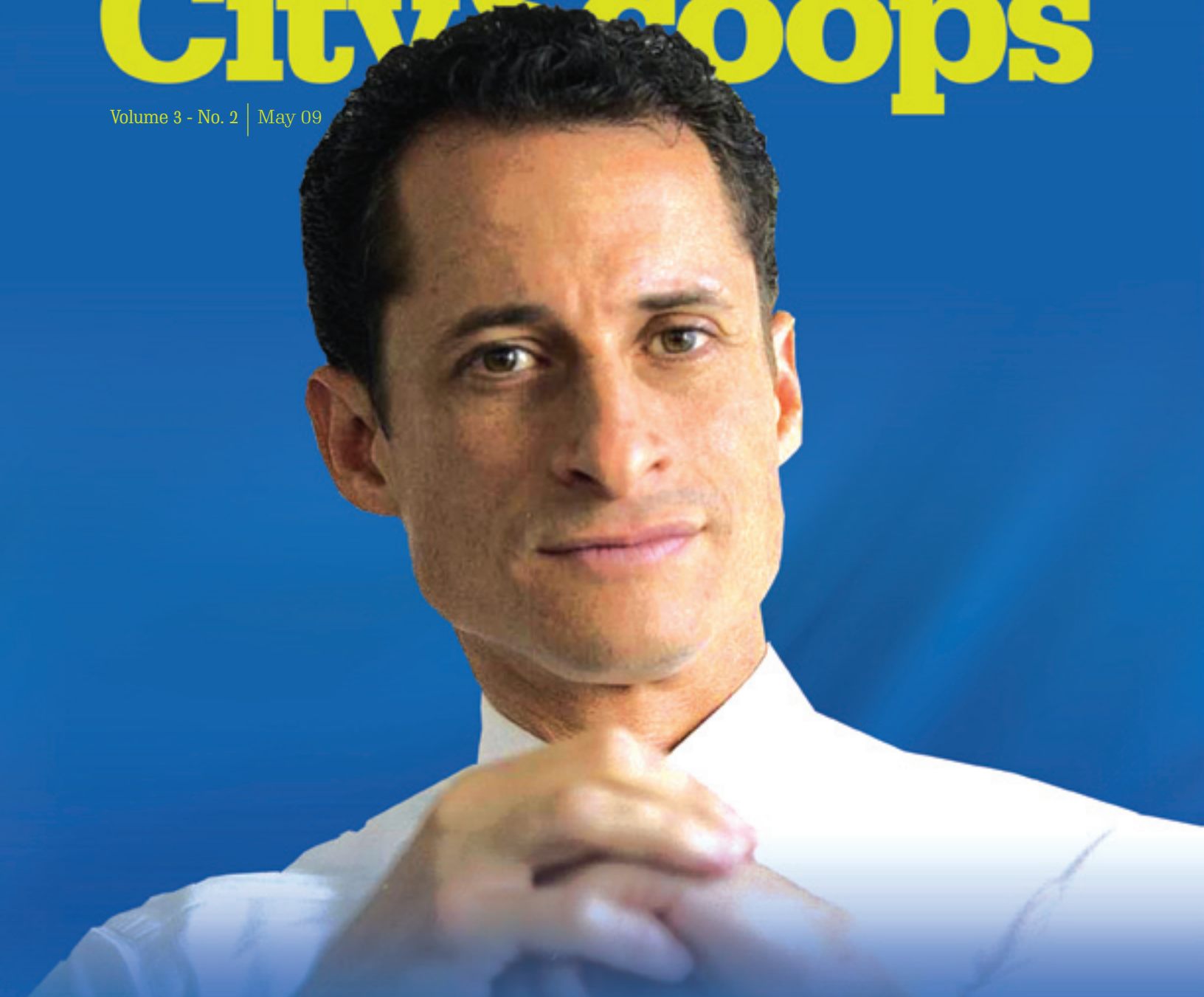


LADIES...FIND YOUR INNER BADASS! — p.6

City Scoops

Volume 3 - No. 2 | May 09



THE MAN WHO WOULD (MIGHT?) BE MAYOR

Rep. Anthony Weiner tells us if he's running for mayor, and talks about our economic mess, how the city lost its way, the problems with being a Jew in Washington, and why his old roommate — "Daily Show" host Jon Stewart — is bad for society

Plus: [Banjo's Manhattanite Master](#) | [The City's Tastiest Tour](#) | [A Different Breed of Museum](#)



The author (r.) learns that her legs can defy gravity. PHOTO: Christine Natanael

Intrigue in a Skirt

Women of New York, rejoice! Your chance to become an international woman of mystery – or at least act like one – has arrived, in the form of the Stiletto Spy School. BY DIANA SPECHLER

WHEN I HEARD ABOUT STILETTO SPY SCHOOL, a ten-hour boot camp that transforms women into badassess, I knew it would be the perfect way for a woman who is decidedly not a badass — that would be me — to spend a day.

It's not that I'm awkward. I'm really not. Just don't ask me to throw a baseball. Or a punch. Don't ask me to hustle someone in a pool hall. Don't ask me to dance. Well...on second thought, ask me to dance. I'd rather be asked than not be asked. No, seriously, ask me. I'll say yes. But understand that the dancing won't be sexy, and that you might get that second-hand-embarrassment feeling you get from watching a junior high school talent show.

It's Saturday morning. My spy school "mission" starts at 8:30 a.m. at a fighting gym in Chelsea, where I meet Stiletto Spy School founder Alana Winter, a natural beauty with long brown hair and a don't-mess-with-me smile who started running four-day missions in Las Vegas last May, and recently introduced one-day missions to New York City.

Alana's inspiration for Stiletto Spy School was Emma Peel from the 1970s British television series "The Avengers." Emma Peel was the quintessential sexy badass: an expert in martial arts and fencing, a science genius, and a fearless, gorgeous, stylish bombshell. "I learned things from my teachers in school," Alana says. "I learned things at home from my

parents. But then I'd see 'The Avengers' and I'd think, 'Where do I learn to do *thats*?'"

Years later, these thoughts returned when she saw Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill." "Uma Thurman's character had to study for six years to learn to fight," she says. "I wanted to be like her, but now. Then I saw the latest James Bond movie and I thought, 'Why not organize a boot camp for women?' My friend's eighty-year-old mother thought it was a great idea. She wanted to do it. So did my ten-year-old niece. Women today want both strength and sex appeal. We can be strong and sexy. We can own it all."

So. Here we are at the fighting gym, starting our mission with a three-hour lesson in Systema, a Russian martial art that emphasizes the importance of relaxed, loose muscles; pressure points; and the "body levers" (elbows, neck, knees, waist, ankles, and shoulders). There are eight of us including Alana, all women in our twenties and thirties, all dressed in workout clothes; and Greg, our Systema instructor, a guy built out of muscles and eye contact who immediately starts sweating profusely. I interpret his sweating as Pavlovian, and deduce that I, too, will soon be drenched. But the workout winds up being almost as cerebral as it is physical.

We practice thinking outside the box, finding different ways to get ourselves onto the floor without using our hands or crossing our legs. Then

I get to showcase my lack of coordination during the backwards and forwards somersaults. "Don't let your heads or spines touch the floor," Greg tells us. "Picture a strip of tacks on your spine. If you put weight on your spine, you're dead." At one point, Greg pulls me into the middle of the room to demonstrate that it's not necessary to wind up before a punch. He touches his fist to my chest, then punches me. I stumble backwards, struggling for breath.

"You see?" he says to the class. "Did you feel that?" he asks me.

"Oh," I say. "Um. A little."

By the end of class, I'm still as uncoordinated as ever, and we're all slightly in love with Greg. Well...I am. I mean, who wouldn't be? Am I expected not to be slightly in love with the man who, during the water break, told me, "You have some natural athletic ability, but you think too much."

Delighted, I waited for him to tell me more about the burden of my cumbersome brilliance.

"Once we start hitting," he said, "you'll stop thinking." Then he clocked me in the stomach and winked.

Sigh.

We leave Greg and walk a few blocks to a nightclub that's middle-of-the-day empty, where

Continued on pg. 8



Essential for any spy: a sense of balance. PHOTO: Christine Natanael

lunch is served to us at two tables pushed together. We drink diet Cokes and eat tuna tartar, mini egg rolls, veggie sandwiches, fried mushroom risotto hors d'oeuvres, and tiny cheesecakes for dessert. And then I'm ready to lie down on the floor and fall into a coma.

But instead, it's time for burlesque dance lessons.

We all put on boas and long satin gloves and meet the woman who drag queens must aspire to be: international burlesque star, Bettie Page-lookalike Veronica Varlow. Last year, on the reality TV series "Made," Veronica turned an awkward seventeen-year-old into an (almost) homecoming queen. Watching her, I think she could probably turn me into an almost

homecoming queen as well. If I couldn't master hand-to-hand combat, at least I can, perhaps, master seductive dancing. After all, as Veronica tells us, we aren't who we are when we're born; we are who we were born to be. And also, she says, "fear stands for Forgetting Everything's All Right."

So we dance.

Veronica teaches us how to be sexy while removing our gloves: bite each finger to loosen them, squat seductively (oxymoron...unless you're Veronica Varlow), place one glove finger under a stiletto heel, then slowly stand, so the arm pulls itself clean out of the glove. She teaches us how to be sexy when we're walking around Manhattan: by holding our purse on the crook of our arm, and

stepping with one foot in front of the other, like we're walking on a tightrope. She teaches us how to be sexy when we enter a crowded room: stand in the doorway, observing, until you feel that the room is yours. Then step into it.

"You are all so sexy!" she shrieks at us.

In the end, I am convinced that Veronica is the sexiest, most badass woman on the planet. And that I am...well...a different kind of sexy maybe?

Luckily, I will have two more shots at coaxing out my inner badass.

The first is a pool lesson, taught by a guy named Mark who has been playing pool for fifty years, who teaches us to hustle men at pool tables by saying things like, "What, you got no gamble in ya?"

He teaches us a shooting technique that he calls "squeeze the finger," and as I'm lining up a shot, he sticks his finger into the crook of my arm. "Squeeze it," he says. "Squeeze my finger." Even though he's explained it in slow detail, I have no idea what he's talking about. I miss the shot.

"You didn't squeeze it."

"Oh," I say. "I'm terrible at pool."

"The one thing we don't do in this class," he tells me, "is say negative things about ourselves."

I have to think for a second. Did I say something negative about myself? Okay. Yes. It is negative to claim that I'm terrible at pool.

"I'm great at pool," I say.

By now, we're all exhausted. It's nearly 5 p.m. We've been in spy training for eight hours.

For the last activity of the day, we leave the dance/pool room and walk through the club to the bar for martini-making lessons. Justin the bartender makes me the best Belvedere martini I've ever had. Soon we're all sitting at the bar, sipping specialty martinis, listening to Justin tell us about his life as a bartender, about how scotch ages, about the history of Patron. He pours us shots. He has us try gin and tonic with a splash of soda.

"I gotta go," I slur. It's 6:30 and I'm getting drunk. I slide off the barstool, blow kisses goodbye (as Veronica taught us), and stumble out into the night, exhausted, but happy, because I can't imagine a more fun and enriching way to have spent a Saturday. I think of Veronica not quite turning the awkward teenager into a homecoming queen. I think of my own hopes when I signed on for spy school of becoming an overnight badass. I trip over a crack in the sidewalk, and think of Veronica squatting seductively to trap the fingertip of her glove under the spike of her high heel. Maybe I haven't accomplished much. But I definitely loved the mission.

For information on upcoming Stiletto Spy School sessions, go to stilettoSpySchool.com.

Diana Spechler's debut novel, "Who By Fire," is available now through Harper Perennial. For information, go to dianaspechler.com.



The hardest part of spydom: staying sober. PHOTO: Alana Winter