

Insecurities

Mistress Andrea Gomorrah stepped down from the stage, trailing her slave behind her. Having peeled off her red latex dress moments before, she strode stark naked and glistening (whether from sweat or lubricant is unclear) through the crowd and exited the back of the small theatre.

Earlier in the evening, the diminutive Filipina dominatrix with hair down to her waist had sidled up to me. Not yet dressed in her costume for the performance, she wore Victoria's Secret sweatpants that said "PINK" across the ass, a Kink.com zip up hoodie, and shearling boots.

"My performance partner will be getting here soon. I don't think his name's on the list, but he's Barry. It's actually some Sri Lankan name that I can't even pronounce, but I call him Barry. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know because he's a Submissive, so if you don't let him in, he won't argue with you. He won't say he's part of the performance, he'll just leave." She told me this with a certain fondness, as if espousing the qualities of a favorite pet. "Oh, don't let him in the dining room, he just loves chewing on the table legs."

I was a de-facto bouncer at a sold-out live sex show in the Mission. The researching writer's compulsion to ask a lot of questions and favors had paid off. Questions about beauty had led me to questions about women's body image. Questions about body image had led me to questions about porn and its near-omnipresence in contemporary culture. And questions about porn had led me to Cum and Glitter's first live performance. And as a friend of a friend of the porn star in charge, I was recruited to work the door.

A short South Indian guy showed up, wearing jeans and a black t-shirt that said PERV in big, collegiate-style white lettering across the chest. He said, "I'm Barry," and I let him in. The next time I saw him, he was onstage in "apology position," face down on the floor with his arms out to the side. I didn't hear him say anything else all night besides "Yes, Mistress

Andrea" and "I'm sorry, Mistress Andrea," during which time he was spanked, knelt on, slapped with a dildo, and pinched with clothespins before an audience of a hundred people. He was a very happy slave.

After the performance, in the cramped, makeshift dressing room behind the bar, Barry's face is half covered with gold glitter and half-covered with a huge grin. Andrea, still naked and holding her neatly folded latex dress over one arm, accepts congratulations from the other performers. She doesn't look quite as happy.

"Great job," I say. "That was really fun." (I didn't really know what I was supposed to say, so I went with the generic compliment, equally appropriate for an oboe concert or a standup comedy routine.)

Her brow wrinkles and she flutters her glittered false eyelashes. "Really? It wasn't stupid? People liked it?"

"It was awesome! I think everyone loved it." I flash a grin to compete with Barry's.

I don't know anything about porn, about domination and submission, or the legalities of live sex shows (which I probably should have checked out before agreeing to volunteer) but I do know a woman in need of reassurance when I see one. Mistress Eden, rising porn star, successful dominatrix, a woman who had just brought a hundred people to their feet, whistling and clapping at the sight of her naked body, needed reassurance.

Sometimes I feel like a collector of women's insecurities. I relish my role in telling them that they're good, they're pretty, they're normal. I tell them everything is going to be okay.

"I'm getting married soon and I think I should get my eyebrows done." Ingrid has freckled, pale skin and wide green eyes. She's a successful lawyer with strawberry blonde hair and an impending wedding. She's never had her eyebrows shaped before, which is common for women with lighter hair. They have lived a lifetime with some blonde fuzz on their foreheads and never thought that it needed maintaining. Dark-haired women, on the

other hand, get intimately acquainted with their waxer soon after puberty starts. The actress Emma Roberts (niece of Julia) confessed to Jay Leno on the "Tonight Show" that she had a unibrow as a child. She said her mom was encouraging her to get it waxed as early as kindergarten. For women like Roberts, body hair shows up young and it shows up dark. Women with lighter hair can live long into puberty and womanhood without making the acquaintance of a hair removal professional.

"We can just clean them up a little. Nothing drastic. We'll stay close to the natural shape, do a little trim. How does that sound?" This is my typical intro with skittish brow clients. As I work, we talk about her upcoming wedding and her fiancé, her work as a lawyer and her crazy landlord. I finish her brows and hand her a mirror. Contemplating her reflection, she gasps dramatically.

"Wow! I love them! I had no idea doing my brows could make this much of a difference." Her face is expressive and enthusiastic, and her brows do look great. "I have another question. I know this is kind of strange, but..."

When people under my care lead with that, I know that the following conversation will be filled with anxiety, embarrassment, and self-doubt. It will be something that they have most likely never shared with anyone before.

"Sure. I promise you, it won't be something that I haven't heard before."

"Well, I was wondering...do you think I need to wax my lip?" She looks down at her hands, twisting together in anxiousness, then up at me with big, innocent green eyes. She looks like Little Orphan Annie.

"Well, what do *you* think?" I ask. "Every woman has fuzz on their face, and for some women that bothers them. Some women it doesn't. It just depends on your personal preference." That's my standard answer, and that is honestly how I feel about it. But this interaction is against everything I have ever been taught about selling my services and "upgrading" clients in the room. Having worked at larger spas that were entirely sales-

driven, the in-room up-sell is the holy grail of marketing. When someone comes in for a brow, I am supposed to say “did you want to do your lip and chin as well?” It’s the spa equivalent of “Would you like fries with that?” Top dollar is the bottom line. This principle has taught me that I am a horrible business woman. I refuse to play on women's insecurities.

Think about this. If you went to the dentist to get a cavity filled, and the dentist looked at you and said “And did you want to take care of that snaggle tooth, too?” You would think “Well, shit. I never noticed that I had a snaggletooth. I mean, I know it is a little crooked, but I thought it looked alright. I didn't think anyone noticed. But this dentist, this tooth expert, she thinks I need to do something about my snaggletooth. What an asshole I have been, walking around with a snaggletooth all this time. Maybe that’s why the girl at Starbucks was rude to me. Maybe that’s why my mother always liked my sister better. Maybe that’s why I can’t get a date...I don't care what it costs. I've got to get this taken care of immediately.”

Despite being a skilled professional and a nice person, I have been let go from a job for lack of financial performance. But I don’t care how many bonuses you promise me for in-room up-sales. I refuse to make any woman who has offered her body for my assessment feel like there is something wrong with her.

“What makes you ask if you should wax your lip?”

“Well, someone suggested it.” I try not to look horrified. “My future mother-in-law suggested that I do it before the wedding.” Fireworks explode behind my eyes. Poor girl. She’s going to have to deal with this lady for the rest of her life. “Do you think I need to?”

“I can barely see it. But if it bothers you, we can wax it.”

“What would you do?” Again with the Orphan Annie eyes. I’m not going to tell Ingrid, whom I have just met, that I would recommend telling her future mother-in-law to go fuck herself.

“Honestly, if I were you, I would leave it alone. It wouldn’t bother me. It’s just invisible fuzz.”

“So you don’t think the fuzz is...too thick?”

“No, honestly. I don’t.”

Ingrid came in, nervous and shy, and I took care of her and made her feel good about herself. She shared with me the quiet cruelty of her future mother-in-law, something she probably hadn't mentioned to anyone else for fear that they would say “Yeah, I’ve been meaning to mention that hairy upper lip of yours.” I could have said, yes, yes, Ingrid, let’s wax your lip, it’s fuzzy. She still would have come back, and I would make more money off of her. To me, it's not worth it. *The Economist* article “Pots of Promise” states that the beauty industry “plays on the fear of looking ugly as much as the pleasure of looking beautiful.”⁶⁸ I don't want to be someone that capitalizes on the fear of looking ugly. I want to provide the pleasure of looking beautiful. I want to provide the moment when Ingrid looks in the mirror and gasps with pleasure at the sight of her new, flattering brows. I want to do that over and over.

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68 "Pots of Promise." *Economist, the (London, England)* (05/24, 2003). <http://0-search.ebscohost.com.ignacio.usfca.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsnba&AN=0FB3EFFDC252FAE8&site=eds-live&scope=site>.