

Once when I was a little girl I yelled, "Ah, your mother wears army boots" at a friend. This was a mistake because my friend was much bigger than I was, and she promptly punched me in the arm and pushed me into a nearby clump of bushes. But she had a right to be annoyed. By associating her mother with army boots (instead of, say, ankle straps) I had implied that the lady in question was something less than feminine, and in those days anyone considered unfeminine was by definition less than a real woman, let alone a real mother.

When I was growing up the image of femininity was a simple one. It was Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn, home-baked banana bread and fresh-squeezed orange juice, yellow "woman's touch" curtains in the kitchen and a C cup (unless you were Audrey Hepburn). My own femininity centered around peasant blouses worn uncomfortably off the shoulder, neckerchiefs and Tangee Natural lipstick—a combination that I felt coupled seductiveness with both a sporty and an understated appeal.

I remember quite clearly when I was seven or eight the day my mother took me into the "Chubby" section of a big Brooklyn department store and I saw *The Dress*, the height of femininity

FEELING FEMALE: WHAT TURNS IT ON IN YOU?

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

For every woman who feels most feminine in a bubble bath, there's another who finds excitement wearing army surplus. Ask 100 women what makes them feel most female and you'll get at least 100 answers. Some of those answers are here. Is yours?

to my movie-trained eyes. It was called a sun dress then, sleeveless, with two straps that tied at the shoulders, and even on my chubby shoulders it looked to me like Jane Powell's most gossamer dancing dress. (Actually it was cotton and printed with candy canes.) When I wore that dress I may not have looked like Jane Powell (even at the age of eight I probably had ten pounds on her) but I felt like her—light as air and as graceful as it is possible to feel when you're wearing brown lace-up oxfords and white cotton socks. And that's what femininity is, after all—a state of mind.

Unfortunately, femininity has fallen into disrepute lately. Some feminists have coupled it with such negatives as passivity, unimportance, silliness, uselessness, subjugation and other unadmirable qualities of political and social weightlessness. Certainly insofar as it is aligned with social conditioning, femininity can have a negative, stunting influence. But when women make free choices as to where and how and when they want to be and feel most feminine, their life options are opened up rather than limited. In the best sense, feeling feminine bespeaks an acceptance of oneself as a female human being, as well as an ability to (Continued on page 74)

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get all the deliciousness out of that fact that one can.

Even some hard-core feminists seem to realize this. It was with some trepidation that I approached a journalist friend of mine, the most militant feminist I know, with the question "When do you feel most feminine?" No sooner were the words out than I regretted them. Oh, God, I thought, she'll tell Betty Friedan I asked her that and then she'll attack me in print, and Bella Abzug will make me move out of her congressional district and Phyllis Schlafly will want to be my friend. But this woman, this ferociously independent career woman, startled me with her answer: "When I see a newborn baby. I immediately want to nurse it. I can almost feel the milk flowing in my breasts."

Armed with this moving response, I approached other women—strangers, relatives, friends, friends of friends—with less worry and the same question: "When do you feel most feminine?" What I found was a reservoir of revelations, many times unearthed with a surprised "I-never-realized" expression. And the more women I questioned, the surer I became that femininity is still as viable a feeling for women today as it was for that chubby would-be enchantress in a Brooklyn department store many years ago.

One thing definitely has not changed since then. Most women still link their feeling of femininity in one way or another to its male counterpart, masculinity. For instance, bigness versus littleness, or at least a difference in size

and strength between the sexes, is important to a lot of women. The tallest, most imposing woman I know, a lady well on her way to six feet, put it this way: "It's the most marvelous feeling when I find a man I can look up to—literally. I don't care if he has the mind of a mole and the manners of a monkey. If I can just stand for a minute with my head at an upturned angle, that's all I care about. Of course, once we sit down and he can't spell cat, forget it."

On the other end of the scale, a woman who hovers around the five-foot mark and who shouldn't need to be reminded of her petiteness all that much loves the feeling of being engulfed by her big husband. "When he puts his arms around me and hugs me, it's sort of like Fay Wray and King Kong." But perhaps the person to whom size means the most was the hatefully thin single woman who confided that she feels most feminine during sex, but that she can't go to bed with skinny men. "I want a man's body to cover mine like a blanket," she said "—a nice, hairy blanket."

An awareness of a man's simple physical strength seems to enhance many women's feelings of femininity, both timid women and those who appear quite sure of themselves. "I love it when something happens to remind me that, muscle for muscle, the man's got the edge by far," said a fragile-looking woman "—like when there's a weighty door to open or a heavy package to carry. It's purely biological—he's stronger than I am." On the other hand, a woman who looks physically quite substantial said she feels most feminine when her husband sticks up for her in an argument, even if she doesn't need his help. Why? "Because he's got not only a voice, he's got muscles to back it up."

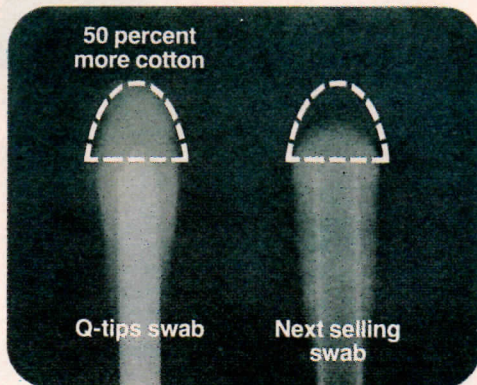
Most of the women I talked with like their men on the dominant side—at least some of the time—when it comes to sex. "The best lover I ever had," said one woman, with a faraway look in her eyes, "was a man who simply took both my wrists in one of his big hands and held them above my head as we made love. Although he was really a gentle lover, it was a constant reminder that he had, quite literally, the upper hand. It made me feel terrifically feminine." A married woman said of her husband, "I love to have him take charge in bed, to feel that he's leading me where I want to go." And another said, "I enjoy the feeling of a man's hard body, its muscularity and strength, during the sexual encounter. It makes me aware of my own comparative softness, and consequently my femininity."

Some women don't seem to need a man's strength as much as they do his attention—or, better still, that of many men—in order to be reminded of their femininity. I myself love to walk through an elegant restaurant when I'm dressed up. I feel marvelous when men at the various tables look up from their food and take note of me, or get momentarily diverted from their conversation when I pass by their table. Nobody ever understands why I always want to sit at a table in the back. My friend Barbara, a fellow New Yorker, likes to



"A new mother has to learn fast. I've learned that

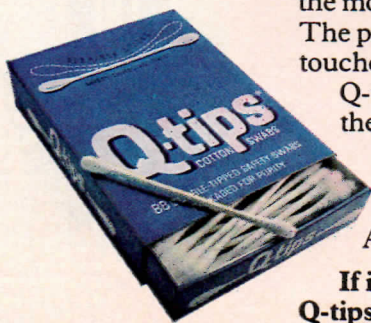
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go to the theater, hang back in the lobby until a few minutes before curtaintime and then promenade down the center aisle, "head high, with lots of men sitting on either side of me, some of them glancing up at me as I sail by. I'm like Miss America on that runway."

Other women feel most feminine in a completely masculine atmosphere. One told me of the night she was taken to a prize fight in Madison Square Garden. "There I sat, in a huge arena full of noisy, pugnacious men. I was wearing perfume, and I suddenly felt like a lone gardenia in a pine forest." My neighbor Susan, an advertising executive, confided that she loves being the only female in a room full of male business associates. "One time it just popped into my head: Unless one of these guys is hiding something, I'm the only person here wearing a garter belt."

Surprisingly (to me), some women feel most feminine when they are with other women. "When I'm chatting with a female friend," explained one woman, "I can be as earthy as I want, even vulgar—something I don't feel I can be with men." Another linked her newly burgeoning femininity to her newly burgeoning feminism. "I remember coming away from a consciousness-raising workshop one day and realizing for the first time that I liked other women. I suddenly felt very womanly and feminine and accepting of myself."

Sometimes women associate femininity with certain places. "I feel most feminine when I'm in the beauty parlor," said a carefully groomed woman, "especially when the hairdresser is working on my hair and the manicurist is doing my nails at the same time. I guess it's the closest I'll ever get to being Marie Antoinette. One day I'll have to spring for a pedicure." My friend Ruthie says it's lingerie departments—"all that lace and silk, even if it is mostly polyester these days." "Luxuriating in a tub," said a third woman, "just floating, looking at my body, feeling the water lapping over me—that's when I feel most feminine."

There even are some women who feel most feminine when they are alone—mostly women who spend a great deal of their time caring for and attending to the needs of others. For one harried-looking young mother, simply "being alone and wearing clothes that don't have baby-food stains on them" satisfies her modest needs for femininity. A career woman loves the time in the morning she spends "showering and powdering and perfuming" herself. And a young therapist put it this way: "I have to be strong for other people so much of the time that when I can do something just for me—allow myself the luxury of being completely selfish—that's when I feel most feminine. It's not that I equate it with selfishness, but for me femininity is linked to taking care of myself—my needs and no one else's."

Clothes may not make the woman, but they can make her *feel* very much one, especially "private" clothes. My friend Bonnie loves lacy underwear because "it's such a female thing. I mean, they just don't put ruffles on boxer shorts." Another young woman told me, "I love wearing real silk lingerie under my jeans. That inner softness under my tough exterior makes me very aware of my femininity. It's also a metaphor of the inner and outer me. My femininity is something that has to be discovered by somebody who takes the trouble to get to know me, somebody I can trust."

"Maybe it's because all my early heroines were drawn from costume dramas," explained one movie-addicted woman, "but I've always found that material fluttering around my ankles when I walk makes me feel very feminine, especially soft nightgown material."

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the women who feel their femininity is enhanced by very *unfeminine* clothes. "I love wearing sleek, man-tailored pantsuits," said a handsomely dressed woman, "maybe because I feel so small and delicate inside them. It's as if my femininity were accentuated by my defiance of it. Does that make any sense?" It does to me. So does the statement of a young wife whose wardrobe leans heavily toward army—and her husband's—surplus. "I like to wear one small, delicate thing as a giveaway to my femininity, a clue that only I'm aware of and that has to be discerned by some-

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response stopped me in my tracks for a minute, until I realized I've never seen a man tidy a cupboard—not unless something actually fell on his head. And no male I know ever felt as tender toward a sponge as some women I could name.)

Mostly the women I spoke to associated the traditional female role with earth mother activities—nurturing, healing, sympathizing, helping. "I feel feminine when I'm answering people's needs," said one "—even simple needs, like getting salt for someone during dinner." "I love it when I can mother someone, take care of him when he's sick or hungry or needs something," said another. But my favorite reply was from a motherly lady who feels most feminine when she can give someone good advice. "You wouldn't happen to have a problem I could help you with?" she asked hopefully.

This giving quality extends in a lot of cases to sexual style. "I love catering to

ably" feminine when she gave herself a monthly—"well, not so monthly"—breast examination. "Damn it, I think, I'm a woman and I have to do this."

Which leads me to point out that not every woman feels feminine and good at the same time. For some women, femininity goes hand in hand with feeling inadequate or vulnerable, like the woman who immediately thought of feeling most feminine behind the wheel of a car. "Somehow that phrase 'Women make lousy drivers' became a biological truth for me, and I become acutely aware of, and frightened about, being a woman when I have to drive." But other women I spoke with rejected this side of the femininity question—rejected it with a vengeance! One woman put it: "Femininity means a quiet sense of responsibility, along with the knowledge that I can handle whatever that responsibility entails."

Strength, vulnerability; sexuality, motherhood; selfishness, generosity—a woman may feel her femininity in alliance with any or all of these qualities. For the vast majority of women I spoke to, it's a lovely way to feel. That goes even for the mavericks who answered "When do you feel most feminine?" with:

"When I'm tan."

"When I'm thin."

"When my hair is clean and wet and wrapped in a towel."

"When I wear something new."

"When a man tells me I am."

"When someone calls me 'madame.'"

"Shaving my legs."

"Dancing."

"Naked."

And: "When a man makes a gesture he can't control. Not something courtly, but something unpremeditated. Like when his expression softens at something I say and he leans across the table in a restaurant and touches my face..."

I'll buy that.

THE END

body else. A fine silver chain around my neck, for instance, makes me feel as feminine as if I were wearing Belgian lace, even though I'm dressed in khaki fatigues—which, by the way, are much more practical for doing housework than Belgian lace."

My friend Martha, already a long-stemmed beauty, feels most feminine in high heels simply because they are for women only. "I was really horrified when they started to make men's shoes with platform heels," she admitted. "Thank God, the only men I know who wear them are nineteen and under." A woman who shares this opinion told me, "I love the feeling of being on a delicate balance in heels. I like the pitch they give my body, and consequently my increased awareness of my body. It's definitely not like wearing flipflops."

Just as high heels are one "for women only" prop that men have horned in on, so is perfume. "I don't like it when a man wears cologne or after-shave lotion," said one woman generously sprinkled with something rose-y. "I like it when he smells like a man and I smell gorgeous." "Perfume," said a second woman, smelling faintly of musk, "is a projection of my feminine aura. I find it thrilling when I see a man become aware of my scent a moment before he becomes aware of me. It says to him, 'There's a woman around,' and then he sees that the woman is me."

For a great many women, experiencing their most intense feelings of femininity depends not so much on external surroundings or feminine gear as it does on the performance of activities traditionally associated with the female role. I'm not talking about the everyday housewife and housekeeper role. I mean, I didn't find anyone who delights in defrosting a refrigerator. (Actually one woman did say she feels very feminine when she's "cleaning shelves, going through spice cabinets, emptying out cluttered drawers." This



a man in bed," was how one woman put it, "exciting him to a wild pitch. For me, that's femininity to the nth power. And I do mean power!" "I love pretending that I'm a prostitute," said another outwardly proper lady. "I get immense pleasure doing everything I can to turn a man on. It makes me feel marvelously feminine, like an Old World courtesan." After a moment she added, "But I do want the favor returned."

Feeling feminine is allied sometimes to an awareness of one's biological workings. Thus a young mother recalled feeling most feminine when she was pregnant. "I loved my body then," she said. "Filled with child, it was such a wonderfully female shape, like a ripe pear." Another new mother told of feeling most feminine when she was nursing her child, "knowing that my body was actually nourishing someone else's." One woman spoke of feeling "vulner-

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