Dr. Leather Meets Mr. Right

Contrary conservative Andrew Sullivan's marching orders from POZ were to find a man who's the marrying kind. He bagged Tony Mills, International Mr. Leather 1998--and a doctor, no less. Get to know the softer side of chaps.

November 1, 1999 By Andrew Sullivan

I've been to my share of leather bars, but none prepared me for the spectacle in downtown Chicago on Saturday night last Memorial Day weekend. In an old, recently modernized industrial building, a small army of men in leather gathered expectantly. Seated neatly in rows, they chattered excitedly as the "Physique and Personality" round of the annual International Mr. Leather (IML) contest got under way. Think of Radio City Music Hall with the entire audience in harnesses. The warm summer air was filled with the sound of squeaking chaps, stomping boots and the occasional high-pitched giggle. But as I made my way down the center aisle of the auditorium, the buzz subsided a bit as almost every head swiveled to look—not at me, but at the tall, imposing man guiding me toward the stage.

In this crowd, I was walking with an icon. At 6-foot-2 and built like a sport utility vehicle, Tony Mills, 38, bestrides the leather world as the biggest daddy of them all. Following him around the Congress Hotel, home of the annual leather convention, was a little like strolling with a Kennedy through Hyannis-port. Everyone seemed to know—and defer to—him. Before Mills, IML was something of a sub-sub-sub-cultural title. Since Mills took the crown in 1998, it has become an achievement.

Mills' skill lies in squaring some of the circles every gay man is supposed to want to square. He looks like an archetypal macho figure: chest hair a good two inches thick, tattoo down the forearm, moustache spread beneath strong features and dark eyes as if in some blue-collar porno fantasy. His closest friends are straight men, he's a model for pornography pioneer Colt, and he sees no problem with the leather world's cult of masculinity. "I did the Colt photos because as a boy in South Carolina, the only gay people I ever saw were extremely effeminate, and I wondered how I was going to fit into that culture," he says. "It was only when I saw images of masculine gay men that I really became comfortable with being gay. I thought I might play the same role in someone else's life." At the same time, Mills is a fan of drag queens, completely at ease with his sexuality, and no dolt. Talk to him, and it's more than clear that he's a graduate of both Harvard and Duke, a fully qualified medical doctor and the kind of man who might have an opinion about the wine you're ordering and the novel you just read. Swooning yet? Try interviewing him.

For those with jaundiced preconceptions about the leather world and its trappings, Mills is also a tonic. He takes it seriously—but not too. That said, the IML process is grueling. Selection begins on a local and regional level, and candidates all over the world compete. The personal interview counts for the majority of points, with physique, speech and stage presence also taken into account. Nine judges rate the contestants. Olympic-style scoring is used to eliminate bias. “It’s supposed to be fun,” Mills explains. “The IML contest is a *leather* contest—it’s not life or death. The reason we have a contest is not to establish a national leader. It’s not about choosing Bill Clinton—it’s about choosing Vanna White.”

When Mills won his leather title, he didn’t engage in the usual self-indulgent piece of sexual innuendo or campy self-deprecation. Instead, he gave a moving speech about the lasting bonds of love, companionship and responsibility that he believes suffuse much of the leather world. At a press conference the day after, he came out publicly as HIV positive. “Honesty is the most important thing for me,” he says. “A great part of my ‘recovery’ with HIV is learning to be honest in my daily valuations of things. I try so hard to be honest myself that it’s something I value in other people. Coming out as HIV positive, I could finally exhale.”

In this healing—his virus was undetectable at last count and his simple drug regimen has remained the same for several years—he speaks unselfconsciously about the importance of God in his life and spirituality in general: “I don’t play the radio in the car very much these days because I’m always talking to God. It’s something that just rides beside me. I used to seek out that awareness in church, but now I don’t think I need to go anywhere—I just need to tear down the barriers in myself.” Mills says that the setbacks he faced in regards to AIDS merely facilitated the process. “Sometimes, I’m almost glad when things look really bleak,” he tells me. “Because I’ve been through these times before and I know it means that God is about to draw me back to him again.”

These days, Mills is shifting gears in his career once again. His medical specialty was once anesthesiology for pediatric heart surgery. Now he’s planning to move from Miami to Los Angeles to specialize in HIV care. Mills says that he’s fulfilling a commit-ment to help build a space specifically for the leather community. To do so, he’ll join his business partner’s internal medicine practice, one that has thrived because of the staff’s familiarity with HIV and leather sex. “How can we expect proper medical care from our doctors,” he asks, “if they don’t understand the sex that we have or respect the lives we lead?”

Despite being a sex symbol, and an unabashedly HIV positive one at that, he seems as sincere about his desire for intimacy and a solid relation-ship as he is about everything else. “I guess I feel like it’s possible to do a tremendous amount of spiritual growth on one’s own, but there are certain parts of an individual that can grow more readily through a relation-ship,” Mills explains. He says, disarmingly, that he has prayed for much of his life for “someone to love who can return that love.”

This quest was complicated recently by a messy breakup with an abusive partner. Mills tells a grim story, but in a way there may be some relief in knowing that love eludes even—perhaps

especially—those for whom it might seem to come served on a plate. Surely it can't be that hard for someone as big and as beautiful as he is? "I'm not beautiful," he says insistently. "Big maybe. But that's the only one I'll own."

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