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Black-Eyed Glee
by Nancy Jo Sales

Once, I beat up a man, and he beat me. And then we had sex.

His name was Vito, and I liked the way he grabbed and kissed me in the kitchen at my friend's party, even though he was gangly as a sea anemone, with the head of Roberto Benigni, and had no apparent reason for such a display of confidence. He came from Milan, was a math professor, apt to be clumsy — something I learned right away when he almost burned himself backing into the stove as he yanked me to him. "Ayyyeee!" he screamed, jumping away from the flame. "You are making me *hot*."

We were boring each other silly, except for in the bedroom.

Vito took sex very seriously — perhaps too seriously. It had actually given him a heart attack, which was the second important thing I learned about him. As we were riding along from my friend's party to his place in a cab, it felt as if something hard and smooth in his breast pocket was about to pierce its way through my heart. "Oh. I apologize," Vito said, releasing me, "it is my nitro gleecerin medication."

When Vito was 39 (he was 42 when we met), he'd been having sex with an old girlfriend in Italy when his ticker surprised him by doing a back flip. "It was *tremendous*," he said. (Vito had somehow gotten the idea, by the way, that "tremendous," which in its colloquial usage generally means "good," meant "bad"; for example, "the intelligence level of my students is tremendous," he would say with disgust; "AT&T is tremendous!") Vito's doctor said high cholesterol had been the reason for his untimely thrombosis ("My love of cheese is tremendous," he sighed), but I suspect his passionate nature was the more likely culprit. I spent one night with him, and, his insults aside ("You look tremendous," he told me in the morning), I was hooked.

We started seeing each other, and to our mutual dismay found it felt as if we'd both been badly miscast in a yuppie relationship play. We ate dinner at recommended restaurants; went to celebrated foreign movies at Alice Tully Hall; had dinner parties at the homes of his colleagues, math whizzes who would get soused on chalky red wine and dance around to Aretha Franklin, thinking themselves very funky. Almost every night, we watched *Seinfeld* (Vito had a particular affinity for Kramer). In short, we were boring each other silly, except for in the bedroom, where we were burning rubber, nightly.

It was a strange thing, our picante coupling versus our cool, limp conversation. Something had to give. And then one night, we were going at it as usual and things were getting particularly hot, when out of nowhere Vito exclaimed, "You beetch!" and smacked at my cheek the way street kids do when they're trying to start a fight.

I squirmed out from under him. "What the hell was that?"

"Oh I apologize," Vito said, going pale and stammering. "Th-that was tremendous behavior! I cannot explain it. I am Italian," he offered.

In retrospect, it's clear that something about his little exploratory slap had intrigued me, because — after the requisite feminism-tinged lecture and finger wagging — I let it pass. It was then, however, that I started to put together all sorts of things about Vito that I'd never tallied on one ledger before: for one, his interest in books about serial killers; his maniacal laughter when we went to see the Benigni movie (*The Monster*) where the actor is mistaken for a serial killer; and of course the fact that he'd once chased me around his apartment with a steak knife, all the while growing hysterical with glee at my almost-real terror.

"You are scared of me now?" he said, breathing heavily, eyes twinkling.

"Is that what you want?" I asked, appalled.

I think if I met Vito today — now that I'm a little older and more sure of myself — 1) I would never

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date him in the first place and 2) if I did, I imagine we'd be having a lot more fun. Isn't that often the way?

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For one thing, I would hardly have taken seriously his constant accusations of infidelity (which started shortly after the "You beetch!" smack), and would have seen them for what they were: transparent attempts to get me into a position where we'd have to have a physical altercation. At which he succeeded, one night.

It was one of those Lipton-soup-dip-and-chip parties at one of his corduroy-wearing fellow professor's apartments. I was chatting up a fetching grad student in game theory when all of a sudden I felt Vito's hand encircle my wrist, tight. "You beetch!" he hissed in my ear. "You slut!" "Buzz off," I told him, through clenched teeth — I was getting tired of these ridiculous scenes. His Italian clown's face fell, and he disappeared.

I watched him flop around the party, getting drunker and drunker. And drunker. Secretly, it thrilled me, because when Vito was very drunk he was insatiable and very enduring, contrary to the laws of biology.

It got late; I went looking for him; and nothing could have prepared me for what I saw: there he was in our host's bedroom, hands all over the behind of a woman in an Indian print skirt — Indian print! the kind we wore in high school! — his drunken lips trying to extract themselves from her long, split-endsy hair.

I announced myself, and also said that I intended to leave — without him. We raced for our coats. Vito came charging after me down the five flights of stairs of the miserable Nolita walkup, stumbling every few steps and cursing in Italian. I slammed the door to the street in his face; he flung it open and lunged for the tail of my leather jacket. I spun around. And I don't know what it was — his triumphant little grin or what he said to me: "Now look, you asked for that" — but I clocked him.

I know now why men dream of throwing punches; there's something glorious about it. My fist and Vito's jaw connected as righteously as two pieces of a puzzle. He went reeling back against a snowbank (this was '93, the winter of seventeen storms), and there he lay, splayed out like a colt, nodding slightly, gazing at constellations.

We were making love, the intensity now all centered in that movement.

I stood frozen, amazed, as he slowly got up and walked over to me, rubbing his jaw and looking menacing.

"Let's go back to my place," he said, with steamy breath, attempting a sultry look.

We rode in silence in the cab; he held my swelling hand as gently as a wounded bird. I was somewhat mollified. But when I looked over at him, I saw again he seemed self-satisfied, and expectant too, like a kid on his way to a party.

"What? What?" I demanded, grabbing my hand away. Before I knew it, we were slapping at each other like unfriendly cats. Vito's glasses went flying from his face through the partition to the front seat of the cab, and the driver pulled over and kicked us out.

We walked the remaining twenty blocks to his apartment, during which I delivered another outraged lecture: how could you, et cetera. Vito said nothing, biding his time. I was coming with him, after all, so he knew that whatever we were wandering into here, we were doing so together.

We never even turned on the lights. This scenario takes place entirely in the dark; it's a lurid, thrashing scene with no dialogue — just grunting, panting, tumbling, the sound of flesh slapping flesh, and cries that might be joy or pain. We were really hurting each other.

I touched one of the red welts on my cheekbone, and then again.

The trick to evening out the strength imbalance between men and women, incidentally, is the use of weapons: Vito smashed my head against the floor, I ripped his glasses off and ground them into his ear. He held me down and smacked my face back and forth, the way he'd always wanted to, I grappled for my purse and beaned him with it. At one point I was hitting him with his own shoe. We bit each others' lips so hard you could

feel teeth grinding against each other through bulbous flesh. We began kissing, our mouths full of blood and mucous and the iron taste of wounds. He ripped my pants down, and we were making love, the intensity now all centered in that movement.

And then it was over.

A tremendous tenderness followed. He got up; I felt I couldn't move. I saw the light from the refrigerator go on in the kitchen. He came back with a half-eaten scone I'd left there that morning, sat down beside me, and shared bites with me, feeding me with his swollen fingers. "I am tremendously hungry," said Vito, preoccupied with getting the last crumbs off the wax paper. I started to laugh. He leaned down and kissed my belly.

"I hate you," I hissed.

"I know," he said.

"I mean, I really do."

"That's what I'm here for," he said. I never loved him as much as when he said that; I started crying.

I stayed the night. We both lay naked on our backs in his bed; it hurt too much to touch, or roll over. We were like patients in a hospital, with identically shallow breathing.

At the first light, creeping into the bathroom to pee, I literally gasped when I looked at myself in the mirror. Was this me? I touched one of the red welts on my cheekbone, and then again. The weird pleasure of it spooked me.

I went home. Vito and I dated for a little while after that, but we were never the same, the sex was never the same. We'd admitted something that night: Our fight had been the first honest thing we'd ever done. You see, I'd gotten pregnant about six months before, and I'd wanted the baby, but he hadn't; so that was that.

Now and again I talk to him on the phone from Italy (he's moved back). He still watches *Seinfeld*, but "it's tremendous because it is dubbed and it's not as funny in Italian."