



working sex
Sex Workers
Write about a
Changing Industry

edited by
annie oakley



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SEAL PRESS

This book is for the ones who blazed the trail.

introduction

Annie Oakley

One time in the olden days when I was working at the peep show (gateway drug to prostitution) a man came in who'd made the rounds of most of the girls but never seen me. I walked into my side of the scrubby booth known as the Victorian Parlor (complete with ye olde lounge-style lawn chair) and started the lame boob-rubbing moves that were always the prequel to the removal of my shirt. The guy wasn't interested and motioned for me to knock it off and come closer to the glass. He had some greasy piece of paper that he was fiddling with. It looked like it was about a thousand years old and had been used to wrap a hamburger. He unfolded it and pressed it to the glass for me to squint at.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked, looking at me intently and already rubbing his crotch through his jeans. It was some kind of clipping from a magazine, folded so many times that only mere molecules of the photo were left in between the web of white creases. I couldn't even muster a guess.

"It's the Partridge Family school bus! I want you to pretend like you're driving the Partridge Family school bus!" Not naked, not speaking lewdly about Danny Partridge, just with my feet on the glass and my hand on the invisible gearshift, making motor sounds. It was an easy \$20 for five minutes of my time, and eventually he got passed off onto Carrie, a nightshift girl who really did drive a school bus during the day. Jackpot.

That's the story I used to trot out when people would ask me what was the weirdest custom or experience I'd ever had. Which was always the first question they'd ask upon finding out what I did for a living (if they didn't immediately change the subject), followed closely by "How much do you make?" The Partridge Family guy wasn't even really the weirdest, but the real answer would've been a lot less interesting, and clearly people were digging for the entertaining. It made the job sound fun and light, like I spent the whole day indulging harmless adult children (hey . . . wait . . .). The kooky specificity of a Partridge Family bus fetish let them off the hook somehow, reassured them that their own weird desires were at least not that weird, and freed them from having to imagine themselves in the customer's role. Titillation without incrimination. This is the kind of story that Americans most want to hear from people who work in the sex trade, and consequently this is the kind of story that most often gets told, when anything gets told at all.

There are a few different ways one's story is allowed to be entertaining: funny, sexy, tragic, scandalous. Repentance, marriage, college graduation, lurid death, or a piece of investigative journalism are the favored endings. The rigid boundaries of archetype, be they happy hooker or downtrodden whore, are a kind of invisibility. They are one-dimensional. Should the story twist to the other side you'll see nothing at all. Once marked by telling the story, you are branded for life. Your credibility is gone, you are forever seen in the context of the work. You don't get to go back to being a civilian. Who needs that kind of shit? People remain silent. This silence, this invisibility, is the linchpin upon which rests the glorious suspension of disbelief that is at the core of nearly every transaction in a service economy. It's the intellectual sleight of hand where one denies one's own knowledge of the essential personhood of the provider of a service or the maker of a product so as not to impede one's enjoyment of the product or service. In this way one avoids being implicated in the boredom, poverty, or ugliness of the work of the service provider. In late capitalist America under the rule of market logic, suspension of disbelief becomes almost a survival skill.

The sex industry is a huge industry. Think of all the venues: Internet porn, magazines, phone sex, dirty movies, strip clubs, peep shows, and hookers from the street, upscale agency, or the ad in the back of your edgy local weekly. Estimates put the U.S. sex industry at around \$12 billion annually and growing rapidly, and the number of people presently employed in it at upwards of six million. To say nothing of those who have been a part of it in the past. What are the implications of the invisibility of such a huge segment of the population? What does it say about us as sexual consumers that we prefer our product to be anonymous? In a probably accidental rare moment of lucidity, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop observed to ABC News that the sex industry “is making billions of dollars a year, is spreading to cable television and to the Internet, and yet their employees are considered to be throwaway people.” When you refuse to recognize someone’s humanity, you don’t have to worry about their working conditions, their safety, their health, their ability to make a decent living. Thus the cops, pimps, club owners, and minimoguls at the head of petty fiefdoms like the Girls Gone Wild porno empire get to run the industry with little outside interference or regulation. Not only is this bad for the people who work in the industry, but are pimps, police, and Joe Francis who you really want to trust with the shaping of the national libido?

Sex workers telling stories, humanizing ourselves through the sharing of experience and insight punctures the bloated dream of consumption without consequence. It puts a real face on the mythological creatures that are the subject of so much fantasizing and demonizing. It moves us from a weird landscape populated by the iconography of people’s fears and desires to a tangible, relatable reality; and only from there can we begin to be taken seriously as people deserving of safety, agency, and respect.

at one point when I was taking a break from the sex industry, I became a housecleaner. My friend and I worked together, cleaning up after grown adults and fomenting cheerful resentment. It wasn’t long before we knew who among our clients had an alcohol problem, who refused to have sex with his husband, who wore a padded-butt mangirdle, who was trying his hand at the newspaper personal ads. Nobody ever told us these personal details, nobody ever really told us much besides when to show up and what to use on the floors. A lot of stuff becomes obvious quickly when you’re observing people whom you’re invisible—and when you occasionally go through their drawers. The point is, the helper always knows more about the boss than the boss knows about them. Sex workers are in a unique position to observe. The work takes place in a freakish crucible of the dynamics of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The fact that, by and large, we are relegated to a simple mascot position in public dialogue about these dynamics is a critical mistake.

Occasionally an academic will be thrown our way to spend a year slumming for a story, or someone will publish a memoir, but more frequently self-representation is a luxury we are denied. How would we represent ourselves if given the opportunity? In ten years of working in the business and meeting other whores, the one thing that’s become apparent is that none of us can agree on a take on any aspect of the work. Even within ourselves, feelings and convictions can shift several times over the course of a night. Sometimes you see the best of people and yourself, and everything seems so easy and attainable, and the money feels like it’s rolling in for free. Other times it’s the worst job you’ve ever had and you can’t believe the ugliness of humanity and you want to get out and never come back. The sex industry encompasses so many variations on how to get to the punchline of ass showing (domination! hooking! lap dances! let me count the ways!) and so many kinds of people who get in it for such different reasons and with different options for getting out. The possible experiences in the

sex industry are so complicated and contradictory, there is no way to describe it without a multiplicity of voices. *Working Sex* includes pieces that clash not just in content but also in form. Experienced, experimental, poetic or pornographic, angry or academic, the pieces complement each other, and through their differences begin to articulate a fuller picture of the amazing humans who populate the mysterious landscape of this business.

the fisherman

Amber Dawn

You can sit in a whorehouse and breathe, until the stink of cigarette smoke and fried delivery food, rubbing alcohol and latex and cheap scented candles, of hairspray and afro sheen, of cock and cunt everywhere disappears, and you think you are breathing fresh air.

You can talk with the girl wearing only a bra and panties while she dumps Cover-Girl foundation over her stretch marks (from childbearing), two scars (botched boob job), and knife wounds (compliments of her man) about matters of the heart and decide that she is definitely, yes definitely giving you sound advice.

You can help that same girl lift a drunken man off of the bed and carry his sloppy body out the door into the parking lot. You can watch her rifle through his pockets for money before leaning him up against the hood of his own car.

You can wear her clothes when she feels like being nice to you. Dresses that are nothing more than a tiny tube of shiny fabric. Dresses so small that either your ass is halfexposed or your nipples are popping out.

You can levitate six inches from the floor, held up by clear plastic stiletto heels and the ability to ignore aching feet.

You can do all of these things and not really feel like a whore. You can even jerk off a few men who close their eyes and say nothing to you. Afterwards you can rub the money in between your index finger and thumb not yet realizing that, indeed, you are a whore.

Such is the state of Sharon Margaret Murphy, thirtyseven years of age, purple glitter lipstick, asking herself, “Shouldn’t this feel more dirty?” But Sharon is only six days new to Eve’s Escape Massage and Steam. And during those six days Sharon mostly paraded around in borrowed outfits, watching the other younger girls break and turn. Really though, more important than any of this, Sharon has Chloe to paint her toenails and flat iron the bad perm from her hair, Chloe to share soda and *Cosmo* quizzes and stories about men and demons from the past. Sharon has Chloe to make prostitution feel like one big slumber party.

Now there is one characteristic inherent to a slumber party—that after some time the dawn will come. Today, Sharon’s sixth day in the profession, the dawn came in the form of Chloe stumbling back into the staff room, wrapped in only a towel, her lipstick moved from her mouth to a smudge across her chin. Her blond bombshell clip-on ponytail a limp mess, like roadkill, in her left hand. Sharon’s eyes grow wide with concern. Chloe flashes a quick smile; she is not looking for sympathy.

“Lookin’ pretty tight, Chlo. Like you been fucked raw or somethin’,” says Tia Lee without turning away from the *The Jerry Springer Show*.

“I can’t do it,” Chloe says, “I’ve been in there two hours already. And he wants to extend again.”

“Who?” asks Sharon.

“The Fisherman.” Tia Lee lazily points the remote at the TV, turning up the volume.

“He’s got money still,” Chloe says.

“I ain’t going in there,” Tia Lee states flatly. I already saw him once today. I had to pretend I couldn’t speak English just to get out of that room. Tell him to go back to the fuckin’ sea. Or send her.” She waves the remote in Sharon’s direction.

“What’s wrong with him?” asks Sharon.

“He’s got coke dick,” says Tia Lee flatly. “And he talks, you know what I’m saying, ‘tight pussy wet pussy pink pussy chocolate pussy my fingers in your pussy pussy fuckin pussy’ the whole time. Caress says he pissed on her this one time. One minute she is pulling it, right, then the next he is just fuckin pissing everywhere. Sick shit if you ask me.”

“Come meet him!” Chloe grabs Sharon’s wrist and starts to pull her from the sofa.

The Fisherman sits on a wicker chair that is too small to hold a man his size. Naked but for a white hand towel thrown over his groin. Curls of black hair cling to his chest like algae to rock. The same smell of sweat floods the room.

“I have to go home now. I brought the new girl to see you,” says Chloe. “You be nice to her, okay? Treat her like a lady.” Chloe picks up a billfold from the nightstand. “So you’ll be staying another hour then?” she asks. The Fisherman starts to tug himself under the towel. Scratching his nose with his other hand, he takes a series of quick short breaths. His eyes seem to be going in two different directions, one on Sharon and the other on his billfold. “I’ll just get the money out for you,” Chloe pulls out two brown bills, slow and deliberate for the Fisherman to see she’s not pinching an extra hundred.

“Only half an hour,” he says in a gurgly voice as his towel drops to the floor. He shakes his near-erection in his hand. “I’ll tire this old girl in no time.”

“Okay,” says Chloe. “I’ll just give her two hundred to start off with. That’s fair.” She holds up the money, then places the billfold back on the night table. She smiles weakly as she gives the money to Sharon, and the room darkens as she closes the door. Sharon notices all the table lamps have been moved to the floor. The lighting throws the Fisherman’s shadow up the wall onto the ceiling.

“Come here,” he says. Sharon takes a step forward.

“Take off your dress.” Sharon pulls herself out of the tight Lycra dress.

“You don’t wear a bra?” the Fisherman asks, eyeballing her puckered nipples.

“Most of the time I do,” Sharon starts to explain.

“You’re not wearing one now because you want me to think you’re a dirty slut.” He nods deliberately as he says this.

After years of being made to watch bad pornography with ex-boyfriends, Sharon is aware that there is only one possible reply,

“That’s right. I am a dirty slut.”

The Fisherman flops his dick in her direction and she comes to him. She grabs a condom from her purse, and with some effort, stuffs his limp dick into it. Sharon has never blown bagged limp dick before. She tries to compare it to something. A mouthful of water balloon? No. A bag of melted Smarties? Hmm . . . No. Maybe a sock monkey’s arm. She decides that she prefers hard over soft. So it is too hard to control. It goes wherever it wants, butting up against her back molars, picking a fight with her tongue. The Fisherman pushes on Sharon’s head.

“All the way in,” he groans. “Get it nice and hard for me. You want the big cock. Tell me how much you want it.”

“I want it,” Sharon mumbles, holding the Fisherman’s dick in between her teeth as she speaks. Her forehead, now a receptacle for his sweat, slaps against his stomach. Her knees become one with the cheap shag carpet. She watches the clock from her peripheral vision, the second hand barely moving. And just when her gag reflex makes her eyes start to water the Fisherman’s dick solidifies. Suddenly

he is standing upright. Knocks Sharon onto the floor.

“Get on the bed,” he says, stepping over her. Sharon, dizzy from the ebb and flow of sucking cock scans the dark room for a bottle of lubricant. The Fisherman slaps the mattress with one hand, his other hand clutching his balls.

Aware that the condom’s lubricant has been completely sucked off, and equally aware that she is so repulsed by this bloated man, perspiring brine and beached upon the bed, that her vagina has sealed itself shut, Sharon searches the room once more, then gives in to his urgency. She lies down and spreads her legs.

“Pussy,” says the Fisherman as he rolls on top of her. Then, as Tia Lee forewarned, the pussy mantra begins: He describes different colors and shades, states of pussy being, pussy synonyms, and three word subject-verb-object sentences, the subject always being pussy, such as pussy squirting juice, pussy eating cock. Except that Sharon’s pussy wasn’t eating anything. Sharon’s pussy spat out the Fisherman’s waning erection minutes ago. She reaches down and tries, unsuccessfully, to redirect him. Holding it in her hand she waits for it to come to life once more. It doesn’t. Still, the Fisherman marches on to the beat of the pussy. Sharon does not ponder the strength of imagination that allows the Fisherman to feel that he is giving it to her hard and nasty. She does not decide that he is a liar, or a fool, or practicing some sort of bastardized tantric meditation. Instead she opts to join him. To abandon this ship of failed erections and half-hour time slots and dive into the deep blue of her mind.

It is an uneasy transition from reality to fiction. Although Sharon finds herself briefly in daisy fields and flying through space, she keeps returning to her soggy and dismal position beneath the Fisherman. She looks up at his face, sees a ring of dried blood around his left nostril, and shivers. She closes her eyes and tries to sing to herself. Sadly, the theme song from Flipper gets stuck in her head. Then, from somewhere, a slow and heavy tempo descends upon her. A rock anthem from the not-too-distant past beckons her like a pied piper of disassociation. There is no resistance, she gives herself to the dark rhythmic guitar and precision drumming . . .

Everything seems different. Now the shadow of him moving repetitiously on top of her is a dance of dark and light, of purples and greens upon the ceiling. Her legs, spread so wide, now span the entire room, knocking down walls, kicking holes in the roof, letting the stars fall in to the room. And there is Chloe, flashing beautifully behind Sharon’s eyes. And when there is Chloe, Sharon feels her pelvic muscles tighten and her back arch. The Fisherman, still held in her left hand, has managed to flop his way inside her inner lips. Her clit aches from the friction. Sharon wonders, *Maybe this is what it’s like to fuck another woman.* The sweet and painful wanting between her legs. The weight pressed against her body. Images of Chloe come faster than Sharon can manage. She touches the Fisherman’s skin and it is soft, and it is hers. A mix between a moan and a gasp of shock leaves Sharon’s lips. She tries to recover, desperately inserting images of Jon Bon Jovi and Rambo’s glistening brow. But Chloe is unmoving. Chloe with the tiny baby hands and squeak-toy laugh. Chloe whose lips move as she reads her books of poetry in the staff room. Chloe who squeezes Sharon’s arm when she is excited. Chloe going round in her head like a chant. Like the Fisherman’s pussy mantra. *Pussy . . . Chloe . . . pussy . . . Chloe . . . pussy . . .* Without the money and the clock ticking and words like whore and trick, they are just two people held captive by unrealized desire, doing whatever they can to break free. *Pussy . . . Chloe . . . pussy . . .*

Bruce LaBruce

Sauntering into an international magazine store recently, I caught a glimpse of a row of a dozen magazines with covers graced by scantily clad females posing in provocative positions which would tend to signify, by the conventions of almost any civilization on earth, pornography. I took a few steps back and looked up at the store's sign to check that I hadn't wandered into a dirty bookstore by mistake. But no, it was indeed a regular retail outlet selling mainstream periodicals. When exactly, though to myself luridly, did the world become so smutty? I felt my cheeks flush. Could I, Bruce LaBruce, international pornographer, be blushing?

Well, actually, let's not forget that I am, according to the title of my premature memoirs published a few years back, *The Reluctant Pornographer*, which may explain my ambivalence toward the notion of pornography taking over the free world.

Let's get one thing straight, or at least as straight as an intercontinental homosexual icon can manage: I don't watch porn. I don't collect it, I don't keep tabs on the latest porn stars and their exploits, I don't even incorporate it into my sex life. One reason for this may be that like many gay men I tend to live my life as if I were a porn star anyway, so passively watching it becomes almost redundant. Another reason may be that I encounter enough "found pornography" in the regular world—those quotidian ad hoc images which can be utilized as jack-off material: black gangbangers, clothes scissored off, operations in the emergency room of *Trauma: Life in the ER*, for example, or Eddie, the hot, one-legged house member of *Big Brother* lying shirtless in bed, or, in a pinch, even good old-fashioned men's gymnastics. I find these images, or the amateur pornographic self-portraits that everyday people send me over the Internet, much more sexually stimulating than your average adult entertainment video.

But wait a minute—I'm a porn star. Or at least, as someone who has made a number of sexually explicit avant-garde films in which he has performed oral sex and sodomy, I've been stuck with the epithets "porn star" and "pornographer." Shouldn't I be steeped in a world of split beaver, gang bangs, and leather slings? And shouldn't I be immune to the moral ambiguities engendered by such staples as bestiality, rape fantasies, and snuff?

It's a strange phenomenon that since I crossed that dark threshold into the adult netherworld, the ethereal region inhabited only by those who have dared to commit their sexual practices to celluloid or videotape for public consumption, I'm not supposed to blush or get embarrassed or presumably feel any other normal human emotions, especially vis-à-vis sex. For me, nothing could be further from the truth. Although I consider myself merely an artist who works in pornography, it's still a world that I've had to negotiate through, and I've discovered it's not one in which you can survive for long without a normal set of human responses, and yes, a strong moral compass. With so much emphasis lately on the mainstreaming of pornography and on the blurring of the line between art and porn, very little attention is being paid, particularly by those who are indulging in it, to the depth and darkness of the sexual imagination and the implications of toying with the dark side. The multibillion-dollar pornography industry, which nonetheless still operates as a kind of dirty little secret, is nothing less than an adjunct of the collective unconscious, and to bring it to the surface, to mainstream it, may be unleashing something we're not prepared to handle. Think Pandora's box.

Back in the last decade, when gender studies and postmodern courses on desire introduced academics to the milieu of sex trade workers and pornographers, there was a tendency to overvalue these phenomena and to confer iconic status on their denizens. Some academics I knew in fact literally segued into various sex trades as part of their research, often with disastrous results. The making of pornography or the practice of prostitution unavoidably becomes a demystifying experience where one learns quickly that there is nothing particularly noble or glamorous about getting fucked for money. As I stood on the set of my first “legitimate” porn movie and found myself obliged to wait over and wipe the ass of one of the performers who was experiencing a little anal leakage, I didn’t feel particularly glamorous. Once a participant in the sex trade, you must also be prepared for the inevitable wall of moral disapprobation that you will at some point run up against, a cold disapproval that may come from the most surprisingly liberal sources. Factor in all the other annoying occupational hazards—STDs, emotional instability, the ubiquity of drugs in the industry—and you may find yourself longing, like Kim Novak in *Bell, Book and Candle*, for a life a little more humdrum.

But I reckon today we’re supposed to be beyond all these mundane, practical considerations. The debate raging now is about aesthetics, about how pornographic images are mediated in the mainstream, and about the lexicon that has developed to accommodate this imagery. It’s all very trendy.

I’m quite willing to bracket everything I’ve said thus far about pornography (I certainly didn’t intend to be an alarmist) and consider the aesthetic dimension for a moment, because I think that’s what ultimately civilizes porn and makes sense of it. The fact that 95 percent of the pornography that is produced today is unwatchable pap can be directly attributed to the advent of video and the concomitant decline of aesthetics. When pornography was being produced exclusively on film in the ‘60s and ‘70s, the emphasis on camera style and narrative and the formal mediation of content—these artistic considerations—were easily as important as the capturing of the sexual moment, which today has become the singular, all-consuming focus.

The digital revolution in general has ushered in an era of literalism, an unimaginative unity of style and substance that reduces meaning to a set of monolithic stylistic imperatives devoid of any complex interplay between the two. The notion that formal aspects may engage content in such a way as to produce contradiction or paradox or synthesis has been subsumed by the slavish capitulation of meaning to technology and production, to pure form. This is probably one of the reasons why the signifiers of the mainstream entertainment industry and of the adult film industry have started to become somewhat indistinguishable. Their shared fixation on the means of production instead of on the production of meaning has resulted in a somewhat dumbed-down, sexually extreme aesthetic proven to be the most commercially viable: sex sells. Mainstream stars and porn stars alike are forced to conform to the same hypersexualized image, regardless of the nature of the product they’re currently promoting. It’s a bland standardization of sexuality which has little or nothing to do with liberal or progressive attitudes towards sex.

So for me, when talking about the new incorporation of pornography into art and the mainstream considerations of desire and pleasure, whether sexual or aesthetic, have become a little outdated and naive. (“Desire,” like “gender,” seems like such an antiquated, ‘80s term today—just a phase, I suppose, like the hula hoop.) My initial motivations for getting into pornographic representation, back when I was a punk in the ‘80s making underground fanzines and experimental Super-8 mm movies, were not only aesthetic, but also political and, well, revolutionary. I was a sexual idealist. My work

since has been as much about the intersection of race and class with homosexual representation as about the filming and photographing of hot, sexy boys, as much about examining sexual stereotypes and iconography as about getting off. I can't deny that there was pleasure in the text, but the text itself was always as important. Audiences today, however, are so inured to the blandification of extreme sexual imagery that it no longer has that same kind of subversive impact. It's just meat now.

smile you've just been dominatrixed

Ana J

My phone pounded and flashed from the coffee table. "Welcome to the Jungle" was blaring, which meant Ellen was calling. I decided not to answer. I'd been sitting on my couch for the past ten minutes, staring at the ripped seam of the throw pillow on my lap. I felt ugly and cartoonish. I tried to laugh to myself out loud, but it sounded contrived. I rolled my eyes. I lifted up my arms and put them down again. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be doing.

It had been one hour since Darren came by to drop off my black and pink shoes. The broken one was with the permanent scuff marks around the heel. One hour ago, he threw his real genuine silver ID bracelet into the street. It slid across the pavement and disappeared into the darkness. The ID bracelet had been a gift from his grandmother, who had been recently murdered. He immediately regretted the hastiness of his decision. We had been repeating ourselves. Our argument, as usual, seemed unauthentic.

I was sitting in the middle of the alley, in an olive and beige canvas foldout chair. The chair was his and I was giving it back. It was recently retrieved from my basement, where it had been buried underneath a pile of burnt-out tiki torches. It was now time for us to give each other's things back. He was slumped against the ledge of a very low window. Due to the complaints from my downstairs neighbor, we had transplanted our theatrical argument to this alley half a block down the street.

I was yelling, saying that he never really knew me at all. He looked distracted and said something totally unrelated. He reached into his pocket. His hand was clenched tight around something shiny. He held it out to me anxiously. I stood up and threw my cigarette on the sidewalk. He wasn't listening to me. He never really did. He only liked hearing the sound of my voice when I was angry. Or watching my eyes when I spoke.

"I don't want that. Whatever it is, I don't want it," I said angrily. I turned and began to walk toward my house.

"Please, take it." he begged.

I pictured him standing behind me with his arm outstretched, and I wanted to run. I knew he had thrown it even before I heard the tiny metal chain rattle across the concrete. I listened to it slide across the ground for a moment, then stop. He sighed dramatically, and then there was silence. I quickly walked up the steps to my building and locked the door behind me. I was still for a moment, listening for footsteps, but there were none. I slumped with relief.

darren had been studying up on professional domination every night for the past four weeks. He had finally come to the conclusion that our disaster of a former relationship had been nothing but a scam. He decided that he had been tricked, that I had tricked him. That I had "dominatrixed" him without his consent. It was hard to take it seriously at first. I had no idea that he had been spending hours on his computer every night. I didn't know that he had been scheduling fake appointments with local mistresses, making elaborate inquiries, trying to figure out exactly what a guy could expect for \$250 an hour.

Then the text messages started. He bombarded me daily with ridiculous messages, each one more

offensive than the last:

~~“Yeah, power fucking destroy men, makes us love you so you can ruin our lives. Really fuckin cool, yeah feminism.”~~

“I only want to be with you, I’m sorry I can’t make you happy.”

“Sorry my dick was not big enough to make you a powerful strong woman. If I kill myself you will be truly fucking powerful. I loved you, and I am shit to you.”

I never meant to tell Darren I was a dominatrix, I just blurted it out one day. It was late afternoon and we had spent most of the morning at the beach. We were buying beer at the corner store, on our way to a barbeque. While we were in the store, I smiled at him and said, “You know, I feel like we are really starting to be friends, and it’s nice.”

He smiled and looked distracted. “Did you know I used to be a dominatrix?” I said to the back of his head as he reached into the cooler and grabbed a six-pack. He closed the glass door slowly. I felt my stomach tighten. For some reason I wanted to laugh, but didn’t. Instead, I quickly told him I was retired. That I had just done it for a while a few years ago. And that I didn’t really do it anymore. And that was that.

I was, of course, still working professionally at the time. Very much so. I had been throughout most of our relationship. It was, I firmly believed, my right to take care of myself. That was my business and it was none of his. As a matter of fact, I had no interest in discussing my job with anyone. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing to discuss. Especially not with him. The thirty-two-year-old emotionally unstable alcoholic. The adult infant. Just telling him that I was a retired dominatrix had been such a fiasco. He didn’t have the capacity to understand. So I made a choice. You see, I did actually like him. In fact, I helped him. I confronted him constantly, even though I knew he would repeat his behavior. Like a client, confrontation made him feel better. He asked me to please help him get his life under control. To show him how to behave. He actually said that. He said I was the only reason he had stopped drinking, even though I knew that he hadn’t. I played along even though I smelled beer on him all the time. I pretended not to notice. I accepted his generic displays of affection. That’s what made him happy. He gave me rides. He bought me things. He felt needed. I thought we had a mutual understanding. I never lied about my feelings for him. He just didn’t believe me. He wanted something different.

“Welcome to the Jungle” began to blare from my phone again. This time I answered. “Where you been, bitch?” Ellen demanded. “Ugh, these shoes are driving me crazy today. What are you doing on Sunday? Jim is in town, and he wants to see both of us.”

Jim is in his late forties, and he enjoys business casual. Jim has been embezzling money from the company for years. Ellen and I find this out one day by eavesdropping on a private phone call. We don’t know what to do with this information. On the one hand, we could do the right thing and turn him in. We might be rewarded with a hefty bonus or a promotion. But on the other hand, this is the kind of information that people would kill to protect. Some people would do anything to make sure their secrets are kept. And I mean anything.

Ellen and I think about this. We discuss it over coffee. We have a girly pajama-party-and-pillow-fight talk about it. *What Should We Do About Jim?* we wonder as we braid each other’s hair. Should we rat him out? If he knew that we knew, we could get him to do just about anything we want, Ellen points out as she rubs lotion on my legs. I confess that I am a little nervous about the whole thing. I tell Ellen I have been really stressed out lately planning my lesbian sister’s bachelorette party. She

getting gay married in June to a Brazilian lingerie model.

~~The next day Ellen invites me over for a surprise. I am thinking she must have just closed the Rogers account, because she sounds so excited on the telephone. I stop by the store and pick up a bottle of champagne. I slip on my sensible heels and smooth my taupe hosiery. I pat my hair into place and straighten my librarian glasses. I knock on Ellen's door softly. I call out to her, but there is no answer. The front door is unlocked so I let myself in.~~

I call out to her again.

No answer.

I see lingerie lying everywhere. I almost turn to leave but then I realize that it is not Ellen's lingerie. She and I have always shared and traded panties, and I know about every single thong and white cotton panty that she owns. In fact we just love going shopping for panties together at expensive stores. We model them for each other and test the items for durability and elasticity.

Suddenly I hear a door open, and Ellen comes up from the basement. She is dressed for work. Her hair and makeup are impeccable. She looks stunning and severe. "Well, hello Sylvia!" she says with a smile. "Come here, I want to show you something." I wonder what the hell is going on. Is Ellen having some sort of lesbian experience that she wants me to get in on?

I start to think maybe this has nothing to do with the Rogers account. I follow Ellen down to the basement. She opens the door, and I explode with laughter. I just can't help myself.

There is a strange woman in the room. She is facing away from me, and she is dressed all in pink like some grotesque little princess. Her golden blonde tresses cascade down her shoulders, gleaming in the dim light of the basement. A sparkly crown glitters from the top of her head. I gasp. She is wearing spiked high heels and white fishnet stockings. Her waist is cinched tight with a corset. My eyes become moist. A new wave of laughter creeps up my throat. Is that a magic wand she's holding? I burst out giggling. I think about Ellen kissing this woman who dresses like the tooth fairy. I begin to feel like I am losing control of myself. I am screaming with laughter, and I just can't stop.

I look over at Ellen, and try to apologize. Was she smiling? She was! "Sylvia," she says to me, trying to maintain her composure. "I want you to meet Jenna. Jen-na!!" she calls out in a singsong voice. "Say hello to Sylvia!"

When Jenna turns around, I just lose it. I scream with laughter. Jenna's eyelashes are enormous and silver. Her eyebrows are plucked perfectly and are arched very high. I feel tears coming to my eyes. I bite my lip and snort.

I look at Jenna through squinted eyes. My jaw drops. Suddenly, I recognize her. It's Jim, from the office! Could it be? Jim? In a tutu?! It is! It's more than I can take. I explode with peals of laughter once again. I howl. I scream. I laugh like it is the funniest thing I have ever seen in my life. Imagine! A man in women's clothing! Can you imagine? I fall forward and clutch my stomach. I try to speak but cannot make out any words through the laughter.

Ellen turns to me proudly. "Now we have the perfect entertainment for your sister's lesbian bachelorette party. Because guess what?" Ellen points at the tooth fairy. "Jenna is a lesbian, too!" This information starts me off into hysterics again, and after another ten minutes of laughing heartily, Ellen and I make Jenna prance daintily around the room. Ellen tells me that Jenna has been rehearsing song numbers for the party. Before I even have time to react, Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive" is thumping from the stereo, and Jenna begins lip syncing, masturbating, and dancing seductively around the room.

"You call that a feminine walk?" I screech. "My dog walks more femininely." More laughter. Ellen and I kiss each other on the lips and giggle.

"Are you supposed to be masturbating?" we demand. "That's not how girls masturbate, rub your

clit!”

~~I continue to scream and laugh wildly. Tears are streaming down my face. My head is pounding.~~ Ellen shoots me a secret look of sympathy and sits next to me. We put our arms around each other and laugh some more. We laugh and laugh as Jenna launches into Christina Aguilera’s “Genie in a Bottle.” We get up and take turns pinching and groping Jenna. She blushes and apologizes profusely. At one point, to everyone’s surprise, I slap her right across the face, because I suspect she is looking up my skirt. Seeing her shocked expression makes me start laughing all over again.

Jenna comes all over herself, all over her cotton candy- pink tutu. Ellen and I are delighted and disgusted. I am still chuckling and commenting on the ridiculousness of Jim’s appearance. “Wow Jim.” I say suddenly, shaking my head. “Seeing you in women’s clothing was quite possibly one of the most shocking and hilarious things I have ever seen in my whole life.” Jim smiles. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. Don’t worry, your little secret is safe with me.” I kiss him on the cheek, and laugh as I go the way up the stairs.

It isn’t until I am completely out the front door of the house that I fall silent. I run into the street and flag down a cab. My vision feels blurry from the pain in my temples. I throw myself into the backseat and begin digging around in my bag. I find a bottle of water and a giant bottle of ibuprofen. I swallow three and try to direct the driver to my house. I have partially lost my voice and can barely speak.

As the driver pulls over in front of my house, my phone begins to beep and flash. I have a text message from Ellen. The message says, “He loved you. He wants to see us again. You got \$300 for that, by the way. You can pick it up tomorrow.” I flip my phone shut and jump out of the cab.

As I sat on my couch clutching the beat-up throw pillow and the phone, I noticed that ten minutes had gone by. Ellen was saying something to me, but I was barely listening. She was telling me that Jim was in town, and wanted to see us again. She asked me when I would have some free time to rehearse before Sunday.

“And this time,” she told me sternly, “he wants there to be more laughing. And wants you to accuse him of sleeping with your lesbian sister at her bachelorette party. Three-hundred bucks for one hour. Are you there?”

I wasn’t. I was somewhere else. I was standing on the street. I was thinking about how I left my gold earring at Darren’s house. From the pair I got for my birthday when I turned thirteen. I was so proud of myself for keeping them so long. Why did I wear them to his house? Why was I still wearing them at all? I should have had them locked up in a box or something. I was so upset when I lost them. Darren promised he would search for it every day, but he never found it. I’m sure it was in his house somewhere.

Maybe I would look for his bracelet tomorrow, and mail it back. Probably not.

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