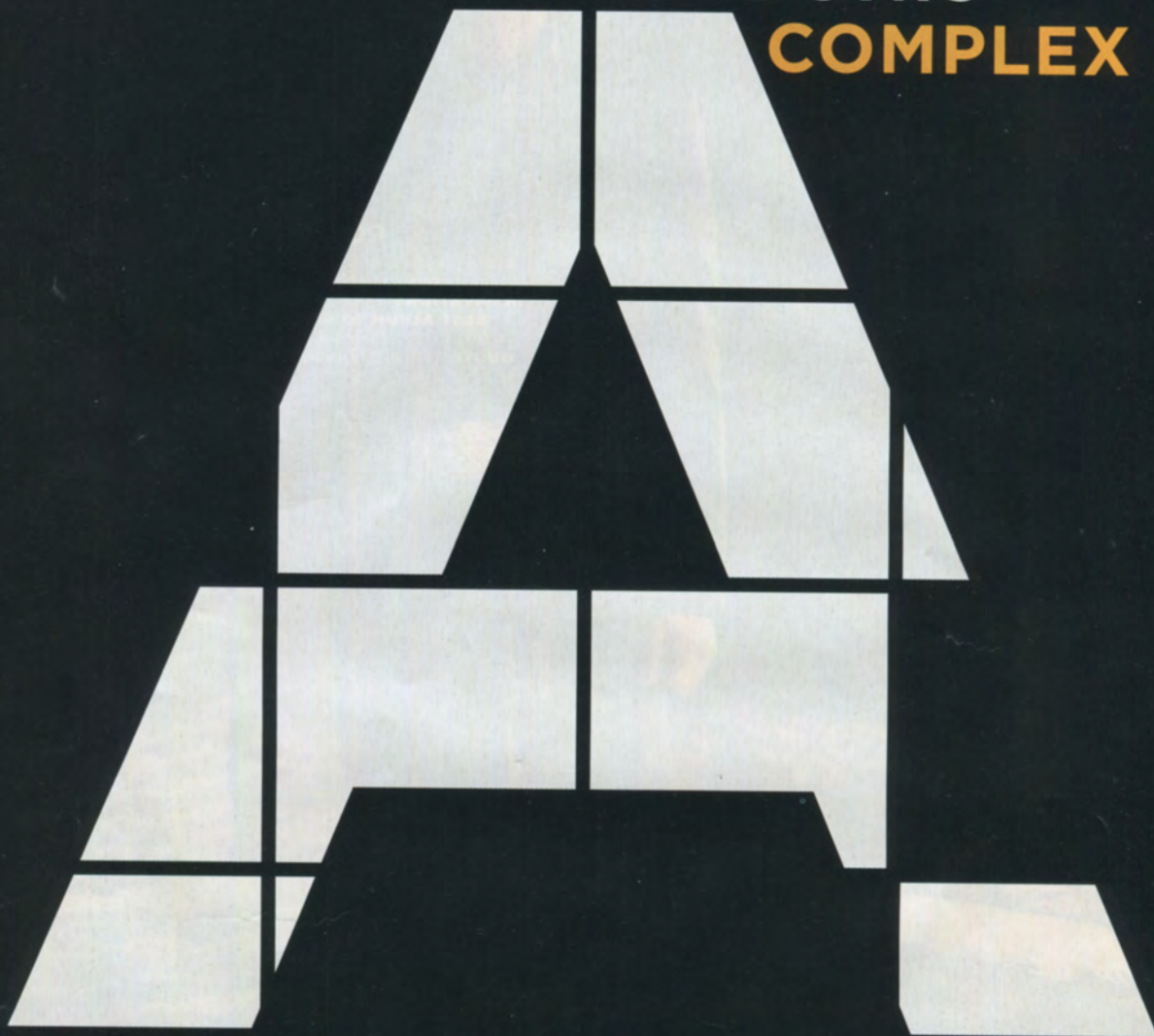


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THE DONIS COMPLEX



IN ORDER TO LOOK LIKE KIM MILLER, PICTURED AT RIGHT, AMERICAN MEN ARE INCREASINGLY THINKING AND ACTING LIKE TEENAGE GIRLS BY JOHN SEDGWICK

■ At six feet one and 230 pounds, Kim Miller has a body to kill for: a forty-six-inch chest, a twenty-inch biceps and a thirty-four-inch waist. "It sure got me down the aisle," says his svelte wife, Timmie. Right now he's a small mountain there on his charcoal sofa, his thick, jean-clad legs spread in a relaxed, manly fashion. His broad shoulders beneath his thin black shirt are flared to take

up space—no, more than that: to *claim* the space, as only a big, strong man can do.

But his body didn't just happen, of course. Muscle group by muscle group, Miller has been painstakingly building it out of protein and nervous energy for nearly twenty years. He's 37 now, a mutual-fund-portfolio manager for Fidelity Investments, and he has a touch of gray at his temples. "I fight the age

battle every day," he says. He takes anti-inflammatories for his hips and shoulders, but don't talk to him about taking a little time off. And for years now, he's had to watch what he eats. As we talk, he doesn't touch the pot stickers Timmie, an attorney, has laid out for us. His birthday had fallen two days before, but Timmie let me know that Kim had limited himself to one slender piece of cake. In

fact, Kim rarely consumes solid food at all; he relies heavily on the high-protein drinks he whips up at the office to generate the 230 to 280 grams of protein he needs daily to maintain his muscle bulk. (That's roughly the amount of protein in four dozen eggs.) He doesn't touch steroids, no sir, but he does go for creatine and has used testosterone stimulants from the health-food store.



Miller belongs to four gyms (to make sure one is always close by) and prefers to travel where a first-class health club is available. He works out almost every day for at least an hour, starting at 5:30 A.M. The time is intense and well-planned; he gets psyched up for it by blasting Depeche Mode and other '80s techno music in his ears, and he ferociously and precisely addresses his abs, delts, lats, pecs and other once obscure muscles that have, for Kim and for many men like him, become a guy's guy's defining characteristics. For Kim the workouts have gone past a psychic necessity to a near physical craving. "I'd get real moody without them," he admits.

But he's into the product. Women go "all girlie" around



IT'S AS IF MEN HAVE LOST THEIR FAITH IN THE IDEA THAT MASCULINITY MIGHT BE INNATE, GOD-GIVEN, SO THEY TRY TO BUILD IT OUT OF MUSCLE.



■ **NO PAIN, NO GAIN** Kim Miller, left, belongs to four gyms, works out every day and severely limits his diet, which consists mostly of high-protein shakes. Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Adonis Complex*, finds that cases like Miller's are becoming more common.

him, he notices, and guys seem a little intimidated. But the major audience for his body seems to be Kim himself. More than once, Timmie has found him shirtless in front of the bathroom mirror flexing. "He'll stand in front of that mirror and totally love looking at his muscles," she says. He uses Nair so the muscles will stand out more clearly. A bodybuilder thing, presumably. But the hairlessness means he can't wear polo shirts at the office, because colleagues might be put off by his bare forearms. So he covers up all year round. Does he ever use the muscles? He looks at me as if that's a dumb question. "No," he says.



AFTER THE INTERVIEW, AS I WAS DRIVING home, it occurred to me that I probably should have asked him to take off his shirt so I could see his vaunted muscles. But no way was I going to do that, there in the house with such a big guy. Besides, as he talked about them, his muscles, so lovingly Naired, were almost too private. They might have been his boobs. Indeed, his whole body had become the subject of such worshipful attention, he might have been a junior high school girl, obsessively dieting, fussing about depilatories, checking the mirror, fretting about her waistline.

For all our prosperity, this is a peculiarly anxious time to be a man in America, possibly because we guys have never had so much to lose. And nothing reflects this more than men's increasing preoccupation with their bodies. We're turning ourselves into beefcake, bulking up as

never before, flocking to gyms, hiring personal trainers, watching our diets, buying exercise gear off infomercials. Even the sedentary writer set I hang out with includes fellow scribes who surprise me with the thickness of their chests, the new firmness of their handshakes and, in some cases, the almost Prussian stiffness to their musclebound physiques. But like an unsettled company suddenly engaged in a massive ad campaign, such showiness seems to be born more of insecurity than of confidence. It's as if men have lost faith in the idea that masculinity is innate, God-given, so they try to build it out of muscle.

A trio of researchers from Harvard and Brown universities have noticed all the fuss and worry surrounding the

manly men of our era, and they have termed this phenomenon the Adonis Complex in a recent book by that name. Half man and half god, Adonis was the Greek ideal of masculine beauty, which is unattainable by mere mortals. (Brad Pitt serves this purpose for us.) The authors suggest that the standard for the male physique has risen through the past few

decades even more steadily than the stock market has, so it remains out of reach for most guys no matter what they do. The *Playgirl* centerfold may not be everyone's image of physical beauty, but it's significant that the average *Playgirl* centerfold has dropped twelve pounds of fat and gained twenty-seven pounds of muscle in the past quarter century, according to the authors. Put another way, years of looking at Schwarzenegger, Van Damme and Stallone means that even an art-house actor such as Jude Law feels compelled to get hunky for a movie like *The Talented Mr. Ripley*—and it was set in the '50s. Men everywhere feel the need—no, the obligation—to get buff.

"For men, the body has become the route to perfection," says clinical psychologist Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D., one of the book's coauthors. "Men think that if they can just become perfect on the outside, then they'll be perfect on the inside. They'll be worthy." Unfortunately, physical perfection isn't easy to come by.

"It's like the quest for the pot of gold," agrees the University of Iowa's Arnold Andersen, one of the leading researchers in the relatively new field of male body-image disorders. "You can move toward it, but you can never get there." Little wonder that, as shown in a series of surveys published in *Psychology Today*, the number of men dissatisfied with their bodies among the group surveyed rose from a scant 15 percent in 1972 to 43 percent in 1997, and more men (38 percent) were disturbed by the shape and size of their chests than women (just 34 percent) were by theirs.

Indeed, once you start to notice, signs of the Adonis

Complex are everywhere. The other day, I watched with some amazement as a 31-year-old retail manager had his hair "processed" at the Boston salon Acôté, turning it from what had vaguely resembled an antelope pelt into something much more minklike. By now I shouldn't have been struck by a man's interest in coloring his hair, but, please understand, this happened in Boston. I was especially impressed by the elaborate technology wheeled out to bake in the color. It was akin to something out of *I Love Lucy* but without the humor. To the client, it was all perfectly natural. He endured the entire experience—the gooey slathering on of the coloring, the dorky plastic wrap to seal it in, the permlike processing—with a Zen-like calm and then left a handsome tip. "His hair's funky," said the stylist, "like a pair of sneakers." The salon's head stylist himself had developed a manly chest in the past few years. He'd spent an hour on it at the gym just this morning, and he extolled the all-steak, hold-the-potatoes Atkins diet that supposedly made his build possible. "I work in fashion," he told me. "I have to show direction."

Personally, I'm not much of a joiner, so I'm about the only man I know who does not belong to a health club. But when I checked out the local Gold's Gym after work one evening, whoa! The place was mobbed. I had to park half a mile away. Inside I was astounded by the army of fat fighters I saw, mostly male, hitting the treadmills, exercise bikes, Nautilus machines and other highly refined, impressively electronic instruments of self-torture. The heavy action was at the bench press, where Mike Kelly, a muscle-bound 23-year-old Boston College graduate, was slowly working his way up to 315 pounds. "Coming here is part of my daily routine," he told me genially. "Like eating, sleeping and taking a crap." A couple more lifts. "The stronger you get, the stronger you want to get." Then he deadpanned: "I want to see how strong I can get before I get hurt." It's no joke. In his bag, he's packed smelling salts, in case he should ever pass out from overdoing it.



OBVIOUSLY, A LOT OF THE WORKOUT ETHIC stems from a sensible desire on the part of men everywhere to avoid joining the ranks of the obese. But that doesn't account for the cultlike behavior of these hardbodies or the sense that, for more and more men, enough is never enough. The authors of *The Adonis Complex* argue that bodybuilders' increasingly widespread use of steroids in the '50s and '60s is largely to blame for inflating the standard for the male physique to a level that is, diabolically, just beyond everyone's reach—without, that is, a heavy, illegal and potentially debilitating dose of pills or injections.

As proof, Olivardia does a little show-and-tell. He takes a couple of G.I. Joe action figures out of a small sack and plops them on the table. One, from 1982, is a rather skinny figure with a body not unlike my own in that era. The other, however, made in 1998, looks like a genetic mutant

who crawled out of a toxic-waste dump. Bulkied up beyond belief and snarling, he is a testosterone-addled caricature of manhood, the exact counterpoint to the prim and absurdly booby Barbie. The new G.I. Joe's measurements, in fact, are no less outlandish than Barbie's. If he were six feet tall, he'd have a fifty-five-inch chest and a twenty-seven-inch biceps. "But look at him," says Olivardia. "He's the embodiment of 'roid rage." Olivardia also produces a couple of Luke Skywalkers from similar periods. The original looks a bit like Mark Hamill, but the new version is so top-heavy it can hardly stand up. "These messages are ingrained in us," says Olivardia. "It's almost an unconscious process. We think, We have to look big."

Olivardia—himself a regular gym patron who looks as if he could easily lift me over his head—says that in one study of male high school students, up to 12 percent reported having used steroids, some starting as young as 12. Altogether, some 3 million American males have used them. Exactly who they are is difficult to know. At Gold's I had a conversation with an extremely well-cut personal trainer who seemed to be a bit jittery. But when I called around to other gyms asking to speak to people who had personal experience with steroids, the closest I came to achieving my goal was a conversation with one night manager who said, "Oh, you mean you want to talk to some of the monsters?" He never did get back to me. Through another source, I found the name of a bodybuilder rumored to be on the stuff, and he did call back but only to ask, "Who the fuck gave you my name?"



STEROIDS ARE ONE SHORTCUT TO THE BODIES OF our dreams. Another is the knife. Whereas cosmetic surgery used to be almost exclusively the province of women, now men account for 11 percent of cosmetic procedures in the United States. And we're not just talking hair transplants. Nationally, 16 percent of all liposuction clients are male. And, notes Malcolm Paul, M.D., president-elect of the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (which provided the statistic), they don't just get a little flab scooped out. They go for body contouring, which entails using extremely fine arthroscopic surgical techniques to sculpt the abdomen, haunches, back and waist. Men will also shine up the outside: They now make up one-fifth of all patients who go for dermabrasion—scraping off the outer layer of skin for a fresher, more youthful look. Males account for 25 percent of clients who add silicone to their cheeks, and they are 22 percent of those who do the same to their chins, to give their faces a more chiseled look.

Adrien Aiache, M.D., a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, is one of the new adventurers who will stick in a little silicone elsewhere, too, to tone a guy up. He started doing calf implants, then branched out to forearms (which didn't work). Now, for \$8,000 to \$10,000, he'll slide slabs of soft

silicone through a hole in each armpit and position them under your pectoral muscles to give you the male equivalent of a Jayne Mansfield bust. "A pectoral implant is just like a breast implant," Aiache says matter-of-factly. Only harder to do, because the surgeon has to pry up the existing muscle to slide the silicone underneath. "Most surgeons don't know how to position it," he says. "They put it too low or too wide on the side." Not Aiache, presumably. He draws the line at male buttock implants, however. All he'll do is remove them after they've become infected or deformed from too much sitting.



SUCH NIPS AND TUCKS ARE A SIGN OF OUR GROWING displeasure with our bodies. A far more worrisome development, however, is the increase in eating disorders among men. You would be excused for thinking that men don't have eating disorders, except for an occasional tendency to overdo it on all-you-can-eat night at the clam shack. Like cosmetic surgery, eating disorders are usually assumed to be a female problem—one that sums up the special anguish of being a woman. No more. According to the University of Iowa's Andersen, among all people afflicted with eating disorders, the number who are male has risen from one in twenty in the past decade to one in six now. One-tenth of all patients suffering from anorexia nervosa are male. The figures for bulimia, the binge-purge cycle that is often deadly because it leads to cardiac arrhythmia, are even more astounding. According to Ira Sacker, M.D., head of the eating-disorders clinic at Brookdale University Hospital and Medical Center in Brooklyn, fully 30 percent of bulimics on college campuses today are male. Some of the incidences stem from sports, such as crew and wrestling, that set strict weight limits. But others arise from a more generalized anxiety about looking chubby. In either case, it's not uncommon for bulimics to purge as many as fifteen times a day. Purging can become so automatic, the bulimic doesn't even have to stick a finger down his throat. "I just bend over," one 21-year-old told me. Half of all people with binge-eating disorders are men, according to Sacker.

"Eating disorders in men are serious and common, and they're complicated by gender bias and shame," Andersen says. Because they are still considered women's diseases, insurance companies are disinclined to pay for men seeking treatment, men are slow to seek help, and they are often distressed to be lumped in with women when they do. As it is, only two programs in the entire country offer separate space for men with eating disorders. "Guys feel weird when they're in a program surrounded by ten girls talking about earrings," says Andersen.

Still, anorexia nervosa can be just as gruesome for men as for women. Thomas Holbrook, a Wisconsin physician specializing in eating disorders, recalls treating one male anorexic who looked like a concentration-camp victim. "He had the taut skin over the bones in the face, very little

flesh in the extremities, veins popping out, hollowed-out eyes, brittle hair, very dry skin. But he was still feeling fat and was afraid of gaining weight." Olivardia remembers one young patient who was so emaciated that the boy noticed his face would expand after he'd drink a glass of water.

Although the wasted male anorexic is distressingly commonplace, the authors of *The Adonis Complex* argue that the true male counterpart to female anorexia is something quite different, something that stems from this new male preoccupation with becoming a hunk. Olivardia and his coauthors, Harrison G. Pope, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and Katharine A. Phillips, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry at Brown University, have proposed the term *muscle dysmorphia* to describe a new condition affecting men who are, in effect, anorexics in reverse. Instead of seeing themselves as fat when they are in fact too thin, these so-called big-orexics imagine they're too scrawny when they're really bulked up. Olivardia guesses as many as 300,000 men in this country are afflicted with muscle dysmorphia. One of them is Tom, a Rhode Island man who, at 49, was still hooked on the idea of trying to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dave Draper, Sergio Oliva and other bodybuilding heroes of his teenage years. Despite a forty-four-inch chest and nineteen-inch arms, he considered himself "a little flat." He lives in virtual isolation in a small frame house, with little but his free weights for company. He rarely goes out, in part because of a demanding schedule of special high-protein meals he cooks for himself six times a day. "The whole bodybuilding lifestyle is all-consuming," he laments. "I really need an entourage, but it's just me."

According to Phillips, the muscle dysmorphics are a subcategory of a group of people with what is known as body dysmorphic disorder, or "imagined ugliness," a dreadful and surprisingly widespread condition that affects as much as 2 percent of the population, both male and female. The vast majority of sufferers focus nearly frenzied attention on their skin, hair or nose—probably because those features are most prominent—but no body part is immune. One victim, 46-year-old Doug, has fixated on the skin of his face since he was a child. With a hypercritical father and a compulsively hand-washing mother, Doug explains, "I got all the fucked-up genes together." When his obsession with his appearance is at its worst, Doug thinks of himself as a vampire, because he will leave his house only under cover of night, lest someone see how ugly he supposedly is. He has only one mirror in his house, in the bathroom, and he covers it on bad days. When he shaves, he lights only the bedroom behind him to avoid examining his face too closely.

Even in cases of "pure" male anorexia, a heavy overlay of macho overexercising seems to derive from this new national compulsion to be strong at any cost—but for fear of looking pudgy, the afflicted skimp on the nutrition needed for muscle growth. A 22-year-old college student

became anorexic after an hour-long weight-lifting regimen he followed in high school didn't seem to be enough. First he lengthened the workout, then he added running stairs. "My goal was to be stronger," he says. He ate carefully—bagels, fruits, vegetables—but too sparingly to support the muscles he was building. So, perversely, the more he worked out, the thinner and weaker he became. His weight dropped from 155 pounds to 125 pounds, but not until he went home for Thanksgiving did he realize how emaciated he'd become. His awakening came at a party, when he bumped into a female friend who burst into tears at the sight of him. Three months later, he committed himself to a program. He was down to 115 pounds by then, but even so, he says, "I never thought I had anorexia. I thought I was being healthy."



SUCH BODY ISSUES HAVE PROBABLY ALWAYS BEEN with us to some degree. From the turn of the past century through the 1920s, a fasting movement, largely promulgated by and for men, spread across the country from New York City, where it was promoted by a magazine publisher named Bernarr Macfadden. "It was all in the interest of purity," says Marie Griffith, a professor of religious history at Princeton who is writing a book about the period. "The ideal was to give up food altogether," she adds, or at least to produce excrement "the consistency of ash." Griffith believes a similar impulse to cleanse ourselves may lie behind the newest muscle mania. As she says, "Fat is our Satan."

Other social factors have emerged recently, however, to sensitize men to their bodies in the same way women have long been conscious of theirs. The media expose more of men's bodies than ever before. It's not just Harvey Keitel in *The Piano*; even a wholesome family musical such as *The Full Monty* shows men baring their all. Olivardia argues that the newly brazen ads have truly changed the scene. Now, men's unclad bodies are deployed the way women's used to be. A turning point came in 1993, when a very buff Marky Mark posed in his undies for a billboard in Times Square. Now near-naked hunks are selling everything from jockey shorts to perfume to cell phones to Kahlúa to ironing boards. A study of *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines published between 1958 and 1998 revealed that the percentage of images of semidressed female models remained relatively constant at close to 30 percent, while those of scantily clad male models rose from 5 percent to 30 percent during that forty-year period. Throughout the '80s, Calvin Klein ads showed so much skin that their creator, Sam Shahid, declared pecs were the "the new breasts." In some ways, pecs were better than breasts—more daring somehow, more nude. And glorified muscle magazines, such as the hot-selling *Men's Health*, have only raised men's anxieties about looking like the flawless hunks on the covers.

There's a heavy economic component, too. The urge

to become muscular may be a subconscious grasp at job security at a time when everyone—especially a man—is expendable. Kim Miller has a B.A. from Brown and an M.B.A. from the University of Chicago, but his thinking is that his intelligence is assumed, so his body becomes, he says, "the differentiating factor," his own personal value-added. Who knows? That added value may have helped him achieve a recent promotion.

THE WAY MILLER THINKS OF IT, HIS INTELLIGENCE IS ASSUMED, SO HIS BODY BECOMES "THE DIFFERENTIATING FACTOR," HIS OWN PERSONAL VALUE-ADDED.



■ **STANDING STRONG** Kim Miller outside his home. His wife, Timmie, occasionally finds him flexing his muscles in front of the bathroom mirror; he uses Nair to keep his chest smooth and his muscles more visible.

Andersen thinks it was inevitable that society focuses so much on bodies today, female and male. In a fast-paced society like ours, a quick glance is all anyone gets—so the outer self is the only part that is ever seen. Forget the old-fashioned interior qualities such as intelligence, charm, warmth; they take too long to discover. And the Superman scale? That may come from our national understanding that bigger is always better. The United States is a country, after all, that has inflated the size of the standard Coke bottle from six and a half ounces to twenty ounces and has made the word *huge* a supreme accolade.

As Susan Faludi points out in her book *Stiffed*, manhood has been devalued with the closing of all frontiers except metaphorical ones. With nothing especially manly for men to do any more, we have become part of what she calls the consumerist ornamental culture, our muscles little more than retro-style totems, like the fins on a '60s T-bird.

The realization that women can do—sometimes better—almost everything men can do hasn't helped men's egos. It's possible that the female invasion into virtually all male bastions short of the papacy has forced men to take refuge in their muscles as a kind of ancient *droit du seigneur*. "It's the last place they can go to clearly distinguish themselves from women and feel more powerful than other men," says Phillips.

Now, if only men could flex with confidence. As it is, we fret over our bulging muscularity so much it's killing us. Do we really need to be defined by our muscles? The big chest, the slim waist, the tight butt—is this really a guy thing? I'm not sure. Deep down, Kim Miller may not be, either. He still remembers his wife's first appraisal of him. "You know what she thought?" he says. "She thought I was a bimbo." ■

John Sedgwick is a GQ writer-at-large.