me how often I went to the gym, then tell me it wasn't enough: they'd just read a study which showed you couldn't increase your muscle mass with fewer than four visits a week. I was never allowed to feel any satisfaction from what I was able to do; I always had to aim at that moving target that constitutes *being in shape*.

I had to stop going to the gym to regain my pleasure in my body. As a femme, I value the womanly softness that, in a patriarchal culture, will always be defined as a lack. As a woman with a disability, I still feel that creeping shame I used to feel at the gym, only now it's every time I can't open a door or carry my own books, or even pour the coffee if the pot is full. Dozens of times a day. Yet I hope for the day when I will feel only contempt for people who assume I can and should be opening my own doors, when I will truly love my body as a femme should love her body: because it is a lesbian woman's body. And then perhaps I will accept myself as a person with a disability.

#### IV

I feel lost along the borders of categories. My disability is relatively invisible; my Jewishness is hidden behind my Gentile name; my femmeness often makes people assume I'm straight. I fight for my identity, struggling against being subsumed into the mainstream. I am exhausted by the constant coming-out that's required for me not to lose parts of myself.

I find myself juggling the risks and benefits of being out. Sometimes I tell people about the abuse, but not too soon after coming out as a lesbian. People have this habit of connecting the two, as if one thing causes the other. Sometimes I feel as if telling other Jews it was my Jewish grandfather who abused me is too much pain to put on them, and telling Gentiles is too risky. Sometimes I try to look able-bodied, because a femme can feel pretty vulnerable on the street at night.

The pieces keep shifting on me. Every time I think I've sorted out the relationship of femme to Jew, or of either of them to disability, another incident in my life throws it all into question. I will never finish this process, which, like this essay, I have worked on for years and still wonder if I'm getting it right. I may never finish, which means I've got a lifetime of thinking femme to look forward to.

Karen Lee Erlichman

## *Embracing the Inner Femme*

I came out as a lesbian in a politically correct college town in southwest Ohio. A displaced, East Coast, middle-class Jewish girl, I had been active in feminist and progressive circles for several years. My mother was a Betty Friedan feminist, joining CR groups in the seventies and singing to herself "I am woman, hear me roar" on a daily basis. After a three-year relationship with a Jewish heterosexual man (who was also a femme!), I finally came out as a lesbian. I had already stopped shaving my body hair and started wearing Birkenstocks. I cut my hair and bought my first pair of hiking boots. I read Adrienne Rich feverishly. Butch-femme, I was told, was a thing of the past. Butch-femme was considered politically incorrect.

As an awkward baby dyke, I looked outside of myself to the Big Dykes On Campus for guidance. Inside me was a hidden femme wanting desperately to come out. I secretly, perhaps unconsciously, fantasized about black lace bras and garter belts, maybe even wearing them underneath my oh-so-rugged jeans and t-shirt.

One spring day, I was sitting in the campus library thumbing through back issues of *Heresies* when I stumbled onto Cherríe Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh's now-legendary article "What We're Rollin' around in Bed With." The article talked about power, sexuality, and butch-femme. I practically fell out of my seat and broke out in a sweat, grinning. The femme inside me began to stir.

After graduation, I returned to the East Coast and had a series of unsuccessful relationships with women who were generally butch of center. I did not identify publicly as a femme, but I knew that if I *had* to choose I would certainly be on the femme side of the continuum. Most of the lesbians I knew seemed to be striving for the sexless, androgynous ideal. But whenever I went to a bar or a party and saw a butch-femme couple — *oy gevalt!* I was mesmerized, thrilled, and delighted: femmes with shimmering red lipstick and nails to match; femmes who nurtured and protected their butches, sometimes with a simple glance or touch; butches in faded jeans, button-down, tailored men's shirts, loafers, and close-cropped coifs; butches who dipped their femmes on the dance floor. My knees quivered and my thighs were wet.

It really began when I started painting my toenails. My roommate Gail and I were blossoming into femmes together. We'd stuff cotton between our toes and lounge together on the couch, armed with our weapons of choice,

Candy Apple Red and Scarlet Noir. The inner femme was standing at full attention now, hands on hips. Gail and I would go bra shopping together, and we'd prance around the lingerie department at Macy's, cooing and admiring each other in our lacy delights. I was a Jewish femme, following in the paths of Joan Nestle and my mother. With my curly black hair and unmistakably femme hourglass figure, I was coming out loud and proud.

Despite my newfound sense of joy and exuberance as a Jewish femme, I heard a fair amount of anti-femme sentiment from lots of dykes. As a femme, I am often invisible as a lesbian. I love wearing lipstick and lingerie. I am not passing. Passing implies choice, the intent to be invisible.

Butch lesbians are on the front lines of gay culture as out queers, challenging traditional notions of gender and desire. Butches are victims of homophobia and sexism on a daily basis. They are wrongly accused of looking like, acting like, or wanting to be men. They are harassed and ostracized, especially if they are also members of other oppressed groups. Femmes bear the brunt of homophobia and sexism in a different way. We are bombarded with straight men's sexual harassment and violence. We are *made* invisible by others, including other lesbians. For both femmes and butches, our strength has helped us survive.

I am in love with a beautiful African-American butch woman, and we share a marvelous balance of butch and femme, Black and Jewish, two creative, passionate, powerful women whose desire for each other flourishes with electric eroticism. When my girlfriend and I went out on our first date, *I* was the one who asked *her* out. *I* picked *her* up at her house to take her to a party. I had spent hours figuring out what to wear and how to accessorize, finally selecting a drop-dead, leopard-print, Lycra minidress with stockings and black leather ankle boots. Clutching my purse in my sweaty hands, I rang her doorbell. She greeted me, dressed to the teeth and looking good enough to eat right there! Both of us stopped breathing. She was wearing black and white, a crisply starched white blouse with a fine black jacket and sharply pressed black pants. She wore small gold hoop earrings in classic butch fashion. I smiled my best coy femme smile and reached for her hand.

Being a femme is about passion, power, and desire. I can look at another femme and find her attractive, but no one gets me right in the *kishkes* like a gorgeous proud butch. This year I am celebrating ten years as an out lesbian. In this decade I have had several coming out experiences: as a lesbian, as a Jew, and as a femme. In coming out visibly, which I continue to choose to do on a daily basis, I have transformed my relationships, my sense of power, and myself.



*My Shayneh Maidelch:  
Portrait of Lesléa Newman*

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Mary Vazquez

Karen Lee Erlichman

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## *The Secret Life of a Jewish Femme*

**T**he truth is, I have always been a femme.  
A femme makes you want her before you even realize it.  
She sees you from across the room and invites you to approach her.  
A femme is loyal to her butch and protects her fiercely.  
Each femme has a baby butch inside of her  
who teases and flirts  
with the femme inside her butch.  
Got it?

What does it mean to be a *Jewish* femme?  
A Jewish femme loves to swing her hips and swish her skirts.  
She is dramatic and passionate,  
and talks with her hands, eyes, and mouth.  
A Jewish femme loves to schmooze in the kitchen.  
She loves to feed you and be fed.  
A Jewish femme can be clannish and protective.  
She loves to sing, eat, and gossip.  
She uses her eyes to flirt.  
A Jewish femme likes to tease.  
She is very persuasive.  
A Jewish femme is born to decorate and accessorize.  
If she has cleavage, you'll know about it.  
A Jewish femme smells of sweat, good food, and musk oil.  
She loves to be seduced and seductive.  
When a Jewish femme wants you, you might as well give in.

A Jewish femme loves to run the show and direct traffic.  
A Jewish femme is a *vilde chaya* and a *shayne maidele*.



Liza Rankow

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## Femme Poem #1

### 1: Prelude

Begin: 1978

I came out  
into a time when Real Dykes  
looked butch.  
I bought the look:  
bristle-cut hair  
Levi's or khakis  
flannel shirt  
workboots, vest.  
(Ridiculed and doubted  
women who looked like I do now.)  
Walked the walk  
for more than a decade  
albeit a femmier and  
femmier butch: longer softer hair  
dangling earrings  
makeup around my eyes.

Epiphany: 1990

A harder and more profound  
coming out.  
Copping to the handle  
a born-again femme.  
Discovering  
my true erotic language  
the native tongue  
I had never heard spoken.  
Claiming an identity  
my lesbian-feminist sisters  
had taught me  
to despise.

### 2: Earthquake

Reading *The Persistent Desire*  
weeping for the femme self

who was stolen.  
For whom even the knowledge  
of an option  
did not exist.  
Finding my home  
in the recounting of the stories.  
A visceral response.  
Wept again  
reading *Stone Butch Blues*. Touched  
in a deep and vital place  
previously uncharted.

### 3: Alchemy

You get it, too. The more I am femme  
the more you are butch.  
The first and every time  
you wear a suit and tie  
it takes my breath away.  
My response is instant  
and irresistible.  
Every time I watch you  
weave the knot, it is sexual.  
Later I will unwind the silk  
slowly, savoring...  
The first and every time  
I slip off your jacket  
undo buttons  
to reveal ribbed white undershirt and  
black satin boxers  
there is no describing the heat  
the tenderness  
the fierce desire  
this calls up in me.

I wear heels for the first time  
amazed to find  
I can walk and even  
dance in them. Three-inch stilettos,  
fuck-me pumps  
we used to call them.  
I am pleased to learn they were, indeed,  
well named.  
You unwrap me like a present  
peel the layers to find what's  
waiting for you

inside.

I love to watch you  
suck my breast  
and move down,  
your face and shoulders  
framed between my thighs.  
The softness in your eyes  
and your tender roughness  
as you take me.

These heels and back-seam hose  
this black lace  
these just-licked lips  
this deep wet  
are all for you.

Morgan Tharan

## *Her Present*

Talking to another femme on the phone  
about the madonna-whore split  
and the total oneness of the two bitches.  
Virgin passivity twisted into the whore's fire and fury.  
My friend goes shopping for a green lace bow for her hair,  
to wrap herself up in the present.

We strut and dance,  
me, in my mean black heels, and my lover in her strong black boots.  
My butch holds the door open for me to walk through,  
a very radical act in a world where women live with fear,  
waiting for the sudden shock of violence.  
It is dangerous to love.

Yes, this is a world of rape and incest. Yes, there are murderers on the loose.  
Yes, I wear tight leather on my wide open hips. Yes, I walk on impossibly  
high heels.  
In the dark past — my own dark ages — days of the incest and rape  
of my sweet body  
I did not wear heels, ever. I did not strut or prance at all.  
I was quiet and frozen and cold and wounded.  
The father and the others literally consumed me, a pink product of their  
fantasies.  
That was my reality.

Now I break the glass ribbons  
wrapped around me and act as if I am free.

My butch helps me in and out of the car, up and down off her Harley.  
She gives me her strong arm. I lean into her side. She is tall and bold.  
She is also disabled and hurt. Sometimes I have to open the door for her  
and she moves in close behind me.  
We keep our creation alive in this place of destruction.

I like my waxed eyebrows. I look at myself in the mirror  
and I see an open woman.  
I see a dyke who loves color and texture, shape and design.  
I make myself into myself  
even after the abusers tried to make me into a toy.  
I move with lust.  
I stand protected by being my own kind of whore.  
I am the virgin who was never a virgin at all.  
I reclaim, reinvent, empower, and author my own disguise.  
I shake my long hair in my wife's face  
and invite her to nestle at my tender breasts.  
I feed her desire.

## Feeling Feminine: Femmedyke

I am a femme — how long it's taken me to be able to say that. I still feel as if I need to qualify that, somehow explain what it means to me.

Let's be honest, girls, for me being a femme includes hot sex! Because part of that identity, though not all of it, is the freedom to be open to my sensuality and to what turns me on. That's obviously not why I am a femme. I don't just *do* femme, like a part read from a script or scored for a movie. I *am* femme.

This fact confused me for a long time. It confused me so much that it contributed greatly to my not coming out until I was forty-one.

I was the quintessential good Catholic girl. And I looked and felt unattractive. I didn't have one date during high school. I never felt sexual about anyone, although I thought about sex probably as much as the average teenager. I was so devastatingly lonely and needy for validation and acceptance that my major fantasy was of someone's head on the pillow next to mine. I wanted someone to talk to, someone with whom I could share my soul's unguarded promptings.

When I entered college, I finally felt on my way to achieving the American dream: parental approval, an independent career, a Madison Avenue image, and attention from men.

Dykes scared me. One time, I received attention from a dyke, and it scared me straight. At a party, a drunken medical student had been harassing me, and ended up spraying contraceptive foam all over me amid gales of laughter. I was so incensed, speechless, and hemmed in by the crowd, I actually put out my lit cigarette on his shoulder.

The silent support of the lone woman across the room, who stared at me broadly afterwards with a sardonic half-smile, was more than I was prepared to handle. She may not have even been a dyke but it doesn't matter now. After I got out of the room, I knew I wanted to see her again, but she had left, too. I was intensely disappointed that she was gone, and terrified at the realization that I had really wanted her to stay.

A teenaged butch baby-sitter in my neighborhood had molested me when I was four. That incident undoubtedly also contributed to my late lesbian-blossoming. How could I possibly be one of them? How could I join forces with the enemy?

What I wanted was acceptance and respect. Being queer was not part of that package. Donna Reed was my heroine, not George Sand or Gertrude

Stein. I wanted recognition as a girl. There was only one way to get that, as far as I was concerned, and that was to get fucked by boys. Butches were women, needing recognition like me, and I certainly couldn't get what I needed from them. Even worse, they seemed as if they were trying to be men, and I had no desire to look or act or talk like a man. So I ran, and I kept running for twenty years.

I fell in love with women along the way. But they were my friends and they were straight femmes, so the energy never clicked. We would give each other long embraces and talk for hours in emotion-filled phone conversations. We would even cry together, but after the embraces and a kiss on the cheek my feelings and fantasies could go no further.

I was a mess. I was supposed to love men. I even married one, in good Donna Reed fashion. But I was thinking love, not really feeling it. Without exposure to queer culture, it was very hard to get it on my own. I was scared of the diesel dykes and thought being lesbian must mean being like them. But the women I had feelings for didn't turn me on physically. So what was I?

I hadn't been a tomboy in my youth. I didn't climb trees or play softball or want a leather jacket. I loved dresses, makeup, and jewelry. The only value a car had was for transportation, as far as I was concerned. I liked making pretty things and was content to own no more tools than required for hanging a picture or turning a screw.

I was, however, quite independent: I wanted to make my own living and my own financial future. And I was adventurous. Although I have scared myself at times in the past, I've always had a lust for life. I had the heart of a passionate nonconformist, but I was afraid to take an unpopular stand. I only connected with men as mother, sister, colleague, or friend.

I didn't know femmes existed. I recognized androgynous dykes, but femmes passed before my eyes without me knowing they were there. The androgynes I knew were an intellectual, philosophical, passionately political but rather asexual lot. In other words: they were a lot like me. I certainly didn't feel attracted to them. One of me was enough.

Finally I realized that I had to risk being wrong, confused, foolish, mistaken, hurt, and even hurtful, and get to know the lesbians and my own life, no matter where that might take me. I eventually dated a few women, heard the awful words *butch-femme*, and knew I was much too liberated for anything like that.

So how come the women I connected with called themselves butches? And why were their histories, including their coming-out stories, so different from mine? Who were those other women, scorned as lipstick lesbians, who danced in dresses, soft and sexy, with these women wearing hats, ties, tuxes, boots, or belts with big buckles? Now that I'd noticed it, why did so many of the androgynes wearing fancy necklaces, curls, or colorful blouses, dance with other androgynes wearing straight hair, plain earrings, or tailored clothing?

My own identity as a femme didn't crystallize until two things happened. The first was meeting Linda, my partner. The second was reading *The Persistent Desire*.

Linda was dressed very simply, but her hair was soft and a little curly. She had a wry smile, but didn't try to act tough. At first I thought we would be friends, comparing notes on our kids, drinking coffee after movies, commiserating on the problems of being single and the difficulties in reconciling our spiritual backgrounds with queer-hating religions. It became apparent that she was serious and I was not. I couldn't be serious as I would be moving across the continent soon. So why did I keep returning her calls? Why did I feel so at ease with her, why did I forget to be afraid when she kissed me, what was that quiet strength that enchanted me? In our hearts we had so much in common and our dreams were so similar — even much of our pasts — yet in many ways we were nearly polar opposites. Even our differences excited me.

We lived fifty miles apart and spent as much time on the phone as teenagers. One of the things we did together was read and talk about *The Persistent Desire*. That book described us. Linda found the echoes of her own youth, pain, and rebelliousness. I found the echoes of mine plus the confusion and the feelings of being less than and marginalized in both straight and dyke culture.

In this world, there is no easy place for a femme to be. Not that making one's place is necessarily easy for anyone. But for those legions of femmes who fall somewhere between Miss America and Donna Reed, the task is even harder. Feminist, masculine, heterosexual women and feminine lesbians — from the quiet-gentle to the makeup-sequins extremes and all that's in between — have a harder time being accepted for who they are, because they don't fit patriarchal norms. Neither group gets much respect. People think they know where you stand if you fulfill the gender, sexual, and role stereotypes. But if you don't, no one is sure what your politics might be, what kind of threat you might represent, or with whom you might fall into bed.

Just as I've heard both women and men put down a feminist, I've heard both androgynes and men put down a femme. But butches and other femmes understand. As a femme, I can disagree with standard ideas of what a woman should be and what a dyke should be. I am not a dyke because I'm in opposition to anything, male or female, masculine or feminine; I'm a dyke because of whom I feel romantic about, to whom I'm attracted, with whom I identify, what my affectional orientation is: who lights my fire.

Being a femme does not mean I can't add a quart of oil to my car, but it may mean I'm not likely to change my own oil. It doesn't mean I can't drill a hole into a wall, but it may mean I don't own a table saw. Neither does it mean I have curls or long hair, although I do like to wear lacy bras and an occasional ribbon. It doesn't mean I wear spike heels and sequins, but I do have this little off-the-shoulder black velvet number. At our union cere-



mony, a straight person might have had a difficult time assigning identities to us: my partner wore white, beads, and a hat with a veil, while I wore a plain green dress and simple hat. But any dyke who saw her quiet smile and my ear-to-ear, animated grin would instinctively recognize the differences in our style.

Being a femme doesn't mean that the only way I have sex is on my back while screaming, "fuck me." But it does mean that, while I enjoy a variety of reciprocal sexual expressions, I especially enjoy inviting and accepting the strength of my lover. There are no rules to our lovemaking; we do whatever turns us on, give and take. We do find there's a resonant turn-on, though, to the dreams of our girlhoods, when Linda fantasized she was the boy who stole her girlfriends, and I fantasized I was Grace Kelly or Marilyn Monroe. Those images have meaning for us, and aren't a limitation. The more we express all of who we are, the more we reveal and share our selves. As she accepts me as a femme, I have more freedom to be one *and* to give expression to my assertive side. As I accept Linda as a butch, she has more room in which to express her butch self *and* to experience her receptive, feminine self. Many of the old images were actually symbols for something else. The symbol still expresses these deeper meanings, even though we sometimes get confused about what those meanings are. A dildo is not a penis; it's not male. But it is about giving and receiving pleasure. It can be about the power of expression and the confidence of knowing a gift will be received. It can be about trusting and acceptance. It can be about daring, intensity, and letting go, and it can be shared. It can also be forgotten at will!

Being a femme means I like to wear symbols of gay pride, hold my lover's hand, and proudly identify us as partners. I like to advertise my lesbianism because it would be so easy for me to pass. I want people to know I'm a lesbian so I can share my whole life without translating parts of it for homophobes. I'd like to let doubtful femmes be able to see at least one self-identified femme in action.

Being a femme means it's easier for Linda's family to accept me and harder for my family to accept her. Linda's family sees a woman who more closely resembles or models what they expect to see in a woman. My family sees someone else who is not the image of what they wish their daughter would be.

While I realize that few, if any, lesbians will line up consistently on one side or the other of the femme-butch line, I'm amazed at how frequently yin-yang dynamics are expressed in a couple. And just as I don't want anyone telling me what I must be like because I'm a woman or a dyke, I don't want anyone telling me what it must mean for me to be a femme.

I hesitate to dress up in front of straight people. I'm not sure if anyone looks beyond the baubles to know there's a brain there, too. But I enjoy flaunting myself in front of the girls. A while ago, Linda had to have surgery. I couldn't be there before she went into the operating room, but I was in the recovery room when she woke up. I chose to wear a purple skirt and a

brilliant fuchsia jacket that I knew she liked. I also had on a glitzy blouse and long, dangly earrings. When she opened her eyes and smiled at me, the smile deepened when she saw my costume, even through her pain and nausea. I can't explain the connection there was. Just like I can't explain how much I admire her years of strength and determination to succeed in her male-dominated field. I thrill at the sight of her in her uniform and tie.

Femme is a freeing force in my life. I can more readily express all sides of my personality in all kinds of situations. My flaming femme was finally released the day I wrote Linda a love letter, and instinctively knew what flirtatious challenge I would teasingly add as a tag line. I've never forgotten it (I'm sure she'll never let me!) and it may be one of the most self-confident, boldest things I've ever said in my life: "Are you butch enough to fuck me?" The reciprocal of that is not only "I'm femme enough to take it," but also "I'm femme enough to fuck you!"

Yes, I really do enjoy being a girl, a dyke, and a femme!

Maluma Crone

## *One Femme's Dreams and Aspirations*

I think it all began when I started toilet training. My mother tried and tried to stop me from peeing in my pants. Nothing seemed to work until she decided to buy me frilly panties in the hope that I would choose not to soil them. It was a stroke of genius: my mother had seen into my baby femme's soul; I never wet my panties again.

Important clues emerged as I grew older, revealing my true identity as a femme and my lust for clothes. When I was seven or eight, my rich grandmother gave me a pretty jumper with matching high heels. I was delighted! My mother was appalled, feeling high heels entirely inappropriate for a young child. But I was in seventh femme heaven. I felt transformed into something truly extraordinary, and it was clothes that had done this for me.

I remember other similar transformations: I donned a blue tutu with dark blue sequins and suddenly became a ballerina. For hours I danced with fervor across the living room carpet, listening to "Gaité Parisienne," lost in my own impassioned world.

Another time with a friend, I draped purple and turquoise velveteen material across my body and became a princess, leaving my other self behind. Afternoons were often spent in this role playing dress-up, and everything yielded to my vivid fantasies.

Certain clothes stand out in my mind, even from when I was quite young. I remember, for instance, a favorite green felt bonnet. I can see it as clearly as the deep purple tunic I'm wearing now. It was soft and fuzzy, with tiny felt flowers in the front. It matched my green winter coat. Another bonnet I loved was made of sheer white fabric with pink lace ribbons.

The sixties coincided with my adolescence. I remember dressing for a Monkees concert at seven a.m. (the concert wasn't until the evening, but I was determined to look just right). I admired myself in the downstairs mirror: my reflection sported a blue miniskirt, softer tone blue sweater, bright blue "mod" cap, blue beads that came to my belly, white tights, and — my pride and joy — white go-go boots. The perfect outfit for such an occasion.

In early high school I wore miniskirts and minidresses, my legs long and gangly, and bright pink hot pants borrowed from my best friend. My mother

would have killed me if she'd known. Later high school years saw me, now a "hippie chick," in torn and patched blue jeans, tight cut-off jeans and t-shirts with no bra underneath, or a paisley minidress. One time I took an Indian bedspread, folded it over, and sewed up the sides, leaving room for my arms: instant hippie dress!

Then came the seventies. After high school graduation, I came out as a lesbian, which was a brilliant awakening for me. I embraced my love for women and acknowledged that love in myself. But it was a killer for fashion. "Femme" was politically incorrect and frowned upon; it didn't occur to me then that I might be one. I joined the ranks of androgynous dykes everywhere, and my wardrobe, if it could be called that, consisted of jeans, brown trousers, t-shirts, vests, flannel shirts, and work boots. I cut my previously long hair and occasionally wore a tweed cap with a small bill, generally known as a "dyke cap." My femme soul went into hiding before I had a chance to name myself as such and blossom into my true being.

I wore the same drab clothes for over ten years. It never occurred to me to dress differently. To be a real dyke meant you had to dress this way. I knew I loved women, therefore I believed that wearing dresses and other femme attire meant you were chained to the patriarchy, to attracting and pleasing men. I had left that all behind me. I said "woman" instead of "chick." I wore jeans and shapeless boots. I was enlightened.

But I dreamed. I was ashamed of my dreams, and only told my friends about them laughingly, making fun of myself. I dreamed of clothes. I dreamed of walking into stores filled with the most vibrant and outrageous clothes, no dull tans or dreary browns to be seen. I was deliriously happy in these dreams and tried on bright boas, bright colors in patterns that didn't go together and textures I had never felt in real life. I touched lingerie of scalloped silk, dresses, stockings, high heels, and hats with feathers. My heart sang with joy. I awoke from these dreams slightly embarrassed, feeling a little silly. I shrugged them off, considering it something of a slip, and went on with my important lesbian-feminist activities.

But the dreams continued. They had a life of their own; they were unshakable.

Around the early eighties my life shifted again. The lesbian land group I was part of broke up, and I felt despairing and directionless. My dreams of a land of lesbians creating their own reality were shattered. I doubted that we could create anything sustainable. I wondered what the hell I really believed in.

I moved from New York to California and lived with an old flame. She was very butch and very politically incorrect. She didn't consider herself a feminist, drank a lot of beer, and hung out with men. I thought I could help her and reform her while falling in love with her and having lots of great sex (there was something about her bad-girl persona that made me weak in the knees and wet in the crotch). One day, very hesitantly, for she knew my

lesbian-feminist background, she approached me with a request: "Would you, uh, do you think sometime, maybe, uh..." Finally she spit it out. She wanted to know if, during sex, I'd consider wearing high heels and seamed fishnet stockings and, perhaps a skirt. My first gut reaction was utter excitement and thrill. In a split second all my political correctness went out the window. I opened my mouth, grinned, and said, "Sure!"

The seamed fishnet stockings took a while to find, but at a nearby Salvation Army store I bought a long multicolored skirt to her liking and black, patent leather open-toed high heels. Back home, I put on these newly acquired items and felt that old familiar excitement course through my body. I also felt pretty awkward and was glad none of my friends back East could see me.

"You're such a girl," my lover said, and blushed. I am? I thought. My girlfriend eyed me lustfully. Her admiration heightened my excitement, and we had some very hot sex, my heels on my feet the whole time.

She brought me out as a femme. It was a gradual process; it couldn't have been any other way. It started in the bedroom and slowly made its way out the door. But that took years. I am very grateful to that woman. She gently and lovingly encouraged me to grow into the femme and lover of clothes that I am now.

One evening the two of us went to a lace-and-leather party. Dress-up time again! I wore fake pearls, white heels, white tights, a white skirt with a tiny lace hem, a white frilly blouse, and white gloves that went up to my elbow, all (except the tights) bought at the same secondhand store. From time to time I put on these same clothes to play the innocent-virgin-who-has-the-hots-for-and-eventually-gets-seduced-by-the-beer-drinking-streetwise-leather-but-neighbor. I was breaking new ground in myself, breaking all the rules of political correctness that had narrowed my soul and stifled the flow of my creativity. And I was having a great time!

The leather-and-lace party was the first time I had worn a skirt in public (excluding my brother's wedding) since 1972, when I first came out. I thought little of it at the time: it was a dress-up party; everyone was wearing unusual clothes, kind of like Halloween. But I couldn't ignore the excitement I felt and the pride I experienced when other women noticed me. How natural it felt to wear these things and how good it felt to be on this butch's arm, basking in her admiration.

In 1984, privately at first, I began to call myself a femme. I still dressed very drably outside my home. The same old clothes: jeans, t-shirts, sneakers; no frills, lace, bright colors, or skirts. My socks never matched. I thought this was who I really was.

My dreams, however, persisted. I walked into exotic stores that carried the most unusual clothes: tapered tops, rainbow colors, amazing materials that I never came across in real life. The dreams seemed to push lovingly at my consciousness, and while I dreamed, I was happy, fulfilled, and brimming with excitement.

would have killed me if she'd known. Later high school years saw me, now a "hippie chick," in torn and patched blue jeans, tight cut-off jeans and t-shirts with no bra underneath, or a paisley minidress. One time I took an Indian bedspread, folded it over, and sewed up the sides, leaving room for my arms: instant hippie dress!

Then came the seventies. After high school graduation, I came out as a lesbian, which was a brilliant awakening for me. I embraced my love for women and acknowledged that love in myself. But it was a killer for fashion. "Femme" was politically incorrect and frowned upon; it didn't occur to me then that I might be one. I joined the ranks of androgynous dykes everywhere, and my wardrobe, if it could be called that, consisted of jeans, brown trousers, t-shirts, vests, flannel shirts, and work boots. I cut my previously long hair and occasionally wore a tweed cap with a small bill, generally known as a "dyke cap." My femme soul went into hiding before I had a chance to name myself as such and blossom into my true being.

I wore the same drab clothes for over ten years. It never occurred to me to dress differently. To be a real dyke meant you had to dress this way. I knew I loved women, therefore I believed that wearing dresses and other femme attire meant you were chained to the patriarchy, to attracting and pleasing men. I had left that all behind me. I said "woman" instead of "chick." I wore jeans and shapeless boots. I was enlightened.

But I dreamed. I was ashamed of my dreams, and only told my friends about them laughingly, making fun of myself. I dreamed of clothes. I dreamed of walking into stores filled with the most vibrant and outrageous clothes, no dull tans or dreary browns to be seen. I was deliriously happy in these dreams and tried on bright boas, bright colors in patterns that didn't go together and textures I had never felt in real life. I touched lingerie of scalloped silk, dresses, stockings, high heels, and hats with feathers. My heart sang with joy. I awoke from these dreams slightly embarrassed, feeling a little silly. I shrugged them off, considering it something of a slip, and went on with my important lesbian-feminist activities.

But the dreams continued. They had a life of their own; they were unshakable.

Around the early eighties my life shifted again. The lesbian land group I was part of broke up, and I felt despairing and directionless. My dreams of a land of lesbians creating their own reality were shattered. I doubted that we could create anything sustainable. I wondered what the hell I really believed in.

I moved from New York to California and lived with an old flame. She was very butch and very politically incorrect. She didn't consider herself a feminist, drank a lot of beer, and hung out with men. I thought I could help her and reform her while falling in love with her and having lots of great sex (there was something about her bad-girl persona that made me weak in the knees and wet in the crotch). One day, very hesitantly, for she knew my

lesbian-feminist background, she approached me with a request: "Would you, uh, do you think sometime, maybe, uh..." Finally she spit it out. She wanted to know if, during sex, I'd consider wearing high heels and seamed fishnet stockings and, perhaps a skirt. My first gut reaction was utter excitement and thrill. In a split second all my political correctness went out the window. I opened my mouth, grinned, and said, "Sure!"

The seamed fishnet stockings took a while to find, but at a nearby Salvation Army store I bought a long multicolored skirt to her liking and black, patent leather open-toed high heels. Back home, I put on these newly acquired items and felt that old familiar excitement course through my body. I also felt pretty awkward and was glad none of my friends back East could see me.

"You're such a girl," my lover said, and blushed. I am? I thought. My girlfriend eyed me lustfully. Her admiration heightened my excitement, and we had some very hot sex, my heels on my feet the whole time.

She brought me out as a femme. It was a gradual process; it couldn't have been any other way. It started in the bedroom and slowly made its way out the door. But that took years. I am very grateful to that woman. She gently and lovingly encouraged me to grow into the femme and lover of clothes that I am now.

One evening the two of us went to a lace-and-leather party. Dress-up time again! I wore fake pearls, white heels, white tights, a white skirt with a tiny lace hem, a white frilly blouse, and white gloves that went up to my elbow, all (except the tights) bought at the same secondhand store. From time to time I put on these same clothes to play the innocent-virgin-who-has-the-hots-for-and-eventually-gets-seduced-by-the-beer-drinking-streetwise-leather-butch-next-door. I was breaking new ground in myself, breaking all the rules of political correctness that had narrowed my soul and stifled the flow of my creativity. And I was having a great time!

The leather-and-lace party was the first time I had worn a skirt in public (excluding my brother's wedding) since 1972, when I first came out. I thought little of it at the time: it was a dress-up party; everyone was wearing unusual clothes, kind of like Halloween. But I couldn't ignore the excitement I felt and the pride I experienced when other women noticed me. How natural it felt to wear these things and how good it felt to be on this butch's arm, basking in her admiration.

In 1984, privately at first, I began to call myself a femme. I still dressed very drably outside my home. The same old clothes: jeans, t-shirts, sneakers; no frills, lace, bright colors, or skirts. My socks never matched. I thought this was who I really was.

My dreams, however, persisted. I walked into exotic stores that carried the most unusual clothes: tapered tops, rainbow colors, amazing materials that I never came across in real life. The dreams seemed to push lovingly at my consciousness, and while I dreamed, I was happy, fulfilled, and brimming with excitement.

Then I met another femme. I don't remember if, when I met her, she called herself that, but she was a femme. Her hair was long and styled, she wore scarves and long earrings, and although she mostly dressed in jeans and t-shirts, she occasionally wore a skirt. At first I was shocked, but then I noticed what pride she took in herself and how it suited her to dress like that. I didn't see any women look at her askance because of her attitude. Maybe things were changing, the old rules dropping away. I felt both insecure and relieved. I recognized that I was like this friend of mine, and I wanted to wear a skirt out in the world, too. I began to wear scarves as my friend had taught me. I had long since allowed my hair to grow longer and felt much more natural with it that way.

I bought my first real, out-in-the-world skirt at the Berkeley Flea Market secondhand. It was a deep purple color, came to just above my ankles, and was made of thin corduroy. I still have that skirt. I remember the first daring day I wore that skirt to a sign language class filled with friends, including my new femme friend. I wore the skirt with a turtleneck and a scarf. I felt hesitant and shy, but also excited and bold. I sensed that maybe who I really was had more to do with this purple skirt and scarf than with the long line of khakis, blue jeans, and flannel shirts I'd worn for years.

My femme friend whispered that she liked my skirt. My other friends were surprised but no one pounced on me for selling out to the patriarchy. I breathed an inner sigh of relief. Maybe I could get away with this.

As time went on, I became more daring. I bought dangly earrings, blouses with a little bit of lace on them, another long skirt. I enjoyed the way I felt in them, and no one seemed to be objecting. I let myself blossom.

Gradually I began to call myself a femme to friends and then even to people I didn't know well. I recognized that all the women I was most attracted to were butch and always had been. Usually, the more butch the woman, the more attraction I felt. At the same time I noticed changes within the lesbian community: more butches claiming their butchness and femmes coming out of their closets. Some lesbians objected, claiming that we were just imitating the heterosexual world. I stopped listening to this and started trusting my instincts more. Other lesbians didn't seem to care who was butch, femme, or otherwise. Some didn't fit clearly into any particular category. I heard about a butch-femme scale with ten being the most butch and one the most femme. My instincts told me I was at the very beginning of the femme side of the scale.

I still had my self-doubts and insecurities. Sometimes I thought maybe I shouldn't be so femme. Maybe it's not okay to dislike building houses (I was living in the country again where half the women I knew built their own homes), fixing my car, or splitting wood. I had never liked doing these things before, but I'd always felt I should.

As I developed my inner desires, other wonderful experiences occurred. A friend of mine started a lesbian talent show for the local community. I'd



had a fantasy for years in the back of my mind of stripping. The talent show seemed like the perfect opportunity to fulfill this desire, but I was a little nervous about doing it alone.

So I chose a good friend, a butch whom I felt was naturally inclined in this area, and asked her if she'd like to do it with me. She jumped at the chance. It was the ideal situation to show off my proud femme body. I loved to dance and felt confident doing so, and of course I could wear fun femme clothes!

As I prepared for the strip with my friend, she offered the use of her leather boots. They were very femme anyway, more suited to me than to her. They were beautiful, thigh-high boots with spiked heels, very sexy. It felt wonderful to wear them in the show, and have her seductively take them off at the appropriate time.

We practiced again and again. At the performance, although we were both nervous, I enjoyed myself immensely and we got a great response from the audience. Afterwards, she gave me the leather boots. "They're yours now anyway," she said simply. "They couldn't be mine again after that." I felt proud and slightly embarrassed as I thanked her.

Slowly my wardrobe expanded and transformed itself. I took boxes of t-shirts and button-down shirts to the thrift stores. I began to window-shop and often spent hours wondering what to wear to an upcoming party (something I'd not previously given any thought to, at least as an adult). I noticed that I was attracting women who either were self-identified as butch or were very butchy and recognized that they were attracted to femmes. I bought more skirts, dresses, femme-looking boots with points, and blouses with flowers and lace. It was important that I wore socks that matched. Sometimes I changed outfits several times in one day. I felt alive and vibrant. My shame was dwindling away. The dreams continued but with less frequency; I had taken them seriously and listened to what they were saying.

I fantasized a lot about lingerie. I bought secondhand: garters, bras, teddies; occasionally I splurged and bought new pieces. My chest of drawers overflowed, so I bought another small one, painted it white, and had a butch attach new handles — white with pink flowers.

I am now femme and proud. There are no doubts or lingering insecurities about my passions. It seems ludicrous to think that being femme has anything to do with selling out. I know it is my true nature. Everything I do is femme, whether it's fucking, taking out the garbage, or reading a book. Everything I do is femme, because that's who I am.

Occasionally, I still have the dreams. When I wake from them, I smile, knowing they are there to guide me, urging me to be as outrageously femme in my waking life as I am in my dreams, to become my dreams.

I know that I was born to strut my stuff, to show off my proud femme body, to have the sexiest of butch lovers. I was born to wear lace, heels, stockings, and miniskirts or elegant black dresses with long earrings and

makeup. I grieve the days I spent as an androgynous lesbian, abandoning my true self and obediently toeing the party line. I'm proud of the woman I've allowed myself to become and I want to flaunt her boldly. As I do, I reconnect with that baby femme who would never think to wet her special frilly panties. Not on your life.

Kate Allen

## *But I Like to Wear Dresses*

Being a two-stepping kind of gal, a couple of weeks ago I found myself in the bathroom of the local country-western bar. I always use the men's bathroom; there's less of a line, so if you need to primp a little there's a chance of doing it without an audience. This time there were two other women with the same idea. They were having a conversation about a friend of a friend who had gone for her fifteen minutes of fame by learning to pee in the men's urinal. (Not something I look for in a woman, but it takes all kinds.) The main difficulty these gals were having with the story was envisioning what this woman did with her pants. If they were around her ankles, didn't she pee on them? Surely she didn't take them off, did she? That would mean taking her boots off, and you know what a pain *that is!*

I listened to this for a couple of minutes while fluffing, and then made a suggestion. "Maybe she was wearing a skirt."

Complete silence. The cowgirls looked at one another blankly, as though I had spoken an unknown tongue. You could see the little wheels turning in their heads. Dyke — skirt? Dyke — skirt? Isn't this an oxymoron? This in spite of the fact that I was standing right there in front of them in a skirt!

This is far from the first time this has happened. I have discovered that doing the femme thing makes many lesbians act as if you are wearing a thin layer of Pam: their eyes might touch you for a moment, but they slide right off without comprehension or memory. It does not matter if you are wearing a Gay Pride button and lambda earrings (always a fashion mistake, incidentally) at a Phranc concert. These women are psychologically unable to recognize you as family. It is even worse if you are out in the straight world. More than once I've been politely asked if there was something in my eye, when all I was trying to do was give another dyke in the checkout lane the high sign.

There is another group of dykes who realize femmes like women, and who may even want to fuck you, but want to relate to femmes with a real strong flavor of redneck male attitude. Once in a period of temporary insanity, I dated a woman who not only thought it the height of wit to make dumb blonde jokes at my expense, but also strenuously objected to my wearing anything but dresses and heels. She also watched everything I ate like a hawk for fear I would gain weight and not show as well on her arm. Oh, please. Being femme does not mean you have been caught in a time machine and are now channeling Donna Reed. Needless to say, this particu-

lar woman is now terrorizing some other poor femme in the suburbs, but there are many others like her. My reaction to this kind of butch is to point out that, if I wanted to be involved in this brand of role and stereotyping, I'd have married an old-fashioned kind of guy and at least gotten the dental benefits and societal acceptance along with the oppression.

Yet, even though at age thirty-six, twenty of those years out as a lesbian, I am strongly femme-identified, I've been guilty of this same type of stereotyping myself. I came out when I was seventeen and spent the next couple of years in a strong lesbian-feminist community loosely organized around a collectively run women's bookstore. It was unlike anything a twenty-year-old New Wave lesbian today could imagine. In many ways we did a lot of good. We, and women like us, were the ones who supported Daughters, Inc., the publishing company that put out the first contemporary lesbian novels and was the grandmother of today's huge array of dyke presses. We welcomed frightened little high-school dykes (who, after all, were really only a few years younger than some of us) and let them do their homework in the back of the store, listening to Holly Near and Cris Williamson, and many other women like Willie Tyson and Therese Edell and Woody Simmons who, though they only made one or two records, created a huge foundation for lesbian music as it is today. We challenged the men on the street, terrorizing those who called us "honey," and defended the prostitutes who shared our block. We boldly went where no one had gone before. We were the first generation to be out in quite that way, the first to wear handmade buttons that said, "Dyke," and, "I like older women" (there was no one younger to like).

Yet for all the good we did, there was a terrible rigidity to our thinking that manifested in our treatment of one another. My friends and I shared more than the uniform of overalls, plaid flannel shirt, boots, no makeup or jewelry. We also adhered to a rigid pattern of thinking that allowed us to embrace only those lesbians who not only looked and dressed the way we did, but had the same ideas about looking and dressing as we did. During a time period when we were trying desperately to look outside the white, middle-class molds in which most of us were raised — trying hard to network with lesbians of color, trying to accommodate the health needs of all lesbians (I went to potlucks where not only was smoking forbidden, but it was required that everyone write and display the ingredients of each dish), trying to make all events accessible to all lesbians — there was little room for any maneuvering in the realm of butch and femme. If you wore a dress and heels you were out, period. (Of course, we didn't mean the poor dyke down the street who was suffering as a receptionist until Denver Public Schools started hiring bus drivers again. Her pained, awkward manner let everyone know she was being oppressed. It was those gals who did it on purpose who we ostracized.) If you shaved your legs and armpits, you were not worth bothering with; clearly you were probably still way too tied up with the patriarchy. We had evolved way beyond that. Rather than honoring

the old-timers with their ducktail haircuts, their girlfriends in beehives and pumps, we instead murmured to one another that it was women like them who gave us a bad name and perpetuated the myth that all lesbians played male-female roles. We didn't do that! We were androgynous! We knew that panty hose was the work of Satan, and fingernail polish thought up by his minions.

It seems odd that, during this time of classification, I continued to wear skirts. I think I was allowed to get by because I was so vocal about what I *didn't* wear: panty hose, heels, makeup. I'd wear a dress, I told everyone who would listen, only if I could do everything I needed to do in a dress. I picketed, hammered, sawed, swam, and put up adobe in long cotton skirts. I drove my bus in sundresses that matched my baseball caps. (In case you are wondering why I am making a big deal out of what I wore, the first time I went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival I saw — out of seven thousand women seen over a period of five days — two other women wearing skirts.)

I was accepted, but just as, all through school, I had known I was not quite the right kind of girl, for years I felt I wasn't, really, quite the right kind of lesbian, either. The skills I had were not those really honored by my contemporaries. My eyes rolled back into my head if anyone attempted to explain engine repair. I couldn't fix my TV, and I didn't even *want* to play softball. It was true I could sew up a storm, but you could see the other dykes wondering, while I was hemming their pants and mending their day packs, if this was really quite PC. It wasn't *owning* a sewing machine that seemed suspicious — lots of other women had Singers that had been graduation presents, never opened, but kept against the day Mom or Grandma visited — but the fact that I seemed *way* too into it. Now the woman who *fixed* sewing machines — there was a real dyke's job!

I was femme-bashing as much as anyone else. I had grown up with an alcoholic, depressive mother who ruled through manipulation and tears. In my house anything like Mom, anything like Woman was bad. My father's favorite daughter was my younger sister, the one who not only volunteered to help shingle the house and trim the fruit trees, but who also dealt with her feelings as he did: by cutting them off completely.

About this time I started using the term "butchy femme," which later became "competent femme." I wanted everyone to know that, even though I had long hair and brought my needlework to collective meetings, I wasn't like those *other* women. You know, the ones who really *deserved* to be the butt of dumb blonde jokes. *I* didn't wear shoes I couldn't run in.

It wasn't until I became involved in the leather scene that I realized being femme could be something that need not be seen as, or controlled like, a bad allergy, but something some lesbians saw as a positive asset. Leather dykes tend to have their sexuality right out there. They were the first ones who said "Hey, we like that part of you, it turns us on." For three years I had a loving and supportive leather butch girlfriend who encouraged that part of

me to blossom and made me feel like Aphrodite, a lovely feeling indeed. Of course there were negative experiences as well: the girlfriend with the June Cleaver fixation; the handful of leather butches at every event who equate femme with permanent bottom or stupid; the women who think dating a femme means immediate care for their children, their laundry, and their dinner. There are also the lesbians who *still* believe that femme women are the enemy and that wearing earrings or lip gloss puts you in the rank of those who deserve to be treated with disdain or ostracism.

But on the whole I believe that lesbians are beginning to see we truly *are* a hugely diverse people. On one far end of the spectrum are the very butch-identified, on the other, women who are very femme-identified. Between the two is a huge range of lesbians of all types, colors, abilities, thoughts, lifestyles, cultures, and identifications. There are women like me, who like to sew and play soccer and two-step and hike. I feel, just as we all comprise a kaleidoscope, I am a kaleidoscope within myself, and everyone benefits when I allow all my facets to show, rather than hiding some for fear of disapproval.

I raised myself feminist, and of course I still have qualms about some of the trappings that come with being femme-identified. I can pass much more easily than a butch woman; does this give me an advantage I should refuse to play on? How much does the way the media portray women have to do with my feelings about my weight? Who am I supporting when I buy stockings, and what does it mean if I shave my legs?

For the most part, I have come to terms with these worries by thinking about the women I see at festivals, those who are painted or tattooed or wearing all kinds of costumes of their own making. Such festivity! When I dress up, I capture a little of that same feeling of carnival.

As for the myth of femme helplessness, my girlfriend once, in an attack of the lovey-dovies, told me she just wanted to take care of me. I responded to this rather sternly by informing her I was very self-sufficient and could take care of myself, thank you! She laughed and gently reminded me, "Honey, it's no fun to take care of anyone who really *needs* to be taken care of." How true!

I live alone, and plan to live alone the rest of my life. I have had to figure out how to take care of all my needs *one way or another*. Sometimes that other way is trading with someone else to do the job, but that doesn't diminish my self-sufficiency in any way. Luckily, there is always someone in the lesbian community who needs to have her pants mended.

## *Skirting the Issue*

I love wearing skirts and always have, especially the kind that ends about midcalf, has yards of material, and a shape that one would call flouncy. Yes, I love skirts. But does wearing them make me a femme?

The first skirt I remember is the navy blue, pleated one I wore to Catholic grade school. Every Sunday evening my two sisters and I would gather for the all-important ritual of ironing the thick, cotton pleats which, after numerous washings, had lost their ordered appearance.

Buttoning the one button at the waistband, I would slip the skirt over the end of the ironing board, and with painstaking care, begin the chore of laying a wet washcloth on the top half of the four pleats that I had set in place with my fingers. Then, carefully, so as not to be caught by the hot iron, I would deftly bring the iron down onto the washcloth, keeping my fingers pressed to the bottom of the pleats so they wouldn't ripple and crease in the wrong way. Once the top half of those four pleats was sufficiently steamed, I had to quickly move the now hot washcloth down to the bottom half, where the pleats seemed less willing to be reined in, as they had no waistband to hold their form in place, and insisted on flaring out into soft waves of dark blue cloth.

Some nights when we were short on time, we'd pull out the can of spray starch. But the heat of the iron turned the starch into white flakes that stuck to the pleat edges and left a shiny film over the skirt. And the pleat just didn't lie right without the searing steam of the washcloth technique. So each Sunday night over the course of my childhood, I stood at the ironing board, rendering order out of chaos pleat by pleat, until all twenty or so stood in uniform fashion, and I was finally ready to face the week.

Coming from such an indoctrination concerning the importance of "looking right," it is no wonder that I rebelled at the first possible chance against all things feminine. As soon as I graduated from high school (all-girls Catholic, where the skirt changed to a gray-and-green-checked whose heavy woolen cloth did not allow many pleats to wander far), I donned overalls and jeans.

My mother hated my overalls. "They do nothing for you," she would lament. And I, the budding feminist, would reply, "That's the point." Sticking my hands deeper into my side pockets, I found comfort in the fact that I was an emancipated adult and she couldn't stop me from wearing them.

Inevitably, skirts caught up with me as I followed in the footsteps of my older siblings and joined the revolution. I became a hippie, and found myself wrapped in the cheap, brightly colored Indian skirts that were the trademark for counterculture women. I grew to love the sensation of soft, swirling material brushing over my calves and thighs as I walked. I reveled in the spiraling arc of color and fabric that spun around me as I danced in late-night bars.

Always a feminist, I found a rationale for this attire, believing that it freed me from the restrictive clothing trends that women were forced to follow. Wearing a skirt removed any obstacle between myself and the earth's vibration; wearing a skirt permitted me to reclaim my own body's movement, as I could break into long strides unencumbered by the chafing cloth of trousers at my hips and knees. Finally, wearing a skirt without underwear (which I did for many years) removed the ultimate difference between menfolk and me. Hoisting the sides of my skirt up around my waist, with my feet wide apart and my knees bent, I could relieve myself standing up. How wonderful to be freed from that demeaning position, the squat. I impressed many a friend with my audacity and accurate aim.

Then I became a lesbian. In the dyke world of the late seventies, the terms "butch" and "femme" weren't applied, at least not in the scene I joined. We were feminist lesbians creating a world of shared sisterhood, where everybody did the dishes and everybody changed her own oil, and nobody wore skirts.

Wanting to please, I shoved my limbs into cotton drawstring pants and relegated my skirts to the ignominious position of cushion covers. Picking up my labrys and marching off to women's land, I dared anyone to say I wasn't a Goddess-fearing lesbian.

It was my friend Wyrda, a working-class butch from San Francisco, who broke the news to me. No matter how well I chopped wood or artfully pounded a hammer, I was still a femme.

"Whaddya mean?" I cried. "I haven't worn a skirt in ten years! I know, I know, my earring collection has grown. But, still...!"

She patiently explained that it wasn't any *one* thing that labeled you one or the other, but rather a certain feeling, a certain way of moving in the world.

"But you've seen me in meetings. I can be as aggressive as the next dyke," I protested. She just shook her head and patted me on the cheek.

"Besides, I've done things no butch would attempt, even if I was wearing a skirt!" And I launched into stories about the time I hitchhiked across Central America alone, wielding my machete against would-be rapists and ominous border guards. Then I described, in detail, how I walked through the backstreets of New Orleans at two a.m., never fearful and never bothered.

"Well, there are such things as butchy femmes. On a scale of one to ten, you're about a five and a half," she complied.



“Ten being butch?” I asked, hopefully.

“No,” she answered, pulling her black fedora down over her eyes and walking away. “No, honey, just the opposite!”

“Well, I don’t believe in that butch-femme stuff, anyway,” I called after her, but she didn’t seem to hear me. So there I was, stuck with a label I wasn’t sure I even agreed with.

Soon after, I met the woman I now live with. She adorns herself with silk scarves and wraps cobalt blue beads around her wrists. She loves to cook, and has turned many a weed patch into a luxurious garden of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. Is she a femme? Or is she is a butch? She can outwork any woman half her age, and has a set of biceps that jump out at you when she wears her tank top in the summer.

Is it like she says, “I’m beyond butch and femme”? Or, could it be that we need a third category, one that would allow for us butchy femmes and femmy butches to feel comfortable in? But maybe that’s ... skirting the issue.

Anita Langford

## *Leading Looks*

*I*t had always been a fantasy of mine. Kind of clichéd, I know, but I'd always wanted to slow-dance, swaying to the music, with a handsome woman in a suit. I imagined myself wearing a long black dress in a dimly lit lounge room, the sound of rain softly pattering outside.

My reality today is in the local Mechanics Institute Hall. It's as bright and hot as any typical Australian summer day. There are pockets of dust underneath the chairs stacked against the wall. I've only noticed this because I'm keeping my head down. I've already caught a few dirty looks. If I make eye contact I'll see the self-righteous expressions on their faces: "I hope she knows this is a lesbian class." Yeah, I know it's a lesbian class. And I've got those I'm-the-only-woman-in-a-mini-and-heels blues again.

I wander off to the ladies' room to check my lipstick. In the mirror, I look scared and insecure, and it's not becoming. I feel small stirrings of anger. How dare they subject me to their small-mindedness? I reapply my lipstick and practice an arrogant stare. Much better. As I slip the lid back on the case I hear a voice behind me. "God, I gave that up ages ago." A smart-arse eighties dyke is looking for a laugh. No one else is interested, so she swaggers out of the washroom, but not before I've had a chance to dish out my most disdainful, carefully penciled, and raised-eyebrow glare.

I'm in a spoiler of a mood now and it shows in my walk. I smack my heels on the floorboards and toss my hair out of my face. I've been known to hide behind my hair, but not now. If anyone wants to give me a dirty look she can have one back. No one takes up my silent offer. I'm not surprised. My inner bitch from hell can be one powerful girl when she's roused. My handbag flies neatly into the corner and lands with an ominous thud. We're ready to start.

Our instructor is a small woman with a wicked sense of humour. "Leaders, you must overpower the followers. Pressure them into the turns," she says with a cheeky grin. I amuse myself imagining how the dyke couples decided who would lead while the instructor reviews the leader's steps for the waltz. Most take turns leading and following. I'd rather sit out than attempt to lead.

I watch you from the other side of the room. Forward, side, together. You're easy on your feet and built strong. You look up and catch me watching you. I blush and look at the pair of Blundstone boots in front of me.

Now for my turn. "Now, ladies — oops, I mean followers." *Followers* is the word all right. They're just as likely to follow dress and behaviour codes as straights. You only need look around the room: waistcoats and white shirts are nice enough, but who wants to wear them as a uniform? Back, side, together. I'm feeling outrageously good in my heels. I step surely, knowing that I won't fall. I step knowing that you might be watching me. You should be; I stick out like a sore thumb in this crowd. Actually I'm glad. I've always been a bit of an exhibitionist when it comes down to it.

I'd have to be to dress this way. After all, it's not going to earn me any favours from my "sisters." I've dressed for you, though, not for them. Red mini, sleeveless black silk top, lace-top stockings, and black suede heels. My hair is soft and flips gently around my elbows as I turn in the practice runs. Yours is newly cut and slicked back. I want to run my fingernails up and down the nape of your neck. You're wearing a freshly pressed shirt and trousers. I've always had a thing for crisp shirt collars. When we partner up, you show me where to put my hands. I resist the urge to grip your collar and pull you over for a kiss. Obviously I'm going to have to watch myself.

When it comes to the crunch though, and the steps get complicated, ideas like that go out the window. I can't follow you, though I can see you know what you're doing. It's not that I can't feel you leading, it's more that I can't let go and allow myself to be led. Instead I screw my face up, look determinedly at my feet, and desperately try to remember whether it's right foot back or left. I'm way out of time and I knock your shins, inwardly cursing myself. So much for seduction on the dance floor.

In the break you say quietly, "Let me take care of it." I smile tensely at my feet and say nothing. It's not that I don't think I should trust you, it's just that I don't know if I can. It's been a long time since this particular femme trusted anyone to take care of anything, even though I want to give myself over to your care more than I can say.

Your hand rests heavily on my shoulder. You're strong, but I've grown used to relying on my strength alone. That way I know it's not going to be used against me. I quietly curse the last butch who abused her power. It's actually surprising that I find you so irresistible. You're not setting off the usual warning bells. Usually I go for the ones with nasty desperation in their eyes and intimidating violence in their stance. You're still waiting for me to acknowledge what you said. I look up at you and step back a little. You remind me of a giant, fuzzy bear. I imagine you giving me a bear hug, offer you my hand, and say, "Let's give it another try."

Patsy Cline pours out her heart from the stereo on the stage and I toss my insecurities out the window. We launch out again and I battle to hold my head up and look at you instead of my feet. You're concentrating as you gently push me into the turns. There are small beads of sweat on your forehead. God, but you're gorgeous. You lift your wrist and I spin under your arm and land safe and sure in front of you, your arm steadying me close at your shoulder. Out of the corner of my eye I see a woman staring in

amazement at my heels. Read it and weep, sister. I chatter away to you, telling you we're the best-looking couple in the room. You smile indulgently. I know you can't talk back or you'll lose concentration. This reminds me of the other ways a femme can lead the dance. I look into your eyes and hold you there in my gaze. I'll get you into my lounge room yet. Just you wait and see.

PART VII

*Femme to the Bone*

Trish Callahan

## Being Femme Means

**B**eing femme means walking into the women's bar wearing a dress and having all the girls look at me because they think I'm hot, not because they think I'm straight.

Being femme means being able to follow anyone's lead and melting on the dance floor for that butch woman who knows just the right steps.

Being femme means choosing to be on the bottom, and never giving up my power against my will.

Being femme means choosing to be on the top, and letting my lover tell me exactly how she wants it.

Being femme means standing around with a tool belt on and a drill in my hand and having girls smile and boys' mouths drop open because I know how to use it.

Being femme means having a butch girlfriend tell me that if I don't close my eyes I'll be able to hit the softball better, and telling her if she does close hers she'll be able to dance better.

Being femme means playing dress-up in the morning with my femme girlfriend.

Being femme means putting on makeup, dresses, and hose, pinning my hair up, putting on pearls, and still saying no to the boys and yes to the girls who ask me out on my lunch break at my temp job downtown.

Being femme means fitting in and standing out. Standing out because I'm a woman, alone, and everyone thinks this means I'm available.

Being femme means being harassed on the street, at the bus stop, on the bus.

Being femme means asking butch girlfriends with cars to pick me up from work. They tell me they don't get harassed, probably because they look like they don't like to be fucked with. I don't *like* to be fucked with either. I *like* to wear girls' clothes. I *like* having a female body. I *like* to walk wherever I want, whenever I want.

Being femme means changing my hairstyle as often as I like.

Being femme means wearing cutoffs and a t-shirt with unshaved legs to go work with kids, and having them think I'm a boy. Then coming home in the evening to wear a black silk dress while Becky wears a tux for her office party, and having her co-workers think we're a couple.

Being femme means scaring butch dance partners who can't follow by learning how to lead.

Being femme means my butch girlfriends let me sit when there's only one seat and always get my drinks. And I let them (one day when they're tired enough, they'll learn to take care of themselves).

Being femme means that butch girls can give up their seats and buy drinks for me, and I can still go home with someone else or no one at all.

Being femme means building a deck with a bunch of women, measuring angles, hauling wood, using power saws, and telling a butch girlfriend that I will not get her the screws she needs and hold the boards while she drills because I'm gonna drill it myself.

Being femme means being patient with butch girlfriends while they figure out that my not knowing how to drive stick or throw a football does not mean I am weak or incompetent.

Being femme means I was never taught and would love to learn.

Being femme means I like to be fucked hard and don't necessarily want to return the favor. Or maybe that's something I would like to learn, too.

Being femme means enjoying the pleasure my butch girlfriends get from thinking they need to and can protect me, and knowing that I can protect myself.

Being femme means telling my femme girlfriend how much I like it when she wears old jeans, a thick black leather belt, boots, and a backwards baseball cap to hide her growing blonde hair. And how I also like it when she wears a short skirt, heels, and dangly earrings while I do the same.

Being femme means I want butch girls and femme girls to answer my personal ads.

Being femme means telling Lexie I love her purple lace bra and telling Becky I love her leather jacket.

Being femme tells the world that every way that a woman is, is how a woman can be; and every way that a lesbian is, is how a dyke can be. There are no rules.

Being femme means being me.

Kay Elewski

## *Femme Da Mentals*

*I*'m not femme because I'm thin; I'm not femme because I'm sweet; I'm not femme because I'm smart and sassy.

I'm not femme for my blue eyeliner or my hot curling iron.

I'm not femme because people mistake me for straight.

I'm not femme because I can run in spikes or mount a barstool and ride sidesaddle in an ass-clenching dress.

I'm not femme because I can't adjust anything on my car except the rearview mirror (do not ask me where my dipstick is located).

I'm not femme because team sports bore me more than the men who describe them.

I'm not femme in a tantrum. In that broken synapse, I'm packing invisible weapons.

I'm not femme when the color-coded manuals enable me to hook up a computer, a stereo, or a videocassette recorder (you won't smirk when I hot-wire your cable).

I'm not femme when I dig up the creamiest gossip.

I'm not femme when I crave the flowers, presents, restaurants, and vacations that belong to those Hall of Fame holidays.

I'm not femme on tampons.

I'm not femme when I love your penetration.

I'm not femme because I love the girls. I love them mean, smart, and sharp. I love them dressed for a hunt. I dance with the girls and lose my shoes with the girls.

I'm not femme when I come to the door in red-sequined cha-cha mules from Manila.

I'm not femme because I borrow your clothes. I only want to wear your cowboy boots (I also have a pair of your panties in my drawer).

I'm not femme in the night when three pillows encircle me and I push my ass into your ass.

I'm not femme fast on languages and I want to understand you. I study and practice you. I listen for your sound.

I'm not femme fatale on a date. You pay for the taxi. I buy the drinks. You light my cigarette. I fix my lipstick.

I'm not femme combing your hair. Your thick beautiful hair rushes over my fingers. I like to feel the prickly shaved parts. I like to twist the curl. I like to braid your tail.



I'm not femme in a push-up bra taking visual measurements of other women's cleavage.

I'm not femme during the leg and bikini wax procedure.

I'm not femme with my legs braced open so a bald, stapled woman can drive a needle through my labia. I'm not femme holding your hand tight so she can pierce you, too.

I'm not femme when I wake up, make coffee, and come back to bed wearing nothing but backless pussy-fur slippers. I arrive with a magazine under my arm and a slice of buttered toast on a saucer. I need all the pillows. If you want breakfast, you know what to do. Move your hand along my leg. Graze my belly with your tongue. Bring your face close, rest your cheek on me. I don't have milk.

I'm not femme about milk. Will you make the milk come? Will you milk me?

I am femme because I know there is a boy inside me. The boy is femme, too. The boy wears dresses and shops. The boy cooks and selects the wines. The boy is hungry.

When I love you fierce and femme, you'll be surprised at how femme you are.

Christy Cramer

## Being Femme

I know I am femme. I also know that I've been femme much longer than I've accepted the label. At times I've tried to deny that I am femme. This was especially true when I got involved with women's studies and feminism at college, and I bought the idea that women should hide their femininity and try to be as androgynous as possible. Androgyny was said to be a healthy acceptance of both sides of your personality. It was something feminists should strive for. Because the lesbians I had seen up to that point looked either butch or androgynous, I stopped wearing makeup, dresses, nail polish, and other items that accentuated my femininity. At first this was really difficult for me, but after a while it began to feel freeing. After years of worrying that I didn't fit in because I was too heavy or didn't have the correct clothing, I could relax and be who I was. Unfortunately, while I was learning to accept myself and understand that appearance did not equal self-worth, I was also learning that it was not okay to be the feminine me. It was not all right to wear makeup and dresses. One women's studies professor taught us that even if we enjoyed doing something, we should transcend the patriarchy's hold on us for the good of all women. I had a hard time with this ideology, and eventually began to accept the term *femme*. Not only did it feel right, but the awareness didn't come with a set of rules. I could be myself without worrying about pleasing others. For a while, my old feelings that I was not feminine enough came back and sometimes they still do. But for the most part, I like calling myself femme and find it a relief to be able to be who I want to be.

Being femme means that I enjoy expressing myself sometimes in ways our society considers feminine. On occasion I'll wear dresses, makeup, and heels, and have fun with my femininity. Other times I grow tired of making myself up and instead enjoy jeans, sweatshirts, and sneakers. Even though these latter times tend to outnumber the former, I am still femme. So then what does being femme mean? To me it means both accepting and rejecting society's definition of femininity, questioning the parts that don't fit and rejoicing in the parts that do. It means choosing how I want to be and who I am, and knowing that the choice is mine alone. It means I can be as feminine as I want, but that I don't have to be.

Being femme is not just about appearances, though; it's also how I see myself and how I interact with the world; the way I feel about my body and

person. A femme in butch clothes is just that; her femmeness does not go away.

Being femme also means being invisible, not only to heterosexuals but also to many lesbians. I am almost always assumed to be straight. The only time I am recognized as a lesbian is when I walk with my lover or one of our friends. I've been told that people think my lover is a lesbian but don't consider that I might be also. One time my lover and I were walking through the mall with a friend and saw a group of lesbians walking toward us. All of them were either butch or at least identifiable as lesbians by their short hair or style of dress. As they passed us, they nodded to my lover and our friend. No one even looked at me. The funny part is that our friend is not a lesbian, yet she got the acknowledgment I rarely receive because she has short hair and dresses in jeans and t-shirts. Maybe the problem is that, while lesbians may choose to express themselves in different ways, we tend to look for similar features as a means of recognition.

For many, being femme is seen in relationship to being butch. Femmes have been described as the opposite of butch and as lovers of butch women. I prefer to see myself as an individual who is who she is, who has made a decision based on how she feels, rather than in reaction to another person or to be one-half of a femme-butch couple.

I believe that I have always been femme. Even as a little girl, I always wanted to be dainty. In junior high school, I even practiced being dainty and feminine because I was convinced that I was not. I always felt awkward, and saw myself as too heavy and ugly to be feminine. As my body has matured, I have become more and more like the woman I always wanted to be. I'm not quite as close as I had hoped for, but I believe most of us feel this way. It is really through my lover's eyes that I have come to see myself as being feminine and pretty. For me, that's where femme and butch complement each other. As a femme, I give my butch the strength and support to be who she is, and in return my butch does the same for me.

Chloë Ohme

## Podsnappery

### *Twisting through My Femme Identity*

**F**or me, coming out has been a process of continually constructing my identity, then finding ways of comfortably fitting into the worlds I move through.

I first came out through politics and feminism. I was in college then, hanging out in the punk scene. That became problematic when, as my political consciousness developed, it became harder and harder for me to hold my tongue when guys in the scene made sexist comments. Eventually I was ostracized. It didn't bother me so much, because I was coming out and didn't really care for boys. What really bothered me was the girls; they couldn't deal with me confronting their boyfriends for being assholes. So I stopped hanging out with them.

I started hanging out with the dykes from my women's studies classes. Now these girls, or *womyn*, if you will, didn't quite know what to do with me. This was at a large midwestern university where everyone was politically correct. The dykes knew my politics — I went to all the demonstrations and I worked at the women's center — but I didn't quite look like them. Where they had short hair, I had no hair; while they wore 100 percent cotton baggy clothing, I wore jeans and t-shirts with leather shoes and a leather belt. They called me “the bad activist” for wearing leather. So I was accepted on some levels (I was invited to their parties and their dances), but I never got a date.

Then in a feminist theory class, we read *A Restricted Country* by Joan Nestle, in which she talked about butch and femme identity roles. When I read that, I knew: *I was femme*. I felt as if I'd finally come home.

In horror, I realized that I'd been dressing butch all along. I traded in my jeans for a black miniskirt and tights, and told all my friends that I was coming out as a femme. They just laughed it off at first; maybe they didn't get it. But they got it — and didn't like it — when I started showing up for women's center staff meetings wearing bright red lipstick.

The dyke bar was where I really brought out my femme, and where I picked up my first butch. I started flirting with her as soon as I saw her. She told me she wasn't available; that she had a long-distance lover. I decided to pursue her anyway. I bummed cigarettes, laughed at her jokes, and touched her arm when I talked to her. I kept asking her to dance, and she kept

refusing, telling me that her lover's friends were there and it just wouldn't look right. The sexual tension between us was so strong that I had to take a break, so I went off to dance with my friends. The whole time I was dancing, I kept an eye on her, making sure she was still watching me. After all, I was really dancing for her.

Sometime after midnight I saw her make her way to the bathroom. I realized that this was my perfect opportunity; I could follow her in and proposition her there. I knew there would be no way she could resist me in the privacy and close quarters of the bathroom. But I hesitated. I was new as a femme and believed that the butch was supposed to make the first move. So I kept dancing and wanting, dancing and wanting, and wanting... Finally, I realized that being femme was not about limiting my desires to what other people thought this word made me. It's about assigning a word to a place inside myself that there is no language for, being true to that place, and feeling good enough to be comfortable with how I look, act, and want. And I wanted her.

I started making my way across the dance floor. It was crowded and I was getting nervous. Perhaps I had waited too long, she would leave the bathroom, and I would have missed my perfect opportunity. I started to run, hearing the cries of couples as I pushed them aside, trying desperately not to dump their drinks. I reached the bathroom, threw open the door ... and there she was, leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette, waiting for me. I turned to the mirror and fixed my lipstick.

Moving to San Francisco was like moving to paradise. There are so many women into butch and femme here, and so many butches to date! I love when a butch girl comes to pick me up for a date and she's all dressed up. She's not *really* dressed up, she's just wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but there's something about the way she carries herself that tells me she spent an hour in front of the mirror getting ready. She's made sure her t-shirt is tucked in just right, so it's baggy, but not *too* baggy. She's cuffed her jeans at the perfect length over her boots and made sure that they're hanging just so on her hips. *Yum*. I love feeling the strength of a butch woman as I stand next to her. Love the feel of her arm slipping around me in that kind of protective, kind of territorial way when another butch has been hanging around me just a little too long. I love that. Except for when it happens all the time.

I started to notice that some butches put their arm around me in that protective, territorial way even when I don't want their protection. They seem to assume that, because I'm femme, I need their help. And I started to notice other things. I noticed that, in group conversations, butches don't acknowledge femmes — that is, they don't make eye contact with them, unless they have a sexual intrigue going on with the femme. And I noticed a tendency for femmes to be referred to as "So-and-so's lover," as if they have no identity except as a certain butch's girlfriend. And then there's the stereotype that all femmes are bottoms...

My friends and I started calling this syndrome Butches' Disease. Butches' Disease is a conscious or unconscious belief that butches are better than femmes. One of the results is that femmes are treated with little or no respect, despite the fact that most women who suffer from Butches' Disease date only femme women.

The more I thought about Butches' Disease, the more I started wondering, What is my role in this? How do femmes play into this dynamic? I started looking for stories about femmes, but everywhere I looked, I only found information and validation of butches. It seems that most queer literature and history use the term *butch-femme* to refer to the history and language of butch experience, leaving femme voices unexplored. In frustration I returned to Joan Nestle. After all, she had been my inspiration to come out as a femme. I was extremely disappointed when I realized that she did the exact same thing. In an article titled "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," she discusses the way butch women have been rejected by feminism and how their appearance in society is courageous. She talks about why she loves them. She only mentions femme women in relationship to butches, particularly the fact that a butch woman is more oppositional to heterosexuality when she is seen in public with a femme.

In other words, a butch is challenging. A couple is even more challenging. But what is the power of a femme alone?

This lack of definition is damaging to the psyches of femmes because it leaves us to be defined only in relationship to butches. It is absolutely no different from the way heterosexual culture defines straight women in relationship to men. I started to feel as if everything that I had rejected about straight women when I came out as a dyke was being thrown back at me because I identified as a femme.

Being a femme is not the same as being a straight woman. But because we have no definitions or role models, femmes are often mistaken for straight women on the street. When I'm harassed on the street for being a dyke, I feel righteous anger at being oppressed as a queer. When I'm harassed for being a woman, I feel shame about being a woman.

That is when I discovered the femme equivalent of Butches' Disease. It can be called many things: Internalized Butches' Disease, Femmes' Disease, sexism, or femmephobia. Maybe we should just come right out and call it misogyny, because that's what it is. I found myself doing exactly what bothers me the most about Butches' Disease: valuing femmes only for their looks. It's as if I don't expect femmes to have any depth, when really I'm not allowing myself to get to know them on a deeper level. If I did, I might see a reflection of myself, and then I'd have to judge myself as I judge them. I'm afraid to start measuring myself because I know how catty I can be. And I know from experience that I'm not the only competitive femme out there. Worse still, I may start to believe my own criticisms and believe that my only value is in how good I look and how well I fuck.

Beyond competitiveness, there's my fear of intimacy and of being sexual with another femme. My first woman lover was femme, although neither of us identified as femme or butch then. When we ended our relationship and my heart was broken, I knew that I couldn't deal with that level of emotional intimacy again right away, so I fucked boys. It was so much easier: boys were so different, so removed from my experience that I could be sexual with them and not lose my heart or my head. When I went back to women, I only dated butches.

My friend and I used to joke when we'd see two femmes kissing; we'd call them lezzies, queers, or homosexuals because they were doing it with their own kind. But the more I thought about butch and femme and the stereotypical gender roles attached to them, I started to think that the most radical thing I could possibly do would be to date another femme.

There is one femme with whom I have some sort of undefined relationship. We started being sexual with each other in the context of a threesome with our mutual ex-lover (who is — of course — butch). Ever since then, when we're sexual I'm in boy-drag. It's not a conscious choice on my part; it's just that I feel butch when I'm with her. Me, the femme who knows she is femme-to-the-bone, 100 percent, complete femme! Yet this girl feels more femme than me, so I try to outfemme her by flipping over and going butch (or pseudobutch, if you will, since I don't do butch very well). When I'm with her, I know what her next move will be. I know how she'll bat her lashes at me, how she'll laugh at my jokes. I know these tactics because I've used them a million times with butch women. This girl is playing up to me like I'm butch. I feel like I've walked onstage and don't know my lines.

She flirts with me as she does with everyone. She's femme, and she expresses her sexuality in every word, in every gesture, and with absolutely no commitment to follow through with a sexual act. Because her flirting is so indirect, I'll never make the first move. I'm never sure that it's me she really wants. I'm afraid that if I respond to her, if I express my desire for her, if I stick out my dick, she'll laugh me off seductively, reject me without exactly saying so, castrate me oh-so-sweetly.

This femme thing is scary to me. But that's my disease.



*Safe Sex: Latex and Lace*

Wendy Jill York



Julie Varner Catt

## *A Kindred Spirit*

*A*lthough part of what identifies me as a femme is my passion for butch girls (their boots, their posture, the way they dance, their arrogance and courage), I don't want to talk about femmes only in relation to their butches. We all know a butch when we see one. Femmes are far more ambiguous, and are often caricatured as wearing six-inch heels, tight skirts, and garters; sounding more like drag queens than women; or being timid women hanging off the arms of strong, tough butches in leather.

I am a femme from the inside core of my being to the energy that radiates from that core and touches those around me. My femmeness can't be captured in what I wear; I refuse to let anyone trivialize the essence of who I am by letting generalizations like that go unchallenged. As a result I've found myself in unlikely conversations with other dykes about what it feels like to be femme, and what it means to be femme in the lesbian community and the world in general. Sometimes I am met with acknowledgment and dialogue. More often the reaction I receive is silence, laden with disapproval. If I press for some sort of response, I often hear, "I can be butch some days and femme others," "I don't want to be labeled," or "I'm not attracted to any one type of person; it's the personality that attracts me." That is all well and good. I'm hardly one to discount androgyny. However, I'd like to point out that not one of those women really acknowledges the existence of femmes, or even a butch-femme dynamic. No one asks about my experience as a femme.

Since the seventies, feminist dogma has decried femme-butch identification as a mimicry of heterosexuality. This theory came as a package deal with many revolutionary ideas, all of which seemed necessary for the evolution of women's, and particularly lesbian, culture. We are now, however, twenty years down that road. What seemed important to the feminist movement in the seventies isn't necessarily relevant in the nineties.

I am not a straight woman. I do not pass as a straight woman in public. While I love looking beautiful, feminine, and sexy for other women, I try not to seem accessible to men. Sometimes that means not wearing makeup or typically feminine clothing in a straight environment; other times it means surrounding myself with dykes whenever and wherever I can. This is a balance I am still learning to create for myself so that I can live comfortably in a way that is self-expressive, and still let others in this small, midwestern community know that I am an out, proud lesbian. I like being in their faces and I don't think I have to look butch to do so.

*Femme* is a relative term. Compared to many straight women, including the straight girls I used to fuck before I came out, I probably seem a little butch. My mannerisms, the way I sit, how I walk, what I wear — my vibe is different from theirs. But in the lesbian community, I am seen as *superfemme*, a one on the one-to-ten femme-butch scale. For me, identifying as a femme has been a way of finding a comfortable niche in the lesbian world.

My first venture out of heterosexuality was a disaster. At nineteen I drove alone down miles of twisted country road to mid-Missouri's only gay bar, the Paradise Retreat. With a thumping heart and sweaty palms, I paid the cover charge and entered a world of flannel shirts, suede hiking boots, and Wrangler jeans. Nowhere did I see a kindred spirit or a shred of lipstick. The evening was rather anticlimactic. At the time I couldn't verbalize what or whom I had expected, but in retrospect I think I had anticipated falling into the welcoming arms of the lesbians and being swept away by some fabulous, beautiful butch with a sense of style and a touch of arrogance. I didn't know the depth of my disappointment until I woke up the next morning, still unfortunately heterosexual. I also didn't know that, in 1985 in Columbia, Missouri, dykes were wearing a cookie-cutter uniform prescribed by the strict standards of feminism. All I knew was that I didn't fit in, couldn't fit in, and that my fantasy was still only a fantasy.

Unlike many women from the generation ahead of me, I didn't come out via feminism. For many years I had little or no awareness of feminist theory or politics. While I instinctively believed in the superiority of women, I was still the model of heterosexuality because I didn't know what else to be. Because the women I saw at the bar certainly weren't like me, I assumed I wasn't a lesbian. I continued being sexual with men (with the notable exception of a few drunken but arousing episodes with my straight girlfriends), married, and had children. Yet I never experienced orgasm without fantasizing that I was being fucked by a woman. So, no, I didn't come out through a feminist ideal. I came out because the urgency of my fantasies convinced me to overcome my initial disappointment in what I thought was lesbianism and try again.

In 1991 I went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. It was there that I first met women who looked at me the way only butches can look at a femme. I met women whose energy felt familiar and who shamelessly enjoyed the little luxuries of lingerie and lipstick. I felt my eyes, heart, and body open, and relief and joy pour in. I *was* a lesbian! It was possible after all! All those dreams and vivid mental images that had grown so familiar over the course of my lifetime weren't some sort of cruel, cosmic joke.

The following year was a crash course in agony, ecstasy, and lesbian-feminist theory. I read voraciously: *The Coming Out Stories*, *The Lesbian Reader*, *The New Coming Out Stories*, *The Lesbian Erotic Dance*, and my absolute all-time favorite, Joan Nestle's femme-butch reader *The Persistent Desire*. I fell in love (at the 1992 Michigan festival) with an exotic Aussie

butch named Juan, divorced, and came blazing out of the closet with no holds barred.

Juan and I have been together for nearly three years. I quickly realized that I still had (and have) much to learn about what it means to be a dyke, and what it takes to live with and love a woman. But I continue to grow and expand and love myself for the femme that I am. And I keep talking to women, approving or not, about the many wonderful ways there are to be a lesbian.

Becky Birtha

## *Femme at Heart*

When I came out in 1976, I remember talking about roles in my relationship and in the community at large. We shared what we knew of “the old days.” We pitied or wrote off women whose partnerships reflected them. We laughed at the notion that roles had any relevance to our current lives. And with much curiosity and some fascination, we covertly watched couples who were visibly butch and femme, couples who weren’t a part of our feminist community. What we didn’t talk about was ourselves in relation to roles. For me to do so, even now, feels risky and scary.

As a feminist from the activist seventies, I spent my share of energy trying to refute the stereotypes about lesbian relationships that were prevalent in places like my middle-class Black family and the straight world at large. One stereotype was that in every couple one of the women was playing the part of a man. I argued long and passionately about the egalitarianism of contemporary lesbian couples and the outdatedness of roles, while ignoring my own subconscious sense of self and of whom I was attracted to.

I didn’t realize that by refuting the concept of roles I was buying right into society’s values, assuming butch-femme relationships to be a bad thing to begin with. I didn’t consider why those values might exist, or how much more threatening to the patriarchy butches and femmes — female couples who appear to be appropriating male power — might be, than “just two [powerless] women.” I didn’t realize that being butch or femme does not diminish a woman’s identity, just as being a lesbian does not diminish (and, in my opinion, will more likely enhance) a woman’s identity.

Now, nearly twenty years later, lesbians have bravely begun to talk and write openly about being butch, being femme, having sexual identities. And in the same way that I claim my Black identity, my womanhood, my lesbianism and my feminism, all parts of myself despised by the larger society, I want to be able to claim my femme identity and, yes, even my femininity.



It’s a Friday in July, a steamy summer evening. I’m getting ready to go to a meeting of a local lesbian mothers’ group. It’s a rare opportunity for me as a single mom: success at finding a baby-sitter has coincided with the scheduling of a lesbian event. I’m looking forward to the group as a place where I might make new friends, might even, if I keep attending, meet someone I can go out with.

I'm in my bedroom, which is painted and papered melon pink, with white eyelet curtains I made myself. I'm standing between the mirror and the open door of the closet, before maybe a dozen skirts and dresses, soft summer garments in lightweight cotton pastels and prints. The dresses have full skirts, or are gathered smocklike into high-waisted yokes. For hot weather, these are the most comfortable, least confining clothes I know. They are the kind of summer clothing I have worn most of my life, through a decade as a heterosexual and through the years of my long-term relationship, when I didn't need to attract a woman with the way I looked because I already had one who liked my style.

Yet even when I was with my long-term lover, even after lesbianism as a culture was no longer new to me, I remember going through this ritual of debating what to wear. The ritual wasn't for her; it was for going out. I was aware then, as now, that for going out as a lesbian, summer dresses are not acceptable. Already, I'm likely to stand out from the crowd as one of few women of color present. I don't want people to assume I have nothing in common with them at all.

I choose a sleeveless top with a floral print in deep, vivid tones and a couple of buttons at the neck. It's cut full, but I'm careful to tuck it into my pants: white slacks with the legs rolled into cuffs, worn with a narrow leather belt. I never carry a purse, but tonight I leave even my backpack at home and go empty-handed, my wallet and keys in my pocket.

I'm thinking all the while I do this about butch, femme, and what clothes say about us and our standing in the community. I know that the point is not to look butch; I'm simply trying to look like a lesbian. It's the look I've heard called "dyke chic." Those words translate to mean a certain degree of butchness. In this urban, northeastern United States lesbian-feminist community, femmes are invisible. A woman who dresses femme is not seen as a lesbian, not recognized as one by others in public places, and not easily accepted as one.

When I compare myself to other women I've met who openly claim the femme identity, I don't seem very much like them. I don't remove the hair from my legs or armpits or even, very often, my chin. I don't straighten, perm, or dye my hair. I have owned maybe half a dozen pairs of high heels (wedgies) in my life. As a young teen, I was in no hurry to wear a bra. I don't know how to put on lipstick, mascara, or perfume, seldom wear jewelry, and keep my nails short. I'm hopeless as a flirt. Fashion has never interested me. Long past the seventies, I was still comfortable in overalls and flannel shirts — that is, when I wasn't wearing dresses. I wanted to look and feel my best, but it was also important to me *not* to appear attractive to men. For me, femme is a very lesbian quality.

Of course this quality is more than surface appearances. It isn't really clothes, looks, or the color of her bedroom that make someone butch, femme, or a lesbian. Nevertheless, all of the women at the mothers' group meeting are wearing shorts, slacks, or jeans, just as I knew they would be.

For the most part, I get what I came for from the mothers' group: some friendly talk, listening, and sharing stories about our kids. But I wonder what I would do if I did meet someone I was attracted to. After all these years as a lesbian, it's still hard to imagine making the first move. I think of women I know who can easily make friends out of strangers at parties. I think of my first ex-lover, who casually announced that she expected to be getting into another relationship soon because she is "not the type who enjoys being single," apparently confident that she could find a new partner whenever she took a mind to.

Though I have done it, under the pressure of a serious crush, it's hard to imagine asking someone out. If it is up to me to make all the advances, I question whether I will ever be in a relationship again. Though this restraint seems very old-fashioned, even anti-feminist, I suspect it's one more part of the way I'm femme.

In the egalitarian eighties, a close friend and I got on the subject of roles and made a startling discovery. In every lesbian couple we knew, it was easy to designate one woman as more butch and the other as more femme. Without discussing it, we were in immediate agreement about each couple. For every pair of lovers, the distinction seemed obvious. Yet all were women who, like us, would not have defined themselves as being one or the other.

A current friend in her twenties confides that roles mean nothing to her or to friends in her generation, that they are much ado about nothing. (As she says this, I can't help thinking how my skin crawls when someone tells me that my color doesn't matter to her.) Yet, this same friend hurries home from work to get out of what she calls her "girl clothes." And she complains that she's got to learn to throw a softball better before summer so her friends won't keep saying she throws like a girl.

I detect an annoying discrepancy. It's not okay to be into roles, but to be butch is perfectly acceptable. Roles, it seems, mean nothing as long as we can all be butch. We don't stop to think what this attitude is saying about us as women, that to despise femme qualities is taking the same position as those who believe that female is automatically inferior.

Roles are, and have been, all over the community. They reach beyond appearances and emerge, to some extent, in how we treat each other. Who gets our respect as a leader, spokesperson, or role model? How are household chores divided up? And in a one-to-one situation, who starts a conversation between strangers? Who suggests getting together again? Who signals the change from friendliness to attraction? Who opens the way to lovemaking? Who opens the car door?

Neither of the women who have been my lovers would call herself butch. Chivalry was never a part of how either interacted with me. On the other hand, neither one will wear a dress. One once told me that wearing a skirt felt like being in drag. She didn't appreciate my calling myself femme because of what that implied about her, by process of elimination (she thinks

of herself as androgynous). I may enjoy the rush I get when I repair an electrical switch, shovel manure into my garden all afternoon, or build a campfire that burns, but I know I'm not androgynous.

I'm femme. I've been willing to admit it for years, but nobody wanted to hear it. When I say those words, the response is generally laughter. I don't know if the laughter is from nervousness, embarrassment, or genuine amusement because my femmeness is so obvious it's old news. But always, after the laughter, the conversation ends.



A week after the mothers' group meeting, I am sitting with my last lover and a smattering of friends on the deck of her trailer. The deck looks out over her garden and a far-off edge of woods. Finished with dinner, we are talking about growing up. One woman begins a story I've heard a hundred times. "I was always a tomboy. I hated wearing dresses, and slips, and hair ribbons, all that girlie stuff. Patent leather shoes were the worst. Me and my cousin had this tree house. And I was always getting in trouble with my mom for tearing up my clothes, climbing that tree. She was always buying me these doll babies. But they were *so* boring." By now her audience is nodding and laughing in agreement. "I could never seem to hit it off with my teachers, either. I did okay with my grades but, you know, my hair was never combed right, or my shirt wasn't tucked in, or my shoelace was untied. Then in seventh grade, I had this gym teacher..."

If I tell my own story, no one nods in recognition. For twelve of my growing-up years, I absolutely refused to wear pants under any circumstances. I didn't want to do anything like a boy — sit with my legs apart, straddle a chair, act a male part in the Brownie Scout play, or read about superheroes. Nicknames like Sonny and Butch seemed unfortunate to me, even for boys. For years I couldn't ride a bike, catch a ball, or figure out which team was winning. Gym teachers seemed to me the most masochistic species in existence, and gym was one subject in which I was unquestionably a failure.

Yet it's clear to me because of one detail that mine was the childhood of a girl destined to become a lesbian. As long ago as I can remember, I was always in love with girls. At first grade recess, I was happiest when Christina Collins and I crawled under the rosebush together to trade secrets and penny charms from the gum machine. I never understood why she worked so hard trying to tease Vernon Sherman into chasing us around the schoolyard.

A few years later, Maureen and I played endless games of last tag on the steps of our church after Sunday school, or the YWCA after day camp. Maureen went to private school, and had the kind of hair that never had to get straightened. Away on a summer vacation that seemed interminable, I read love poems and silently wedged her name between the lines.

I drew pictures of curly-haired, pinafores little girls in my sketchbook. I only read novels about girls. Right up to adolescence I continued to sew

wardrobes for my dolls, who were never teen fashion models but little girls like me.

In high school, I slipped poems I'd written about other girls into their lockers, and chose genderless names for the characters in the stories I turned in for Mrs. Grossman's creative writing class. I couldn't stomach teenage romance novels. Even during the ten years I was heterosexual, while I assumed I would meet a nice man, settle down, and get married, there was always a woman with whom I was secretly in love. When I finally did come out as a lesbian, in my late twenties, it wasn't really a surprise.



On the deck, the long summer evening is finally night, and the conversation is slowing down. Lightning bugs hover and flicker over the garden, and the sky has filled with stars. Just as I'm ready to begin telling some of my thoughts, a baby in an inside bedroom wakes up crying. Naturally, I am the only one present who has brought a baby, so the evening is over for me. But I hold onto the ideas it has engendered.

While I wasn't always a lesbian it's clear to me that I was always femme. And femme is much more than a role; it's an identity that reaches beyond appearances, beyond interactions with other lesbians. It runs deeper than my longing for a lover who is comfortable calling herself butch, deeper than the desire for a woman to sometimes make love *to* me, rather than *with* me. I'm learning that femme is an attribute I can take pride in, take joy in, embrace, and respect. It's who I feel I am at heart, a quality something like race, something like gender, something like sexual orientation. Whether it is lived out in my relationships or is never even discussed doesn't change it. It's with me to stay.



Faithe Wempen

## Coming Out, Femme-Style

From the beginning, I've always been a femme.

When I was eighteen, I would sit on the third floor of the university library, devouring all of the books about lesbians (there were less than ten). There was *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, *Lesbian/Woman*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and a few years' worth of *off our backs* on microfilm. A good English-major researcher, I found them all. I never checked any of them out, of course; what if someone saw me? But I read every page.

And after the last page of the last book, I still had no answers. Was I one, or not? The lesbians in the pages of the books were flannel-clad, short-haired radicals, angry at men, angry at society, angry at women like me who had perms and wore makeup. Nowhere did the authors mention eighteen-year-olds who fell in love with their fellow Girl Scouts and spent entire winters writing long passionate letters of earnest friendship. Nor could I find mention of seemingly normal girls in embroidered jeans and peasant blouses who dated boys because it seemed the sensible thing to do but had never felt the lust they warned us about in the tenth-grade health textbooks that was supposed to make it "hard to stop at petting."

I had felt an outsider many times in my life, as brainy, unathletic kids often do, but never because of my sexuality. In fact, that had always been the one thing I was able to do right. I had a natural ability to flirt, and at a very young age I learned to manipulate the men around me with it. I wasn't all that popular in high school, but I had dates, mostly with older, good-looking guys. I made it a point to always have a boyfriend because I thought other girls would like me for it and think I was cool. Whether it worked or not, I don't know.

The awkward and usually pointless quasi-sexual encounters I had with the boys were entertaining. They were something different, something new to experiment with. But I often wondered about those caveats I would read in the teen magazines and advice paperbacks about being so overcome by lust that one would not be able to stop short of "doing it." While "doing it" (and doing all the things that lead up to "it") was fun, it was certainly easy enough to stop. Just stop! What could be simpler? My dates would breathe hard and get all excited, which was fun, I suppose, because it meant they liked me. I never felt anything more than vaguely, pleasantly warm. But then, boys were supposed to want it more than girls, anyway.

While all the boy-dating business was going on during the school year, I spent the summers at Girl Scout camp. There were a core group of us who hung around together, and at several times I had very intense friendships with one or another of them. They weren't sexual, but they sure were romantic! We would sit close together around the fire at night, holding hands and singing songs of true friendship and love. These songs were so melodramatic and sugary that our counselors must have been thinking, "Gawd, what a bunch of little dykes," and either smiling or being quite disturbed, depending upon their own orientation. At one point I remember thinking, "When I fall in love with a man, I'll be able to recognize the feeling as true love, because I've already experienced it with *her*," (her being my current best friend of the summer). Believe it or not, I didn't have a clue that I might not be heterosexual.

In fact, I stayed clueless until junior year in high school, when my best friend from camp, Nancy, wrote me a long letter. She was in her sophomore year of college, and had realized she was a lesbian. She had not yet had sex with a woman, but she was sure anyway. I sat in the backyard and cried my eyes out, without knowing why. She was so concerned that I would stop being her friend if I knew. How could I tell her how strange and queasy it made me feel, to love — no, to *be in love with* — someone who was a lesbian?

Thus began a five-year odyssey, in which I discovered what those teen magazine articles had been talking about.

For a long time, my friend Nancy was the only lesbian I knew and therefore my sole role model (except for the pictures of the dykes in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *The Lesbian Path*, both of which the university library stocked on the sixth floor). Nancy had jumped squarely into radical lesbian-feminist politics, which I discovered when I went to visit her over spring break my freshman year. She was living in a "women's collective," had cut off all her beautiful, long blonde hair, and was wearing tattered flannel shirts over t-shirts bearing important slogans. I spent a week there, a curious straight girl toting a curling iron and a huge suitcase full of skirts and accessories, not wanting to appear too curious, but desperate to fit in with the lesbians.

Everyone in the collective was very nice to me, even Elaine, Nancy's current girlfriend. I disliked her instantly, though I couldn't bring myself to label the feeling jealousy. But nothing I saw during my visit gave me a glimmer of hope that I might be a lesbian like them.

The college years slipped by, and I dated men vigorously, one after another, sometimes two at a time. I felt as if I were sorting through the close-out bin at some discount store, sure that the perfect one was waiting underneath all the piles of rejects, if I could only stumble upon it. But the more I dated, the more bored I became.

I spent summers at Girl Scout camps as a counselor, drifting into and out of infatuations with straight women, wanting to somehow go beyond back-

rubs and hugs but not knowing how. I kept in touch sporadically with Nancy, who by my senior year had settled down with a joyless grad student who was threatened by our friendship and forbade Nancy to see me. I snuck off to the library to reread those lesbian books whenever I could.

The thought of being a lesbian was endlessly fascinating and perplexing to me. I wanted desperately to be one. I thought being a lesbian must be the coolest thing in the world. But the cold hard facts appeared to be thus: I had had dozens of fairly pleasant relationships with men; the lesbians in the books had none, or were miserable in them. I'd had a few highly charged friendships at camp, but I had never really had an overtly erotic thought about another woman; lesbians were supposedly burning with lust for one another. And anyway, I looked all wrong: I had long, soft brown hair, and feminine curves. Levi's jeans, the wardrobe staple of all the lesbians I had ever seen, didn't fit me at all. If I got them big enough for my hips and thighs, the waistband stuck out six inches from my back. It was hopeless.

By the end of my junior year, my frustrations were coming to a head. I decided to go to a campus gay alliance meeting. I put on the most masculine-looking clothing I owned (jeans and a women's flannel shirt), snuck out of the house (no small feat since I was living with my boyfriend), and, gathering up every ounce of courage, swaggered as convincingly as I could into the appointed meeting place. As luck would have it, there was no meeting that night. Instead, a bunch of people were gathering for a road trip to the gay bar in the next town, fifty miles away. Oh dear. I wasn't sure I was ready for *that*.

But I went. Not only that, but I ended up driving, since my '74 Impala comfortably seated eight. The bar was huge, loud, and impossibly decadent. I sat at a table with the five women who had ridden with me, drinking a soda and watching everything closely. Were they just being nice to me because I drove? Or was it possible that maybe, just maybe, they actually thought I was one of them? I felt like an impostor; as if someone would suddenly stand up, point, and shout, "She's no lesbian! She's just a curious straight girl!" No one did. I staggered home, happy, at two a.m. My boyfriend was angry, but I shrugged and told him I had been out with friends.

By the time my senior year rolled around that fall, the boyfriend was history and I was ready to give lesbianism a try. If a good, honest butch had found me at this point the story might have ended happily much sooner, but as luck would have it the first woman to seriously come on to me was a small, lipstick-wearing, New Wave feminist with heavily sprayed blonde hair.

Denise was a mistake from the first. I wasn't attracted to her, but I wanted to be a lesbian so desperately that I didn't admit I felt nothing for her sexually. Not even a glimmer. I had felt more with some of the boys, actually. But she was hot for me, and pursued me as a femme would pursue a butch, which I think she assumed I was since I was still trying to look like the dykes in the books. I guess I figured if I had a girlfriend, the other lesbians would take me seriously.

I appeared in public with Denise as much as possible (especially at gay events), and slept with her as little as I could get away with. In the meantime, I continued to sleep with men, telling them I was bisexual and telling the lesbians as little as possible. In retrospect, all this must have been quite hard on Denise, who was sweet and quite pretty, if a bit unconventional. Wherever you are, Denise, I'm sorry. But how could I tell you what I didn't yet know myself?

I dumped Denise by going to grad school in another state, where, as luck would have it, a man I had dated also attended. He and I took up again, and for a while I forgot about wanting to be a lesbian. I had tried it, after all, and it was a disaster. I didn't feel what I thought I was supposed to feel, and I had felt like a giant phony, trying to fool everyone into thinking I was cool and queer when I was really just a mixed-up straight girl. I dated the man all through grad school and probably would have married him, but he wasn't ready. I broke it off in exasperation.

About that time, I met and started hanging around with some gay men, who sympathized with my plight. They assured me that, if I just found the right woman, everything would click. The gay men were such fine companions — so affectionate with me and unashamedly slutty with one another — that I was soon caught up in their lives. It was a fine, reckless existence. Unable to find work in my field, I worked temp clerical jobs by day to pay the rent, and at night ran with a pack of young, beautiful men who liked me for my mind.

Eventually, of course, there would come a time in the evening when they would crawl off to have sex with one another and leave me sitting alone. They felt bad about this (though not bad enough to stop doing it) and vowed to find me a woman.

Lesson number one: do not allow gay men to pick your women for you. They assumed that I wanted the type of woman they would want if they were straight: beautiful, small, and blonde. Week after week, they would bring me women they had met at one place or another, curious straight girls who had confided that they had always wanted to try it with a girl. Naturally, the boys thought of me. I slept with most of them, just to be polite. I was gaining quite a reputation among the men as a lady's lady, but I still felt nothing. A big fat zero. I began to wonder what was wrong with me. I no longer slept with men. It was just too boring. And I was beginning to dread the now almost obligatory encounters with the women my gay friends rounded up.

Finally I met a butch named Jane. She lived in the basement of the women's rugby house on campus, and shared a room with (as luck would have it) one of the little blonde girls my friends found for me. Jane was all of five feet three (I'm five feet eight), and she had a crew cut and a big motorcycle. Like me, she had just graduated from college, and had no job. She cleaned carpets and delivered pizza to pay the bills. And she was shy, taciturn, plain, and very much unlike any other woman I had known.

The first time we kissed, I felt the strangest feeling: a warm burn that started at the back of my neck and made its way down between my legs. I would be sitting at work and suddenly think of her, and that warm shiver would wrack my body for a moment. It took me a few days to realize what was happening to me: that feeling they warned us about in the teen magazines — lust. But why her? Why now? She wasn't pretty. She didn't even particularly look like a girl. I didn't understand, but I *felt*.

Within a week, we were seriously courting. With Jane, I felt free to open up and express my sensuality. I brought out every trick I had learned from dating men and put them to good use with her. I ran my nails slowly down the back of her neck, kissed her earlobes, and snuggled up behind her on the back of the motorcycle, my breasts pressed tight against her back. We were both in heaven.

My gay male friends, naturally, thought I had gone off the deep end. They had no idea what I saw in her. She wore ratty clothes and chewed tobacco. Slow with words, she wasn't witty and entertaining (to their eyes), and she didn't dance. They encouraged me to rethink the situation, and every time I did, I came back around again to the same conclusion: "Yes, but she makes me wet."

I was with Jane for nearly three years before we went our separate ways. The whole time, I knew I had found something I needed, but I didn't have the words for it. I felt settled and secure with her, like some bizarre kind of *Ozzie and Harriet* rerun, perverse and at the same time very small-town, middle-American wholesome. It was quite simple and obvious, though the words *butch* and *femme* were seldom spoken. I realize there are other rhythms and dichotomies in lesbian relationships, but I became a real lesbian the day I was able to say, "Butches are what I like."

It's been nearly twelve years since I sat in that college library, and for the last five years, I've been out as a femme-identified lesbian who loves butches. It's hard to believe that it took so much time and grief for me to figure out one simple fact: I'm not a perverted straight girl, or a lesbian impostor, or any of those other cruel terms I came up with for myself. There's a word for what I am. I'm a femme! And I'm not alone.

Leslie J. Henson

## *My Sister, My Blood, My Femme Lesbian Body*

There is a pain, deeper than loss and more wordless, that I have been living close to these last few weeks. It is the pain of having had no authentic images of myself as a child learning a sexual identity, no mirrors in which to learn to move through the world as a femme lesbian. Instead, where my femme lesbian body should have been, there was a tear in the fabric of language and being. Without language, I have been a stranger to my own desire.

*Fifteen years I tried to love men, Mamma: the intruders, the invasive ones. I did what you told me: I spread my legs. And it hurt, Mamma. For fifteen years, it hurt.*

When I came out, I thought it would be easy. I had a word, a name; I knew who I was. I did not know that those fifteen years would live on in my body: a yeast infection no doctor could cure. Though I dream all day of women, at night, when I am trying to fall asleep, the infection burns. Nor did I know that to construct an image of myself from the ground of my daily living and the words and faces of other strong femmes, I had to go back to when I was torn from my childhood mirror, to my own femme lesbian body.

The year I came out, the phrase "butch power, femme hunger" was circulating in the Gainesville lesbian community. Now, I had certainly had too many womanless days, months, and years, but I wanted to be *powerful*, not hungry and pathetic. And I wanted to be seen as a lesbian by the straight world in which I had moved for so long. I knew no other way to signal my newfound identity but to take on a butch persona. So I gave away my dresses and my high-heeled shoes (most of them, anyway), and tried to act tough and reserved. It was liberating not to have to worry about wearing makeup or about how I looked (at the time I defined butch as the absence of such worrying). Still, I felt alienated, absent. And I worried secretly that I didn't look pretty enough. When I'd go out with lesbian friends, I'd start out the evening full of the euphoria of my newly realized dykedom, and come home drained of energy. There were so many times I'd wanted to laugh a certain way, talk a certain way, flirt a certain way, shake my hips a certain way, but stifled it. Among straights, I felt proud and defiant. Among lesbians I felt strangely invisible. Bloodless.

I look back at this time, which I now call my butch phase, and my first feeling is shame: I am guilty of faking my lesbian gender identity by impersonating a butch. The feeling is quick and sharp, and brings with it a memory that has lain dormant just under my skin for years. I was seven years old, and the altar boy at church had just told me that girls can't be altar boys, or priests, or anything else that amounts to much. "I'm not a girl, I'm a boy," I said over and over, until the altar boy agreed with me just to shut me up. But I could see by his face that he didn't believe me, and that only a crazy person would try to be a boy when she was really a girl. As I remember this incident, the shame starts to flow, taking me back to an even earlier memory, a deeper wound.

I don't know how old I was, but I was sitting in the big rocking chair in Mamma's bedroom, swinging my feet and listening to Mamma talk while she ironed Daddy's work clothes. The words she spoke burned into my brain. "I didn't want you to be a girl, you know," she said, and laughed. "In fact, when they told me you were a girl I turned my face away and cried. I wouldn't look at you." I remember feeling as though I'd fallen a long way, as if I was looking up at her from the bottom of a deep well, but she didn't seem to notice. "I mean, I was all doped up and being silly," she continued, but it didn't matter anymore. Mamma wouldn't look at me: I was the wrong gender. I was wrong, and there was no way to crawl out from under the weight of that wrongness. *Oh, Mamma, how do I say what you did to me, the way stroke after stroke you captured all the colors of the sky?*

That was the beginning of the tear. But there is more, a set of memories bound so tightly with shame that I have resisted giving them language for years, all the while knowing that I needed to say the words if I was to free my femme lesbian body from its fetters. In the same room where I learned that my female body meant less love from my mother, my youngest sister Mickey and I were giggling together. I was eleven and she was seven. She was laughing at how my breasts had started to "pop out" of my small chest. I asked her to put her mouth on one of them, to see if milk would come out. (Somewhere I had heard that that's what breasts were for, holding milk to feed babies with.) She didn't want to do it. I knew somehow that what I had asked her to do was wrong, and that I could not ask such things of the neighborhood girls, who were as old as me and couldn't be trusted not to talk. And though I made my sister swear not to tell our mother, she did. My mother confronted me in front of the rest of my family, and I denied everything. Even then I knew that I would have been treated differently had I asked a boy to suck my breast. Girls simply did not *do* such things.

Several months later, we were all watching a TV movie about a British schoolboy who gets whipped for disobeying. I was sexually aroused by the sight of the male headmaster whipping the boy, perhaps because I had learned by then that my lesbian body was wrong and bad, and needed to be torn apart and thrown away if I was to survive emotionally. I convinced my sister to play school with me: I would be the headmaster, and she would be

the boy to be punished. My mother, who no longer trusted me alone with my little sister, walked into the room just as I was striking my little sister's buttocks with her baton. I don't remember what happened next; the memory has been drowned in shame.

Even now, there is a chasm between these events and the rest of my life experiences. This is why I slept with men, unaware of my own desires, for fifteen years. This is the shame that burns in my cunt at night. My little sister is now married to a man and I do not know how those incidents affected her, or whether they live on in her body. It is not my place to ask.

*Mamma, you turned my own blood against me, as yours was turned against you. I buried my menstrual blood in the backyard at thirteen, along with the panties I ruined, rather than tell you I was a woman now like you. I vowed I'd never be like my mother: loaded down with four children and a husband she tried to love, chronically tired and angry, mired in dust and dishes — routine without pleasure, without end. To be a woman like you was to be heterosexual; to stay connected with you I went with men. To get back your love. But not anymore, Mamma. Not anymore.*

Knowing myself as a lesbian was not possible in those years. It had never occurred to me that women could be romantic and sexual partners with other women. I had known the term *lesbian* since grade school, but in my middle-class world there was no flesh, no blood behind the word. It was certainly not a possibility for my own life, though everywhere I went my eyes lingered on the faces and forms of pretty girls. And they *all* seemed pretty: their shoes, their hands, their noses, their hair, their eyes, lips, hips, breasts ... Nothing escaped my worshipful attention. I just did not know, could not even imagine, that my hands and lips could follow my eyes, that *these* were the bodies that inspired my passionate love, my limitless desire.

*This is the source of my pain. That I did not have a lesbian childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood.*

I do not know how similar my pain is to that of other lesbians, though other femmes have told me that they identify with this particular ache. Every time a man responds sexually to me, I am reminded of this pain. Not that men fall at my feet wherever I go; still, I *am* pretty, or try to be, and I often wear dresses and lipstick. When I am walking down the street, I focus on the small pleasure and the deeper pain of knowing I am found to be attractive by *men*. Their smiles underline the absence of women from my life, and the fact that I have never had more than a few brief romantic involvements with women. I am a stranger to my own body; the depths of my own feelings are uncharted and unfelt. And there is the ever present fear I share with all women: *these men think I am available to them, and they could take what I would never willingly give.*

Given the ways in which the heterosexual world has denied me my femme lesbian body, imagine my pain when my lesbian sisters — androgynous women, butches, unidentified women, and sadly, even femmes — perpetuate this same oppression. Once I told a woman who seemed quite



femme that I identified as femme, and she told me she didn't *believe* in butch and femme. How would this woman have felt had she told someone she was a lesbian and the person responded that he or she just didn't *believe* in straight and gay, heterosexual and homosexual?

Despite the token, exotic lipstick lesbians who appear in the mainstream media (conveniently separated from their androgynous and butch sisters in order to be accessible fantasy objects for men), there are still lesbians who staunchly believe and proudly assert that most lesbians stop wearing makeup and femme clothing when they come out. What do we as a culture lose when we define lesbian only according to visible markers of butchness or androgyny? Similarly, what do we lose when certain, more traditional markers of femmeness — like makeup and clothing — are anathematized? Such markers are not the be-all and end-all of femmeness. But when we erase these markers from lesbian culture, with them we exclude the bodies and minds of many invaluable, irreplaceable, inimitable femme dykes.

Being erased as a femme lesbian is not an academic issue to me. I feel a very real loss when I am not publicly acknowledged as a lesbian by other lesbians. *Mamma wouldn't look at me. Girls didn't do such things. The femme lesbian: a tear in the fabric of language and being. No words, no images, no culture, no lover.* As a femme lesbian, I have to work harder to prove that I'm a lesbian. Once another femme woman told me that she hadn't thought I was really a lesbian until I was arrested in a lesbian and gay civil rights protest.

Again and again my lesbian sisters, in their suffering, have made me the target of their rage and erased me from their world. Like my mother, they enact their sexism: femmes just aren't as good as butches (what else am I to assume when the word *butch* is used as a synonym for strong, determined, and assertive?). Like my mother, they enact their heterosexism: someone who looks like a girl can't *really* be a lesbian. And yet I can assure you that I am as committed, as passionate, as righteously and joyously *queer* as any dyke. And just as out, since I am a teacher who tells a roomful of sixty students every semester that I am a lesbian.

Despite all my shame, fear, guilt, and most of all, cursed invisibility, I have begun to flex my lesbian muscles in as many ways as I can. I remember the ecstasy I felt when I reconnected with my feelings for women four years ago. I felt more real and alive than I had ever felt, desire coursing like blood through my veins as I walked down the street. The air seemed more crisp, the sky more wide, and every color more intense, the world spilling open. Remembering this joy, I now look at femme women in public places, not the mild, pleasant look of one straight woman recognizing another, but rather a raunchy look: desire in my eyes and the devil of a smile on my lips. I've seen women who probably aren't aware of their own lesbianism or bisexuality blush and look away, while others return my gaze moment for moment. Last week, one femme woman grinned wide and looked me up and down, her eyes lingering on my breasts and thighs. It was the

sort of look that would have chilled me to the bone had it come from a man. But for this beautiful, bold femme woman, I put more shake in my hips and jiggle in my butt as I walked away from her, my skirt riding up to flash her my lesbian legs, my painted red lips smiling a lesbian smile.

Kelly Conway

## *Stop Me Before I Bake Again*

*I* am a born-again femme. Today I can embrace and celebrate my femme self. I have my incredible butch to thank for that.

I was raised by two butch lesbians who denied being butch. "If I wanted a man, I'd get a man. I don't need a woman who looks like a man," Mom would say as she and Jean, her lover of many years, drove to the barber to get their brush cuts trimmed. Or, "I don't understand this butch-femme thing. Why are they acting like straight people?" Children are a captive audience. Statements like these worked their way into my belief system and stayed there for a long time.

I came out in the midseventies at the age of thirteen. My first crush was on a 29-year-old butch named Les. I was not subtle in my infatuation: I pined, sighed, and wrote bad poetry. Les gently ignored the obvious and treated me like a younger sister, calling me "Little Bit." I finally accepted that we would never be an item, so I decided to imitate her. I saw her as being strong, powerful, and unafraid. If I couldn't have her, I'd act like her.

My parents displayed an obvious disdain for anything feminine. My older sister, in her budding adolescence, was teased for primping. They called her a prima donna for combing her hair, wanting to wear makeup, and dressing like a girl. I was given strokes for remaining a tomboy and ignoring how I looked, though by observing Les I became more aware of my appearance. I started to dress like her: jeans, black t-shirts with my cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve, which looked quite strange, as I smoked filter 100s. I tried to look tough and swagger when I walked. I did everything to look butch except cut my hair: I couldn't go that far. The adult lesbians around me encouraged this in many subtle ways, indicating that they thought the baby butch look was cute, although unconvincing.

My sister and I began sneaking into gay bars right around this time. The lesbian dress code was changing, and everybody started looking alike. I had a lot of secret femme urges. I played with my sister's makeup in the bathroom. I curled my hair when no one was home, and did exercises to try and make my breasts grow. Once I made the mistake of dressing in a pink bodysuit with jeans and going into a gay bar. A lesbian in the regulation dyke uniform asked, "Are you here on vacation?" Her identically dressed

friends laughed. At that point I began to conform. I bought the uniform: flannel shirts, jeans, hairy legs, and, in the summer, sandals (I couldn't afford Birkenstocks). I could occasionally get away with a femme urge by wearing a wraparound skirt and peasant blouse. As long as the hairy legs showed, it seemed to be acceptable.

As I write this I realize that I feel pretty pissed off. If a straight man wants to write poetry and become a nurse, his peers and maybe his own father might call him a fag and pressure him to become more macho. The women's community has worked to stop this type of prejudice and allow people to be who they are without their sexuality being questioned. I resent being told that I wasn't lesbian enough, and having my sexual identity challenged based on my appearance. When I came out to my parents, they said that I wasn't really gay, I just wanted to be like Les. If I wore makeup, it was because I was still male-identified, and not quite queer enough. If I dressed butch, that was bad because butches are "oppressors of women who want to look like men." If I wanted to love a butch, it was because I was "hetero-identified" and secretly wanted a man. Luckily, today I know that this is all a crock of shit.

I met my butch three years ago at a women's bookstore in Laguna Beach, California, where I was performing a song I had just written. I had created a variety show of musicians, songwriters, comics, and poets called "Dykes on Mykes." This was our third show at the bookstore and the place was packed. I was playing the guitar introduction to my song when I looked into the audience and saw Jill. She was the most exquisite butch I had ever seen. Black hair streaked with silver, wolf-blue eyes, a body that announced strength and power, and leather, which she wore like she was born in it. My stomach flipped several times and I completely forgot the words to my song. After the show I left quickly, and didn't see her again until the next performance.

My attraction to Jill startled me. She was intensely butch and I had resigned myself to dating women who were neither butch nor femme, like me. It had been fifteen years since my crush on Les. I had forgotten I could feel such passionate desire, until the moment I saw Jill.

Jill taught me about the erotic dynamic of butch-femme. It turned me on when she opened doors for me. That may sound silly, but I found it really sexy. I found that I let myself feel soft when I was around her. If I knew she would be at a show, I wore seductive stage clothes and flirted through my songs. She taught me to celebrate my femme self. I felt beautiful around her. Her butch strength made me feel safe enough to let my walls down. When we first began to cultivate a friendship, I made it clear that I wanted more. Jill was only a year and a half out of an eight-year relationship and still healing. I was ending a two-year relationship and still living with my ex-lover. I knew instinctively that Jill was whom I had been searching for and that she would be my life partner. We needed to proceed slowly, and with caution. So much changed as I waited for Jill. The more I was around

her, the more my true femme self emerged. She taught me about the power I have as a femme. I had always equated femme with weak, powerless, and vulnerable. I think this comes not only from the media's constant depiction of woman as victim, but also from my own childhood sexual abuse, and rape as a young woman. I never wanted to be powerless again. I have learned that butch-femme is not a power imbalance, but a power exchange.

Today I wear silk and lace, makeup, and whatever the hell else I want. Today I know that whatever two women do together in bed is lesbian sex, not the emulation of heterosexuals. Today I don't have to pretend to be a butch top, or a banal look-alike in a uniform. Today I know that to be butch or femme is not to play a role but to express one's self. It saddens me when I see young lesbians assume a role that is wrong for them. Somewhere, someone put out the word that to be butch one has to scowl and be grumpy. Now there seems to be an abundance of cross-looking young women with short hair.

I am amazed at how clear I feel inside since coming out as a femme. I am in constant awe of my butch: her strength and intelligence, and the power in her ability to be so gentle. I love our combination of satin and steel; her leather and my silk. We complement each other. It's a perfect balance of yin and yang. I am honored to be femme and to love a butch. It is liberating to be able to turn to strong arms during a nightmare, delegate spider patrol, and allow myself to be vulnerable and nurturing.

I take good care of my butch and she returns the favor. I've taken a year off from the real world to finish my first novel and produce some concerts. Jill brings home the broccoli and I cook it. I keep our home clean. Jill has garbage and bug duty (nothing is more pathetic than two femmes and a bug). I have made our relationship the number-one priority in my life. I love to cook for her, nurture her, and make our home comfortable. Our biggest problem is that I often nurture with food. I love nothing more than to put on a satin teddy and wait for her to come home to freshly baked bread and a chocolate cake. She begs me not to bake so much, as our cholesterol level is skyrocketing, but I can't help it. The look on her face when she comes home and the house smells like home cooking and I'm dressed like dessert makes it all worthwhile.

Wendy Frost

## Queen Femme

My femme friend F. says to me, "What I like about femmes is, they're like queens." "Queens?" I say. I think of crowns and sceptres, regal women staring imperiously from thrones, jeweled and enrobed, furred and sleek. Promenading in gaudy despotic display, haughtily flaunting gorgeous excess. "You know, *queens*," she says. "Drag queens. Femmes are dykes in girl-drag." "Oh, that kind of queen," I say. "Yes, of course, you're right." Both meanings merge as I contemplate myself as femme, deliberately costuming myself in femininity as drag, constructing myself as a spectacle for women's eyes. Queen of the Night. Queen of Desire. The woman-to-be-desired who declares herself a desirer of women. Queen femme.

*Memory:* At the age of nine I fell in love with Melina Mercouri in *Never on Sunday*. She was the whore with the heart of gold, but I didn't know then that was a cliché. I only knew that she was larger than everyone else in the movie, almost drowning poor Jules Dassin in her waves of sexual energy. She is on display, always; everyone in the movie watches her. In the film's opening sequence, we watch a series of men leave their occupations and take up watching positions, waiting for what is clearly a ritual performance. Here she comes, running down the street, tearing her clothes off one by one, laughing. She ends up stripped down to a skimpy black bikini and plunges into the ocean for her morning swim. The men return to their work, looking not like sated voyeurs, but like people who have been touched by a momentary magic. The men's desire for her throughout the film is very open, and in an odd way, almost wholesome. They pay homage to her. She is the independent whore, the one who owes allegiance to no one, who is friends with all the men, who has sex because she likes it, who is a prostitute out of an overflowing bounty of sexuality. I know now exactly what's wrong with this stereotype, and I still find it, as embodied in this movie, overpoweringly attractive. I know chunks of dialogue from this movie by heart. *Hello, sister, are you Ilya? 'Allo, brozzer, I am Ilya.* As an adolescent, I would recite these scenes to myself in the mirror, trying to mimic Mercouri's throaty, drag queen voice. I thought then that what I wanted was to be her, to be that desirable. In my thirties, looking back on this and many other memories of being irresistibly drawn to erotic images of women, I thought that I simply wanted her, but had no language at the time to know it. Now I look again with the femme's double vision, and I know that both

are true. I desire her. I desire to be desired by a woman the way I desire her.

*Dream:* I have a dream in which my butch friend K. becomes my lover. I'm in a daybed in a basement rec room, a room I don't know. I'm naked in bed in the half-dark. K. gets into bed beside me, in khaki pants, a man's sleeveless undershirt, and dog tags around her neck. She says nothing. The fact that she's intending to make love to me with her clothes still on seems the essence of butch sexiness to me. The next morning, as she's leaving, she says to me, *I'll get the things I need and bring them to bed next time.* I know she means the things she needs to come. I'm relieved: she's going to take care of it herself. I won't have to figure out how to please her; she'll take all the responsibility. I'm disappointed: she's not going to let me please her. She won't allow me close enough to discover her. And I feel shut out, plaintive in my inexperience: What things? *What* will you bring? How do you do it? Why won't you tell me? I am a novice facing the mysteries. When I wake up, I cannot remember the sex in this dream, only these two moments: her arrival, her departure.

*Fantasy:* A pool hall full of men. My butch and I walk in the door. Sudden silence as all eyes turn on us. I'm in high heels, sheer stockings, a tight thigh-high skirt, a low-cut blouse, and gold hoop earrings: my slut outfit. She's in Dr. Martens and skintight jeans, a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, sharp new flattop haircut. No mistaking us. The men all go back to their games, giving us sidelong glances: lustful at me, wary at her. I perch on a stool, showing plenty of leg. She leans back against the counter, easy and insolent, and checks out the action. I know she's sizing them up, looking for the best player in the room. Once she's spotted him, she moves away from the counter like Gary Cooper peeling his long frame from the bar in some western, saunters over, and challenges him to a game. He's been watching her watch him. He knows she's picked him out. As he accepts, he looks over at me, raking his gaze over my body. I slink off my stool and find myself a spot closer to the action. I keep my eyes on her throughout the game. Once, when she sinks an almost impossible shot, I close my eyes and gasp softly, and then open them and smile directly at her. She smiles back, slowly, and a low uneasy murmur washes around the room. She beats the pants off him, three games running. When the third game's over, I walk slowly over to her, rolling my hips in the harlot walk I've perfected. I take her arm and press myself against her. "I'm getting tired of this, baby. Why don't you take me home?" She says, "Sure, sweetheart. I'm through here," and takes my hand. As we stroll out, I meet the gaze of every man between us and the door. I want them to read it in my eyes: That's right, boys: *Anything* you can do, she can do better.

*Desire:* I want to ravish butches. I want to crack that composure, melt that cool. You're cool, baby, but I can make you sweat. Open you up. Lay you

out, peel you open and spill your juices. Make you moan and close your eyes. Make you say, *Please*, and, *More*. I want hoarse whispers, torn from your throat. I want the words you never dared to say. I want you to beg me to please you. To lay you down, open you up, peel you naked, spread you out. No secrets left, nowhere to hide. Fingers in you, hands in you, deep, deeper, open, open. You thought you were rock, but you're lava. You thought opening would crack you, break you, ruin you, but no, you're flowing, you're lava, you're molten. I set you on fire, I dip into you, you're whispering, you're moaning, you're screaming, *Yes, more, please, don't stop, I love it, I want it.*

So cool, not a hair out of place. So in control, of the scene, of your look. The look that says, *I'll do it for you. I can completely take care of you.* But always waiting. Waiting for the femme who's woman enough to break you down, woman enough to let you scream. Woman enough to tell you, *I'll take care of you.* I'm taking care of you now. I'm holding you down. I won't let you go. It's you, me, and this bed, and you're at my mercy. No mercy. Every pore on your body is mine.

Look at me. I'm your femme. I'm the woman every man wants, and I want you. I want the cunt beneath the cool. I want to rip away the boy-drag I love and burrow in your breasts, anchor my hands like tree roots in your ass, roll on your belly, disappear into you. I want the woman in the butch.

*Memory:* Does it all start with closets? When I was a teenager, I would go into my mother's closet when she was out and try on her clothes. She had a strapless long-line bra with a dozen tiny hooks and eyes down the back. The cups were so stiff they stood up by themselves; I didn't need tits to fill them. Hooking myself into the bra was my favourite part of the dress-up, slowly, painstakingly fixing the look onto my body, becoming the woman to be looked at, clasping myself into my own vision of desire. Becoming the object of my own gaze. I'd slip my mother's black low-cut cocktail dress on over the bra, or her sleeveless gold lamé jumpsuit. Posing for the mirror, constructing the look that spelled sex to me. In the bathroom, I'd rummage in her makeup. The mascara that came in a flat cake that you had to wet before you could coat the tiny brush with it. The Madame du Barry powder in the oval peach-and-pink box with the picture of Madame on it, all bosom and curls. My mother kept that one box of powder for years. It was my favourite thing of hers, the single most glamorous item of my childhood. There was a bottle of foundation lotion, beige, thick, and creamy. I would smooth it on, completely coating my face, add powder, and then carefully apply drops of water at the corners of my eyes so they would run furrows through the mask of makeup. The tracks of my homemade tears.

In the books I read then, if gay characters ever turned up, they were always men, and homosexuality was explained as the result of overindulgent mothers who had let their sons dress up in Mummy's clothes when they were little. The old smothering mother, childhood cross-dressing explanation for



homosexuality. They forgot to warn parents of girls: Mothers, don't let your daughters dress up in your clothes; they might grow up to be femmes.

*Fantasy:* I walk into the nightclub, and there she is: the femme fatale, all the men's eyes on her. She's perfect in clinging black velvet slit up to the thigh, her long arms bare as she holds up her cigarette to be lit. The man closest to her leans in with his lighter, but he's too late; I get there first. She looks up at me through the smoke, and our eyes meet. I'm wearing the same dress, in red. We look at each other in silence for a long beat. Then, "Wanna dance?" I ask, in my sexiest voice. I hear the simultaneous shocked intake of breath from the surrounding men. She makes me wait for it (*Bitch!*) and then, not taking her eyes from mine, she rises from her chair and holds her hand out to me without a word. I pull her in close and whirl her onto the dance floor. Over her shoulder, I watch the men watching us. I whisper into her ear, making sure they can see me. Before the song is through, I dance her to the door and pull her, laughing, into the night.

*Desire:* I want the femmes to ravish me. I want the woman from all those *Playboy* centrefolds I lusted over for all those years to toss her hair and flash her eyes in my direction. I want the Hollywood glamour girl to turn out to be a dyke, and I want her to want me. I want the woman who is the object of all desire to desire me. I want to translate the female landscape into a forest of lesbians. All the straight beauty queens, femmes in disguise, were faking it all these years. I want legs in sheer stockings, Love Shop lingerie, bodices to rip open, Frederick's of Hollywood dominatrix. An ultrafemme, ravishing me. There's nothing I need to do. Woman over me, on me, holding me down. Woman on me, in me. Kneeling over my face, cunt pressed to my mouth, soaking my skin. Legs intertwined, rolling me over and over, kisses until I can't breathe, sex in my mouth, fingers in my cunt, up my ass, mouth all over me, hydra-tongued, unstoppable. As if I would want her to stop. I want to turn a femme on so much that her only desire is to hear me scream with pleasure. I want to turn a woman on so much that she transforms into a femme, for me.



From the collection of Debra Bercovitz and Kris Knutson

*High Femme*

C. Colette

## Femme Is ... (A Flirtation)

Femme is  
going limp beneath your kiss  
and letting you direct the lovemaking  
because you always do it  
the way I want it.

Femme is  
wanting it ... the way you do it.

Femme is  
putting on lipstick in front of the mirror  
where you can watch me.

Femme is  
putting on lipstick because I like to.  
And because you watch me.

Femme is  
bringing you coffee and a muffin every morning for breakfast  
and getting flowers sent to me at work and my bath drawn  
on nights I work late.

Femme is  
wearing a locket with your picture in it.

Femme is  
giving you my picture for your solid-gold locket ID bracelet.

Femme is  
submitting until I don't.  
Serving you, unless I won't.

Femme is  
you wear the strap-on *most* of the time.

Femme is

walking into my office party on your arm  
taller in my heels than you are in your boots.

Femme is

following when we two-step, so I can close my eyes  
while you negotiate dance floor traffic.

Femme is

loving you and respecting your butchhood when you hurt,  
when you cry, when you need your hand held  
and your nose wiped.

Femme is

coming first  
and over and over again  
as an offering.

Femme is

washing the taste of me off your mouth  
and then feeding it back to you from the wet cloth.

Femme is

sometimes being a bottom and sometimes being a top  
but never, ever being the butch.

# About the Contributors

**Kate Allen** is the author of *Tell Me What You Like* and, most recently, *Give My Secrets Back* (both from New Victoria Publishers).

**Victoria Baker** lives in San Francisco and continues to explore the multiplicity of gender through writing, solo performance, and music. She believes that connectedness and the courage to love are essential to integrated being, and questions the various authorities purporting to define the correct way to experience them.

**Jane Barnes** is a poet whose chapbooks include *Mythologies* (1976) and *They Say I Talk in My Sleep* (1979). *Extremes* (Blue Giant) was published in 1981. She has received PEN Syndicated Fiction and Urban Arts awards for her stories. Currently, she is working on a novel and teaching fiction privately and at the Boston Center for Adult Education.

**Ellen Bay** is finally starting to emerge from her writer's closet. She likes to read, talk, cook, and work in her garden. She believes in letting people be whoever they are, and in the strength of women.

**Debra Bercuvitz** is a 28-year-old Mistress of Public Health student with a trashy-lingerie fetish. "I want to thank Joan Nestle and Amber Hollibaugh for bringing the word *femme* into my personal dictionary. And I want to pay tribute to all the unknown partners of passing women throughout history."

**Jan E. Bevilacqua** was born in 1975 in Boston, and grew up with her parents in Merrimack, New Hampshire. She studies poetry and performance at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, aided and abetted by many wonderful family members, friends, and instructors, not all of whom fit in only one category.

**Becky BIRTHA** is an African-American, feminist, Quaker mother who has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pew Foundation. She is the author of two collections of short stories and *The Forbidden Poems*. This is her debut as a femme.

**Hannah Bleier** lives in Los Angeles in a building full of queers and their beloved pets. She teaches a workshop called Dyke Writing Magic at Santa Monica's 2 Spirit Salon, and is working on a book.

**Trish Callahan** is twenty-six years old. She loves living in Austin, Texas, where she goes out two-stepping every weekend. She is currently working with her many dance partners to create a women's community center in

Austin where women can connect — dance, play, eat, share — outside of the bar scene.

**Amy Warner Candela** is a femme lesbian, a writer, and an aspiring editor who lives in Louisville, Kentucky, with her wife, Charlie, and her puppy, Harvey. She is the author of the “Dear Amy” column in the butch-femme newsletter *Swagger and Sway*.

**Theresa Carilli** is a Sicilian-American playwright and associate professor of communications at Purdue University. Her two forthcoming books of plays are *Women as Lovers* and *Traveling in Familial Circles* (both from Guernica Press). Her play *Delores Street* has been produced in San Francisco, San Diego, and Australia. She resides in Chicago.

**Julie Varner Catt** lives with her two kids and her dog, Tripod, as they wait to emigrate to Australia so that Julie can live with her lover, Juani, and continue her postgraduate work in psychology. She is twenty-eight and this is her first published lesbian work.

**Sandra Chan** is proud to be a southern, recovering Catholic, half-Chinese, slightly Jewish (granddaddy on my mother’s side) 100 percent femme dyke, freelance artist, and aspiring writer currently living in the state known as the “Mother of Presidents.”

**Chrystos** was born in San Francisco on November 7, 1946, of Native American and Euro-immigrant parents. She works as an activist for land and treaty rights for prisoners (especially Norma Jean Croy and Leonard Peltier) and with Hands Off Washington. Her books include *Not Vanishing*, *Dream On*, and *In Her I Am*.

**Constance Clare** is a writer, dancer, bookseller, and housepainter. These are her first published works. A former horse trainer and competitor in dressage, she has returned to school to further pursue writing and dance. She lives in San Francisco with her lover, Michele, and operates Mico, a butch-femme painting company.

**C. Colette** is a writer, activist, professional, and toppy femme who lives in Denver, Colorado. Currently, she is writing an essay on cross-role gender play and working on a book about Teena Brandon.

**Kelly Conway**, a writer and musician, lives in the Sacramento, California, area with her butch and their two ill-mannered cats, Nicki and Trouble. When not working on her novel or baking, she produces concerts featuring women musicians and comics through her two production companies, Lavender Underground and Dykes on Mykes.

**Angela Costa** is a poet-songwriter and recording artist. She performs regularly with her all-female poetry band and has released a song-and-spoken-word album entitled *Sister Outsider*. She is listed in the *Directory of American*

*Poets and Fiction Writers* and has been published in numerous literary magazines.

**Bree Coven** is a 22-year-old femme feminist writer, singer, and proud lesbian from New York. She was first published at the age of sixteen in *Youth Scene*, and is now a regular contributor to *Deneuve* magazine, including the baby-dyke column "Hey, Baby!"

**Christy Cramer** lives in Albany, New York, with her lover, Lorrie, and their dog, Lucy. She is twenty-four years old and has recently graduated from college. Her life goal is to find peace within herself and to make a positive contribution to the world.

**Kathryn Chiesa Crema** is a midlife Italian-American. After nineteen years of living in Alaska, she returned to midwestern soil and a doctoral program in psychology. She and her partner live in a sprawling home they're recrafting with her dad, three kids, cats, dogs, flowers, music, and other things they love.

**Maluma Crone** is an almost-forty disabled femme living in the country with one dog, two cats, and a butch "made just for me." She has published in *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Outrageous Women*, *Hikané*, *Tears of Fire*, and an anthology of writings of women with hidden disabilities.

**Patricia Dark** lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, with her feline companion of fourteen years, Juice. She writes poetry to maintain her identity and sense of purpose.

**Aiye Elena** lives, works, and loves in Chicago. Her favorite phrase is "peace and love." Most of her waking hours are spent working against violence, discrimination, and oppression. Passions include laughing, dancing, and kissing her sweetie. "My 'pro' pumps and makeup live in perfect harmony with my sweatpants and sneakers."

**Kay Elewski** likes to have a good time by hiking with her dogs, reading smut, and getting up at four p.m. Two years ago, when she quit writing, she went shopping, bought herself a computer, and left her job. How did life improve? She reached for the keyboard. "FemmeDaMentals" is dedicated to her partner in mischief, Beverly.

**Karen Lee Erlichman** is a Jewish femme lesbian, transplanted from Philadelphia and living in San Francisco. Mourning the loss of a good pastrami sandwich, she is a licensed clinical social worker, writer, and activist. She is grateful for butch passion and for the *chutzpah* of Jewish femmes.

**Deborah Filipek** is a 34-year-old femme living in the northern suburbs of Chicago. A journalist by day and often by night, she dabbles at fiction at other times. She would like to thank the Kinheart Writers Group for giving her the kindling for this piece.

**Lois Fine** is a smooth-talking, woman-watching, femme admirer.

**Elisabeth Freeman** is bisexual and has lived with her longtime partner for ten years. Her favorite activities besides writing are running and cooking. She is currently working on her first novel.

**Wendy Frost** is a forty-year-old femme in sensible shoes who took thirteen years to come out. She considers herself (in no particular order) a writer, a mother, a materialist, a feminist, a utopian dreamer, a brilliant conversationalist, and an incorrigible flirt.

**Lisa Ginsburg** left Bethesda, Maryland, to come out in San Francisco, where she has worked as a video producer and lesbian erotic video editor for the past decade. She is currently writing a screenplay and hoping to remedy the scarcity and lack of diversity of lesbian imagery on the big screen.

**Sharon Gonsalves** is a multitalented, out, proud, bisexual woman whose struggles with incest survival affect her ability to be femme as often as she might like. She gets support from her cat, Ida; her girlfriend, Linda; her therapist, Elaine; and chocolate in its many guises.

**Melinda Goodman** teaches poetry at Hunter College in New York City. She won a 1991 Astraea Foundation Lesbian Poets award. Her book of poems, *Middle Sister*, is available from Inland Book Company (P.O. Box 120261, East Haven, CT 06512).

**Tzivia Gover** is an MFA candidate at Columbia University and a freelance journalist. She has recently completed her first novel. Born on Long Island, she has made her home in the hills of western Massachusetts but is temporarily camping out in Manhattan.

**Ellen Grabiner** is a painter, writer, and recovering chocoholic. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with her lover and their nine-year-old son.

**Jaime M. Grant** is a happy, lusty femme living with the butch of her dreams in Washington, D.C. A writer, activist, and extrovert, she has been doing social-change work in various movement settings for ten years. Currently, she serves as director of the Union Institute Center for Women.

**Pamela Gray**, born 1956 in Brooklyn, New York, is a Jewish lesbian poet, playwright, and screenwriter living in Santa Monica, California. Her work appears in many anthologies, including *Love's Shadow*, *Dykescapes*, *Naming the Waves*, and *Cats (and their Dykes)*. Pamela won the 1992 First Place Woman in the Moon Poetry Prize.

**Morgan Gwenwald** has been creating lesbian erotic images for many years and usually employs a photo-documentary approach. She is building a collection of real-life photos of lesbian sexuality. She has a background in fine arts with many years of photographic experience, and has done exten-



sive personal research into this subject. She is a coordinator at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York.

**Heather Hadlock** “writes down the bones” in Princeton, New Jersey, where she nurtures her Ph.D. dissertation and her nascent poetic urges. An avid fan of lesbian anthologies, she’s excited about making her debut in one. She loves opera, Thai food, and being mistaken for a drag queen at fancy dress parties.

**Leslie J. Henson** is a 28-year-old femme and a radical activist–teacher–scholar finishing her Ph.D. in English and teaching women’s studies at Gainesville’s University of Florida. She plans to continue teaching and publishing on lesbian life and literature, particularly contemporary U.S. American lesbian poetry, the subject of her dissertation.

**Barbara Herrera** is a single mother of three beautiful, incredible children; a midwife; and a lover of women. “I am finding myself more active in the AIDS experience, learning that birth and death are really not that different after all. I love my life!”

**Carolynne Hyman** is a 24-year-old femme who wears jeans and watches football. Originally from Virginia, she currently resides in Chicago, where she is a doctoral student in clinical psychology.

**Faith Jones** is a 29-year-old student and writer who lives in Vancouver, Canada. She is wondering what you can do with a women’s studies degree and a bad back.

**Susan Kane** is a 25-year-old slam poet from Cleveland who dreams of moving to a city that stays open after midnight. Her work has appeared in *Whiskey Island Magazine* and numerous Ann Arbor publications. When not working long hours at her family’s coffee shop, she writes poetry and flirts.

**Corrina Kellam**, poet and woman-lover, is a vocal proponent of lesbian vibrator use in her community in southern Maine. She writes while using her vibrator and gets spiritual inspiration through the batteries. “Downstairs in the Ladies Room” is her first anthologized short story.

**Pamela Kimmell** is a peacenik, hippie, Quaker, leather butch lesbian; a Leo; forty-four years old; and the oldest of six. She’s taught Jamaican junior high, English to Yucatan Mayans, and Palestinian girls in an old Quaker school near Jerusalem. She moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, in 1978, and publishes the *Lesbian Calendar* every month, “mostly so I can know everything.”

**Anita Langford** is a 24-year-old Australian femme dyke. A student at La Trobe University, she has edited the campus newspaper, convened the lesbian collective, and been Student Politics’ resident bitch on heels. She lives with her cat Jess, the butch in her life. “Leading Looks” is for Kate.

**Heather Lee** is a lesbian writer, artist, and part-time femme, living and working in the Santa Cruz, California, mountains with her significant other, her cat Susan. She is currently working on a book of short stories about the incredible realities of lesbian life.

**Constance Lynne** is a psychologist working with PWAs and their families, and a sexuality educator at a large southern university. She writes fiction and nonfiction for fun, sanity, and a clearer vision, and is thrilled to appear in this anthology. She is twenty-five and lives in Alabama with her partner.

**Teresa Mendoza:** Young Xicana. Mexicana. India. Lesbiana. Writer. Stand-up poet. Performance artist. Her work has appeared in *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *VIVA* (Gay and Lesbian Latino Arts Organization's quarterly publication), and *Esto No Tiene Nombre*. She is the self-published author of the poetry collection *Life in the Dyke Lane*.

**Meg Mott** lives in Halifax, Vermont, where she edits a feminist literary "minizine" called *Out of the Kitchen* and writes a monthly column for the *Brattleboro Reformer*.

**Lesléa Newman** is a poet and fiction writer whose books include *Love Me Like You Mean It*, *Sweet Dark Places*, *In Every Laugh a Tear*, *A Letter to Harvey Milk*, and *Every Woman's Dream*. Her literary awards include a Massachusetts Artists Fellowship in Poetry and the James Baldwin Award for Cultural Achievement.

**Ní Aódagáin** is a lesbian writer who has been working with prose, poetry, and short fiction to express herself on such themes as lesbian erotica, lesbian parenting, and the realities of lesbian rural community. Her writing has appeared in Tee Corrine's *The Poetry of Sex*, *Woman of Power's* "Women in Community" issue, and *Maize: A Lesbian Country Magazine*.

**Chloë Ohme** is a 26-year-old writer—dancer—bad girl—theory slut. She was raised in the Midwest and graduated from the University of Wisconsin—Madison with a B.A. in philosophy and women's studies. Chloë currently resides in San Francisco, where she pursues girls and boy-dykes.

**Liz O'Lexa** is the author of five plays, many magazine articles, tons of erotic love poetry, and a quarterly column on collecting Tarot cards, but she spent her finest hour penning astonishingly obscene lyrics for the Baltimore Bawdy Dykes Choir, a group she formed on a dare.

**Gerry Gomez Pearlberg** is a writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Global City Review*; *Modern Words*; *The Best American Erotica, 1994*; and *Sister and Brother: Lesbians and Gay Men Write about One Another*. She lives in Brooklyn, New York, with her very butch (but not macho) boxer, Otto.

**Su Penn**, formerly one of the publishers of *Lesbian Connection*, is an English teacher and storyteller with extensive performance experience, including an appearance at the 1994 National Women's Music Festival. She is very proud of her master of fine arts degree (Goddard College, 1993).

**Mary Frances Platt** defines herself as an "impossible crip" who came out as a femme in carnival culture in the sixties; found feminism and femme-hating in the seventies; got sober, clean, and clear in the eighties; and discovered the second love of her life in the nineties. She still seeks her impossible butch match.

**Jill Posener** is a British photojournalist whose work has been seen in publications ranging from *Out* and *On Our Backs* to the *New York Times*. Her books of political graffiti, *Spray It Loud* and *Louder Than Words*, have sold out on both sides of the Atlantic.

**A.J. Potter**, twenty-three, is a witch baby from Brattleboro, Vermont. She received her B.A. in the history of sexuality from Marlboro College, studying female prostitution in U.S. history. She is the publisher and editor of *Nine Above!* a newsletter for fantasy author Tanya Huff.

**Liza Rankow** is a lesbian health activist and educator who grew up in New York, came out in Massachusetts, and for the past eleven years has lived in North Carolina. She is an artist, writer, gardener, and practicing physician's associate. She loves butch women in ties.

**Amiee Joy Ross** defines herself as "a 31-year-old bulldaggerous gender-bending wandering Yid, a true raging Scorpio, the kind your mom warned you about." She has identified as a butch since she came out at eighteen, and has been traveling ever since. "I am still in the throes of my Saturn Return, so, womyn, beware!"

**Scarlet Woman** is the alternative identity of a fifty-year-old San Francisco therapist who has been an active sex radical since 1961. She is a poet, feminist, mother, survivor of the politically correct era, leatherdyke, whip-maker, killer-femme-slut. Her work has appeared in *Coming to Power* and *The Persistent Desire*.

**Talin Seta Shahinian** is a 26-year-old Armenian, Christian, bisexual femme dyke of size; a poet; and a writer who loves women but (believe it or not) doesn't like labels because "I'm too complicated to be summed up by a few words and by the time you read this something else will be happening."

**Jeminie Shell** is a 25-year-old photographer, writer, and "admirer of femmes." Originally from Montana, and most recently from New Haven, she is presently experiencing shell shock in Manhattan. Her current projects include joint writing and photography adventures with her lover, and applying to graduate school.

**Anna Svahn** has collected numerous publishing credits in both the straight and gay press, including in *Sappho's Isle* and *On Our Backs*. After nine years in "Dyke Slope," she recently moved to Manhattan near the Cloisters, where she is hard at work on her lesbian cyberpunk novel, *Call the Land Mother*.

**Tristan Taormino** is a freelance writer who lives in New York. She is currently tied up with several ventures: writing a collection of erotic stories, collaborating with her lover on a photography exhibit, launching a new queer magazine, and planning to pursue her Ph.D. in sociology.

**Theresa C. Thadani** is a lesbian photographer of Japanese and East Indian descent living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is currently working on a collection of portraits of Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian and bisexual women.

**Morgan Tharan** is joyously married to a sweet butch. She discovered her femme identity one piece at a time and now she has a complete wardrobe! Her cat Timberwolf is her clearest example of femme power. Morgan rode her Honda 400 coast to coast. She has loved the sky ever since.

**Celli Tiemann** is a first-time writer, closet artist, and professional "leaf in the wind" who is moved by music, lively spirits, elements of design, and the colors of Earth. "Each day I am astounded by what I think I can and cannot accomplish. This is the way I create adventure."

**tatiana de la tierra** flies ferociously with lipsticked bilingual-bicultural contradictions, digging her crimson toes into Florida sand and laying her soul bare on Colombian mountains. "One vision that I fuel close to home is a Latina lesbian publication and international network, *Commoción* (1521 Alton Road, #336, Miami Beach, FL 33139)."

**Raven (Heather) Tompkins** has been a drug dealer, cook, carpenter, farm-hand, stagehand, and addictions technician. "I am always a student of the great mystery. I love being alive and out!" Raven dedicates her piece to K'ai, to whom she's been married since May 23, 1993.

**Kitty Tsui** identifies as a butch but has frequently been called a femme in butch clothing. She's always loved butches but sometimes switches to femmes. A poet, short-story writer, and essayist, she is currently at work on her first novel.

**Karen X. Tulchinsky** is a Jewish butch writer and president of the Femme Fan Club. Her work has been published in several anthologies, including *Getting Wet*, *Lovers*, *Afterglow*, *Testimonies*, and *Out Rage*. She is currently working on a short-story collection and co-editing a lesbian sex anthology.

**Raphaella Vaisseau** resides in Los Angeles, and is the publisher of *Woman Voices*, a radical femme-butch feminist 'zine. She is also the owner of Heart Art Greeting Cards and the Revenge T-shirt Company.

**Mary Vazquez** is a photographer whose work has appeared on numerous book jackets for Lesléa Newman, on a CD cover for folksinger Janet Feld, and in *Metroline*, a lesbian and gay newsjournal. She has been an eclectic deejay, spinning discs for various clubs and private parties for over fifteen years. Her first short story was recently published in *Bless Me, Father: Stories of Catholic Childhood* (Penguin, 1994).

**Chea Villanueva** is a 42-year-old butch of Filipino-Irish ancestry who believes this combination of strong cultures has helped make her what she is today. She is the author of *Girlfriends*, *The Chinagirls*, and *The Things I Never Told You*.

**Jess Wells** is the author of *AfterShocks*, a novel, and two volumes of short stories, *Two Willow Chairs* and *The Dress/The Sharda Stories*. Her work has appeared in thirteen literary anthologies and university curricula. She resides in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Faithe Wempen** is co-editor of *Swagger and Sway*, a quarterly newsletter for the lesbian butch-femme community. She writes and edits computer books and spends endless hours playing computer games and chatting with the butch-femme support group while her very understanding butch, Margaret, does most of the housework.

**Linda L. Wiggin** is a writer, psychic, feminist, and practicing witch living in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her columns appear regularly in the alternative paper *The Planet* and in *Provincetown Magazine*. She is the author of a collection of erotic poetry, *Blood on the Moon* (Feathertouch Press, 1994), and her work has also appeared in the *Boston Globe*, *Folio*, and *Scribblement*.

**Terry Wolverton** is the author of a collection of poetry, *Black Slip* (Clothespin Fever Press, 1992), which was nominated for a Lambda Literary Book Award; editor of *Blood Whispers: L.A. Writers on AIDS, Vols. 1 and 2*; and co-editor of *Indivisible: New Short Fiction by West Coast Gay and Lesbian Writers* (Plume).

**Wendy Jill York** has published over sixty photographs in her own card line and in several gay and lesbian publications. She has also written celebrity profiles, and her work has been published in *The Advocate*, *On Our Backs*, *Lesbians on the Loose* (an Australian production), and *Deneuve*.

**Dr. Valerie Young** loves dressing up, playing house, and stylish, soft butches who can dance. Bored by her corporate day job as marketing manager, she created a line of humorous lesbian greeting cards called *Making Waves*. "Sources of comfort and strength are friends, prayer, and my mother's memory."

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Mary Vazquez

Lesléa Newman has been practicing the art of being a femme fatale for thirty-nine years, except for a brief period when she buckled under the peer pressure of the politically correct. Luckily, she didn't discard her lipstick and lace, but only banished them to the attic temporarily until she returned to her senses. Ms. Newman is an author and editor with twenty books to her credit, including *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *A Letter to Harvey Milk*, *Every Woman's Dream*, and *Sweet Dark Places*. Her literary honors include a Massachusetts Artists

Fellowship, the *Highlights for Children* Fiction Writing Award, and three Lambda Literary Award nominations. She makes her home in Massachusetts with the butch of her dreams.

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