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CHAPTERS 4 - 7

CRACKING THE ARMOUR

POWER, PAIN
AND THE LIVES
OF MEN

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JEKYLLS, HYDES AND HULKS

♦ *The Difficulty of Finding the Man*

In a Bible I had when I was a kid, there was a drawing of Moses at the Red Sea. His beard was long, his body strong and he looked rather distinguished in the midst of a rather bedraggled league of Israelites. He was bathed in a heavenly sunbeam. His arms were raised, staff in hand, and the Sea had divided. Two enormous banks of water rose along the pathway, and in those impossible walls of water, millions of colourful fish swam in panic and wonderment.

The process of creating gender is kind of like that. It's as if the Moses-that-is-society divides the full range of human characteristics into masculine and feminine, the "opposite" sexes, the complementary genders. On one

side are all the wonderful fish of masculinity; on the other are all the beautiful fish of femininity.

If life were as straightforward as this image, things would be simple for men. As you grew up, you'd figure you weren't a woman and you'd learn to be a man. So why are so many men confused about what it means to be a man today? Why are millions of men talking about Robert Bly and how to discover their real masculine self? Why do some men engage in desperate acts to prove they are men? It's partly because the whole business of acquiring masculinity is difficult for a boy to pull off. He's trying to fit himself into a hallucination that is tied to an ever-evolving, hard to define, and often elusive, idea of manhood. And, from the outset, he's starting to feel that both pleasure and pain are part of his experience of power.

♦ **The Horror of Our First Wound**

Remember that the process of becoming masculine started because of the promise of power to the young boy. He sought that power by rejecting the things he associated with the femininity of his mother and his dependency on her. It's not an all-out rejection, for he knows he can keep experiencing them through her; someday he'll marry someone like her. Rather, he drops certain qualities from his personality. Once these are lost to him, he develops in a different direction, the way a river might cut through a bank of dirt, never to return to its original course.

In opting for this course, we distance ourselves from what is usually our most powerful experience of

connection with another person. Barriers are set up against the attunement, empathy, oneness and harmony we once experienced. We erect what Nancy Chodorow calls rigid ego boundaries, by which she means solid emotional walls between ourselves and the rest of the world, walls that define ourselves as separate and impenetrable.* The degree of separation and emotional distancing varies from man to man. We can be limited in our empathy yet remain compassionate, warm and generous. Nevertheless, our dominant definitions of masculinity put a premium on separation, independence and autonomy.

A man builds up new psychological barriers against a range of human emotions that come to represent his own weaknesses. At the same time he remains a complex human being with needs to be intimate and nurtured.

* For Jessica Benjamin, the child wants to solve "the insoluble conflict...between the desire to hold onto mother and the desire to fly away....The 'solution' to this dilemma is to split - to assign the contradictory strivings to different parents." Benjamin suggests that in setting up emotional boundaries, the boy might be losing his capacity for mutual recognition, for merging with another. "Emotional attunement, sharing states of mind, empathically assuming the other's position, and imaginatively perceiving the other's needs and feelings - these are now associated with cast-off femininity. Emotional attunement is now experienced as dangerously close to losing oneself in the other."

"When I went to camp for the first time," one man told me, "I kinda felt babyish when Mom and Dad kissed me goodbye in front of all the kids. You know, I sort of pushed them away. Guess what, though? Within, it must have been, about two days I was homesick as hell. I still remember lying in my bunk crying my eyes out. It felt like I would die if I couldn't get home. None of the kids teased me, but I still felt ashamed."

To the extent that his personality includes these unwanted traits, he feels himself to be someone without power. He senses that to have power is to have mastery over these feelings and to have control over those who still have these feelings. Yet the feelings can't all be mastered, and so these unchecked and untamed needs are, in men, a pit of buried fears, dread, even horror. Because these things are associated with women's power and the power of life itself, boys and men remain secretly afraid of women.

Horror stories gives us an insight into this battle. The fear of all these needs and latent possibilities is the theme of many such stories: men are unable to control their animal urges, lurking within is a beast with untamed emotions that only primordial blood can quench. The Jekylls and Hydes, and the Incredible Hulks. Men remain fascinated and envious of women's procreative capacities, but it is an envy that inspires fear: witness the Frankenstein myths in which men are the creators of life

but, again, all goes wrong for they are unable to control their creations.

In the dark corners of their hearts, boys are afraid of needing the mother they are distancing themselves from and of wanting to be all that she represents. We hear so much these days about father loss. Indeed, as we've seen here, the relative absence or emotional distance of most fathers in our society has a big impact on the lives of men. But what we can also see is the immense pain and confusion caused in boys and men by their separation from their primary love and their first model of caring and behaviour. The first wound of men is just not the father wound, but, simultaneously the mother wound. It is the loss of our mother, the rejection of those parts of our birthright that we associate with femininity.

◆ **Exorcising the Mother Wound**

Up to a point, boys are able to handle the mother wound because we are rewarded for accepting the ways of the patriarchal world: we will come out on top. Rather than feel our loss of the mother and our fear of women's power, we join the fraternity of men, self-defined as superior to and more capable than women.

And in a remarkable feat of human creativity, we bundle up our fears and project many of them onto women. We then say that it is women who are the weak and fearful ones. It isn't males who need nurturing from

women. No, it is women who must be protected and looked after by us.

These attitudes towards women – the envy and anger, fear and disgust, dependency and protectiveness – have been demonstrated in men's immense fear of women's bodies and women's power from the earliest patriarchal societies to our enlightened world today. Some early patriarchal societies developed elaborate rituals based on the idea that women's menstrual blood could infect and reduce the power of men. Women were segregated during their menstrual periods or after childbirth; their mere touch could destroy men's cherished objects. In some North American indigenous cultures, women weren't allowed in the ceremonial sweat lodges during menstruation, although this acknowledged what they believed was women's superior power at that time. Patriarchal societies have carried forward to the present many taboos concerning menstruation. In both Islam and orthodox Judaism, couples are not allowed to have sex during a woman's period, and no woman may enter a mosque or synagogue. Only less dramatic are the prevalent social taboos around menstruation; for many, it is still something not talked about, still wrapped in an air of mystery. The images I have are of my mom coming home from the drug store when I was a kid with *The Package Wrapped In Brown Paper*, of the woman rushing off to a washroom clutching a huge purse when a simple

pad or tampon was all she needed, or of the men and women who feel oral sex is somehow dirty during menstruation. Menstruation is a process that breeds euphemisms – “that time of the month,” “feminine hygiene products” packaged in boxes displaying images of flowers and birds to hide the disgust or shame. These attitudes have been accepted by most women in our culture who in turn have often imparted them on their unwitting daughters. Meanwhile, some religious authorities express reverence for the mother and her powers of life, just so long as she doesn't get too uppity and insist on having power over her own body and claiming the right to regulate her own fertility and procreation. All that dirty, nasty blood might go to waste.

Historically, we men have done all we could to erase the memory of women's power of creation. Patriarchal societies developed elaborate myths of creation in which men, a patriarchal God, or male gods are credited with having created the earth. Philosopher and sociologist Mary O'Brien has written convincingly that patriarchy was a response to the realization that the ultimate human capacity – childbirth – was held by women. Men began dominating women in order to control the circumstances in which children were born. As various anthropologists now suggest, only by enforcing monogamy on women could men know for sure who their offspring were, who

would inherit their power and who, by their existence, could confirm a man's potency. This seems to be the source of the sexual double standard, by which monogamy is demanded of women even where polygamy, or at least promiscuity, is indulged in men.*

But men's unconscious fear of women goes beyond an envy of women's procreative abilities to a fear of being contaminated by all those things that we have rejected. Within the dominant forms of masculinity, men are afraid, to a greater or lesser degree, of their own weakness and vulnerability. And so masculinity, of whatever brand, is a defence against unwanted desires and vulnerability, a form of protection against feeling envy of women's procreative powers. Psychoanalyst Alfred Adler called this “the masculine protest” and judged it to be “the arch evil of our culture, the excessive preeminence of manliness.”

* But whatever the power of these patriarchal myths, they are only myths and thus ours to rewrite. In Timothy Findley's magnificent retelling of the story of Noah and the ark, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Noah is a sadistic patriarch, God is a decrepit, cantankerous old man who surrounds himself with a coterie of sycophantic angels, and Noah's wife – dubbed Mrs. Noyes in the book for the simple reason that she doesn't even rate a name in the Bible – emerges as a hero.

◆ Trying to Grasp a Slippery Fish

The boy begins to move towards something that is experienced as “not female.” This break from the mother and identification with the symbols of manhood is based, in part, on an idealized and imaginary image of the father. It's a shimmering fish he's trying to hold on to. I ask one middle-aged man about his images of masculinity and he immediately thinks of his father. Then he stops short and says, “I have no real image of him. Wow, I never thought of that. He wasn't there a lot. I know he was strong and fair, but nothing really comes to mind.” Even when the father has a strong presence, he is still representing an illusion, for he must embody an impossible measure of independence and social power.

The sense that all is an illusion, that we can never have the power we imagine should be ours, is manifest in our own young bodies. The penis, for example, might be our passkey to the world of power, but at an early age the little penis and testicles are not much defence against the world. Nor can they measure up against the impossibly huge genitals of one's father or older men. I remember standing in the shower when I was five or six years old, staring up in awe at my father. Years later I realized a full circle had turned when I was showering with my son and saw the same crick in his neck and the same look in his eyes. More recently, when Liam had just turned nine, he

and I were talking and, after a bit of prodding on his side, I said that in a few years his penis and testicles would be as big as mine. He only laughed and said, “No way,” as if I were suggesting he'd be able to walk on water.

This internalized image of the small, boyish self remains a nagging presence in each man's unconscious, so much so that, as adults, men go to war to prove themselves potent, risking their lives to show they have balls. This is certainly not the root cause of war, but it does help explain why so many young men allow themselves to be marched off to the battlefield.

Because we base our masculinity on an idealized image, this process takes place even when the father is completely absent. The child simply constructs an image of manhood from the raw materials provided by siblings, older men and the media. I asked a middle-aged engineer about his early images of masculinity and it was his uncle whom he thought of and not his father. He only met his uncle once or twice, but this older man remained a spectral presence in his life. “My uncle, well, he was an engineer off in Central America cutting roads through the jungle. That image was with me all through childhood: off somewhere cutting roads through jungles.” Is it any surprise that this man went on to become an engineer specializing in forestry work?

Any man will do as a model of manhood. After all, in the mind of a young child, all grown men are fathers.

Any image of manhood can be turned, in the cauldron of our unconscious minds, into images of the father. He may not be your actual father, he may be an uncle or grandfather, an older brother or teacher, but in our society a child tends to develop an image of that idealized father.

◆ From Puberty to Manhood

This story is far from complete at age five or six. All the conflicts of the early years re-emerge with a vengeance from pre-adolescence through our teens. Around age five we hit a plateau. By then, most of us have taken the social definitions of gender and integrated them into our developing personalities. Things seem okay for several years, but in our pre-adolescent years, when we're eleven or twelve, everything starts to get shaken up, and it takes tremendous emotional energy to re-establish the bulwarks of gender identity.

Our childhood security is shaken by all the real or anticipated changes in our own bodies. Our adult sexuality awakens as we enter adolescence, along with all those long-expected physical changes associated in our minds with manhood. Our changing bodies become a source of both pride and embarrassment. We never feel like we're changing fast enough, but we quickly lose our childhood elegance and grace. Our voices crack, orgasms happen while we sleep, penises become erect in the middle of class.

It's right then that we first experience the confusion between sex and gender. Until this stage most of us were able to play with a range of human possibilities. We may have buried certain emotional orientations associated with femininity, but we were still able to be babies sometimes; we didn't always have to be strong; we could cry and have tantrums; there was some room for nurturing. With these physical changes we suddenly see ourselves becoming men – here comes the hair, there goes the high voice – but we still feel like complex human beings. We still have a variety of urges and emotional needs, not all of which conform to our understanding of masculinity. Our sense of ourselves as now *really* becoming part of the male sex clashes with our worry that we have not yet achieved full manhood. We have this new body image in our heads, but it's at odds with our still young bodies. This is the source of the early adolescent fascination with strong male heroes with pumped-up bodies – Charles Atlas in my day, Arnold Schwarzenegger for my son's generation. The upshot of all this conflict is the tumult of emotions and confused behaviour of adolescent boys in our society.

This personal struggle is miles away from the gender struggles of our early childhood. Then we fought for both approval and independence from our parents. In adolescence the social context and our personal situations are different. Now we're fighting for the recognition, love

and approval of our peers. The boys around us become the mirror of what we want to be or what we want to avoid. We're sure that other boys have it all worked out and we are the only ones who are plagued with self-doubt and fear. We have to keep a distance even from our best friends; otherwise maybe they'll discover our self-doubts. Or maybe we fear being too dependent, needy or passive. It is in these painful moments of adolescence that lifelong patterns of isolation from other men are born.

In a culture based on emotional separation among men *and* on the imposition of a heterosexual norm, we have had to undergo a traumatic shift in affections. During our childhood, other boys were the main object of our affection; they were our main playmates and our trusted allies. Now, with a growing sexual interest in girls and a caution about opening up to other males, we are expected to do an about-face in our closest relationships and re-orient towards girls. If boys are the model of what we want to be, girls become one means through which we measure our achievement of this goal. Yet boys remain our chief companions, the objects of our admiration and, for many more years, the real love of our lives.

"I remember," says John, "when David and I would do everything together. Every day after school we'd hang out, listen to music, do homework, watch TV. We'd do stuff on weekends and at night went to movies or slept

over. Then he got his first girlfriend and I got replaced by someone else. I mean we still hung out, but not nearly as much. I acted like I didn't care because I didn't want him thinking I was weird and I started going out with a girl I knew, but it wasn't the same."

Since we're supposed to have left boys behind, adolescence is also a time when many young men feel immense fear about homosexuality and their own sexual orientation. John's fear of being thought "weird" would have been all the stronger if, like many boys, he and David had explored each other's bodies when they were young or maybe masturbated together when they reached puberty. The intensity of this fear explains why most gay-bashing is done by adolescents.

This period is further complicated by the way our society is structured. The real or relative powerlessness of young people, male and female, impinges on our developing sense of self. In our early childhood, boys accepted a self-definition that equated us and our actions with power. All those symbols of boyhood play, all the guns and superheroes, became projections of our power. But this sense of power starts to wear thin as we become aware of who really does and doesn't have power in the world around us. Because of our class or race, because of our physical abilities or differences, because of our religion or ethnic group, because of not being superheroes or saints, because we are just plain real people, we

develop a feeling of inadequacy and sometimes even a bit of self-hate. We start feeling different from others, maybe not quite as good. We spot the limitations of our parents. We feel anxieties about money, jobs, relationships, success.

All this is exacerbated by that strange invention of twentieth-century Western societies: adolescence. Puberty no longer means the entrance into adulthood as it once did. Now it signifies the entry into a netherworld of competing demands: we're told to act like adults, but we don't have the power to make adult decisions and be independent. We have adult bodies, but don't have the social or economic resources to live adult lives. Adults endeavour to confine and control our sexuality. We want to be independent, but in many ways, enforced dependence keeps us behaving like children.

The real social powerlessness we experience clashes with the masculine ideal. It exacerbates our confusion over the difference between sex and gender, and we feel even more inadequate as men. So teenage boys become more aggressive both verbally and physically; it's a way of announcing, loudly, that they're all right. All sorts of behaviour in sports, in school hallways or at the mall makes this statement. Harassment of girls or taunting of weaker boys is more of a performance for one's peers than anything else. Sexism has as much to do with the hierarchies and power relations among young men as it does with feelings about young women.

The stakes are high. How we are judged by our peers

and how we feel is measured on a scale of personal insecurities. Every action or gesture threatens to become a divining rod that points with precision to underground rivers of inadequacy, to our underlying failings as men, or, on the other hand, to our own image of masculine power. In Grade Seven or Eight I was fascinated by the way a particular older boy chewed gum. I was in awe of the way the tiny muscles flexed in his cheeks and the subtle sense of power, control, toughness and sex as he worked over his Juicy Fruit. This one action represented to me then the full glory of masculine power, and try as I might, it seemed impossible for me to emulate him.

One thing has remained the same from earlier years. We had already learned that masculinity was something for which you had to fight. The drama of school-yard battles was a struggle to shape and define our manhood, a struggle that continues into adolescence. What doesn't persist, however, is our emotional capacity to process all these sources of conflict and stress. When we were really young, we could feel two conflicting emotions at once without feeling stress. We get through our childhood conflicts because our personalities, our mental structures, are still being formed and remain flexible. Once they are set, however, it becomes hard to negotiate between conflicting pressures and demands. If things don't fit into our sense of self, well, they simply don't fit in. The other reason it gets harder to emotionally process these new sets of demands is that we have progressively lost the tools of emotional release, and this has made us more

vulnerable and less able to deal with stress and to respond to the difficult challenges of our new world.

By our teenage years, by the time we really are men, we find our sense of male power increasingly confused and tarnished. The stage is now set for our adult experiences, for the intricacies of sex, for new types of relationships with women and with men, for the violence that might still be a presence in our lives and for the conflicts and crises of men in an era of change.

◆ CHAPTER FIVE

THE BURDEN OF PLEASURE

◆ *Men and Sex*

Some of us act like prisoners of our raging hormones. We learn to be sexual aggressors; some days our sexual needs feel insatiable. But men's experiences of sex are rich, complex and varied. More than any other part of our lives, it is in our sexual lives that our contradictory experiences of power get acted out, where our fragility and power combine with an experience of ecstasy. This is often hard to pick up. As much as men talk about sex, we spend little time talking about our personal experience of it: what we like and what we don't, what's easy for us and what's hard. In a workshop on sex I attended, one older man was asked if he had ever talked to another man about his sexual experiences. Not missing a beat his reply was, "Sober?"

Of course, we are often aware of conflicts. One man has a buried sense of unease and frustration, another feels a twinge of shame, another suffers from performance anxieties. For many men attracted to women, our feelings have become even more complicated in recent years as we've been challenged to examine what might be objectionable in our relations with women. Many men feel caught between their desires and forms of sexual behaviour or fantasy that appear to, or actually do, oppress women. Summer comes and you're walking down the street, going crazy at the sight of women whose bodies have been covered up for the last six months. You catch sight of nipples and thighs and it excites you. Is that sexist, or is it just a wonderful attraction to another human being? Is it objectifying women? Or does the answer depend on *how* you react and what you do about it?

Just as complicated are the challenges faced by gay and bisexual men, for attraction towards other men runs smack into the many forms of social prohibition of homosexuality. The challenge isn't simply about what you *do* sexually; it's about who you are and how you see yourself as a man.

In bed and on the street, sex becomes a form of power play, where relations of power become eroticized, usually subtly, sometimes not. Sexual power, though, requires performance and control, and that doesn't leave much room for a vast range of needs that each of us tries to meet

through sex.

Why is sex a source of so much emotional conflict? It may be a place full of bounty and pleasure, but it's also full of tension, conflict and struggle; for sexual pleasure gets tangled up with sexual power. Sexual power, like any kind of power, can be a double-edged sword.

◆ Sex and Sexuality

Humans are physical beings with many possibilities for sensation and delight. For us, ultimately there is the body, a tingling in the mouth, an erection of the penis, the blush of skin, the pleasure of taste, sight and sound, a pressure on the prostate that can take your breath away.

At the same time, we live in societies where our biology is shaped into specific forms of sexuality. As odd as it seems – for sexual needs feel so natural – our actual experiences of sex and the way we relate to our bodies vary widely from one society to another, within societies and, of course, from individual to individual. Sexuality depends not just on our bodies but also on how our society teaches us to feel. While the sight of a woman's breasts will drive to distraction many a man in our culture, for example, it wouldn't warrant a second glance by a local man on some South Pacific islands.

When we learn to be men, we're infusing our bodies with social meaning. In the end, society doesn't exist

only in external structures like an economic or political system; it is embedded within our bodies as well. Witness the stance of a soldier or the pose of a model. Why do we see power and strength in the soldier's rigidity? Why does a certain thrust of a model's shoulder spell out beauty and sensuality? The ways that we hold our bodies or the pleasure we find watching human movement bear witness to the ways that we have incorporated a society's images of power and pleasure into ourselves and made these something to desire.

Sexuality includes not only direct physical activity like genital contact and kissing, but the physical pleasures of looking, smelling, tasting, touching, and hearing. And fantasy. Thinking about things can give us pleasure, whether it is the taste of chocolate cake, the gurgling of a mountain stream, the suppleness of leather or the sight of a naked body. I recently led a workshop for men and women on sexual fantasies and noted with interest that a lot of the fantasies focused on a setting – rain falling, a fire glowing, ripe mangoes, soft sheets – rather than on an actual sexual act.

Sexuality is a natural human capacity, but no one expression is natural in all human beings. The sheer variety results from our individual and unique mixture of biological maturation, hormonal influence and social and natural environments. The diversity of our sexual natures helps make men's sexuality so complex. For most men in

our society, three principles shape our sexuality: Activity is accentuated and passivity is discouraged; sexual energy is almost completely focused on our penises; and homosexuality is suppressed.

◆ **Active, Passive and Masculine**

I was at a workshop with a group of men and we had left the stuffy confines of the conference centre for a clearing in the woods; we wanted some fresh air and a nice view. I asked them whether they'd ever felt pressure to perform at sex and they looked at me like I had just arrived from Neptune: Of course they had! I asked if they felt they had to initiate dates and make the first moves, and most again said, "Of course." In all aspects of our lives, men strive to succeed and achieve, to steer the way and blaze the trails. No wonder we feel pressure to perform in the bedroom. But why our performance and achievement such an important part of our sexuality? The answer has a lot to do with the way we've come to associate activity with masculinity.

As I watched my son in his first months, it was difficult to distinguish between activity and passivity. He might have seemed passive at his mother's breast, but his sucking was an active function that gave him satisfaction. This unity of activity and passivity is part of what my colleague Gad Horowitz and I call the initial *polysexuality* of the human being. Humans start off with

a fluid capacity for sexual excitation through any part of their bodies including the brain, with its ability to fantasize, and through the senses of touch, taste, hearing, sight, and smell. This is why we have the ability to develop different sexual orientations and different ways of experiencing our sexual desires. Growing up takes something formless and moulds it like clay into our adult desires.*

One of our most basic, even if unconscious, lessons is to separate activity and passivity. We come to experience certain things as active and others as passive. Activity is associated with an aggressive, outgoing, achieving or doing orientation, passivity with a more receptive orientation. The active/passive split becomes a basic structure of our psychic reality, determining the structures through which we perceive the world and our activities within it.

But is anything intrinsically active or passive? Remember the child at the mother's breast. Remember the

* Freud had a slightly different view. He suggested an original bisexuality of humans and believed that activity and passivity coexisted in infants, as did an attraction to both males and females. But he assumed an original existence of these dualities—active/passive, masculine/feminine—in the minds of humans. Gad Horowitz and I suggest, rather, that these dichotomies are themselves products of societies. Nothing is intrinsically active or passive.

example of the “male” and “female” electrical connectors and the identification of one half as the active part and the other as the passive or receiving end. This active/passive split, with its male/female connotation, has become one of the central ways we organize thought and action, one of the basic concepts through which we now view the world. It is a concept as pervasive in Western thought as in the notion of yin and yang in the East, though the latter presupposes the need for balance between the two.

These separate traits, active and passive, aren't neutral or equal. Since patriarchal societies value men's activities over women's, and since men come to be seen as the doers in society, those things we see as active are associated with masculinity while those things we think of as passive are associated with femininity. That is why we think of that “male” plug as actively doing something to a passive, “female” socket when in fact neither is doing anything to the other – they are simply forming a bridge for the flow of electrons. (This is all the more ironic in the case of the “female” wall socket, for that is in fact the source of power.)

Activity becomes central to our concept of manhood, and these images of masculinity are at the core of our sexuality. Luckily, few of us fully become rigid, controlling, ever-active men. Some of our armour slips off as the clothes fall to the bedroom floor – we love to be

cared for and we love to care and we manage to retain aspects of receptivity just as women retain aspects of activity. Our humanity remains intact, even if muted, but since we can never fully be the ever-performing sexual man, there is an ever-present source of tension between our image of manhood and the complex sexuality of a real human being.

Our experience of sexuality, like our experience of power, is contradictory. On the one hand, in our most rapturous experiences of making love, the boundaries between two people start to vanish, and we lose sight of where our body ends and our partner's begins. Similarly, in masturbation there is no subject or object; in this case, we receive pleasure from ourselves. In both examples, the separation between activity and passivity is momentarily overcome. No wonder most of us cherish sex.

On the other hand, many of us experience sex as something we do actively *to* our partners, whom we often prefer, however unconsciously, to think of as more or less passive recipients of our attentions. Popular language reflects this: we say, "I made love *to* her." A man tells me, "When I make love to her I feel like I am an artist or a magician spinning a beautiful web. I can bring her up or down. I can make her have an orgasm or hold back for a bit longer. Sometimes I'll put on a record, some hot jazz, and I feel like I'm choreographing the whole thing. It's delicious." These are romantic images, but as fun as it might be, it's hard to be a choreographer, a practised

dancer and an abandoned lover at the same moment. In the crude locker room version some men say, "I gave it to her" or "I screwed her." Women become "pieces of ass" and the objects of male sexual gratification.

Many couples – whether a man and a woman, two men or two women – develop patterns of love-making in which one partner assumes a more dominant position, taking the initiative, opting to be on top, literally or figuratively. In heterosexual sex, often, but not always, it is the man who assumes the dominant position, reflecting the power relations between them – or at least the power relations between men and women. These couples have turned a relationship based on power, consciously or not, into a source of intense pleasure. One couple I interviewed talked of "playing with power." She said, "Here's what's number one on our hit parade this month: He'll be on top, I might be on my back or on my stomach. But he's holding me down." "Yeah," he interjects. "I'm holding her down, not hurting her, but being a bit rough, pinning her down a bit." She flushes and says, "It's great." I ask her if this means she is the type of person who likes being controlled and dominated. "Are you nuts? It's just a way I can get those feelings out of my system. Get excited by them without feeling guilty. In sex with someone I trust I can be dominated because I know I never actually lose control."

In other couples, this pattern of dominance and

submission becomes the only way a man can let go of his desire to control and perform. For a few moments of ecstasy he might let someone control or dominate him. "She's on top. She's in the driver's seat and I'm under her purring like a Ferrari," says one man.

By and large, though, our social codes ordain that men assume responsibility for initiating and orchestrating sexual contact. Some men would find it a relief if women were more aggressive; others would find this uncomfortable. One handsome and sexually active man in his thirties tells me, "I can't remember the last time a woman came on to me and made the first moves." Would you like that? I ask. "You bet," he says. Then he thinks for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so, but now that you mention it, I do remember something. Last year at a party there was this woman who was pretty good looking. She started coming on to me before I had made up my mind about her – she even suggested getting together sometime. I started finding her a bit pushy and by the end of the party I didn't think she was that attractive after all."

These are the power dynamics of sex, the politics of sex. There is no way around the fact that power relations have become a key component in sexual relationships. We often experience sex in terms of power. "Getting it" makes you feel strong, in control, a man. Performing becomes a grandstand play on par with a slam dunk in basketball. We speak of sex in terms of potency, meaning power. As

British writer Lynn Segal notes, "men's greater power in the world and the particular construction of masculinity both allow and *encourage* men to express domination and power through sex."

The problem isn't only what's happening in a man's head. If men are often stuck on one side of the social split into gender opposites, women are often stuck on the other. They might defer to men to initiate sex or dates; they might become the watchdogs of traditional morality; and it often falls to them to look after important concerns such as birth control or the emotional content of a relationship.

The result is that many men feel a tremendous pressure to conquer and perform sexually. The scuttlebutt around the cafeteria might be that men are preoccupied with how a woman looks, but their focus in a sexual encounter is often their role as scriptwriter, director and lead actor of the unfolding drama. We perform for the woman or man we are with; maybe we even perform for the invisible men who loom in our imagination like judges of manhood; most of all, we perform for ourselves. In doing so we reassure ourselves that our masculinity is not only intact but flourishing. All these concerns, of course, leave little room for sheer abandonment and spontaneity, for those prolonged moments when sexual pleasures are diverse and infinite. "No sooner does a man arrive at a particular level of

sexual intimacy," writes Michael Kimmel, "than he must begin to strategize how to advance to the next level."

Over the past two decades, men have begun to discover that women *like* sex but don't necessarily have orgasms just through vaginal intercourse. Rather than simply enriching the quality of heterosexual relations, for men who have learned to be in control this has often proved to be one more source of pressure. One man, informed Shere Hite, "I get paranoid. Did I please her? Was I good enough? This makes me mad. Why is it that the burden of pleasure is always on the man?"

This is one way that men's contradictory experience of power rears its head in bed. A sense of power can give men pleasure, it can help us feel secure. At the same time, we feel we have to perform to achieve this pleasure – through skill and technique we can get ourselves and our partner to a point of pleasure. Sex ceases to be just an end in itself, a pleasurable state of being – naked, skin-to-skin, in ecstasy with another person. It becomes a procedure with a purpose, a target. For men, it often feels like it's our responsibility to achieve that end. Suddenly, sex becomes a burden, a way to demonstrate to our partner and ourselves that we really are men.

◆ Enter the Penis

For men, sex is most often focused on one part of our bodies, the penis. Following the active/passive split, this

is the second organizing principle that shapes the dominant forms of men's sexualities. We just don't seem to be able to move away from the notion that masculine power is symbolized by the penis. In images of contemporary pornography, real men always have a throbbing rod of steel, ready for action. In the way that pornography caricatures so much about sex, this is of course a simplification. After all, when we make love we can forget about our problems, experience pleasure to the maximum and unite physically and psychically with another. Men's images of intercourse are often at odds with the stereotype of men just wanting to dominate women. One man told Shere Hite, "My lover's vagina feels warm and smooth. With my cock deep inside her, I feel totally secure and loved." Another said, "Like fitting two pieces of a puzzle snugly together, intercourse feels psychologically like acceptance of me."

At the same time there is some truth in the caricature. A man is supposed to maintain control over his penis; he has to keep it up and perform to spec. By the time we're teenagers our sexual focus is so locked on the penis that it comes to embody all of our sexual desire. Penises become little men with a volition of their own, sporting cute names like Dick and Peter. Penises become machines ready to perform at a moment's notice. Bernie Zilbergeld writes, "Not only are fantasyland penises much larger than life, they also behave peculiarly. They

are forever 'pulsating,' 'throbbing,' and leaping about. The mere sight or touch of a woman is sufficient to set the penis jumping, and whenever a man's fly is unzipped, his penis leaps out....Nowhere does a penis merely mosey out for a look at what's happening....The names given to these penises reflect their inhuman nature – tools, weapons, rods, ramrods, battering rams, shafts, and formidable machines. Somehow the humanity of the penis has been lost.”

There's no denying a biological function is at work here. With the reproduction of the species at stake, there are hereditary and hormonal reasons why, as we mature, we develop an ever greater interest in our genitals. Humans, however, aren't only sexually stimulated when a woman is ovulating, or when we're actually reproducing – we need mate only a few times in our lifetimes to ensure the reproduction of the human species. Our physical pleasure goes beyond our genitals. Many parts of our bodies can be a source of intense physical sensation: our mouths, nipples and anuses, the skin inside our thighs, the cheeks of our ass, our hands or feet – really, any part of ourselves. We all know sex isn't limited to a man's penis in a woman's vagina, so what makes us focus almost exclusively on our genitals? It must have to do with our minds. As one prudish but perceptive character in a P.D. James novel laments, “I find it extraordinary that a straightforward if inelegant device for ensuring the

survival of the species should involve human beings in such emotional turmoil.”

Men's strong genital fixation can lure us across the border from the land of pleasure into the land of obsessive need. Sexual conquest by the penis becomes a means to prove masculinity – we don't even consider it “making love” or “having sex” unless it involves putting our penis inside someone else's body. “When I am there inside her, I'm bursting with manhood,” one man says.

The reasons for our genital fixation are varied and involve both physical sensation and our whole imagined masculine identity. Remember, from the days when we first realized there were two sexes and one had power over the other, our penis became a passkey to the world of men's power. Our penis is made powerful -- in contrast to that other part of our biological maleness, our testicles, which remain soft and vulnerable. Our penis is the center of attention; as our passkey and emblem, a lot is riding on its ability to perform as expected. Since it is the part of our body most strongly associated with activity and power, it's not surprising that many men, particularly as teenagers, are anxious about the size of their penises.

It's also not surprising how anxious we can be about impotence. I have never forgotten the times when I wasn't able to get it up. Rather than recognize that I simply wasn't in the mood for sex, that I was too tired or

had drunk too much, or that the sexual chemistry simply wasn't right between me and my partner, I felt embarrassed and ashamed, as if I had failed. Each of those occasions is cemented in my brain. There was the time with X when I was 26. We were on her living room carpet. The carpet was white, we had just been to a movie, afterwards I had eaten an orange and I can still remember its delicious smell. There was the time with Y in her basement flat as we listened to Vivaldi and sipped the cognac she had brought back from London. And, yes, there were other times, filed away in my brain. Each time I acted reasonably cool – oh, yeah, no sweat, it's no big deal. But I still remember these moments with the vividness of yesterday. Why are we so bothered by impotence? After all, it doesn't mean you can't have sex, it only means you can't have intercourse. But if we think that the only real sex is intercourse and if we're fixated on the penis, an erect penis carries the burden of pleasure. The word itself tells the whole story, for “impotence” literally means lack of power. It isn't simply that at that moment, or perhaps as an ongoing condition, you can't have an erection; the fact that you're not hard often feels like a total loss of power.

The anxiety around the penis is what psychoanalysts have dubbed a castration fear. Castration anxiety, of course, isn't usually a literal fear of having someone slice

off your penis. Rather, it is a buried and unconscious fear about losing masculine power, losing your prerogative for activity and control, losing the thing that most identifies you with other men, that allowed you as a child to break away from your mother.

Perhaps this helps us understand the great paradox of men's embarrassment concerning their penises. The male sexual organ is celebrated in many cultures – as the unconscious embodiment of male power and a symbol of patriarchal tribal society. We see its reflection in monuments to glorious military leaders and alliances, from the Washington Monument to the Egyptian Obelisk now at Place de la Concorde in Paris. At the same time, men tend to be personally embarrassed by their penises, particularly when erect. In an era when nakedness is *de rigueur* in most feature movies, it is still rare to see a penis on the screen. An erect penis would automatically give a movie a restricted rating even though it is something as ordinary as a pleasant smile.

It seems to me there is more at stake here than just shame. Anxieties and mixed messages around penises bear witness to men's contradictory experiences of power and the conflicts buried within men's sexuality. Another theatre of conflict is the repression of homosexuality, which forms, in many societies, the third organizing principle of dominant masculine sexualities.

◆ Nipping Homosexuality in the Bud

Imagine this: A group of men are sitting around a table, a pitcher of beer in front of them. They're talking about their own experiences involving sexual acts, sexual feelings, sexual relationships or moments of physical affection with other males. If they felt perfectly safe, if they felt no one was going to make fun of them or give them a hard time or hassle them, if they knew that whatever they said was confidential, it might go something like this:

The first one starts: "I remember going into my son's bedroom to get a friend of his and take him home. They were both real young, just two and a half I think. I came in and there they were on the floor without a stitch of clothes. The other little guy was sucking on my boy's dick and he was laying there with the biggest smile you could imagine."

Says the second, "When I was a little kid, oh I don't know, maybe seven or eight, all my best friends were boys. They'd come over and spend the night. We'd sometimes take a bath together then curl up in bed like it was the most natural thing in the world."

"That's nothing," says the next, who always likes to tell the best story. He waves his hands in the air as if he were making a drawing. "Picture this: A big woods in the summer between Grade Five and Six. My twin brother and I out there in the woods playing strip poker with our friends Tim and Jeffrey. The poker was just an excuse to

get all of our clothes off and romp around in the leaves and wrestle a bit until you started getting poked and pricked too bad. There didn't seem to be anything strange about a bunch of guys getting each other to undress, not at all. We started talking about hard-ons but I don't remember any of us had heard about, you know, masturbating. One day when we showed up, Tim and Jeffrey announced they had figured out a new thing. Both undressed and, as usual, had hard-ons. Then they started having anal sex. I remember being a bit horrified, but you know what? It wasn't because it was two guys having sexual contact, it was just that my mom had drummed into me how dirty you were back there. That was the only problem with it at all."

The fourth man blushes and takes a slosh of beer. "Okay, I guess it's my turn. Well, back when I was in the Boy Scouts a couple of times we had these circle jerkles at night when the grown-ups were off doing something. Five or six of us from my pack would start going at it and the winner was the one who would have the first orgasm. Sometimes we'd line up and see who could shoot the farthest. We had a lot of fun back then but, God, is it embarrassing to talk about that now." And now he's not just blushing but has turned beet red.

The fifth man is more circumspect; he always plays his cards close to his chest. "My dad always kissed me goodbye in the morning and sometimes gave me nice

hugs. Then all of a sudden he stopped. Just like that. I don't think he ever told me why. He just stopped and I got the sense that there was something wrong with guys doing that with each other, hugging or kissing."

They're almost all the way around the table and the talk arrives at a young man with an English accent. "Last year I was in Morocco for two weeks and it was quite impossible to believe what I saw. The men there walked along the streets holding hands. These were blokes who wouldn't even let the wife out of the house without a veil on, but there they were holding hands. Can you imagine, what do you have here, the Joint Chiefs of Staff holding hands before a news conference?"

And finally the last man. When he speaks he is more subdued than the rest. There is no embarrassment, but some of the gaiety of the previous remarks is no longer there. "It felt like a heavy blanket had come down over me. I had always liked guys; they were my best friends. When I started getting sexually mature it seemed only natural that they'd continue to be my friends. It wasn't the girls; the boys were the ones I thought were cute. Did I get creamed for that. It took me til my twenties to make my peace with the idea that I loved men."

Except for the last one, all of these men – whom I talked to, not around one table, but at different times – identify themselves as heterosexual. Like most men in our culture, straight, gay or bisexual, their first quasi-sexual

experiences were with friends who were usually other males. There isn't anything unusual about this. According to various studies, 40 to 50 per cent of males have had some sort of contact with another male's genitals. Alfred Kinsey's pathbreaking study of men's sexuality in the late 1940s suggested that 37 percent of men had at least one homosexual experience leading to orgasm. Today about 10 to 15 percent of the North American male population is gay or bisexual.

So why do we define masculinity as exclusively heterosexual? Why do some teenage boys bash gay men? Why the stigma against homosexual love? What does this tell us about the fragility of masculinity?

Prohibitions on homosexuality differ from one society to another. In homophobic societies such as ours, you aren't even supposed to hug, kiss, or hold hands with another man, although these things are accepted in many other patriarchal cultures. Some societies, such as ancient Greece and Rome, celebrated same-sex relationships; in others, such as certain North American Indian nations, some men would cross-dress. Legal prohibitions on same-sex activities in the Anglo-Saxon world date back little more than a century. Until the second half of the 19th century, homosexuality wasn't illegal in Britain, although anal intercourse with a man or a woman had been banned since the time of Henry VIII. In the late 19th century a distinct homosexual subculture

emerged in England, partly as a result of increased mobility and urbanization, with young men leaving their families and villages to find work far from home. While there has always been homosexual *behaviour*, a discernible community of men then emerged with what became defined as a homosexual *identity*. In response to this nasty development, Parliament rushed to shore up the battlements of Christian morality, passing the 1885 Labouchere Amendment to the 1864 Contagious Disease Acts. The amendment outlawed all forms of sexual activity between men. Brotherly love was now on the statute books.*

Such regulation had less to do with a perception of what men should do with particular parts of their bodies than with the changing perceptions of what it meant to be men. After all, a real crisis was emerging for masculinity. Women had entered the work force in large numbers and the first wave of feminism was off the ground. Men were no longer self-employed, with power over their shop or farm. Meanwhile, European empire-builders were marching into Africa and stoking the fires that led to the great

* Sexual activity between women was not included in the prohibition because Queen Victoria made it clear she would sign no such law. After all, no British lady would even think of doing that sort of thing. Lesbian communities in Britain did not develop until early in the twentieth century.

imperial wars. The response to the crisis of masculinity, the rise of feminism and the needs of military expansion was the emergence of a militaristic, aggressive and dominating form of masculinity in Europe and North America.

With all this happening, perhaps men sensed that any contagion of brotherly love could have compromised the capacity of men to lust after each other's blood. Gentleness or "passivity" with other men was one more symptom of the feminization of men, something to be feared. Through these years the stigmatization of homosexuality grew. Within a few decades after Havelock Ellis and U.S. medical writers introduced the word homosexual into the English language in the 1890's, the American Psychiatric Association had listed it as a disease, a categorization that persisted until 1973. All modern societies still impose what Adrienne Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality. Men and women who choose an openly gay or lesbian life often find themselves the subject of discrimination - some of it informal, such as in being denied housing or jobs, some of it formal, on matters such as limitations on adoption, family insurance benefits or medical plans for spouses.

In spite of today's increased acceptance, unease persists in the minds of many men. One man says baldly, "I don't see anything wrong with it. I just don't want it shoved down my throat." Another man seems to

accept homosexuality and says he is pleased to have several close gay friends, but when I ask him what would happen if a gay friend casually put his arm around him for a moment or two on the street, he replies quietly, "I wish I could tell you differently, but I would be horrified that someone from work would spot us."

What is it about homosexuality that frightens so many men?

Let's remember the active/passive split. Perhaps physical love for another man is seen to be passive. In the minds of many men, intent on excluding everything that is experienced as female, nothing could be more threatening than the idea of being sexual with another male. It appears as if you can't be dominant and active – that is, masculine – in sexual partnership with another who is also dominant and active. As we have seen, patriarchal cultures that accept homosexuality, from ancient Greece and Rome to our modern-day prisons, still demand a clear division of roles, with older or bigger men "using" a weaker, younger, prettier or socially inferior male "like a woman."

The fear of losing male power is the root of all homophobia, for to lose that power feels like losing manhood. The more fragile your sense of manhood, the more intense can be the fear of homosexuality. This explains why most gay-bashing is by teenagers, who are experiencing the time of life when a man's sexual identity

is most insecure. The fear of homosexuality results from both the fragility of masculinity and the structures of men's power.

In reality, this capacity to love other men doesn't disappear. Like cool water flowing under the desert sand, many men continue to tunnel towards the pleasures of active homosexuality or bisexuality. "I denied it," says one man. "I denied it till I forgot that I was even denying it. Luckily I met Bob and all that changed." Another says, "It never occurred to me, not until I hit my late twenties. Then I started having these dreams – not exactly porno thrillers, but I'd dream about men's hands, they were strong and grasping, sometimes onto me. I started having fantasies and thinking about men and, like they say, the rest is history." An office worker says, "There was no question about it. I was born queer, I stayed queer, I'll always be queer. The only thing I wasn't was raised queer." One college professor replied "No," when I asked him if he was heterosexual, "No" when I asked if he was homosexual, "No" to bisexual, and "No" to the question whether he was celibate. "I resist all those categories," he replied. "Why should I have to pronounce what I am sexually at any one moment? Why should I have to define and limit myself in any way whatsoever?"

These observations underscore the existence of different masculinities and different masculine

sexualities. The importance of the gay liberation movement since the late 1960s has been to affirm, for millions of North American, European and other men, that their sexual orientation isn't a negation of masculinity, but an affirmation of a different definition of masculinity. Of course, gay men, like all men, have to work their way through the conflicts of masculinity and of men's contradictory experiences of power. There's nothing inherently superior about being gay or about being straight: the issue is to find your own source of water under the desert sands.

◆ Sex Objects

The camera focuses on the lips of her vulva, gleaming under a sheen of oil. She is pushing her breasts together, squeezing them as if crushed under the weight of uncontrollable passion. The tip of her tongue touches her upper lip, the little nub of pink matching her rouged clitoris. Her eyes stare at the camera in a parody of seduction and desire.

We don't know who she is, and just as importantly, we don't really know if these gestures have anything to do with how she actually experiences her body or what she likes doing with herself. She is a model, an actress, there to please the photographer and the publisher, and to meet their expectations of what the audience wants. It's porn and you know, whether you like the image or not, that

you're looking at a sex object. The object might be a whole person or it might be a body part, teased and contorted into a position of seductivity, submission, aggression and two-dimensional ecstasy. Women and sometimes men are paid by the job or the hour to model passion, intimacy and desire.

One of the charges we often hear about men and dominant forms of men's sexuality is that they objectify women, turning them into things. Objectification is said to be a key to men's sexuality and men's relationships to women. Objectification, though, means at least two different things, and this again shows the conflicting nature of men's sexualities. In part it is a wonderful way we all relate to others; in part it is a negative symptom of patriarchal relations of power and of life in a consumer society. The realities of men's power are, as always, confused and contradictory.

What might be all right about objectification? Sexual desire always has an object. The object may be oneself, it may be another, it may be a part of another or it may even be a thing. From the moment of birth and as we grow up, we learn to meet our needs in the world around us. One aspect of doing this is attaching our desires to specific objects. It might be a breast or a bottle, a piece of cake or a teddy bear. The object may be pleasing for its look, its touch, its taste, its sound or its smell. When the object of desire is another person, we

often focus on particular attributes of the total person. For the newborn baby, the breast and the voice of the mother represent the mother as a whole. In objectification, a part of a person comes to unconsciously represent the whole. Nowhere is this better illustrated in patriarchal societies than in the fantastic psychological and cultural investment of energy in a relatively small and tender bit of tissue that dangles between a man's legs. The penis becomes an object – in this case, an object of power.

Any part can represent the whole, and this isn't necessarily bad. Each of us sets our boundaries of sexual attraction through a number of secondary sexual characteristics. The touch of relatively hairless skin will excite one man while the texture of a rough beard will do the same for another. And because most of us do not go around without clothes even when it would be comfortable to do so, it is usually secondary sexual characteristics that come to represent the whole of someone's body. We manipulate these through fashion, makeup, body language and the way we use our voices.

Our sexuality is expressed towards specific objects. As we mature, in place of our original polysexuality – that diffuse capacity of the newborn to experience pleasure in any bodily activity – successive zones of the body become the site of intense physical and psychological excitation. The pleasure of a part – part of one's own body or part of another's – captures the pleasure of the whole.

In itself this is not a bad thing, so long as the whole person doesn't disappear in the process. The incomparable thrill and excitement attached to particular parts of our bodies or of another's body need not be denigrated. Male or female, if one can touch one's tongue against a lover's nipple or penis or clitoris and in that brief moment of contact capture the vastness of our desire and of our lover's desire, this is clearly a great achievement of human sexuality. It is part of the grandeur of human sexuality that sets up apart from the more simple, instinctive reproductive behaviour of our animal cousins.

Dale says to me, “I can't get over how much I love women's bodies.” This love doesn't have to be denigrating or derogatory, nor is there anything wrong with his desire to look at women's bodies. Ed feels the same about men's bodies: he loves asses in particular, fitted firmly into a pair of jeans; it is the stuff of desire and sexual appreciation.

This is also where problems begin. I suggested earlier that nongenital forms of sexual desire get suppressed, belittled, and often forgotten as sexual expression becomes focused on our genitals. Fallen from the grace of innocent desire, we cover up these parts of our bodies. To add yet more forbidden fruit to the garden, in most contemporary societies women are taught from girlhood to cover their breasts. The upshot

is to invest portions of our body with supercharged energy. Dale doesn't just love women's bodies – he feels he can't get enough of them. “I can't tell you why, it seems crazy,” he tells me. “But I just want to see women's breasts, and asses, and pubic hair and vaginas, and, I don't know, everything, so much I think I could die sometimes. It's like it's something I never got to see, never get to see, and never will get to see.”

As a result of living in a world in which sex is made both an object of embarrassment and derision, and a means to titillate and sell products, Dale is a bit obsessed. Like many men, he has an overwhelming desire for something he is not allowed to see or enjoy often enough; certain parts of the body come to represent these desires in him. In the end we fracture the whole person into component parts and processes, identifying a few of these parts with all our sexual energies and longings. We point to these parts and watch them sizzle.

This problem isn't lost on Marney, a young autoworker. “It's funny, you know, like when I have a girlfriend for a while I don't really think just about her boobs or nothing. I think about those things but also about her and what I like about her or don't. But sometimes when I hear us guys talking, you wouldn't even know it was a real person we're talking about.” He pauses for a moment before adding, “The girls don't seem to like that anymore.” The guys don't always seem to like it either. “I

remember once,” continues Marney, “this guy was going on about how much he'd like to get into the pants of this girl he saw working at a store in the mall or somewhere and he was going on and on until somehow it turned out to be the sister of one of my buddies. Whew! you should have seen his cork go off!”

◆ **Breast Men**

A lot of men seem to end up living out their sexuality in a landscape of obsession and conflict. They become fixated on women's bodies, which seem shrouded in mystery. It's hard to believe that such an intense preoccupation results from not getting to see women's bodies or being deprived of sufficient sexual contact. After all, women do not generally manifest a parallel fixation on men's bodies. The most unusual aspect of this fixation on women is that it isn't usually on women or women's bodies in general, but more often on particular body parts. “I like asses with nice round cheeks,” says Ed. Marney confides he's a “breast man,” but adds, “I like it all, I like eyes a lot too.” One man says, “Oh, if I had to decide, I'd probably say legs, hips and rear ends.”

What is it about the dominant forms of masculine sexuality that creates such a preoccupation? There is a clue in psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysts use the term fetishism to describe a form of intense mental

preoccupation. The fetishist attaches sexual significance to an inanimate object or a part of the body not usually considered an erotogenic zone – classically feet, hair, shoes or another article of clothing. In extreme cases, a person cannot experience sexual excitement except through a focus on that object. This phenomenon is sometimes seen in women, but much more often in men. Why is that so? Bear with me and, for a moment, suspend your disbelief for their answer seems incredibly strange. Psychoanalysts have come to the conclusion that the fetish usually unconsciously represents a penis. Expressed slightly differently; in the unconscious mind these fetishes are experienced, like the penis, as objects of power.

Analysts have theorized that these fetishes come from particularly pleasurable or frightening experiences of childhood. Most often one fixates on experiences or objects that simultaneously provide some form of satisfaction and give reassurance in the face of some anxiety or fear. What can give reassurance? One thing is a person who represents our initial object of love; that is usually a woman. And what is it men fear? It is often the childhood fear of not having power as a man, and in a patriarchal society this power is represented by the penis. The possibility of not having power is equated in the child's mind with not having a penis, for those who don't have penises are those with less social power. Thus the image of a penisless person (particularly the object of our

love) causes a greater or lesser amount of fear in each little boy. Through a mental trick when some boys are still young, a part of the woman's body or apparel can take on the significance of the “missing” penis. The unconscious “discovery” of this missing penis (that is, of the object so highly valued in patriarchal society) reduces a boy's fear of losing activity and power. It's as if a boy or man unconsciously says to himself, all is safe, I can't lose my penis. See, even she has one.

The fear, I want to stress, isn't about penises. It's about power. If the penis represents the boy's passkey to power, then its absence (in a patriarchal society) means he is relegated to a life of powerlessness.

All this isn't just a problem for a few men whom we can write off as mentally ill. To a greater or lesser extent, fixation and fetishism are integral to “normal” masculine sexuality in most societies in the world today. It is a preoccupation with the loss of an early unity and connection with women and it is a fear of losing power. Along with the many wonderful things it brings to men, sex is also a way to hold down or avoid feelings of loss and fear.

Whether we're gay, straight or bisexual, young or old, from strict or permissive backgrounds, promiscuous or celibate, sexually frustrated or fulfilled, our sexualities unfold across a landscape of pleasure and power, ecstasy and doubt.

LEATHER WHIPS AND FRAGILE DESIRES

◆ *The Riddle of Pornography*

Bobby looks like an overgrown kid. He is in his mid-forties and has the appearance of a successful politician, something he probably cultivated when he was a speechwriter for a Congressman. Bob likes pornography, looks at *Penthouse* and occasionally at an X-rated movie. I ask him what he likes about it and he pauses for a second, perhaps trying to come up with a memorable phrase: "I like how unreal it is. Suddenly everyday life goes erotic. *Debbie Does Dallas* or whatever it is. You get stories of sex erupting everywhere; suddenly people are shucking off their clothes in offices and the back seats of cars, in their

neighbours' living rooms and in locker rooms, and just doing *it* anywhere."

Then there's Marney, a twenty-two-year-old bachelor and the line worker for an auto maker. "I like skin mags and all that," he says. "You want to know the truth?" A laugh pops out of his mouth. "The truth is I always feel horny, like I can't get enough. It drives me a bit over the wall when I'm in here all day long. So maybe I pick up a video or a magazine on the way home and it kind of tells me I'm okay. Nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Perhaps nothing better expresses the conflicts within the dominant forms of masculine sexuality than the attraction of many men to pornography and our fixation on the bodies of women or other men to a degree almost unknown among women. There is no better way to explore men's contradictory experiences of power than by looking at the riddle of pornography.

◆ **The Riddle**

Pornography is a riddle for it means different things for different men. It expresses the distorted ways we experience power because it can be, at once, a celebration of eroticism *and* a statement of men's sexual alienation and loneliness. It is a depiction of sexual energy *and* of men's domination of others, especially women.

For Bobby, pornography is the penetration of the erotic into daily life. Marney the autoworker seems to tell us that it is also a testimony to the insatiability of desire in a society where sex pops up everywhere but is still often treated as something dirty. It seems to provide a relief

from the grey realities of many lives. The stories of three other men help us get a grasp on the way that porn fills a vacuum, or creates new ones.

Ron is married to an outspoken woman and works with a number of women in a small print shop. He's reluctant to talk about porn, but he finally says this: "Yeah, I guess I have a bit of a hard time with it. I'm not at all open about using it. It's partly the pressure around here, partly at home – neither my wife nor the women here would stand for pin-ups or the stuff you usually see in shops. The thing is, though, I absolutely love women's bodies. I can't get over how much I love women's bodies. I could look at a woman's body all day long – at everything, but I guess especially the things you don't normally get to see. I'd just like, oh you know, just to be able to have that all the time."

Ed splits his time between running his bookstore and working out at the gym. He also regularly buys gay men's pornography. "You can't judge this the same way you judge straight porn. I mean, look, here they're celebrating penises and men's bodies and asses, things that just aren't talked about let alone appreciated in our society. Maybe it makes straight men squirm a bit, but I love it."

For some men, pornography has been a source of images and information about bodies and sex that wasn't available elsewhere. Michael stars in a weekly TV drama. He talks about his first exposure to pornography in the late

1950s. "My mom bought me *Playboy* sometimes. She'd die if she heard me tell anyone that now, but she must have figured there was stuff I needed to know."

Pornography is the celebration of parts of bodies we've always learned it's not nice to expose. It gives expression – however muted, distorted or exploitative at times – to feelings and longings that are considered to have no legitimate place in our society. At the same time it reflects the distortions of sexual desire in our society. It projects onto women and men what is supposed to be required by each gender and, in its extreme cases, depicts acts of violence as being the stuff of human fulfilment. Its images of women, and at times of men, are often demeaning, cruel or simply banal. It is full of misinformation about women, men and our sexualities. Michael says, "I wasn't even sure women had pubic hair until I was sixteen, it just wasn't there in *Playboy* at the time." Ed says, "I'll defend it [gay male porn] to my last breath, but it is a bit much. You start feeling like if you don't have a ten-inch shaft, or meet someone who does, you'll never be happy." Ron, the printer who talks about his love for women's bodies, says, "The problem is that the women in the magazines all start looking the same. What makes each of them distinct and unique disappears under the airbrush. That bothers me because they seem to be telling me who and what should turn me on." Marney doesn't say so, but hints that he "uses it" when he

masturbates, but even then he says that sometimes porn “just leaves me more frustrated.”

It seems easy to judge what's bad about pornography, to list some of its more demeaning or brutal samples. Such a catalogue cannot fail to move us, to make most women and many men disgusted and angry. There is the *Hustler* image of a woman being fed through a meat grinder and *Penthouse*, with its women suspended from trees; there is the boring sameness of *Playboy* Playmates, made up and photographed to look like Barbie dolls; there is the testimony of Linda Marchiano, who says that as Linda Lovelace she had a gun at her head as she performed in *Deep Throat*. For some reason, an image that haunts me is one reproduced in the anti-porn film, *Not a Love Story*, in which a woman is forced to perform oral “sex” on a gun.

To judge, however, is not necessarily to understand. To say that certain forms of pornography are degrading to women (or, as some would have it, that all forms of pornography are degrading, period) doesn't help us to understand the broad appeal of pornography to men nor how it represents a distorted and sometimes negative manifestation of genuine and positive human desires. Pornography is many things – a commodity to make money, a mirror of certain social values, a refutation of others, a statement of the needs and desires of its consumers. But it isn't always what it seems to be. Sociologist Michael Kimmel points out that “although

most pornographic images are *of* women, pornography is, at its heart, *about* men. It is about men's relationships with sexuality, with women, and with each other. It is about women as men want them to be, and about our own sexual selves as we would like them to be.”

◆ Why Porn Isn't Vacuum-packed

In a narrow sense, we might think of pornography as images of women or men that objectify and degrade, that depict persons as just sexual objects while uncovering certain parts of the body that are usually covered. Others might think of it simply as any image that displays genitals or a sexual act. But such definitions are not satisfactory. Any two people will quibble about what constitutes pornography, what is objectifying or degrading. Some will try to make a distinction between porn and erotica. So, as useful as it would be, there is no simple way to define pornography.

One reason it's hard to define porn is because it does not begin or end at the door of the video store or the strip club, or at the magazine stand. The same images, ideas and values permeate all of our society. In a society that is both patriarchal and consumerist, there is what I like to think of as a pornographic continuum. Pornography is not the root of all sexist evil; it is one of a number of spheres in which we find evidence of sexism and in which sexism is perpetuated.

Images of pornography don't exist in a vacuum; they aren't insulated from what happens around them. Pornographic magazines and movies are not objects that float up like lost cargo onto a tropical paradise. Most of our mass media, from daytime soaps to adventure shows, from advertising to fashion magazines, are saturated with similar images and values. These parallels have been noted by many feminists who oppose censorship of porn. They have pointed out that the market for romance fiction and fashion magazines add up, like porn, to a multi-billion-dollar industry. These publications, like porn, objectify women, eroticize men's social power, transmit current standards for sexual attraction and, in the case of fashion and advertising, even exploit many of the same expressions and poses used in pornography, often with little more in the way of clothing. Throughout the mainstream media, in shows or magazines directed at men or the whole family, violence is glorified and eroticized. Violence is the explicit theme in only a small part of pornography, but it is the staple of movies and television shows, from the nighttime cop dramas to Saturday morning shows for kids in bunny pajamas. Violence is equated with power: it gets wrapped in mystery, and sculpted into an object of erotic fascination.

Given all this, though we are right to be angry about pornography that treats women as the sexual property of men, its popularity shouldn't surprise us, since domination

has been the general rule in patriarchal and sexist societies. We may be offended but shouldn't be particularly surprised that it preserves the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore, adding the misogynist twist that inside every virgin is a whore waiting to burst forth. We should not be surprised that penises are symbols of power in porn, nor that men are portrayed as having the capacity to dominate women, and that women have their own, seductive ways to control men. Nor that women should be prized for their bodies before their minds, hearts and souls. All these things and more are examples of the very same values and beliefs that permeate patriarchal societies.

Folksinger Fred Small writes, "Pornography is relentlessly sexist, displaying women as objects for men's sexual gratification....It generally presents a viciously narrow and rigid physical stereotype of women....Often it associates sex with violence. It is patriarchal, produced by a multimillion-dollar, male-dominated industry in which women are exploited and frequently mistreated.

"In each of these particulars," continues Small, "pornography seems indistinguishable from American mass media as a whole....The sole unique feature of pornography is that its sexism and violence involve women, and frequently men, with their genitalia graphically displayed. Personally, I am no more offended by sexism and violence unclad than clothed."

◆ **Erotica? Pornography? Commodity?**

Like many others I once spent a lot of time trying to separate what is erotic from what is pornographic. My hope was that if we could draw a clear line between the erotic and the pornographic, then we could wage war against pornography while celebrating and promoting erotica. In the end I decided the attempt was a waste of time. No sophisticated argument is needed to show that such a distinction is impossible: just try to get ten people of different backgrounds, ages, races, sexes and sexual orientation to agree on a distinction. Nor can there be any hard and fast line between “hardcore” and “softcore” pornography. We all might agree that certain scenarios, such as a “snuff” movie or “kiddie porn” are hardcore, but in general it is impossible to agree where to draw a line between hard and soft. Traffic-stopping underwear ads that festoon billboards in Los Angeles or London would be deemed hardcore pornography in Mecca. The porn of Europe and North America of the 1950s is tamer than Walt Disney movies of the nineties. Pornography reflects not only sexism but changing moral and cultural values.

There's been erotic art in many cultures, but modern-day porn has something special about it, for it's a product of market-driven societies. The flourishing pornographic and sex industries are centred in the North American, European and Asian heartlands of capitalism. These are societies based on commodity production and

acquisition, where objects of desire are produced for the market, where it becomes possible to manufacture, buy and sell desire itself. Women and men are turned into sexual objects to sell other products. Commodities come to embody images and ideals that are manipulated to make money for those who produce and sell.

You might find porn more offensive than shampoo or underwear, but, like them, pornography is a commodity. Not only is pornography itself a commodity; it acts as an advertisement for sex that, increasingly, has been turned into something anyone can buy and some – movie stars, models and prostitutes, for instance – can sell. In many forms, sex and its representations have become commodities. We're being sold a fantasy of what passes as sexual pleasure in our society. Like many other commodities, porn offers us a way to transform ourselves, even if only momentarily. In this, pornography is like other forms of advertising. For British social critic John Berger, advertising promises us self-transformation by buying something. “This will make us in some way richer – even though we will be poorer by having spent our money.”

◆ **Men's Experience of Porn**

Pornography can be a brash affirmation of men's power, of the sexual availability of any woman to any man, of women's vulnerability, of women reduced to sexual parts,

of women defiled and even dismembered. As a statement of fetishism, of mystification and domination, pornography reflects and reinforces negative images of women. The great majority of pornographic images contain this idea. Even when they do not, the more innocuous image gets pressure-treated by the overall content of the magazine, by the setting of a porn theatre or, more generally, by the patriarchal society in which the porn is produced and consumed. As writer Mariana Valverde notes, "If men never raped women in real life, the same picture would not have the same power to make us feel violated."

So what makes these pictures of naked women – whether in pornography or a mainstream movie – attractive to so many men? Bobby, the former speechwriter, says innocently, "I'm not sure why, but it always made me feel good to see those pictures. Sometimes when I was a teenager I'd pick up a magazine and feel like a million bucks." One reason why the images of pornography are so appealing is that, in gender-based social orders, by confirming that one is masculine, they also confirm that one is male. Porn becomes one means through which a man, writes Andy Moyer, is "welcomed as a member of the brotherhood of all men, united with them in the fact of his gaze."

Pornography also contains elements that stand in contradiction to sexual repression. Ann Snitow and other

feminist writers have noted that pornography can include elements of play, of "thrilling (as opposed to threatening) danger," of defiance, of childlike freedom, of sexual and erotic joy, of just plain fun. Naked women or naked men romp around everywhere, with seeming childlike abandon. The struggles of actual relationships disappear in the immediacy of physical desire. In real life this is irresponsible, but as a flight of fantasy it can be experienced as joyous: suddenly no one has to worry about birth control, or safe sex, or how someone else will feel the next day. The viewer can experience complete control. "The pornographic utopia," writes Michael Kimmel, "is a world of abundance, abandon, and autonomy – a world, in short, utterly unlike the one we inhabit." This doesn't make pornography "good" or its images necessarily acceptable. Nor does it mean that porn is a useful means of education. It does mean, though, that porn can appeal to fantasies that are pleasurable as simply that: as fantasies.

Heterosexual pornography also provides a context for men to experience what we have lost. We seem fascinated with those things we have given up to achieve masculinity. As we grow up, our skin becomes rougher, but, just as importantly, becoming masculine requires a suppression of softness and receptivity. On top of biological development – the loss of baby fat and the arrival of bristly hair – comes *gender* development: our

muscles tighten into a rigidity that is part of the masculine pose. Fixation on women's bodies shows the buried desire to re-experience our first object of love and physical contact. In the fantasy of pornography or in the arms of a lover, a man can return to the original oneness and closeness we had before we developed the rigid ego barriers of manhood. Heterosexual porn is just one outlet for an endless fascination with women's bodies. "Is it possible," asks Myrna Kostash, "that even in pornography, in spite of its distortion and its viciousness, in spite of the systematic organization of male desire in paradigms of power, men want to be close to women?" If this contradicts the brashness of porn as a statement of men's power over women, it is because porn is in fact both these things.

In its heterosexual and male homosexual forms, porn is just about the only place in our society where men are uniformly seen as desirable. Timothy Beneke notes that "homophobia and sexism have in common their inability to identify with someone sexually attracted to men." Pornography, in spite of its sexism, seems to include a partial refutation of homophobia. This is because, in a sense, men are the true sexual objects of pornography, not only of gay porn, but of heterosexual porn as well. The gaze of the model is a gaze of desire for the male consumer of porn; it is a statement to him that as a man he is desirable. The desirability of men is the hidden or overt

homoerotic aspect of porn. Marney says succinctly, "I like these girls because they like me."

Even penises have their day in the sun, not only as weapons (and porn does maintain a fixation on the penis as the always erect and ready weapon) but also as objects of eroticism. David Steinberg writes: "Pornography is the one arena that is not afraid of the penis, even when erect, that does not find sperm disgusting." As an accessory for masturbation, it provides a context in which "a man can control his own sexual pleasure unaffected by performance anxiety," writes Andy Moyer.

All these meanings exist at the same time as porn expresses forms of domination and degradation of women and a single, stereotyped view of men and what's supposed to turn us on.

Porn feeds the desire for what we have lost not only in the images being viewed. The actual act of viewing porn reunites men with the sexual pleasure of looking, one of the most basic of passive and receptive sexual activities. Observe a baby. She or he spends long moments staring, wrapped in the pleasure of visual sensation. Along with activities of the mouth, seeing is a primary way through which the baby takes in the world. Viewing pornography, like any act of voyeurism, takes us back to an earlier time, to an aspect of our polysexuality that has undergone so much repression. It is the male, in our society of male power, who has undergone such a

searing repression of passivity. This repression does not destroy passivity (for this is part of our birthright), but it forces it into disguised and distorted forms. Pornography not only presents a passive object to marvel at; it offers a form of sexual pleasure in which men can be passive and receptive to the image and to the object of desire. In a real-life situation, with real contact with a woman in her full subjective, directive, active presence, passivity can arouse all sorts of anxieties in many men. Not so with porn, whose essence, Timothy Beneke suggests, "is to seek arousal and gratification without vulnerability, without risk to the self. For male adolescents, looking at women is full of risk in the form of humiliation, desperation, and sexual distress." And part of what allows the passive pleasure of viewing pornography is that the object is often portrayed as passive and unthreatening.

Of course, the images of pornography vary widely. In its own distorted way porn has adapted to feminism. In the 1950s and 1960s most porn showed women in utterly passive poses. *Palyboy's* Bunnies were fluffy, mindless creatures, their individuality whisked away with the airbrush. If they had sexual desires of their own, aside from pleasing their men, it was a well-kept secret. Now if you flip through most skin mags or put on a video, you see right away that most images show relatively aggressive women who are interested in their own pleasure. The purpose might still be to turn on the male viewer, but

magazines are now full of women masturbating, women panting in ecstasy in the arms of a lover, women having sex with other women, and women patiently explaining how to give them pleasure – a sort of Clitoris 101. It is women who are now presented as being the way men often feel we are: creatures with insatiable sexual appetites. "Surprisingly," says video artist and critic Sara Diamond, "feminism and porn have something in common. Both insist that women are sexual beings." How different from the prescription of Queen Victoria a hundred years ago, when she instructed British women to do their marital duties for the good of the race: "Close your eyes and think of England."

Pornography may still distort female sexuality, for it represents men's images of women's desires – they may be, but aren't necessarily, accurate portrayals of women's desires themselves. The image projected onto women looks suspiciously like an idealized image of our own sexuality: always seeking it, always ready for it, and most of all, wanting *cock*. Image or reality, in the pornographic world the tables are suddenly reversed. It isn't men who have to be on the make, who have to make the moves, who yearn for what is denied. In porn, every street, every restaurant, every classroom, every gymnasium, every bedroom is crawling with women who want to rip off men's clothes on the spot.

◆ Porn, Power and Pain

If porn does connect with what men have lost, with relationships that are constricted by the demands of patriarchy, then there is a fleeting and distressing quality to pornography in terms of men's own experience. "Men go to pornography for excitement," writes Phillip Lopate, "but also, I think, to be put in touch with their sadness. They know that before the experience is over, the connection between their own desire and the lusty bodies dangled before them will have been missed."

This point wasn't lost on writer Deirdre English, who commented that a visit to a sex emporium in New York left her with the "overwhelming feeling...of the commercial exploitation of male sexual desire. There it is, embarrassingly desperate, tormented, demeaning itself, taking any substitute and *paying* for it. Men who live for this are suckers, and their uncomfortable demeanor shows they know it."

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, cyberpunk science fiction writer William Gibson describes the faces of men at a strip joint. "They wore the expression men always wore when they watched you dance, staring real hard but locked up inside themselves at the same time, so their eyes told you nothing at all and their faces, in spite of the sweat, might have been carved from something that only looked like

flesh." If heterosexual porn is one expression of the subjugation of women, if it functions in some ways to perpetuate that subjugation, it also perpetuates narrow and distorted definitions of men's sexuality and desire. One set of stereotypes substitutes for the infinite variation of men's desire. "Commercialized sex requires dependably replicable standards of beauty," writes philosopher Harry Brod. "The supposed freedom all men then enjoy to participate in joint evaluations and grading of women's bodies...is in reality a sign of how completely men have internalized the standards of the commercial industries that dominate them....To bring themselves into relationship with an objectified female body, males must objectify their own bodies as well. The necessary corollary to pornography's myth of female instant availability is its myth of male perpetual readiness."

The rock-hard penis – the staple of gay porn and the supporting actor in straight porn – represents the coexistence of power and desire. Desire is equated with power, but only a particular brand of power: the power to dominate, to ravish, to act upon, to control. Viewing porn is a passive celebration of a particular definition of active masculine power and as such helps fix our definitions of masculinity. It is a poignant moment in men's objectification of their own bodies. Even when the penis isn't present, men objectify not only women but also

themselves through the definition of one standard of sexual desire.

Once again we see the consistency between the structures of women's oppression and the limitations of masculinity, of men's power and men's pain. That pain becomes a reason for porn: the act of consumption makes men feel triumphant and in control. But that feeling is needed only because of the alienation and isolation from women, other men, and our own buried desires. Porn as erotica represents the celebration of sensation, desire and physical beauty. Porn as domination and sexism represents the ways that patriarchy distorts men's celebration of sensation, desire and beauty, shows women as limited objects of our desire and requires men's alienation.

◆ **Fighting Porn**

Pornography is but one expression of a patriarchal and consumerist society. Its images are often degrading to both women and men. This sense of degradation is exacerbated by the surrounding society that has reduced the status of women and has both demeaned and exalted women's bodies. However innocent a pornographic image might seem, it can still be experienced as hurtful and harmful by many women. If we can't make a clear separation between erotica and pornography that satisfies everyone, then it is apparent that what one person

experiences as an erotic image, another will find pornographic.

At the same time, porn is a contradictory and distorted expression of many positive longings; aspects of porn representing a celebration of sexuality. With such conflicting messages, then, finding a strategy to combat the negative aspects of porn and the commercialization of sex is a major challenge. It is a problem without easy solutions. More than any issue in this book, it is one in which I feel swayed by completely opposing sides of the debate: when I see a violently pornographic photograph I feel impelled to side with those who think porn should be banned; when I see the banal images of much mainstream porn I agree with those who think it should be ignored or combated where possible; when I see or read erotica that others would define as porn, I find myself in agreement with those who say censorship is a blunt weapon that would limit all erotic expression in our society. I can't, therefore, suggest easy solutions. I can only talk about the limitations of certain anti-porn strategies and suggest that we must go to the roots of the problem.

The current opposition to pornography comes from two sources. There is the white, fundamentalist political right wing, particularly in the United States. This current has whipped up frenzied anti-porn sentiments in certain sectors, decrying any public expression or representation

of nakedness or sexual relations. Records are banned not because they're sexist but because they talk about sex in explicit terms; books are pulled from library shelves; theatre companies and galleries lose their funding; photographic exhibitions are shut down and museum directors are hauled into court simply because these powerful fundamentalists don't like the subject matter of the pictures. Homosexual artist Michelangelo would be in deep trouble trying to exhibit his statue of David were he a young artist in the United States today.

The impossibility of drawing a line between erotica and pornography prompts some fundamentalists to suggest banning it all. They react with particular virulence against portrayals of homosexual love, or when what is shown diverges from their image of normal sex – that is, between a married, heterosexual, single-race couple, and in the approved position. These are people who experience fear and hatred when confronted with a world of change and upheaval. Their fear gets directed outwards: against women or men threaten the so-called traditional roles by exhibiting sexual preferences openly different from theirs, or at least different from what they feel theirs should be.

A very different source of opposition to pornography – and one that is more intellectually and socially challenging – are those feminists who say that pornography in hate literature that promotes violence

against women. Their solution is public education and the promotion of whatever measures are necessary, including government laws, to get porn off the shelves and out of the theatres. While their work has been controversial within the women's movement, they have played an important role in focusing discussion on one expression of sexism in our society. At the heart of their argument is the link between pornography and violence. Indeed, a small portion of porn is explicitly violent, depicting rape, torture and murder. But, as we've seen, in a society where many women experience men's violence and where women traditionally have been treated as second-class citizens, much porn, whether degrading, hateful or simply banal, may well be experienced as an act of emotional violence against woman.

But is there a case that porn stands out as a promoter of violence against women? Is porn, by definition, hate literature? As for the first question, there simply isn't any clear evidence that porn as a whole actually promotes violence. In fact, some research suggests that non-pornographic violent movies promote more violent attitudes towards women than violent porn does. Nonviolent porn and nonviolent, non-porn movies seem to have a similar lack of effect on attitudes. That violent pornography may promote violent attitudes isn't surprising, but in this it may be no different from the much more prevalent movies, books and TV shows that

celebrate violence and eroticize the use of force.*

* Studies of the effects of pornography on men's behaviour have produced conflicting and inconclusive results. For one thing, there is no reliable correlation between attitudes and behaviour. A man who fantasizes about rape will not necessarily commit rape. Also, much of this research doesn't distinguish between explicitly violent porn and nonviolent porn. An exception is a widely cited study by Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz which revealed that while violent films, whether pornographic or not, stimulated violent attitudes, films without violent content, again whether pornographic or not, produced no noticeable change in attitudes. This suggests that the problem is the depiction of violence rather than nakedness or the depiction of sex.

And so while a violent man might find encouragement in porn, this is likely no different from the impact of Hollywood movies, TV shows and popular fiction that promote sexist and sometimes violent attitudes towards women. In fact it is Hollywood that specializes in snuff films, although the victims aren't only naked and female.

The European experience following the legalization of porn is instructive. In Denmark, where all but child pornography was legalized in 1969, there was no increase in rape for almost ten years, at which time rape began to increase at pace with other violent crimes. In Germany, where porn was legalized in 1972, figures show that rape decreased between the early sixties and the late eighties; rape by strangers actually fell by one-third. This doesn't mean that the availability of porn makes things safer for women, but it does suggest there is no simple link between porn

The second charge is that porn, by definition, is hate literature—that is, it promotes demeaning and hateful images of women (and sometimes men) that renders them less than fully human. There is truth to this, but, again, it could be argued that this makes it barely different from the worlds of fashion, advertising, television soap operas and sitcoms, romance novels, adventure fiction and the mainstream cinema. Again, in the words of Fred Small, why should sexism without clothes be more offensive than sexism with clothes? Part of the answer is that, in our society, nakedness tends to increase one's feeling of vulnerability. Yet, as many other feminists point out, nakedness can also be a symbol of power and strength.

The problem of violence against women and demeaning representations of women and men is one that extends well beyond porn. This is why I started this chapter showing the continuity of pornography with a range of sexist images and institutions in our society. Pornography is simply one manifestation of the problem. What's more, the charge that porn is made up only of hateful images of women is only half true. As a distorted expression of men's sexual desires, porn also represents

and violence against women. Or, to approach the matter differently, we know that violence against women is widespread in many cultures that have little or no pornography.

aspects of yearning, idealization, admiration and envy of women and an acknowledgment of their sexual power, even if the presentation of such things is distorted.

What does this tell us about strategies to fight porn? What about pressuring the government to pass laws against porn? It's a tempting solution. You "just say no" to porn, as governments are urging people to just say no to selected drugs. You unleash "a war" against porn. The problems with this approach are twofold. First, it would not touch most sexist and degrading representations of women. Not many legislators would be interested in combatting advertising that uses the bodies of women and men, clothed or unclothed, to sell products; banning porn is not going to stop the sexism and violence that is now the mainstay of the media as a whole, nor is it going to affect the values of a consumerist society that turns everything, including sex, into a product to be bought and sold on the market. Like the war on drugs it would only target selected products while permitting the continued promotion of other drugs—mainstream sexism persisting unchecked—like the tranquillizers that so many women are addicted to, or the alcohol and tobacco that kill millions of people worldwide every year.

The second problem with this approach is that it would greatly limit erotic expression not only in the arts but in the community as a whole. I'm not someone who

thinks that hate-mongers should be tolerated. I don't think that Nazis should be free to spread their filth nor that snuff movies or images of women being tortured for the pleasure of the viewer should be tolerated on the grounds of free expression. On the other hand, I don't trust governments or judges to impose some arbitrary line between erotica and pornography. Would you want Clarence Thomas to decide for you what is and what isn't sexist? Or what's erotic and what's pornographic? The experience in Canada is instructive. In 1992 Canada's Supreme Court ruled that nakedness and depictions of sex were legal but that degrading representations of women or men could be banned. Canada Customs reacted promptly. They didn't take mainstream pornography off magazine and video racks; they seized yet another batch of books—one a collection of stories, others with erotic pictures, one a safe-sex manual—bound for a gay and lesbian bookstore. The powers that be use the power of censorship to clamp down on the things they've learned to find offensive.

What then, can we do? I would support the development of community and national guidelines that challenge sexism and the proliferation of violence in the media as a whole. But I would support this only if such guidelines start not with a focus on nakedness or sex, but, rather, on whether there is a graphic, titillating and

exploitative depiction of violence and whether depictions of women or men are degrading. Such guidelines would cover not only pornography, but mainstream movies, television and popular magazines.

The question is, who's to set these guidelines and, knowing that guidelines can be abused, how should they be enforced? The religious right believe a picture of two men kissing is pornographic and should be banned, and that a child's book that talks about sex and sexuality should be yanked from the school curriculum. I don't want these people or those they influence to tell the rest of us what is acceptable. Any artist, writer, or theatre director would be vulnerable to threats against presenting any material with a sexual or erotic content. The guidelines could also be used against films or books that seek to show the horrors of violence or sexual degradation. They would be unlikely to distinguish between the book *The Story of O*, which is a frightening and intelligent tale of patriarchal domination, and the movie of the same, which is sexist porn.

In order to help limit abuses, guidelines would need to be explicitly pro-sex and pro-erotic, their aim to encourage the depiction of human sexuality, human bodies and human relationships. Their assumption would be that by discouraging exploitative and violent use of humans in all media, our culture could become more sexually affirmative. And they would recognize the need

to promote erotic alternatives, to encourage the development of movies, videos, books, magazines, photographs, novels and live performances that are sexual and sexually explicit without being exploitative, violent and debasing. I am convinced that the power of truly pro-sex, pro-erotic images could win out over mainstream pornographic images that have such a contradictory content.

On the other hand, social-legal guidelines can only be one part of a solution since they themselves would be fraught with problems. Above all, what is needed is a challenge to the social forces that encourage an attraction to porn in the first place. To challenge what is negative about porn means challenging an economy that makes bucks out of exploiting people's bodies. To challenge depictions of violence against women, for example, requires not just social guidelines or laws, but concerted change in a world that equates violence with power, that allows our political leaders to use violence as a means to increase their own popularity and that eroticizes and glamorizes instruments of war and destruction. To challenge the commodification of sex requires challenging an economy where everything can be an item to buy and sell. To challenge the demeaning and banal images of porn requires promoting erotic art in all its forms. To build an alternate culture means sweeping changes, from throwing out laws that prohibit public nakedness to

ensuring equal rights for gays and lesbians. If we're going to challenge the way porn and other media portray men and women, we've got to rethink our everyday views of women and men, and the relationships between the sexes.

◆ CHAPTER SEVEN

PAIN EXPLODES IN A WORLD OF POWER

◆ *Men's Violence*

In the dying moments of the 1980s a man named Marc Lepine walked into the Engineering School at the University of Montreal. He wore jeans and a baseball cap. In his hand was a semi-automatic rifle. He climbed the stairs to a second-floor classroom, and calmly ordered the men out of the room. After they left he opened fire. He cruised the room, then a hallway, then another classroom and by the time he was finished he had killed fourteen women and wounded several others. Witnesses later said he looked like an ordinary sort of guy. Normal, one of them said.

Mass murders are not common in Canada and, really, by the standards set in the twentieth century, the cynic might say that killing fourteen people hardly counts.

Marc Lepine, however, did manage to touch a nerve before he ended his own life. With his finger on the trigger he said simply, "I want the women. You're all a bunch of feminists. I hate feminists."

At first the media covered these events as a random act of violence by a lone and crazed madman. There was no doubt Marc Lepine was crazy. The horrible thing was that he had chosen to express his craziness through violence, using a language that has gained far too much social acceptance. After all, there are lots of ways to be crazy. He could have dedicated his life to collecting recipes for Jell-O salads. He could have run down the street naked, tossing dollar bills to strangers. Instead, the language he chose was the language of violence, his particular dialect was a hatred of women.

Let's not talk about crazy men. Let's talk about all of us, or at least about something that gets attached to our definitions of masculinity. Of course most men aren't rapists or murderers; we're not batterers or child abusers; we're not army generals who order bombs to be dropped on cities. But all men have experienced some form of violence as a child or adult, as perpetrator or victim, doer or done to.

Men's violence is the most dramatic display of the destructive potential of the hallucination of masculinity set in a real patriarchal world. Combined with the realities of men's social power, such a hallucination is a dangerous

thing. The potent mixture of men's pain and men's power nurtures aggression and, all too often, encourages that aggression to be expressed in acts of violence.

◆ **The Nurturing Environment of Violence**

Men's violence is not just a psychological problem that torments individuals. Although there are bad men, men aren't bad. We aren't born to kill. We are the products of societies led by men in which violence is institutionalized at all levels of social, political, cultural and economic life. It should be no surprise that such societies produce some men who are particularly violent and many others whose lives have been touched by violence. Violence is the preferred means to settle international and individual disputes among men. War is a corporate fortune-maker, the world's biggest business, accounting for trillions of dollars of annual expenditures. Media violence is now the prime form of popular entertainment and also a big money-maker. One estimate suggests that the average North American child has seen depictions of 18,000 murders and violent deaths by the end of high school. Violence is integrated into sports, and sport becomes a metaphor for large-scale violence.

The roots of violence run deep. Some tribal societies had high levels of violence; others had absolutely none, and some only experienced it occasionally. As larger, hierarchical societies developed five to ten thousands

years ago, first in parts of the Middle East and Asia, large-scale, organized military violence became a chief means of expansion and survival. The modern world has been built on so much violence that blood has soaked deep into the fabric of society: European colonization, slavery, decimation of indigenous populations, imperial wars, the conquest of nature, the inroads of industrialization into every corner of our lives. Nowadays many forms of violence are barely considered criminal. Think of the many forms of corporate violence, from the poison of toxic waste, and the daily crush of unsafe and alienating jobs to the activities of the biggest drug cartel on earth – the tobacco companies. Psychological and sometimes physical violence is etched into the body politic of our world through widespread acceptance of discrimination and oppression that casts certain humans as acceptable targets for the wrath of others. Institutionalized and individualized forms of hatred, discrimination and violence based on sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, physical ability and age are widespread throughout the patriarchal world, from North America to Europe, Africa to Asia, Latin America to the Middle East.

In any act of violence, whether sexual harassment or rape, whether a school-yard tussle, a violent display of temper or a vicious assault, individual men are acting out relations of sexual and social power. One man may be striking out at a woman or a man in order to deny his own

social powerlessness; another might be repeating his own treatment as a child. Whatever the case, there is nothing purely individual about these acts. The violent man must be held responsible, but he alone is not to blame, for these actions are a ritualized acting-out of our social relations of power: the dominant and the submissive, the powerful and the powerless, the active and the passive, the masculine and the feminine.

♦ Individual Reproduction of Violence

Into this violent environment the individual is born. Here we arrive, spanking new, ready to take it all in. Boys take it in with a vengeance. The starting point is not violence, nor even aggression. It is the boy's unknowing acceptance of the dominant creed of manhood: to be a man we need to shape a personality that can always control and dominate our social and natural environment. It is the way we build our psyches around the active/passive split. The ability to dominate – perhaps only through words or self-control, perhaps through actions – becomes a core feature of masculinity. It is our ability to act *on*, to do *to*, to control and manipulate the world around us, and not to succumb to “weakness” or receptivity. This is our great escape from the childhood experience of powerlessness.

The boy comes to personify activity, developing what Herbert Marcuse calls a “surplus aggressive” character

type, although important differences exist between one man and the next. The problem isn't that men are assertive or aggressive in some situations, for these are important and positive human traits; the problem is that aggression is not usually balanced by receptivity and passivity.

Control, along with the aggression that is often required to sustain it, and the rejection of "weakness," together form the dominant values of many patriarchal societies. Those who rise to the top in any niche are those who are most effective, efficient, capable, and in some cases ruthless, in controlling and manipulating their environment. It is their orientation that we men, to a greater or lesser extent, tend to develop, maybe in our work life, maybe in our life in our communities, on the street, at play, or at home. Some of us express it in our body language. Ken Kesey captured this in his description of Hank, a central character in *Sometimes a Great Notion*: "Did it take that much muscle just to walk, or was Hank showing off his manly development? Every movement constituted open aggression against the very air through which Hank passed."



Robert is thirty-seven years old. Three months before I met him, he arrived at the door of a treatment program for men who batter. Arrived is a nice way of putting it. He

had been ordered by a judge to attend the sixteen-week program or spend the time in jail. Robert works as an accounts manager for a small company. He's rather soft-spoken, not someone you'd guess was a bully or a batterer. Josh is twenty-eight and works as a counsellor in the treatment program. A counselling group is in progress. Some of the material they are covering they've obviously been over before.

Josh: "You beat your wife regularly." (It's a statement, not a question.)

Robert: "Well no, not really, it happened a few times a year." Then he asks angrily, "Why are you asking me again?"

Josh pauses for a moment, letting the tension die down; then asks: "When did it happen?"

Robert: "No time in particular. Things just seem to build up. Get more tense and troubled." (Robert often uses the word troubled.) "Something would happen and I'd feel pushed too far by her."

Another man in the group: "Sure you didn't have a couple?"

Robert: "No, not really. That might be the case with you and some guys here." (There is some hostility in Robert's voice, but other men in the group nod their heads.) "But in my case, no."

The discussion moves on to others and later comes back to Robert.

Robert: "My life felt troubled, I know that now."

Josh: "By what? ... What about?"

Robert: "Something was missing. Not with Julia, she was really a fine catch for me, I've always known that. It's that I've always felt, since I was a teenager I guess, that I had a lot bottled up inside. Back in college I worried about it sometimes. As soon as I heard the words 'existential crisis' I started having one. But then that passed and I settled into a job and my marriage."

Josh: "When did the violence start?"

Robert: "A couple of years into the marriage."

Josh: "What was happening around then?"

Robert: "Nothing really. I felt like I had settled into the rest of my life. Like this was it. It kind of troubled me. This was it, that's all, this was all I can expect."

Another man in the group: "Like waking up with a hangover after partying for a week."

Robert: "I had these ideas about what my life would be like. I mean, I never really expected to be rich or famous... well, a bit, like everyone else, but I knew I would amount to something. That made me feel good in high school, knowing I'd amount to something."

Josh: "And?"

Robert: "What do you think? I put in my time. I get pats on the back sometimes and dumped on other times. It's a job. It's life. Then my wife comes in chattering about her job or the kids are bugging me about something. And

I can't seem to hear myself think and it builds up and then...."

Although he hadn't yet found the words for it, what Robert had been experiencing during those years was, in part, a drawn-out crisis of his sense of masculinity. Like many other men and women in our society, he was feeling a sense of disappointment with what his life had become. More than disappointment, he was feeling as if his power had been stripped away. He had little control at work and was alienated from his job. "At work men are powerless," writes sociologist Meg Luxton, "so in their leisure time they want to have a feeling that they control their own lives."

Being a man is supposed to be about having some sort of power and control. Robert wasn't in control of his environment. He felt shunted around by the demands of life. It was as if a demon were whispering in his ear that he hadn't made the grade as a man. So what did he do about it? Society had provided him with a way of compensating for these feelings: it had linked him up with someone who had been defined as less powerful. If masculinity isn't only a set of roles we fit into, but a power relationship between men and women, then asserting his dominance in his relationship with his wife became a means to reassert his sense of self-worth and manhood. This was one reason why he felt terrible after he had hit or beaten his wife, although one can't compare

it to what she, the survivor of his rage, felt. Before and during, he had no sense of wrong, but afterwards he knew he had done wrong although he wanted to deny it. Why? Like most men in that situation he was worried his wife would leave him or call the police. There was something else, however, something genuine about his concern. After all, now that he felt strong again he no longer needed to beat his wife. At least not until the next time, several months later, when the same self-doubts and insecurities would build up and he would lash out again.

Part of Robert's problem was that he had learned to suppress a range of emotions and capacities. He was unable to feel what his wife was feeling. Many abusers simply don't recognize the harm they are doing to their son, daughter, lover or wife. Violence may even be experienced as a misshapen image of concern, of love, of caring. As he became a man, his own sense of alienation, self-doubt and confusion was transformed into emotions that he identified with his own sense of masculinity: he started turning a range of feelings into aggression and violence. Aggressiveness is a trait that is part of every person's birthright, but here it rages unbalanced due to an inability to express reciprocity, connection and receptiveness.

Underneath the violence directed at his wife was his own internalized violence – violence directed at himself. Such is the structure of the masculine ego, of the dominant

and normal forms of masculinity in most of the world's cultures. The formation of what we think of as normal manhood in our culture does not depend on brute force, but it does require internalized violence. We ask ourselves to continually deny, or at least hold down, the many emotions, feelings and actions men associate with passivity – fear, pain, openness, sadness, embarrassment. Anytime these emotions rear their heads we feel a sense of unconscious dread that warns us to stay away from that feeling. There's a bad smell about these things. It tells us, No trespassing. Off limits to men.

The dampening of these emotions is compounded by the blocking of avenues of emotional release. The expression of fear, hurt and sadness, for example, through crying or trembling, is physiologically and psychologically necessary because these painful emotions fester, especially if they are not consciously felt. Men become pressure cookers. The failure to find safe avenues of emotional expression and release means that a whole range of emotions are transformed into aggression and hostility. You feel sad or hurt or angry, and you strike out. Part of the aggression is directed at yourself in the form of guilt, self-hate and various physiological and psychological symptoms. It isn't simply anger, for anger itself is just an emotion that grows out of a sense, rightly or wrongly, that your needs have not been met. The problem here is the way anger, like other emotions, gets

expressed through aggression and violence.

For some men the only safe avenue for letting go is through outbursts of verbal abuse, which may be as subtle as a sarcastic putdown or as clear as a string of insults. Other men will explode in fireworks of anger or physical violence. Many men explode only in a situation where they feel secure and where they can feel confident of winning. This is why so much violence occurs in families, against those whom men love. The family provides an arena for the expression of needs and emotions not considered legitimate elsewhere. It's one of the few places where men feel safe enough to let go, to unwind, to express emotions and to demand that their needs be met. When their emotional dams break, the flood pours out – mostly on women and children.*

* Levels of spousal assault (most often assault of women) are horrendous. One study suggests that every year in the United States, one in six couples experiences at least one violent act. According to a national survey by the U.S. Violence Commission, 25 percent of respondents could think of “appropriate circumstances” for spousal hitting. It would be naive to think that men completely monopolize household violence. Women, too, internalize the values of a violent society, even if to a much lesser extent than men. As primary caregivers, women are often responsible for the physical punishment of children, although the ultimate threat is often, “Wait till your father comes home.” In the U.S., roughly the same number of domestic homicides are committed by each sex. In 1975, 8.0 per cent of homicides were

Violence is not always so intimate. Nor does it come naturally to men. A look at the making of soldiers confirms this.

◆ **Making Men in the Military**

007. Bond, James Bond. He had, in addition to endless fresh suits that would appear out of thin air, a licence to kill. Part of the allure of the whole story – it almost seems quaint in retrospect – was the idea that this right was so well guarded that only nine men in the British secret service could be trusted with the responsibility. Including “our James,” as Miss Money Penny liked to call him.

Men with arms, armed men. Their training and their very existence is a metaphor for what happens to men in our society. First, the social truth. Around the world there are not nine, but roughly fifty million men (and some women) with that licence to kill. They are members of armies and police forces, secret services and private security agencies, and they legally pursue the business of violence. This is part of the truth of patriarchy: while masculinity might be a collective hallucination, patriarchal systems are very real and are backed by force.

committed by husbands against wives and 7.8 per cent by wives against husbands. But these statistics paper over what Suzanne Steinmetz and others have called the cycle of violence: many of these women are reacting to years of harassment or battering by their husbands.

Of course some men who become soldiers take up guns to combat outside aggression or the injustice of a dictatorial or otherwise repressive government. But most contemporary soldiers haven't experienced these evils; they are conscripts or young men looking for a job or boys who have learned to demonize their neighbours. For them, becoming men who can kill isn't an intellectual decision but something that happens in their guts. Yet something has to be stirred into their personalities to make them ready for battle. The training process achieves this. In most of the world's armies training is a protracted act of psychological manipulation and abuse during which older men take insecure teenage boys and terrorize them. It is an extreme version of the process of making boys into men, and it instils in them an extreme version of masculinity. Older men act as mentors and wise men for the young in passing on a particular brand of manhood.

Victor DeMattei was an army paratrooper in Vietnam. "The purpose of basic training," he later stated, "is to dehumanize a male to the point where he will kill on command and obey his superiors automatically...How does the army get you to do this? First you are harassed and brutalized to the point of utter exhaustion. Your individuality is taken away, i.e., same haircuts, same uniforms, only marching in formation. Everyone is punished for one man's 'failure.' You never have enough

sleep or enough to eat....After three weeks of this, you're ready to kill anybody. Keep in mind there is no contact with the outside world. The only reality you see is what the drill instructors let you see. I used to lie on my bunk at night and say my name to myself to make sure I existed."

Given what we know about masculinity it is no surprise that such brutalization seems to work. The whole process of training is a supercharged replay of the first eighteen years of a young man's life. A recruit is shoved back to the powerlessness of childhood. As if he was a newborn, everything around him is suddenly unknown. Much of his past knowledge of how to act is now useless; reality itself seems arbitrary. More than the most sadistic of parents, his superiors play on his fears. His sense of security is stripped away. On top of him are powerful authority figures – omnipotent beings with an apparent power of life and death – who can control his every move and dispense harsh punishment without any possibility of retribution. According to a former U.S. army drill sergeant, "You take that man, and you totally strip him, and then you make him like a big ball of clay, and you take and you make him a soldier....They taught me in drill sergeant's [school], get the psychological advantage off the top. Remain on top; remain the aggressor. Keep the man in a state of confusion at all

times....If in doubt, attack."

The recruit's survival seems to depend on adapting to a new reality tied to rigid discipline and the exercise of aggression and brutality, and a particular definition of courage. All this is equated with being a man. While it is men who do the training, women will sometimes collude in the process of making violent men. A Turkish man told me of his return from compulsory military service in his country. His mother greeted him like a returning hero. "Now you have balls," she said. "Now you are a man." It's an attitude that has been mirrored, at times, by many women in other countries.

It's not only that basic training inculcates a capacity to commit violence. More than this, the whole process is tied to his identity as a man, and becomes linked to his still youthful and developing sexuality. According to Wayne Eisenhart, a former U.S. Marine, "One of the most destructive facets of boot camp is the systematic attack on the recruits' sexuality. While in basic training, one is continually addressed as faggot or girl. These labels are usually screamed into the face from a distance of two or three inches by the drill instructor....During such verbal assaults one is required, under threat of physical violence, to remain utterly passive....Recruits were brutalized, frustrated and cajoled to a flash point of high tension. Recruits were often stunned by the depths of violence erupting from within. Only on these occasions of violent

outbursts did the drill instructor cease his endless litany of 'You dirty faggot' and 'Can't hack it, little girls.'...In several outbursts I utterly savaged men. In one instance, I knocked a man off his feet and rammed a knee into his stomach. Growling and roaring I went for his throat. I was kicked off the man just before I smashed his voice box with my fist. In front of the assembled platoon the drill instructor gleefully reaffirmed my masculinity."

The results are frightening. Normal men gain the capacity to kill; a handful develop an appetite for wholesale slaughter, rape and torture, while others become terrified into complicity with such acts. Humans are transformed into killers. John, a U.S. Air Force pilot who fought in Vietnam, recalls: "I was flying along once and I saw some activity, and I thought to myself 'Oh boy. I'm going to kill all of those people.' I was relishing it. Really - almost salivating. I could hardly wait until the air strike, it just made me feel so good. And then I was coming into base and I realized what I had been thinking....That's when I decided to get out."

Modern soldiers learn to experience their aggressiveness as a confirmation of manhood; some learn to equate the aggressiveness with the thrill of sex. Al, who fought in Vietnam, says, "There is no feeling like being under fire. Nothing. Sex is nothing compared to being under fire. It is like 100 orgasms." In the Gulf War, one U.S. soldier, whose job was to check out the bunkers

left by Iraqis, said, "It's as exciting as sex because you don't know exactly what's in the bunker until you get there. Then I love to blow it up." The bunker, of course, is a vagina and an orgasm is the detonation of a bomb. It's hard to know whether the description is more chilling as a commentary on sex or on war, but either way it shows the equation that is set up between danger, aggression, violence and sexual excitement.

The process seems to be but a more intense form of the 'normal' dehumanization that goes into the making of men. Dehumanization is pushed to an extreme and aggressiveness goes over the brink into the world of violence. Violence becomes an accepted part of the basic personalities of normal, good men, and this violence is integrated into their self-images of manhood. It isn't just something that happens to soldiers. It is but a very extreme form of the normal fare of growing up male in most societies. It is a rage that gets acted out against other men and turned against ourselves; much of it, though, gets focused onto women and children.

◆ Rape

Most of us are lucky: war has not been a regular feature of our lives. Yet the realities of men's violence against women are as everyday as apple pie. In rape, wife assault and child abuse, we see some of the more vicious and common expressions of these patterns of violence.

Rape is not a universal feature of manhood but the product of particular societies. Many tribal societies were free of rape, while only a few had high levels of rape comparable to those in than contemporary North America. Those societies where rape was common were those that believed strongly in the inferiority of women and encouraged physical aggression in men.*

Many researchers now estimate that a U.S. or Canadian woman has a one out of four risk of being raped sometime during her life. Most attackers know their victim, and rape is often directed at dates or spouses. Because men are not the principal victims, most of us don't realize the extent of rape, the extent of fear in women's lives because of something that our brothers and sons, our fathers and friends are doing. A pioneering study of rape on college campuses in the United States conducted in the mid-1980s indicated that over half of college women had experienced some sort of unwanted sexual victimization since the time they were fourteen

* Peggy Sanday's study of ninety-five tribal societies, almost half, 47 percent, were free of rape. Only 18 percent showed what she called a significant amount of rape. The remaining 35 percent had a very limited amount. Another study of 186 non-industrialized cultures, by I.L. Weiss, suggests that those societies with strong beliefs in women's inferiority and high levels of male physical aggression were the ones with a higher percentage of rape.

years old. Meanwhile, although one out of four college men admitted to some form of sexual aggression, only 7.7 percent admitted rape or attempted rape. Many men refused to own up to the truth: of the men who admitted an assault that met the legal definition of rape, 88 percent insisted that it wasn't really rape.*

There is a much smaller incidence of rape of other men. The chief location for rape of adult men is prison, where it is an institutionalized product of an inhuman environment. Outside prisons, rape of other men and boys goes almost completely unreported because of the immense sense of shame experienced by a raped man, the almost complete lack of social support and the fear of further violence. Not surprisingly, the response of raped men has many of the same characteristics as that described by raped women. One man, reflecting on being raped by a stranger six years earlier, still feels the pain: "I feel a mixture of physical and emotional pain, the sense of the crossing of boundaries which shouldn't be crossed. Someone has crossed the boundary of my skin and stolen the basis of my identity, my ability to control my body....I feel

* The study by Mary P. Koss and colleagues reported that 14 percent of women mentioned unwanted touching, 12 percent said they had experienced sexual coercion and over 27 percent had experienced rape or attempted rape. One out of four women in this eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old group had been raped, 84 percent by close acquaintances or dates.

like nothing more than a rag for someone to come in. I go through the paces unaware of my surroundings while I think over and over, 'How could I have let this happen?'"

In the important struggle to reform our criminal codes to bring in harsher penalties for rape and stricter compliance with the law, rape is increasingly recognized as not being about sex, but about control and violence. Some believe it's a violent assault like any other. I agree, but only up to a point. Rape is *always* an act of violence and aggression and has *nothing* to do with sexual pleasure for the victim. But that much said, rape certainly can have something to do with the sexuality of the rapist and with the way sexual relationships have been shaped in our society. After all, the way our sexualities develop always has something of a power play in it, and this is obviously going to be reflected in sexual assault.

The rape of strangers gives us the clearest example that rape isn't primarily about sex, but rather about control and domination. It is also the rarest type of rape. The testimony of these rapists reveals a bottomless pit of inferiority, powerlessness and anger. While many men might experience these feelings to some degree, a relatively small number choose rape as a way of expressing their power and of making others feel the terror they feel. In doing so, they have chosen three popular refrains of patriarchal culture: that power equals power over another person; that to be a real man you

have to have power over women; and that you can't be degraded yourself if you can degrade someone else. The recollections of such men are horrifying. Hal: "I felt very inferior to others....I felt rotten about myself, and by committing rape I took this out on someone I thought was weaker than me, someone I could control." Carl: "I think that I was feeling so rotten, so low, and such a creep." Len: "I feel a lot of what rape is isn't so much sexual desire as a person's feelings about themselves and how that relates to sex. My fear of relating to people turned to sex because...it just happens to be the fullest area to let your anger out on, to let your feelings out on."

The vast majority of rapes – of a girlfriend, a date or a spouse – have a different dynamic. Unwanted physical contact often occurs because of attitudes among boys and men that sex is a right, particularly if they are paying the way. Studies of date rapists, such as those by researcher Mary Koss, have shown that these men view sexual aggression as normal. They have conservative beliefs about women staying in their place and about women's sexuality. They accept the myths that women are turned on by coercion and want to be raped, that no means yes. They see heterosexual relationships as game playing. Rape in this instance is not motivated simply by a desire to put a woman in her place; it is also a misguided and destructive attempt to find sexual pleasure.

Two male students once offered to tell me why they didn't think date rape was a problem. "It's not really rape, you know," said an otherwise bright young business student. "I can't stand it when I hear people say that. It's a game. You ask someone out and, you know, it's not like you're asking them to go to a tea party or home to meet the parents. They know what they're getting into. Why the hell does anyone go out with anyone when you're my age?" He paused for effect. "We're talking the big F." He smiled. He liked his turn of phrase.

A frosh engineering student nodded in agreement. "I think some people are making a mountain out of a molehill. Sure, there might be a problem once in a while. Everyone has heard of those and I certainly don't like that, but we're just trying to have some fun. No law against that, is there?"

"Actually there is," I chimed in.

The gulf between men and women, men's confusion about sexuality, the mystification so many men feel about women, all seem to coalesce in rape. Anti-rape activist Timothy Beneke reports that he often hears men say, "I have been injured by women. By the way they look, move, smell and behave, they have forced me to have sexual sensation I didn't want to have. If a man rapes a sexy woman, he is forcing her to have sexual sensation she doesn't want. It is just revenge." One told him, "Growing up, I definitely felt teased by women...I

definitely felt played with, used, manipulated, like women were testing their power over me.”

In these statements, the masculine fear of unwanted and powerful emotions reaches an extreme. We see the myths about women and about women's desires. At the same time there is also an accurate, even if horrific, acting-out of the active/passive split of masculinity and femininity, of male/female relations of power. Some men's insecurity and a fear of rejection combine with their views of sex as adversarial with terrifying results.

Rape, as a drama where relations of power are acted out, is made possible by the adversarial nature of sex and just about everything else, in our society. Because of the active/passive split, patriarchal society has tended to place sexual assertion and aggression in the hands of men. How can women control and shape their own sexuality? Although many women have reclaimed sexual independence and control, and others have developed a sexual orientation towards other women, many women, particularly while young, have only the tools of refusal and manipulation to meet their needs. Our culture celebrates the resultant game playing, dressing it up in heroic guise – man the hunter, woman the coy prey. It's no wonder that sexual relations often take on an adversarial air or that there is sometimes game playing with words, particularly among the young, where experience and confidence are still low. When you combine this

adversarial dynamic with the insecurities of masculinity, with the way sex gets defined as a power relationship, with sexist attitudes towards women, with public shame and misinformation about sex, then the climate becomes ripe for the proliferation of all forms of sexual harassment, from verbal harassment and unwanted touch to coercion and rape.

Establishing that these sexual dynamics are among the factors leading to rape does not suggest that any woman is responsible for being raped. A young woman, any woman, may give off signals that a man may misinterpret. Young, inexperienced, scared, confused, she might just say yes or might say no when she is actually feeling ambivalent and simply needs to wait, or talk, or think things through. It's important for her to learn to express what she wants and for couples to learn to express their needs. No man has the right to decide on her behalf what it is she really wants. Men, too, must learn to express clearly what they want, but also to realize that *no* always means *no*, and that the absence of a clear *yes* also means *no*.

◆ The Abuse of Children

One of the most terrifying manifestations of a world of violence – and perhaps the greatest, most sustained crime of humanity – is the systematic abuse of young children. In all but some tribal societies, there is an almost

uncontested acceptance of the right of parents to hit children. One U.S. study estimates that 84 to 97 percent of parents physically punish their children. Children learn that violence is legitimate if you have power over the person you hit. Children learn that you can simultaneously love someone and be violent, even be violent *because* you love someone. It's high time we recognize hitting a child, no matter what the situation, as an unacceptable form of abuse.

The problem isn't only corporal punishment. It includes the more subtle uses of parental power to enforce discipline in ways that are not necessary for safety, that are rather the result of parental frustration and merely surviving life in an industrialized, hectic, stressful society. In such a society it takes a conscious act of will *not* to be violent. I think of the times I used my superior strength to stop my son from doing something he wanted to do. These weren't moments when his physical safety was at stake. They were the culmination of an escalating battle of wills, usually in the morning before school or at night before bed – times when both of us were overtired, when I thought he was being obstreperous and stubborn and he probably thought I was being the same, when I had other things I desperately had to do, and after I could no longer keep my patience. Of course children must learn there are costs for certain types of actions. But whatever his stubborn behaviour, it couldn't justify my harshly

grabbing him. How much this typical family conflict must be magnified in the lives of children who are regularly threatened with physical punishment. Might is right. Somehow we are supposed to be surprised when these children become violent as teenagers or adults. Like the hysteric in the 1950s movies, we expect them to respond to a slap with a grateful, "Thanks, I needed that."

Sometimes the abuse of children takes the form of sexual abuse. Those who work with incest survivors report some cases of abuse by women – relatives, teachers, stepmothers, rarely mothers – but these remain a small minority. Most perpetrators are men. Again, we have a men's issue. It is a men's issue because it is men committing most sexual abuse, and it is a men's issue because the victims include boys as well as girls.

In her autobiographical story, *My Father's House*, novelist Sylvia Fraser writes of her own abuse as a child. Early in life she developed a split personality. It was the second personality that bore the weight of abuse. Throughout her childhood and teenage years her dominant, everyday personality didn't even know her father regularly forced her into having sex, and it wasn't until she reached her forties that she rediscovered her other self and what had happened to her. At one point in her book, Fraser recounts a visit to her bedridden grandmother, "Other Grandmother," as she called her. "Soon, soon will come that unspeakable moment when

we line up, in order of size, to kiss Other Grandmother's cheek. I struggle against the heaving of my stomach, the yammering of my heart, trying not to experience, before I have to, that instant when the sweet smell of Other Grandmother's gardenia powder overwhelms me and my lips are swallowed in the decaying pulpiness of her cheek. Why this revulsion for an old woman's kiss? I do not know. I cannot say.

"This truth belongs to my other self, and it is a harsh one. Other Grandmother's caved-in cheek is the same squishy texture as daddy's scrotum."

We talk about these horrors to learn about them and to learn how to interrupt the chains and cycles of violence. I once heard a social worker speak of being in a courtroom where a man was being prosecuted for sexual abuse of a young boy. "I remember," she said, "feeling so much hate and anger for this man throughout the trial. Then he started talking about his past and I realized that in twenty or thirty years the abused little boy at my side might be the one up there on the stand. I wondered when it all would end. The older man was guilty and deserved to be punished, but he was only part of the cycle of violence."

◆ Violence as an Issue for Men

Since the rise of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s, one of feminism's major themes has been the many forms of violence against women. The issue of

violence has been brought into popular consciousness and public debate with urgency and in some cases desperation. Women raped and women battered; fear at home, on the streets and at work. Men's violence against women and children isn't a new issue, but we don't often hear it talked about as a men's issue. That's a shame since it may be your brother, your father, your son, your best friend, your neighbour or even you who is carrying out this violence. It's a shame because there might be a man out there who is using violence to reinforce his control over your sister, your mother, your daughter, your friend or your neighbour. It's a shame we haven't seen it as our issue for it affects all of us: as children many men suffered violence at the hands of men or other boys and many witnessed abuse of their mothers; as adults all of us live in a society where women have learned to be afraid of us simply because we are men. It's a shame because, if statistics hold true, every fourth male reader of this book has committed an act of violence—perhaps unwanted touching, perhaps battering, perhaps rape, perhaps verbal abuse—against a girlfriend or spouse.

"For six months," writes Martin Amis in one of his short stories, "she had been living with a man who beat her, lithe little Pat, sinewy, angular, wired very tight. I think she beat him too, a bit. But violence is finally a masculine accomplishment. Violence—now that's man's work."

It now must be men's work to challenge men's violence. We can confidently take up the issue because we know that men are not born to rape and batter. It isn't in our genes, hormones or anatomy. It's lodged in our vision of manhood and the structures of patriarchal power; in many cases it results from the way pain and power combine to make the man. The fact that most men *don't* explode, or do so rarely, is a testimony to some sort of basic human principle that resists the more destructive norms of masculinity. It is a testimony to the uninterrupted unity of activity and passivity which seems to endure, like a whisper in our souls.