



Wild & Sublime® Podcast, Season 2 Episode 13
“Iowa Boy to L.A. Leatherman”
March 4, 2021

Pup play, leather, kink, sobriety, and the search for intimacy: In this erotic biography episode, one man shares his journey from Iowa musical theater kid (with a girlfriend) to out-and-proud L.A. leatherman — how he moved out of shame and hiding, and into making the deep relationships he was looking for.

Host: Karen Yates

Guests: Tom

[Wild & Sublime theme music]

Tom

My drinking and drugging was starting to escalate more and more. So, the one consistent thing that happened with me is that — and this was actually since I was a teenager — was, I was much more comfortable having sex with people that I didn't know. And it was really about, like, if I knew your last name, we were not gonna have sex. And the truth is, I wasn't getting close to anybody, and yet I was everybody's friend. You know, I have to be able to like, drop and run at any moment.

Karen Yates

Welcome to Wild & Sublime, a sexy spin on infotainment®, no matter your preferences, orientation or relationship style, based on the popular live Chicago show. Each week, I'll chat about sex and relationships with citizens from the world of sex positivity. You'll hear meaningful conversation, dialogues that go deeper, and information that can help you become more free in your sexual expression. I'm sex educator Karen Yates. Today we learn about one man's sexual journey, as he explores leather, pup play, and the foundations of intimacy. Keep listening.

I'm really interested in erotic biography, how we get from point A to point Z, and all the in between points as central themes emerge in our lives. I think it's good to listen to the pathways of someone else's sexual journey. We can compare and contrast our own lives, and maybe see that while someone might have on the surface a much different sexual expression than us, at the heart of it, we all sort of want the same thing —

connection and transcendence. Today we'll be hearing one person's story, from childhood to middle age, and how he navigated the twists and turns of sexual exploration. Tom Pardoe is a dancer, director, and teacher; a kinkster, leather daddy, and titleholder; and now, a certified massage therapist in LA. And he's an old friend — we go way back to college. There have been years when we haven't been in touch, but way more years where we have. I asked him if he'd be interested in sharing his story, because his experience is multi-faceted. In our Zoom VIP hangout, part of our Afterglow membership, Tom recently joined us, and we all chatted about exposure, what it means to tell your sexual story in public. We talked about the benefits and costs of living transparently: Jobs lost, but pride gained. I hope you enjoy our conversation. And before we begin, I want to let listeners know that there is an explicit description of a nonconsensual BDSM experience in this first half.

Tom, welcome.

Tom

Thank you, Karen. It's great to be here.

Karen Yates

I have known Tom for an extremely long period of time. [laughs]

Tom

This is very true.

Karen Yates

So both of us are like, "We don't know where this is gonna go today!" Well, okay. The first time I ever saw you was at a theater party in Iowa City, Iowa.

Tom

The black and white party.

Karen Yates

Yeah. And you were on a couch with your girlfriend at the time, Tammy. And you were, you know, a musical theater actor, and you were Christian, and you were shiny. [laughter] And Tammy was blond and shiny, and you were just like, all rainbow-y. But, like, the Christian rainbow.

Tom

We were the Disney kids.

Karen Yates

—not the gay rainbow. So let's go back. Let's go back. So we were like, what? I think oh, man, I think I was 17.

Tom

I must have been 19, probably.

Karen Yates

Yeah. Let's go back to grammar school. And you had mentioned to me prior something about Tarzan and Cheetah. And I'm like, wut?

Tom

This is something that I just realized, that plays into like, in the kink world, as being like, my openness to being a switch. When I was a kid — and I mean, like, an elementary school kid — I would have, you know, playtime with my friends. And I would bring them over and we'd go to the basement, and I really was drawn to playing like, Tarzan and Cheetah as a little kid. And it's also — I haven't said this before, but I used to watch Tarzan after church on Sundays, and would get the stirring in the loins while I'm laying on my belly watching Tarzan, and thinking, "That's strange..." You know?

Karen Yates

And you were coming from Catholic church? You were coming from Mass?

Tom

Yes. Yes. Yeah.

Karen Yates

You need to explain something, because I'm not really up on my Tarzan. I'm really sorry about that. I mean, I know Tarzan, the character. But was Cheetah, the animal? Or was Cheetah a human?

Tom

It was this monkey.

Karen Yates

Oh, it was a monkey named Cheetah? I'm really confused.

Tom

I can't believe you don't know that!

Karen Yates

So Cheetah is a monkey, named Cheetah?

Tom

Yeah. So here's the point. [laughter] There's Tarzan, and he walks around in all his prowess, and being you know, Tarzan, and he's got Cheetah, his faithful, you know, companion-helper monkey.

Karen Yates

Was Cheetah a sub?

Tom

Here's the thing. So, it depended on which childhood friend I brought home with me, but sometimes I wanted to be Cheetah, and sometimes I wanted to be Tarzan. And I was always the control person. So it was like, I'm the one that's gonna say, who's playing which role. So it was always my fantasy, and it was always directed by me — with their consent, of course, because they had to agree. Otherwise I would just send them home. That's fine. [laughter] But what's funny — when I look back at it later, I go, wow. Even then, this is when I learned like, my connection, sexually, to individuals was really like a — it was a deeper thing. It was a chemical thing. There was something else going on. Because I didn't, I wasn't just one thing. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm just going to be the daddy Dom, and you know, Master, Dom, blah, blah." You know, whatever. Here, I'm like, "I want to submit to that person." It's very specific. It wasn't just like, "I'm in the mood for, you know, switching." You know, it wasn't that. It had to be connected, I think, through the brain. And I didn't understand any of that forever. As you will know — I mean, as you do know — I've had a lengthy drug and alcohol career that took me to the end of my 20s.

Karen Yates

Tell me about the first sexual experiences you had. Because I know that they were not... not cool.

Tom

Right. Well, the first two primary sexual experiences happened at the age of 14 and 15. Separately. When I was 14, there was a woman in her 30s that worked at the — oh, can I say this? Sure. She worked at the pet store in the mall. And she would draw in these young boys and buy them beer. We would get beer, and we would get to drive her car.

And she sat next to whoever was driving, and would, you know, fondle you. And it was always this whole game, this dance we were doing. And then that, of course, led to, you know, all of us going back to her place and having sex with her. Individually. One at a time. Yeah. And so that was my first, you know, boy-girl experience.

Karen Yates

Wow.

Tom

And after — I mentioned this earlier, like when I realized I was different, and since I was tap-dancing since I was four years old, I became aware that boys aren't supposed to dance. But I danced anyway. You know, I loved it. But I got really conflicted when this good little Christian boy was like, "God is presenting this really sinful thing to me." Like, I'm one of them. You know, I'm a gay one.

Karen Yates

Right. So yeah, you were starting to understand that your longings for other boys or men was not on the Christian-Catholic agenda.

Tom

Right. So even as early as junior high school, I was really pissed off, number one, but second, I was adamant about, you know, making sure my gait was stronger. And the way I moved, and what I wore. And you know, I tried really, really hard to not be any part of gay at all.

Karen Yates

So when you say gait, you mean G-A-I-T? Your walking gait?

Tom

Yes. I'm talking about my gait, my walk. So when these two major sexual experiences occurred, you know, clearly I'm kind of gunning for the female one. Like, this should be good for me, or whatever. But I'm 14, you know? And then I was in a show, and there was another cast member that was in his 30s, I believe, and he wrote me a letter. Now me and my girlfriend at the time were both in that show, and he wrote me a private letter that said, "I know who you are, and if you ever want to talk about it, you know, don't be afraid, I can talk to you about this." Part of me, as a 15 year old, was like, "Holy crap. What happened? Somebody found me out."

Karen Yates

You knew he meant "I see you as a gay person."

Tom

Correct. I understood that. And I was like, maybe I can just see what this is about, I guess. Because of course I was curious, right? But I was terrified. And that just turned out to be [laughs] a hookup. Which, you know, silly me, I didn't know. But — I knew, and then I was like, "Wow." So I don't know, I guess early on—

Karen Yates

Can I interject and say — "silly you"? You were 15. I mean...

Tom

I know. But, you know, I feel like I've been a perv my whole life. And I've just been kinky from the gate, you know? So, I don't know. I of course wanted to take on — I guess it's like, it's the "good sport" syndrome, you know? But it still set up something in me that said, "Sex is really going to be about people taking advantage of you, somehow, and getting what they want." And you know, I was a cute little number. Anyway, that kind of started things off. But then I definitely stayed in the closet for a few more years after that. Like, when we met each other — because I'd come out in Chicago.

Karen Yates

You left Iowa, you went to Chicago, you transferred to the DePaul Theatre School...

Tom

That's what I got my leather on. That's when I found my first leather jacket, at the army surplus on Clark. And I remember smelling it, and just going like, [inhales deeply]. It was like poppers. You know? It was like poppers to me, just like, going right down my spine, right to my — can I say "sphincter"?

Karen Yates

You can. Yes, you can be sexually explicit. Absolutely cool.

Tom

Yeah. That was kind of the beginning of my leather days.

Karen Yates

You were working at Berlin, the club.

Tom

When I was still underage, when Berlin was a little tiny bar.

Karen Yates

When it was cool.

Tom

When it was very cool. Thank you.

Karen Yates

We were there.

Tom

[laughing] I know!

Karen Yates

You were working there. And for the listener: If you don't know, Berlin is a club in Chicago, a pretty famous club. Gay club.

Tom

Yeah, it was a great family there. I worked there twice, because I moved to California, to go through that conservatory out there, where I had another girlfriend for a minute. But I was also you know, hooking up with one of the leading men in the cast and stuff. I was a mess [laughs] I was a mess.

Karen Yates

I'm just thinking about like, when we don't know ourselves. Right? We have these, like, programs that are operating simultaneously — like what we really want, and what we think we need to do to be accepted. Right. And sometimes when they're in conflict, it's a big mess.

Tom

It was complicated, because I was a dancer first, and then I got into musical theater, and then I was choreographing — this is all in California — and then I put it all away so I could go back and audition at the theater school at DePaul, because I wanted to be a serious actor. You know, but everything people would tell you would be like, you can't be gay, or you have to at least be able to, you know, get cast in straight roles, too. Otherwise, you'll get pigeonholed, and blah, blah, blah. And at the same time, you know, my drinking and drugging was starting to escalate more and more. So, the one

consistent thing that happened with me was that — and this was actually since I was a teenager — was, I was much more comfortable having sex with people that I didn't know. And it was really about, like, if I knew your last name, we were not going to have sex. And the truth is, I wasn't gonna really get close to anybody, and yet I was everybody's friend. You know, I have to be able to like, drop and run at any moment.

Karen Yates

You had to show that vulnerability could only happen when you're, you know — with strangers, you can be vulnerable, and with other people, you can't like longer relationships. I totally understand that. And I think that's also part of the — I'm not gonna lay it at the feet of alcohol and drug addiction, but I think that that is a major component of like, building up the walls. The wanting to make a connection, you know?

Tom

Yeah. It's like, the gateway to get free in some ways. Until it's not anymore.

Karen Yates

That's a great way of putting it. So tell me a little bit about, you know, when you were working at Berlin — the second time, I think — this was really the beginning of... The AIDS crisis was really starting to hit Chicago, big time. Talk a little bit about that, and your relationship with what was going on with the disease, and what was happening for people.

Tom

Yeah.

Karen Yates

And how you fit into it.

Tom

I just felt like, if I stayed medicated, I could kind of remain in denial about a lot of it. And because of the nature of my sexual exploits thus far, it kind of just rolled with that. Like, you know, just keep yourself numb, have anonymous hookups, don't get too close to anybody, it's not going to happen to you, right? I'm in my 20s. As I shared about getting my first leather jacket, you know that just kind of gave me my ticket to go to the leather bars, and to be able to explore further my kink, in the way that I knew how to do it. Which meant, I'm going to continue to just get loaded at the bar, and then hook up with that one person that's hanging out in the corner, that is not talking to

anybody. And I'm going to go there, and I'm going to — you know, let's, let's make that happen. So I would. And ultimately, you know, eight out of 10 times, it would be the same. You know, this one particular time, it was in the dead of winter in Chicago, and I got handcuffed to a kitchen chair with my arms and my hands behind my back. And they would pour, like, Absolut down my throat, and, you know, set up lines of coke on the table. And, you know, for me at that moment, I'm a happy camper. This is cool.

Karen Yates

And how old are you?

Tom

I must have been... Let's see, probably 27? 26, 27, somewhere around there. Anyway, it would turn really poorly into a situation where I was clearly just someone that's just gonna — there's no negotiation, there's no exchange of power, there's no conversation. Or I don't even recall the guy like, "Ooh, that's hot. That's turning me on. Yeah." But you know, it was one of those things where it's like, the nipple clamps went on, the blood was running, you know, the balls were tied up with heavy weights, and I had to crawl to get to the other room, you know, my knees are scraped, blah, blah, blah. And I don't remember one millisecond of me going — first of all, I always check in with my dick, you know, like, to find out what gets my dick hard, in terms of what my kinks are. You know, that's where I check in for that. And if it stirs, it feels, "Oh, this is cool." Good. You know, it's pretty simple. I'm sorry, but it's really that simple for me. But you know, all I recall was at the end of it, I had lost my shirt, so I just had the leather vest, and bloody nipples, and walking through the snow, trying to get back to either the train or my apartment, I don't remember which. But my bones were shaking, I was terrified, I just had a horrible experience. And yet, of course, the next day comes around, it's like, "Well, let's try that again. Maybe there's a different way to do it." So it took me years before I started finding, you know, the real tribe, or the tribe that I wanted to be a part of, in terms of the leather world.

Karen Yates

Right. And I'm assuming, correct me if I'm wrong, you would probably chalk a lot of this up to the fact that you were extremely under the influence.

Tom

Yeah.

Karen Yates

That this wouldn't have happened if you had been not under the influence.

Tom

Yeah. It's that, but I think it's also a lot of repressed sexual feelings about homophobia, or... I don't even know what else. A lot of other things—

Karen Yates

Like self hatred?

Tom

Also self hatred, and... Yeah, that would pretty much cover it. Because it was just about like, numbing everything out, you know, clearly not even identifying the AIDS crisis as being... It's not like I was taking care of somebody. It's not like I was running around helping people where they needed it. That wasn't the 20 year old that I was. In my 20s, that wasn't me, at that time.

Karen Yates

Yeah. Also, we've talked about the fact that, who does know how to negotiate, when you're that young? Is it on anyone's radar?

Tom

In my older years, I've mentored and helped many young people, you know, sitting on the outdoor bench at the Eagle in LA. And there's a lot of dialogue, and there's a lot of communication. There's a lot of groups that are running, that are supportive of workshops, and gatherings, how to do things, and how not to do things, protocols, and all that stuff. There's definitely a village of people, the leather folk, the people that really live 24/7.

Karen Yates

Yeah. But my question is, did you feel that that community existed — I mean, it exists now, and yes, I do know that there are a lot of workshops on protocol and negotiation. But do you feel that that was in place back then?

Tom

I do. I do. I don't think I could see it.

Karen Yates

Let's talk about... You moved to New York. First, you got sober, right?

Tom

I did. Yeah. Well, when I moved back to California after leaving Chicago again, that's when I found crystal meth. And then fast forward to, I don't know, until '93, I'd moved to Phoenix, where I was doing meth and teaching step aerobics. It was 1993, people. [laughs] And I had the most crowded classes on the planet, because I was so high that my beats per minute were so fast. So I would teach a class, go do a trick — because I was into hustling, too. I started hustling. Then very shortly after that, I really kind of caved, and thought I was going to die, and blah, blah, blah. And I had to get sober. And then the other part of all this craziness, I never once got tested for HIV. Not once. So I went back to my parents' house, in the Midwest, I got sober. And after four months, I finally got clarity enough to move to New York. I had wanted to go there since I was in seventh grade. And so now, I'm 29 years old, and I move to New York, four months sober. And, you know, I do the do, I got a sponsor. He told me you can do three things a day. One of them has to be a meeting. And then I just started hitting the pavement, doing auditions and stuff. And within a year, I got my first Broadway show, and then I had my second Broadway show, and then I got to do some really cool stuff. And five years later, I left and moved to California, to figure out what intimacy was all about. It was going to be my very first relationship I was stepping into. Like, I knew his last name.

Karen Yates

That's when you knew it was love. When you know his last name.

Tom

Yeah. I knew his last name. I knew where he lived. Like, I could go back to this home. I knew where it was, like that kind of thing. So there's a whole 'nother part of the journey that begins there.

Karen Yates

The long-term relationship journey.

Tom

Once I got to LA in '98, a lot of things changed. The first thing that happened was I became a primary caregiver to that partner's best friend, who was dying of AIDS. So I went from Broadway to primary caregiver. And I said yes to it, not because I was trying to prove something, but it was — in the sober world, it was like, "What's the next right thing to do?" And that friggin' changed my life. You know, number one, it was a way for me to kind of like, make amends for my behavior before then. But that was, you know, that was life-altering. And I did that until he took his last breath, with my hand in his hand. And from there, I went out and joined the board at Christopher Street West, and

worked on the board at CSW, who put on the LA Pride event every year, and have since the '70s. So I worked on that board for several years, and was a part of creating Erotic City, which is a section of LA Pride. We kept feeling like, you know, the leather community, the kink community didn't have a place represented at Pride.

Karen Yates

[to audience] We'll come back to our conversation with Tom Pardoe in a moment. I talked a little bit earlier about the VIP level of the Afterglow, our monthly membership program, but benefits abound at other levels too. We now have behind the scenes Creator Notes: short, unedited audio about my take on putting the episodes together, and the \$5 a month level also includes a bonus panel of experts answering your questions. Consider joining our sex forward community and supporting our work. The link is in the show notes.

Wild and Sublime is also sponsored in part by our Sublime Supporter, Chicago-based Full Color Life Therapy, therapy for all of you, at fullcolorlifetherapy.com. If you would like to be a Sublime Supporter, showcasing you and your business and supporting us at the same time, contact us at info@wildandsublime.com. In part two of our conversation, Tom shares about what it's like to date a porn star, and his involvement in leather contests, which form a crucial part of the leather world, as contestants do service in the LGBTQ community by raising awareness. We also learn about his latest fetish, pup play, and how he found love in Target. Enjoy.

You were with him for 10 years?

Tom

Correct. I really was desperate for intimacy, I really wanted that. I was finally not so scared of me — or, you know, I've been sober almost five years when this happened. So I've done a lot of work on myself. And I was really getting to that place of being unafraid enough to see what this intimacy thing was all about. Anyway, we started this emotional journey, where I found him to be really witty, really charming, really sweet, really attentive, and yet I wasn't attracted to him. I fell in love with him. I just didn't have va-voom for him. Va-vooom, right? Now, when we were in sync, in love, on the road together, you know, literally like on the same track, when our lives were in that place, we had great sex. And it was really fun. But the moment we steered into difficult times, like finding out character defects, and finding out resentments and holding on to ones we're not talking about, and all of that, then it became this sexual negotiation, to like, that's the only thing I had power over in this relationship. I mean, he was the big job money guy who had the new trophy wife — that's me — and that was the only ticket I

had to play. And that turned into like, being miserable after year six. And then staying in it, and getting really complacent, and just shutting down completely, sexually. Everything shut down.

Karen Yates

Did the two of you, or you yourself, make any moves toward counseling, or any sort of like, "Let's talk about this"?

Tom

We had a yearly contract with this relationship, that we created before I even moved to LA. And this was something that both of our therapists came up with. And we were like, "Okay, so here's the only rule for this first year: You can't leave." That's the only rule. I moved all the way across country. We're gonna just make a rule, steadfast. That's it, no leaving for the first year. After a year, in one day, you get out, if you want to get out, that's fine. But no leaving for one year. So what that taught me — I'm so glad we did this, because what it taught me was, after about three weeks, I discovered he had character defects. He was not what he claimed to be. You know, I was flawless. This is how it is in my head. I was just fine. But he had all these character defects. And I had to somehow not leave, right? So what that turned into was like, me having to do the work and finding out that I, too, have character defects, and that I, too, have things to bring to the table and to discuss, and I also had resentments that I had to work through. And, you know, if you do this in kind of a circular format, where you go, like, resentment, and I'm hating you, I want to get the hell out, and the circle is creeping around the clock, you know, ticking, ticking, and then you get up to like 10 minutes to the hour, and it's like, wait a minute, then we're hitting this place called forgiveness. And we're hitting this place called acceptance, and then you get back up to 12 o'clock on the clock, and it's like, oh, we're back in love. We actually worked through something, and stayed in it. That never would have happened, had we not done that. I don't know if any of that — if anybody understands what I just said. But that was the manner in which I started to understand, you know, accountability.

Karen Yates

And even with this, though, even with these new awarenesses, it didn't really help, ultimately. I mean, ultimately, you felt that the relationship ended?

Tom

No, I think — and my part is, I think ultimately, I downplayed the va-voom factor. As we will find out, I never did that again. You know, I never made that mistake again. So that put me as a single. When that ended, I was by myself for a couple of years. And—

Karen Yates

And how old are you at this point?

Tom

Oh, late 30s, maybe even early 40s. But what happened next was, I met the hottest Latin man you've ever seen in your entire life. And he's newly sober. And he hits the va-voom chart for me, like, above and beyond. And this is kind of me moving into my daddy phase, even though we were just 10 years apart, I think. But he had two kids, you know, two 12 and 14 year old kids, two boys. And I was like, "Man, I'm moving into my daddy phase, and I'm gonna be a daddy! I can get to be a daddy!"

Karen Yates

Double Daddy! You're a kink daddy, and you are a real daddy.

Tom

And I was like, that's kind of cool. That could be really awesome. And the truth was like, it was amazing to have this experience. However, my partner, he had one absolute rule, which was, we had to be in a monogamous relationship. And that freaked me out, because my last, my 10-year was open with boundaries. And "My boys come first," that's what he said. And I was like, "Okay, you know what, I'm gonna try this. I've never done that before in my life, but I'm gonna try it." And after two or three months, I was like, "I think I got this. I love this. In fact, this is really cool" I was afraid I would be like, you know — I mean, I'm a retail kinkster. Like, I like going into retail and just like, looking around. And, you know, if somebody—

Karen Yates

Retail, like the market? You mean the meat market? Or when you say retail, what do you mean?

Tom

Oh, no, I'm literally saying, I like to walk into the department store. [laughter] I'm just looking for people that will cruise with me, right? So, he says, "I got to be monogamous." I said, "Okay, let's try it," and we do it, and it's great. And then two months later, he doesn't have a job anymore. And somebody at the gym told him he should do porn. And long story short, he gets into porn. And we've had conversations about it, la la la. He goes, how are you going to be with that? And I said, I don't know, I've never had this experience before. So let's see what happens. And, you know, we set up some boundaries and guidelines, and stuff like that. And, and I said, "Really, I'll

probably know better after the first day you come home from work" — from "work," air quotes. And he came home, and we had great sex. And it absolutely didn't faze me, that he was off, you know, shooting a film. And then he had the name change, and the popularity. And so this whole character emerged, who became... Like, "narcissist" is a really gentle, mild term to use. But it really took off, so much that I wasn't even a part of the equation anymore, except for caretaking of his two dogs, and to see the boys when it was appropriate. And he also borrowed money — and of course, my part is, I gave it to him to borrow. But then I became absolutely obsessed. He was my drug. He was my fix. It was crazy good. But it was toxic and nasty in the end.

Karen Yates

Right. And I was thinking about, you know, how you can be addicted to people as much as you can a substance, right?

Tom

Absolutely, yeah. And I would be the last person to believe that, until it happened. I'm also the guy that would never ever leave the table, if you were annoying the hell out of me. I wouldn't get up from the table at a restaurant and leave because you were rude to the waiter, or because you were just an ass, you know. I would be the guy that would sit it out and just tolerate it, and be the good sport, whatever. But this time, I was the one that broke up with him. And at the same time that this was going on, I had been out of that 10 year relationship where I was completely shut down sexually, and I really just started to find my voice again, and find my sex. And Charlie and Hunter at The Eagle had been asking me to run for a title—

Karen Yates

Tell the folks what The Eagle is.

Tom

The Eagle is a great leather bar. There's Eagles all over the place. Eagle LA is just a great stomping ground. I don't even know how to describe it, other than: It's a real, friggin' solid leather bar. And I had been going there for a few years. And anyway, the owners were like, "You should run for the Eagle title." I'm like, "No, no, no, no." Finally, right before I met my second relationship, I was like, it's time. I need to do something about this. So, I kind of went through this transformation. I started go-go dancing for them. And I'm in my 40s. And I'm like, oh, wow, I'm like, I'm getting my sex back. Right. And it was really, really cool. And then I ran for the Eagle LA, Mr. Leather title, and I won. So that was in 2010. And then I got to kind of like, be of service to the bar and everybody for a year.

Karen Yates

So let's talk about where you are now, and the relationship you're in now.

Tom

Yes. Well, first of all, I grew a lot in my discoveries of what gets my dick hard over the years. And one of the things that happened: I did a lot of IMLs — International Mr. Leather — showing up for that weekend, and all these other places, and CLAW.

Karen Yates

CLAW is what?

Tom

CLAW is a huge leather event that happens in Cleveland. It's really one of the only big events in the country that doesn't have a contest connected to it. So, the jam is a lot different. Anyway. So I'm at a bar in Long Beach, California, called Pistons one night, and I'm smoking a cigar. And I'm outside — well, of course, I'm outside — and this guy crawls up beside me, and he's got a jock strap on, he's got wrestling boots, or wrestling shoes, and just boxing gloves. And he sits down next to me, and he has a dog collar on. And he just leans his head up against my, you know, my tensor fascia latae, which is your — it's the muscle by your pocket, okay? Anyway, he just places this nose right there on my upper thigh. And I looked down at him, and I don't know, just impulsively, I reached behind the nape of his neck and just started scratching. And he kind of leaned into me a little bit, and next thing you know, I'm like... I'm starting to get turned on by this! I was like, "Oh, I think I found another one!" So then I get to do what I love to do, like, go play! Go. And he took off. And then like, 20 minutes later, he comes back to me, and I'm like, see, it's still working. This is really cool. So that's my introduction to pup play. And that's how that entered my realm. And this was not puppy play, where you're talking about the folks that like to, you know, strap on a puppy tail and toss a ball around, and get up and run after each other, and make lots of noise barking, and stuff like that. I call those the "Nickelodeon puppies."

Karen Yates

Ow!

Tom

But there's a place for that too, right! But, you know, I'm not judging any of it. It's like, whatever's for me is for me. So I'm shopping at Target. And I'd just come from the gym. And suddenly, and as you know, my retail history — suddenly there's this young

guy. And so I see him over by the DVDs, the CDs, and then I see him at the produce, and then I see him again by the vacuum cleaners, and he stops me finally. Because I'm like, yeah, I can feel me getting a chubby through my jock strap, because I've been watching him watch me. So like, and he stops, he goes, "Hi." I was like, "Hey." He goes, "I just wanted to say hello. I think you're really handsome." And then he goes, "Well, my name is Joe, and I wanted to know if we could go out on a date." And I was like...

Karen Yates

Whaaat?

Tom

I said, "No... But we can fuck." This is in Target, by the vacuum cleaners. "But we can fuck." And he goes, "Okay." So I said, meet me downstairs in like, 15 minutes, like at the base of the elevators. So I met him down there, took him to my car, drove around the parking lot, a couple spins, just so I could get a better sense of what I was dealing with. And dropped him off. He went away, and he came to my apartment, like at 7:30 or 8:00 that night. And it turns out he's a puppy.

Karen Yates

Did you know that that night?

Tom

I did not know. Not until things got started. And I was like, "Whoa, cool. This is really cool." But still, you know, he was 25 years younger than me. Twenty-five, Karen! Yeah, that's a lot.

Karen Yates

I'm aware. [laughs]

Tom

So I was like, okay, so this will work, is that he can be a playmate. We can play, and that'll be our groove. So we tried to do that for the first few months, and then my friends kept egging me on, to be like, are you guys gonna, start dating or like, whatever? And I said, you know, he's half my age! And they're like, "Is that the only reason?" And I said, "Yes! That's the only reason." It really turned out to be like, well, that reason just wasn't good enough. Plus, my heart was still so shattered from that last, bad relationship. Anyway, it turned out that I needed to learn a lot from him. A lot from him. And he needed to learn a lot from me as well. So, fast forward, we've been

together, eight-plus years. And we were going to get married in November of last year. But the second spike of COVID came, and it stopped our plans for the moment. But we bought the rings anyway, so I've been wearing them like we're married anyway. And that's nice. But having this dynamic has been really, really interesting.

Karen Yates

When you say dynamic, what do you mean?

Tom

We would fight hard. We would, you know, have sex hard. And not always hard. But like, it was intense, in the beginning. I was fine to be like, let's do master/sub, because that way, I can deal with what's going on with me, and my heart, and my sex, at the same time, where I have a lot of rage going on, and I have a lot of resentment and anger, that I'm dealing with. And I'm not going to project it all on this young man. You know, that's not what, I mean by that. But I was very shut down in terms of like, an openness to being with somebody, for reals.

Karen Yates

So you were using the Dom/sub form, just to kind of make sense of the whole thing.

Tom

The Dom/sub, the Daddy/boy, anything that kind of kept me in charge, in the driver's seat, and I could just play it. And the thing is, he loved just servicing me, as a pup, or as a boy, or whatever. He loved that, but it wasn't the be-all and end-all of him, either. I was kind of riding that wave for a while thinking, you know, this is perfect. Right? And then, you know, it wasn't perfect anymore. You know, he was growing up, and I was starting to open up. And yet, I was still really damaged. So when conversations came about, about polyamory and opening things up, I was like, I want you to go for it.

Karen Yates

He was the one that was bringing up wanting to open the relationship up.

Tom

Well, we were both talking about it, but I definitely just completely encouraged him to go like... I want you to — I mean, you're in your later 20s. I don't want you to feel like this is all you got, especially because I wasn't really giving him my all. He met a guy up at Folsom. And I was — I still like having my alone time. I have my whole life. I like being alone, sometimes. The kind of alone where you don't have to be accountable to other people. I just like being alone, and like "None of your business, fuck off." So

anyway, he started this thing up, and then it came that day when he came home and said, "You know, Daddy, I think I think I'm starting to love this guy." And I had to go, "Okay." Okay, what does that mean? I just kind of tried to wrap my head around it and be like: Do I have enough love in me to allow him to have love from other people? And to give love? And I'm like, I think I do. Not very successfully at first, he would come back from his house, like if he stayed overnight or whatever, and I would just treat him poorly all day. Subtly, but, you know, clearly not that subtle, because he would notice, and I wouldn't notice, he knew what I was doing that, and that just wasn't fair. You know, that wasn't right. But that went on for a while. I guess the reason I bring this up is because I think it's important for me. I had to become that guy that could really point out what I'm doing wrong, when I'm doing something wrong, or doing something not fully, or doing something, you know, that's half measures, or, you know, I need to want to be that guy. But I love what's happening with my partner now, just being able to — we can get through anything, because we've been through so much, and the kicking and screaming and the, you know, name calling and all that, we've been through all of it. And yet, you know, sexually, we still come together, like it's the first time. That's a miracle. And that's, I'm going to acknowledge that and be like: That's fucking awesome. It's really beautiful. He'll always be my boy. Right? He'll always be my pup, my boy. But I want him to be a man. I want him to be like a grown-ass man who could — you know, if he wants to come in and, you know, Dom a whole session or whatever, you know, if that's in him, if that's what he wants, go for it. You know? I don't know. What do you say, Karen?

Karen Yates

I really appreciate you sharing all that you did. It was... I'm not gonna say "brave." I always hate that word, for some reason. I'm gonna say, it was very vulnerable. And I really appreciate vulnerability.

Tom

Thank you. I think it's too exhausting to try to mask my reality.

Karen Yates

I hear you. The mask is heavy.

Tom

Yeah. And it's layered. You know, but I love you. And I love that you are one of the few people in my world that really know me. It's been beautiful watching you discover you. And I think that would be the wish I would have for everybody out there. You know, to

be able to slow down enough and take note of those people around you that are really there for you.

Karen Yates

I love you, Tom. Thank you.

Tom

You're welcome.

Karen Yates

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