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Prince & the Gun Oil

BY DEBRA JARVIS

A survivor's foray to Toys in Babeland

Before surgery and chemo, Wes and I had a great sex life and I missed it. But I was still, as Wes put it, “intensely desirous of cuddling.” That was true. I needed to be comforted about the fact that I wasn’t interested in sex. For one thing, my vagina had shrunk down to the size of a drinking straw.

I consulted my naturopath. “The only thing I can think of,” she said, “is a dildo to stretch out the tissues.” She started to write it down on my chart and then paused. “I don’t even know how to spell it.”

My primary care physician nodded sympathetically when I told her the problem. “Okay, what you might try is some kind of—dilator.”

“You mean a dildo,” I said.

“Uh, yeah. You may have to start small and work your way up.” She gave me the name of a sex-toy shop on Capitol Hill in Seattle: Toys in Babeland.

Oh. My. God.

I wore sunglasses on the way over and fully intended to keep them on while I was inside. But in my mind, there is no other way to do this kind of thing except directly.

“May I help you?” She was a sweet 20-something girl with pierced eyebrows.

“Yes. I was on chemo and we didn’t have sex for a while and I have no estrogen and my vagina has shrunk to the size of a drinking straw and I need something to get it back in shape.”

“Yes, of course,” said Pierced Girl.

Of course? Did she hear this all the time?

I looked at the vast assortment of penises. They were like puppies at the pound. All of them seemed to say, "Pick me! Pick me!"

She took me over to three shelves of dildos. "These are silicone, these are latex, and these are blown glass," she said, pointing to the different shelves. I know she said something after that, but I didn't get it because my mind was screaming, "Glass?! Isn't that dangerous? Why don't you just use plutonium?"

"You can't use silicone lubricant with silicone. You can only use water-based or glycerin, although we don't recommend lubricants with glycerin because they can cause yeast infections. Now with latex toys you can use silicone lubricant."

I should be taking notes! Yeast infections? That's all I need.

I looked at the vast assortment of penises. They were like puppies at the pound. All of them seemed to say, "Pick me! Pick me!"

"How do I know which size to get?" I asked coolly. Never mind the fact that this whole venture had brought on a marathon hot flash.

"It depends on how many fingers you can get in your vagina."

"Oh, yes." I looked down at my hands and pondered this question. Did she include the little finger? Because that's a lot smaller than the other three. That could throw off the entire calculation.

"Thank you so much."

You would have thought I was buying gloves at Macy's. I quickly ruled out the glass and latex varieties. But the dildo buffet was still overwhelming, so I ruled out anything that looked real because I had the real thing at home.

Then I remembered what my doctor said about starting small. There were three that were exactly alike, except they were small, medium, and large. Perfect. I picked up the small one: \$30! \$40 for the medium, and \$45 for the large. I wasn't about to spend \$115 on dildos! Once I graduated to the large, what would I do with the small and medium ones? Donate them to the church rummage sale?

I would just have to start big. I grabbed the Papa Bear off the shelf and waved at Pierced Girl. "I'll take this one."

"Alright. I'll be right back." She returned with two sealed bags. "Purple or black?" she asked.

"Well, black does go with everything," I said, "but how can I resist the purple?" I immediately named him Prince.

Now I had to get some fancy lubricant. Clearly our common drugstore stuff wasn't cutting it. There were testers for every brand. On every shelf was a box of tissues so you could wipe off your fingers. So thoughtful.

So I tried Maximus, O'My, Sliquid Silk, Babelube, Infinity, and Pink. Pink was in a handblown Italian glass bottle so you could leave it out on your nightstand and no one would walk in and scream, "Oh, my God! Lubricant!"

Instead they'd probably say, "Oh, what a beautiful bottle." Then they'd pick it up, and because it's slippery, drop it on your floor. Then you'd have lubricant everywhere and a lot of explaining to do. But what are they doing sniffing around your bedroom?

Anyway, I ended up buying a bottle of Gun Oil because I liked the way it felt, and I knew Wes would die laughing at the name. Unlike Pink, I wouldn't keep it on the nightstand but perhaps in the garage.

I was feeling pretty wild now and decided to buy some erotic literature. I chose a book whose cover looked very cultured and sophisticated. It was a collection of stories. I'll tell you right now that the stories where they hop in the sack after knowing one another only 10 minutes just didn't turn me on. I got anxious and started talking out loud, saying things like, "You need to pay attention to your relationship first!" or "What did you learn from your last relationship?" I was doing pre-marital counseling with erotic literature.

The stories that worked for me are where they secretly love one another for ages, are afraid to admit it, finally confess, and then hop in the sack. So I read a story and then Prince and I would get to work, paving the way for the Real Thing. It really was work at first because there was a fair amount of discomfort. I looked upon it like dental hygiene, although I've never once had an orgasm while flossing—yet.

So like my taste buds, slowly and gradually things came back. Lights were flickering in the house.

At night, while Wes read his journal in bed, I read my erotic lit. After a story or two I would fling the book on the floor and say, "Honey, step away from that journal!"

Sex on the Road

So our sex life is better thanks to Prince and the Gun Oil, although I did have one very bad experience. We were coming back from a vacation and I unconsciously, thoughtlessly, stupidly threw the Gun Oil into my carry-on luggage.

"Ma'am we need to check your bag," said the woman at the X-ray machine.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Is it my inhaler?" Sometimes my inhaler is mistaken for a small pistol. She dug through my bag and pulled out the bottle.

"Gun oil?"

Everyone stopped talking and turned around. I mean, everyone. Of course, this triggered a hot flash. Little beads of sweat were forming on my forehead. Why didn't I just turn myself in as a terrorist?

A big, burly TSA guy came over and said, "Dump out your bag."

The woman was still examining the bottle. I leaned over and whispered, "It's

lubricant.” Our eyes met and there was a flicker of recognition, of empathy.

The burly man was just about to take the bottle from her when she snatched it away and said, “We have everything under control here.”

I still had to dump my bag and let them paw through nasal decongestant, a half-eaten protein bar, a hairbrush that looked like a Shih Tzu, and a package of facial oil-blotting papers. Humiliating?

This is a test of the Universal Humiliation System. If this were an actual humiliation you would feel worse. This is only embarrassing.

So like my taste buds, slowly and gradually things came back. Lights were flickering in the house. I am convinced there is no way to rush this. The best thing to do is to pretend you are a teenage virgin and will only allow kissing. You might try saying, “I’m not one of those slutty cheerleader types!” and gently smack your partner. Then think about your parents coming home any minute. Then imagine all the girls at school finding out. Then all the boys. Then ... well, it worked for us.

Debra Jarvis is a chaplain at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. Excerpted with permission from It’s Not About the Hair: And Other Certainties of Life & Cancer by Debra Jarvis [Sasquatch Books, 2007].