Crashing the Cotillion, Part 1: Tonight Is What It Means To Be Dumb

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To quote from their website, TransGender San Francisco is a "non-profit corporation dedicated to serving the educational, social, and recreational needs of the transgendered community. TGSF is also dedicated to educating the general public about transgenderism and promoting a positive image of transgendered persons among the general public."

The "recreational needs" part is a major element, as they hold monthly Socials and other events in safe, trans-friendly public places, providing much-needed opportunities for many to dress *en femme* and meet other like-minded individuals. So, they're doing the Big Work, and I know people who are very grateful to them for help they've provided over the years. I also know people have a lot of issues with TGSF, but, well, somebody somewhere is *always* going to have a problem with something.

I never really availed myself of their services for the first few years of my transition, which I mark as beginning in 1999 because it sounds cooler than the somewhat more accurate 1998, and of course my transition has been a lifelong process starting when I was a child and I first realized *yadda yadda yadda*. But in December of 2004, I decided to go to one of their Socials.

I'd been living full-time as female since 2001, I was long since out to my family, my employment troubles were due entirely to a crappy job market and not me being transgendered, and I didn't feel the need to be around others transsexuals in order to somehow validate my own existence, or to feel supported by them.

I went to the social because I heard there was open mic. I went to be a rock star.

By late 2004, my writing and performing career was at two-and-a-half years old. After working the open mic circuit tirelessly I was finally making a name for myself, and was starting to get some high-profile gigs. The most recent one was at City Lights Bookstore for the J.T. Leroy book most people have never heard of, *Harold's End.* The Leroy hoax was revealed shortly after that, and while everybody else was up in arms about it, I thought it was hilarious, and it made me all the more proud.

I mean, not only did I read at City fucking Lights, I did so in the context of the greatest literary hoax of the first decade of the twenty-first century, putting me in the company of people like Jerry Stahl, Lou Reed and Rosario Dawson--and, judging from stuck-in-amber "Past Events" page on jtleroy.com, it was the last of the readings. What's not to like? A columnist who covered the event for a local gay rag even wrote "Sherilyn Connelly blew me away she was so dynamic and gorgeous and a real Star presence", and heaven knows I wanted to believe *that* hype, so I was going to bring that Star presence to the TGSF Mid-Month Social and ride out my fifteen minutes.

I was strangely nervous when I arrived, and I savored that feeling, too. I seldom got nervous before a reading anymore, particularly one that was just an open mic. I hadn't even felt this nervous before the City Lights reading. Perhaps it was because I felt a little alien, moreso among this group of trans women than I ever did even when I was at events populated largely by straight and/or cis people. I was also the youngest one there at thirty one and a half, and in general I'd taken a slightly different path in life to get there than they had, and had different plans and priorities going forward.

For example, there was a lot of talk about plastic surgery, the subculture of a culture, who's getting what done by whom and when. The same initialized names over and over: Doctor Em, Doctor Zee, the vaguely filthy-sounding Doctor Oh. It was a very big deal to them, and while plastic surgery skeeves me out something fierce, I couldn't say I didn't empathize in this context. I understood the need to change your reflection, and if I felt facial feminization surgery was necessary, well, that's what I would do (if I could afford it, which I've never been able to). I was the anomaly in this particular environment, with a face that hormones and electrolysis and genetics had at long last shaped into a form that my brain was wired to be satisfied with. And I knew good and well that it was all luck, particularly my acceptance of it. One neuron zigging instead of zagging, and I could well be saving up my pennies to get a brow shave.

One of the other topics of conversation was the upcoming Cotillion. The biggest shindig of them all, a fancy to-do built around a pageant to select the new Ms. TGSF, who then acts as an ambassador of peace and goodwill from TGSF to the world at large, like riding on the float in the Pride parade or attending San Francisco Imperial Court events. (There was also a Mr. TGSF selected, but, well, he didn't get nearly as much attention and stage time as the Ms. TGSF. The Cotillion is Ladies Night, and there's precious few of those for trans women in boy-happy San Francisco.) Ultimately it was an excuse for everyone to get all dressed up and formal and to just have a night of elegance and glamour, including a presentation of debutantes, giving people not competing for the tiara the opportunity to strut their stuff onstage.

The organizer of the Cotillion was at the Social, and after I read, she asked me to be in the 2005 Cotillion, to run for Ms. TGSF. Oh *hell* no. I am absolutely not wired to

participate in a pageant, to compete, to be judged. I'm too busy competing with others (most of whom have no idea they're competing with me) and judging myself every day, thank you very much. Plus the required aesthetic appeals to me not in the least, not to mention the time commitment if I won. And, horror of horrors, what if I *lost?* Oh, no way, no how. That was a risk of failure I was in no way prepared to face.

So I kindly declined, but offered a counterproposal: could I read at the Cotillion? And she kindly accepted. The Cotillion was less than a month away and had already been scheduled down to the minute, but she was sure she could squeeze in five or six minutes for me. As an open mic veteran, I knew how to make five or six minutes count, and it was going to be the Cowell Theater at Fort Mason, the same stage I'd seen my favorite ambient composer Robert Rich perform on in 2002 , and without question the biggest room I'd ever played.

Because cotillions need themes (right?), the theme of the 2005 TGSF Cotillion was "Back to the 80s". The poster for the event, featuring a drawing of Cyndi Lauper fully Laupering, was awesome. I took it as the excuse I'd always been looking for to do Madonna's look from the "Lucky Star" video. (I find the song to be absolutely atrocious,

but for my money it's her hottest look until "Frozen.") Indeed, I was one of the only trans women present who did not wear an evening gown or somesuch.

I attended the day-long rehearsal at the Cowell Theater even though there was no real need for me to be there, certainly not *that* long, since my only needs were a microphone, a light, and for a song to be played as me intro and exit music. But it was fascinating to watch the rest of the preparation. One of the sketches was based on *Fast Times at Ridgemont High,* and somebody realized they were going to need the theme song. Having nothing better to do, I volunteered to go to the now-defunct Tower Records at Bay and Columbus to buy it. They didn't have the *Fast Times* soundtrack, but they did carry the one other album on which the song occurs: *The Essential Red Collection* by Sammy Hagar.

Buying a goddamn Sammy Hagar CD at Tower Records is quite possibly the most embarrassing thing I've ever had to do. For as much as I wanted to say "It isn't for me! Honest!", I decided to approach it like porn: clerks, as a rule, do not care what you're getting. If you act casual about it, so will they. If you say it's for a friend, they will *not* believe you. Alas. It just meant I could never set foot in that Tower Records again. (It went out of business the next year anyway. Problem solved!)

Since a recurring theme in my life is pride in my pottymouth, I was proud to be the only person to swear onstage at the 2005 Cotillion. Indeed, one of the first words out of my mouth was "fucking"--as in, "Give it up again for our host, Lenny fucking Broberg!"), followed later by "fuck" yet again, as well as "tits" and "boobage." Those aren't quite so much swearing as simple vulgarity, but are still downright *outré* for an event which features a non-ironic debutante walk. Besides, the organizer said she wanted

me to be “edgy,” so I gave ‘em the next best thing. My girlfriend Maddy said the ASL interpreter's interpretation of “boobage” was hilarious.

Trying not to be a dick about it, I’d asked the organizer a few weeks back when she was designing the programs if she could make extra-certain that my name was spelled correctly. I'd only been getting my name onto flyers and programs for about a year, but at least two-thirds of the time spelled as “Sherilynn” or “Sherylin”, and even when the first name was right the last name got altered to “Connolly”. It’s never not an ego-stroke to see one’s name in print--or even online when somebody else puts it there--but the stroke is accompanied by an unwelcome pinch when it’s misspelled. Indeed, that was the only diva behavior I allowed myself, since it’s the only sort that seems justified. (I don’t do the diva thing anyway, because it’s a great way to not get asked back. Besides, there’s never any excuse to not be nice.) She promised me she’d make sure that my name was spelled correctly in the program, and indeed it was.

But the name of the piece was wrong. Really wrong. So wrong, in fact, it moved beyond annoyance into sheer absurdity, and all I could do was laugh. I called the piece was “Tonight Is What It Means To Be Dumb,” which I fancied to be a Negativland/Zappa-esque riff on “Tonight Is What It Means To Be Young,” the climactic song in *Streets of Fire* (and my intro and exit song, obviously). Though *Streets of Fire* figured into the piece, it was still a pretty deep cut, and the odds of anyone in the audience being familiar enough with the film and/or the *oeuvre* of Jim Steinman to figure out the joke I was making was pretty damned slim. But that's why it's called "self-indulgence" and not "others-indulgence".

Act 2

The Mellow Sounds of Ms. CJ Khing
Where Everybody Knows Your Name (Evening Wear)
Tonight is the Night I Feel Dumb (Sherilyn Connelly)
The Final Answer
Fast Times at Ridgemont High (Lisah Aubergine and)

In the program, however, it was listed as “Tonight Is The Night I Feel Dumb.” Which is hilarious. Hell, I wished I could take credit for it.

Anyhow, the piece went like this:

I was eight years old when The Reagan Era began. The older I got, the less I liked what I was seeing. By the time Reagan kicked Mondale's ass, I was downright disenchanted. Not about politics, but something much more powerful and insidious: fashion. I knew something about me being a boy wasn't right, but being a girl didn't look much better.The word for the decade was *excess*. What was the point of consuming if you weren't going to be conspicuous about it? Heavy makeup. Big hair. Big jewelry. Big floppy bow ties made from scarves. *Shoulder. Pads*. Shoulder pads were confusing and frightening, making me want to run deeper into the closet like a spooked tabby cat. I couldn't figure out why a girl would wear something that made her look like a football player. I *still* don't get it. Kids at school laughed at the bell bottoms of our parents, and I

was teased mercilessly because I folded up the cuffs of my jeans. And yet, they were oblivious to the genuine horrors all around them.

In her essay "Power Dressing: 1980s Fashion History," Pauline Weston Thomas writes,

Lavish use of both fine and costume jewelry was worn day and night on the television show Dynasty*, and it drifted into mainstream fashion. Big, almost huge gilt fashion earrings several centimeters across drew attention to faces drowning in shoulder pads. Stones could be fake or real. Diamante, pearls and gold chains were intended to tell the rest of the world you had arrived.*

Dynasty didn't go away until I was sixteen, and I never watched it once. If it was up to me I never would have even seen pictures, but that's not possible in our culture, regardless of the decade. Even now, I wish I didn't know what Paris Hilton looks like.

Its influence was inescapable. No, not everybody dressed like that all the time. But the show's female stars were the decade's most prominent icons of femininity, and there was a definite trickle-down effect. Had I been a budding drag queen with a taste for the ostentatious, it would have been terribly inspirational. Instead, it was just terrifying. My slowly developing aesthetics were not reflected in the world around me. I didn't want to wear shoulder pads. I didn't want to be Linda Evans when I grew up.

What I couldn’t have known was that fashion would not intersect with my own tastes until the mid-nineties. We're all products of our environments, and I often suspect that if I'd been born ten years later, I would have come out at an earlier age because I would have seen girls around me who looked the way I wanted to look.

Now, like most socially challenged boys, I was heavily into *Star Trek*. This being the dark ages before the World Wide Web, I kept an eye on the magazine rack at Bullard Village Drug in Fresno. One of my favorite magazines was called *Enterprise Incidents*. It wasn't just about *Star Trek*, but sci-fi, fantasy and horror, the sort of thing my lonely demographic ate up.

The cover of the August 1984 issue was puzzling. Alongside the expected stuff like *The Last Starfighter* and *Star Trek III* was a picture of an actress named Diane Lane in a movie called *Streets of Fire*. From what I could tell, *Streets of Fire* had no spaceships, special effects, or monsters. It wasn't even set in the future--at least, not any future that looked like, you know, the *future!* Almost every picture, even on the back cover of the magazine, was of Diane Lane singing. For pete's sake, was it a musical? What the hell was a musical doing in *Enterprise Incidents*?The indignation I may have initially felt at this genre-blurring was evened out by the aforementioned pictures of Diane Lane, in clothes which were nothing like *Dynasty*. Sexy but not gaudy, feminine without being a caricature.

I knew deep down that I wanted to be her, but I also knew closer to the surface that I wasn't supposed to want to, and that it was something I had to keep to myself. Going to my mom with the magazine and saying "Can I get my hair to look like that?" was not an option.

The next year I came across a magazine which was an even more transparent attempt to sell sex in the guise of sci-fi. I don't recall the name, but the cover story was about Sybil Danning playing the villain in *Terminator 2*. It was completely fake, of course, nothing more than an excuse to show her tits. I don't like Sybil Danning or gratuitous boobage, then or now, but I bought it anyway.

There was also an article about a television movie called *A Bunny's Tale*, in which Kirstie Alley plays Gloria Steinem going undercover at the Playboy Club. Like the Sybil Danning story, it mostly existed for the T&A. The centerpiece was a full page picture of Kirstie in costume as a Playboy Bunny.

She was already cool because she'd played a Vulcan in a *Star Trek* movie, but even if she hadn't, the picture still would have struck me. I didn't care for the cleavage, but the shape of the rest of her body, the look of the fabric, the angle of her eyebrows, the fact that instead of a smile, the expression on her face said "What the hell are YOU looking at?"...it was glorious, a revelation. I didn't have the first clue about the political ramifications of what she was wearing, and I wouldn't be capable of physical arousal for at least another year. What it stirred in me was something more basic, not about sex but about who I really was.

Unaware that this sort of picture was in fact called a "pin-up," I was very tempted to pin it up on my bedroom wall. But I didn't. I was afraid to. My fear? That my mom would think I was gay.

Seriously. Why else would a boy put a picture of a girl on his wall? To admire how she looked, to imagine being her, which meant he was gay. Obviously, I had no idea what the word "gay" even meant. All I knew was that it was bad. Ironically, my mom probably would have been thrilled that I was showing an interest in girls. I suspect she breathed a sigh of relief when I eventually got a real live girlfriend, since that meant I was a normal boy. That relief would last for less than a decade.

In all fairness, however she may or may not have reacted at the time, my mother is very proud and supportive of me, and introduces me as her daughter. So we're good.

Like comedy, nostalgia is tragedy plus time. It's been fifteen years since Joan Collins assumed her rightful cultural position as has-been, Diane Lane is the only star from *Streets of Fire* to still have a career, Kirstie Alley probably won't be dressing as a Playboy Bunny again anytime soon, and I can dress like “Borderline”-era Madonna if I want. Ladies and gentlemen, tonight *is* what it means to be young.

Yeah, I know. The Kirstie Alley joke in the final paragraph is sizist. It was 2005, okay? I’m more enlightened now, I swear, and I bet that if Kirstie Alley did dress as a

Playboy Bunny now she'd be much more beautiful and real than any of those bullshit stick-thin supermodels, *amirite?* (More about them in Part 3 of this series.)

The piece was well-received, and after the show was over, I figured that was that. I'd thought about going to the occasional Social, keeping in touch, that sort of thing, but my life imploded shortly thereafter when Maddy and I broke up, and suffice it to say, I was distracted.

Then, in July, the organizer wrote and asked if I was interested in reading at the 2006 Cotillion.

Yes. Yes, I was.

(To Be Continued.)

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