

# MY HARD-CORE OBSESSION



# THREESOMES, FISHNETS, DIRTY TALK—those are the vanilla sorts of fantasies we admit to. Then there’s the truly filthy porn we actually watch when we’re alone. **SHALOM AUSLANDER** decided to track down the movies that made him feel very good and then very bad about himself. And soon discovered that everyone has his guiltiest pleasure

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY KELLY

**XXX I WAS RAISED** in an Orthodox Jewish household in New York, where the Old Testament was believed to be the literal word of the Almighty God and where we obeyed, as closely as we could, all 613 commandments elucidated within its holy pages. To us, God was not simply a concept, but a very real, everyday presence in our lives and our community. Which is to say, I know pornography. Hard-core, graphic pornography. My father had it buried beneath his mattress. My brother had it hidden under his dresser. Pornography, like God Himself, was everywhere. Sex was dirty. Pornography was worse.

The really bad news was this: God, my rabbis told me, could only grant me forgiveness for the sins I had committed against Him; sins I had committed against my fellow humans could only be forgiven by them personally. If they didn’t forgive me, my rabbis said, when I died and went to heaven, God would cause me to suffer in the exact way I had caused them to suffer.

At the time, though only 14 years of age, I had already tired of the porn magazines I found in my house and decided it was time for full-motion video. I went to Times Square, where a group of women stood outside a porn shop, protesting and carrying placards. On one placard was a picture of a naked woman tied to a bed. She had a ball gag in her mouth and clamps on her nipples. I ducked into the store, spent every dollar I’d stolen from my father’s wallet, hurried home, and hoped the videos wouldn’t work.

They worked.

*Fuck.*

I wondered what was wrong with me. I wondered how many gang bangs I would have to suffer in heaven. Was it like an eye for an eye—a gang bang for a gang bang—or was it some sort of eternal gang bang that never ended? Would I be anally violated? Would I be spanked? Did they have ropes and ball gags and Ron Jeremy in heaven?

I decided to watch them again. If I did, and they didn’t work for me, surely I would be forgiven.

I watched them again.

*Fuck.*

It has been a guilt-filled few decades.

A while back, I read that a pornographer named Max Hardcore, having been



convicted of obscenity charges two years earlier, was serving time in a federal prison in Texas. A few Googles later, I learned that over the course of his career, Max had made hundreds of films, ranging from the mildly rough in his early years to the truly disturbing before his conviction. A few more Googles later and I was watching one of his scenes.

*Ext.—Somewhere in California—Day.* Open on wooden deck. A bright yellow couch. Max and his co-star appear. Max wears his trademark cowboy hat, white tube socks, and nothing else. The woman wears a ponytail and pink high heels. She lies supine on the couch, legs spread, her head tilted back over the armrest, mouth open. This video seemed to be about a 5 on the Max Hardcore 1-to-10 Scale of Fucked-Upitude. Still, it was shocking. It was outrageous.

I didn’t want it to work.

It worked.

*Fuck.*

It wasn’t any one thing they did, not one specific act or position, and I suppose with fantasy it never is; it’s a triggering thought, a concept that runs through the mind at just that apical moment, and for me that triggering thought was this: *I can’t believe she’s letting him do that.*

I hoped the woman was okay. I hoped she was acting. I hoped she hadn’t been forced. I wondered if the founders of Google knew they were contributing to an exploitative, misogynistic industry that lets strange men watch this woman do these strange things. I wondered if I could find her and apologize.

And I wondered, most of all, what the hell was wrong with me.

**XXX I TOLD MY** friend Jerry\* about Max Hardcore. When Jerry isn’t practicing mixed martial arts, he works for the N.Y.C. fire department. I wanted my confession to be met with macho derision, which would shame me out of my shame.

Jerry, it turned out, has a Max Hardcore as well: sleeping-girl porn. In sleeping-girl porn, the woman pretends to be asleep while the man creeps into her room, undresses her, and does his thing.

“Is it like a rape thing?” Jerry wondered aloud about himself. “Do I want to rape someone? Or do I just think she’d never let me fuck her if she was awake, like I’m not good enough for her, like a low-self-esteem thing?”

I didn’t know. A subgenre of sleeping-girl porn is drunk-girl porn, in which a girl drinks a tremendous amount of alcohol until she passes out. Then a man undresses her and does his thing. I asked Jerry if the drunk-girl thing worked for him, too.

“No, no, no,” said Jerry with a disgusted shake of his head. “That shit,” he insisted, “is fucked up.”

I told Jerry that I want to locate the woman in the Max Hardcore scene, to ask forgiveness.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m sure that will cheer her right up.”

The thing is, I don’t like myself very much. I’m my least favorite person in the world, by a long shot, and if you knew all the dark, sick, demented things that go through my mind, you’d agree. I’ve wasted fifteen years in therapy with a shrink who spends an hour a week trying to persuade me to like myself even the tiniest bit more or to just loathe myself the tiniest bit less. We’ve made very limited progress.

\*Jerry’s name and some of his identifying details have been changed.

And so while Jerry felt shame, I was sure his wasn't nearly as warranted as mine. Sleeping girls? Sleeping-girl porn was almost peaceful; she's having a nap. She's catching a few z's. Heck—she's Sleeping Beauty! Max is the Big Bad Wolf, though, and his Little Red Riding Hoods suffer through an *ordeal*. Which is why, later that evening, I decided to visit Paul Little, a.k.a. Max Hardcore, at the Federal Correctional Institution-La Tuna, just outside El Paso.

I needed to know we were different. I needed to know I wasn't him. I needed to know that whatever the hell was wrong with me was not as bad as whatever the hell was wrong with him.

A couple of thousand miles, I decided, wasn't too far to go to find someone I hated more than myself.

**XXX THE TSA OFFICER** at JFK airport waves me forward through the metal detector. I am holding my breath, trying not to make any sudden moves, afraid she will stop me, inspect my bag, and find the image I had printed out from a scene of Max's. The image is of Layla Rivera, a recent Max Girl. A Max Girl is Max's Squeaky Fromme, his favorite, his something-like-a-girlfriend, the girl who gets to live in his California mansion and star in his films. In this shot, Layla's makeup is smeared across her face, her legs are spread, and Max's hand is inside her pussy.

*What the hell is this?* I imagine the officer asking me.

*Nothing.*

*Doesn't look like nothing, she says. Do you hate women?*

*Hate women? I don't hate women.*

*What do you call this then?*

*That's...that's fisting. Some people call it handballing....*

She grabs me by my shirt collar and slams me against the wall.

*Why don't I handball your fucking face?* she asks.

I pick up my bag and head to my gate.

When I arrive at the prison early the next morning, Max meets me in the prison's busy visitation room. He is of medium height, with silver hair and an easy smile; with his cowboy hat off and his pants on, he looks like a dentist, like a salesman, like he'd be more interested in putting me in a Toyota than a porn film. He shakes my hand firmly (too firmly; did he hurt those girls, I wonder, did he squeeze them that hard?) and says, "Thanks for coming." I can't help cringing and wishing that the first sentence Max Hardcore said to me hadn't contained the word "coming." And that he hadn't said it quite so loudly.

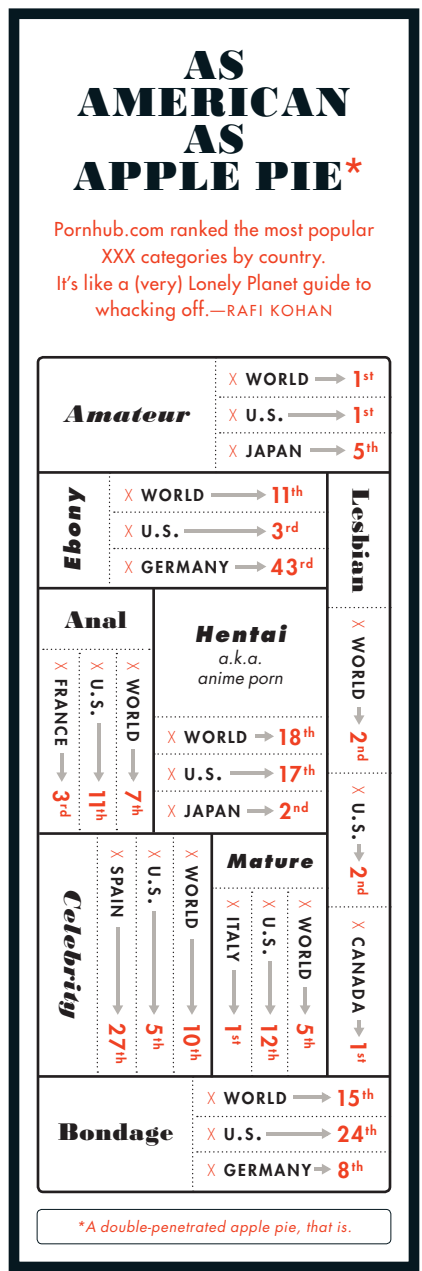
We find an empty bench and sit down. Max tells me to call him Paul. Paul tells me

he's glad I enjoyed his movie. I tell Paul that I feel like I jerked off to a crime.

"They know what they're getting into," says Paul.

"Do you ever feel guilty?" I ask.

I expect him to say no. I want him to say no. I want the guilt to myself. My



guilt, at least, makes me better than him. Paul shrugs and sighs.

"Sure," he says.

"Really?"

He nods.

"But they know what they're getting into," he quickly adds. "It's like boxing. You don't feel bad for the guy who loses; you don't wonder why they're in the ring."

"I don't watch boxing."

"Why not?"

"I feel bad for the loser," I say. "I wonder why they're in the ring."

"I have this board," Paul explains, "in my office. There are twenty Polaroids on it, each one showing what we're going to do in the scene. I tell the girl, 'See this? This is what we're going to do. First we're going to deep throat, then we'll do some puking. Are you okay with puking? Good. Then we're going to do some anal, then I'm going to fist you. Oh, you've never been fisted? Don't worry, we'll show you how. Then I'm going to piss on you, then we'll do the pop shot.'"

I ask him if he ever shows them the twenty-first Polaroid, the one where they crawl into the corner, suck their thumbs, and think about how to kill themselves.

"It's not like that," he says. "I'm not Khan Tusion."

Khan Tusion is the notorious porno director of a series of films called *Meatholes* and *Rough Sex*. They are extraordinarily violent. There is choking. There is hitting. There is crying. In the videos, Khan masks his voice and obscures his face.

"Khan wants the girls to feel like shit," says Paul. "With Khan it's real. Khan hates women."

Paul is soft-spoken and often laughs at himself. I know it's all bullshit—he's in prison, he's on his best behavior. I try to picture him violating someone I love.

"I'm playing a character," says Paul. "I'm playing this average guy who can get these babes to do all this stuff. That's Max. But the minute the scene is over, I'm Paul. Ask anyone. Talk to Layla. Go see Layla. Ask Layla if you should feel bad."

It was time to go. Paul walked me to the door.

"I don't want people watching my films to feel lousy," said Paul. "I guess I just want them to be more like guilty pleasures, like eating chocolate. Is that the way you felt?"

"Kind of," I said. "Like eating chocolate made from babies."

It had been over two hours. I didn't hate him nearly enough. And it made me hate myself even more.

**XXX ASHLEY BLUE** saw the tunnel.

"I died," she says.

It was in a scene with Khan Tusion. He was choking her, and she says she saw the tunnel, the one people claim to see when they're dying. She woke up a few seconds later.

"He's more of a monster," she says. "Definitely."

Ashley was known as the female Max Hardcore; she and Max wanted to make a movie together, but no actresses would

agree to be in it for fear of what might happen to them. Polaroid number twenty-one, presumably.

We are sitting in the den of Ashley's tiny ranch house, which sits only a few feet off the edge of an impossibly busy Los Angeles thoroughfare. The den doubles as her studio—she gives ever more time to painting since reining in her porn career. It is small and cramped, the walls covered with her paintings. The drawing table is buried beneath her charcoal-and-pencil sketches; a magazine featuring R. Crumb's drawings sits nearby. Her dog's collar jangles incessantly until she locks him in the bedroom, which, from what I can gather, is the only other room in the house.

Ashley Blue, whose real name is Oriana Small, is as physically un-porn-star-like as one can imagine: small, un-made-up, un-cosmetically-altered, and, for a man like myself on forty milligrams of Prozac a day, depressingly happy. It seems to me she should be more miserable, more guilt-ridden, and so it takes me a while to tell her why I am there: to admit that I watched a Max Hardcore scene, and that it did it for me.

Ashley laughs and tells me that she doesn't think there's anything wrong with it. She tells me that she doesn't think it makes me sick. But I'm sure she thinks I'm a pervert. I'm sure she's thinking, Why did I let this sicko into my house? I'm sure she's wondering where she left her Mace.

"Max, to me," she says, "is kind of a gag. It's all dressed up, he's got the things he likes to do. It doesn't seem as bad as Khan Tusion, where he wants the girl to really feel like a turd, and then he wants to pee on that turd. He really has problems."

Ashley says I have nothing to be ashamed of. I appreciate her saying so, but I've watched a few of her porn films, too—it has been a guilt-filled few decades—and so I'm silently wondering if I should ask her for forgiveness now or just wait for the afterlife and suffer through *Anal Excursions 8 Starring Shalom Auslander* then. Ashley says that she would worry more about guys who get off to "vanilla" porn—that she suspects they're dishonest or, worse, dull.

I tell her it doesn't matter. I tell her I still feel bad. I tell her about Jerry, who likes sleeping-girl porn.

"What about you?" I suddenly ask her. Has she—the star of *White Trash Whore 30*, *Attention Whores 1–9*, *Gag Factor 10*, *Piss Mops 2*, *Girlvert 2–19*, and many, many (many) more—has she ever gotten off to something that made her think, Jesus Christ, what the hell is wrong with me? Something that worked for her that she didn't know would, that made her wonder how the wires in her head got so bizarrely, disgustingly crossed?

She sighs. She shakes her head. And then, incredibly, Ashley Blue blushes.

"Incest," she says. She covers her face with her hands for a moment and lets her hair fall down in front. Mr. Natural watches from the cover of the magazine, amused by our self-contempt.

"Incest?" I ask.

Not real life, she adds, just the fantasy.

"Like when I see—oh God, this is so... When I see twin sisters or twin brothers," she says, "brother-sister...even a dad and son... that's where I feel like, I am so gross. That's such a crime. Anal, throwing up—I feel like I can justify everything in that, but I have no justification for the incest fantasies that I have."

She shakes her head, and the blush returns.

"I don't know why," she says.



EX-CON AND PORN STAR MAX HARDCORE, WITH HIS GIRL HUMPHDAY, LAYLA RIVERA.

She buries her face in her hands and laughs again, and the dam of our shame seems to break; we're laughing at ourselves, at our humiliation, at our own foolish, tortured humanity. She tells me about sisters and brothers, stepfathers and stepdaughters; about mothers "sharing the cock" with their daughters, about sisters doing the same with each other. On a roll of acceptance now, she tells me about her husband, a caring, sensitive photographer, a man who would never hurt a fly, who feels shame about the fantasies he has of men tying women up, having their way with them. I tell her that my shrink says the people who should feel guilt usually don't, and the people who shouldn't usually do. She goes back to talking about watching twin

sisters sharing a man. "I kinda almost feel, oh, I wish I had a twin sister. I feel envious, and I feel it's really, really dirty," she says.

"I'm so glad I came here," I say.

She laughs. She shakes her head again.

"It's so," she says with a sigh, "*disgusting*."

**XXX BIG PAUL IS** Max's office manager and occasional bodyguard. He is a heavy-set Mexican-American man with a personable air, unless you're trying to touch Max's cowboy hat.

"I made sure nobody touched the hat," says Big Paul.

Big Paul has offered to show me around Max's home, high in the hills of Altadena, just outside Los Angeles, where he continues to run the business while Max is in prison. When I arrive, black trash bags line the foyer. Big Paul is in the process of throwing Layla out.

"Yeah," says Big Paul, "she's a troublemaker."

The trash bags are filled with Layla's clothes, all neon colors and high heels and spandex, waiting to be picked up. It looks like someone robbed a Frederick's of Hollywood, got home, and couldn't figure out why they'd robbed a Frederick's of Hollywood.

Big Paul shows me Layla's bedroom. On the wall hangs a large crucifix strung with rosaries and flowers. Beside it hangs a poster-sized still from one of her Max Hardcore scenes; Max, smiling and fully dressed, stands beside Layla, who is naked, legs spread, steel dental instrument forcing open her mouth. I ask him if girls ever got upset after a scene.

"Nobody is putting a gun to their heads," says Big Paul. "Any girl has the right to stop. You don't want to get pissed on? Don't do the scene."

Big Paul shows me to the garage, which also serves as the warehouse. Steel shelving units filled with DVDs line the walls. He seems to show no interest whatsoever in these films; he displays, it seems to me, a measure of disgust with them. And then, standing awkwardly in this porn-filled confessional, I tell Big Paul I watched one of these movies. He nods. I tell him it worked for me. I tell him I feel bad.

"You want any of these?" he asks.

"Um," I say.

"I'll hook you up," he says.

He pulls a few from the shelves—notably films like the ones that were shown to the jury, the films Max is serving time for—and hands them to me. I think about refusing them, but I don't want to offend him, and the yeshiva boy in me will kill me if I do.

I ask Big Paul if he has some sort of a box to carry them in—I'm staying at a nice hotel, after all. As *(continued on page 212)*

he looks for one, I ask him if he has ever gotten off to something that made him feel ashamed.

He shakes his head and says no.

"I watch that soft shit," he says, "I guess I'm more of a foreplay, take your time, kissing, and then going at it kind of guy."

This is typically referred to as "bullshit," but the more I admit my own shame to Big Paul, the more Big Paul loosens up. Just as I'm thanking him for his time and making my way to the door, he stops me.

"Oh," he exclaims, as though he's only now remembered. "I do have a fat fetish. For fat chicks."

"Like 300 pounds?" I ask. "Four hundred?"

"No," he says with a wince, "not that big. Like 200. Nice chubby chicks. That turns me on, I don't know why."

He shrugs, runs a hand over his head as if he's confessed to a murder.

I ask him if he dates big women.

"I fuck them every now and then, but then I feel guilty. I feel disgusted. But yet I still do it." He swears to himself after that he'll never do it again, but when he's doing it, he just can't stop himself.

I ask him if he watches Max's videos. He shakes his head.

"*Palos*," he says of the Max Girls in Spanish. Sticks.

He's laughing now. The only thing that can make the moment even better is to declare roundly that others are worse than us.

"My brother-in-law," he says, "that's with my sister is into like 300 pounders." His sister is, alas, only 150, 155. "He always wants to feed her," says Big Paul with a laugh, "and I'm like, Fuck you."

"One day," he says, "I had him working here on the computer, and he was getting these chicks with, like, rolls on their legs, and printing them out, and I'm like, What the fuck are you doing?"

"You're not into that," I say.

He shudders.

"That's fucking sick, dude," he says.

Layla Rivera thinks I think too much.

I meet up with her one evening, almost two months after visiting Max in prison, at an upscale bar in Santa Monica. The bar is filled with mostly after-work business clientele in dark, formal business attire. Layla arrives wearing bright yellow four-inch platform heels and a matching bright yellow dress that would have been small on a toddler. The men and women at the table beside us titter and snicker. Beneath all her pornification, beneath the ludicrous implants, the heavy makeup, the garish spandex, Layla is a beautiful dark-skinned woman of Mexican-Polish-Hawaiian descent. She exudes insecurity, though, this supposed high priestess of shamelessness—she lowers her eyes when she speaks and twirls her hair nervously. Her

clownish, superficial appeals to the predictable male sexual desires are having the opposite effect: I don't want to fuck her, I want to club her over the head, put her in the car, drive her out to the wild, and set her free, free of this bar, this city, this world. *Go! Run free, Layla! Start over!*

I confess to her I've seen her movies and that they worked for me. Not what Max did to her, but that she allowed him to do it. Her compliance. Her acquiescence. Her submission. I told her that I felt bad that the movies worked, and that I wished that they hadn't.

"It's for perverts and sickos," she says, looking down at her drink. "You're not a pervert or a sicko; that's why it disturbed you."

It didn't disturb me, I tell her. It worked for me. That's what disturbed me.

"Because you're normal," says Layla. "That's why it bothers you. If you were a pervert it wouldn't bother you."

She is sounding disturbingly like my shrink.

She adjusts her breasts, flips her hair, trying to be alluring but never quite making eye contact, always staring down at the table or her drink. I ask her what else I should know. Without looking up, she replies: "I don't know. I just know how to give blow jobs. Want a blow job?"

I decline. Politely.

"I'm so blowing you right now. Assess my blow jobs. Anytime."

I tell her I don't want a blow job, and I suspect Max put her up to it, and I feel bad. Every time the conversation lags, she offers me a blow job; and every time I say no, she responds with such genuine bafflement that I suspect Max didn't put her up to it, that this is just the way of the world in her world. Now I feel even worse.

The people at the table near us laugh loudly, and I assume it's at us. I ask Layla about Max. He has three rules for his girls, she says. The rules were written on a board and hung in his house.

"Don't get pregnant," says Layla, "don't get a fat ass, and don't fall in love." Those are his major, major rules to live by, and you'll be fine. Because then you don't have to worry about your feelings being hurt, you don't have to worry about having a baby and getting fat, and you don't have to worry about not getting work, because you're skinny, so don't get fat."

The men and women behind us look over at Layla again and roll their eyes. What, I wonder, is their Max Hardcore? How dark are their dark corners? Does the smug little bald man in the blue tie like to get pissed on? Does the woman in her sharp red business suit like to get spanked, like to spank? How many of the respectable folks in this bar want nothing more than to go home, tie up their mate, and play Nazi and Jew?

"People who know Max," continues Layla, "love him."

"It's all an act," I say. (It probably isn't.)

I ask her what I asked Jerry and Ashley and Big Paul—if there's anything that does it for her that she feels ashamed of—and for once I want to hear that there isn't, that she really is okay with it, with all of it, that she's achieved some sort of Zen-like state of personal enlightenment, of sexual wisdom, a meditative state of Non-Self-Loathing and Un-Reproach.

"Me?" she says, still looking down. "No way, uh-uh. I do it all, whatever."

The people at the table behind us finally get up and leave. Layla watches them go. The bar seems empty, quiet. And at last she looks up at me and shrugs.

"Amateurs," Layla says.

"Amateurs?"

She wrinkles her nose as if it's disgusting.

"Home videos," she says. "Just couples, you know. I like couples. It's real."

Missionary position, she continues, if she can find them.

"Lovemaking," she says quietly.

"Sure."

"You know?"

"Sure."

She shakes her head, and pulls up on her tube top. *What am I doing*, her motion seems to convey, *in this ridiculous outfit?*

The waitress comes by, hands me the bill, and glances with contempt at Layla. Layla disgusts the waitress, Big Paul's brother-in-law disgusts Big Paul, drunk-girl porn disgusts Jerry, Khan Tusion disgusts everybody. But nothing, if we're honest, disgusts us more than ourselves. Our truest selves. The selves we give in to when we watch sleeping girls, and brothers and sisters, and Max and Layla, and amateur couples together in bed (missionary style if possible). The selves who experience these flickering moments of pure acceptance—that's the real pleasure, isn't it, the real joy?—when Shame and Sin watch from a distance, blessedly, briefly silent. Maybe that's why we take such consolation in meeting other people with their own Max Hardcores, and, paradoxically, why we put our Max Hardcores in prison—because by declaring them obscene, we can tell ourselves that we are not.

"You think too much, I think," says Layla.

"You don't think?"

"I never think usually on a regular basis," she says. "I just don't think."

"About anything?"

"Usually. I just be."

"I can't stop thinking," I say.

"That could be bad for your health," says Layla. "Thinking too much."

"Do you read a lot?"

"No."

"Because it's thinking."

"It's in the category of thinking," says Layla. "Comprehending."

"Do you think you're not thinking about things," I ask, "because there are things you

don't want to think about?"

"No. Because it doesn't need to be thought about. Just be."

I'd never thought about it that way before.

"You think too much," she says, getting up from the table and tugging down on the hem of her dress. "That's enough thinking for me for one day." 🌈

---

SHALOM AUSLANDER *is the author of the forthcoming novel* Hope: A Tragedy.