

[From *Shaming the Devil*]

THE EMBRACE

We talked about types as we crossed Columbia's campus at 116th, headed down Broadway, then over to West End. Our discussion degenerated block by block as we walked west and south, surrounded and jostled by intellectuals, would-be intellectuals and haters of all stripes and ages in the diminishing heat of early autumn. In the space of a few short minutes, I'd turned our conversation from listing lofty, long term requirements for our ideal men—like professional degrees and executive positions—to cataloguing more instantly gratifying preferences for them, such as dick size and machismo.

Quincy and I were two overgrown boys—seemingly barely out of our teens—walking with our ex-choir director in Morningside Heights under a cloudless night sky. Talking about nothing of consequence. Really.

"Yeah," I said, enjoying center-stage. "I like tall, dark-skinned men. Hopefully with trade. And who know how to use it."

I didn't bother to mention that my only real lover up to then had been a mestizo Central American, or that the only big dicks I'd seen were in print, or had cost more money than I could afford on my meager earnings from work-study. Details like that only clouded my contention that I knew what I desired.

I was at the point in my gay life where I wanted everyone to think I was clear about both my abilities and my preferences. I was hoping to clarify—for myself and everyone else—most of the bedroom confusion and anxiety I'd been suffering since I stepped into the life. I was at that pivotal moment in my gayness at which I was trying to own—for my own peace of mind—being a bottom, after four years of claiming "versatility."

I hadn't even considered the labels "top," "bottom," and "versatile" until I'd come to New York and found a gay "community." The problem was, however, that I'd done little of being any of them. Pain on the one hand and a morbid fear of premature ejaculation on the other had kept me from going very far in any direction—even as the Gods of nomenclature continued to demand from me increasingly more precise terms of self-classification.

"But what do you want these men for?" Eric, our old choir director, asked. His bearing suddenly became serious.

Eric was taller and more attenuated than most Mexicans I knew. Standing a good six-five and cigarette thin. His father was African-American, but had lived more than half his life in Guadalajara. After his mom's death, Eric was packed off to the States to grow up with his aunt's family in a small city called Natchitoches in Louisiana. He resembled any of a number of handsome, curly-haired, fair-skinned black men. His voice, though, was singular. Unmistakably southern, but extraordinarily deep and shockingly resonant, as if each word he spoke was excavated from the ground beneath him. Despite his African-American appearance and sound, he never introduced himself as anything other than Mexican—perhaps to set himself further apart from all the blacks who made meat pies back in Natchitoches.

"You started this off talking about relationships, Michael," he continued, "now you're onto studs, it seems like. What do you really want?"

"She thinks she's looking for love," Quincy chimed in. "But I don't think he'd know the real thing if it walked up in a white leisure suit in winter and bit him."

Quincy was just that: a chimer. He paid little attention to most conversations, but somehow knew just when to insert his famous bits of wisdom. It usually turned out that he'd gathered more than anyone thought. At times it was uncanny. He often vaunted that he'd learned his talents from his mama, so he could "piece it" with the best of them.

"That's right. I am looking for love," I said. "And I'll know it when I find it. I'm not settling for anything less. It's just that a man's got to be attractive to me. Sexy. And it's gotta be all breathing and sweating in bed from jump, or else I know it's not gonna last."

"I'm certainly not gonna stay with somebody just because we think we 'started' something. If it's not good in the beginning, what good is it really?" I sucked my teeth. "It's no use working on building a paper house with somebody. The shit's just gonna collapse the first time it rains, right?"

I looked to Quincy for his grudging agreement.

"I'm sure that the rest of that stuff—brains and drive—are gonna follow one day. God willing. Then I'll have it all. But I think it's the sex that's the spirit, the underpinning of the whole thing."

"You need to get fucked, you nasty ho, instead of just sucking dick," Quincy offered.

I suddenly wished I'd chosen to meet him at Escuelita, instead of our traveling to the club together.

"Don't your knees hurt," he continued, "and your mouth, from talking so much mess?" He sighed dramatically. "Sexual attraction doesn't come first to you, girl; it comes easiest. That's just the way you meet men. Try building a house on that foundation, chiiirl." He waved his hand dismissively.

"Quincy, be quiet," I said. "Just hush that shit."

"Quincy does not talk shit before he's had a cocktail," he replied, shaking his head. "But maybe you do need to finally get stuffed, though, girl. For real. So you can see it for what it is, and go back to getting a life. You graduated in May. Now it's September. You're back here with me, and you still don't know or have shit. Maybe a good piece of dick could make some room in your head for your brains."

"Maybe," I challenged. Brushing over Quincy's reads, as I often did. "Huh," I thought aloud, "If I met the right man to do it—fuck me, I mean—I wouldn't kick him. At least not until it was done. Who knows? He might even turn out to be 'the one.'"

"Wasn't the last one who beat up your tonsils for a few weeks 'the one'?" Quincy asked sarcastically. "What was his name? Something 'Doe', right?" He held his palms out as if he were beseeching God. "Why don't a bitch learn how to be alone?"

"I think you'd like my friend David," Eric interrupted then in his basso voice. Cutting off what was about to become a cat and dog fight between Quincy and me. There was a strange lilt of doom in his deep voice though. "The one I'm staying with. Remember?" he went on.

"Is he *the* one?" I asked jokingly. Trying to lighten things up again.

"One of the ones," Eric responded flatly. "If getting fucked into love is what you're looking for. He's one of them. But he's not about games though, Michael. Like you and Quincy. He's about sex. Serious sex. Do you even know what that is?"

Eric peered at me unshiftingly then. His question had me busy picturing myself somewhere in a cross between being plunged by a pimp in an alley and being thoroughly fucked by a prison daddy on my first night inside. The cross was really no cross at all, though, I realized. I knew that one way or another, prison daddy and pimp were only metaphors for the type of man who made the probability of my being submissive all right.

I thought about being passive in bed more often than not, yet I still required that certain masculine conditions be met before I would allow anyone to fuck me. These were the men that I boasted about and dreamed of at night. Men who would be able to force their way into my body and hopefully hold some position in my life.

There weren't many of these manlier men in my world, though. My standards may have been different from most. It wasn't about the size of their arms or their legs, but something in the way they carried themselves. The energy they gave off. Their very nature. The way they smelled, or talked or stood that said no one could be ashamed about giving them whatever they wanted. Seeing such men secretly brought out the "I can try this" mentality in me. I considered that actual sex with one would be a minor test to see if being treated like a woman by a man would make or break my impression of myself over the long haul.

I imagined that "Are you all right?" from that type of man would mean, "Are you man enough, motherfucker?" in the old tongue. I envisioned myself grunting "Yes. Yes," and having more affirmatives rammed out of me during the fucking. Then I would fall asleep in the shelter of such a man's arms, knowing that he was mine. Or at the very least that I was his.

Harsh though it sounded, my skin prickled at the thought.

"Watch out, girl!" Quincy yelled, as I stepped off the curb into oncoming traffic and the scream of blaring horns.

My heart rose up frantic and loud in my chest like a startled pigeon taking flight even as I inwardly reeled and snapped, "Don't call me that! You little bitch!"

I was a moment recovering from the nearness of the yellow cab as it brushed me in a whoosh of horn blowing and not even a second's application of brakes. I kicked away the page of newspaper that had wrapped itself around my legs and inhaled deeply to try to gather myself.

I didn't know why I'd suddenly been so offended by Quincy feminizing me. We did it to each other all the time. Certainly, I was embarrassed by my misstep into the street, but the momentary anger I'd felt towards him was something more. Stronger, it seemed, than just that moment. I sensed dimly that my fury was connected to the thoughts and conversation I'd been having about sex, men, and about myself. Most particularly, about Eric's friend. My heartbeat had taken on a voice since Eric mentioned him a moment ago. "*Day-Vid. Day-Vid. Day-Vid.*" My heart clenched, released, pushed blood and sang.

"O.K. Girl," Quincy responded to my insult, interrupting my thoughts and turning his attention away again. Daring me to continue my tirade. "You're welcome for my saving your little life, or whatever you call it. You must think your cat has nine of them. Carry on," he motioned with his fingers twinkling, lips pursing and eyebrows raising all in one gesture. Then he said, so faintly that I almost didn't make it out, "...chile gonna get killed for thinking about dick. Unhh."

I doubted it.

Eric was already on the other side of the street by the time I'd fully regained my composure. Seeing him over and between the cars and awash in their lights as they passed returned the stream of my curious thoughts. He was like a lighthouse. Guiding me somewhere in relation to jagged, rocky shores. Somewhere in relation to this man, this spectre, named David.

I was interested in meeting him—apparently even my blood was—yet I was cowed, all the same. Men of his implied masculine profile rarely approached me, though we often caught one another's eye. In city after city, I'd see such men in the clubs. Against the odds, we'd notice one another across crowded, dim rooms, flashing lights and pounding bass. We'd stare and

circle, like loosed dogs. Kind of sniff one another's asses, but never really connect. Apparently we all traveled, so it was always the same few men that captivated me, no matter what city or state I was in.

After awhile I recognized that more often than not these men also knew one another. They and I seemed bound together as a group on some fraternal level that I didn't comprehend. It was astonishing the way I felt acquainted with them even though we'd never actually met. I wanted to, though. Desperately. I had always been too young, shy or intimidated by their energy, however, to make a definitive move.

In general, I rarely made the first advance, no matter whom I was attracted to at any given moment. I almost never went after what I wanted. At the same time as I was handicapped by my timidity, it was obvious that I managed—without trying or desiring—to intimidate lots of other gay men. As objective as I could be, I knew that I was attractive. Tall, nutmeg brown, and thin, but muscled. With large lips and a broad nose, both of which I'd grown into well. My hair was the kind of coarse, overgrown mess that held onto men's fingers for dear life. Like a field that had returned to nature, a friend once said he could imagine bees and butterflies landing in the afro of my hair. But it was my eyes, though, that made them first stare at me and then look away. Evidently, men were comfortable if their gazes only skated across the deep brown surface of my eyes, but most seemed unwilling to risk drowning in them. In me.

So, while I waited for the men I wanted to come to me, they waited for me to come to them. No one moved. It was almost hilarious. The brave ones were almost always effeminate, old or otherwise unattractive to me. For all of those reasons, and probably more, I'd ended up being lusty, yet inexperienced with the more cleaving aspects of sex. I was well aware that I hadn't yet grown into my own masculine power. I was afraid that Eric might actually have been right when he'd suggested that I probably couldn't cut it with someone like David anyway.

My sexual resume contained little more than some birds munched on and a few frightened gasps of pain. Even Quincy was right when he'd suggested that most of my short relationships had ended either because my boyfriends had turned too quickly onto their bellies, or rigor had set in my jaws. I wondered seriously whether my eagerness could make up enough for my inexperience. I wanted whatever might happen between David and me to be more of a boon than an eternal half-hour of glass shattering screams and torture. I was full of self doubt, but convinced myself that if David wanted me, as Eric had suggested a few days ago, I would stay the course, no matter what.

As Quincy and I crossed the street, I wanted to ask Eric more about David, but couldn't find suitably toned-down words to conceal my excitement. The duration of my silence as we stood on the corner at 107th and West End got him to laughing. He looked at me exaggeratedly wide-eyed as he told me we were almost there. He was like a maitre d at a cemetery. Leading me terrified to a place that seemed inevitable.

He asked Quincy again if Quincy wouldn't rather head on out to Escuelita by himself while I caught up later. Quincy told him, however, that he wouldn't miss this for the world. Eric looked at him disapprovingly for a few seconds. Then Quincy looked at me, and I looked at Eric, and Eric looked at Quincy. The stalemate was pointless, and that pointlessness quickly became humorous. Before we knew it, as we continued southward, we were consumed by nervous laughter, as three black men on an increasingly deserted and upscale, residential street.

Our laughter was still heavy as we entered David's elegant, five story, red brick building. The combination of curiosity, fear and the knowledge of having been singled out by Eric as the one to *meet* David worked on me as sweat beaded my brow. David had seen me during one of

our gospel choir concerts last semester, Eric had told me. David had decided then that he wanted Eric to bring me to him. After several months, here I was. I suspected that Eric had waited for me to graduate and receive my diploma before bringing me to David. A sense of “accomplish some things in your life first, just in case...” moved furtively behind the explanation he’d given me for the delay.

The door clicked heavily into place as we left the City’s captivating song of gentrified dysfunction outside. We were struck for an instant by the sudden almost-silence and shadow there in the vestibule. It muted us. The anteroom was tomblike, yet brightened on its edges by the low, muffled sounds of passing traffic. Wheels on road. Metal passing close and windy beside metal. Eric unlocked the inner door and we laughed nervously again, ostensibly for no reason. As we passed through we recreated the warding bubble of conversation we’d erected around ourselves while traversing the streets of Morningside Heights. We formed a line and began slowly climbing the stairs.

Windows on the landings allowed streetlamps and headlights to unseal slightly the envelope of darkness surrounding the steps in front and above us. For some reason Eric had decided not to tap the light switch before leading us up the stairs. As I mounted in the semi-dark, somewhere in my head I imagined myself being raped by this David while Eric, and maybe others, looked on. I have no idea where that intuition came from. I felt vaguely, though, as if Eric were luring me into some kind of carnal trap. The way he kept turning around at the landings to check if I was still there did nothing to diminish the sentiment.

A feeling of *deja vu* began to grow in the stairwell as we ascended. To my skin, it felt as if I’d had sex there, on those stairs, before, though I was certain I hadn’t. The banister felt coated with sex. Warm and wet like blood. I looked up at Eric as that impression took me. He smiled. An almost predatory curve of his lips. I wasn’t sure anymore whether Quincy was still behind me.

The space quickly took on a life of its own then. Our footfalls sounded like flesh slapping against flesh. Doors opening on other floors passed through me like moans. My hand sliding on the rounded rail moved me to shivers. I tried to shake the bizarre feelings off into another round of laughter. To argue with myself that I had no reason to be so anxious. I reminded myself that I wouldn’t be staying. That Quincy was with me—even though he’d grown uncharacteristically speechless there behind me. My mind was blowing things out of proportion, I told myself. I reasoned and reasoned until the stairs slowly became stairs again.

As the *deja vu* faded, though, a sense of compulsion supplanted it as we exited into the hall on the fourth floor. The impulse’s grip increased as we walked. I was being pulled. There was a divining so strong that I knew David’s apartment several doors before we reached it. Apartment 4I. The number four on the door hung loosely upside down. It reminded me of one of the Tarot cards—the Hanged Man. I found that I could imagine the sound of David’s voice well before I saw him. I was alarmed. I noticed the others looking at me strangely, as if every bit of my dismay was evident on my face. Quincy probably thought I wanted to punk out of the meeting. I didn’t. This was something else. Eric’s face was shifting. I sensed that he wanted to tell me to run. But he didn’t.

After Eric rang the buzzer below the peep hole, a man opened the door wide. David was nude except for the telephone in his hand. He smiled and nodded at us—at Eric—as if I were dinner being held on a serving tray. Quincy had turned his head. Not wanting to look at David’s muscular body and dick as it hung there. However innocently. David gave no apologies. No

hello. With an appraising nod, he signaled that he'd be back in a minute and closed the door with us still outside.

When he came back, he had added only a pair of grey sweat pants over his nakedness. Obviously, no underwear. The phone was still pressed between his ear and the thick roundness of his shoulder. He welcomed us in with only a gesture then left us in the dim parlor with only the rank smell of his sweat for a host as he continued his telephone conversation.

His living room was a gallery of phallo-erotic art. From marble monoliths and iron currency spades to sculpted obsidian needles and painted landscapes where nature was somehow twisted or perhaps untwisted to allow a certain masculinity—a definite measure of sex—to shine through. But nowhere was sex represented for the sake of sex. To me, David's care at not being completely gauche with static representations meant he probably worshipped the active thing. The flesh and blood, moving and sliding thing that could be so naturally expressed in and frozen as art. The entire room felt like a not so subtle invitation to explore the carnal in myself. The room was like the man, as far as he'd been described to me, and his presence pervaded it.

"So, hsss," the intake of breath seemed to be from a sinus condition, though it made David appear as if he was accustomed to snorting coke, "who are your friends, Eric?" He scanned us in a sweep, then raised his eyebrow at me as I stroked one of the obsidian needles. His glance froze my hand in its stride along the needle's edge.

"This is Michael, the guy I told you about from Columbia," Eric said, gesturing. He seemed almost retreating now in David's presence. "And this is Quincy. His friend. My old choir boys. They're going out to the club together afterwards." He stepped back from David. "That's why they're here...together."

I noted Eric's withdrawal, and the apology in his downturned eyes, as I moved to shake David's hand. Not for the first time that night I wondered about the particulars of their relationship. Unless I was way off base, Eric seemed somewhat frightened of David. The way an abused dog might be fearful of his tattooed and pierced owner. There may even have been a bit of the same kind of loyalty or love. With my hand in David's, I began to feel afraid for myself again, as I had in the stairwell.

"Yes, hsss" he said, still gripping my hand. "I like that—a man's grip." He peered more directly and deeply into my eyes than I felt anyone in my life ever had. Than any other man upon meeting me ever dared. David was not intimidated by me whatsoever.

The way he avoided looking at Quincy said that he had only expected and wanted one of us to come with Eric. After almost a full minute, he released my hand and looked at Quincy finally.

Without greeting him, to my surprise, and probably Quincy's, he said, "But this isn't going to work. Not at all."

He seemed to stare through Quincy. As if he were blind and unaware that some living thing was standing there. He didn't offer that any of us should sit down.

"Eric knows what I mean," he continued, turning away from Quincy. Then he looked at me and said, almost whisperingly, "Michael, come with me a minute." He gestured toward the hallway in front of him and waited for me to pass.

One second, I was bewildered and embarrassed for Quincy. The next I was distantly ashamed of myself. I knew that I should have protested David's effrontery, but refusing him was absolutely the furthest thing from my mind. Irrationally, I never considered it for an instant.

Instead of saying to David "That was incredibly and unnecessarily rude," I turned to Quincy, and said, "Girl, I'm not sure what's goin' on, but I'll be right back."

Quincy's lower jaw dropped in astonished disappointment. He simply, silently, gave me the hand as I started walking towards David.

Just as I'd passed him to take the lead down the hall, David used his right hand to dim the lights in the apartment even further. As the light faded, out of the corner of my eye, over my shoulder, I thought I saw Eric's six foot five frame moving quickly towards Quincy, and Quincy flinching in surprise. It was hard to tell what had just happened in the darkened room, though, especially since David stood directly in my path when I turned around to clarify. He held my face in his hands and locked my eyes to his in the almost candle light, completely narrowing my field of vision.

He said, "This way, hsss," stepped around and turned me to have me follow close behind. My questions about Quincy quickly dissolved in my mind.

David was tall like Eric—at least six four—raw umber brown and broad. Walking behind him, I watched the lines and curves of his shoulder muscles in the faint light. The lumps of his triceps. The way his waist swelled slightly before dipping into the arch of his hips. I loved the dimples on either side of his lower back.

He was in great shape, but not a gym body. His physique was more natural than manufactured. His form seemed a perfect complement to the smell of perspiration that surrounded him and made him even more beautiful.

I was imagining myself cupping his ass while he fucked me, when he stopped suddenly in the doorway to one of his bedrooms and spun around. I walked straight into his chest.

"I'm sor—"

"I'm not," he whispered, as he took my hand and gently forced me to trace his dick down his leg. "Hsss. Now does that call for an apology?" he asked.

I didn't say anything. Couldn't.

He took me by the shoulders and turned me around so that I was part way into the bedroom, my face pressed against the left frame of the door. I could see that he had dressed the bed in satin sheets so red that I could feel the warmth of blue in them, even in such muted light. Enough plush pillows to fill a deep clawfoot tub were esthetically arrayed across the head of his huge bed. The lights had been dimmed just enough to make the room a cube of suspended dawn. New York City night, with its millions of lights, waited anxiously just beyond the large windows. I knew immediately that he had re-made this small corner of his world expressly for me.

He pushed his body up against mine and lowered his head to breathe into my ear from behind, "I still don't hear anything, Michael. Hsss."

He lowered his hands to my hips, then down and over my ass just once. "Tell me," he said. His voice was like the sound of blood flowing into my erection. "Am I wrong about you?"

"N-no," I said, hesitantly. I wanted to sink to my knees. I wanted him to grind his dick against the back of my head as I knelt there. I wanted him to bruise my lips on the frame of the door. I wanted him to unhinge me. I could have cared less whether he was right or wrong, or what he was asking. I had never felt so taken advantage of and thrilled by the offense as I was then.

"Do you know why I had Eric bring you here?" he asked.

"No," I sighed.

"Sure you do," he said.

I could feel a sly smile ease across his face as his cheekbone rested against my temple. Then he slid his tongue into my ear as he breathed and licked in short flashes. My ears were so

sensitive that I reflexively struggled against him. But he held me firmly. Pulled me back against him with his right hand, like a clamp around my throat. The longer he grappled with me the less I wanted to be let go. The more I relaxed into his invasion.

—TO BE CONTINUED—