

## CHAPTER 2: SHADES OF GRAY

*Everyone's a little bit kinky...*

My friend Mark who, to use the popular parlance of the BDSM scene, is “kinky as fuck,” loves to tell a story about a ballerina he once had sex with. Knowing his love of kink, she initially refused to sleep with him, insisting that she was *vanilla* (i.e., not kinky). He assured her that he doesn't need kink to have a good time, and that he really loves sex, too. So she agreed to have sex with him. Once they started having sex, lying on her back, she crossed her legs into her chest and encouraged him to push them down. She kept encouraging him until he was eventually *choking her with her own ankles* while fucking her. And so, he likes to conclude, he had some of the weirdest sex of his life with a “vanilla” girl.

The story plays well at BDSM parties because (1) by the standards of the Scene, it sounds like really hot sex, and (2) it supports one of the favorite beliefs of folks in the BDSM scene: *everyone's a little bit kinky* (although even by the standards of the Scene, getting choked by one's own ankles while having sex is probably more than a “little bit” kinky). One of the women I interviewed, Mila, articulated this perspective particularly well, saying:

I honestly think that if you delve deep enough into anybody's sexual relationship, with very few exceptions, you will find that there's at least a little something that would be considered kink. When you think about it, there is a power dynamic that exists in every single relationship. You don't have to call that kinky. However, when you're thinking about how you relate to your partner in bed, there's someone that's the top, there's someone who consistently kind of drives the sex—that's a little bit kinky. When you climb on top of somebody else and fucking ride them, that's a little bit kinky. Vanilla sex is the missionary position. That is what that is. Anything aside from that is a little bit kinky. If you enjoy giving blowjobs, that's a little bit kinky.

Mila's view is a common one among people who self-identify as kinky: most kinksters tend to argue that if you scratch the surface of just about any sexual relationship, you'll find a dynamic that defies social constraints and expectations about what sex is supposed to be and include.

More than most people, participants in the BDSM scene tend to be extremely aware that *kinky* is a very subjective label—a cultural product of social time and space. Most people agree that there are things that are *obviously* kinky, in the sense that society says that they’re sexual or sexual-like things that are way outside of the accepted norms of sex and desire. Despite social labeling, many people still find these things arousing. For instance, studies consistently find that around 50% of all women show signs of physical arousal from reading graphic accounts of rapes, and fairly large numbers will even say they do. To my way of thinking, that sounds pretty damned kinky. (And just to bypass any curiosity or concerns, let me hasten to add that most women don’t *actually* want to be raped). The BDSM community has constructed an entire set of practices that it usually euphemistically labels “consensual non-consent” to try to avoid the negative connotations of, well, *rape*. But even in the Scene, “consensual non-consent” and “rape play” are considered “edgeplay”—i.e. very kinky. (“Play” is the common term used by kinky people to refer to BDSM activities, although it can also include sex as well). If 50% of women are aroused by something that is very kinky by everyone’s standards, then very kinky desires are actually statistically normal.

You might reasonably counter with, “But most women don’t actually engage in ‘rape play’ or even want to, so that hardly seems like a convincing argument for the ubiquity of kink.” If I subsequently point out that the millions of women buying *50 Shades of Grey* probably aren’t reading it for its in-depth character studies, you would probably again argue that most of those consumers aren’t actually entering into the kinds of “owner-submissive” relationships described in the novel. It’s certainly true that there’s a long distance between fantasizing about something and actually engaging in it. I’ll readily concede that at most, these numbers show widespread kinky desires, not widespread kinky activities. But it’s also possible that the main thing that’s

stopping people from manifesting their desires is fear of social condemnation, not insufficient desire.

Part of the reason that kink doesn't feel ubiquitous is because the standards for what's kinky are constantly changing. Society cheats on this one: as something becomes common, we stop thinking of it as kinky—although it used to be, and so we don't notice how kinky we're becoming. Consider the way that in the 1950's, oral sex was considered kinky and now it's just normal; likewise, anal sex used to be considered pretty kinky, but is slowly finding its way into mainstream sexual practices. Bondage is still technically defined as kinky (and it's the first word in the BDSM acronym). Yet the Spencer's gifts store at my local mall has started selling increasingly high quality rope and handcuffs that were once only sold in windowless sex shops' basement floors or backrooms. No longer zoned to the decrepit side of town, sex shops themselves have gone mainstream. The bright glass store fronts of "feminist" sex shops openly sell a colorful variety of vibrators, dildos, and other toys—all of which were once considered kinky. Biting and hickeys appear pretty popular in the mainstream too, but they seem at least a little bit kinky to me (most of the best bruises I've ever gotten were from being bitten). What's kinky is just a matter of perception, and that perception tends to change fast. And yet, no matter how you define *kink*, statistics indicate that Americans and people in most other developed countries have gotten increasingly experimental in their sexual lives during the last 50 years. Much like punk, it feels like kink is perpetually getting mainstreamed.

Although society tries to label some things kinky and other things not, in reality, individual perceptions are much more important than broader social norms. If you date someone who thinks everything you like to do is normal, then it doesn't feel so kinky. Society only gets to talk as loudly in your bedroom as you let it. Of course, some people have Society as a much

more vocal partner than any of their actual sexual partners. But if you tell Society to hush, and you and your partner are basically in accord about what you want, then “kinky” can start to feel “normal” very quickly. My husband, who had a collared submissive and a collection of sex toys that causes even most kinky folks’ eyes to go big, loves to joke, “What you do is kinky. What I do is perfectly normal.” He says the same thing whether he’s talking to kinksters or vanillas. It’s a good joke because it’s the actual attitude of so many people (and it used to be my own attitude, once upon a time)—especially people outside the Scene. Almost everyone seems to have a few weird things that turn them on, and sometimes those things turn out to be very weird indeed. People just aren’t in the habit of admitting them.

*So what is “really” kinky?*

The only way to know what is “really” kinky—that is, sexual activities that really are abnormal—would be to have reliable data on what most people do in bed. We don’t. So the next best way to figure out what’s really kinky is to see what people who call themselves kinky like to do. FetLife, kinksters’ primary social networking website, actually logs the most popular things that self-identified kinky people say they’re into. Discounting oral sex (#2) and anal sex (#5), the 10 most popular things are: bondage, spanking, hair pulling, blindfolds, biting, talking dirty, handcuffs, discipline (which is so vague that I’m still not sure what that really means), collar lead/leash, and lingerie. None of those things seems very kinky at all to me; I’d wager a lot of money that most of the people reading this have done at least two, if not more, of the things on that list. How kinky can something really be if so many people are into it? The list continues with candle wax, masturbation, toys, Master/slave, ass play (which includes, but is not limited to, anal sex), role play, erotic photography, mutual masturbation, high heels, and dildos. Well, Master/slave relationships sound pretty kinky to me, but aside from that, I don’t think the

kinksters are providing much kinky inspiration here.

It's only when we get into the 20's on the list that things start to sound kinkier on average: sex in public, vibrators, breast/nipple torture, pain, strap-ons, whips, humiliation, rough sex, bare bottom spanking, and exhibitionism. There was undoubtedly an era where vibrators seemed kinky, but it's hard to think of them that way in 21st-century America. Conversely, sex in public was probably normal for most of human history (privacy is something that few people had historically, and a significant chunk of the world's population still lacks); it has only come to be considered "kinky" in the last couple of hundred years. But I'm guessing that most people would still agree that nipple torture, whips, and blatant exhibitionism (in the BDSM world defined as actively enjoying people watching you engaging in BDSM or sex, not the medical definition of "flashing" people) are still pretty kinky. Meanwhile strap-ons, rough sex, and bare-bottom spanking would probably fall into the "fairly kinky" category (with the caveat that strap-ons generally seem to be kinkier to straight people than women who have sex with women). Actually, the numbers seem to support the idea that "rough sex" is indeed "fairly kinky": using the questionably representative sample of okcupid.com users, 10% of them say they prefer rough sex to gentle sex. Assuming those numbers are at least somewhat true for young people, it's probably reasonable to call rough sex "fairly kinky."

In short, I don't know what makes a person, their proclivities, or their activities really kinky. Without reliable data on the actual population-based prevalence of kinky desires or practices, no one else can scientifically know what's really kinky either. When it comes to judging what's kinky, as the U.S. Supreme Court has said about pornography, the best metric we have is that "we know it when we see it." That said, I've talked casually and professionally to quite a lot of people about sex. Neither kinky identity nor participation in the public BDSM

scene seems to be a very good predictor of the extent of someone's kinky tastes or behaviors. My professional opinion is that the majority of people are into some weird shit—they just don't usually like to admit it.

*Everyone's a little bit kinky... but maybe not quite like that*

Despite kinksters' belief that "everyone's a little bit kinky," kinksters tend to imagine themselves and their lives as being very different from those of so-called vanillas. But if kink is so hard to define, and everyone's a little bit kinky, what really distinguishes people in the BDSM scene from the vanillas outside the Scene? The answer was accidentally summarized by a "vanilla" acquaintance of my friend Mark, who said, "Sure, I like to do kinky things with my wife in our bedroom—but that doesn't mean that I want to spend my Friday nights doing it in clubs, wearing leather, and talking about it." His comment highlights the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between kinksters and vanillas, which mainly come down to: 1) scales of kink 2) exhibitionism and 3) subcultural values. I'll explain each of these in order.

"Scales of kink" refers to the way that people who participate in the Scene heavily tend to have a taste for more extreme versions of what many people outside the Scene do casually. Kinksters often distinguish between "slap-and-tickle"—the type of "lightly" kinky activity that vanillas engage in—and the kink that they themselves engage in. For example, kinksters generally assume that outside the Scene, bondage mostly involves people tied to a bed, using polyester "love ropes" purchased at a local sex shop, presumably for sex. But in the BDSM scene, bondage is usually much more elaborate, typically uses handmade ropes from "natural fibers" such as hemp and jute (which bondage enthusiasts mostly consider superior to cheap machine-made polyester ropes), and is only sometimes explicitly sexual. Currently, bondage in the Scene focuses heavily on "suspensions," which range from mildly uncomfortable to

excruciating ways of using rope to constrict someone's body and then suspend them in the air.

Bondage in the Scene is mostly about rope and restraint, not sex.

The same concept of scale holds true for many other kinks as well. Biting and hickeys are usually considered vanilla; but people in the Scene will sometimes allow themselves to be covered in serious bruises from heavy biting all over their bodies. Vanillas might also be excited by being blindfolded during sex; but in the Scene, I have watched blindfolded women in dungeons be led around by their partners and fingered, fondled, and tormented by numerous people at the discretion of the person leading them. Similarly, "light spanking" may be part of vanilla sex; but self-identified kinksters tend to engage in much harder or more frequent spanking play. For instance, I interviewed a man named Bill who primarily identified as a spanking fetishist. He explained that he had had a partner who wanted to quit smoking and had encouraged him to discipline her by spanking her whenever she smoked. He said that he ended up spanking her at "breakfast, lunch, dinner, and before going to bed," adding with a wicked grin, "You wouldn't believe how naughty she is." Kinksters will often proudly show off asses and thighs that are dark purple just from intense spankings.

Of course, self-identified kinksters do more than just extreme versions of the same lightly kinky things that vanilla people do. Self-identified kinksters also often enjoy doing things that are considered much more extreme by their very nature. These kinds of activities are difficult to admit to liking without at least some kinky identification, regardless of whether one actually participates in the public BDSM scene. These activities include fairly common (in the Scene) things like single-tail whips, which are both very painful and require a lot of practice to use well; breast/nipple torture, which involves everything from using nipple clamps to poking needles through nipples to suspending a person's entire body by ropes tied around her breasts; and cock

and ball torture, which involves everything from stepping on or kicking testicles, to encasing a penis in metal or cages, to inserting medical grade metal rods called “sounds” down the urethra of the penis. These are not activities that fit social criteria for normal sexual or pleasurable behaviors, and doing them almost necessitates some self-identification as kinky. It is certainly difficult to learn to do these things safely without at least accessing BDSM websites, but it is usually easier to learn them by going to classes taught by kinky experts through the public BDSM scene. Enjoying doing these activities usually requires having a partner who also enjoys them, and it is much easier to find such people through the public BDSM scene than outside of it. Consequently, a taste for these types of extreme activities usually eventually leads people to the public BDSM scene.

*The performance: From puppies to “rape”*

While the scales of kink undoubtedly create a distinction between people who identify as kinky and people who don't, one of the key factors differentiating people in the public BDSM scene from those who stay home with their kinks is a penchant for exhibitionism/voyeurism. I don't use these terms as a diagnosing psychotherapist might to refer to someone's tendency to engage in illegal acts of sexual or physical display/invoke others' privacy. On the contrary, as I will explain more in Chapter 5, the Scene is carefully structured to create a consensual performance space for people to enjoy watching and being watched as they engage in sex and BDSM. The label *Scene* is no coincidence: the public BDSM scene is heavily focused on utilizing flamboyant costumes, crafting a persona, and a sexy and kinky performance. Public dungeons usually function as stages for people to create intimate kinky “performances” and others to openly and guiltlessly enjoy watching them do it.

The spectrum of these performances was explained well by one of my interviewees,



Marilyn. She described in articulate detail a comedic but vicious “gangrape” scene she had witnessed at a party, involving a Jacuzzi and five people violently and rather absurdly fucking a girl I’ll call Jezebel:

She was being held under the water, and they were fucking her with dildos on a stick and still being kind of ridiculous and piratic about it, like, “That’s what you get, dick on a stick.” So it was sort of a comedic performance. But at the same time it was being, like, a very brutal thing. And so she came up out of the water, and she just started wailing. It wasn’t a quiet cry—it was loud, shrill, prolonged, and at that point I was, like, shuddering pretty hard, seeing her come up and react like that. And she collapsed in the whirlpool, and everybody was gathered around her, and being very soothing and what not. And so at that point I left because I felt like... it was a public scene, but I felt like that moment was a little too personal to have witnesses. I remember that was the very first kink party I ever took my boyfriend to.

Jezebel’s “rape” scene had a sort-of legendary status in the local kink scene, and I’ve heard several people’s accounts of it through the years. This scene embodied much of what the Scene values, as an entertaining performance that was also conspicuously emotionally meaningful. It was well-known that Jezebel, who had previously been a victim of an actual sexual assault, had deliberately created the scene for cathartic purposes (more on catharsis in a Chapter 8). This type of potent blend of kinky performance and emotional intensity, which straddles a line between public and intimate, is what kinksters often most admire in BDSM scenes. And yet, Marilyn, like many kinksters, was still cognizant of the subtle distinction between the kinky performance and the more private intimate emotional catharsis.

At the other end of the exhibitionist spectrum are light-hearted role-plays that people perform in a highly interactive fashion. Marilyn went on to explain:

And then the next party I took my boyfriend to was one where my friend Amy was doing her puppy play thing and bounced up to him in puppy mode. And he ruffled her hair, and she was panting at him and being all cute. After those two parties, I was like, “Now you’ve witnessed the spectrum of the kink community: puppies and ‘rape’.”

“Puppy play” is one form of “pet play,” which involves people taking on the roles of a variety of

animals (the most popular being puppies and ponies). People taking on animal form usually have some type of “handler” to figuratively or literally hold their leashes. Handlers will sometimes encourage other people to feed “kibble” (cereal) to the pets, scratch their ears, or throw toys for the pets. Acting as a pet sometimes involves elaborate costuming gear—especially for “ponies,” who may wear leather body harnesses, headdresses that resemble manes, butt plugs with tails, and even special hoof-like covers for their hands and feet. Lucy, who had worked as a “groom” and “trainer” for pony players for many years, explained that as a groom, her job was to take care of “whatever accoutrement they have to make the person feel more pony-like, because pony play is all about someone taking on the persona of a pony and acting in that way as much as they want. Some people go really, really deep into it and really become a pony.” Pet play is usually not particularly violent (although it can be), and rarely culminates in complex scenes. Kinksters seem to value it in large part for its whimsy and fun, as well as the intimate interactions that can occur between “owners,” who are often dominant, and their pets, who are often submissive. Pet play involves taking on a role, performing partly for the amusement of others, but informally interacting with others while maintaining that role.

Even for the Scene, pet play often involves exceptionally elaborate performances and role play. However, many people who participate heavily in the Scene create less elaborate kinky personae or roles for themselves. People often use “scene names” for themselves, in much the same way that burlesque performers, strippers, or porn stars traditionally take alternative names. The tradition of scene names originally began as means of protecting people’s real names and identities so that they could stay safe from being “outed” in professional contexts (and the consequences of being outed for people in many professions can still be very serious. A party promoter in the Baltimore area in the military was instantly demoted when his kinky sidelife was

discovered. And one of my interviewees, who was a high-ranking official in a major government agency, had her job threatened when her superiors decided that she was essentially engaging in unbecoming conduct by presenting at kink events). Although some people have strong motivation to protect their real names and identities, many people just seem to enjoy adopting an identity that allows them to basically become a cooler version of their real selves. People frequently acquire signature styles, symbols, or looks to accompany their kinky personae, from lab coats to elaborate garter belts to rainbow tutus to superhero backpacks to elf ears to three-piece suits. These costumes and identities may become integrated into people's kinky scenes, such as a girl in superhero underwear being suspended in ropes so as to appear to be flying. An important difference between the kinds of people who just want to do kinky things at home and the kinds of people who want to join the Scene and do them in public is their interest in this type of elaborate performance, roleplay, and identity construction built around kink.

One of the most common reasons people I interviewed who self-identified as kinky but didn't participate in the public Scene much gave for their non-participation was "I don't like to play in public," or, "My partner doesn't like to play in public." Without strong exhibitionistic or voyeuristic motivations, even very kinky people generally don't have a good reason to pay \$20-30 to attend parties, unless they're looking for a partner. (People who are looking for a partner, but don't like to play in public, frequently use the Scene to find partners, and then basically leave). Whatever the apparent specific kink on display at any given moment, the underlying kink in the Scene is always the pleasure of display and performance itself. People who want their kinks to stay private don't do them loudly in semi-public places.

*The land of misfits...*

While enjoying kink *and* kinky performance (either as a performer or audience member)

is usually necessary to become a participant in the public BDSM scene, it is usually not sufficient for staying an active member of the Scene. The Scene is, first and foremost, a social gathering, and people go to hang out with friends and savor the company of people they feel are similar to themselves. Even people who don't like to play in public and who aren't looking for more partners still sometimes attend kinky parties because they enjoy the atmosphere. It's a social world that just makes sense to some people in a way that the outside world—which kinksters often call the “real world” or the “vanilla world”—does not. One of the men I interviewed, Gabe, summarized many people's feelings about the social world of the Scene:

It's been a long time since I've been out drinking with normal people. Because the only time I ever go out drinking is when I'm going to [Kinky] Happy Hour, which is great. But I don't know what happens in regular bars. It's a really weird [experience]... and I get really nervous when I'm in social contexts where I have no idea what the cues are.

Like Gabe, many kinksters I know (including myself) think that vanilla bars are the antithesis of enjoyable social milieus, and that those bars are actually “weird.” Vanilla bars are social environments that, for whatever reason, just don't make sense to the kinds of people who tend to fall in love with the Scene.

Kinksters who are gregarious and outgoing in the social world of the Scene will often admit to being painfully shy and awkward in other public settings. Why? Because the subculture of the Scene seductively convinces people who feel out of place elsewhere that it loves them for who they are. As Gabe went on to say, “It's a wonderful feeling to be in a group of people where the things that I feel are valuable about myself are the things that other people are valuing about me when they choose to do things with me.” The social drug of the public BDSM scene can be just as addictive as crack: *Acceptance*. For some people, the Scene is the first place in their lives where the norms and values just make sense to them, and where they feel that people appreciate them for who they really are.

As Gabe’s comment about going drinking with “normal people” implies, kinksters usually self-consciously perceive themselves as very weird. The Scene not only tolerates but actually *values* weirdos—particularly people who are weird and proud of it. Bobby, one of the people I interviewed, who was a sleek-looking 40-something stylish actor, explained that he loved the Scene (or the “Lifestyle,” as many people call it) because he enjoys “just hanging out and talking and getting to know people for real. You know, the Lifestyle and the people that are attracted to it—it’s the Land of Misfit Toys. And I totally relate to that, because I am a misfit toy. It’s just hanging out, and drinking, whatever—but meanwhile people are getting tied up and screaming and all that, like, simultaneously.” As a collection of self-identified oddballs, the Scene often becomes a haven for people who feel that they just don’t really fit in anywhere else. Pat, another person I interviewed, identified as a man, but was born a woman and did not yet clearly pass as a man. He said that,

When I go to a Scene event I don’t get stared at for having blue hair; I don’t get stared at for being fat; I don’t get stared at for being gender non-normative. Like, people just kind of go, ‘Oh, that’s Ren,’ and they move along. Whereas in the real world, or in the Vanilla world, like, it’s perfectly acceptable to stare at someone like me and kind of make judgments on me based on knowing nothing at all. Whereas, I think in Scene community there’s a lot more acceptance of people who look different and who act different.

That warm feeling of acceptance often permeates all aspects of people’s social life inside the Scene, from casual acquaintances to lovers and spouses to deep friendships that people often refer to as “family.” People check out the Scene for all sorts of reasons: because they felt they had always been kinky, because a partner wanted to go, or because they were bored or lonely. But when they stay, it’s because they feel a deep connection with the types of people they meet there, and an almost giddy sense of belonging.

Yet it’s easy to over-idealize the Scene’s world of acceptance and companionship. One of my favorite bumper stickers says, “You non-conformists are all alike,” and the statement applies

as much to kinksters as any other group. The mainstream BDSM subculture celebrates certain *types* of non-conformity like those mentioned by Ren, such as Muppet hair colors and gender non-conformity. It also relishes expensive and large tattoos, although only within certain traditional constraints (namely, no tattoos on the hands, neck, or face). Many body piercings, especially nipple and genital piercings, are also valued (though not precisely common); but much like tattoos, excessive facial piercings are less popular. As mentioned by Ren, the BDSM subculture has a relatively high tolerance for people who aren't thin; nevertheless, the standards for beauty in the Scene aren't radically different from those in the White middle-class Vanilla world. The most popular aesthetic for women in the BDSM subculture could probably best be described as Suicide Girls Chic. Moreover, as in the Vanilla world, Kink world is much more interested in the appearance of women than men. Indeed, I'm hard-pressed to find a pattern in the physical appearance of the types of men who are considered attractive in the Scene because men are rarely explicitly admired for their appearances. The Scene is also extremely Caucasian. Although there are quite a number of Black people and, much less frequently, Asians who are prominent in the east coast BDSM scene, their presence is insufficient to make up for the vastly disproportionately White-bred world of the Scene. In short, the Scene is chock-full of what can best be described as a very White middle-class brand of socially liberal non-conformity.

Interestingly, it is not non-conformity per se that the kink subculture values, but rather a strong sense of identity and personality as a non-conformist. One of the men that I interviewed, Damon, was clearly kinky in his personal practices by pretty much any definition of the word. Nevertheless, he said that he rarely participated in the public BDSM scene because the Scene was filled “with those people who didn't quite escape being a nonconformist in high school—the kids with the chip on their shoulder because they can't fit in.” His comment surprised me, since

he was in his early 30's and had shown up to our interview wearing a skull shirt, heavy black pants, and several rings. He also had numerous piercings and black-painted fingernails—he looked, in short, like a stereotypical Goth, and the usual sort-of “non-conformist” one finds in the Scene. When I asked him about the seeming contradiction between his words and his looks, he shrugged and said that he had been a “jock” in high school, and that he always felt comfortable fitting in with virtually every group. He clearly had no interest in identifying as weird, nor in associating with people who did. The kink subculture wants people who want to feel normal by surrounding themselves with people who are “weird like us,” not people who just want to feel normal and who embrace an identity as normal.

*Shades of gray*

Most kinksters readily admit that the main thing they love about life in the Scene is the people they meet there; and yet, they still tend to think that the defining dimension of the Scene is kink and kink alone. Thus they usually assume that all really kinky people will eventually find their way into the Scene and love it once they get there. For example, I am a regular fixture in the local Scene, and I find that kinksters display a lot of skepticism about my marriage because my husband isn't. When I go to events and tell people that I left my husband at home with his girlfriend, people will sometimes gently and sometimes bluntly ask in concerned tones if I'm happily married. I always laugh and tell them yes. The next question they ask is usually, “Is your husband kinky?” I always tell them truthfully, “Oh, my husband's kinkier than I am. He just doesn't like to play in public, so he doesn't come to a lot of events.” Since acquaintances know that I'm really kinky, at that point, they tend to look downright perplexed, because kinksters are so convinced that all really kinky people should be in the Scene.

Their conviction is especially amusing since in reality, the vast majority of people who

like to do kinky things are only kinky in private. There aren't good statistics on this, of course, but it's a statement I'm willing to stake my professional reputation on anyway. The public BDSM scene is very, very small, and human desires are very, very vast. Only a few large cities have thriving public BDSM scenes, and most people don't even know about them. Most people don't have access to a regular BDSM scene, can't afford to participate in it even if they do, or see no reason to do what they like to do in the bedroom in front of friends and acquaintances. Consequently, people in the public Scene definitely don't represent all kinky people: they only represent a group of people who like to do kinky things in public with people, while following some highly ritualized rules (which I'll explain more in Chapter 5) who happen to share a lot of their values and interests. In short, people in the Scene are almost always kinky themselves, but most kinky people aren't in the Scene.

It's harder to know if most "really kinky" people are in the Scene. Logic suggests that people who enjoy kinks that are way outside the norm would need or want a group of people to support them and their interests (especially since most of those activities require special tools and training to do safely and well). But my sense from interviewing people is that people who are mostly outside the public Scene are just as likely to be really kinky as people in it. There's no way to actually measure "how kinky" someone is. Even when comparing two individuals, it can be hard to figure out which one of them is kinkier. I dated a guy named Curtis who I jokingly said was "kinkier than me, even though I'm really kinkier than he is." That sentence doesn't really seem to make sense, but it's sort-of true anyway: he *needs* kink much more than I do in order to enjoy intimate sexual-type interactions, but I love doing things that are much more extreme than what he was even willing to do. So who's "kinkier"? I don't think anyone could ever really say. Deciding what is and isn't kinky isn't a black and white matter: the experience of



## Chapter 2: Shades of Gray

kink really just comes down to shades of gray.