

## **Notes from a Kink Club**

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**T**wo metal doors stare at me. The fleeting promise of darkness beyond them. My chest tightens. Breath quickens. In. Out. In. Out. Trying to match the pounding rhythm coming from behind those doors. Boom boom. Boom boom. A heartbeat. I keep telling myself that I'm here now, that I've already bought my ticket. I had to pay full price because I was fully clothed. In, out. In, out. About halfway to matching the rhythm now. Hands are sweating. Sticky. My hands reach for the door. Extensions of some broken machine, rusted, and bleeding gasoline. I open the door. The stairs wink at me. I peek back. I enter the kink club.

The darkness is suffocating. Twisting and coiling itself around me to the violent beat of the music. Post-soviet techno. It's industrial. Peppered with the screeches of metal equipment. Each beat is like a knife stabbing deep into my flesh. Twisting the blade. There are people here. Lots of them. They fade in and out of the sporadic flashes of strobe lights. Their bodies are convulsing. Flickering wisps of smoke pretending to be human.

Most of them wearing black. I am too. At least I got that part right. But there are a million ways to wear black at a kink club. Some people are wearing the staple Berlin black t-shirt. Some have whips hanging from their waists and some have collars around their necks and some have masks on their faces. Those are the ones that are clothed. Then there are the ones who don't have anything on at all. Their genitals flop back and forth as they dance.

I try to move my limbs, but they're mechanical again. Dancing to techno is already weird, it's even weirder in this place. I can't seem to catch up with the others. I'm falling behind. It feels like people are staring at me, but I know they aren't. Should I take my clothes off? My chest is tightening again. I need to get some space.

People are fucking in one of the bathroom stalls. The walls are shaking a bit. I manage to find one that's empty near the end. Shut the door. I can still hear moans from the other stall. Don't focus on them. There's graffiti all over everything.

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I take out the small baggie from inside my pants. A little orange ecstasy pill. Should I flush it down the toilet? No. Break the pill in half. The tightness has left, replaced by the sensation of butterflies tickling my stomach lining. Pop it. It's bitter. I leave the stall and quickly walk out onto the dance floor again. Done.

I've got forty-five minutes until the ecstasy kicks in, but the tantalizing promise of its arrival is already making things better. I'm moving again and I begin to look at the people around me, watching as they move from shadow to flesh in a dance with the darkness. In front of me there's a man wearing nothing but a gas mask and a thong, and alongside him there's a woman waving a large white fan and wearing duct tape over her nipples. The man is swaying and his movements are gentle, a melody that seems at odds with the high tempo of the music. The woman is jerking back and forth, like she's sinking her fingernails into someone and tearing them apart – limb from limb. It would look violent if it weren't for her closed eyes and the large smile cutting across her face – on drugs for sure. In front of them, two men are kissing. One of them has a fluffy pink scarf which the other grabs like a rope, pulling him underneath a leather trench coat. And as he does, the scarf falls to the floor where it lies like a little pink snake, flickering in and out of the flashing lights.

My skin is tingling, a sign that the ecstasy is kicking in. Everything in the room speeds up, and then, simultaneously, slows down as if time is driving under the influence, swerving through this strange world whose soft edges are slowly merging into those of a dream. People and objects and thoughts flutter around me like delicate moths and I have the urge to reach out to them. My body is in sync with the other bodies around me. Our bones and sinews all tremble to the same melody. An uncontrollable smile etches itself into my face. I can't help but feel anything but gratitude for being able to float aimlessly inside this hedonistic pool of desire.

The tingling has turned into a soft buzz arcing through my body, an electrical current. There's nowhere in the world I'm supposed to be right now except in this place, with these people. Are these feelings real? Forget that thought. These thoughts feel genuine, but will they later? Shhhhhh. Feel happy. Feel good. Those feelings are hard to come by.

Drifting through the building, gliding through these narrow and dark halls. I'm one of the moths now. People lean against the walls like shadows and a few reach out to me, fingers sliding across my arm, across my waist, and their touch is faint – they have the hands of ghosts. Strangers in leather. Strangers in latex. Strangers in straps. Strangers being led on chains. There's a humanness to them,

the type of humanness that inevitably comes when a preconceived caricature dissolves into reality, or whatever this is. The stretch marks. The wrinkled lips. A small smile. They are all far too pure and far too honest and far too real for the twisted world that lies just beyond these walls. A societal rock has lifted away, one that I've been told my whole life would house maggots underneath, but instead, all I see on that damp soil, once enshrouded in darkness, is the imprint of my own figure.

I've finally made it to the end of the hallway, where I find a black curtain that obscures whatever acts are producing the labored moans slithering beneath it. It's the sex room. My mind populates the unknown with images and bodies twisting and convulsing in some carnal cult-like dance. Suddenly I find myself back at the beginning of the night, staring at a new door; a door within a door. The effect of the ecstasy is slowly growing stronger and I'm not ready for it to peak in that room. I want to talk to someone. I want to talk to everyone. And people aren't talking in there. What have I even come here to do? Nothing is certain anymore. Moments are fragmented. I'm fragmented. I'm someone else. Fragments of a shattered mirror. Strange thoughts on this dreamy night.

The smoking area is just an empty slab of concrete on the rooftop of the building. I rest my arms on the railing and stare at the sprawling outskirts of the city, at a street lamp flickering in the distance, at the homes of families who have just gone to bed. Fast asleep, they have no idea what is going on up here, we're the figures of their nightmares, their desires.

I'm joined by a man and a woman. He's short, bald, and is led by his partner, a taller woman who I assume is his partner. She's wearing a winter coat over latex. She keeps glancing at me as she caresses the man's shoulder with a small whip. I wonder if I should say something, but they seem older, somewhere in their forties, and that intimidates me. I can't be rude. I need to come up with something, but before I can she says something to me in Dutch.

"I'm sorry I don't speak Dutch," I reply.

"Oh English," she says, "are you okay?"

I turn to face them.

"Yeah, just enjoying the view."

The fascination growing. I want to know about them. My lungs replace oxygen with curiosity.

"I like the writing on your arm," she says, "Can I touch?"

I nod. Her hands are delicate but deliberate, following the curve of each letter with her fingernail: *Stars hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires.*

"What's it from?"

"Macbeth. The Shakespeare play."

"I know it's Shakespeare," she says.

I should ask them something, but I don't know what. The first thing that comes to my head. "What do you both do for a living?"

What a stupid question.

"I'm training to be a Kindergarten teacher," she says, glancing at her partner. Up until now he's been silent.

"I work as a software engineer."

"Oh, that's nice," I say. "What do you want to teach?"

She smiles again. It's a smile filled with weight and power. I'm suddenly small.

"How to be dominated."

She gently starts tapping the folded whip against my ass.

"He means what do you want to teach the children," the man says, laughing.

"Oh," she closes her eyes. She thinks it over, still tapping my ass. "Well, I guess... I want to teach them how to be confident. Yeah, confident. Especially the girls. Girls need more of that in this... in this crazy world."

"That's really cool," I reply.

Everything around me is hazy. A mist has crept in, one which makes the world seem blurry and soft. The ecstasy is starting to peak. My jaw is clenching. Skin sweating. Chest tightening. The air is cold but my skin ignores it. The absurdity of the situation hasn't been lost on me. These off people here. Do they come often? Is it their first time as well? I want to know. What do they do to one another behind closed doors? I also want to know. I want to be trapped in this world of hedonism and sensations. I could stay here forever. That thought scares me.

"Are you okay?" she asks. She grasps my arm. She has a tight grip, almost painful, but somehow also calming, soothing even, and the tightness in my chest subsides.

"Can I ask you something?" she continues. The tapping of the whip has turned into a soft hitting now. "How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-one."

"So young. You don't look very experienced either. We could teach you if you like."

I try to answer something, but she cuts me short with a finger on the lips.

"Think about it. You can always find us later."

She leads her partner away from me and back down to the darkness below, fading away.

There are red rose petals in front of the black curtain. I pick one up to see if it's real. So delicate. I bring it to my lips and then let it fall on my tongue like a snowflake. I'm at the final gateway of this dream and for some reason it seems quieter than I expected. Deep breath. Another. Then I slip through the curtains. Slip through them like everyone there is sleeping. Slip through them like they have to wake up early in the morning.

Kissing. Thrusting. The smell of sex is strong. I could cup it in my hands if I wanted to. There are a couple cots. A couple couches. I sit on one, unsure of what to do. There's a faint light coming from an LED bulb in the corner. Enough to make everyone look like an outline of a body. My eyes have to adjust to it, have to adjust to the scenery. There's a swing that looks like a hammock in front of me. Two bodies in it. The swing rocking back and forth. Their bodies rocking back and forth. It's hypnotizing, this bodily pendulum will never end. I hardly even notice the man giving a blowjob beside me. He looks up at me and I smile back awkwardly. I move to another sofa.

A guy and a girl sit down next to me. They're younger, probably close to my age.

"Where are you from?" she asks me.

"California."

She smiles.

"Cali boy."

"And you?"

"Berlin."

It's hard for me to look her in the eyes. I glance over somewhere else. Four bodies in a dog pile. I can't even tell who's who. A fleshy hydra. In the corner the outline of somebody with their hands strapped to a pole and getting fucked with a strap on. Beside them, two naked women are taking a break, taking pauses in their conversation to take a sip from a tall glass of water.

"Why are you here?" the guy asks me.

"I don't really know, to be honest," I say. A pause. "Why are you here?"

"I'm here to play."

Another pause. Then he asks me:

"Do you want to play?"

I'm trembling. This couch is the electric chair. I smile. I nod. She kisses me first. Her mouth is warm and she has a piercing on her tongue. He takes off my shirt and touches my skin. He's gentle, but there's a roughness too. A subdued roughness. A precision, like a surgeon. The ecstasy makes every graze of the skin pulse through my entire body.

"You have nice skin," he whispers in my ear.

I should pay him a compliment back. But I don't know what. He starts to kiss me and the girl moves to my neck. Her nails are long. They dig into my back. Digging deeper and deeper. Her nails like swords, his beard like needles.

Her lips find the tattoo on my back. Her hair, red like the roses outside, brushes against it. It's a redwood tree. A reminder of home. She kisses it. He's moving further down, my body is clenching like a fist. Further down. Suddenly there's a warm sensation. Rhythmic movement. She keeps kissing it. That doesn't feel right. The piercing on her tongue is scraping against home. Swallowed inside the dark embrace of her mouth.

Thoughts start spilling into my head. My mind is bleeding, just like my back. All those confused feelings from growing up. From growing up in a small town. The repression of those urges. Wanting to fuck boys? Wanting to fuck girls? Wanting to fuck everyone outside and in between? You're a fucking freak. That's what you are. Imagine if your parents found you here. Imagine if they had any idea of those thoughts and desires that slither through your brain. Half of your family would disown you. Your friends would think you're disgusting. And maybe you are.

And now she's touching something from a different me. A me that I had tied up before coming here, but who now has broken out and is tearing me apart from the inside out. It's not that me that's supposed to be here, doing this. I'm supposed to be someone else here. Buried fragments have risen from the grave. The dream is cracking. I'm falling on the shards.

I pull away and look at them. Disappointed. Not in them, but in myself. They look back, concerned.

"I'm sorry. It's not you." I struggle for words. "It's a lot. I'm sorry." I pause again. "It's just a lot. I'm sorry."

They tell me that I shouldn't worry. I shouldn't do anything that I'm not comfortable with. I leave while they're still talking to me.

I'm sitting down, my back pressed against the cold hallway wall. The big question. Why am I here? Searching for some form of validation. To feel like I belong. And now I'm sitting here alone and I want to cry. The loneliness is a river now. That need for belonging a pulse. Everything is numb. Everything is faint. Physical sensation

has become an echo. A dying heartbeat. The line between dream and nightmare is fragile. The ecstasy tells me that it's still an experience. That it can still be important. That it can still mean something. I'm trying to listen to it, but another part of myself, one that I've seemed to have forgotten when I popped that little orange pill, is telling me otherwise. It's like I'm trying to stab a knife into my heart, but the ecstasy dulls it just as it's about to cut in.

Oscillating between a place of emptiness and fullness. Swinging back and forth like the bodies. Sliding down the peak of this dream, dreary and deflated. A soft techno song plays in the background. A looped rhythm as a monotone voice repeats, in German, *Ich will eine Maschine sein. Arme zu greifen. Beine zu gehen. kein Schmerz. Kein Gedanke.* I roll my head back against the wall. *Ich will eine Maschine sein.* I close my eyes. *Arme zu Greifen.* They feel like they're going to roll out of their sockets. *Beine zu gehen.* I wish they would. *Kein Schmerz. Kein Gedanke.*

My thoughts are swirling in my head. I see someone sitting farther down from me. I walk over and sit down beside them. Their makeup is messy. Mascara running down their face. Two black waterfalls.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

They look over at me. There's a faint smile on their face.

"Yes, honey. Just need a little bit of a break from the whole thing." They gently tap my arm a few times, "And you darling?"

"I guess I also need a break."

They laugh. Their voice is soft and gentle.

"You're a pretty boy," they say.

"You're pretty too."

"You're young."

"I feel young."

"If you keep coming to these things like me, you'll need lots of breaks."

"I don't know if I will."

They smile knowingly.

"We'll see."

"Yeah we will."

"Why did you start coming to these?" I ask.

"To be myself. And you?"

"To be someone else."

"And do you think that that someone else belongs here?"

I roll my head back against the wall. I stare up at the ceiling.

"They could someday."

They grab my head between their hands.

"Honey, that someone else will always belong here. Even if they never come back."

I smile. Again, I'm like a child. Again, I want to cry.

"Here honey, let me put some eyeliner on you. You'll look pretty in it."

They take out the pen. They press it down. Near the waterline. It's kind of painful. A tear slides down my cheek. It's delicate. Almost tickling.

"Look up honey. There you go."

They finish and turn my head. They cup it in their hands again.

"You look beautiful honey."

"Thank you."

"What's your name?" I ask.

"We don't do names here."

They move closer to me. Their lips are bright red. Like the girl's hair from the sex room. Like the rose petals on the floor. They kiss me. They stand up. They point to my lips. They laugh.

"I'm going back in honey. You might wanna go to the bathroom and wash up."

They disappear through the curtain.

The bathroom is empty now, which means it must be getting late. I look at myself in the mirror, staring at the eyeliner circling my eyes, the skin draping around them. They look tired and they look pretty in a childish way, just like the bright red lipstick smeared all over my mouth. I smile at myself in the mirror.

The lights go on. The music shuts off. It must be time to leave. They're harsh and they sear my eyes and they burn my skin. The black curtains fall from the windows and the outside world floods in, invading the once soft and sacred darkness. As I walk upstairs, the promise of morning becomes more and more frightening. People are changing back into their normal clothes. Masks and wigs come off, latex and leather are exchanged for cotton and polyester, collars are replaced with winter coats, and whips are being stowed inside purses. People are calling taxis and searching for their metro cards. Some of them have to work in the morning.

Moving from this to normality. Now I have to do the same. They all seem so comfortable doing it, but I don't. Just the thought of going back into the outside world seems repulsive, perverted. For a second I wish they would lock the doors and we could all stay here forever. Even in my momentary fantasy I'm a nameless shadow on the wall, half of myself within, half of myself without. I'm content with that for now.

The dream is ending, the haze slowly clearing. The distant world below the stairs is gone now. My shirt is heavy. My eyes are aching. I feel a familiar hand around my arm. It's the woman from the rooftop, except she's in normal clothes now, and her grip is soft.

"Don't you have gloves?" she asks.

"No, I don't," I say, "I forgot them at home."

"You fragile little thing. Your hands are going to freeze to death out there."

She reaches into her bag and searches around for a second.

"Here, take these," she says, draping a pair of long latex gloves across my arm. "A little gift from me."

"Oh, no I can't," I say, "really it's not that—"

Cut off again by a finger on the lips. Then she walks away. In a staring contest with the door again. I put my hand inside one of the gloves. It almost reaches my elbow. Slowly zip it up. It feels tight around my arm. I like it. Repeat with the other hand. They're smooth, brushing against my skin every time I move. A natural extension of my body. I put on my coat, making sure to pull the sleeves over the latex gloves before finally opening the door.