

IN THE END It's a dom's life

By Lawrence Levi

“It was something I thought about for a while, and then did for a while before I told many of my friends,” Sarah says. “I thought, ‘What can I do that’s not illegal?’”

Sarah’s a dominatrix. We’re having tea in her Manhattan studio apartment on a bright December afternoon. On her coffee table by our teacups are books by Melville and Marx and the latest issue of *Whorezine*. Professionally, she’s Delilah White—“Miss White” or “Mistress Delilah” to you. She’s 27 and extremely poised. She has straight, brown, shoulder-length hair, blue-gray eyes and a lovely, if intimidatingly assured, smile.

Sarah (I’ve changed her name) used to work full-time as a dominatrix, but now that she’s studying for her doctorate, she’s reduced her hours. She doesn’t have sex with her clients; some of them don’t even want to be touched. Her job—within certain limits—is to do, or be, whatever they want. “I’m Zelig,” she says. “I tell them whatever they want to hear. If they want me to be 6 years old, I will tell them that I’m 6.”

She’s getting her degree in sociology, with a focus on sex work. “Everything I’ve read by sociologists and scholars on the sex industry has missed something,” she says, “something that could be clarified if they were inside rather than outside.” At academic conferences, she delivers papers like “Stigma Within Sex Work” and “Caught Looking: Strippers Return the Gaze.” One client, whom she’s been seeing for several years, knows she is a student: “He reads my papers before I turn them in—we have similar academic interests. He has a regular job in an office. Together we do variations on a rape fantasy, where he wants to be violated and humiliated.”

Sarah grew up in New York. In high school she aspired to be a cryptologist, and she went on to major in linguistics at an Ivy League school. (She takes down her diploma, which hangs in the bathroom, when clients visit.) While taking

time off from college, she found her work as a part-time museum educator just didn’t pay the rent: “There’s not a lot of work for a 19-year-old with limited typing skills.” So she took her first job at a dungeon. She had a mentor—“a woman there that I got along with”—to show her the ropes. “She would say, ‘Deal with it this way. Do you know what he likes? He’s a regular here, this is what he’s into.’”

For our chat, Sarah wears a turtleneck dress and black stockings, through which the octopus tattoo that covers most of the front of her left thigh is hazily visible. For work, she’ll change into the customary dom uniform of leather corset and high heels. Sometimes, though, she just works in whatever she has on. Anything in black or red will do, as long as it fits the fanta-

sy her client wants to act out. Sarah knows every scenario: teacher and naughty student, boss and employee, parent and child, pimp and prostitute. “These fantasies are much more articulated and less ambiguous than ‘I just want to look at pretty girls,’” she says. “There’s a lot more structure.”

When she’s not working at a dungeon, Sarah supplies her own tools: a pair of shoes, nipple clamps, rubber gloves, lube, a hairbrush. “Or if I

know someone wants me to bring stuff for them to wear, I’ll carry furry panties in a man’s size, bondage equipment, shackles.” A lot of her equipment, like clothespins for nipple clamps, can be picked up at hardware and medical supply stores.

“The doctor’s office medical fantasy comes up all the time,” Sarah says. “It means I’m wearing a white lab coat and a stethoscope and have some scary-looking metal things around. It’s not, ‘Tell me where it hurts.’ It’s, ‘Tell me where you want to hurt.’”

I ask what it takes to be a good dominatrix. “Being careful is the most important thing. Not being judgmental is a close second.” Yesterday, Sarah tells me, each of her three clients wanted to be dressed up like a girl, in lingerie, panties, stockings, garter belt, corset, basic makeup and maybe a dress.

All that lacing and fitting often takes up much of the typical session’s 45 to 60

Continued on page 39



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