

Sex Werque



Moriah Ella Mason



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SEX WERQUE

MORIAH ELLA MASON



Sex Werque
A Play and Conversations
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*To strippers, models, escorts, hustlers,
porn performers and sex workers of all kinds.
And to the people who love them.*

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Part I

THE PLAY

Sex Werque is an autobiographical one-woman show about working as a stripper in Pittsburgh. Choreographer Moriah Ella Mason explores how we perform eroticism and consume intimacy, both in the club and at home. Through theater and dance, she unpacks the world of sex work: the emotional and economic forces, the movement vocabulary, the masks, and the moments of authentic connection.

Part I contains excerpts from the scripted portion of the play, with production photos by Heather Mull and Kate Hagerty, and sketches of Mason's choreography by Utku Sönmez. *Sex Werque* premiered at off the WALL productions at Carnegie Stage in Carnegie, PA, on July 20th, 2017.



1

BEGINNINGS

I started stripping because I have this insatiable desire to be seen. What can I say, I'm an exhibitionist! This isn't my "real" job. I come here to get wild, to work it out of my system.

I started stripping because I just love to dance! It's a total rush.

I started stripping because I'm kind of a nymphomaniac. Don't tell anyone.

I'm just stripping to put myself through grad school.

college!

law school!

art school!

nursing!

What am I studying? You.

What am I studying? Nothing. I'm not in school. But doesn't it make you feel better to think I am?

The real reason I started stripping is because I was a starving and I didn't want to be the starving part anymore.

The real reason is that I wanted to sock away cash in a safe deposit box to pay off my student loans when I get out of bankruptcy.

The real reason is that I couldn't handle my other jobs anymore. Couldn't lecture ten-year-olds on self control while I

taught plies in carpeted classrooms with the desks all pulled to the side. Couldn't remember any of the names on my roster. Couldn't be patient through temper tantrums and testing days. Couldn't keep up faith that my massage practice with my trickle of loyal but haphazard and broke clients would ever be able to support me. Couldn't pretend I cared about marketing or being a business owner. Couldn't pretend I didn't feel like a complete loser treading water at the end of my twenties.

And stripping looked so easy. I had friends who'd done it.

It looks *so easy*. I mean, you don't even have to be a good dancer.

I used to model for art classes. I'd sit naked and still for long periods of time. Listen to the instructor as he stalked around the students' drawings. I'm fidgety and anxious, and the forced stillness gave me a sense of peace. I'd drive home feeling like I'd spent the day smoking the finest weed. At one rural community college, the professor gave me props to pose with. For \$20 an hour I sat nude, clutching a plastic skull and the hilt of a cardboard broadsword like I was in some renfest porno. The freshman boys all drew my breasts two sizes bigger than they actually are.

So stripping. No big deal.

If you want to be a stripper, you don't need a resume. Which is good because I didn't want to update mine. And you don't need a cover letter, which is even better, because at the time cover letters gave me panic attacks. All you need is a pair of heels, some underwear you aren't embarrassed to be seen in, and a working razor.

You call the club. They have you come in during a slow time to audition. You put some make-up on your face, but however much you put on, once you go in and see the other girls you'll realize it was not nearly enough. You talk to a manager or a bartender or a DJ and they ask you what kind of music you like. And then you get on stage and you have three songs to strip. If they like you – basically meaning they don't think you are too heavy or aren't discriminating on a racial or ethnic basis – then they hire you. You can even stay and work a shift that night.

Stripping is easy. No big deal.

But at my audition I was terrified. I was sure I wouldn't be hired. I was too fat. My ass was too big. My breasts were too small. And have you noticed my skin? I cover it up, but I have a chronic case of bacne. I felt tears pricking at my eyes, and I was subtly shaking from the moment I began getting dressed at home until I was standing at the stairs leading up to the stage.

There were only two guys in the club the day I auditioned. It was a dirty, smoky little yinzer bar. I chose it because it seemed less intimidating than the big shiny clubs that had touring porn stars and ads on the top of taxicabs. If I was going to be rejected, it would be by someplace *way* beneath me.

Portishead started playing. My hipster strip club selection. I walked up the stairs and circled the pole, trying to mimic the languid movements of the dancers I saw onstage before me. Trying to cover my face with a blank mask of boredom.

No one booed! No one told me to get off the stage! The second song began and I slowly removed my bra, struggling slightly with the new clasp. Both men leaned forward. I was still shaking, so unsure of how to be purposefully sexy – I never *tried* to be sexy.

I felt like a newborn deer on its weak little legs. But no one noticed. Or if they noticed, they didn't care. I mean, I still had boobs.

Finally the last song came. I stepped out of my thong, and spread my legs. And I felt so incredibly... silly. I lay on my back, opening and closing my legs at the edge of the stage, letting a strange man stare at my pussy.

This is ridiculous! It is so ridiculous that this is a job. And I'm so relieved that apparently my vulva is as appealing as any other woman's.

You see, the real reason I started stripping is that I felt lonely and unloveable, and I was desperate to feel attractive in any way, even in the most shallow.

The real reason I started stripping is that I wanted to be wanted.





2

THE BACHELOR

Being a strip club, we'd have lots of bachelor parties coming through. Once a wedding party even came in, the bridesmaids all done up in matching purple dresses – surprisingly tasteful – and the bride, right up at the tip rail, her giant skirts and pushed-back veil billowing around her. It was funny writhing around so naked next to a woman so immersed in clothing.

With parties you can always make some extra money if you make it a real show and do some little tricks with how you tip.

Here, let me demonstrate. Anyone have a dollar bill? Just whip it out. *The bill!* Okay great. Thank you. I'd like you to just stick the dollar on top of your head so the edge is just hanging over. Great, and then I'd take it like this:

Audience balances dollar bill on top of head. Ella bends over suggestively, taking the bill in her mouth.

Or if you want to get really risqué, this is what the ladies – including that bride – would do. Could you put this dollar between your breasts? Then I'd take it like this:

Ella bends over, taking the bill in her mouth from between audience member's breasts.

Stripping gave me the immune system of a god.

And then there's my favorite:

Ella lies on her back, spreading her legs wide.

Can you hit the target!? If you make tipping into a sports competition, guys who aren't even into you will suddenly throw five dollars or more at your pussy.

Men are idiots.

Of course we had a bachelor party special. For forty bucks the bachelor's buddies could get him a chair onstage for one song and the dancers would do a particularly hammy lap dance, and then remove his belt and spank him with it while the DJ provided a truly thrilling blow-by-blow commentary.

I always liked performing for parties. It's more fun performing for people who are determined to have a good time. And everyone wants to feel like it's a wild night without actually doing anything that wild, which is exactly what I like. Fake wild. Like the movies. Like Disney World. Like a ghost story.

But sometimes groups of guys would come in and you'd know they were only there because they believe that they have to go to a strip club for a bachelor party to count. And then the following scene would take place:

Bachelor, buddy 1 and buddy 2 come on stage.

BUDDY 1: Hey, beautiful. Come over here, come over. (*to buddy 2*)
She's perfect, right?

BUDDY 2: Yeah, yeah. Okay. Here's forty dollars. I want you to take my friend Timothy right here and do whatever you do

and I want you to give him a wild time. You got it? You gonna take care of my friend.

BUDDY 1: He's getting married on Sunday. You gotta take care of this guy!

BACHELOR: That's ok. I'm fine.

BUDDY 2: Nah, man. You go back there. We're not going to tell Katie. You go enjoy your freedom.

BUDDY 1: That's right. You get crazy with my man here. That's my best friend!

ELLA: Alright, bachelor boy. Come right with me.

Ella and bachelor move to another part of the stage.

ELLA: You can just sit down right there. It's totally ok if you don't want to do anything. We can just talk for a song and then when we go back out I'll tell your friends that you had a "crazy" time.

BACHELOR: Yeah. That'd be ok.

ELLA: So what kind of music do you like?

BACHELOR: Classic rock. Heavy metal.

ELLA: Cool.

BACHELOR: Do you like metal?

ELLA: No. So...having a big wedding?



BACHELOR: Not too big. My mom wanted me to invite more people.

ELLA: Yeah. Weddings can be so expensive. Are you nervous?

BACHELOR: Nah. Maybe a little. But we've been together five years and I know she's who I want to be with for the rest of my life.

ELLA: That's really beautiful. I think it's normal to be nervous.

BACHELOR: Yeah, I guess.

ELLA: Alright. Well, that's our song. Let's take you back to the party.

They walk back over to the buddies.

BUDDY 1: AAAH man! Did you take care of this D-bag?

ELLA: You better believe it. I wouldn't send a poor man to get married without having a good time first. What do you say, Timothy, do I get a good review?

BACHELOR: Oh. Yeah. Very good review. It was really hot.

BUDDY 2: Yeah it was, you dog!

ELLA: So who wants to go next?

Now it didn't always go just like that. Sometimes I would get back to the lap dance booth with a groom who was clearly uncomfortable, and I'd say, "Hey, we can just sit and chat."

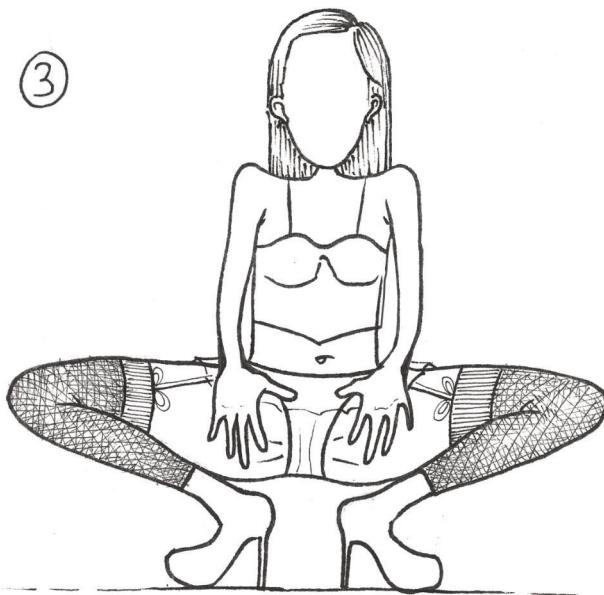
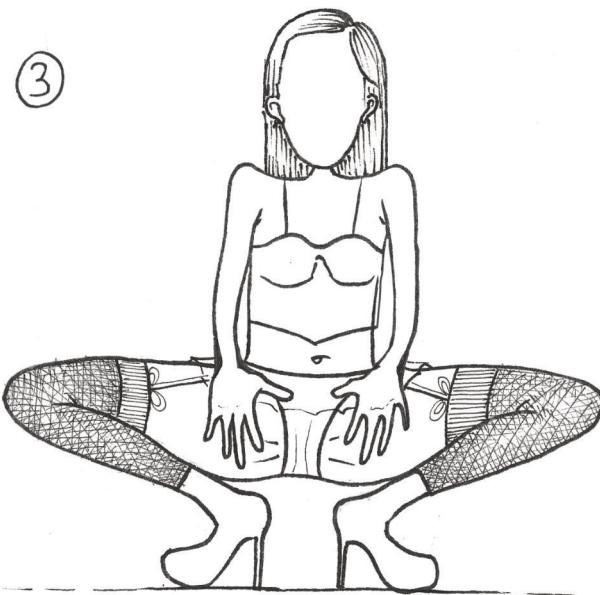
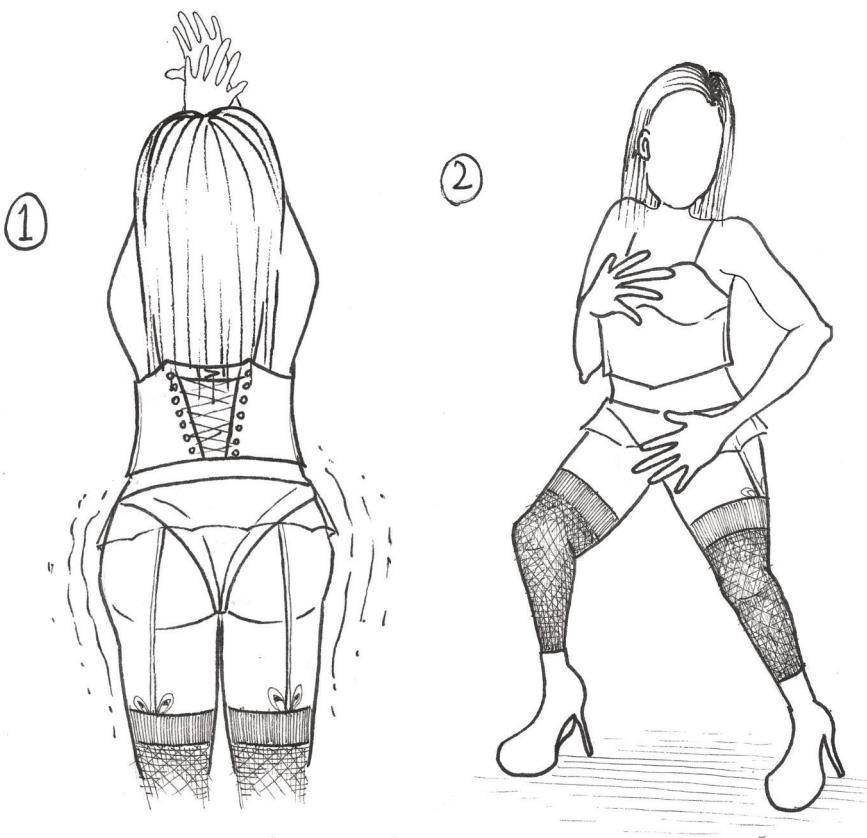
And he would say, "No, that's okay, just... do your thing."

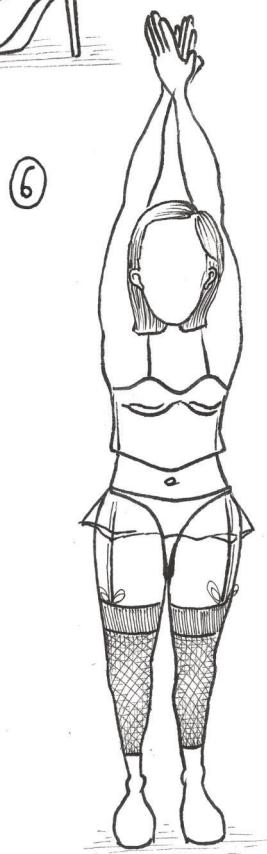
And then I would proceed to give a lap dance to someone who *clearly* wasn't into it. Nothing is more awkward than staring at some guy's clenched jaw muscle as you grind over him.

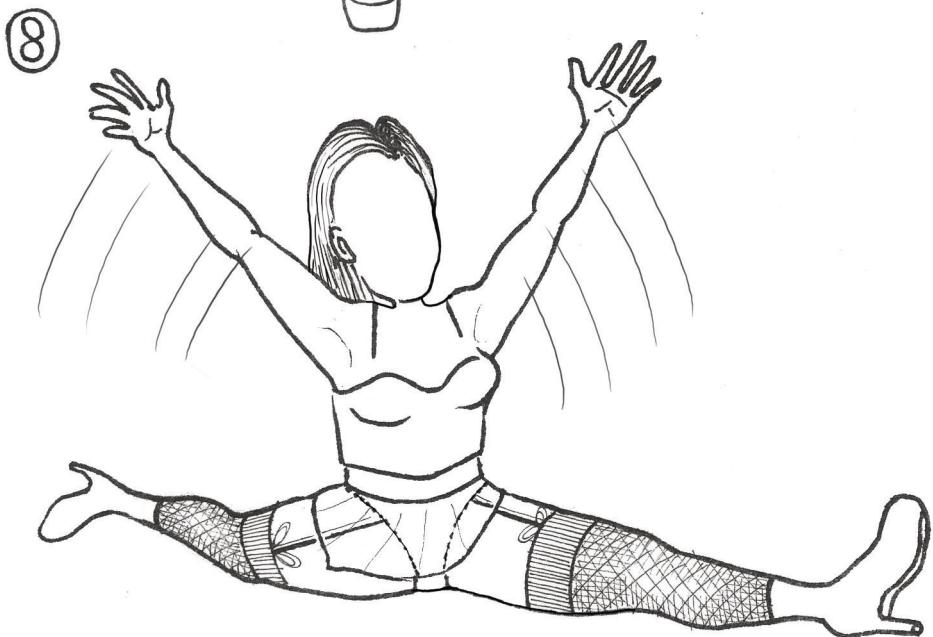
What is happening here? Does he think I'm going to be disappointed if I don't *get* to give him a lap dance? I get paid either way.

My conclusion: Masculinity is a trap. People want to get what they paid for – even if they didn't want that thing in the first place.

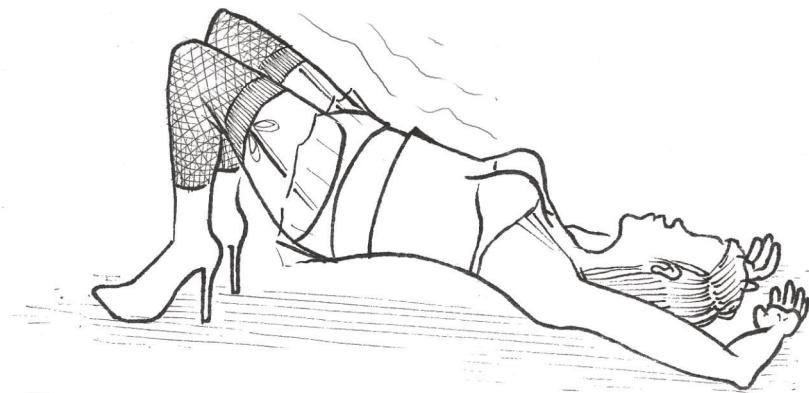
Stripper Positions



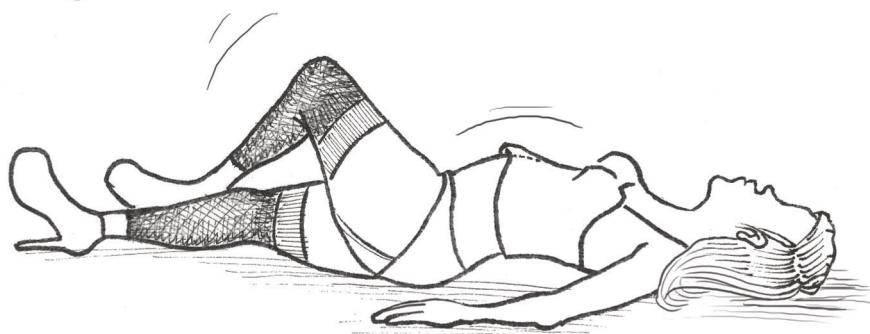




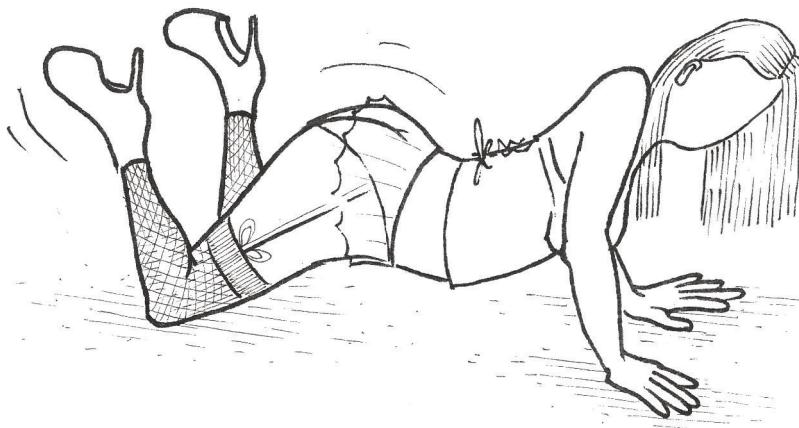
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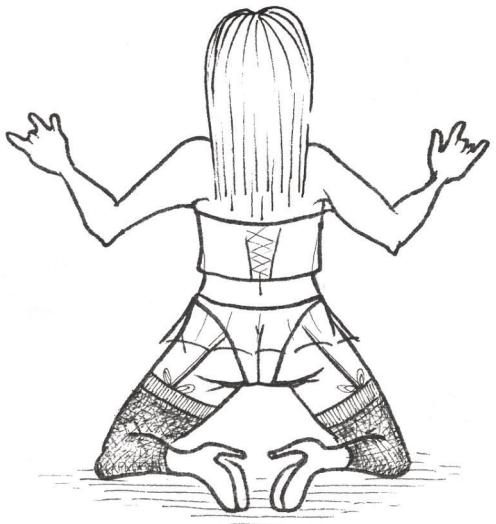
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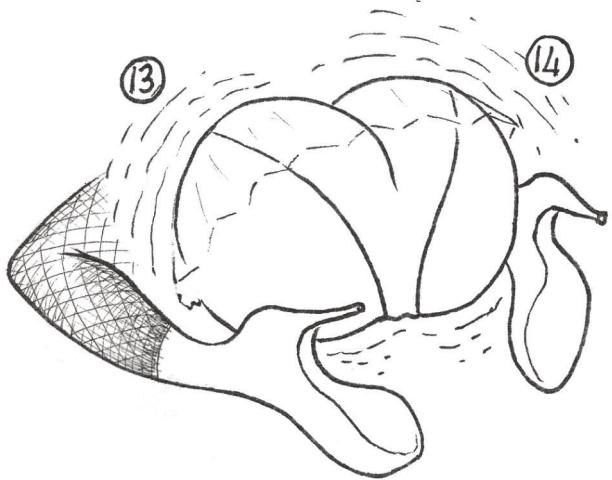
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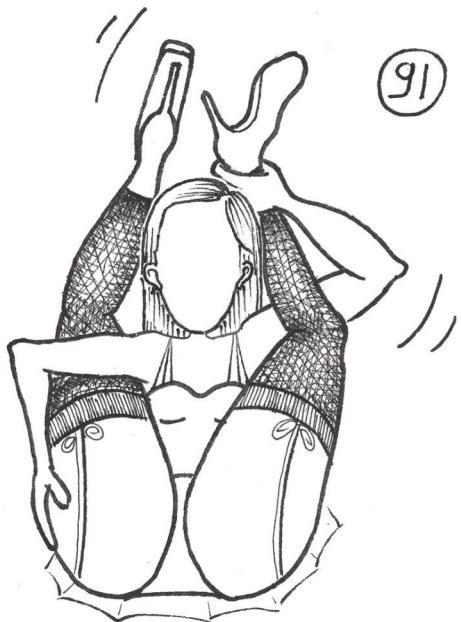
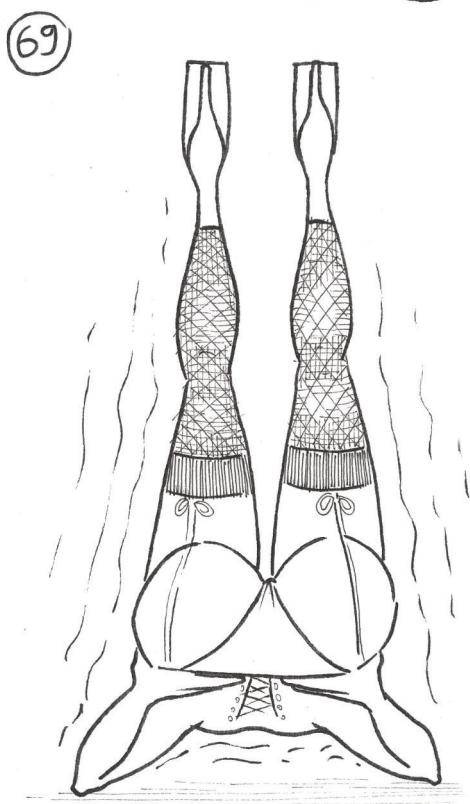
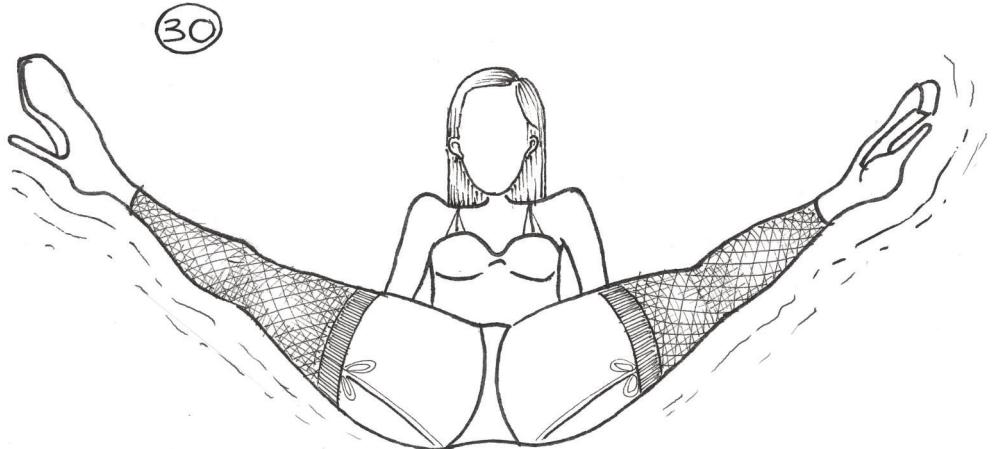


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3

REASONS

ELLA: I want to tell you the truth, okay? I want to tell you something real. But I need your help. When I come to you, I need you to ask me why. Ask me, "Why are you doing this?" And mean it, okay? Or at least act like you mean it. Like you are really curious. Convince us.

Ella approaches various individual audience members.

AUDIENCE: Why are you doing this?

ELLA: Because I'm lonely and it's fun.

AUDIENCE: Why are you doing this?

ELLA: I have so much debt, and thinking about it is suffocating. I think about how I want to have kids someday, and how can I have kids someday if I can't even take care of myself?

AUDIENCE: Why are you doing this?

ELLA: I'm tired of being harassed and groped for free.

AUDIENCE: Why are you doing this?

ELLA: Because I didn't used to be a pretty girl.

I mean I've always looked the same. I've been this height since I was eleven. My face has gotten a little more angular. I've filled out. But I've looked essentially the same. And I was an ugly girl growing up.

People never believe me when I tell them this, but I was bullied so much in school. Popular girls would make the popular boys ask me out so they could laugh at me when I said yes. I knew it was a joke, but they wouldn't let me alone til I went along, said yes, and let them hit the punchline. And maybe people didn't think I was ugly because of how I looked – it was more about the general social caste system. It was because I was a nerd, because I was a closeted queer, because I was the only Jewish kid. A whole rash of things, which when you add being a little gangly and a few years of braces, equals ugly.

When I left my hometown, I left that ugly label behind. But it took a while for me to realize.

The first boy who kissed me in college quickly broke my heart. I didn't realize I was "hot," or that someone might use me for my looks. I truly believed that if this boy wanted to make out with me after our five-hour conversation on Dostoyevsky, it was because he *so admired* my literary criticism that he was able to overcome my inherent hideousness. He could see beyond.

You can decide that looks don't matter. But I've found that the rest of the world doesn't agree.

I used to refuse to wear pretty, feminine things. It's not because I'm particularly butch, or don't like them. But I was worried that it would be embarrassing. If I wore something pretty,

someone might get the impression that *I* thought of myself as pretty. And that opens you up to all sorts of attacks. I felt much more comfortable owning my ugliness.

But I still *wanted* to be pretty.

Ugh.

But look. Look how far I've come. You don't find an outfit much more femme than this.



4

NUMBERS

- 1: The number of times a customer has tried to put a cigarette in my pussy.
- 2: The number of times I've used my heels as a weapon.
- 3: The number of times I've cried at work.
- 5: The number of marriage proposals I've received.
- 212: The number of times men asked me to sleep with them after hours.
- 48: The number of times I've been told I have a "black girl's ass."
- 6: The average number of times I'm asked my ethnicity each shift.
- 5: The number of men I've refused dances with because they said something racist or pedophilic.
- 76: The number of men whose racism or sexism I've ignored because they were paying me.
- 1: The number of women I've given a lap dance to.
- 2: The number of co-workers I've made out with for a customer.

2: The number of recent widowers who've cried on my breast.

3: The number of men who just wanted to spoon and talk during their lap dance.

1: The number of times a customer has invited me to Dubai.

2: The number of times I've heard a customer laughing at me while I was onstage.

3: The number of drinks I can have before I start to fall off my heels.

1: The number of customers who have passed out while I was giving a lap dance.

\$30: The minimum amount of money I have to pay the club to come in to work.

50%: The amount of money the club takes from every lap dance and champagne room.

\$1,015: The most I've made in one night.

- \$57: The least I've made in one night.

1: The number of times I've been assaulted at the club.

o: The amount of protection that was provided.

\$45,000: My student and medical debt combined.

EMPOWERING: To be wanted, to be idolized, to feel like I am winning the game of the male gaze.

DEVASTATING: To realize that even with all my education, all my fucking privilege, all my talent and advantages, the thing my culture values most is my naked body.

REAL: I don't know anyone who is a full-time creative artist – not a teacher or a manager – who doesn't either have major financial support from family or a partner, or who isn't doing sex work of some sort on the side.

But hey. At least I get to dance for a living.



5

WHEN THE CLUB WINS

Last night the strip club won.

By “won” I mean the game of it all, and the many things that can go wrong and knock me off my center. Let’s just say it wasn’t a balanced night.

During September, working Sunday night shifts is usually a good idea. Sunday means football, and there are still home baseball games, too. Sports fans always crowd up the club. Plus you get people who travel into town on business Sunday afternoon and have a lonely night to kill before work on Monday.

But last night was *slow*. It wasn’t the emptiest I’ve seen it on a night shift, but very few people were actually spending money. Most guys were steering clear of the tip rail and any obligation to pay the women dancing in front of them for hours on end.

I’ve still done well on nights like this. You don’t need a whole crowd raining ones on your ass if you can find one or two guys who like you and will spend some significant cash for your company. Sometimes guys who just want to talk will tip me a twenty every fifteen minutes while we chat at the bar. It’s not as much money as I’d make from a fifteen minute lap dance, but I’m always incredibly touched when a guy recognizes the value of the emotional labor I’m providing. This is

rare. Most men who come in feel entitled to a great deal of chat-up time before they spend a dime.

Different dancers will set different rules about how much time they are willing to go through this kind of verbal dance. Some insist that if a guy doesn't ask for a dance within ten minutes, then he's never going to, and it's not worth your energy.

In my experience there's really no consistency to it. I've had situations where spending up to an hour at the bar chatting led to \$500 of room fees and tips. And then there are other times when a customer grabs me out of the crowd milling on the floor, flirts with me for an hour, and then becomes indignant when I ask if they would like a private dance.

Last night was the worst of the worst. The first three men I interacted with expressed that they weren't really interested in seeing me at the *club*. But would I be willing to come to their...

- apartment?
- hotel room?
- car?

and...

- suck them off?
- ride their cock?
- take it up the ass?

...for \$100–200?

To be clear, I don't think there's anything morally wrong with sex work or prostitution. But it *really* pisses me off when guys

come to the club for that reason. I know women will fuck for those low prices if they are desperate. But there are ways of finding sex work that don't involve harassing every stripper in the club, all while refusing to pay them at their actual job.

The other thing that offends me is the low price point. Even on a bad night I can still scrape together \$150–300, and that's just from dancing. That doesn't require me to risk disease, or rape, or violence, or police arrest. And it doesn't require me to put up with some guy's bad breath, or shitty foreplay, or fake an orgasm.

Last night these guys just would not let up. One kept grabbing my ass whenever I walked by him. Another kept following me around and begging me to come to his apartment.

Finally, after an hour or so of this, I found a seemingly nice, normal guy to chat with. He was near my height, so only a little shorter than I am in my platform heels. He had brown hair, a full but trimmed beard, and a pleasant expression. We ended up just talking for about 45 minutes. He was fun. A nice guy with a boring job but a good personality, in town for work. He lived in midtown Manhattan and we talked about places we liked in New York, and how the clubs are different here. As we talked, we stood facing the stage, swaying side to side a little bit, only subliminally taking in the dancers switching off in front of us.

Abruptly he turned to me and said, "So I know you need to be making money and I don't want to stop you."

See this smile? This is my angry smile; my I-wish-I-lacked-the-self-control-to-keep-from-slapping-you smile.

"So that means you aren't going to spend any money on me."

He laughed and looked away. "I feel like we're friends now. So I can't get a dance with you."

"Fuck you, dude, we are *not* friends." I walked away.

I didn't actually say that. I'd like to think I said it with my eyes. My friends at the club tell me I'm too nice. I'm trying to work on that.

The night progressed. I finally did give a dance. This time to a guy who kept sneaking his dick out of the top of his waistband and rubbing it on my ass crack. At that point I honestly didn't even care enough to fight it. I kept it – and his hands – away from my pussy, got my money, and got out of there.

Towards the last hour of the night I met a man with a cute smile in a fancy suit. He seemed to like me. He had just come from his brother's wedding – a nice Jewish boy. I joked with him that his mother would be so proud of him because he was flirting with a nice Jewish girl. Ok, maybe not *that* nice.

Our conversation was interrupted when I was called up to the stage. By the time I came back down, he was infatuated with another dancer – a friend of mine. I couldn't try to scoop him back up without offending her. And I found myself embarrassingly hurt that he had chosen another dancer to focus on. I kept glancing back at them, chatting at the bar. At some point he tired of her, or she tired of him, and she left. Another girl quickly took her place. It really doesn't matter. That's the point of the club. Everyone is a fill-in for someone or something that isn't there.

But it hurt me last night. Because the club, more often than not, is a fill-in for me, too. The men who praise my beauty, my wit, my smile; the hands that run over my curves with relish; the women who shyly kiss my cheek; they are fill-ins for how empty and unloved I feel most of the time.

It can be addictive – this intense, unrealistic attention. At at the same time it doesn't exercise the same threat as any real intimacy. No one makes promises. Or if they do, even *they* don't believe it. It's a place entirely safe from true love and fearful desire. Better than opium for a girl steeped in self-loathing.

Give me a shot of whiskey, a bad pop song, a pole, and a stranger's attention, and I will be a queen.

Give me a friend with their undivided attention and deliberate care, and I'll fold up into a ball unable to speak. You want to get into my heart? Better pretend you don't want to be there.



6

PERMISSION

I don't want to go into work anymore.

I don't want to go into work anymore.

I don't want to go into work anymore.

Nah, girl. You can do it. It's no big deal. You're safe.

So I got assaulted at work. I kind of didn't even notice. I mean, no one else noticed. Not the managers who were supposed to be watching. I shook it off. I finished my shift.

It's not the first time I've been raped. So it's no big deal, right? Anyway, I don't want to talk about that. If it happens a bunch does it still count? What if you've gotten really good at tuning it out?

Whatever. No big deal.

Okay, girl. You are strong. You can do this. Remember your loans. You aren't going to be defeated by this. You can do this. Come on, girl.

I hate being weak. I hate being kind.

Don't look at me like I'm a victim, alright? I mean, yes, I've been *victimized*, but I'm not a *victim*.

ELLA: Okay. I need your help. When I come to you, I need you to give me permission. Give me permission to be weak. To be kind. Give me permission to quit my job. Can I quit?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

ELLA: ... can I quit?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

ELLA: Can I quit?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

ELLA: Okay. Okay. Thanks. I know it's silly, but it helps to hear somebody else say it.

Lights dim until Ella is only silhouetted. She removes her stripper clothes and does a sensuous STRIP-ON into her street clothes.

7

CURTAIN

Lights come back up. Ella pulls a champaign bottle from the bar cart and pops it open. She takes a swig.

ELLA: Alright, well, thank you for a lovely night. It was so great reading with you. It's been about 90 minutes, so you owe me \$500. You can settle up with the box office. Cash is best, but you can also use a card with a 10% service fee. Come see me tomorrow!

Part II

CONVERSATIONS

Sex Werque included several videos of conversations with anonymous sex workers in Pittsburgh. Part II contains extended transcripts, with photos by Alejandro Pinzón.



A

IT'S A JOB

A conversation between two strippers.

ELLA: How did you get started, and why did you decide to start stripping?

PHOEBE: I worked at a restaurant. I'd been there for about five years, and there were definitely some issues that I could have handled better. For example, there were some customers – and this was a family dining place – who sexually harassed me, or would even grab a handful of ass. And there wasn't a lot of support from my female general manager, or the predominantly female staff. So that sort of got the seed planted. And I had a friend who was a dancer. Curiously, before I ever even thought about dancing, someone at the restaurant started a rumor about me being a stripper. And I thought... perhaps that was something that I would be interested in doing.

E: Do you think that rumor was spread to hurt you?

P: Yeah. I was about 10 years younger than the majority of people working there, and there was definitely some ... strange consternation ... based off of a myriad of factors. It just was not the healthiest environment to work in. And my friend who was a dancer gave me a very fair run down of what dancing entailed.

E: So what was your first day like, and how did it feel?

P: My first day was quiet, I remember being incredibly nervous. But the slow pace of a day shift helped, and being able to talk to a few regulars and a few dancers. I'm always overly inquisitive, so it helped to have some questions answered, especially about creating and enforcing limits, and instructing customers how to treat you via body language and subtle statements.

E: What are some ways you do that?

P: I'm always very, very clear about it being a job. And I enjoy it, so I can candidly tell people that. But I've certainly witnessed and sensed people fully concocting the girlfriend persona for a customer. And that's where it gets murky for me; it feels unfair to both the dancer and to the customer.

E: I do that! I'm really authentic with people, and then it's easy for them to feel like the service I'm providing is a little fake girlfriend fantasy, which became problematic. That can be fine as a service that's agreed upon, but it gets difficult when it's not explicitly agreed upon. I wasn't good at stopping that from happening. So I'm curious about how you do that.

P: I've certainly felt that danger zone, crossing that line. And it's not physical at all, it's an emotional intimacy. It helps being clear that I'm in the process of figuring out my next step in terms of grad school. I have a very full life. I don't have time for a boyfriend. Which may or may not truly be the case, but in their eyes, is the case. Setting

that out early in a conversation really helps me. And it helps me feel like I'm not manipulating them.

E: So you can have a very flirty, date-like conversation, but they know for sure they aren't going to convince you to go out with them later.

P: Right. I mean, if you look at a masseuse – you are providing a physical service. You get something out of it. The customer gets something out of it. And you as someone rubbing somebody's shoulders can enjoy that sensation. But it stops there.

E: Sometimes I felt like I was a therapist for some people. I'm a therapist with my boobs out.

P: I prefer that role to the fake girlfriend role.

E: Me too.

I'm a therapist with my boobs out.

P: Being honest about my expectations helps a customer feel comfortable being honest about theirs. Sometimes they'll say, "I want X, Y, or Z," and I'll have to be candid and say, "I can't provide that." Whether it's a kiss on the lips, or a date, or something sexual that they saw, or concocted, or thought was a possibility. I'm a lot more as-

sertive in my daily life having to do it as a job. And I'm more communicative in my expectations of people, and theirs of me.

- E: Do you do anything to alter your voice or your appearance? Do you change anything that feels typical of your personality in order to appeal to different customers?
- P: The most marked difference between my actual personality and my stripper persona is that I smile and laugh a lot more in my stripper persona. Because you're immediately more accessible when you're smiling, and I've been told I have an intimidating face or presence. I think a lot of women have been told that – the resting bitch face, or whatever you wanna call it. It makes it easier to approach people when you seem more open. Basic body language, like not sitting with your arms crossed. It's simple. But certainly getting that all down when I started was really hard.
- E: That's a type of performance I can do really naturally, but it's still a performance. So when I was upset or bitter, I couldn't do it, and then I would do worse. That creates a horrible snowball of, *I'm unhappy, and so I'm not making any money, and people are being mean to me in response to me, and...*
- P: It's the same as a waitress, server, or bartender. But those are a shallow façade of friendliness. It has to go deeper as a stripper. You have to follow through with that smile. You can't just smile and then go back to your grouchy ways.

E: Yeah. You have to keep that up for a longer period of time. You have to really listen and be invested.

P: There's a lot more follow-through.

Problems that exist in the world are under a microscope at a strip club.

E: Is there anything you're excited about for when you stop doing this work?

P: No. The job appeals to me a lot more than I thought it would. The main thing that I'm excited for when I'm done dancing is just a more intellectually stimulating career. What bothers me the most is the mundaneness of some of the conversations and interactions. And you endorse overhearing some homophobic, transphobic, racist comments from people. Certainly as a dancer you have the agency to say something and point that out. But it's just not productive to have those conversations there. You're not going to change anyone's mind.

E: Totally. So many times I would ignore something from a customer that I would never put up with from someone I knew in my social life.

- r: Or even someone I encountered who was waiting for the bus. I would still be more comfortable saying something because they are not paying my rent.
- e: Yeah. There's a power dynamic there.
- r: I'm always interested in the different unexpected power dynamics I witness at the club. I think that a lot of male customers come in expecting, as the person who's spending money, to have some wealth of power. And that dynamic does not take place. It's reversed, perhaps.
- e: There can be quick reversals back and forth. When a guy comes in looking for something specific, and wants a room or a dance from me, I feel in control to set those terms – what we will or won't do, and what the boundaries are. But in a situation where I'm in a financial bind because I didn't make as much, or rent is due the next day, I've opened myself up emotionally to more manipulation, or needed more validation. Suddenly the customer is more in power, and might get me to say, "Well, yeah, I'll let you kiss my neck," or, "Maybe I'll give you my number and text you when I'm working next" – things that would normally be out of bounds for me. Even if it doesn't manifest in crossing a boundary, it changes my inner feeling of being dependent in a way that's scary and draining.
- r: I've certainly felt that way a handful of times. And that's why to combat that feeling – because it's not a good feeling – I try to be static in my persona regardless of who the customer is, or how much money is on the table. I try to see each new customer as a challenge rather than an

automatic payday. There are some more veteran dancers who have given me tips on how to combat that. Which is seeing it not as a game, because that's too trite, but as a challenge. By setting goals. By analyzing the best way to make the most money within your boundaries. That really changed my hustle and my approach.



E: Do you have a system of how you approach people?

R: I have dozens of anecdotes that I can get into. I'll ask about their day, and get tangible right away. I'll establish a rapport, and show that I have a sense of humor. And

then from their response, I sense what they are interested in – someone who's mature and intellectual, or someone who's wilder. I'll tell a story from my college days. I'm not a good liar, so I embellish, but I can't just make things up. So that gets it going. But the key is keeping a sexual tension without being overtly sexual. As soon as you bring in the possibility of sleeping with the customer, you've already failed. They're not coming to pay for sex. They're coming to pay for a sexual *fantasy*. And that's what makes me comfortable. Because I am prudish. I realize that dancing is the limit of my comfort zone as a sex worker.

- E: Part of the fantasy for a lot of people is, *hey I'm going to have a really wild crazy time!* But there's also the safety of, *it's at a strip club, so I'm not really going to cheat on my partner, nothing too crazy is going to happen. But I'm going to feel like I'm letting loose and having fun.* That's super fun for me too – I had some wild crazy experiences as a college student which I revel in, but don't actually want to repeat. So it's fun to say, "Yeah, there was this crazy time when we had this party and then everyone was making out, and blah, blah, blah."
- R: Just sitting with someone, asking them about their experiences and sharing my own, has provided that same sort of thrill. People *love* to talk about their past experiences! I'll say to customers that I'm an emotional voyeur. I'm really, really interested in the inner workings of people's personalities and their lives. Just keeping a good level of energy and being really inquisitive often scratches that

itch. The person leaves fulfilled, without having crossed any lines they wouldn't be comfortable crossing.

- E: That's a part of it I miss. I would meet so many different kinds of people during a shift, and learn so much about how to interact with people very different from me. And how to make almost anybody comfortable. That could be draining, and it was also really rewarding.
- P: It's definitely enjoyable, but "draining" is the best word for it. You need emotional bandwidth. I'm generally pretty extroverted, but I know with this job I have to allow certain amounts of time to be by myself and regenerate.
- E: What do you do for self-care?
- P: Baths. So many baths. I really like reading in the bath. I also find stripper upkeep cathartic. Painting your nails, or doing skincare, or hair treatments. It's a good way to prepare for a shift. And to work your way into your dancer persona.
- E: Has stripping changed your perceptions of men, or masculinity, or human nature?
- P: Not at all! I get asked that a lot. I think we all do. And not at all. If anything, it's reinforced what I already believed.
- E: Which is what?
- P: There's a spectrum of men. There's not a male personality type that's attracted to strip clubs. There's several, but there's not one general type of strip club man.

- E: People I know who don't go to strip clubs assume that there's only one type of guy who does – only the worst hypermasculine type. Or someone who's so lonely and socially dysfunctional that they can't talk to anybody.
- P: There's a sort of badge of honor that these non-strip-club-going guys wear. But I think there is something positive about being overt about your sexuality, and being able to go and indulge that. When I think about the more insidious personality types that I've met, it's those insecure guys who would never go to a strip club because "why pay when you could get it for free."
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There's a badge of honor that these non-strip-club-going guys wear.

But I think there is something positive about being overt in your sexuality, and being able to indulge that.

- E: Yeah, and those guys are the least respectful when they actually come.
- P: Absolutely. I'm not embarrassed about being a dancer. Why would you, as a customer already in the strip club, be embarrassed about being here?

E: I had never been in a strip club until I started working in one, but I would go as a customer.

P: I definitely would. I know when I phase out of this job it would be something really fun for me, because I do enjoy the dynamic. But I think it's just too small of a transaction for me. Like G-string to G-string, or there's no real reason for me to go now.

E: Yeah. There's no reason for me to go now either. But I could imagine if I was in a different city, or as I get older... I could imagine being an older queer lady showing up at the club. Absolutely.

P: And to be fair, those are the best ladies, the old queer ladies who come to the strip club. Young heteronormative girls who are super insecure and whispering body-shaming things while you are on stage... those are the worst.

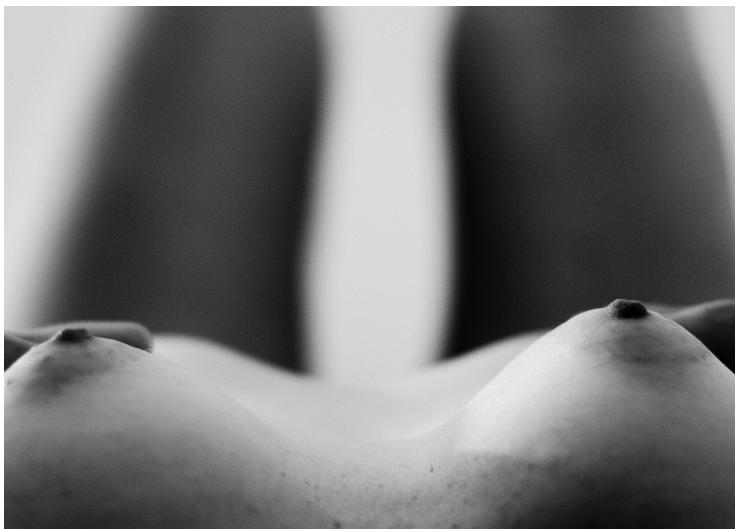
E: Those *are* the worst.

P: There are mirrors everywhere. I just want to hold one up to the girls who are sitting there at the rail, just trying to eviscerate whoever's onstage, and say, "Why are you here? There's not an ounce of solidarity in your bones?"

E: There have been a few times I've witnessed customers laughing about me, or saying mean things while I'm onstage. And it's so hard.

- P: I don't think there's a dancer out there that hasn't happened to. I can't think of a single girl I haven't overheard something rude about.
- E: Sometimes customers will try to start something between you and another dancer by talking shit about them. They try to compliment you by saying, "You're way hotter than that dancer over there."
- P: But it's the same as when you go on a date with a man and he says, "You're different than other girls."
- E: Yes! Which is something that worked on me as a nineteen-year-old.
- P: Totally! Manic pixie dream girl... *I'm an individual!*
- E: Now I know that's the biggest red flag.
- P: It's a huge red flag.
- E: It makes me ask, what do you think about women?
- P: Problems that exist in the world are under a microscope at a strip club.
- E: So when people ask, "Is stripping empowering or is it sad and victimizing?" – how do you deal with people putting that binary on it, or asking you questions that come from that binary viewpoint?
- P: It depends on my mood. Sometimes I have very little tolerance for that massive generalization. It's both and it's neither. It's a spectrum. For the most part, my shifts fall

in line with the empowering part, but that's not always the case. When I worked in a bar, I would be harassed every so often. Someone would grab my ass every so often. And if I complained to a friend or a partner, no one said, "Well you can just quit." But as a dancer, that's often the reaction that friends and family will have. Whereas I've had worse experiences in a bar. That's how I try to get people to relate to it. No one likes their job all the time. There's always going to be difficulties, there's always going to be challenges. Even if it's a bit sad there sometimes, I personally feel safe. I know that's not the case for everyone. But even if it's a demoralizing night, I personally feel safe, and in as much control as I can be.



E: If you could change anything about the industry, what do you wish were different?

- P: There's a lot of substance abuse and addiction. And there's not an infrastructure to help you. If you are an addict, it's a vicious cycle. I also know there's a sexual assault component that I just haven't experienced. But I've seen people nodding out.
- E: Yeah, I've seen that too. I see those dancers leave the club pretty quickly when they are getting out of control with addiction, but then they'll come back in a few weeks. And it's not that they are actually better. It's just that...
- P: It's more in check.
- E: Yeah. It's a little more in check for a little bit. And then you don't see them again for a few more months. It's a reflection of this ongoing addiction crisis.
- P: We've both been in a situation where we haven't had as good of a month, and we're feeling a little desperate about rent. But that tone of desperation is constant in their lives. And it's super palpable. It's really easy to sense just being around them.
- E: And then the dangers of becoming manipulated or being assaulted goes way up – because they are desperate, and they aren't necessarily in control, or in their right mind.
- P: Or they agree to do things that in their right state of mind, or sober state of mind, they would not.
- E: And that sets a tone that becomes a little more dangerous for everyone.

- r: I try to be as compassionate as possible, and see them as marginalized and neglected by a system.
- e: I don't think it's their fault. I don't blame them for it. But I don't want to say, "Well, I'm not an addict, so this doesn't affect me." I think it affects everyone in the industry, so everyone in the industry has an interest in helping people with addiction.
- r: One big positive about the job has been realizing that I have certain privileges and advantages from being decently educated. I see people who've had next to no advantages pulling themselves up by their bootstraps to a degree. Providing for their family. Working really hard. Remaining healthy. And there are those stories – going to school at night. Doing everything they can to better themselves and their children. That sort of optimism is something that I really like about the job.
- e: I've met women that I admire who have found stability for themselves, and found ways to change their life by doing this job.
- r: But anyone who says it's some sort of cohesive sisterhood is just wrong. That's just an overly idealistic view of it.
- e: There are friendships I've made through it. And I think different cities and different clubs could have different feels for sure. But in my experience, it's not some perfect comfy sisterhood.
- r: Not at all. But I think I'm more productive as a dancer because it's not that way – because I see it as a job.



B

AUTHENTIC

A conversation with two strippers and a webcam model.

ELLA: So let's talk about performance and the work.

COLETTE: I had to take on a character and alter ego for myself. I thought that would be safer. But I found it difficult to maintain that alter ego in conversation. I felt like I had to be honest and real for no reason. So there was this toggling between honesty and the comfort of portraying a character on stage. That was always addictive – this subversion into this other body that almost felt surreal. Like I was putting on a suit over my skin. That was my favorite part. That was the most liberating part – wearing a whole new body. But I was too permeable in conversation. It was hard for me to put up the same barriers when I wasn't stage. At that time I didn't know how. I was so eager to make myself so transparent to people. It was dangerous for me to be that open.

E: I can relate to that. I found dancing on stage to be super liberating and super addictive. Even being a performer for a long time, I have a lot of shyness. I almost will the audience not to watch me. But you can't do that when you're stripping. You have to ask people to watch you energetically. You have to eat that up, and appreciate it, and give back that joy. That was really fun, and really

affirming. But I was bad at keeping a strict character in conversation because I find it painful to be inauthentic.

c: I watched a lot of the older dancers; I found that to be fascinating. To watch them onstage, and to watch them with people. It was this magic they could turn on. It was something I didn't know how to do while still having a shield up.

FRANKIE: You'd think with the layer of being on the internet there'd be protection. But if I did have a connection with someone, there were a couple times I woke up at whatever time in the morning and realized I gave that person information about myself that I really really shouldn't have. What if they're a stalker, or someone who could get obsessed with me? It never happened, it never coalesced into anything. I have a hard time trying to be inauthentic because I've spent my whole life trying to be authentic. But why do these people deserve that from me?

c: I think it's because I want to believe in humanity. But there are some things you just can't fix.

f: How many of those people are actively looking for humanity? There are some really dull people out there who are actively saying the worst things because they can, and are actively treating you like an object because they can.

e: Some people come in for junk food and some people come in for a real meal. I can do either, but they require a different psychological act from me. If someone's looking for an entertaining sexy time, I'm one type of character. I have some different shields up that let me deal with

them being a little disrespectful, or with part of their fantasy being misogynistic. But then other people come in needing emotional care that has this erotic component. Or maybe they don't really need the erotic component, but they're lonely, and this is the only way they can figure out how to deal with it because they don't have friends or they don't have a therapist.

- F: Someone paid me to sit in the room while they smoked weed and talked to me. I'm getting paid, and we could have done that in a public chat room. But they wanted this specific special time.
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Some people understand that
they're paying for emotional labor.

Others think that because you're a woman,
you should do that for free.

- E: I find that part of the work super rewarding, but then if those people flip... some people will pay for that emotional labor. They understand that's part of what's happening, and they're respectful and grateful for that. And then some people think that because you're a woman, you should just do that. So then I say, "I'm at work, and you're not my boyfriend. So if you wanna act like my

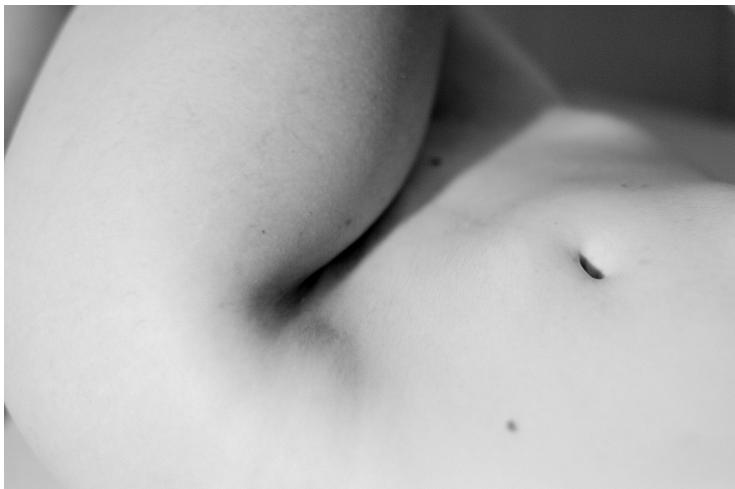
boyfriend, you pay me, and then I do that service for you. But if you're not, well, that's not what's happening."

f: It's hard because we are trained to acquiesce to those sorts of things. To be nice.

c: I totally get the junk food versus meal. I really found fulfillment in some of the interactions with people that were just about intimacy, being with a body, being with another energy. But it was really difficult for me. I now understand the transaction and the emotional labor. But at the time, because you're being authentic in those intimate ways, they felt it was so real that they could manipulate you to have it outside of the space where it was supposed to exist. That space exists to keep you safe, and everyone thinks they are the exception. Everyone walks in there like, "I'm going to fall in love. This'll be the one." People started to find me outside of the club and that was when I had to leave.

f: There's someone I talk to regularly who I'm pretty sure lives in this city. We didn't ever talk about places, but we have enough overlap in interests that I'm pretty sure he walked into a coffee shop I was in the other day. I don't think he knew who I was. I don't think he even saw me. But it was this *ohh fuck* moment. Really, the coincidence is that I met someone on the internet who has the same lifestyle as me. That was one of those moments where I thought, *should I be doing this anymore?*

c: I liked being a mirage. It's a part of me I now search for in other work. I always think about going back, but I'm like, *god, I'm going to have to shave my whole body!*



C & E: YEEES!

- c: That's such a process! The beauty maintenance was one of the most difficult parts. Second to maintaining boundaries and feeling emotionally suckled on.
- e: It required me to conform my body to standards of beauty I don't believe in. And then once I was doing it long enough, I started to believe in those standards because I was incentivized to. Like being really hairless, or having perfect skin. I went from feeling not confident about my weight to feeling affirmed that I still got a job as a stripper – so I must be hot – to wondering if I would make more money if I were a little more like this or a little more like that.
- f: I was always struggling with how my hotness is tied up in my authenticity. Hotness is based on image, but it's

also based on who you are as a person. So I struggled a lot with, *Oh if I just wore this thing, or took the time to put on makeup before I got on cam, I would make more today.*

The more I worried about it, the more I realized it didn't even matter. The whole game of the internet is that it's a toss up. It depends on who shows up. It depends on what time you're on. It depends on how people are feeling. It depends on whether it's the end of a two-week pay cycle and people have money to spend on you. It's really wild.

I did find that when I was on the west coast I was doing way better. And I wondered if I stayed up till it was west coast time every night, would I make this much all the time? And then how much does that cut into your real life?

E: It definitely fucked with my sleep schedule.

C: You also go into this space that is psychologically designed to make you lose track of time. You're in a basement for hours, but it's this really psychedelic basement. I could be there for my whole shift and feel like an hour, or like an eternity.

E: Years!

C: You're like, "My god, I've been here for 30 years!"

E: Every dancer seems to have a different system. You work *these* days, or you talk to *this* person for so long... but I always found it was such a shit show. Who knows. I never know how much money I'm going to make. So

when that was the major way I was paying not just my loans, but my basic bills, it made me super stressed out. Even if I was making the amount of money I needed over the course of months, it was so unpredictable day-to-day. That made it easier for management or customers to manipulate that stress against me.

c: That's part of the whole system. For three years after I left they would call me every couple of months: "Hey how are you? If you ever want to come back, just come on!" "Hey, how's your dance career?" They were waiting for my plummet. Management was counting on it.

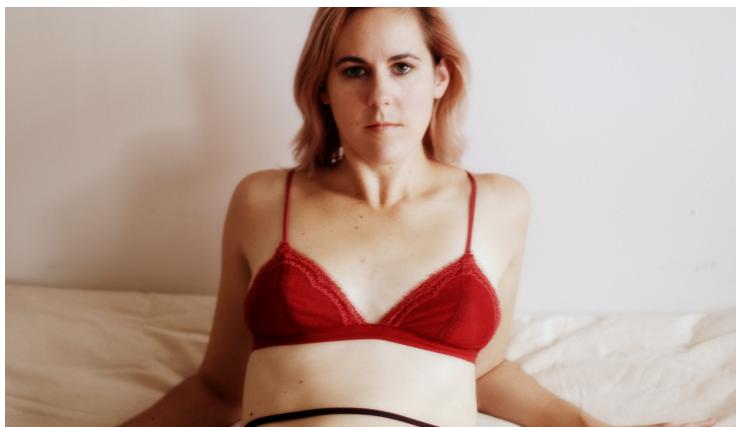
f: Hawks. Hawks.

e: I follow this instagram page of stripper memes. My favorites are the superstitious ones: "It's a triple Sagittarius moon, don't go into work today!" Everyone has their rituals. They carry around their lucky bag, or wear their lucky underwear. I had a little stone that I would carry in my money purse that was my money stone.

I also think that sex work is like magic. You are conjuring what you want. I saw people who had been working there for ten years and they had their system down. They knew how to go in, get what they needed, and leave. That always impressed me because I felt like it was so random. But they built their market. They had their daddies on their phones and would text them, "This is when I'm coming in."

f: There's a commitment you have to have if you want it to be sustainable. That feels like a point of no return for me.

With cam work, I know there are things I could have been doing so that I could have a following. But how much of this do I want to have in my life forever? I know there's ways to get out. You just don't do it anymore. But my career as an artist is more important to me, and ideally will be all I put my effort into. So how much effort do you have left?



- c: It gets really slippery. When you are interacting in the same space as people, it can be a quick road to escorting. Which is something that I kind of lost track of what my values were. I saw a bunch of people around me doing things that I went in saying, "I would never do that." Then it became so normalized that I was like, "Yeah, ok, for the right amount of money that may be ok." Everybody has their prices.
- e: That's something I see in the club that really makes me sad and I feel a lot of stress around. There are people who are escorting, and I think morally that's fine. I don't think

there's anything inherently wrong with that. But it leads to this dynamic where guys come into the club thinking they can ask for that, which is really frustrating when you're trying to make money doing the services you provide at the club – doing lapdances and being company. So then every couple days there'd be some drunk dancer in the dressing room crying, or yelling about, "those girls who do those things!" There's such a harshness of workers towards each other from escorting. Because it's illegal and there's stigma. It divides the dancers and workers from each other, and keeps everyone less safe and less supported.

I don't think there's anything morally wrong with escorting.

But it leads to this dynamic where guys think they can ask everyone for that.

c: Definitely. And I heard stories about management that would let certain girls do it because it turned a profit for them, but then would kick out or go to police with other girls that might be drug addicts and exploit their vulnerabilities.

r: Yeah. Because they're even more vulnerable.

- E: And because there's that grey area. Where I was working, they weren't really watching the cameras. So I got assaulted in a room and nothing happened. There's no protection. Because if you're management and you're playing a game where you're turning a blind eye to some people who are escorting, then you're not keeping the people who aren't safe. Or you wouldn't even know who's doing it and who's not. And so it just breaks down any possibility for accountability and safety and support.
- F: Well, who is running that? It's all based on money for them. It's this façade of care.
- C: Yeah. Calling every few months wasn't because they cared about my life. It was because they wanted to catch me.
- F: They knew you made money.
- E: It's frustrating because you are paying them *so much* to work there! They are making so much money off of you. The clubs in Pittsburgh I've been to don't provide a level of service comparable to what they are making off of you.
- F: Hearing you guys talk about this, it amazes me how many parallels there are to the internet. I get emails every week to come back. I haven't said that I'm done yet, but it's getting to the point where they will delete my account if I don't get back on within a certain amount of time.

On top of that, what you're saying about workers being against each other based on what they're willing to offer – the internet is the fucking wild west, and you can

get anything you want somewhere for free if you look hard enough. That has changed the game for cam people so much because people know they can find what they want for free. So you gotta exploit the market that's still willing to pay because they think that it's important, or they know that you're a person.

- E: I think there will always be a market for having experiences with a live person. There's desire for that connection. You can't replace having a relationship and what's appealing about that, no matter how shallow that relationship is, or how bounded it is. There will always be people who want that. But how many people and how much they're willing to pay is really changeable.
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Work became a punishment I would go through to prove to myself that I could handle it.

Have you ever been interviewed about this stuff before?

- C: We don't get to talk about this stuff a lot. You can talk about it with your partner, but...
- E: But it can be stressful talking about it with your partner! I couldn't keep a relationship very long when I was doing that work.
- C: My partner had been with me the whole time, so he witnessed it from a different perspective. He saw when it

was weighing on me more than anybody else. I also had an experience getting assaulted in the club which really fucked me up. He was able to say, "You're suffering, and I see it in these habits you're picking up, and how you're acting towards your own body, and this isn't good for you." But then there's this part of you that's like, "Well, how do you know what's good for me? I love you, but, how do you know what's good for me?" I felt like, "I'm strong, I can handle it!"

- E: I wanted to prove that I was super tough and super strong and I could handle anything. So when I got assaulted I didn't even realize or think about how that had happened until a couple weeks later when I realized I was having a panic attack every time I went to work. Because at the time I thought, "Ok, that sucked, whatever." I finished my shift.
- c: Part of the job. Part of the territory. Everyone has a story of that happening.
- E: There was this hardness that I started to treat myself with. Yes, this was my plan to deal with student debt. And I'm still really scared not having this as my plan. But I realized that I was punishing myself. Going into work had become a punishment I would go through to prove to myself that I could handle it. And when I finally called off and just never rescheduled – effectively quit – I think I called you?
- F: Yeah, you called me.

- E: I called a couple friends. I had to call friends and say, "Can you give me permission to quit my job? Because I can't seem to give it to myself." I couldn't admit that I was being hurt by it. I couldn't admit weakness, even though I had friends who said, "You seem unhappy, you should stop doing this."
- C: Everything about it is addictive. The money is addictive. I think that's maybe the most addictive thing. Because the amount of labor that I would do to get even a fraction of that amount of money was so much more on the outside. And I saw that as another kind of wringer they would pull you through: "You're never gonna make this amount of money this easily." And I mean, what is easy?
- F: Just having a job that pays you regularly above minimum wage is so hard to find. I have that now, and the sense of being able to leave my work at work, and being able to know that I'll have a certain amount of money during a certain period of time is amazing. I mean, yeah, no shit you should be making that amount of money when you're stripping! No shit! It's a different level of all the things that are wrong with work in general, heightened by a lot of emotional and physical work that is hard. It's hard!

No shit you should be making that much money!
You're dealing with everything wrong with work,
heightened by a ton of emotional and physical work.

- c: Then you'd have those magical days where you say, *What if I could just get it like this every time, just every day.*
- f: Totally! It's like gambling.
- c: It *is* like gambling!
- e: Yeah! Because some days it's super fun, no one's a jerk, no one tries to assault you, and you leave with five or six hundred dollars. And you're like, *This is a-mazing!*
- c: I got a massage at work today! There was a guy who paid to massage my calves and it was the best day ever. It was so good.
- e: There was time where I felt like, man, I get harassed and groped and have all this stuff happen to me in my life as a woman, at least now I'm getting fucking *paid* for it.
- f: I can fucking deal with misogyny if I'm making money. If I'm making money doing this thing I'm already doing in my life just walking down the street.
- e: It makes me want to walk down the street with a garter on my leg, and when people catcall me, say, "That's fine, but give me a five."
- c: "You owe me for that one!"
- f: I think that's the unclear line for most people: how do we treat women, or people who have breasts and asses? How

do we treat them? And that changes what it's worth, the value of bodies.

E: It makes me sad because I don't feel like it has to be this way. I don't feel like sex work, or stripping, or the industry has to feel this sad.

F: It shouldn't have to be.

E: It could be a good job. Not just a good job for some people who are tougher than me. I think the conditions of it could just be better. It doesn't inherently have to be the most misogynist dangerous place—

F: Stripper Co-op!

E: —yeah, but it would have to be owned by the workers.



- f: It speaks to how messed up our sense of sexuality is in general, and our sense of what sex is. We can't divorce sex from certain things. On top of that, you add how fucked up our relationship is with money. There's all these layers of things we already don't deal with very well in our society on an average day.
- c: Would it even be as good of a business if those factors were not there? If the Puritanical systems of shame weren't present, would men still spend a bunch of money on someone? People who go in there want to project their narrative on you. There are so many people who come into a strip club and then say, "You're such a nice girl."
- f: "I could take you out of here." Fucking *Pretty Woman* ruining everything for everyone!
- e: "You're so sweet!" "You're too smart for this club, you're too sweet for this club, why are you doing this? Let me save you."
- c: Right! I had several guys say to me, "You know I didn't come in here to talk to someone who's smarter than me." I was like...
- f: Sorry! Picked the wrong person. Move along!
- c: If that's what you want, I can play dumb. You're gonna have to engage in the conversation then.
- e: People definitely assume that strippers are dumb. But if you were smart, and you realized that this is how you could make the most money, you might do it too. It doesn't

require a college degree for me to be here, but having a college degree doesn't make me think that this is a bad idea necessarily.

c: I found men would get jealous because they would look into it, to see if they could do the same thing on their own. And they'd realize, *I don't make the same amount of money! It's just not as valuable!* Well, that's too bad. The one place where men don't make more than women is at the strip club.

e: Unless they're the fucking owner!

c: Right. Or they're at a bridal shower.

f: I'm thinking about personal relationships versus money relationships. For example, the guy that will talk to you forever, won't ask you to do anything, but will still be there when you strip.

c: Just sit and not pay!

r: Yeah. He'll be super nice but not ask for anything. It's like you know how to play the game long enough to see something. Then there's the folks who are the opposite, who know what they are going to get if they pay, so they just pay. They are still kind. In the perfect world, that's the system, that's how it's supposed to work.

e: I hear you. Something that would happen to me is that people would say, "Oh, I feel like we've made such an authentic connection I can't sully it now by paying for a lap dance..."

c: Gross! Right!

f: It's manipulation! Even if they don't think they are manipulating you, it's what they've been taught, that it's shameful or wrong to pay for the attention you want. If you want that, just admit it to yourself. And also treat that person like a fucking human by paying for it.

e: They think it's dirty, and that they can't be kind to someone and feel sexual gratification. They can't do both. They clearly want both because they're engaging in both, but they will only pay for one of them. So they'll talk to one dancer and require emotional labor, but then pick up a different dancer they haven't talked to to actually get a lap dance.

c: Yes. And then it fucks with you! You start wondering, *Am I not attractive enough or something?*

f: But really it's them thinking, *I need to pay for this thing, but I don't need to pay for that thing because that's free*. That's the thing with catcalling. With catcalling the person just wants that moment of attention from you because it's free if you surprise someone enough.

e: It's also largely about posing for other men.

b & c: Totally!

So much of being in a strip club

is just dudes performing being dudes in front of other dudes.

E: So much of being in a strip club is just dudes performing being dudes in front of other dudes. We're having a meeting at the strip club so we can say, "We're so hetero!"

F: "We're so masculine."

C: "Look at us."

E: "Look how hetero we are!"

C: "Yeah, I got the hottest girl in here."

E: And sometimes you can tell they aren't even having a good time. They don't even like it, but they feel obliged to do it.

E: Has this work changed how you view human nature or how you view men?

C: I've been lucky to have really great male role models in my life growing up. So when I entered the environment, it was abnormal of my relationships with men in the past. I almost categorized these people – I started to create a divide between the good men and the bad men. There were days when I would come in and I just fucking hated people. I just couldn't stand looking at their faces and their expectancy of me to perform for them. Especially the men who would ask me to do stuff for them without

paying for me. That definitely instilled a big hate seed. But I think it was easier for me to notice that because my dad did not ever mistreat me or sexualize me in my life. He never made comments about my body in a way that I know some people have a relationship with male figures in their life, men who are addicted to porn, or go to strip clubs, or aren't as present.

F: It's funny, I think I've gotten most of my bad relationships with sexuality and men from overarching culture. But in my personal life, I don't feel like...you know I have a similar relationship with my father; I never felt sexualized by him or mistreated ever. I think being on camera, it just shows I've always felt like it's care work. It's something where people are really looking for a connection that they can't have.

The ones I end up disliking are the people who can have that, but just want it all the time, and don't recognize that as a thing that maybe isn't healthy. I definitely had relationships with people that were neurodivergent or had some types of mental illness and recognizing that maybe they can't meet people in real life. Maybe that's not something they can handle or do. It just showed me that people are human. No matter what. And we're all just seeking human-ness.

C: I was in the club and I encountered my boss's dad from my other job, a teaching job that I had. It started out with him asking where I went to school, and then saying his daughter taught there. And then him telling me who his daughter is, and then realizing that I knew his daughter,

that I worked for her. It made the situation more enticing for him. It furthered our engagement. But it made me sad for my boss, who was also my friend, and someone who I looked up to. This was exciting to him, and that was her dad who brought her up. She might have a totally different experience with him, this might be the secret thing he engages in.

F: People have multiple lives.

C: Yeah.

E: I think it comes back to that issue of shame really forming the industry, and some of the needs in the industry, and what people want, but also how they engage with it, and why there's stigma for people working in it.

F: But if you look on a larger scale for sex workers and escorts, there's always punishment for the sex worker or the escort, and there's almost never punishment for the John or whoever's paying for it.

C: They're the victim!

F: And then there's also the whole narrative that all sex workers are victims and that is also unhelpful.

E: There are ways I have been victimized while doing sex work, but I don't feel like I've been victimized *because* of sex work. I'm a victim because of forces that victimize me in other contexts too, like misogyny or capitalism. They play out through sex work in specific ways, but I think that's mostly because there's additional stigma in

sex work, and less because it's inherently risky or inherently degrading. It's more that it's degrading in these contexts.

F: We live in such an exploded version of those things.

C: And it's interesting how it was hard for me to process that while in the environment. And it came out as a sort of self-harm, and as feeling violent towards people. I'd replay a situation in my head over and over again and imagined myself violently protecting myself. And crushing them with the base of my heel.

F: Yes.

C: I so badly want to have that happen. But it's not compassionate of me.

E: Maybe it's compassionate towards yourself though.

F: Being able to have that regaining of power.





C

HOES & WHORES

ELLA: How did you get started stripping and what led you to make that choice?

IRIS: I started dancing when I was 20. I had just gotten back to the U.S. from Australia and I fell madly in love with this woman while I was there. I needed to come back to the U.S. for a little bit because of my visa. So when I went back to Australia, I needed a job that paid cash and did not have a tax ID number. The woman I was with had been a stripper 8–10 years before, so she was like, “I know a job where you can get money under the table.” And I was like, “Ok.” And so I started being a stripper.

E: I don't know anything about the clubs in Australia. What was it like there?

I: The first club was crazy as hell. The owner of the club was this short, stocky, bullish, ‘roided-out, bald-headed man. I only worked at that place for two or three shifts, but on the second shift, the owner invited myself, my ride, and another chick to stay after the club closed to have drinks. I thought it was good for rapport and I was very young. So I was thinking, *Oh, this is a good opportunity to show the owner that I'm friendly and can do well here.* One thing led to another, and they were all snorting something – to this day I don't even know what. I had

an accent, and I was so young, so I already had a big target on me. The owner kept trying to forcibly kiss me and put his tongue down my throat. We were in his “office.” It was really just this long hallway. The chicks were throwing back liquor, the dudes were snorting shit, and I was not about either. So I was down there, and he kept pushing me against the wall and trying to kiss me. So I grabbed him by the throat, head on the wall, and I said, “I’m not here to play with you, and you need to stop!” So that was tight.

- E: Holy shit... what was different about stripping here when you came back?
- I: I was fucking astounded when I came here and they took money from our dances.
- E: They don’t do that in Australia!?
- I: At the clubs where I worked, no. You could arrive at 10:00 at the latest. Your house fee was \$60 and that was it. If you sold a room, they would take not even a third. And they fed you. They brought trays of fruit and little sandwiches and juices and water.
- E: This sounds like paradise!
- I: It was stripper paradise! It was the sickest shit. *Men’s Gallery*. I’m gonna promote that baby till the end!
- E: I’m curious what your experience has been dealing with race at the club. As a white dancer, I hear so much racist shit said to me in the way of, “Oh, I can talk this way

to you, fellow white person.” But I don’t know what it’s like if you are a dancer of color. And I imagine there’s a lot of shit.

Being mixed and being light-skinned,
people still look at me as a black woman,
but it’s the segue into black women.

I: It’s super weird. Because being mixed and being light-skinned, there’s this dynamic where people still look at me as a black woman, but it’s the segue into black women. It’s not just white dudes – it’s virtually every fucking ethnicity that comes through that door. I’ll have customers say, “Oh, I’ve always wanted to be with a black chick,” or “Oh, you’re just so beautiful for a black chick.” I look at them and I say, “I appreciate that you recognize that part of my family is black. But if this is the image of blackness that you see as being appropriate, then you are totally missing the point.”

I also find that being light-skinned gives me an upper hand against management that is racist. If I call off last minute – if I were curvy or darker skinned, that would just be the basis for them to tell me to leave so they can hire someone else. But from my position, they realize, “We have to keep you around.” And I’m like, “Fuck yeah you do!”

E: I've heard from other people that, at least in Pittsburgh clubs, it's harder to get hired if you're darker, or if you're curvier. But when I see those girls in the clubs, it doesn't seem like they make any less money. So I look at management and think, *Why, even if you are racist as hell, don't you want to make money? You are making a ton off of these women when they're here!* There's some very unprofitable racism happening that doesn't make sense to me if I'm trying to be a cold capitalist!

I: It's fascinating. It's also very regional. I spent a lot of time living and working in New Orleans. And in New Orlean, oh my god, there are some of the most cornbread-fed, thickest, fattest, most glorious asses I've ever seen. There are some dark-skinned, fucking hood accent from these bitches, and you don't know what they're saying but you're just basking in their gorgeousness and their attitude. Up in Pittsburgh, there's a totally different scene. But honey, you go to Memphis, or you go to Atlanta, or you go to New Orleans, and Houston, and Dallas...if you have a fat ass and a bad attitude then you're going to be making *way* more than any of the other bitches there.

Up here, race in the club is one of those things where it's just unavoidable. You have to submit to the extortion of yourself to nth degree, and it's your responsibility to know your own boundaries as a person, let alone as a dancer, let alone as a woman of color. I find where I work in Pittsburgh there are a lot of dark-skinned hoes who are like, *I will just go up to the whitest nerdiest white boy and flaunt my status in front of him and that's what makes my money.*

- E: Right, because whatever feels like the opposite or the taboo or the really forbidden is desirable. I've definitely profited off of that with some black men, but also with a lot of Indian guys, a lot of Asian men. Especially because when I was stripping I was blonde. It was the fakest fucking blonde. But just the fact that they could be like, *A blonde white woman! This is probably not somebody I'm ever going to date, this isn't who I'm married to, this is outside the parameters and is just very exotic!* It was so funny to me, but it made me a *lot* of money.
- I: I think management will always be the biggest issue with regards to race in a club. If you're a down-ass hoe, you know you can make your money no matter what.
- E: Even as racism or sexism or pedophilic stuff come up, in general, most customers aren't that hard to please. They are going to find someone there that they like. It's going to be fine.
- I: And if that's not, you then you just get to stepping and find the person that is going to pay you.
- E: Do you have a specific attitude when you are dancing or a specific character?
- I: One of the things that I love is dancing to funk and soul – Marvin Gaye, Barry White, James Brown... Earth, Wind, and Fire. . . I'll just fuck it up! And Shaggy. I love dancing to Shaggy too. I am such an old soul. If I were to try to market my style to dudes under 40, they just wouldn't get it. I don't really know how to talk to you about the internet. So I have a big 'fro, and I have a bush, and I

fucking dance to James Brown. And I look at all these men in their 50s and 60s and I think, I know that when you were 10–17 you were whacking it to a *Hustler* that looked like me. So let me take you back to your Oedipus days. And we're just going to really reel you in through your unconscious.

- I: When I first started out in New Orleans, I would go running to younger dudes because I thought they were so cute and would have so much fun. Then I realized you guys have such a horrible fucking attitude and such an intense God-complex. As a 35-year-old young man, you could perhaps take a stripper home and fuck her, so your pedestal is there for a reason. But I don't even date people anymore under the age of 40. If I'm going to be dating a dude, then he needs to get his head out of his butt and have that maturity resonance. The same with women, too.

Now I just enjoy my time being my authentic self. There was a point where I tried to put on a persona, or tried to put on a face, but it was exhausting. Especially when someone tries to fuck with you. I can't pretend to not be myself because that will just amp me up to want to punch you in the face more. I don't assert myself as a dominatrix at work, but as a dominant woman. I'm not going to take your bullshit.

Compliance between the stripper and the customer is difficult. If you are too compliant, they take advantage of you and don't pay you. But if you are too authoritative, you just come off as a bitch. I like to take a stance of

saying, "This what I'm about: you're going to buy me a drink, and if you are still trying to talk to me after fifteen minutes and you haven't done anything for me, then we are going to part ways. I'm not going to fucking waste my time. I'm a dope bitch so you shouldn't pass anyway, but here are my guidelines."

- E: I get stuck on the idea that you're basically shoplifting. If you talk to a dancer for hours and don't pay her, if you grab her ass on the floor and you didn't tip her when she's on stage, you are just shoplifting. And the thing is, this is a place where you can do all those things! And that's fine! Come here, and get it out of your system. Don't afflict poor women on the street with it. Just do it here, *but you have to pay for it*. You don't get to just do it for free. You don't take a swig out of a bottle of orange juice and then put it back on the shelf in the grocery store.
-

If you talk to a dancer and don't pay her,
If you grab her ass and don't tip her,
You are just shoplifting.

- I: This is also a regional thing. I don't see a lot of dancers in Pittsburgh who go up to people and say this type of shit, but you bet your motherfucking ass in New Orleans, there is a gaggle of five hoes, in their 7-8 inch

heels around one customer, pouring their drinks on him, telling him to get the fuck out cuz he's been sitting there for an hour and not paying anybody. That's some real shit.

E: That's fucking amazing.

I: I've seen a hoe, and she had a plastic bag of money in one hand, and we were watching this guy go up to the girl on stage to tip her. And he started grabbing her ass and smacking her ass. And she said, "Get away!" And then he did it again, and she put her leg out to kick him and he grabbed her ankle...

E: Oh shit.

I: And the hoes came running! This one bitch with her bag of money, she just went up and clocked him in the face. With the same fucking hand that had the money bag! They don't play. You know, I'm there to work, so I don't have a problem being a boss if I need to be the boss.

E: Do you have any sense of why it's like that? My sense is that if one of the dancers at a club here did that, hit someone who was essentially assaulting another dancer, she could be totally in the right, and I am sure she would be fired immediately. Here, management doesn't have your back. Why do you think it's different in Pittsburgh than in New Orleans?

I: Where I work in Pittsburgh, I've developed a nice rapport with management. I think it's only been after a while where I've shown them: I work Mother's Day. I work

Easter. I worked Fourth of July. I was not here for Christmas, but I show up with a good attitude. When you're a hoe with a good attitude, and you're not coming in with your head rolling around, and your eyes rolling back, and you're not a total problem, then I think there's lenience no matter where you are.

But in the City of New Orleans, it's Bourbon Street. You just have bar, bar, bar, strip club, bar, bar, bar, souvenir stand, bar, bar – so if the hoes are going to stand up and punch somebody in the face, management is like, *That motherfucker was probably drinking for the last seven hours and don't know what the fuck he's doing*, and that's cool.

Whereas in Pittsburgh, you're in the middle of downtown. Granted, these motherfuckers have probably been drinking for seven hours too, but they're in a three-piece suit and just got finished with some Google deal, so it's a different dynamic.

In Pittsburgh, he may be drunk and out of line,
but he's also in a three-piece suit
and that changes the dynamic.

E: Yeah. The other thing I think is really funny is that there's so much about "classiness," and being like, *This strip club is really classy, here are our many different rules to make sure it*

seems classy, which are all very arbitrary, and in my head, don't actually make anything more classy. Like, you wear a long gown, or you can't drink out of a beer bottle, you have to drink out of a glass, those kind of things.

- I: Oh my goodness. I had not heard that latter rule because I'm not a beer drinker, but it doesn't surprise me. That's hilarious.
- E: Yeah, I got yelled at for drinking out of a bottle. I don't really drink beer either, but someone bought me one, and management said, "You aren't allowed to drink out of a beer bottle!" Why? That doesn't make sense, everyone does, all the customers do. "It's not classy!"
- I: Interesting. My feelings on the long dress – I don't know if classiness is how I view it, but I do think that there's a very 80s kind of visual – that woman who is very proper, wears a long flowing dress, but then gets on stage and gets down to nothing but her heels and her pussy's out, right? That's filthy. I love that. I love that that's nasty as fuck. I love the thought that we're in our nice long dresses, and then next thing you know, the pussy's out, bitch!
- E: I guess I like that depending on the dress. People wear dresses that are basically just a bikini top and then a string and then there's kind of a skirt, but cut up everywhere. This is horrible! It looks horrible first of all.
- E: I totally agree. God.
- E: It's just not aesthetically pleasing.

I: I thrift all my dresses.

E: I did that. One of my favorite dresses that I did really well in is an old prom dress from Goodwill.

I: I am all into wearing the same fucking dress for like months, and then I'll go and roll myself a joint, and just get really stoned, and then I'll go to all the thrift stores in Pittsburgh, and I'll just have a day out of it.

E: I have a fantasy of getting enough people together and starting a collective strip club. It would have a better aesthetic, be a little more queer-friendly, and a little hipper, not giving tons of money to management, and safer because everyone's watching their backs, and you can deck someone who is assaulting you.

I: Definitely.

E: I think the drive-through idea is great because, whatever, you can masturbate in your car. I feel totally safe, you can watch me. The problem is that now everyone has camera phones, and how do you stop people snapping video?

I: I was just talking to someone who went to a drive-through. There's this stage setup and somebody just sits on the stage, and there's a little menu.

E: Like McDonald's?

I: Right, but it's a hoe menu.

E: I hope there's like a crackly voice over the intercom like, "I'm sorry, did you order the full nude? With a side of

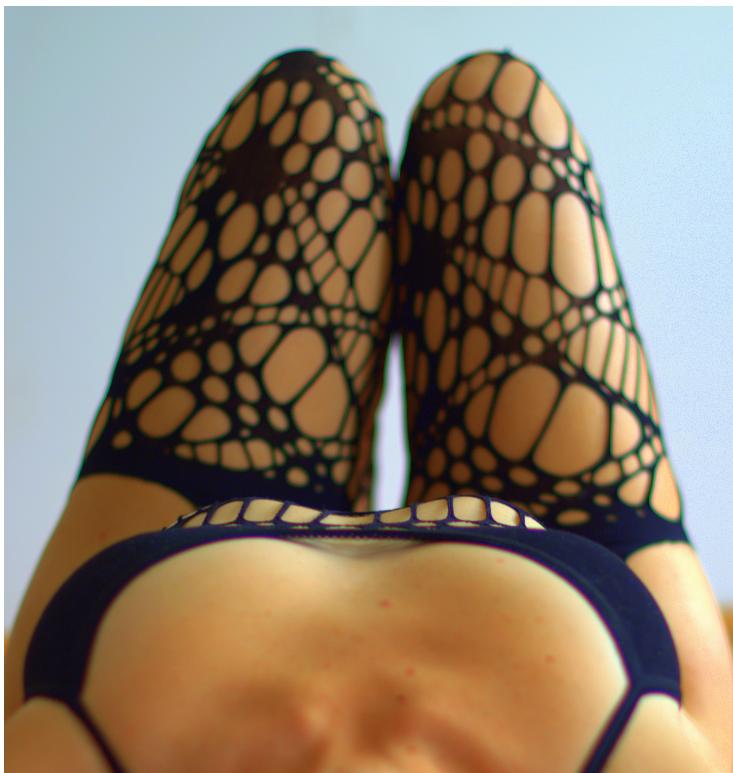
twerk?" I hope you get handed your change by a teenager with a lot of pimples, struggling with the acne and wearing a headset.

- I: I heard there's another club in the boonies where instead of a DJ there's a jukebox, and the dancers had to put their own money in the jukebox. Sometimes their song would just cut out, and they would be on stage, like, "Anybody? Anybody?"
- E: That's so shitty. I'm cheap, I would just be up there singing. I'm not paying anything. I'll give a little tap dance. Just start making an impromptu little show out of it. In a chair. Start writing your to-do list. Make it more like webcamming. It would become performance art for me, doing spontaneous poems.
- I: While twerking.
- E: While twerking. That's what this show is, basically.

What do you want people to know about what it's like to be a stripper?

- I: Strippers are not leaving with \$1,200 in their pocket every night. There are women who go to the club and have regulars, or have an incredible boob job, or have hustled their way through thick and thin, and know how to do that. But it's very frustrating to me when people in your vicinity who know that you're a dancer just imagine that you have the most lavish fucking lifestyle. Even if I did make \$1,200 a fucking night, Daddy, I would have to pay

back my taxes. That's always a misconstrued idea about dancers.



I: Another thing that's important to note is that sex work goes across the board. People love strippers, people love hoes. And then it breaks down to a smaller group where people love sugar babies and people love hoes. And then it breaks down to an even smaller group where people love webcam girls and they love hoes. And then if you are not serving on any of those three top tiers, then you're

just considered a whore. It's put in this bottom-barrel category which I think is such total bullshit.

I: I think it's total fucking bullshit that if you work in a full-nude club, you can go in a champagne room – where there are four walls and a closed door – and you can get butt-ass naked with your fucking ass-hairs two inches away from someone's face. And that's ok. But as soon as you, as a grown-ass adult woman, consent to sleep with somebody, or going on dates, or sugaring, or whatever the fuck it is – then all of a sudden it becomes diminished and illegal. Which blows my fucking mind because how is it that all of the legality and hierarchy are set up so that if a *man* is making money off of me being in this room putting myself in danger – all consensually – if you can make a profit off of it, that's sick for you. But as soon as I take it in a different direction, and it's *me* making the profit off of all of it, then that's when it becomes illegal.

There are hierarchies of sex work
and the forms that are respectable and legal
are the ones where a man is making money.

E: Yeah. Lots of people get married for the same reason.

I: Definitely!

- E: Hey trophy wives, hey gold-diggers, hey First Lady... you're sex workers! It becomes a way to control women that can constantly shift depending on who's saying it, what mood they're in, and what they think about women in general. When you are just "a sexy lady." When you're a "whore." When you're a "hooker with a heart of gold." It makes a line that you always have to walk, or be afraid that someone else might decide that because of what you do, or what you did this one day, you're disposable now.
- I: Yeah, definitely. One of the most profound things I saw in regards to sex work: I was in the dressing room working in Pittsburgh a week or two ago, and there was this chick in the dressing room who was just talking the maddest shit on prostitutes. Just like, nasty degrading words about women who have pimps. I remembered standing on the balcony on the second story of the club where I worked in New Orleans, and on the street I saw two women with skin-fucking-tight dresses and high heels, nowhere to put a phone, nowhere to put a purse, nowhere to put anything. They would stand on the corner and wait to see dudes who were super fucking drunk, and the two of them would go up to them, talk to them, coerce them, and they would turn a corner. And these women – to the unsuspecting eye you're thinking *oh, ok, they're prostitutes* – these women would beat the SHIT out of these men and rob them. Their pimp is standing a block away, watching to make sure that his hoes are not going to get fucked up, because if they are, he's going to come in and finish the job.

I: So back to the strip club, I'm in the dressing room listening to this dancer talk about this stuff, and you have no fucking idea what these women go through. There are so many different experiences, not just women, there are so many different men, trans people, non-binary people, underage people – there are so many fucking people who see sex work as an opportunity to leave something that's so much more horrendous. If you're some femme chick who has an abusive family background and you leave and go into sex work because it gives you your independence and power, or if you're a femme chick and you have this boyfriend who tells you that he's going to take care of you and then he ends up pimping you out, or if you're a super queer dude and your family fucking hates you for it so you leave, or you're a trans person who just got kicked out of their house – sex work is given such a terrible fucking name, and it's an industry that people may or may not go into, but they wouldn't do it if there are not customers.

This morning Facebook was showing me memories from last year. This time last year the Republican National Convention went to Cleveland, and all of the gay male sex workers in Cleveland posted, "I just want everybody to know that we clean house. We all made a lot of money on these down-low Republicans."

E: There are people who go into it as adults, and it's consensual, and it seems like a better option to build power for themselves. And there are people who get coerced into it, and it's traumatizing. And then there's a lot of in-between. The reality of it is, the way that our society is

dealing with it now doesn't help anybody. It stigmatizes the people who are doing it in empowering ways, and it actually doesn't help any of the people who are being coerced and traumatized. Half the time they just end up incarcerated, and that becomes the way to "help" them.

There are people who go into sex work to build power
There are people who get coerced, and it's traumatizing
And then there's a whole lot of in-between.

- I: There is a side of it, though, where the taboo nature of sex work fuels the financial aspect of sex work.
- E: Right. If it wasn't as taboo it wouldn't be as highly priced.
- I: For example, free porn. Personally I think free porn sucks because someone did *not* just get railed in the ass take after take for you to sit on your phone and watch it for free. So even though there's some taboo – some people still have a moral dilemma about watching porn, or their partners watching porn – it's now so much more accessible, so much more accepted. Porn is now less taboo, and you bet your fucking ass people are not making half the shit they made during the *Boogie Nights* era where everyone was doing coke off each other and making pornos, and it was mad profitable. So there are many angles to look at sex work, but one stance I have is that I'm fortunate that there's still this taboo nature to it.

E: I think it might be different for any sex work that happens in person; there will always be some restriction of supply and over-valuing of anything that's a person-to-person interaction. The bottom can only fall out so far for stripping, or for prostitution, or for fetish work that's in-person. The things that are good about that for people you can't replace with a computer.

Unless VR gets really fucking good.



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