

## **Jennifer Steil**

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### **The Braille Machine**

When I quit my job at a mid-sized newspaper in New Jersey to write for a pornographic magazine in Manhattan, my parents were dismayed. But you were doing so *well*, my father said. You were heading straight for the *New York Times*!

*The New York Times* did not know I existed. What he meant was, I was doing something meaningful with my life. I had purpose. Not like when I was working as an actor, performing for half-empty houses in black box theatres. I'd had plenty of purpose then too, but it did not manifest itself in regular paychecks.

It's true I wasn't doing badly; I had just won two New Jersey Press Association awards for stories I had written about the heroin epidemic in the largely white, rich, Republican county my newspaper covered. I profiled a teenage boy, one of the nineteen people who had overdosed that year, spending weeks listening to his father tell stories and cry on his sofa. I touched the blanket the boy slept with every night, examined his heavy metal posters, and listened to the last voice message he ever left for his best friend.

I also wrote about a kid whose overdose gave him such severe brain damage he was in a wheelchair. At first I couldn't see what was wrong. Not until I interviewed him for the third time did I realize he repeated himself constantly, his story subtly shifting. Jennifer, he said one afternoon as we sat in the reception area of the halfway house where he lived. Heroin killed my best friend and it almost killed me. And not a single hour goes by that I don't want to do it again.

The work did feel meaningful. These stories mattered. For the parents, they were the last stories ever to be written about their children. For Morris County conservatives, it was just a little bit harder to pretend that drugs were only a problem for poor, dark-skinned immigrants.

But I wasn't happy. It was the year I turned thirty, which brought with it the abrupt realization that magical things would

not just happen to me. Life would go on the way it had been unless I worked harder, unless I changed everything. The years would just go by without turning me into anything more than I was.

I wanted more than daily black-and-white bylines. Reporting was rewarding, but I also wanted to be doing vocal warm-ups in an over-crowded theater dressing room with sweaty, half-dressed, half-mad people. I wanted to mess around onstage, doing handstands and arabesques during tech while we waited for someone to adjust a light. I wanted to involve my body in my life.

Before graduate school, before my newspaper career, I had performed in Shakespeare or contemporary lesbian dramas, the only plays that seemed to have decent female roles. But a newspaper career does not leave room for rehearsals. I could try to leave the office at 6 p.m., but if at any point in the evening someone threw themselves in front of a train or committed a triple homicide in one of my towns, I had to go back to work. I had a pager then, in those days before mobile phones, that tied me to my editor like a leash.

So when I ran into Claire at a media cocktail party in the garden of a Meatpacking District bar and she told me she was now the editor of *Playgirl* and was looking for an associate editor, I told her I wanted the job. Claire was wearing leather pants and had cut her blond hair short. In chunky heels, she was several inches taller than I was, holding a green martini level with my lips. Her face was pale; her eyes a hot blue. When we were classmates in graduate school, Claire had written a story about seducing her best friend's boyfriend and I still remember the way she described him watching her walk down five flights of stairs in a tight, short skirt. It had turned out not to be so fictional, and Claire married that friend's boyfriend.

One night during the second year of our MFA program, Claire invited a group of us to join her and a wealthy friend from New Orleans in a suite at the Plaza Hotel. I had never been to a hotel room that fancy. I had never walked through the doors of a hotel like the Plaza. There was a lot of alcohol and a lot of other things I don't remember before the police knocked on the door. Claire did dangerous things, things I admired from the sidelines, and her mind was dagger-sharp.

You'd be great at writing porn, Claire said now, smiling

at me over her drink. We'd have so much fun. She still spoke with the New Orleans drawl of her home. I could listen to her talk all day long.

I want to go back to performing, I said, looking away from the photographer trying to inch us closer together in the crowd of bodies. I want to be able to leave the office at predictable times. A bald man in thick black glasses knocked my elbow as he passed, splashing red wine from my glass down the sleeve of my cardigan.

That's not a problem. Claire dabbed at me with a cocktail napkin. Send me an email. I'll set you up with Carmine.

The application wasn't as easy as I had anticipated. Carmine, the publisher, wanted me to pitch seven story ideas and report and write a 2,500-word sex-related freelance piece before they would interview me. My then-boyfriend Lance and I had an entertaining evening coming up with a list of topics. We had actually broken up four months earlier, but he had found a new apartment and I had not. So I was still living with him across from the Port Authority bus station in a rat-infested studio with slanting tiled floors. Some mornings there was no water and I walked to the gym around the block and asked to use their showers.

Eventually, I settled on swing clubs. The research wasn't straightforward. Many clubs don't flaunt their identity and are often not online. But eventually I tracked down half a dozen and interviewed people who ran clubs not only in New York, but also in Amsterdam, Georgia, Moscow, and Alabama. To do real reporting, of course, I had to go to one. Lance did not need persuading to be my escort. We headed down to Le Trapeze, located behind a discreet sign on a genteel block of Chelsea.

But that's not the story I am telling here. Let's just say we made some interesting new friends, though I maintained a journalist's distance from my subjects. Let's just say I witnessed a few scenes so memorable their details remain vivid decades later. I did my reporting wearing only a towel, occasionally darting to a corner of the locker room to scribble notes.

I was rather proud of the piece that eventually ran, though I'd never be able to use it as a clip because of all the naked people illustrating the pages. My parents wanted to read it but I refused to send it to them. So I was confused when they rang to

congratulate me.

But you haven't read it.

Of course we read it. We're your parents.

But I didn't send it to you.

That's why we had to subscribe.

You *what*? The thought of my parents reading about our night at Le Trapeze nauseated me.

We want to keep up with your writing. Don't you want us to be supportive?

But that's weird. Don't you worry what the neighbors will think when they see your mail on the hall table?

The upstairs neighbors are gay. They might want to borrow our issues when we're done with them.

I sighed. I have to go. These vibrators aren't going to review themselves.

When I started at *Playgirl*, I had big dreams. I wanted to transform its cliché-riddled pages into a sex magazine for the new millennium. I wanted to fill it with erudite erotica and photos of men in Elvis Costello glasses. I wanted fiction by Anais Nin and essays by Annie Sprinkle. I wanted art reviews and black-and-white photography. I wanted features on bisexuality and the merits of ethical promiscuity. I wanted, essentially a glossier, steamier, and more provocative *New Yorker*.

These, I learned quickly, were delusions.

*Playgirl's* audience, I discovered after finally getting Carmine's approval and taking over my modest cubicle, consisted almost exclusively of rural housewives in Oklahoma, Texas, West Virginia, and Oregon, who hungered for the fantasy we fed them—namely, that one of these lubricated hunks of manhood could be theirs. Only for them, it wasn't a fantasy. They believed us. *I saw Jason in your February issue, and I am so wet for him, one wrote. Tell Jason I want him, and I'm waiting. I'm so hot for you Jason, come find me!*

There were many, many such letters.

I read all the mail. It was the most interesting part of my job, as well as the most disturbing. (Oddly, although we had many gay male readers, they did not write many letters). When I was through opening and sorting all of the letters, I washed my hands twice with disinfecting soap and water so hot

it burned. Maybe it's because some of the envelopes came branded with the bright-red, rubber stamp mark reading *Mailed from the Pennsylvania State Penitentiary*. Or maybe it's because most of our grubby, sub-literate mail was about sexual fantasies, and I knew what people were doing when they wrote.

Our readers, it turned out, didn't want to read literature or ponder the philosophical aspects of sex. They just wanted hope that something less drab could be theirs.

My favorite task was choosing the sexual fantasies to publish. We printed four in each issue and paid our writers. Just \$100, but we paid them. In my cubicle, I'd make a cup of tea and prop my feet on my desk as I read through every improbable sexual scenario imaginable. I loved my job.

I sorted the fantasies into files. The first file, labeled Possible, contained stories I would consider publishing. The second was, If Desperate. And the third, No Fucking Way—Fiction? There was a fourth category for pieces I couldn't finish reading, fantasies that involved relatives or serious abuse or other themes so disturbing they went straight into the recycling bin.

While Claire was my boss, she reported to Carmine, publisher of Crescent Publishing's many saucy titles. Don't look too closely at the other magazines, Claire said during my initial tour of the offices on Second Avenue in midtown. Or you won't stay. Carmine looked like the kind of guy you'd imagine running a stable of pornographic magazines: impeccably tailored and unable to sustain eye contact.

Around 10 a.m. Claire paused in the doorway of my cubicle. Her legs were long and white under a denim skirt. Watch this, she said, gesturing to the door of Carmine's corner office. It's breakfast time. She put air quotes around the word breakfast. Thirty seconds later, our art editor Joanne hurried from her office, gold-streaked hair slithering across the shoulders of her olive pantsuit, a stack of folders in her arms, and slipped through Carmine's door without knocking.

They won't be out for at least an hour. Happens every morning. So not a good time to pop in. Claire presented this without judgment, as something to amuse me. When Joanne started, she was always talking about the \$6 dresses she got at Conway. Now look at her. I think that was Dior. She shrugged.

She's got a son and lives with her mom in Long Island, so.

And Carmine's married?

Of course.

I watched Joanne when she emerged from the office, running her fingers through her hair and smiling. She was always friendly to me, soliciting my opinions on photographs and sharing her exercise tips. You know what gives you an amazing ass? she said. Squeezing a quarter between your butt cheeks for an entire day.

But over my first month I learned that culpability never paused by Joanne's office. If we were behind on an issue because her art department hadn't designed the pages, it was still somehow editorial's fault. To criticize Joanne was to earn yourself a private word with Carmine, who would patiently explain your misunderstanding of the process.

While the editorial staff of *Playgirl*—me, Claire, and our savvy managing editor Sandra—was all female, we were surrounded by the all-male staff of the other dozen or so porn magazines. Across the corridor from me was the editor of *Barely Legal*, who spent his days examining photos of narrow-hipped girls in white cotton panties, debating the best caption for a cum shot.

It's no accident that nearly the entire time I was writing for *Playgirl*—after I moved out of Lance's studio and found my own apartment on the corner of Seaman and Cumming (I'm not making this up) on Manhattan's Upper North Side—I dated only women. At staff meetings, we'd sit around the enormous table of the conference room, passing slides of naked men back and forth, offering editorial comment. But the only thing these photos aroused in me was my gag reflex. I didn't even want to touch them, to feel their slippery surfaces. "You don't think this guy's hot?" Joanne's big brown eyes widened. I shrugged. "I guess I'm just not a visual person."

It was even worse when we were putting together our Big Issue. Everything in that issue had to be big, especially the men. These men weren't just big, they were circus-freak colossal. Having sex with one of these guys would be like backwards childbirth, without the epidural.

Many of these men had dropped out of high school to

pursue modeling, hoping to use their bodies to coast their way to a better life. I know this because I interviewed them. I'm sure there are plenty of clever and enlightened male porn models in the world; I just didn't happen to meet them.

One day I was interviewing this guy named Luscious Johnson—they all have names like that—and I asked him about his favorite romantic place. I always start off with a few softballs before getting into the tough technical questions about sexual positions and the dessert most delicious to lick off a woman's breasts.

Luscious told me his favorite romantic place was the Bahamas.

Great, I said. Why the Bahamas?

Well, I like the Bahamas because—he paused here, he was thinking deeply about this—I like the Bahamas because the ocean is so close to the beach.

I wrote it down, word for word. So what do you look for in a woman?

What do you mean? he says, as if I'd asked him something baffling in a foreign language.

I mean, do you like artistic women? Doctors? Librarians? Assertive women, the kind who do all the vacation planning? Women with a sense of humor? Athletic women? Dancers? Auto mechanics? Do you like a woman who takes control, or do you do all the driving?

I don't like a bossy girl. There can only be one man in a relationship, if you know what I mean.

I knew what he meant. Sometimes that's one too many, I murmur to myself.

What? he says in his bewildered child voice.

Nevermind, I tell him. I think we're done.

**B**ut I loved working with Claire. She came to work in rubber dresses and platform shoes, told hilarious tales of her trips with Carmine to Hungary and California to interview models (they're all gay, she said, but don't tell the housewives) and was an exacting editor. She probably could have been working for the *New York Times*. I loved both her wildness and her kindness, her unwillingness to judge the choices of others. At the end of the day, if I wasn't rushing off to rehearse with the lesbian theater company, we'd unscrew the top of a bottle of Reunite or whatever

free booze had been delivered by an advertiser, and have a cocktail before heading out.

One afternoon, as I was shuffling through the usual rubbish, I came across a story whose crisp, white pages gleamed like a pearl in the pile of grimy sheets on my desk. It was neatly typed, rather than scrawled in a childlike hand. All of the grammar and punctuation was correct. It even included interesting scaffolding for its tales of sexual hijinks. Her fantasy involved a university student and her physics tutor. But what made it interesting was the way she had worked in actual theories of thermodynamics and motion into every sex scene. It was the most lucid physics lesson I had ever read.

I reached for the phone. I wasn't going to find anything better than this one.

Hello?

Yes, is this Carrie White\*?

Who's this?

I'm an editor at *Playgirl* magazine and I want to publish the story you sent me.

Silence.

The one about physics. It's really terrific.

You—you're kidding. Is this one of my friends playing a trick?

Um, no. I'm really calling from *Playgirl*.

And you want to publish my story?

I do.

No, this has to be a joke. This wouldn't just happen.

This went on for a while.

Look, I finally said, unable to convince her of my authenticity. Why don't you hang up, look up the number for *Playgirl* magazine in New York, ring it, and ask the switchboard for me. Will that convince you?

Okay. But I know this is a trick.

I sat there, holding the receiver in my hand for a few moments, unsure if she would really call. But a minute after I placed the receiver back in the cradle, my line began to ring.

Oh my god it really is you. It really is *Playgirl* magazine.

And I really would like to publish your story. We can't pay much, just \$100, and I'll need you to fill out a freelance contract but—

I couldn't believe it. She was crying. I couldn't

understand how it was this big a deal to be published in *Playgirl*, for this little money.

Are you okay, Carrie?

You don't understand. This is the best thing ever to happen to me. Her voice shook with emotion.

Well, I'm glad you're happy...

I'm sorry. It's just—and there's no way you'd know this—but I'm blind. I dictated that story to a friend of mine. I really want to be a writer, but I need a Braille machine, and they're really expensive.

I waited for her to continue, unable to imagine where this was going.

So the Braille Institute said they will give me a Braille machine for free—for free! —if I can prove that I can sell my writing.

But we can only pay you—

I know, \$100! But that's enough! What matters is that you are paying me for something I wrote. If I can send photocopies of three checks that are payment for my writing, in any amount, the Braille Institute will give me the machine.

You're kidding. A warm, philanthropic glow spread through my ribcage.

No! It's true.

You should get the first check within six weeks. If you send me more stories as good as this one, I'd be happy to publish them.

Really? You would? She started to cry again.

We published Carrie's first story, and several more, at least one in each monthly issue for five months.

One afternoon, just as I was zipping up my backpack, getting ready to head to rehearsal, my phone rang. It was Carrie. And she wasn't crying.

*It's here*, she said.

It is?

They actually sent it! The Braille machine. It's sitting right here in front of me. Thank you. Thank you. More than you can know.

Oh! The Braille machine! It really came?

It really came. Oh Jennifer, it's beautiful.

Thank *you*. It was your work.

I can type my own stories now! I don't need to dictate

them to anyone.

That's wonderful, Carrie.

I hung up the phone, smiling. After a minute, I picked up the receiver and dialed my parents.

Remember how you said you wanted me to do something meaningful with my life?

A month later, Claire told me she and her husband Rick were moving back to New Orleans. I miss my family, she said. I miss New Orleans.

I could think of nothing to say. I couldn't think of any reason anyone would ever leave New York, but then I hadn't yet been to New Orleans.

After Claire left, no one came to tell me funny stories about the models or travels with Carmine. No one invited me into her office for a sip of Reunite from the bottle before leaving work. No one walked by my desk whispering "breakfast" with a knowing smile.

Things unraveled from there. Our managing editor Sandra, whom I liked enormously and whose passion for grammar rivaled mine, told me she was going freelance.

Which left me. Me, and a stable of regular freelance contributors. Me alone with Carmine and Joanne.

I didn't want Claire's job. I was happy writing stories, picking fantasies, and doing interviews. I had no desire to run things. Running things meant responsibility. Responsibility meant staying late. Staying late meant giving up rehearsals with the lesbian theater company.

So Carmine hired Amy. At first I worried I'd fall in love with her. She was tall and slim, with enormous green eyes and royal carriage. She wore her blonde hair braided and twisted up in an elaborate knot on the back of her head, and skin-tight, low-necked shirts. She looked like she'd come directly from yodeling in the Alps. Or at least from modeling for a travel poster about yodeling in the Alps.

Carmine hadn't hired her for her magazine experience, which did not exist. My enchantment with all things Amy lasted only until the first time I had to edit her work. Staring at the page of run-on sentences, misplaced modifiers, and abused possessives, I saw my fantasies popping like soap bubbles, shimmering and multicolored one minute, gone the

next.

Still, we did get along. Everyone but me had quit, so I had to teach her how to do her job. She listened to me until she got a handle on things, and then decided she had better remind me whose name was at the top of the masthead.

It was the argument about the tire that dashed my hopes for happy collaboration. Amy had been there for about a month, and we were putting together our first issue of 2000. I'd been working on a list of 1,000 things every woman should know in the new millennium. The story, one of Claire's ideas, included how to undo a button fly with one hand and how to put a condom on with your mouth, as well as more practical tips, like how to treat a urinary tract infection or change a tire. I had fun with the tire item, while still providing actual instructions. We couldn't have our readers standing like helpless prey on the edge of the highway.

Which turned out to be Amy's problem with it. When I got the edited pages back, Amy had deleted my instructions and replaced them with: Stand there and look helpless. He will come.

I stood up and took the page into her office, which smelled like vanilla from the scented candles she burned all day.

About the tire, I said. I really don't think we should be encouraging women to be helpless in the new millennium.

She looked up calmly. But it's funny.

I don't think it is, actually.

Jennifer, she said, patiently. It's all about how we can manipulate men to do stuff for us.

I stared at her. Aren't we trying to do away with these outdated stereotypes of the greedy, manipulative woman? Why should men ever trust a woman if this is how we're telling them we behave?

She sighed. Stop being such a boring feminist.

Stop sending women back to the dark ages.

We glared at each other.

I tried again. You're not only reinforcing stereotypes, but it's *dangerous* for a woman who's driving alone not to know how to change a tire. What if she's stranded on a deserted road all night. And even if some guy stops to help her, what if he's a rapist, or a serial killer? How does she know she won't end up tied up in the trunk?

Amy tilted her perfectly coiffed blonde head and smiled.

Don't you think you're taking this a little too seriously?

It's possible I was. I often took things too seriously. But it wasn't the first time something like this had happened. Somehow I'd become known as the nutty staff feminist, just because I didn't want to get married or have children or even necessarily a monogamous relationship. Or a heterosexual one.

I'd been so enveloped in a liberal cocoon my entire life—at a radically experimental high school, at Oberlin College, and at grad school at Sarah Lawrence—that I'd forgotten that women like Amy existed. Women who really didn't like other women, who married for money, and whose idea of a perfect afternoon was shopping for uncomfortable shoes.

Amy pressed a button on her phone and summoned Joanne. Joanne, knowing who wielded the power, sided with Amy, and that was the end of my tire item.

And my porn-writing career.

The next afternoon, Amy beckoned me into her office with a crook of her pearly-tipped index finger. I want you out of here in fifteen minutes, she said. We'll mail your stuff.

My feet felt glued to her carpet. No one has ever said one negative word about my work, I said. What grounds could you possibly have for firing me?

You, she said, glaring at me, have no respect for authority. You have no respect for *me*.

Well, I said, unable to resist, at least you've got that right.

Not until I was standing outside holding a cardboard box of the few things I had time to gather did I realize all I had left behind. My files of letters. My Rolodex. Contact information for Carrie White. I couldn't even remember which state she lived in. There were probably hundreds of Carrie Whites. What if my replacement wouldn't publish her stories? Amy would probably think they were too clever, too intelligent. And intelligence, we were told, contrary to nearly all of my own experience, was the enemy of sex. I also knew that there was no possible way that Amy would ever mail my stuff.

I considered going back in, but the security guard who had followed me out shook his head when I turned around. Pulling my box close to my chest I turned north. Well, I

thought. At least she got her machine. At least there's that.

*\* Because I don't have my records, I am not sure of her name. But she would recognize herself in this story. If someone reads it to her, or if it is published one day in Braille and she reads it herself, I hope she'll find me.*