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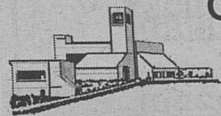
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Amazon Trail: When a Butch Goes Bad

My friends and I kid around a lot about butch and femme. To us, it's not about role-playing, it's who we are. None of us wears motorcycle boots or lipstick, but we know where we fit with one another. There are unspoken customs and unwritten behaviors that are not even second nature — they're built-in. Most of all, acknowledging our butch and femme sides is a lot of fun.

A few weeks ago a femme friend and her partner were telling a story about a couple that had disappeared from their lives. This was near the holidays and our hosts had decorated their new home with lights inside and out. The house felt warm and snug despite the gale force winds buffeting their windows.

The femme of the house said, "Bertha thought she was losing control over Smithy because Smithy was getting tight with us." Her partner nodded. The rest of us had watched this happen and agreed. "The last straw came when Smithy started going grocery shopping with me — grocery shopping!" We all laughed at the absurdity of getting jealous over grocery shopping.

"When butches go bad — they go grocery shopping with another femme!" cried someone, cracking us up again. Immediately came a string of comic examples of butches going bad.

"When you turn them loose in a hardware store!" struck us as particularly funny, though my partner salivates even more than I do in the hardware aisles.

"When you turn them loose anywhere with another butch!" I was reminded of the time our butch host and I had gone shopping for their anniversary. She found an irresistible anniversary gift in every store we entered and I egged her on to keep splurging. It's what happens on these butch adventures, as the femmes obviously knew.

Through laughter, a femme offered, "Don't forget the B&D butches!"

That stopped me short until someone else reminded me, "Black and Decker butches."

"Of course," I said and immediately pictured a slew of us marching in formation, power drills held high, at a gay pride march.

I reminded them of what had transpired just a few moments before — I'd gotten up to retrieve another slice of pizza and was back at the table and well into my first bite when, to my horror, I realized

lee
lynch

that I'd forgotten to bring my femme host a slice. She got it herself with an affronted dignity, but I will never live down the teasing, which was more about my remorse at failing my self-imposed butchly duty than about her expectations.

When I referred to her out loud as a host, she teased back that she was a hostess. Did that make two hostesses, or is the butch a host? There was no preponderance of opinion, only preferences. It seems that modern usage would make everyone a host, but some femmes reclaim the feminine forms of words — perhaps to assert their feminine identities in a world that would lump them all into the diesel dyke category. Or perhaps because they really enjoy their womanliness. I sure do.

Someone got up to clear the table and said, "A butch goes bad when she brings home the 10th cat." Hilarity shook everyone. It was all too true.

The next example, "Or when she puts the house up for sale without telling the femme," brought on a quick awkward silence.

"Did you really do that?" one butch asked the accused. She's currently adding a room to her partner's home so they can live together and was obviously incredulous. Butches don't do these things.

"But femmes do," someone said. That brought up the question, "Why do butches let femmes get away with so much?"

"Cause we're easy!" All the butches agreed with that, smiling

and not meeting anyone's eyes.

"A butch goes bad when she gets too close to her cat!" someone volunteered, cradling one of the house cats in her arms. A groan went up, like everyone was familiar with that one. "Or dog," someone else offered.

It's evenings like this that remind me how very much I love us, the inhabitants of lesbian nation. I think we're the wittiest, warmest, most loveable creatures on earth. Except when we're not.

"Hey!" someone said, "When does a femme go bad?" The group didn't want to go there at all.

I thought of my partner, who was in a distant city that night, and how in our early days together, we got so shy about who would push the grocery cart. Was that a butch thing or a femme's job? Now we sometimes push it together, and

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laugh at our funny selves. I guess grocery shopping can be romantic after all.

"A butch goes bad when she votes wrong," said the femme hostess.

It turned out that all the butches relied on this politically savvy femme for voting information. She delivers a not insignificant block of votes to our common causes. "What would we do without you?" we all wailed. She allowed herself a satisfied look. After all, she knew she'd never have to get up for that next slice of pizza again. These butches weren't about to go bad. ▼

Copyright Lee Lynch 2003. Lee Lynch is the author of eleven books including *The Swashbuckler* and the *Morton River Valley Trilogy*. She lives on the Oregon Coast.