

TC



DURING THE *erotic museum*

BY STEVEN TAGLE

IF YOU REALLY WANT TO

Speeding down Hollywood Boulevard, I don't even notice the museum, but my brother sticks his head out the window of my silver Volvo, maybe restless, maybe trying to sniff it out. Just as we're about to drive by, Jim says, "You wanna go in?"

"What?"

"The Erotic Museum," he says. "Wanna go in?"

I try to catch a glimpse of it without crashing. "Right now?"

"It might be interesting."

"Right now. You wanna go?"

"I'm just saying: might be interesting."

I'm twenty now, and Jim's eighteen, but he insists we double back to get his driver's license, just in case. Tonight he hasn't shaved and looks as old as me, dark stubble masking any hint of a blush. *Well if you really want to*, I think, catching his eye. He shoots me a look I know well, light but defensive. Of course, by now, it's already been decided. We both want to, and this is just formality, us spinning the story, heaving the blame around like a sack of steaming potatoes. My brother's sex drive is an elusive creature, like Sasquatch or the Loch Ness. He's playing a risky game,

finally admitting to his teenage angst, his red-blooded curiosity about sex. We never talk about it, just those few times in the car, when after one juicy question, he actually says, *This is making me uncomfortable.*

THE FREQUENCY OF "IT"

"This is making me uncomfortable," Jim said. He was a freshman then, and as we drove away from his dirty high school friends, I kept an eye on him, hoping he'd share some of their dirt with me.

"You brought it up, dude."

"Well, Eric said it happened in his sleep. Woke up, and it was everywhere."

His friends were having a jerk-off contest, the ultimate test of restraint, gunning to see who could hold out the longest. For pampered high schoolers, this was a hip new trend, prelude to losing your virginity at prom. It was an assent to climax, shedding small things first, your freshman sense of taboo, your shame. They wouldn't let him play.

"They said, 'You don't do it! That's cheating!' How is that cheating?"

"Why did they say you don't do it?"

I asked.

"Because I don't." Then, reddening to meet my skepticism: "I don't."

Then it was cheating. When I was in high school, discovering that your buddies did "it" too was a strange and exciting relief. While it was virtually impossible not to do "it," going out on a limb and sharing secrets that shocking manufactured its own intimacy. Refusal to do so was not restraint, but a lie so obvious it bordered on betrayal, violating friendship and its expectation. Then again, the possibility that he really didn't do "it" was even more unnerving, signaling a superhuman strength that squashed my will to putty in comparison. Our parents raised us to accomplish, leaving little room for what they termed "unproductive sexy-sex." They sheltered us by accident, minimizing sex to the level of distraction. I still saw Jim as asexual as a cartoon, more naïve than most, and more pure. When we were kids, he mooned over April O'Neil, the cute, yellow-suited reporter from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. I always thought they'd make a good match.



out, ending their contest in a series of anticlimactic spurts. We were lying in our bunk beds with the lights out, and this time I got the nerve to follow up, asking bluntly, “So, you really never do it?”

“Well,” he said.

“Never ever?”

“Most of my friends have to do it every day or a few times a week. I ... for me—about once a month, maybe?”

About once a month. Not every day or a few times a week, but an occurrence on the order of months. Then Jim said he felt uncomfortable talking about it, and I wondered how red the question had made him. He was an awfully good sport, giving his secret away without asking for anything in return. His admission kept me up late. Not every day. Not a few times a week. About once a month. As if somehow, like menstruation, it just happened.

PUTTING OUT

A man in a worn leather jacket stands outside the museum handing out coupons. He looks homeless, a formidable obstacle. I consider turning back. This homeless man will know we were here.

“Discount on admission,” he says. “Two bucks off.”

Jim reaches for a coupon.

“Discount’s automatic inside,” the man whispers, pulling his hand up and away.

The lobby of the Erotic Museum seems clean enough, a sparse, intellectual art deco. Here they sell backscratchers and fluorescent dildos, t-shirts that say, “Just Did It,” and “Tough Love.” It lacks a sex shop’s grit, but just beyond that black curtain is who knows what.

The lady at the counter looks bored, an art student, used to this scene.

“Two?” she asks.

Jim nudges me. “Do you have cash?” he asks.

“Are you going to put out?” It’s the first thing to come to mind, gliding out of my mouth with a flourish of male sarcasm. Though it easily ranks as one of the more unseemly things I’ve ever said to him, I figure, what the hell—we’re in the Erotic Museum. The lady at the counter coughs, and Jim toes a smudge on the floor.

“I’ll pick up dessert with my card,” he says quietly.

“Two,” I nod, sliding a twenty across

the display case.

“Your first time?” the lady asks, counting out change. I notice the entwined symbols of Venus on her wrist, peeking out from a severe black cuff.

“Of course not,” I say.

“Just play safe.”

She hands me two tickets and change. I offer Jim one, but he shrugs it off, so I’m stuck with the dirty evidence. Silence becomes our understanding. I agree to finance this trip knowing it’s something he’ll never tell his girlfriend, never tell our parents, the kind of lesson older brothers are supposed to teach.

LAST KISSES

The last time I kissed a girl, I was in the first grade. Her name was Lisa, and she was a year younger than me. She lived right across the street, and after school we often invited each other over to ride bikes and play house. Lisa had a small room, and her bed took up most of the space, positioned diagonal to a corner. One afternoon, we lay in the crawlspace beneath the bed, staring up at the triangle of ceiling where the headboard met the walls. This was our house.

“So I’m your husband,” I said. “I’m coming home from work.”

“What should I do?” she asked.

“I dunno. You’ve been cleaning all day. Just say, ‘Welcome home, honey.’ Greet me at the door.”

“Honey?” she asked. “My mom and dad say ‘sweetheart.’”

“I think ‘honey’ is better,” I said, wriggling around to face her. “And you should probably kiss me.” Kissing struck me as a necessary evil, the hard-won detail that would make our performance memorable for having been endured. Real artists suffered. And after all, what husband and wife didn’t kiss?

“On the cheek?”

“On the lips,” I said, grimacing.

We took a moment to get into the scene.

“Hi honey,” I said. “I’m home from work.”

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” she said.

The kiss, as I remember, was soft and fleeting. Her lips, moist with kindergarten spittle, felt dramatically different from what I had expected. There wasn’t a grand soundtrack or spinning lights. I didn’t feel

like a hero. Instead, there was just moist rubber, a part of the body that felt different from skin. Our lips touched briefly, and then we were just two kids again, two kids under the bed, playing house. She never said whether or not she liked it, and in any case, we didn’t do it again. I was too young to know what should follow a kiss, but I expected something comparable to love, and felt vaguely let down when she pulled herself up and out of our triangular house. As I walked home, I told myself it was just a kiss, wondering if I should have saved it. Regrettably, the suffering of two young artists made for great neighborhood gossip, and by that evening, my parents, Lisa’s, and all the kids on our block thought that I liked her.



BIG GRANDMA BETTY

Converted from an old souvenir t-shirt shop, the Erotic Museum covers two floors, but is still smaller than I expected. It’s a museum that takes itself seriously, with stark white walls and hardwood floors that echo when we tread on them. I suppose an establishment like this needs to take itself seriously so that others will, too. The world is overrun by righteous parents and snickering teenage boys. Founded in January 2004 by four Russian entrepreneurs, the museum is the only one of its kind on the West Coast. I like the uniqueness of that fact; it’s the only sexual sanctuary for thousands of miles.

Right inside the curtained entrance is “The Human Body Project,” an array of photographs cataloguing every imaginable variation of penis and breast. The exhibit features row after row of naked men and women, the enduring image of mankind, posing as neutrally as action figures on a shelf. I don’t see any supermodels. The people on the wall have bodies like marshmallows and flat tires, with skin colors as diverse as a multicultural marker set. They are fat and

hairy in all the wrong places. *What about this is erotic?* I wonder. *These people look just like me.* Big Grandma Betty once told my brother and me that she makes a point of weighing herself in the nude each night before she showers. *Somebody's grandmother is here,* I think. From the corner of my eye, I watch Jim stare at the frumpy, tan-lined nudes, trying to decode the meaning of their terrible ordinariness. Then he turns to me.

"Do you know what this is?" he asks.

I glance at the placard he's puzzling over: *The Erotic Museum is conducting an ongoing research project intent on recording the full breadth of natural and altered human physiology.*

Is he joking? What does his question even mean? He stares at me expectantly, and I get the sick feeling that it's not the exhibit he's puzzling over, but the whole idea of the Erotic Museum, the public display of private desire. I'm afraid he'll ask me what this museum's all about, keep staring me down until I explain why we've come to see grandmothers naked. I scan the lines of misshapen nudes, trying to intuit an answer from their sad, concave chests. None of this is what I thought it would be.

"It's like reality," I say finally. "People aren't really like what they're like on TV."

MERELIN MONROE NAKED, PART I

Last year, when Jim came up to visit me at school, I thought I caught him watching porn on my computer. I checked the History Trail on a hunch, and while he showered, found the wayward scent of his secret, primal urges. Jim was a horrible speller, so horrible that he could almost be proud of his unorthodox creativity; Yahoo returned records like "Merelin Monroe naked" and "collage porn stars." "Merelin Monroe naked" was especially telling, since we had just returned from San Francisco, and he bought a street vendor's sketch of the actress for his girlfriend, Sarah. The sketch was flattering and generic, but Yahoo infused it with seedier motives. He found Marilyn attractive? And not just celebrity-attractive, but attractive enough to get off on? Something sexual drew him to that pencil sketch, pheromones from the canvas persuading him to lay down twenty bucks.

As for "collage porn stars," Yahoo returned 468,000 sites, and Jim clicked on the second and third. *Luckily for him, people in*

TEDIOUS QUESTIONS

1. Can you feel each internal organ operating?
 - (a) Streetlights go out over me as I walk under them.
 - (b) Streetlights turn on over me as I walk under them.
 - (c) A sublime abstraction.
 - (d) I won't tell if you don't.
2. Are you prepared to be satisfied with a vague immanence?
 - (a) mechanical soliloquy
 - (b) all peaceful on the ocean floor
 - (c) broken bottles reflecting sunlight
 - (d) strange happenings in small towns
3. Will the trains run on time?
 - (a) I will grow up to be my father.
 - (b) I will grow up to be my mother.
 - (c) Crisp money from an ATM.
 - (d) The trains will run on time.
4. Was it worth it?
 - (a) only optically
 - (b) fresh stench of unwashed bodies
 - (c) hours spent inside a windowless office
 - (d) the brilliant minds of the Manhattan Project

– ERIC PHETTEPLACE

porn spell just as badly, I thought. *Collage Girls Exposed, free pics!*, screamed *teenagetits.com*. *Sexy Southern Collage Students Having a Hard Foursome Fuck Fest!!!*, said *southernwhores.com*. These were porno sites I hadn't been to before, some of them surprisingly good. Here, thumbnails linked to full-sized pictures, and the girls actually looked my age. It was hard to imagine that less than ten minutes ago, Jim was looking at the same pictures. The History Trail listed every link he clicked on, so I became the voyeur of his most private thoughts. These were the girls he found attractive enough to fleetingly pursue, the ones who successfully seduced him into clicking their thumbnails. Most of the girls—Vera, Alex, Jules—were brunettes

with curly hair. They intrigued me: Vera with the silver-dollar nipples, Jules with the diamond-haired crotch and spread legs, triggered something in him that I could not fathom. They were his type, and maybe mine. We never discussed type.

OUR BEST DEFENSE

On the second floor, Jim holds a cock-shaped magnifying glass up to slides from the "San Fernando Says" exhibit, the Valley's representative wall of porn. There's so much skin on these backlit slides that the whole wall radiates an orange glow. Here's a woman rubbing a cat between her breasts as she masturbates. Here's a naked man painting a woman's toenails as she gives

him head. *Why doesn't this shock me anymore?* I wonder. Jim drops the magnifying cock, his face unreadable. It's not distaste exactly, but maybe embarrassment for me, that I could really be the type of brother who'd bring him here just to win his approval. We waver at a portal to the exciting and the absurd, and I want to say, *Do you think about this stuff too?* Yet in the depraved Valley of barebacked porn stars, I feel a growing need to protect him. This is not the innocuous Human Body Project. This is sleazy hardcore stuff that large, hirsute men mass produce and sell at neon XXX joints to Jim's dirty friends.

"Are these just more pictures of naked people?" he asks.

"Yeah, really," I scoff.

We peruse erotic art, one room devoted to vibrant portraits of naked women eating. On one canvas, a woman with olive skin and dark nipples sits squeezing a watermelon between her legs. One thin sliver of the fruit has been removed, giving us an illicit peek at its ripe interior. She nibbles on the extracted slice with a smile. We look at her, then look at each other—*Why is sex so random?* I feign shock to put him at ease, trying hard to find that part of myself that sex once appalled. Together, we stare at the displays with an objectivity borne of our real and imagined terror, our own particular shame. Anyone else would laugh.

I stop to examine the original Playboy spreads of Marilyn Monroe in her Red Velvet series, Mona Lisa to the Erotic Museum. Beside the spreads play clips from an infamous 1948 porno flick, featuring a woman who may or may not be her. I watch the surprisingly flexible maybe-Marilyn in action and ruminate on the quality of black and white porn. When Jim nudges me on, I can't help myself.

"Look!" I say, grabbing him by the collar and mimicking her most seductive pose, "it's *Merelin!*"

He rolls his eyes, a nod to either his guilt or my stupidity. Maybe Jim's embarrassed to find himself here, but I'm more disappointed. Some things just don't belong in museums. In these sparse galleries, sex is sanitized, abstracted into a series of neat, spotlighted artifacts. We're given crumpled sheets in shadow boxes, sex under a microscope, sex without intimacy. Like the framed *Peanuts* strips in San Francisco's

Cartoon Art Museum, these remote pictures frustrate me. Something messy and essential has been lost.

"This is like that cartoon museum," I say.

"You're enjoying this?" he asks.

SUCKER PUNCH

The thought formed fleetingly in my mind, like all of my outrageous and repressed desires: *If he agrees that his girlfriend's car is better than mine, I'm going to punch him.*

"I don't know," Jim said, glancing from me to Sarah. "The Stevemobile is pretty cool." He lay a hand on my silver Volvo, the car he named, an old friend. It was our car, a symbol worth defending. I carted him around in it for four years, and when he was learning to drive, it was the car I trained him in, just us and an abandoned parking lot. He knew to leave our emblems be, to remain impartial. Weeks earlier, Sarah called the Stevemobile a taxicab for her and Jim. April O'Neil would never have stooped that low.

The thought of Jim having a girlfriend was itself strange and awkward, a nagging reality I tried my best to ignore. Compared to his alleged forays into porn, this new relationship seemed impractical and concrete, an unnecessary burden to bear. While porn was a pleasant departure into something like sex, this had an unwelcome gravity: dating someone real and kissing her, too. He never consulted me before asking her out, perhaps figuring that in liking and love, he didn't want protection.

That particular night, Jim, Sarah, and I planned to watch a movie together, but as the previews began, she whispered something to him, and they slipped away. Half an hour later, unwilling to watch the whole movie alone, I went outside to find him. In the dark, I couldn't miss them in her green Mustang, making out with the lights on. He and Sarah kissed long and hard, eyes closed, faces pressed together in need. I wavered at the corner of the house, knowing I shouldn't interrupt, but unwilling to leave them be. *Why are they doing this now?* I thought. I blamed Jim for his lack of control, trying to convince myself that he hadn't outgrown Blockbuster movies with his brother. His making out with a girl seemed almost obscene to me, disloyal, grown-up, and dangerous.

When the movie was over, I came

back outside to join Jim and Sarah on the driveway.

"I know!" Jim announced. "We'll have a thumb wrestling match to decide." And for some reason—maybe to impress him—I submitted to this bizarre trial. After Sarah and I clasped hands, I deftly swung my thumb around and pinned her fair and square, perhaps a little too hard.

"I don't think you can wrap your thumb around like that," Sarah said, rubbing her hand. "That's cheating."

"I think she's right," Jim said.

And that was it. I let my fist fly right into his soft belly. He stumbled backwards, doubling over and grabbing his stomach.

"You dick!" he said.

"I don't like this," Sarah said. I could tell she had never heard him curse, and it upset her. I stood there grinning, happy to assert myself, amazed at what I could coax out of him with one lame punch. He had a darker undercurrent that I could tap, sending expletives welling to the surface with the wind I knocked out of him. It felt good, an action required to keep my younger brother in line. I offered him a hand, and with one swift pull, he yanked me off my feet. Not knowing what to do, Sarah retreated to the front seat of her Mustang. We wrestled playfully on the street, asphalt digging into our backs, and I emerged a minute later with a scratched watch and elbow, all forgiven. Jim and I hugged, and I apologized again for hitting him, wondering if this fight would foreshadow another.

INTERACTION

In the interactive section of the museum is the ToyBox, an aquarium of slick sex toys, moisture from the lube condensing on glass. Two pairs of latex gloves allow access, and I notice a tear in the pale vagina, the gaping grin of someone's excitement.

"You wanna do this?" Jim asks.

We stand on either end of the ToyBox, inserting both arms up to our elbows. The inside of my gloves feel moist and cool. I begin by exploring alone, trying to insert a fleshy penis into the torn vagina. It's surprisingly hard to get the penis to penetrate. The dildo's not as firm as I'd like, and its knobby head keeps slipping away from the gummy orifice. A small squeak announces each failed connection, an irritating reminder of my inexperience.

“Here, let me try,” Jim says. He wields the double headed dildo like a baseball bat, two hot pink penises conjoined at the balls.

I hold the sardonic vagina up to face him, and he uses his fingers to pry open the lips, jamming the Siamese dick at the hole with brute force. It bounces off the impenetrable orifice, smacking me hard on the wrist.

“Hey, watch it, will you?” I’m getting a sense of my brother’s style, and it’s not pretty. The silicone hurts.

After the ToyBox debacle, we find an arcade game from Japan—strip Mahjong with giggling Japanese schoolgirls. The game’s 8-bit graphics make it all the more absurd. Who would get off on this? Who would own this? It reminds me of my old Nintendo set at home. The machine won’t let us play, but we watch it cycle through previews and sample games. A cartoon girl appears on screen. She has the allure of a paper doll: one by one, her clothes magically disappear. Another girl lies naked on her back, legs spread as she touches herself. She gasps in ecstasy, body a pulse, and out pops a speech bubble with a single Japanese character.

“Fuck,” Jim says in awe. The word slips out softly, without its usual meanness or stupidity. It sounds so foreign that I don’t think to elbow or chide him. *Fuck*. This whole time, we should have been learning Japanese.

MERELIN MONROE NAKED PART II

The evidence was overwhelming. He was guilty, *so guilty*, but now that I had him pinned to the wall, I didn’t know what to do. *I want to be strong about this*, I thought. *Not pedantic or parental, but I definitely want to send message*. Looking back, I could suddenly remember (or at least convincingly imagine) all the telltale signs that something fishy was afoot: the locked door, the closed laptop, the friendly, preoccupied look on his face. We weren’t allowed to lock our doors at home because locking doors implied keeping secrets. But he locked my dorm room door, and I had to bang on it three times wearing only a towel before he answered. Furthermore, as he opened the door, I caught the strange look about him, a guilty “hand-down-my-pants” look. I knew that look.

How far did he go with Vera and Alex behind my locked door, at my desk, with my laptop? My computer was less than a year old then, and I secretly prided myself on my restraint: in all that time, I managed to keep it completely porn-free. But I allowed Jim the liberty of brothers and best friends. I let him borrow books and board games knowing that they’d limp back to me with dog-ears, broken spines, and missing pieces. It was just his way, a habit too deeply entrenched for me to even fault him for. Feeling a stab of pity for the misguided kid, I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt by erasing the History Trail before he returned from the shower.

Minutes later, Jim burst into the room wearing his same worn pair of jeans, my Polo towel slung over his shoulder. “All right, let’s eat!” he said.

Be strong, but don’t accuse, I thought. Don’t come off as judgmental.

He slid a rumpled shirt on. “What?”

“For some reason there seems to be porn on my computer,” I said, meaning, *Why are you looking at porn on my computer?* I took a breath, rephrased myself. “Why is there porn on my computer?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Why is there porn on your computer?”

“Because of you! You did it!”

“I didn’t do it.”

I glared at him, flustered. I didn’t expect him to deny it. He did it. I *knew* he did it. But by refusing to own up to it, he stubbornly retained immunity, kept the case open, skipping just a step out of reach. Now I could only say, “I think I caught him,” not, “I know.” But really, it wasn’t about who caught whom or my inherent craftiness. It was him saying that there were things we couldn’t share, a world beyond the scope of brotherhood. He held me at arm’s length—neither of us could deny it.

“Are you angry?” he asked. His tone implied a confession, and I let the moment linger. *Am I?* I didn’t mean for my curiosity to come off as anger. *I just want to know*, I thought. *If you had caught me looking at Merelin Monroe naked, I’d be able to tell you*. Of course, that was unfair—I was much more careful than him. But at least we could have joked about it.

Jim nudged me. “Are you?”

“No.”

“I’ve only done it once... Dad caught

me. He got really, really mad. ‘What are you doing?!’ he said. ‘What the hell are you doing?!?’”

He turned to me, wondering if he was really as naked in his emotion as he felt.

“Hey,” I said, “Your secret’s safe with me.”

TRANSLATION

When we’ve had our fill of the Erotic Museum, we walk over to the Disney soda fountain on Hollywood and Highland, shaking our heads free from the \$6,000 sex robots with the interchangeable dicks, San Fernando’s glowing wall of porn. In the book we kept of our adventures, I already planned to mark this one with a giant X.

“I can’t get my head out of the gutter,” I say.

“The Mahjong game was cool,” he says, blushing. “I mean, you know.”

“You said ‘Fuck,’” I say, half regretting it.

“Well, I don’t know. You say it too.”

“The museum was interesting.”

Then, of course, he pegs it on me, saying he can’t believe I dragged him in, jumping at the chance to see boobies and touch myself. I let him project, imagining myself a slate for needs he keeps well hidden. I’m still trying to decipher that part of him that suggests the sexual but is so quickly shamed. Perhaps it’s because we continue to play young for each other, demanding innocence from our childhood days that we can’t help but violate. We’re kids at heart, trying to retain simplicity as we remember it, enforcing each other’s purity with shaky, self-conscious eyes. Though we both tend toward the insular, brotherhood has been the repository for our most candid shame. It’s to each other that we have pledged lasting innocence, and with each other that we continue to whittle it away. More and more, I’m learning that innocence is expendable, a virtue more imagined than real. Jim and I reprimand each other for sexual lives we haven’t begun, but I suspect it isn’t the sex we’re after so much as the intimacy of secrets shared. Sex is a colorful reminder of all that we long to know about one another, a vast, uncharted terrain that we can sense but not see. Like our cartoon friend, we both speak Japanese, the unreadable language of our curiosity and desire. ℒ