

Blaze VOX 2k9

Late Spring 2009

Larry Gaffney

### HOWDY, NEIGHBOR!

I have to admit I was not entirely displeased when the dominatrix moved in next door. Not that I planned to use her services, but my life, and certainly my neighborhood, needed a jolt.

She was slender and tall, with exactly the kind of cold, hard-bitten face you would expect to see on a dominatrix. Her long hair was blonde, her pale eyes usually hidden behind dark glasses. She wore high-heels and tight-fitting skirts. I suppose I harbored thoughts of us becoming friends, and me helping her with some maintenance problem and getting a freebie in return.

The neighborhood is working class—small houses on half-acre plots of fetishistically manicured lawns. I live here because I inherited the house when my mother died a few years ago. I am cordial to the neighbors, but distant. People on the block generally mind their own business, though there seemed to be a lot more activity in front yards when the dominatrix started moving in. She was helped by three men who unloaded her things out of two paneled vans. I had the distinct impression that they were not professional movers. I myself had undertaken a raking of the front lawn, and at one moment when her helpers were in the house and she clack-clacked in her stiletto heels out to the van, I gave her a friendly wave. I thought for sure that her head was turned slightly in my direction, but with those dark glasses who could tell. She ignored me. Too bad, because I was ready to bellow out a hearty and welcoming *Howdy, Neighbor!*

I teach at the local university, and with the fall semester well under way I had little time to pay attention to what was going on next door. But I couldn't help noticing that my new neighbor had a steady stream of visitors—well-dressed men who would park their late-model cars out front and walk briskly to her door. They seldom stayed longer than an hour or two. The indications were clear.

Her house was silent at Thanksgiving. During Christmas, too. One morning in February, in the middle of a snowstorm, I sat in my car letting the defroster warm up and heard the muted whine of tires spinning on ice. I got out and slogged through ankle-deep snow to my neighbor's driveway. Her cream-colored Protégé was half in the street, its back wheels trapped in a furrow. I tapped gently on her window and she lowered it. The morning was dark and her sunglasses were off. I could see that her eyes were hazel.

I'll give you a push, I said. Put it in reverse and rock back and forth a few times, then give it the gun.

She did as I instructed, and my strength was sufficient to propel her into the street. She waited for me, window down, her motor purring nicely.

I'm Steve, I said, removing my glove and extending my hand.

I'm Andrea, she said. (I would later find out that her clients addressed her as *Mistress* Andrea.) Her grip was firm. How could it be otherwise?

Thank you *so* much, she said.

Hey, I said, what are neighbors for. See you around sometime.

Yes, let's get together, she said. There was real gratitude in her smile. It softened her face, letting me see how pretty she was. Barely out of her twenties, good cheekbones, thin, patrician lips.

Now that I had spoken to her, had looked into her eyes, had come into contact with her warm skin, I began to have the occasional fantasy that any man living next to a dominatrix might have. Nothing fancy, mind you. My first wife and I had played at bondage games a little during the early days of our marriage, but it never worked out. Neither of us was comfortable as the dominant partner. We both preferred being passive—the *bottom*, as they say. If I seem a bit too familiar with the lingo of the S&M scene, let me state that it comes from omnivorous reading. Fifty and twice divorced, I am war-torn and played out. I live like a monk, sans girlfriend, and lack the energy or the inclination to dabble in anything exotic. Still, seeing Andrea in leather pants carrying groceries up the walk gave me an unexpected thrill. I may be celibate, but sexuality—and in particular *aberrant* sexuality—remains for me a

fascinating topic, as, I suppose, maritime adventures absorb the attentions of certain landlocked Midwesterners. So I had no problem imagining what she was doing over there in the small, neat house that had been owned by the Skenazys, a factory-working, childless couple my parents had known for half a century.

Spring was unseasonably warm, and I spent a lot of time in the backyard, especially on weekends when Chelsea was with me. She has a ringing voice and an inquisitive nature, fine attributes for a twelve-year-old girl. She's not bad at softball, either. When I was growing up girls didn't do sports, except maybe tennis or swimming, but that's all changed. I'm glad of it. We play catch in the backyard, then sit in lawn chairs talking about everything under the sun.

One Saturday afternoon I went into the house to prepare lunch and when I came back out there was Chelsea leaning against the fence, talking to my neighbor. It was the first time I'd seen Mistress Andrea in her backyard. They were having quite a conversation, those two, so I stood on the steps for a moment to watch. Then Andrea saw me and waved. Join us for lunch? I asked. She surprised me by saying yes.

I brought sandwiches, chips, and sodas out to our small patio. There was no chance of the conversation lagging, not with Chelsea around.

Are you married? She asked.

Not yet, hon, said Andrea. Haven't met the right man.

Chelsea guzzled her Sprite. What do you do for a living? She asked.

I'm a massage therapist, said Andrea.

We ate our sandwiches while Chelsea mulled this over. Do you ever get people who you don't want to give massages to?

Chelsea, I said.

No dad, really. What if they're fat or smelly?

Andrea laughed. I don't mind if they're fat, she said. Fat people need massages, too. It makes me feel good to help anyone. And if they're smelly I ask them to hop in the shower.

I gave Chelsea a look, but she ignored it. We consumed our meal as the warm wind dried the sweat from our faces, and afterward we fed our crusts to a squirrel that came boldly to the edge of the patio.

A week later Andrea knocked on my door to ask if I would watch the house while she was out of town for a few days. I said I would. And I gave her a piece of paper with my phone number on it, saying she should call me if she needed anything. She did call once, after a thunderstorm, to see if the power had gone out at my place, too. We ended up talking for half an hour, which seemed odd since we were separated by only a few feet of driveway space and some wallboard.

I taught summer courses that year, and felt quite distracted by all the coeds parading into my classroom in the semi-nude. Had they no sense of propriety? Sex was in the air. At night I would lie in bed, the windows open, and imagine that the distant throbs of automobiles were groans of pleasure coming from the house next door. I couldn't take it anymore and ended up in the arms of a colleague, a temporary instructor from Canada, a woman on the wrong side of forty who was studying for a PhD in linguistics. She had excellent teeth and good legs, and I found our copulations to be marginally satisfying, an evaluation perhaps not shared by my paramour, judging by her readiness to agree, after only two months, that our tryst had run its course. By September I was on my own yet again.

I was watching a Yankees-Red Sox game when Andrea called to invite me over for coffee. I TiVoed the sucker and took a few minutes for ablutions and to put on a clean shirt. I told myself not to have any expectations, but I had them anyway.

She greeted me at the door in jeans and a t-shirt, and she was wearing Nikes, so there went the expectations. The fantasist inside me was hoping for latex and opera pumps, I suppose. Well, this was going to be a casual, neighborly visit, all right. But over coffee and cake she surprised me by bringing up the subject of her profession right away.

I'll bet you know I'm not really a massage therapist, she said.

I've put two and two together, I said.

And how do you feel about it? I mean about having a neighbor who does what I do?

I think you're great, I said. What you do for a living isn't anybody's business.

She had a wry smile on her face as she poked at some crumbs on the plate. Her nails were perfect. Not too long, and an attractive shade of rose. So what exactly do you think I do, Steve?

I think you're a dominatrix, I said urbanely.

Her laugh was pretty, like the rest of her. You get the gold star, she said. But is it really that obvious?

I shrugged. You look the part. And those clients of yours seem pretty darn eager to get their massages.

She sighed. Well, others have noticed too, I'm afraid. That's why I called you over. You're a nice guy, and I wanted to tell you in person that we won't be neighbors much longer.

What do you mean? I asked.

One of my clients is a cop. He gave me a heads-up that someone called in a complaint about me.

A complaint? You're quiet as a mouse over there. I've never once heard the crack of a whip.

That's not my thing, she said. My slaves don't need that kind of training. The worst you'll hear is an occasional tongue-lashing. Anyway, it seems one of the old biddies in the neighborhood has been paying attention. I should have known better. But I really wanted a house, you know? So now I'll have to sell it.

Damn, I said. I'm sorry to hear this.

Yeah, she said, and in a gesture more warm than provocative, she put her hand over mine. Would I now be invited to the boudoir? Her living room was normal—a cloth sofa, Francis Bacon print, a plasma TV—but who knew what bizarre accoutrements awaited behind the closed door upstairs? Oddly, I felt no stirrings at the prospect. And of course nothing happened.

She removed her hand—not hurriedly, not awkwardly—and said that she was going to miss talking with Chelsea.

Come visit us anytime, I said.

And you, too, she said. Please. I'll probably move back to New York. Or maybe Boston. But *do* visit. Promise me you will.

It occurred to me that she must be very lonely. We will, I said. But I couldn't really see it happening.

She was gone before the holidays. Chelsea was disappointed but not exactly heartbroken. She had other things going on in her young life. But one morning I noticed that she was brooding over her pancakes. What's up? I asked.

She looked full into my eyes. Mom says that Andrea's a dominatrix.

The word sounded all wrong on my little daughter's lips. Your mother isn't always right, I said.

So then she's *not* a dominatrix? Mom said it's a kind of hooker.

What do you know about hookers? I asked.

Dad, I know what hookers do. I don't live on Pluto.

Sure, sure, I said. But hooker's not a very nice word. Anyway, Andrea's an adult. She can do what she wants to earn a living.

Mom said being a dominatrix is illegal.

I almost said something ugly, but held my tongue. I knew the sound of a gauntlet being thrown down—by proxy, in this case—when I heard it. I would not pick it up, not give my ex the pleasure of a good fight.

I sat down at the table. So how come your mother knows so much about Andrea's business?

I think she talks to people in the neighborhood, said Chelsea.

I nodded. Well, I said, finish up your breakfast and we'll head out to the mall.

So you're not going to tell me what a dominatrix is?

She certainly enjoyed saying the word. But what could I tell her about the business of domination? Should I tell her that one of Andrea's clients, a local politician, served meals to her while wearing a frilly French maid's uniform? Or that another client, a successful landscaper, paid Andrea his hard-earned cash for the privilege of cleaning her house? Then there was the elderly clergyman who came to her each week for a session of vile and profane verbal humiliation.

Andrea had told me these things during some late-night chats we had before she left. When she told me about the clergyman I said if he wants to be verbally abused, he should just get married.

He is, she said. Most of them are. So's the guy who cleans my house. I think his wife would be more upset about *that* than if we were fucking. He pays to scrub my toilet, but at home I don't think he even picks up his socks.

No, I couldn't tell my daughter any of this.

It's complicated, I said. The thing is, some men actually like it when women bully them. You know, boss them around.

Chelsea worked her features into a familiar look, conveying equal measures of disgust and disbelief. But *why?*

Oh, I don't know. A lot of guys run businesses and are always giving everybody orders. I guess they're looking for balance.

She thought this over. You mean like yin-yang?

Exactly! I said, genuinely pleased. But that was enough for now; I didn't want to field any more questions. When you get older, I said, you can read psychology books and learn all about it, but let's get ready, okay?

As she was bounding up the stairs her cell phone rang. A twelve-year-old with a cell phone, but her mother knows best. I knew there'd be a wait while she gabbed with her friend. So I poured another cup of coffee and stood by the window, looking at the house next door, still vacant, a for sale sign jammed into the lawn.

A month ago I had stood on Andrea's front walk while she supervised the man—one of her clients—who had loaded

up his van with her things and would be driving her all the way to Boston. He was a meek, middle-aged fellow, but an efficient worker.

Don't forget the suitcases upstairs, she said. As he turned toward the front door, she added, *And be quick about it!* She gave me a small conspiratorial smile, and then she looked away for a moment, surveying my house and all the other houses within view, and I saw something else flicker upon her face. It was a look—very fleeting—of sorrow, bitterness, resignation. She sighed and held out her arms. We hugged, and then her minion reappeared with two handsome leather suitcases. I nodded to the guy and stepped off the walk. Andrea gave me a final smile. Write, she said. And visit.

As I walked back across the lawn I heard her voice one last time, strident now: *And I better not find any scratches on that leather!*

My ebullient daughter came flying down the stairs. Dad, she said, can we pick up Monica on the way to the mall? Why not, I said.

I would listen to their bright chatter in the car. At the mall I would walk wearily—but happily—beside them, stealing glances at their pretty faces. At Friendly's I would buy them cheeseburgers, and then watch with pleasure as they consumed the rich, mountainous sundaes placed before them by an obsequious waiter.