



JASON LANGER/GETTY IMAGES

*I understand that sex should be peaceful and good and loving, but what about the things that turn me on and are repellent at the same time?*

— Lisa Palac, *The Edge of the Bed*

*The men [who frequent peep shows] don't know it, but they are secretly coming to church. They are seeking absolution, acceptance, compassion, kindness, and caring from a willing, friendly woman — if she is pretty, so much the better. They believe themselves to be fundamentally unlovable because of their sexuality. . . . Granting these men acceptance and understanding instead of disgust and ridicule is the single most profound aspect of sex work.*

— Nina Hartley, “*Bodhisattvas among Us*”

**I**n the fall of 1997, my friend G. asked me to read my work at a benefit for a San Francisco alternative performance space. G. is a radical queer woman. I am a heterosexual white man. I hemmed and hawed and tried to duck her invitation. I said I was busy, that I hadn't written anything in ages. I even told her I just plain didn't want to do it, but she wasn't buying my excuses. The truth is, I was not eager to be the token straight white male in the show. It's not that I'm uncomfortable in the radical queer world. (OK, maybe I'm a little uncomfortable.) I just have absolutely no interest in stepping up in front of that community and proudly representing the patriarchy.

With about a month to go before the event, though, I acquiesced. All too quickly it was the week of the show. My name was on the flier, and I had no idea what I would read. Instead of writing something, I spent much of my time trying to think

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of a plausible excuse to bail out: Broken limb? Dead relative? Laryngitis? As the date drew near, I anxiously sifted through old grad-school poems, pulling out some “nice” ones: about my mother and a snowstorm, about a fondly remembered ex-girlfriend, about a long nighttime drive filled with hopeful thoughts of the future. Hey, leather-clad lesbians like mothers and ex-girlfriends and hopeful thoughts of the future, right?

In the back of my mind, though, nudging at me, was a new piece of writing that I had been working on. It was a short story called “Close,” and it was the first fiction I'd written that I actually liked; it was also the worst possible piece for this particular show.

“Close” is the journal of a museum guard named Henry, a

mulletted, unkempt, oily-faced junior-college dropout in his early forties. Socially inept and utterly isolated, Henry divides his time between home, work, and a Times Square peep-show joint, where he's fallen in love with a curvy Slav whose stage name is Nadja. The story includes several scenes of Henry participating in the only form of intimacy he knows: masturbating while awkwardly touching Nadja's breasts through the eye-level porthole of the peep-show booth. I imagined I'd have a hard time reading “Close” out loud anywhere — much less to an audience of hard-core dykes — for fear of offending people and revealing way too much personal knowledge about strippers and peep shows, the sort of knowledge that can only be learned firsthand.

**I** grew up the only child of two academics, a feminist English professor and a moral philosopher. Together we formed a left-of-liberal family unit whose values included strong stances against racism, sexism, homophobia, and social injustice. Though the Berger family values were ethical guidelines, not moralistic strictures, they engendered as much guilt and shame as Catholic doctrine.

My parents made no explicit rules prohibiting drinking, drugs, and swearing. (Well, words that were offensive to various oppressed groups were forbidden. And the word *sucks* was also a no-no, I think because it debased the sucker, as in “cocksucker,” who is by inference a woman or a gay man. But *fuck* was acceptable in moderation — in fact, I'm pretty sure I first heard the word from Mom.) Civil-liberties concerns aside, though, both my parents were certainly against pornography. So, naturally, I found it incredibly enticing. After a brief

preadolescent obsession with forbidden toy guns — I traded some prized Matchbox cars for a couple of heavy, metallic toy pistols — I quickly moved on to the glossy pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Soon I made the jump to the grittier, nastier *Hustler* and *Club*.

I stole my first *Hustler* from Tom Denton's house one night when I was in eighth grade. Denton was a gentle giant, a star football lineman who effortlessly tossed opponents about without malice — it was just what you did. Then the game would end, and he'd become his big, harmless, stoner self again. The Dentons' liquor cabinet was always fully stocked and open for the raiding. A bong sat out on the rec-room ping-pong table. And, most exciting to me, Tom left porn just lying around in

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the open. One night I snuck a *Hustler* into the secret zipper pocket of my parka.

I still have the cover of that magazine somewhere, with its picture of a devilish blonde in shiny red leather, head thrown back and to the side, mouth forming an O. The look in her eyes is not soft-focus come-hither but straight-up lust. The image, a thrilling combination of the combative and the submissive, contradicted everything I'd been taught. This woman was objectified and loving it. She was horny. She didn't want to be tenderly made love to. She wanted — no, she *needed* — to be taken, to be fucked, and fucked hard. This was so wrong, so confusing — and so damn *hot*.

The images inside the magazine evoked similar contradictory feelings, both exciting and disturbing. In my first, furtive jerk-off sessions to the photographs, I focused on the soft smoothness of breasts and bellies, legs and asses, averting my gaze from the pink, fleshy wetness. Learning to like pictures of women's genitalia was like learning to like the taste of booze. The pictures in *Hustler* burned like bourbon. I started with little sips.

I discovered Times Square in its LIVE! NUDE! GIRLS! hey-day late one night in my freshman year of college after a punk-rock show at Roseland Ballroom. I was walking through midtown with my jaded New Yorker friends (I was a recent arrival from upstate, still wide-eyed, just beginning to discover big-city splendors) when we passed by the peep shows on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. I was riveted. Of course, there was no way I was going to admit, let alone indulge, my fascination in my friends' company; it would've been uncool on so many levels. But after that night, at least once a week, I took a subway trip downtown and spent several guilty, anxious hours lurking outside peep show after peep show in the late-autumn cold, furtively glancing at the windows and wanting badly to go inside, but always chickening out and heading back uptown to my safe college haven. What was I so afraid of? I can't say exactly. That I'd be "sinning"? That I'd get caught? That I'd suddenly be sucked into a vortex of scantily clad women who'd scorn me and lure me into giving them all my work-study money only to disappoint me in the end? Something along those lines.

Finally one night I had a couple of beers, got up my nerve, and walked into Show World on the corner of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Eighth Avenue, the least seedy, most legit-looking of the porn-and-peeps emporiums. I remember fluorescent lights and magazines that showed actual penetration on their covers. It had the grotesque allure of a street fight or a car wreck. A flashing, multicolored arrow that read, LIVE SHOW, pointed upstairs.

I didn't go upstairs that first day, but I did soon after, to the little peep-show windows like the ones in my story "Close." That first incursion was both unsatisfying and achingly thrilling. I practically sprinted away afterward, repeating to myself, *I'm a pig. I'm a bad, bad person. I will never, ever do that again. I'm a pig. I'm a bad, bad person* — my secular-humanist Hail Mary.

I've been going back to peep shows more or less regularly ever since, for ten years in New York and another twelve in San

Francisco. As the panic and shame faded (but of course never entirely disappeared, especially the shame), I slowly learned how to get what I wanted and needed from that world. The kind of peep-show performer I craved was hard to find. She had to be someone I found physically attractive, of course, but more important, she had to look me in the eye and appear to *see* me, to willingly accept my gaze, my confession.

The peep-show scenes in "Close" are meant to show how unhappy Henry is in his isolation, how badly he needs human contact, which he finally finds with a young museum patron. Though he evokes sympathy, Henry remains an objectifying, straight white male who jerks off daily to peep-show strippers. "Close" is the memoir of a man who could easily (if rashly) be labeled a misogynist, but who is meant to be seen as a pariah, a freak, the kind of person for whom porn and strippers serve a clearly ameliorative purpose. Henry's interactions with Nadja lack any of the mortifying ambiguity of his other interactions with women, or with people in general. He pays her; she gives him what he needs.

To this day, I have never caught my father checking out a woman. I've always known, somehow, that this isn't from a lack of desire on his part, but rather an abundance of principle: it's something you just don't do. One time an attractive young woman working behind a shop counter was extremely friendly, even flirtatious with my dad (who bears a strong resemblance to Paul Newman), and, after we left the store, he said, "What a *bright* young woman." The message, as I interpreted it, was that a woman had to be intelligent or interesting in some other, nonphysical way for a man to like her, and only after she'd been well appreciated as a fellow human being could she be — maybe, someday — physically desired. Never objectified, of course, but desired. Though I don't think my father overtly tried to teach me this lesson, I learned it nonetheless.

I never imagined that my dad would ever let himself think, let alone say, *Wow, those are some sexy eyes*, or, heaven forbid, *What a rack on that broad*. Part of me is proud of him and wants to follow his example. Another part likes to believe that he can leer and fantasize with the best of us — or perhaps I should say the worst of us. Most important, with me.

(end of excerpts)