

"*Seventy-Two Penises* is this idea that I've had since I first came to film school. It's totally brilliant. It's about guys going about everyday guy stuff, so we shoot it like a documentary, right? Just guys playing sports, guys driving fast cars, you know, regular guy stuff."

I pause for effect before I tell her the big part.

"But here's the thing. Every now and then, like when the scene changes, there's a sudden cut to a shot of a penis, and the idea is, like, guys are always thinking about their dicks, right, so I figure, this way, we can show guys kind of as they are on the outside, and then sort of what they're thinking inside. I got the idea when I watched this old Eisenstein movie—which doesn't have anything to do with penises of course, because they probably weren't allowed to do that in film back then—but the neat thing is that they don't know how to link ideas; they don't have a film vocabulary, so they kind of adapt ideas from other things. Eisenstein tried to adapt from books, right, only some things kinda don't work on film the way they do in books, so in his movies if he wants to say that the crowd roared like a lion, he'd show a crowd scene, and then he'd quickly cut to a roaring lion. I mean, I guess people sort of knew what he was doing, but you don't do that kind of thing in film anymore. Anyway, that got me to thinking. I read a book on him and it said the reason no one does that now is because simile doesn't work with film the way it does with words. But then I started thinking, well why not? Maybe it could. Maybe there's something to be explored there."

I can't tell if Drew is liking this or not, but I really want her to do camera for it. She's good. She's got this total eye for the lens, like it's just a natural extension of her, and I know that a bunch of other people want her for their projects.

"When we see the penises," I continue, "each one has a number written on it in magic marker. We start at number one, and we keep going until we get to number seventy-two. When we get to seventy-two, the movie ends."

"Oh," she says. "You mean like Peter Greenaway?"

"What?"

"Peter Greenaway. He had that movie." She scrunches her face up as she's thinking. "*Drowning by Numbers*. That's what it was called."

"Well, it's probably a bit different."

"No, it's basically the same thing, just without the penises. These numbers show up during the course of the movie, and it starts at..."

"Okay, okay," I interrupt. Greenaway. I *hate* Greenaway. Such pretentious British crap. I can't believe he got my idea. "So, are you interested in doing camera?"

She shrugs. "Sure. I haven't seen much cock in my life."

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That night Jenny comes over, and I make her a mix of fucilli and sea-shell

pasta and we open a bottle of rosé, and we go to bed again, and it's only maybe our sixth or seventh time together but she's amazing, just incredible. I usually wait at least two months before going to bed with a girl, and sometimes they think that maybe it's because I'm not interested, but not Jenny. She's patient. I like that. Afterward, we're lying in bed together. I'm sure I've got this huge grin on my face. I never knew a girl could do so much just moving her hips. But I notice that Jenny's staring at the ceiling now, and there's a look on her that I don't think I've seen before.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yeah. I was just thinking." She looks quickly at me, then looks back at the ceiling. "I was talking with someone on campus today, and they mentioned you were recruiting people for that film."

"Yeah. I put some posters up. I put an ad in the campus paper. But I've told you about this before. That's not what's bothering you, is it?"

"Well, sort of. I guess I didn't think you were serious."

"Why wouldn't I be serious?"

"Well, for one thing there's that Peter Greenaway film that does the same thing."

"Look, I came up with it independently."

"Yeah, but it's just going to look like a parody, you know?" She's silent for a while. We haven't been together long but I can tell there's something more.

"Is that all that's bothering you?" I ask. "You're worried that I'm going to accidentally make a parody?"

"Well, no. It's just ..." She turns onto her stomach and she's looking right at me. "Have you thought about ... well ... how you're going to get enough guys to volunteer their penises for this?"

"Yeah. I figured that if we don't get enough that a few people can be more than one number. We just have to remember to use a kind of marker that washes out easy."

"I guess what I'm worried about is that ... well, were you planning on using your own in this?"

That deflates me. "Why? Would that be a problem? Don't you like mine?"

"No, it's not that." She reaches out a hand and pets me there the way you would a small animal. "You know I like Mister Pickles."

Never, ever, let your girlfriend name your penis. Just don't give her that option. Tell her that you already call it Fred, or Johnny Wonderful, but just don't let her come up with her own name for it. Jenny did it before she even saw mine, just felt me once through my pants and said "I don't know why, but for some reason it reminds me of a pickle." If she'd seen me first, she probably wouldn't have ever said something like that.

"So, what's the problem, then?" I ask. "You don't want other people to see it?"

"I just think it might be better to keep certain things ... private."

I lie down and turn away from her. I know what she's getting at. "It's the hoodie, isn't it?"

"No, of course not."

But I know it is. She looked like she was about to scream when she first saw it, and I had to convince her that it was okay, that she wouldn't hurt me if she touched it. It's not that I'm uncircumcised. It's not that I *am* circumcised. It's that I had a botched circumcision that left me with what I call my half-hoodie, circumcised on the left side, uncircumcised on the right. It always makes me think of those circus freaks whose profile looks like a man from one side and a woman from the other.

"You don't have to lie to me," I say. "I know that's what it is."

This always comes up. I had a couple girls ask, "why don't you just go and get it fixed," and I've always been like, "if you'd had an operation on your genitals messed up, would you really want to go for another?" and they usually say something like, "yeah, but don't you want to be normal?" It's not like I haven't thought about it, but it hurts when someone else says it.

I hear her sigh. "Look, it's not that it bothers me. It's just that ... well ... maybe you don't need to advertise it, you know?"

"I hadn't planned on using mine," I say. "I mean, until you brought it up it hadn't even occurred to me."

"Well, I just thought I'd ask. It worried me."

"It hadn't occurred to me that while I'm thinking about how to direct my movie, all you're thinking about is *gee, I hope he doesn't show his cock in it. Boy, wouldn't that be embarrassing for me.*"

"That's *not* what I said."

"You might as well have."

"God, you're impossible." She gets up. Paces the room. Stops. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?"

"Sorry I got angry there. I just ... I don't see why we can never talk about it."

"What's there to talk about? That's just the way I am."

"God!" She starts looking for her clothes, picking up a sock tentatively before she's sure it's hers. "Have you thought of the irony, at least?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, why are you doing this particular movie? Why this of all things?"

"Because guys are really concerned with their penises. They think about them all the time."

"*You* think about *your* penis all the time. *You* bring it into everything. Every time I say even the slightest thing you're always like, *it's because of my penis, isn't it?*"

"That's not fair," I say. "That's not fair at all." But yeah, I know it is. And it's been three months with Jenny. Enough time to get to know one another. Enough time for problems to crop up. Three months is when it usually ends, and

I've seen this one before. I try to think of a way to make it different this time. "Look," I say. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to be so sensitive. Just come back to bed, okay?" I pause. "Please?"

She hesitates a moment, then puts down the sock. She climbs into bed next to me. We don't say anything. I hold her really tight until she finally falls asleep. I stay awake for a long time. I know where this is going.

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Drew and I have a good time filming the documentary section. We go to different sports bars, some construction sites, anywhere we can think of where there will be lots of men. I kind of leave the penis-footage for last, and we're all set up in the studio, with the eighteen guys who show up, when I realize I don't really want to see all of them with their pants off. They probably have similar doubts. Lots of guys worry that some other guy is going to be bigger than them, but for me even the smallest penis would have something to hold over me.

Drew looks disappointed as she's getting the camera set up.

"I just thought there'd be a lot more guys," she says.

"Yeah. So did I."

"And some of them are *so* ugly."

"Well, that's not exactly the part of them that we're shooting anyway."

After a pause I add, "their penises might look great."

"I don't know," she says. "If a guy's that ugly, I think I'd just rather not know what his dick looks like. I'd hate to think that there are perfect cocks out there attached to really ugly bodies."

It's just me and Drew and eighteen guys. We don't need any sound and we're doing our own lighting. I'm trying to decide which order I'd like them to go in but I have no idea what they'll look like from the waist down. I get the guys into a huddle while Drew finishes with the camera. I go over some of the basics with them: Flaccid is fine for most shots. Only numbers twenty-three and fifty-one have to be fully erect. I don't tell them this but I'd also like to use someone very large for those two shots, but I'll have to wait until they've all done at least one number before I can tell who would be good for that.

"So, is that the girl?" one guy says, pointing to Drew.

"The girl?" I glance quickly at Drew. "She's doing camera," I say. "I'll be directing you."

"So, is there going to be another girl then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Another girl for us to ... you know." He makes a humping gesture. "And is it going to be one at a time, or all of us at once?"

I'm speechless for a second. "It's not that kind of movie."

"Oh." He goes to the edge of the room, takes his jacket from the back of a chair, and leaves.

"Maybe I should ask. Did anyone else think that this was going to be ... something like that?"

Sheepishly, two guys put up their hands. A third follows suit.

"Fine, you can all go too."

They start to leave. The third one comes up to me. "You know, I been in many gang-bang."

"That's nice." I notice that he's a bit older than everyone else.

"In my country, I never hear of such thing. Here, they making biggest *putanas* big stars, and any with hard enough dick, he getting to fuck them."

"Yeah, that's really nice." I look for someone to rescue me, but no one is about to. He seems to want to talk about porno. After a minute he finally leaves. I wonder what kind of guys are out there reading campus newspapers.

"Well," I say to the group. "And then there were fourteen." Everyone is quiet. "It's a joke. You don't have to laugh, but it's a joke."

No one does.

"Fine, so let me just go over this once more. This is not a pornographic movie. This is an art film. You will not be having sex with anyone. We just need your penises on camera. Are there any questions before we get started?"

A guy near the edge raises a hand. "How much are we going to be getting paid for this?"

"You're not getting paid. I thought that was clear."

"Fuck." He starts to leave. "This is bullshit. Total bullshit."

Thirteen, I think. Lucky us.

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The shoot takes a lot longer than we'd expected, partly because most of the guys don't want to be seen in front of each other. Maybe it's a competitive thing, or maybe it's a homophobic thing. The other snag is that the magic-marker doesn't come out as easily as we'd thought and we have to break so Drew and I can make a trip to Grand & Toy. She'd rather not be left alone in a studio with a bunch of guys who have been showing her their penises all day and I can't say I blame her. We get a big assortment of black markers and Drew is testing them on her arm as we're driving back. Driving is really making me tense. It's like I'm floating in the stream of traffic with no control.

I say to Drew, "So, is it what you expected?"

"I don't know," she says. "I think I'm just desensitized to dick now. I can't even remember who has each one."

"Yeah," I say. "I know what you mean." I had to take notes to remember. Some are circumcised. Some are not. Some are growers, while others are showers. The showers are easier to use because you can put a bigger number on them, but almost all the penises are fickle, react to the slightest breeze or repositioning of lights. One thing I do notice though is the way they all look

different: some guys lean left or lean right, and some guys have brownish spots on them, and the heads are all different shapes and sizes, some pointier like an arrow, and some bulbous like a mushroom. I'd been thinking about it. I finally decide to ask Drew.

"You're straight, right?"

"Yeah." She pauses. "Where is this going?"

"I just wanted to ask you something. Do women really care much about how a penis ... you know... looks?"

"Is this shoot hitting a bit close to home?"

"Ha, ha." I want to laugh it off but can't quite. "Seriously though, do women care?"

She shrugs. "I guess some might, and I can't speak for all straight women."

"But would they care ... a lot?"

"You mean, would it be a deal-breaker?"

"Yeah."

"I don't think most women care as much as you think they do. It's guys who are always thinking about their dicks. Overall I think we're not as shallow as you think we are."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, what do you think? You're the one who said at the beginning of this that the whole point of your movie is how guys are always thinking about their dicks. I think it's a male anxiety."

And she's right of course. She's obviously fine with it. She'd have left already if she wasn't.

"I've got a question for you," Drew says. "What are you planning for your next film?"

"I don't know. I hadn't thought too much about it."

"I think that you should maybe move beyond the penis thing. I mean, it's interesting, don't get me wrong, but there's a lot more out there that you can do a film about." She's quiet for a moment. "And if it's about what makes a man and all that, there's a lot more out there."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I say. And I really hope she is.