

The Male Submissive **–sasha**

If they be two, they two are so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other doe.
And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roame,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as that comes home.
Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like th' other foote, obliquely runne;
Thy firmnes draws my circle just,
And makes me end where I begunne.
- A Valediction Forbidding Mourning
John Donne

My name is “sasha.” I got my start in BDSM in New York City about forty years ago – long before several well written books, and then the Internet, had brought it “out of the shadows,” and made it almost respectable. I played both roles for many years, always thinking of myself as a “switch,” but today would introduce myself as a male submissive, happily belonging to the lady I have lived with for eleven years now. She turned out to be a gifted Domme when I introduced her to the Scene shortly after we met and, over the time we have been together, has developed and deepened her self-awareness in that role, as I have done in the other.

So on one level, this essay is a valentine to Lady Carol – to express my love and appreciation that she shares her life with me, and has taught me so much about myself. As well, there are a few things I want to get off my chest about masculinity and the submissive’s role, and how these fit together. I have been searching, like so many men today, for a gentler, more authentic version of male identity that works with women and with my fellow males. Having found something of this in the Scene, I’d like to share what I can of it. I also want to comment on the practice of submission (erotic or otherwise) as an antidote to the egalitarianism, competitiveness and isolation of life in today’s world. Finally, I want to articulate (as I think may at last be possible for me) what I have been seeking all my life in the Scene and elsewhere – much of which I have been lucky enough to find.

The Scene: Being, Belonging and Permission

About the conduct and emotions of a scene I don't need to say very much, except to comment that it is difficult to have a coherent thought, or even remember who you are, when you are strung up helpless and a whip is falling across your back. Identity is erased in a heavy scene. Ordered reality slips away, pre-empted by the pain, an abyss of suffering in which identity is lost. That you are enduring this of your own will, that you have a safe word that would halt the ordeal at any time, makes a huge difference. Real corporal punishment, of identical severity, would be a kind of rape. Voluntarily entered into, at the hand of a lover or a skilled pro, who is only giving what you wanted – though, probably, just a little more than you wanted – there is no sense of violation. The pain is an ordeal but not an intrusion. A sense of honour carries you through it. You want to show your mettle. You do not want to wimp out.

For any sub, male or female, the ingredients of a scene – nakedness, helplessness, pain, sensory deprivation and erotic stimulation – play along the boundary of personality with annihilation. The metaphor of *punishment* touches all the keys of identity: love and rejection, pride, dignity and honour, guilt and shame. For the male submissive worked by a female Domme, there are maternal and school-marmish overtones. The first authority figures in a boy's life are usually female. There are also religious overtones with a pagan quality. These are alien, and may seem wicked or evil to a society still narrowly Judaeo-Christian in its ideas of divinity. The Domme is an avatar of the Goddess in her demanding, cruel aspect. She tests men; sometimes She breaks them; but She can be merciful and indulgent. She is dangerous, She must be treated with due respect, but She knows men to their core. She knows our guilt and our shame, but She herself cannot be shocked. Therefore, She is (or, when she wants to, can be) a giver of permissions. In her bosom, all is well.

This giving of permissions works both ways. The sub gives a blanket permission to be sexually worked and used. Within limits, the Domme can play as she wishes with her male toy. (The same, of course, would go for any combination of sexes.) At the same time, the sub is not only permitted, but even "forced" to be as wanton and shameless as he longs to be. Ropes or chains deprive him of his power to resist; the whip or paddle corrects him for being so naughty. Hence the jibe, which may be acknowledged to have some truth to it, that BDSM allows puritans to enjoy sex and be punished for it at the same time!

This exchange of permissions must be the key to the Scene's versatility, its readiness to accommodate every conceivable taste or fantasy. Why does the campy, stylized encounter between "Dominant" and "submissive" – lend itself to, and involve itself so readily with every other sexual orientation and script?

A first answer is that such a relationship sweeps away the tacit negotiations that characterize ordinary sex-play: "Would you do this if I ask for it?" "Is it OK if I do that?" Such permissions are given up front, inherent in the posture of submission. "I am your slave," a lover declares. "Do with me what you will!" A further answer is that all

sorts of interesting polarities can be mapped onto the BDSM roles. The dramatic encounter of Domme and sub can be made to stand for freedom and necessity, dream and reality, indulgence and control, authority and lawlessness, or any dialectic you please.

Deeper still, we can think of fantasy as a kind of inward proposal – a suggestion from the self to the self. It is in the nature of these that they be "submitted" for consideration – by another person (or persons), or by one's internal "structure of governance," however constituted. The **proposing** individual who raises the issue automatically takes a submissive stance vis-a-vis the **disposing** authority of the situation – the one with power to say "yes" or "no". We see that any proposition or suggestion – commercial, sexual or whatever – must invoke a Dominant/submissive polarity. The submissive party says "Let's!" and holds his breath. The Dominant turns a thumb up, or a thumb down.

BDSM liberates the sexual imagination by its nature: by its central fantasy that all permission comes from the Domme. She and only She has power to loose and bind, accept and reject. It follows (provided She allows), that nothing is forbidden. But is this, in fact, a fantasy? Many men **in fact** experience their wives this way: Kosher sex is what their wives will do, or let them do. What their wives won't permit them is unclean and shameful by definition – acquiring the appeal of forbidden fruit, but then available only in secrecy, through a practice of deception. Men go to a mistress, or a Mistress, or a professional prostitute to get what their wives will not allow. And all these women, just by giving or withholding permission are Dommies so far as the guy is concerned, while he experiences himself as submissive.

Play and Earnest

Until very recently, I understood BDSM as an intimate theatre of fantasy, where actors chose and played their roles. Before I met Lady Carol, and in the early months of our relationship I played both roles with her. In fact, I introduced her to the scene, and in that period, she mostly played the sub. Gradually, however, it became clear that things worked better the other way round, and today it is mutually understood that she is Mistress. Moreover, after about ten years of confusion on the matter, it became obvious that her dominance was not just make-believe: erotic theatre. We were not just doing scenes from time to time, but had settled down into what is sometimes called a 24-7 relationship with my own role distinctly and happily submissive because both of us seemed to prefer it that way.

There was never any formal agreement to this effect. It just sort of happened, as the best arrangements do. In fact, I think we are both still trying to understand the terms of this new relationship, and that is one reason I am writing this.

My submissive status does not mean that I obey Lady Carol all the time, nor that I spend my time sitting at her feet in slavish devotion, nor that I follow her around

and have no life of my own. I don't do my lady's housework on any regular basis, though I do a lot of the cooking, and try to help out with the chores whenever I can. I would do more if ordered, but this would take some arranging and is not likely to happen until next year when Carol's daughter goes off to college. At that point, I think the routines and rhythms of our life will change drastically, and I will suggest reorganizing the household to relieve her workload. As with any couple, our relationship has its issues and its politics. Mostly we compose our differences, as any experienced couple would – through mutual understanding and negotiation. We have our arguments, and quarrels, though fewer and less nasty ones than before. Once or twice I have apologized and asked to be punished for getting out of line; but I rarely have felt so completely in the wrong, and Carol has never demanded such complete surrender. I don't know what would happen if she did, but this would be out of character for her, and it is not something that worries me. All this said, you might find it odd that I describe myself as 24-7 submissive.

Largely, it's a question of my own self-understanding. Perhaps the briefest way to put it is that in all that concerns my physical and social existence, I have found my centre: It is in her, and she is its keeper. There are huge parts of my life that she looks after and cares for much better than I do. Much more competently, to begin with, and with greater interest. My mind spins off in concepts and abstractions and arguments; hers is grounded in the concrete and the factual. It's a very womanly mind – a bit “challenged” in the area of fantasy and imagination, I'd irreverently say, but superb at keeping six balls in the air and never dropping any. (How much this owes to the physiological differences and how much to the severe training of having borne and raised three children, I don't know.) She seems to relish and thrive on this virtuoso performance. I, on the other hand, can only do one thing at a time, and am definitely “challenged” in the reality department. For these reasons, her help and guidance are invaluable to me. There's quite a large part of me that she has little interest or stake in, but in all that concerns material existence, or our lives together, I have learned to follow her lead. And am the happier for it. All that being submissive necessarily means is that “**We** will have it **her** way.” Both of us will have it, but on her terms. I may propose, but she will dispose. I may ask, advise, argue (up to a point), exert my influence any way I can, but the final decision (it's mutually agreed now) will always be hers.

In his book on *Politics*, Aristotle says that some men are natural slaves. The passage is shocking to modern sensibilities, yet the point deserves to be considered not as justification for enslaving others, but as a serious question to ask one's self. For Aristotle's suggestion here is that many persons can do better as instruments of another's will than as free agents pursuing happiness on their own. And he is careful to distinguish the abusive condition in which a slave is bound to his master merely by power and by force of law, from what he considers the natural and healthy relationship in which slave and master are linked by mutuality of affection and self-interest, and by devoted service on one side exchanged for protection and wise instruction from the

other. Such relationships are termed “patriarchal” today, and they are out of fashion – considered beneath the dignity of the slave and less than maximally profitable for the master, who incurs responsibilities from the relationship that need not worry a mere employer. It is said that “Power corrupts,” and that “No man is good enough to be another man’s master.” Both statements are true enough, so far as they go. I would not want to be the slave of any man (or woman) – much less of any state – whose power over me was unbreakable and absolute. But some form of voluntary fealty, with ready access to manumission is another matter. What would one call a loyal and loving slave who could leave at any time, but sticks around and serves because he wants to, and because he knows – correctly – that it is in his own best interest to do so? The only problem for such a person is to find a master worth serving.

For much of my life, I’ve felt a bit of a misfit in the democratic, capitalist world. I can cope, but it goes against the grain. My real interests are very interesting, but they don’t make money. Of each one of these could be said what J.P. Morgan said of his yacht, that “If you care about its cost, you can’t afford it.” I share my real interests freely with anyone who cares, because I can’t make a decent living from any of them. I can’t bring myself to compete for a promotion or even a job that I don’t particularly want anyway. At the same time, I don’t like to be a parasite, and I do have a few valuable skills. Accordingly, I feel much happier if someone hands me an assignment and pays me what he or she thinks the job is worth. I don’t need a high wage; and so long as I get enough to live on, and am left enough leisure to lead my own life, I am content with the bargain.

In this sense, I could describe myself as a natural slave in Aristotle’s sense; and a good Mistress who knows my worth is a Godsend to me. So long as she keeps the world off my back, her whip is welcome! Especially since it’s a turn-on.

In these feelings, I don’t think I am unique, and they may be part of the reason why the Scene is gaining in popularity and acceptance. When people talk about wanting “to feel they belong somewhere,” or of wanting “a sense of community,” they are beginning a retreat from, or reaction against the liberal values of formal equality and free competition – in most cases, without quite realizing it. It is still difficult to think against the current of present-day society, which continues to hold the individualist qualities of assertiveness, ambition and competitiveness in such high esteem that their opposite values are not merely forgotten, but actively repressed. Not with complete success, however. They survive in our fantasies and, probably not by coincidence, are just what submissives like myself are seeking to embrace and celebrate.

The notion that it is possible to find a measure of personal triumph in the sacrifice of personal willfulness is certainly not peculiar to the Scene. To the contrary: most societies have prized values of loyalty, obedience and dutiful service above the individualist values of personal desire and self-actualization. The anti-individualist values have long traditions in myth, in religion, and in the daily lives of other cultures. They’ve become so quaint in our world as to be almost unintelligible, but the themes of

Hollywood movies hint at how sorely we miss them, and the fascination of BDSM fantasy and ritual suggests they can never become entirely obsolete. All societies save up for week-ends – preserve and cherish in play and ritual and religion – the values too powerful to forget that find no place in daily life.

To understand these submissive values one must see them as they once flourished in hierarchical, feudal cultures like medieval Europe or Tokugawa Japan. (To this day, they linger in tightly-knit, stratified communities – military, clerical, or academic – where traces of a feudal origin survive.) In these societies loyalty, devotion and obedience are at a premium for a simple, pragmatic reason: the rigidly hierarchical arrangements make it necessary to keep a distinction between social status and personal worth that becomes blurred where status is more temporary or situational, and especially where status has become hereditary.

Where upward mobility is all but impossible, basic self-esteem must be available to the lowest as well as the highest, if the system is to work. Personal dignity has to derive from worthy occupation of one's place in the world, not on the loftiness of that place. Even for the privileged it becomes expedient to justify exalted status in "the great chain of being" by remaining decently submissive where submission is due. What the noble pays to those above him, he can demand from those below; he knows what is expected of him, and knows where he belongs – in the line of battle, on the map, and in the great scheme of things. This is more than anyone knows today – which, in turn, is one plausible reason why the BDSM chord resonates so strongly in the modern soul.

At every level of feudal society, the vassal's dignity is not diminished but greatly enhanced by his duties of loyalty and obedience to a lord. His dignity is safe, because his role with its duties and prerogatives, is always clear. This certainty – of where and especially **to whom** one belongs – becomes the more valuable the more life itself is harsh and uncertain. What else, under such conditions, could sustain the poise, the inner sureness, on which dignity rests?

In feudal Europe, the political structure both realized the religious ideal and was echoed in it, (it is impossible to say which caused the other), and the whole complex installed itself in erotic fantasies and dalliance. Think of King Arthur's knights, bustling round the country with odd bits of feminine apparel waving from their lances – either running errands for some lady or questing for the Holy Grail (a transparent sex-symbol in itself). Twelfth century troubadours and Victorian pornographers worked with different imagery, but the emotions and archetypes are akin. *Courtly love* is transparent submissive fantasy:

*Noble Lady, nothing do I ask of thee
But that thou shouldst take me for thy servant.
I would serve as one serves a good lord,
Whatever reward I might gain.
Behold, I am at thy command:
Sincere and humble, gay and courteous.
Neither bear nor lion art thou,
To kill me, as I here to thee surrender.*

*Bernart de Ventadorn (fl. c. 1150-1200?)
Creative Mythology, Vol.IV, p. 179
Joseph Campbell*

My suggestion, then, is that many people (and I have come to think of myself as one of them) can do better for themselves today in the old feudal game of giving allegiance to a protector than in the free-market game of buying and selling their services as advantageously as possible. More generally, there may be more happiness and a better life in giving one's self away than in selling one's self at the best price. That has been my experience, at least. Today, it seems to me that my taste for whips and chains, my orientation toward an eroticism of dominance and submission – of devotion, obedience and discipline – may have been trying to teach me this all along. I have been happiest, and most completely free, when I felt dedicated to something or someone beyond myself.

The problem with excessive freedom is that one can easily be left without a clear sense of direction and, consequently, without the inward sureness to do much of anything at all. This may seem a pleasant problem to one who suffers from a deprivation of freedom, but it can lead to paralysis. "A journey of ten thousand miles begins with the first step," as the Chinese say, but suppose you have no more reason to take that step in one direction than another? It seems the only thing you can do with freedom in the long run is to make an offering of it to something (or someone) you feel is worth it.

Shortly after we came together, when I told Carol that I loved her, she asked me what that word meant to me. I had to think for a moment. One says such things to a woman after making love, without knowing exactly what they mean – but, of course, it would not do to say this. I wanted to please her, but I also wanted to be sincere. I did not want to sound mawkish. Nor did I not want to say or promise more than I really meant. After thinking a moment, I answered that it meant I would follow our relationship wherever it led. We have been together ever since, through a lot of good times and some bad ones; and where the relationship seems to have led is to the state of happy submission I have just described.

Training Wanted

Mistress and I would like to find a mentor to work with us, to help us develop further as a Domme/sub couple. On the theory that whatever you desire strongly and can imagine clearly must eventually be realized, let me try to describe what I would want for us in the way of “development,” and the training I feel is needed.

I would like for Lady Carol to be inspired and challenged into realizing her full potential as a Domme. I think this potential is very great: She is intelligent, sensitive, pains-taking, demanding, meticulous and possessed of truly formidable will-power and integrity. She needs to gain experience in the role; she needs to expand and refine her technique. Most of all, probably, she needs permission and perhaps some help in exploring the resources of her own imagination.

For myself, the training I want is what she feels I need to be the consort that meets her needs. But my own desire is to become a beautifully mannered escort and man-slave for scene occasions, and a devoted spouse, companion and bed-pet for our private life together. I want to be worked hard and publicly at play-parties. I want everyone to see what a slut I am. I want everyone to know that I am *her* slut.

To speak more generally, I would like to see the Scene evolve to emphasize the elements of training, service and consortship, more than is the case at present. Fetish dress, bondage, corporal punishment and all the other rituals are certainly valid aspects of our thing (A trip across my Lady’s knee turns me on like crazy; as she says, I have a high-maintenance ass.). But they are not ultimately what is most important to me about the Scene and not, I think, the best it has to offer. The crucial teaching of the Scene, as it seems to me, is anti-liberal, anti-political, anti-democratic. It is that all the really interesting and important aspects of a relationship begin once its power issues have been settled, and the respective duties and prerogatives worked out. Love need not be a relationship of equals. More often, it is a complementary relationship; and in some of the richest and most rewarding, there is a real disparity of authority and power.

Yet the ideal of democracy can still be reconciled with the power asymmetries of BDSM – depending on precisely what you want to mean by *equality*. Our acceptance of status differences does not impugn the core liberal doctrine of theological and legal equality *despite* all differences of power or wealth or status. On the contrary: The ethos of our community accepts, and actually affirms that all persons – dominants and submissives, in particular – are of equal dignity, and endowed by their Creator with the same human rights. At the same time, and with no contradiction it affirms that some relationships work best when one party assists and sometimes advises while the other calls the shots for both, when one serves and the other is served, when one *gives* a scene and the other *takes* it.

The Greeks had a word – *agape* (pronounced **ah-gah-pay**) – for a kind of love that raises and exalts its object. Eros – erotic love – flows out to the beloved in aspiration and longing; *agape* reaches downward to raise the beloved to a new level of being. *Agape* is a teacher's love, or an artist's, or a god's. It is God the Father, as

Michelangelo painted Him on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, reaching down to pass the spark of life to Adam. It is the magisterial Professor Higgins in Shaw's, *Pygmalion*, (or its musical version, *My Fair Lady*), turning a flower girl into a duchess by teaching her to speak – and thus to feel and think. Finally, *agape* is a theological notion, calling forth Being and Identity out of Chaos. When the early Christians said that God was Love, it was *agape*-love they meant.

Dominant love may and should be tinged with other modes of love – desire and friendship and caring-for – but its distinctive quality is *agape*. The submissive counterpart is devotion or *worship*, the latter word having been shortened from "worship" which implied both a giving and a receiving – a reciprocity – of values, or worth. This is yet another form of love. The sub gives value to the Domme by assigning to her a pre-eminent place in his imagination and his emotional life. He brings acknowledged feelings of incompleteness and neediness to the relationship, and promises to requite her generosity with obedience and service. He takes with humility the value that she gives to him, accepting that this value is gratuitous – a product of her own creative imagination. "I am yours", the sub declares. "Use me well, and make of me what you can."

John Keats' idea of *negative capability* comes to mind here, defined by him as [the capability] "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. . ." The poet's capability is "negative" (we might add) because it is opposite to what the world understands as cognitive power: not the (Dominant's) ability to understand and use, but the good submissive's: to respond, mould to, and be taken by. I'm not good at this aspect of submission. In fact, a teacher once told me, not admiringly, that I had less negative capability than anyone he'd ever met. I was very young then, and in my ignorance, took this as a compliment. The "irritable reaching after fact and reason" was then and still is one of my specialties. I don't think it's always a vice, but I know it often gets in the way. I like to think that along my way I've acquired just a little negative capability, in the Scene and elsewhere. But I know I have a long way to go in this area, and look to my Lady to help me. Training wanted.

Constructing Masculinity

In this final section, I want to use the phenomenon of male submissiveness as a point of entry into the broad question regarding the construction of masculine identities and roles in our post-modern society.

The gender wars of the last decades produced a social revolution whose outcome remains uncertain. In the societies of North America and Western Europe at any rate, women have largely won their struggle for political emancipation, and are now faced with the question of what kind of family arrangements – and what kind of men – they really want. What kind of men they end up with depends only partly on them, of course, but will be influenced by the terms they are prepared to offer and settle for. It

is also constrained, by certain basic facts of human biology; and will be influenced too, by the way men play their hands. Finally, I doubt that there will ever again be any single, simple understanding of “normal” family life. The possibilities are now so diverse that each couple must negotiate its own arrangements in its own way. What seems likely however, is that the possibilities for doing so will group themselves into a few standard configurations, known to everyone as the viable options from which basic choices are made. To some extent, this has already happened; and among the options that have emerged is the more-or-less submissive guest-husband in a matriarchal family.

This is the pattern I find myself in with Lady Carol and her children. It is a pattern that makes sense for many couples, and I think the world will see more of it as the male role of breadwinner and protector loses its traditional significance. The pattern makes sense because it acknowledges the woman of a household as its ultimate authority, and pays due honour to her as the life-source that she is, and as the generous giver that she tries to be, while leaving the male a viable role as lover, friend, advisor and assistant. I don't find such a role beneath my male dignity especially because, as compared with more traditional arrangements, it offers a huge gain to me in psychological and practical freedom.

Relieved of our ancient role, or with its burden considerably lightened, males are left much freer than before to pursue our own bent and interests. No one likes to be a parasite; and certainly no sensible woman will want to have one around: The male still needs to make some kind of a living, or otherwise find some way to earn his keep. However, being absolved of sole responsibility for keeping violence and famine from the door leaves him more choice and more leisure time. Clever men will take advantage of this, and wise ones will put it to good use. For the same reason, men can afford to be less stoical – more open to aesthetic and emotional experience. We can be less stoic and more sensitive than previously we could afford to be, when we had to claw our way up the promotion ladder, doing the best-paid job we could find.

For women there is considerable loss in the greater male freedom that their own new freedoms necessarily entail. To the extent women are serious about wanting economic and political freedom and reproductive enfranchisement, they will have to accept not just a share, but probably the lion's share of responsibility for the babies they produce. In the Western world today, many women are feeling the old necessities more sharply than their men – only to be expected since the primary responsibility of bread winning must fall increasingly on their shoulders once they are in a position to bear it. They will not be able to have it both ways.

But there are compensations also; and the most able, energetic and advantaged women will prefer the new arrangements to the old. Such a one wants no husband as her lord and master; on the other hand, it will make both practical and emotional sense for her to keep a man around (on good behaviour) as a bed-pet if nothing else. Under such conditions, each couple will negotiate the “terms of endearment,” but in each case the woman will have the whip hand, and the man who wants to stay around will have to

meet her terms, whether or not his sexual orientation is submissive. Increasingly, I suspect, male submission in this sense will simply be the reality of a post-modern relationship.

To some extent, it has always been so. The bedroom is pre-eminently a sphere of male vulnerability and female power. In bed a woman can let her man feel like a king or leave him feeling guilty and shamed and castrated. A man comes to a woman's bed either as tyrant or as suppliant. And we fare better as suppliants, I have found.