

The Pussycat Master

by Traci Burns

Andy likes his eggs scrambled hard, almost burned, tough and brownish. I like mine fluffy, maybe even a little underdone. This morning I cracked four eggs into a bowl and stirred them, added a splash of milk and some pepper, poured them into the already-hot skillet and watched the bubbles. I scooped a few out of the skillet when they looked about right for me and ate them standing up in the kitchen, waiting for Andy's to blacken. When his were ready, I put them on the plate next to his already-buttered English muffin. I poured his coffee and added the milk. I never tell my girlfriends that I feed Andy like this, but I do it every day. I'm compelled to do it. I have fifties housewife genes, domesticity in my blood. I can make any recipe exactly right on the first try. You could eat dinner off of my kitchen floor.

Well, then, eat dinner off of it tonight was the e-mail I got today from P.M. P.M. is short for Pussycat Master. I met him online. I call him P.M. in my head because I don't like thinking the word *pussy* all the time. I'm not a prude, but that word makes me uncomfortable. I wrote to him this morning telling him about my domestic bliss. I thought he'd be interested in the subservience implicit in the housewife schtick. I thought he'd think even more what a catch I was, what a wonderful girl, he'd be surprised at how much I think about things, how I analyze every stir of my spoon in the eggs, every minute spent Dustbusting up the toast crumbs on the living room floor. When I first met P.M., I thought his name meant he wanted to be the master of my – well, *you know*. It turns out his name means that *he's* the pussycat, he's a genuinely sweet guy. And he's ordering me to eat my dinner off of my kitchen floor. I have to admit, I'm excited.

Andy and I got married right after I graduated from college. He was graduating from law school, and he got a job right away at his Daddy's law firm. I was an English major; my options were more limited. I worked for a little while as an assistant manager at Barnes & Noble but we decided that I could quit and just be a housewife for a little while. I keep everything clean, watch Oprah, talk on the phone to my girlfriend Margaret who has a two-month-old with a colic issue, and I write e-mails to P.M. I always made fun of people with online boyfriends – it seemed corny and desperate, something reserved for people with chronic flaws, like a harelip or a stutter. P.M. lives in Las Vegas and,

from his pictures, looks like a gray-bearded Danny DeVito. Andy works out three days a week; he has a tan and a head of thick blonde hair, but when I'm with him at night, I close my eyes to try and imagine the gleam of nightstand light on a bald head.

Andy isn't home yet but I'm expecting him any minute. For dinner I made steaks, baked potatoes, asparagus with a balsamic vinegar drizzle. There's a blueberry pie in the oven. The house smells like Lemon Pledge; there isn't a pillow out of place. I am even wearing an apron, one that used to be my mother's – it's pink and black, very 50s, with a pattern of little cartoon dogs. I keep staring at the kitchen floor, the black-and-white tile. It's gleaming up at me, daring me, exciting me. I still don't know how I'm going to sneak away from the dinner table to eat off the floor, but figuring it out is thrilling. I hear Andy walk in; I open the refrigerator, stick my head in, looking for nothing, pretending not to have been waiting for him.

"Hey, baby. Dinner's smelling good. Willya grab me a beer out of there?" Andy drops his armload of papers and work paraphernalia on the kitchen counter, grins at me when I hand him the Miller Lite. He looks so young, almost younger than he looked when we were in school. He's wearing a suit, a pink dress shirt, some loud paisley tie. I love the way he dresses, I have to admit it. There's something fundamentally great about a man in a suit, especially a man in a rumpled suit, with the necktie all loose and the shirt all wrinkled.

Back in the day, Andy would never have believed he'd be wearing a suit and tie every day. In 1990, he wore skintight black stretch jeans, Cure t-shirts; he dyed his fair hair inky black and spiked it up with cheap hot-pink hair gel. He always smelled like cigarettes and metal – I can't explain it, the metal smell, but it was something sharp and exhilarating. There was a certain kind of girl back in 1990 for whom Andy was the ideal boyfriend; he had women all over him, all the time, and he picked me. At the time I was too self-conscious to ask him why it was me he'd chosen – maybe I didn't want him to examine his choice for fear that he'd realize he'd fucked up, *wait, what am I doing with this chubby enthusiastic girl?*, he'd send me back and pick another mate from the long line of tall, skinny, chain-smoking arty girls dying to be near him. He never talked much about our relationship – he was never much of a talker; he communicated with his silences, or at least that's what the arty girls thought. They thought sitting next to him at a party for three hours and not saying a word was the sexiest thing on the planet. I always hated it; I'd always get up and leave him, chat up the gay boys by the punch bowl. I like small talk; it makes me feel alive and goofily human. I don't mean for it to sound like we

never had fun with each other – we did, we were totally in love, I guess I’m supposed to say we *are* totally in love but I don’t feel it any more. Life feels ridiculous and routine. I don’t feel necessary, really. I’m seized with desire to ask Andy now, right now, at this bland 6:30 dinner hour, I want to know why me. I imagine what I’d say. *Tell me right now why you love me. Give me three reasons you’d rather be with me than anyone else. Turn around and close your eyes tight – now tell me what I’m wearing. Did you even look at me? What color are my eyes? Do you know the freckle constellations on my back? I know yours.* I sigh. I lose my nerve.

“You ready to eat? I have everything all done.” Andy nods and goes to sit at the table. He’s so spoiled, but he has no idea. His mother was just like me; I don’t think he really grasps the concept that this is something special, that this doting is a gift. I put his plate down, put mine down, go put in a cd. Lyle Lovett. Something laid-back, cool, and smooth. I am feeling none of the above. The dark pink of my steak’s inside gives me away. I cut my meat into squares, cut my asparagus into manageably-sized bites, mash the potato together with sour cream and salt, but I eat nothing. Andy shovels food in, guzzles a beer. I sit and wait for him to talk to me, but he won’t – he alternates his gaze from his plate of food to the gray-screened television set in the middle of the living room.

“Grab me another beer, baby? And do you mind if I turn this off and turn the tv on, watch the news a little while?”

“No, of course I don’t mind. Here, I’ll do it.” He is satisfied. Sometimes it’s like having a big, dull child instead of being married to another adult. I don’t know what I want him to say to me. He never asks how my day was – I can’t really remember if he ever did. Maybe he did and he got bored of the same nothingness filling my mouth every day. God knows I did, and now look where I am.

I take my full plate into the kitchen. The people on CNN are talking about terror, terror, always terror. I take my knife and scrape the contents of my plate into a centrally located white tile. The apples of my naked knees hit the hard floor. I bend at the waist to take a bite of steak, holding my own long hair back with one hand. I’m not sure if I should sit back up between each bite while I chew politely, or if I should stay down like a dog. I choose to sit up. It’s almost like doing exercises while you eat. Bend, bite, chew, repeat. I love the feeling of my teeth picking up food off the floor. It really is so clean down here, every corner of this universe dust-free. I bend and chew, bend and chew, feeling my face flush when I think about what P.M. will say, how when I tell him what I’ve done he’ll call me a good girl, such a good girl, the best little girl in the world.

It’s two months later and I’m driving down the interstate, barreling, really, driving fast as hell, jacked up on adrenaline. I’m meeting P.M. at a bar – an S&M club, to be more exact. It’s called The Dungeon. I am not a fan of dungeons or the idea of dungeons so there is a huge possibility for discomfort. I don’t know how he talked me into doing this. I never meant to see him face-to-face – that wasn’t even a part of it. I never thought about actual sex, actual stubby hairy fingers on my actual soft slip-white breasts, but now thinking about it has me in a fervor of disgust and joy. I don’t know what is wrong with me at all. I definitely need a drink. Traffic on the interstate is awful; it’s all glaring red taillights, the sharp interruption of honking horns, the other motorists not willing to let me over when I’m in the wrong lane. The traffic is putting me in an extra panicky mood, which may be good for the situation at hand. I’m not sure. I’m not sure about anything at all in this moment. I’m listening to an old Depeche Mode tape from college and the music reminds me of being drunk in sweaty, tacky bars, baring my navel and my teeth to the blacklight, rubbing my blurry body against as many others as possible.

P.M. has started calling me on the telephone. He only does it during the day, when Andy’s at work. Every time the phone rings during the day I lurch out of my chair, propelled by butterflies and static electricity. I feel like a high school girl, giddy about a boy on the other end of the line, analyzing every breath and pause, but P.M. is no high school boy. He’s way better than that. He talks fast, with a New York accent – he must be a transplant. I never ask him about his life; I try not to care – and he talks *dirty*. I sit, drink wine, listen, rapt. Sometimes I do what he tells me and sometimes I just lie and tell him I’m doing it, but it’s great either way. Sometimes he says things so close to the unsayable obscene heart of my secret desire that my voice disappears down the back of my throat and I’m just a throb, a surge of red energy, raw on the other end of the phone, swallowing, swallowing. I have to be sure to erase the Las Vegas call from the Caller ID. Usually when Andy gets home from work I jump him. I’m ready for a body at that point. He must be thrilled, thinking he’s married the sex kitten of the universe. We fuck on the floor most often, me on top, and I’ll reach down while we’re doing it to cover his eyes with my hands. I don’t want him to see me. I feel like a liar, I feel unfaithful, and with no eyes watching me I feel less exposed. Andy never mentions it afterwards. When we first started dating, we took acid together and spent six hours kissing with our fingers in each other’s ears; it was like living underwater together in a universe of spit and sea-creature tongues. It was absolutely fantastic. That was the first night I told him I loved him – I said it first; after

only two dates, I was ready. We were coming down off our drugs, lying on our stomachs in dewy park grass in the amazing purple early-morning light, and I said, “I need to go somewhere and get a Coke and some buttered toast. And I love you.” He smiled and smiled, each of his teeth a separate glowing moon I could see my reflection in. How did we get from there to here? It can’t be all my fault. It’s probably all my fault.

Back in the car, Depeche Mode starts in on “Master and Servant” and I crack up. I’m diffusing my own tension with laughter. “Forget all about equality!” I’m singing along in my best fake British accent, then I begin to wonder if I picked the right outfit. It’s summer, and warm, so I’m wearing a black tank top, an aqua silk skirt, expensive black sandals with a much higher heel than the shoes I usually wear. P.M. talks a lot about his love of women in heels, how they lengthen the leg, tilt the ass up at a dirty little angle, make the woman stand a certain slightly uncomfortable way, so even though they kill my feet, the shoes are the only part of the outfit I’m sure about. They’re totally sexy.

I find my exit, turn off. I’m fumbling in the passenger seat for the instructions I printed off the internet. This whole endeavor suddenly seems ridiculous and I really wish I was a different kind of person, a *freer* person, instead of who I am: the kind of person to do a crazy thing like this and then fret, fret, fret the whole entire time and not be able to enjoy any of it. The city roads are dark and bright all at the same time; I’m driving past KFC’s and convenience stores, past groups of rangy boys in baggy clothes on street-corners, past strip-malls filled with cell phone stores and nail salons. The world seems desperate and temporary. I’m suddenly hungry – I’ve been so nervous I’ve forgotten to eat all day. I stop at a Taco Bell, then think better of it – Taco Bell food is messy and runny, and what if it gives me the farts? I do not want to have the farts tonight! I walk to the convenience store next door, where I buy a pint of milk and a pack of cigarettes. A girlfriend of mine once said, “Milk is like liquid meat,” which did not gross me out at all (her intended effect) but instead has made me think of milk as a first choice for food when I don’t feel like actually eating. I drink the milk and smoke two cigarettes; I haven’t smoked in a while and I get a thumping headrush and a hot surge of nausea. It is sticky black and neon out here and it is nearly midnight. Andy thinks I’m spending the weekend with my parents; my parents think Andy and I are going to the beach. It’s like high school all over again. The wind is a warm hand tugging at the hem of my skirt. I get back in the car, start driving.

The first mean boyfriend I ever had was Xavier. Xavier wasn’t his real

name, his real name was Josh, but I sat in front of him in French class senior year and Xavier was his French name, and I liked saying it so much I never stopped calling him that. We all had to pick French names; mine was Dominique. Our French teacher Mme. Adams was young, barely out of college, and beautiful. She had thick dark hair and lips like a little juicy plum, and she spoke French with a Southern accent. She was a terrible teacher but a fun person. Once Jacques, a nerdy boy whose real name I can’t even remember, called her over to his desk to explain some graffiti – someone had pencil-drawn the words “HAIR PIE” in huge, intricate block letters on his desk, right next to a goofy-looking hairy triangle.

“What’s a hair pie?” Jacques asked, peering up with his watery blue eyes.

“If you don’t already know, I can’t be the one to tell you!” Mme. Adams choked, trying not to laugh, trying, trying, but finally giving up and giggling until she wept and her nose started to run and she had to excuse herself to go to the bathroom.

Every Friday we had a *fête*, a party, everyone would bring food and drinks and we’d just sit in the classroom talking and eating. During one of those *fêtes*, I was sitting at my desk enjoying a ham and cheese sandwich when Xavier leaned into my ear and said, “I fucked her.” I was startled.

“Who? Mme. Adams?” I asked. He nodded. I paid attention to his face for the first time ever, for what seemed like the first time I’d ever paid attention to a face in my life. His lips were full and turned up at each corner in this perfect way, so even though he wasn’t smiling, he still had a smartassed look. His eyes were so dark blue they were almost purple, and he didn’t stop staring at me, he didn’t take his eyes off mine for a second. It was great. His forearms were thick. He had spread his legs out so that his feet were on either side of my desk – one clunky, giant black skater sneaker on either side of me. It felt incredibly intimate to be between his legs like that, especially when he was talking about sex.

“You are *lying*.” I turned my head around to glare at him, to give him a *bullshit* look, but those purple eyes caught me and made me vulnerable, so all I could do was stare and listen to my heart beat. I felt suddenly, immediately jealous of Mme. Adams.

“I’m not lying,” he said, then, closer, again, so close to my ear it tickled and I wanted to jump back but I also wanted to stay right there, getting buzzed with the electricity of his voice, “you want me to tell you about it?” I did.

That night I was in Xavier’s bedroom. It was a funky wreck; every

surface was covered with dirty clothes, magazines, dishes, books, God knows what. I was thrilled to be in the middle of it. His parents weren't home. He told me the story of Mme. Adams, how he'd been at a bookstore and had seen her and the two of them had started talking, how they liked the same authors, they both liked Bukowski, and did I read Bukowski? I admitted to Xavier that I didn't. I was disappointed in myself. I was sitting on the floor, having cleared a semicircle of carpet, and I was staring up at Xavier on the bed. I was doing that self-deprecating girl thing of trying to pretend that I didn't care if he told a story about sex with another woman when truthfully the only thing I could think about was his body and my body and skin and oh my God here I am in his room what's going to happen is something going to happen do my boobs look o.k. is there anything in my teeth did I wear good underwear today is he going to want to have sex with me? I wasn't a virgin but I wasn't very experienced either.

Suddenly I didn't care about the story of Mme. Adams any more. I was impulsive, always have been – I pulled him by the wrist down onto the floor with me. He lay on top of me, not kissing me, not doing anything, until it was so awkward I almost couldn't stand it. Then, just when I was about to wriggle away and run out the door and cry, he kissed me. A ferocious kiss full of teeth, my first kiss like that, and it felt like I was finally awake within my body and awake within the world. Every palpation of my lower lip with his teeth was like a heartbeat I hadn't noticed before. I tried to move to put my hands on his head while we kissed, which was when I realized he was holding my arms down. I moved them; he pressed down tighter. He held me down like that, down on his floor, on that soft mat of dirty boy clothes, and he turned me into his girl. He wouldn't let me move until the second that I became incredibly frustrated, then he'd move me where he wanted me to be. He wouldn't let me kiss back, would pull away and away, leaving me with my mouth open, rooting for him. When we fucked he told me I had to say all the words, had to tell him every single thing I wanted, and then when I finally cleared my throat of the shyness and said it, he said, "What? I couldn't hear you. Say it louder."

My tires are crunching on the gravel of The Dungeon's parking lot. There are a lot of cars and a lot of people standing beside their cars or walking in little clusters. Most people are wearing black. I park far away, try to practice breathing, to regulate my heartbeat. There are no lights in this parking lot and the building is like a big ugly warehouse and P.M. is in there somewhere, this man I've been giving the most intimate parts of myself to for most of the

past year is in there, inside that nondescript building, big-belly-up to the bar, maybe, drinking what he likes to drink, which is whiskey, straight. I flip my mirror down and reapply lipstick; I'm wearing a very dark red, almost bloody, and my lips look like a bruise blooming in the middle of my face. Potentially I have the whole weekend free; I could meet him in here and request to be taken away, back to his hotel room, where God knows what will happen to me. It will be completely out of my hands, which is why I like P.M. so much – he knows the relief of taking it out of my hands and putting it in his own. He knows how to flip me, turn me around so the things I think I'm in control of are taken away, so I'm just a body, stretching and raw, needy and satisfied all at the same time.

Walking towards the bar, I stumble on my unfamiliar high heels and nearly fall; I steady myself on the bumper of a giant black SUV with tinted windows – *what if that's P.M.'s car? It's such a big, ridiculous, sexy car!* I giddily think. I pay my cover charge and walk inside. The crowd is mostly young; there's a little stage set up where girls with duct-tape X's over their breasts are spanking one another with little leather paddles. The music is so loud it just sounds like fuzz. I beeline for the bathroom. I need to look at myself again, need to steady myself against the reality of a bar-light bathroom mirror reflection.

People are fucking in the bathroom. It's totally obvious to all of us who are in the bathroom and *not* fucking – we're all making eyes at one another, like *there they go, at it again!* as if it's someone as familiar as a roommate having all this public, noisy fun. I check my reflection and am pleased to see that I look pretty cool – not just cool as in hip, cool as in calm, cool, and collected. I don't look anxious or shaky. I put on more lipstick, aware that I've just applied a coat in the car, but also aware that, in a place like this, three or more coats of lipstick is not going to make me stand out all that much. The bathroom fuckers are reaching the critical point now; there's a series of metallic *thuds* and a little spasm of funny-sounding heavy breathing and then the girl screams, "Oh God, Jesus, I'm dying! I'm dying!" and it's too much for me and I have to get out of there before I lose my cool altogether.

I'm supposed to look for P.M. at the bar. I can't believe he had us meet in this place. It's like the cartoon version of everything we've been talking about for the past year, and if it's really his scene, I don't know if I can go through with it. There's a store adjacent to the bar where you can buy leather harnesses, dildos, leather whips, dark pink latex miniskirts. Fetish Wal-Mart. I feel ridiculous and kind of angry. I really want a drink. I scan the rows of bodies perched on barstools – none of them are P.M., not even close. What if, after all this, *he stood me up?* The idea strikes me as funny, and I giggle as I or-

der a vodka and cranberry from the cute young shirtless bartender with thick silver barbells through his painfully tender-looking nipples. I pierced Andy's nipple when we were a new couple. He was numb from whiskey and ice cubes and I did it at a party with a roomful of people watching. I was drunk, too, but Andy didn't know it. My hand did not falter. The needle through his red flesh was like a promise, a kiss, like a wedding ring, only sexier. He only kept the ring in for about six months; the piercing wouldn't heal properly. The skin didn't want the metal.

Thinking about Andy makes my whole body feel confused. I live so much in my own head that I have no real idea if the problems we have are *our* problems or only mine. I suppose, though, that if they're mine, they're ours, in that completely awful bear-my-burden codependent marriage way. I imagine seeing Andy circa 1990 walk in the door of The Dungeon – he'd be right at home. Shirtless and skinny, with a blotchy red right nipple and the tightest pants in the world. Just then there's an eerily familiar voice at my ear.

"Hi, sweetheart." I turn to look; it's P.M. He's wearing a black button-down shirt and looks younger in person, although he is probably not very many people's idea of *hot*. I smile at him, but my voice has disappeared and I can't talk. I finish my drink in one unladylike gulp; I even drool a thin stream of cranberry out the side of my mouth. I can't think straight enough to be embarrassed about it; I just wipe it away with the back of my hand like somebody in a t.v. commercial about thirst-quenching. Now that he's here I don't want to look at him. I try to think of somewhere to look, but I can't think of anywhere good, so my eyes focus on P.M.'s hands, which are thick and hairy-fingered. P.M. is staring me up and down and up again, stopping at all the important parts. It's almost like I can feel those hands on me. P.M. stops the bartender, orders a whiskey for himself and another vodka and cranberry for me.

"Make it a double, please," I say to the bartender – or, rather, to his nipples, since I suddenly seem unable to look anyone in the eye. I wonder if I should small-talk; should I ask P.M. about his flight, about the hotel, should I find out if he's eaten at any local restaurants, should I recommend some? I don't know what the protocol for this situation is. And just then there it is, bearing down on me like an animal – P.M.'s face, his breath, his beard, his teeth, all up close, all at once. The kiss is awkward at first but he stays there until it gets better, and by the time we're done, our drinks are sitting neatly on napkins in front of us and my face feels pink and abraded by his beard. I like the feeling. I have been kissing the same lips for ten years now, and P.M.'s mouth on mine makes my tongue feel shiny like a medal, shiny and brand new. I wonder if I have lipstick all over my face. I hope I do.

"What do you want me to do to you?" P.M. asks. "What do you want now?"

"I don't want you to ask me," I say. "I just want you to, you know, *do it*." God, I hope he doesn't think I mean *do it* as in *sex*. I didn't mean for it to come out like that.

"Okay. Drink your drink, fast. Then we'll go outside."

I gulp again; the extra vodka makes me screw my face up a little bit. P.M. laughs, and I feel as precious as a little doll in a box. I am a teenage girl just coming into her own. I am not a married woman, childless, no career, nearly thirty. I do not waste my life. A girl like me would not waste her life. The vodka makes my limbs move with warm, friendly fluidity as I walk out the door just a little bit ahead of P.M., just so he can get a good view of my legs in the high heels, my ass in the silk skirt.

P.M. points me towards a car – not a big black SUV, a bland rental car, an egg-shaped wheat-colored bore of a car. Inside, it still smells new. I can't believe I'm in the car with this man. He could drive me away and murder me. He could kill me and fuck my dead body and throw me in the river like a croaker sack. I don't think he's going to do any of these things, though. The night is amazing; it's really starting to smell good outside. I roll down the car's window, stick my head out like a dog riding down a highway, only we're sitting still.

"What are we doing in your car?" I ask. I feel flirty, vivacious.

"We'll just talk. That bar was fucking ridiculous. We had to get out of there. You want some of this?" He has a silver flask, warm from being near his body. I take it from him and pour whiskey down the back of my throat. I try not to let it touch the inside of my mouth at all so it won't burn and taste awful, but it still does. I make more faces. "You drink booze like a teenager," P.M. says, fondly.

"Hey," I stare at him, "what's your real name?" I'd always made a big deal about not wanting to know.

"You serious?" he says. *Now* we're talking like two people who know each other. Now we know the ropes.

"Totally serious. Lay it on me, daddy."

"It's Andrew."

I'm quiet for a minute. "*Bullshit*."

"No bullshit! I always thought it was such an odd coincidence, but I could never *talk* to you about it, because you're so stubborn, you and your boundary issues." He looks a little pleased with himself.

It's just now occurring to me that I talk to P.M. on the phone like I'd talk to a girlfriend – Andy this, Andy that, grocery shopping, houseclean-

ing, should we have a baby *now* or should we wait, blah blah blah. I'd always assumed he'd be interested just because I was young and cute and I was talking to him – that should be enough for him, he shouldn't need anything else – and now I'm realizing what an asshole I was. I mean, he did plenty of the talking, too, but his was mostly dirty – I never asked him about his life, and if he volunteered information, I'd cut him off, shut him up, and he was always so gracious about it in his domineering way. I feel suddenly beholden to him in a huge way.

“So everyone calls you Andrew and not Andy?”

“People call me both. I prefer Andrew. *Andy* is kind of a douchebag name. No offense.”

I wave my hands around as if to imply *no big deal*. I want to ask P.M. everything else now – *What's your job? Do you like it? What were your parents like? Have you ever been in love? Tell me about the best kiss you can remember. How was your day? No, really, how was it?* Instead I say, “Close your eyes. Now tell me what I'm wearing. Don't forget the details.”

He remembers everything, even down to the tarnished silver of my ankle bracelet, even the bitten dark red of my fingernails. I wish he wouldn't, but he does. With his eyes closed he looks very handsome in the moonlight. I imagine him playing the piano. I don't know if he can or not, but if he can't, he should learn. He'd look great doing it. The whole world suddenly feels like a chain of one lonely person reaching out for another, and the wind just whips through us as if we were made of tunnels, as if we were never really there at all.

