



## Good Form

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Tara's studio pad is one floor above Artie's Theatre & Adult Book Store. Her place has one window to the outside world and it frames a bright neon sign that says "Got Porn? We do!" Through the nocturnal glare of the porn store, I can see an ambulance pull away from the curbside below. Nearby stragglers and dealers are howling epithets of encouragement to the recently departed. Her name, the one in the ambulance, is Mary Ann. I wonder if she can hear her friends and johns from inside the meatwagon. Maybe she's shed this mortal coil. If not, she'll return to her dark playground soon after SF General stabilizes her and punts her back onto the street. She'll get back to dancing and partying, twenty-four seven, while waiting for her sweet eternal relief. It's a priceless scene all around but Tara is not with me to enjoy the sights. She is in her bathroom, twenty feet away, crying. There is some leftover gourmet chow on a coffee table in front of Tara's futon, behind me. It's good food for sure,

but I've lost my appetite. Her dining room, living room, and bedroom are one. Tara pays seven-fifty a month.

Tara and I met inside the Squeegeedoo Room near 17<sup>th</sup> and South Van Ness a couple months back. I had touched down in San Francisco two weeks earlier and was locking in to a mindless temp gig for a downtown tax lawyer. It was a Friday night, and I was very high and friendly when I first made eye contact with this tall lanky redhead, wearing bright red shoes and mismatched argyle socks, on the dancefloor. Tara and I smiled and began to dance together under the spell of mediocre trance, which of course sounded wonderful at the time. It was really as simple as that when it started, and quite fun. She had a big smile with perfect teeth and very bright eyes. Several hours later, when we were naked and snorting lines of crushed x, I saw a nice stretch of summertime fun ahead. The next day, she made breakfast for me at two in the afternoon. After a few more hours of weed, sex, and lunch, we left her apartment to score some whippits at the porn store downstairs. Tara already owned a whippit cracker.

Inside the porn store, Tara told a 40-something shock-haired register custodian what she wanted as I cast my eyes up to one of many video monitors posted throughout the well-stocked store. "Christ," I said, "She's going to maim him." Tara looked up and giggled. A bald lady in dominatrix garb was yanking and pulling on this poor man's member like it was a stuck doorknob. After a quick scene cut, the dominatrix, fitted with a strap-on, reamed her man with long angry strokes. The sound was off, and I was grateful for that. The cashier laughed.

“Yeah,” he said. “I don’t watch those damn things too much anymore. But, Jesus, they got some damn doozies, don’t they?” He shook his head. “Crazy Germans.” I paid for the whippets and we left the store.

Outside, there was shady activity everywhere. I got elbowed by a lumbering man in a puffy Fubu jacket who was in a hurry to stand post underneath two sets of Converse sneakers, tied together by their laces and dangling from a power line near the curb of the street. I learned later that the sneakers were dealerese for 'drugs sold here, cash only please'. Across the street, two scruffy and worn men took turns on a crackpipe near the loading dock of the Warfield Theater. They gestured to each other with plenty of animation between hits, but I couldn’t make out what they were saying. A few feet away from them, closer to the curb of Taylor than the loading dock of the theater, a wobbling bleached blond in a fake fur jacket lunged out from between two parked cars and came within an inch of being clobbered by a speeding beer truck. It was Mary Ann, and she was jaywalking. With eerie precision, Mary Ann stopped in the middle of the street, listed gracefully towards oncoming traffic, and began to dance...wasted. She caused traffic to back up around the perimeter of her stage. One of the crackheads near the loading dock, a half-crippled man with salt-n-pepper hair and a torn leather jacket, called out her name. He then pointed his aluminum crutch at her. Mary Ann moved back towards the curb and prepared a response. She pulled a rust-colored object from her fake fur coat pocket and fired it at him. It missed by ten feet and landed on the sidewalk with a thud I heard clearly from the gate of Tara's small apartment building. It must have been a heavy object. The crackheads were visibly disturbed.

"Mary Ann!" The man with the crutch called out in a high-pitched growl. "Why you such a meany! Mary, Mary baby!" That was how I came across her name. Tara and I ducked back into her apartment building. After I recovered from a double-sized whippit balloon, I went to Tara's window to watch Mary Ann taunt her buddies.

"Tara," I said, "she's chasing him." Tara, hitherto reading an article in Spin while waiting for a pot of pasta to cook, jumped up from her futon and fastened her face to the windowpane.

"She's aggressive." Tara said, studying Mary Ann's movements as she lunged after the salt-n-pepper redhead, snagging his crutch. "Lucky for the crackies she doesn't run too fast or throw straight." I took in the shape of Tara's face and eyes, captivating in a way, even when she was stoned. "Maybe I'll sit her down some day," she said. "Bet she has a great story. They all tend to have great stories."

"How do you go there?" I asked.

"You're too sentimental." Tara paid attention to Mary Ann's spacey aggression for another moment, kissed me on the cheek, and went back to her futon and magazine article.

Mary Ann tired of accosting her fellow travelers and decided to return to the centerline of Taylor Street to clog traffic during the Friday evening rush. She staggered about the street like she was negotiating a spinning obstacle course. Most cars did not risk moving around

her for fear of collision. Crackheads will sue, and eager representation is everywhere. Commuters voiced their displeasure with horns and screams. It was quite a racket. I half-expected a volley of gunshots to top it off. Mary Ann settled in place and danced again, slowly, with her left arm extended and slightly curled before her. She danced as though she had a partner. It disturbed the hell out of me, but I kept gawking.

"Babe," Tara said, "You're obsessing way too much about that view."

"I just can't believe that adults behave this way. Where I'm from, the police would have moved in to toss these folks into a padded room."

"Doesn't work that way around here, babe."

I moved away from the window and sat down next to Tara as the cacophony outside subsided. I realized that Tara had fully adjusted to the neighborhood. It took some time for me. Tara had lived above Art's Porn Mart for eight months when we met. She grew up in Modesto and went to school at UC Davis, Class of 99, Sociology. She puts that education to use working weekday shifts at an Irish bar in the Lower Haight. Whenever I'd stay the night, which was probably too often, I would spend an hour or two leering from the window. Depending on my disposition at the moment, I looked for either education or entertainment. Participation was definitely out of the question.

With regular visits to Tara's crackland abode, I picked up some skills. I learned to recognize the peculiarities that betray an addict's preferred substance, something I had never before paid a thought to. Even the ones who are insane to begin with tend to top off the genetic instability with a creative combo of chemicals to enhance the psychosis. Crackhead winos' are definitely the loudest. Smack junkies though can go weeks without making a peep as long as their spike is full. However, if the jones is up and money is scarce, someone's car will lose a window and everything inside that's not bolted down. If they can find suitors, most of the Tenderloin's walking dead will turn tricks to support their habits, though the more ragged they get, the harder it is to find someone to screw them for cash. I know where some of these shenanigans take place. I've seen Mary Ann, and a few who aren't yet as hopeless as Mary Ann, pull a staggering john behind a building, or into a doughnut-haus restroom.

As the summer progressed, Tara and I kicked it once or twice a week, always staying in, and we almost always stayed at her place. Though Tara's pad is small and surrounded by seediness, she had managed to create a relaxing internal atmosphere. This was especially true during the day when Artie's neon porno advert was overwhelmed by natural light. Tara loves to assemble collages, buy houseplants, and curtain materials of many varieties. Her forest-green windowsill is lined with knick-knacks and succulents in small pots. She's also an amazing cook. On paper, quite a catch.

I found myself wondering if I had stumbled into a serious boo-boo when Tara's post-coital looks of adoration started to seep into the parts of my brain that peered beyond pleasure. In my lust for summer fun, I wasn't paying attention to the signs of mate-audition.

"How do you feel about me?" Her eyes, those ridiculously bright orbs of hers, were glowing at max intensity. We were both sweaty...the last portion of Massive Attack's Mezzanine thumping through her small but able stereo system.

"I like you. You're really fun to be around."

"I like you...A LOT."

"You're probably the coolest person I've met this summer."

These exchanges happened often.

During that first weekend together, I was straightforward about not considering a serious relationship— trading those magic three words like lashing chained anchors around my legs.

All along I learned that the Tenderloin would be my zone of choice had I released the last pretense of trying to iron out my life. The rotation on the streets here can range from a couple of months, if you're on the fast track to oblivion, to several years. Mary Ann's mottled and swollen hands, bright nose, and twitch-driven slow dances betrayed a mix of crack, Royal Gate vodka, and maybe angel dust and paint thinner. The Tenderloin was going to be her last stop in life. I doubt that she's seen her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. I'm not sure if she'd been keeping track of her birthdays, but I knew that she was not going out quietly. When I first

saw Mary Ann try to take out her two friends behind the Warfield, I thought that she simply hated other crackheads, which seemed reasonable enough. Later on, I came to realize that her violent streak could be summoned by any man.

Mary Ann and I got into a scuffle last week. I was walking down Taylor towards Tara's apartment building and noticed Mary Ann twitching and spinning around the building's entrance like an angry deadhead. I never saw her stay in one place long so I held back for a bit and let her do her thing, thinking that she would move away soon enough. No luck. After about thirty seconds she was still staggering and twirling around the entrance. People were starting to stare. I stood out by virtue of my clean clothes and smooth face.

"Hey, I need to get past you," I told Mary Ann.

She kept spinning and dancing.

"Hey, excuse me, I need to ring an apartment number."

Still spinning.

I then decided to use my cell and call Tara so she'd be able to buzz me in. All I'd have to do was nudge Mary Ann out of the way a bit, slide into the building and make sure that Mary Ann could not follow me in. No doubt that the last thing a building manager wants to see is

an incoherent crackhead running roughshod through a respectable building, driving down property values.

I dialed up Tara.

"Can you buzz me in?"

"Oh I'm sorry, babe, the ringer must be broken again."

"No, no, the Crackdancer is workin' on a routine right outside the gate."

"Don't let her get inside."

"I'm going to rush past her and slam the gate behind me. There'll be no time for her to react."

I was wrong. Whatever I say about Mary Ann, and there's a lot to cover, crack and booze did not harm her reflexes. When I tried to slide by her into the apartment, I felt a bit of resistance for a moment and then things went dark. The first thing I heard afterwards came from the porn store clerk.

"Goddamnit, cut that shit out!" The worker screamed. I heard this as I staggered up from the foul concrete about a foot from the main gate.

Like a lightswitch response, my head went from numbness to sparkling pain. I had been hit with something hard. I looked around the sidewalk and saw half of a brick less than a foot from where my head was.

"Bitch hit me with a brick!" I yelled. I stood, staggered, and then retreated backwards towards Market Street to collect myself for possible combat. Mary Ann wobbled after me and proffered what looked to be a length of hose or slice of shredded tire from her fake fur coat, projecting a mean and almost inhuman moan. As I regained my bearings, I figured that the time had finally come for me to beat down a female, or at least give it good shot. It would be my official welcome to the big city, something to write the family about. I was thinking that a couple of good shots to the mouth would mellow her out until I got inside Tara's spaces. Mary Ann traveled another fifteen, maybe twenty, feet towards me before the porn store worker ran up and doused her face with a stream of pepper spray. That dropped her quick. At that moment, Tara opened the iron gate to her building.

"Babe, get in here!" Tara called from behind the gate. I moved towards her, skirting around Mary Ann—a furry, sobbing, mess, along the way. I wanted to talk shit, or maybe drive a foot into her back, real sneaky and quick, but my head hurt too much. I had grown alert enough to check the growing bump every few seconds to make sure that blood wasn't flowing. Tara and I ducked into her building. At some point, I half expected Tara to wet down some washrags, grab her first aid kit, and hop back down to the sidewalk to help Mary Ann. Tara did things like that. Instead, she walked into her closet to grab her bong while I paced around her apartment, head throbbing, but too keyed up from the violence to sit down

and chill. I'd never seen Mary Ann hit anyone else. I was pissed, thinking that I might be the first chump she'd knocked out with her ghetto weaponry. Tara's window was open and I poked my head out to watch Mary Ann deal with her newest ordeal. She had already managed to stand up and weave towards Market. Her habits had toughened her up. Usually a good shot of pepper spray will keep a perp close to the deck for fifteen minutes or more. I'd have still felt sorry for her if my head wasn't hurting so damn much.

The bong was ready, as was a dishtowel wrapped around a bag of ice. Tara had dropped a couple of cubes into the bong water.

"What did you do to her?" Tara asked, handing the icepack and freshly packed water pipe to me.

"I just tried to get around her. Goddamn freakjob." I sparked the bowl and took a monstrous hit.

Tara grabbed the bong. "Here, I'll take that. Put that ice to your head. You sure that you weren't baiting her? She seems pretty sensitive."

"This place is bullshit. I don't know how you can live here."

"San Francisco's expensive," Tara said defensively.

"I don't know how you deal."

"You like it fine from a distance."

"I'm sorry. My head hurts."

"I know, babe. I know." We finished that bowl and then part of another for good measure.

About an hour later, I decided to take off and straighten some stuff out in my head, alone. When I was ready to leave, we kissed at Tara's door, and I felt her arms draw super tight around my back. I reciprocated, though I'd grown uncomfortable with the level of attention and what I thought it meant. It hadn't occurred to me, not when she gave me a key to her apartment, not when she volunteered to do my laundry, not even when she cooked meals for me, that she had considered us to be a functioning couple with real long-term possibilities. Maybe I had lapsed into a temporary bout of willful stupidity and Mary Ann was just setting my mind straight again. I wasn't into the idea of Tara and I being a serious couple, in part, because I had a long history of recklessness in the field of romance. I wanted us to stay tight. You know, wanting the cake and....

I made lists and reasons in my head later on that night and during the days that followed. I hated the idea of having to say anything. I was not initiating contact; I hadn't in some time. Maybe I should feel right when I'm with her, but I didn't. I didn't picture us together in any imaginable future. Whatever it was that compels someone to flip over someone, it wasn't

happening in my head or anywhere else. She looked nice enough— great teeth, awesome cook, witty, smart, blah blah. I felt like a complete jerk.

Five nights later, I bumped into two 50ish wasps emerging from the porn store before calling Tara from outside her iron gate. She buzzed me in and I climbed the steps towards the second floor to meet her.

Tara opened her door and the wondrous smell took me away. Notes of rosemary, cilantro, shallots, sun-dried tomatoes, peppers, and feta wafted through the apartment. Individually, these are pleasant, sometimes tempting, aromas. Together, with an array of spices and Tara's wonderfully strange mastery of food preparation, it was a nostril treat that conveyed bliss, our great reward for pushing civilization forward. No one else had ever encountered anything like it, I was sure of it. I kept my mouth closed lest I start drooling. There were two cream colored ceramic plates on the coffee table, accompanied by wineglasses and basic silverware.

Tara said, "I should uncork the wine so it has some time to breathe before we eat."

The wine bottle was next to three serving dishes. They were all on a countertop near her stove, a scant 10 feet from where we would eat. The food looked gorgeous. It astounded me that Tara wasn't a leading chef somewhere in this culinary wonderland. Never mind that she'd never spent a moment in cooking school. What she had done was read a score of cooking books and follow her instincts. By the time we sat down to eat my mind was devoted entirely to the food.

We had been eating for maybe two or three minutes when suddenly something struck Tara's picture window from outside. I guessed that it was a bottle. Both of us jumped from our positions. The window was intact. I ran to it.

"You ought to stay away from there, babe." Tara remained close to the futon. I turned my head to see her for a second. It felt like a reprieve. I looked out the window.

Mary Ann reeled across Taylor Street towards the Warfield loading docks. She threw the bottle. For a second I wanted to run downstairs and beat the mortal crap out of her, especially since my head was still tender. I was infuriated. I've yet to accumulate enough grace and strength to physically deal with these people. I've stuffed some ones underneath the tattered nightcoats of sleeping winos before, usually when I was in stagger mode myself. Sober reflection, however, just paralyzes me. Compassion is not what Darwin had in mind, not at first glance. Mary Ann was a couple of weeks past having the mental acuity to effectively utter her own name, but her right arm remained strong. As quickly as it had seized me, the anger subsided. "The Crackdancer is on her way out." I said over my shoulder. Tara was rifling through a stack of her CD's.

"Maybe, she's only been out there for a few months." She said.

"She's doing the Leaving Las Vegas thing."

"I don't know, babe. I've tried carrying a conversation with her. I don't think she was ever very bright. I think that she's slow. Fucking skanky men for crack money probably seems like a reasonable occupation to her. Just like another day at the office." Tara cued up a CD and went back to the futon.

"Well, Nicholas Cage's character had a reasonable occupation. He was going to booze up until lights-out."

"You're so full of it. That wasn't his occupation." Tara smiled, and patted a space on the futon. "Why don't you come over here, it's a better view."

I turned away from the window and walked to the futon. There was all this incredible food and classy wine in front of me, but my appetite had taken a walk. Tara would be okay if I didn't eat her food, because she knows how well she cooks. She'd know that my loss of appetite had nothing to do with her or her culinary skills. People have been complimenting her cooking since she was five. Then I figured that I'd stop trying to apply logic to this situation and just finish my plate. Two or three bites into it, I had my appetite back. She was that good.

Soon enough, we were lying next to each other. My mind went back to the first night we had spent together. At that point, we had known each other for six hours. We were, drunk, stoned, naked, and rolling around her apartment with a great deal of zeal. And though my mind has tried to warp the significance of that initial encounter, any jury would say that such

a night either signifies the beginning of a long, passionate relationship, or a brief and equally passionate one nighter. That same jury would also reject, totally, an assumption that such an episode of intense fucking could be pushed aside to the back of the head, and that the couple could thereafter behave platonically. These things had been going through my head for awhile, because that was how I saw it. I'm also bound tightly enough to reality to keep this info away from most reasonable people, to avoid unnecessary mocking.

Tara's head was on my chest, her right arm wrapped around my head. She was nuzzling my neck, and I was thinking like a man who had just been asked to defuse a bomb.

Don't yank the red wire.

She was trying to kiss me, holding on. I moved my head away, and then I made eye contact.

"I think we ought-

"That we ought to be just friends." The sun disappeared from her eyes. "Story of my life."