

Shelley Stoehr

Girls! Girls! Girls!

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In the early 1990's, when I told people in New York City that I was moving to San Francisco, the sentiment I heard most in return was, "I could never live where there are earthquakes." The second most frequent response had been in the form of a quote, purportedly from Mark Twain: "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco." So, like everyone else, I layered my clothing, especially in the summer, to accommodate days that might range from a brisk 50°F in the early morning to a near-balmy 75° in the afternoon, then drop down to the low 60's at sunset, and finally continue through the night at around 50° again.

Raising the collar on my jacket to cut the chill of the night breeze, I looked up at the marquee: Girls! Girls! Girls! it read in bright lights, like the lyrics from that old Mötley Crüe song.

Inside, I let my eyes adjust to the dark for a moment. I approached the counter. Though I was new to San Francisco, I knew how things worked. *Deep breath. Go!*

"Hi, I'm Sheila," I said. "I'd like to audition to dance."

I'd graduated from college a half-year early, in December of 1990, during a severe economic recession, and jobs were extremely scarce. As an artist—a choreographer, dancer, and writer—I had really wanted to live in New York City—it had been my lifelong dream. And so, first determined, then desperate, I took the train in from Long Island and walked the streets of Manhattan a neighborhood at a time, applying for restaurant work and opportunities from the want ads. To my despair, nobody wanted to hire me, not even to bus tables. It was a hard time to be just starting out in the world—frustrating and frightening. My college major had been in modern dance, so I even tried to make my living street dancing, setting up a boom box alongside an open guitar case (for tips) in the Times Square subway station.

The concrete ground was cold and filthy with the residue of thousands of feet, and the smell of urine was everywhere. As I danced, my pink ballet slippers turned gray. One woman stopped and told me that what I was doing was beautiful, and occasionally, someone would drop money into the guitar case, but to most passersby, I was just another crazy person in the subway station. Nonetheless, I was determined not to give up and continued dancing. The cold and damp seeped through my thin tights and leotard and settled deeply into every bone. The pee smell was part of me now.

In the end, I left after two excruciating hours with a sore body chilled through and only about \$20 in earnings for what had been very hard physical effort, not to mention the courage it had taken to be that publicly vulnerable in the first place.

I took the subway to 34th Street, where I would walk to Penn Station to catch the train back to my parents' house on Long Island. The racket of the car bumping and rumbling over the tracks provided a rhythm for the

pep talk I was giving in my head—don't cry, it's not a big deal, you're fine, don't worry, you can do this, you can handle this, you're not a failure, this isn't the end of the world, please don't cry!

When I came up from the subway at the intersection of Broadway and 33rd Street, I had no idea what to do next. I would never be able to support myself. I was a loser and a failure. But as I turned away from the wind to light a cigarette, I noticed a neon sign on a building to the east that I'd never seen before, probably because I'd always turned west toward Penn Station when I got off the subway. I crossed the street to get a closer look, and there on the door was another sign: "Dancers Wanted." Without pausing to think about it—because that might have stopped me from doing it—I pulled open the door.

To my joy and horror, I got the job.

The next night, I showed up with the best costume I could come up with in a day—a black bra and thong, short skirt, and a pair of knee-high go-go boots (though the heels weren't high enough to qualify as stripper heels, they would have to suffice).

The dressing room was cramped and bright, with white lights bordering a smudged mirror full of the reflections of faces. Beneath the mirror was a narrow counter cluttered with balled-up tissues, various makeup tools and trays, and other accoutrements of beauty. The Formica was old and worn and dusted with cigarette ash—nothing in the space was very clean or nice. Music throbbed just outside the door. I shrank into a back corner, trying not to get in anyone's way or even to be seen at all. I listened. I tried to learn, because I didn't have a clue what to expect or how to behave.

"Hey new girl," said a skinny punk with shaggy, bleached blond hair and a line of crystalline studs climbing up the lobe and around the entire curve of her left ear, a spike in her nose.

The room buzzed with energy and the rise and fall of women's voices. I looked around, unsure.

Me? I thought. Yes, me. She means me.

"Where'd you work before?" the blond asked as she tweezed an eyebrow, friendly if a little bit mocking in tone.

I shook my head and blushed and said, "This is my first night."

"*Ever?*"

Gulp. Nod.

A tall black woman introduced herself as Princess, smiled, and offered to show me the ropes. I was so grateful for her kindness that I almost cried.

"What's your name?" she asked me, her voice low and smooth and thick like velvet.

When I told her 'Shelley,' she chuckled. "I mean your *stage* name," she said. Then her look darkened and became serious. "Never use your real name here. Never let them know who you really are."

I chose the stage name *Sheila* because it was close enough to Shelley that if I forgot where I was and spoke my real name—as happened several times, the first week—I could quickly correct myself and no one would much know the difference.

That first club was a "champagne bar." We performed topless in groups of three on the stage behind the bar, teetering on heels and with one hand on the mirror behind us for balance because the stage had a slant to it. It was only a few feet deep, so there wasn't a lot of room to move, still, just as when I'd performed in the Times

Square subway station, I threw myself into the dancing, and that made it okay. I became all body—thrusting hips and shimmying shoulders and goosebumps all over—with no consciousness. Plus, the lights were bright, so you couldn't really see the audience from the stage. It wasn't all that different from dancing alone in my bedroom (as I liked to do)—or so I told myself.

Occasionally, men would pass bills to us via the bartenders, but the stage wasn't our main source of income. We were expected to sit with customers between sets and to encourage the men to buy us drinks, for which we got a small cut—two dollars per non-alcoholic drink or twenty on a seventy-five-dollar bottle of fake "champagne" (which I hoped never to be offered because I wasn't too keen on the dark, cordoned off corner in which dancers sat with customers, supposedly only to share champagne). After my first set onstage, the punk girl from the dressing room told me that she could tell I was a trained dancer, but that I needed to chill out up there because the men didn't care about talent or skill, and it would be a long night. She warned me not to waste my energy. However, when she said that, in my mind I was like, but I *can't* stop dancing my best because that's how I'm going to survive this—by performing my heart out. To not do that would have meant suppressing my favorite parts of myself—the fierce optimist, the cute and energetic artist girl, and even the Little Toughie (a childhood nickname once given to me by a school principal because I was always hitting boys on the head with my lunchbox.)

Although I understood the need to dissociate from one's true self to survive the nastier parts of the job, I didn't want to be *entirely* someone else. I wanted to still be *me*. I was determined. If I was going to do this, then the job could never change me. I would always remain the same creative, emo-but-still-hopeful, brave young woman that I'd always been.

Soon, I had saved enough money to move to a loft in Brooklyn with my boyfriend Frank, a few doors down from a poultry slaughterhouse from which blood and feathers flowed and froze to the road in the wintertime, and across the street from an ice cream truck depot that injected a little bit of magic into the early evenings of summer, when the tinkling chimes of the trucks filled the air.

I lost my job at the midtown club following an incident wherein I convinced several of my fellow dancers to appear on shock-jock Howard Stern's TV show with me, performing in a dance I'd choreographed. We all called in sick to the club, and I was subsequently fired. Frank was happy about that, but I was worried about our rent and knew I'd have to find another club soon. However, because he'd been so awful about me working at the midtown club, I didn't tell Frank that I was looking for a new place to work.

I'd recently gotten a part-time day job teaching creative dance up in Harlem, and although it was not for much money and I still needed additional income to live on, teaching gave me enough financial wiggle room to be more particular about the next club I worked at. After trying a couple of the bigger clubs that had been popularized by the Howard Stern radio show and doing some travel stripping in upstate New York (yes, that's a thing), I ended up at Billy's Topless on 6th Avenue in Chelsea. I found out that shifts there were assigned through a booking agency's office, located in the historic Flatiron building, a 21-story wedge at the intersection where Broadway met 5th Avenue.

The ancient elevator groaned and twitched up to the 12th floor. The booking agent had a small, dark office that could have been a movie set for a noir detective agency—I half expected to see Veronica Lake smoking a long cigarette in the corner. The agent himself was a short stub of a man, indeterminately aged.

Perhaps because I was so young, he appeared to be simply *old*. Old and mean, with tiny knobs of features squashed onto a fist of a face. I don't remember his name or even if I ever knew it, but in my head, I called him Golum—*precious, oh my precious!* He wanted me to take my top off so that he could evaluate my worth topless. My neck prickled with embarrassment—it's one thing to take your top off while costumed and made-up in a dark club, but quite another to expose your breasts in some old dude's office in the middle of the day. But I bit back my shame and did it.

The agency took me on, but I didn't get a shift at Billy's because according to the agent, I didn't have "the look," meaning that I was too short and too skinny, and my breasts were too small. Part of me railed internally at his blunt insensitivity and sexism, but another, deeper part took the criticism in and filed it away in a mental cabinet where I stored a growing collection of hits to my self-esteem, not only from the comments I received on my appearance while working in the clubs, but also out in the world. I was frequently accosted by random men on the sidewalk or in passing vehicles calling out bold "compliments" and suggestions: nice tits, nice ass, hey baby, sit on this, suck on this, touch this. In fact, I used to joke (without really laughing) that I was harassed more outside on the streets of New York than I was inside the clubs—but on the street, I didn't get paid for it. My indignation at "acceptable" judgment by the patriarchy oddly helped make the job more palatable.

The agency sent me all over New York City for the next year. Frequently, I worked Friday nights at a bar in Queens called the Cozy Cabin. The Cozy Cabin was the only club I remember ever working at that had a female owner, an ex-nun (!) who would come in sometimes to check on us and make sure we weren't doing

anything too risqué—floor work was not allowed, which was the main drawback to the Cozy Cabin. ("Floor work" was crawling on and grinding against the floor, or, if a dancer was really tired, then sitting and leaning back with her legs spread, sometimes opening and shutting them in time to the music, but often just lazily posing and doing as little as possible, because either there was, like, one loser at the bar with his hand cupped protectively over his meager stash of bills, or it was three in the morning and our knees ached, our backs ached, and it felt like there were knives stabbing through the arches of our feet.) When she came in, the owner didn't speak to any of the dancers, but would communicate to us through the bartender as needed. If the owner looked at us at all, it was always with a glare of disdain and distrust—as if the second she let down her guard, we'd be gyrating all over the floor and probably having sex in the men's room. While most strip club owners are mean-assed, misogynistic pricks, it was unexpected coming from a *nun*! But the bartender—a goth with shiny black hair down to her ass—said that she wasn't surprised at all by the owner's cruelty because the bartender had gone to Catholic school and remembered a common punishment of being banished to the supply closet with just a pamphlet on masturbation to read. I laughed and asked what the pamphlet had been for—"to tell you what to do while you were in there?"

Meanwhile, during the day I went to school to become licensed in massage therapy, and I continued to teach dance to preschoolers. I studied and choreographed and performed modern dance. (I mean, that was why I was doing what I was doing, right? So that I could afford to do art.) In addition to dancing, I wrote and published my second young adult novel, loosely based on some of my experiences as a stripper (toned down for a YA market), which I titled *Weird on the Outside*—the sentiment being that everyone has weird idiosyncrasies on the inside, but strippers wear theirs on the outside. Much later, when I moved to L.A. after San Francisco, a

paperback copy of *Weird* got passed around from stripper to stripper across the city until I got it back dog-eared and worn a year later, having been lovingly read until it was coming apart at the binding.

Frank was also producing art—photographs and paintings.

That's almost all I can tell you about Frank. I remember the *events* of the eight years that I was with him, and I even remember his work—the canvasses drenched in vivid, clear colors and kaleidoscopic photo arrays—but I don't remember *him*. I hardly remember anything about him, the person.

I loved him, or at least I believed I did. We did everything together. Once, we biked from Brooklyn to Shea Stadium. Another time, we watched the sunrise on New Year's Day from the Brooklyn bridge. I remember drinking vodka and dancing with a bar full of old Russians in Brighton Beach. We liked Coney Island and Keith Haring, we watched MST3K on Saturday mornings, and we had a dog.

New York-Frank was mostly fine, I think. Certainly not that bad, and certainly I had a part in whatever wasn't right. He honestly didn't become abusive until ... well, no. Or well, maybe. I do remember that shortly before we moved to San Francisco, I was going to break up with him because he was becoming controlling and kind of mean, but then we went on vacation together, and I got really drunk in Reno, and he convinced me to marry him in the middle of the night at a 24-hour wedding chapel.

During the ceremony, the officiant had Frank repeat just one promise: to have and to hold from this day forward, until death do you part. But when it was my turn, the officiant's list went on and on, and I began to laugh, because was this for real? What a sexist jackass! When Frank glared at me, it only made my giggles worse, and when the officiant (who'd soldiered on despite my laughter) got to the last promise—"and cleave only unto him"—I completely cracked up and couldn't stop. I laughed through the kiss and all the way up the

aisle. I laughed until my stomach hurt. Frank was angry and in revenge, he later took a picture of me naked and passed out, spreadeagle on the bed in our hotel room—a picture that he then put into our wedding album and showed to two of his friends and his cousin, but I don't think anyone else.

At some point, I'd told Frank that I was stripping again (I'd softened the blow by buying him a stereo system, so he was less angry than you'd expect). It had been taking too much energy to maintain secrecy, energy that I was sorely in need of because the job was exhausting and wearing on me, not so much because of the sexual element as because of the difficulty of the hustle and trying to convince customers that my body and attention were worth a dollar. I remember listening to that Soul Asylum song, "Runaway Train": "How on earth did I get so jaded? / Life's mysteries seem so faded" and bursting into tears. But though I was aware that I was becoming jaded, there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it. So much of my energy was going into survival that there wasn't enough left over for me to change what was happening. I continued to do what I felt like I needed to do, on my own in more ways than I cared to be.

Although I felt comradery with my coworkers, the booking agency kept us moving around, no doubt intending to keep us from feeling solidarity that might have led to demands for equity. At the same time, Frank discouraged me from hanging out with and thus befriending any of the other women, and he didn't like me spending time with my friends from massage school, either. And so, I had no one to talk to about the more awful parts of my work in the New York clubs, such as the elderly man in Astoria who had thrown handfuls of coins at the stage because he wanted to see me crawl to pick up my tips, or the humorously absurd parts, such as working at Chuck's, a dive bar in the meat packing district with a corner stage built from raw two-by-fours and

half a sheet of plywood, where shifts ran according to meat cutters' hours, from 6am till 2pm. The bullnose of the bar had been slick with layers of fat transferred from customers' bloody aprons to the wood, and men sometimes tipped us with fresh cuts of meat instead of dollars.

San Francisco. It was dark in North Beach, and I walked fast, bending up my collar against the summer chill as I sought the Garden of Eden strip club. I remember old, unused trolley tracks in the road, a meat market with cheese balls hanging in the window, and an Italian bakery with pastries glowing palely on display. Girls! Girls! Girls! read the club's marquee.

It was as chilly inside as out on the street, the intent to make the women's nipples stand up and to keep the dancers from lazing around between sets, instead of what they were supposed to be doing, that is, selling seventy-five-dollar bottles of non-alcoholic champagne. Dancers at the Garden of Eden were only given one day off a week and one holiday off a year—Thanksgiving or Christmas, never both.

Because of that, I didn't take a job at the Garden of Eden, but the next day, applied at the Crazy Horse Gentleman's Club, downtown on Market Street. The Crazy Horse was new and housed in what appeared to be an old movie theater with red walls, rows of red, drop-down seats, and a small proscenium stage with a carpeted ramp and runway extending into the body of the theater like a long red tongue. Shiny brass railings about waist-high surrounded the stage and ran down the sides of the ramp, which I'd later use like parallel bars to do various acrobatics during my performances onstage. (The other women were always impressed and said that my stage shows were cute and creative.) I watched as a tall woman with a flip of brown hair climbed the requisite stripper pole then hung upside down, held by the clamp of her legs as she corkscrewed gracefully back to the stage floor.

Roxy was the "feature" performer, a frequent headliner whose name appeared on the marquee outside.

Meanwhile, the manager, a slim, handsome young man named Max with long curls of hair, low-hanging skater jeans, and a sexy English accent, showed me where to change for my audition.

Nerves singing on high alert, I took up as little space as possible in the dressing room, which was actually several rooms—one lined with gray, metal lockers such as you'd find in a gym or high school, one surrounded by mirrors and a counter where women clustered putting on makeup, and a third room with thin carpeting and sofas where more women relaxed and chatted, their laughter floating in the air like bubbles of champagne. Someone had a puppy. The air smelled of hairspray and marijuana. A small slip of a half-naked woman approached me, smiling. Paige, she told me was her stage name. She had tiny, high breasts with small beads of dark nipples and short, black bobbed hair that swung from side to side as she talked. Paige's heavily drawn cat's eyes glinted with bright interest. She held out a hand that I accepted and shook as if we were in an office, not near naked in a locker room. I hadn't brought music—I'd never before worked at a club where the dancers chose their own songs to which to perform—so Paige lent me a Portishead CD ("Give me a reason to love you / Give me a reason to be ... a woman.").

It was midafternoon and there were few customers. The music started, the DJ called for me to go on, and I parted the curtain, slipping out from backstage into the spotlight. This was the first time I'd danced onstage alone—in New York and New Jersey it had always been in groups. It took a moment to adjust to the sudden brightness of the stage, as the theater on the whole was quite dark. With red walls and red floor, it was like being inside a giant womb. Nervous but also committed, I ran my hands over my skin, touching my breasts,

stomach, hips. Max was a dark shadow in the rear of the club, making notes on a clipboard, I assumed rating me. (The economy was still so bad that even stripping jobs were hard to come by and very competitive.)

During the first song, I exposed my breasts, and when the second song began, I slid out of my skirt. When the third song began, naked and ala my previous formal dance training, I took long, gliding steps down the runway, Martha Graham style. Paige sat next to the stage while I auditioned, tossing dollars. Another woman joined Paige, tall, with a head full of pale-yellow hair that I later learned was a wig meant to hide the woman's more wiry, ethnic curls. I found myself smiling genuinely as I performed for them. After my set, I was hired, and Paige and Ruby became my first friends in San Francisco.

Frank's and my San Francisco apartment was in a gorgeous old pre-war building on Hayes Street, technically in Hayes Valley, an up-and-coming neighborhood that had been partially renewed after the Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed a freeway overpass running through the neighborhood several years before, displacing the prostitutes and drug dealers who'd plied their wares under it. Although we couldn't afford the gentrified section of Hayes Valley, we found a more affordable apartment a few blocks away, across the street from what we later learned was nicknamed, "The Pink Palace," a housing project scheduled to be torn down at some indefinite time in the future. The Pink Palace, we'd been told, was notoriously dangerous, but it seemed pretty tame for a housing project; its boxy, two-story buildings painted a pale pink that glistened in the sunlight like spun sugar. However, it soon became clear that the neighborhood was anything but tame—the first time I heard gunshots, I called the police, but when I gave my address, the dispatcher only sighed and said that they would "try to send someone out."

The cops never came. I went back to the bed to try and wake Frank, but he was passed out dead asleep, so I put my headphones on with music to drown out the world and cried. All I could think was that this was supposed to be a fresh start, but already it was worse than it had been living in New York.

Within a few weeks, I stopped calling the police when there were gunshots outside. Instead, I learned to pay attention to the cadence of the shots and following the final quick succession of shots that emptied the gun—because they always emptied the gun—I'd shut the shades, climb back into bed, and return to sleep. If that sounds I was hardening into someone I barely recognized—I was. But at the time, I was proud of the tough skin I was growing, and I hadn't been wearing it long enough for it to become as dark and heavy as it eventually did.

I became accustomed to violence not only on the street, but inside my home. One of Frank's favorite things to do on a Saturday night was to get me really drunk and then we'd listen to music and play darts, and it would be fine until it wasn't, and then he'd drag me down the hall to the bedroom—literally *drag* me. (Rug burn on the sides of my feet the next day, my voice husky from cigarettes and booze.) He was also fond of compelling me to have sex with him in semi-public places against my will, such as giving him a blowjob while he drove (in a convertible on the freeway) or letting him fuck me under a blanket on a public beach in exchange for him agreeing to pay his half of our utilities that month. But I know that Frank didn't think these things were abusive. Rather, he thought they were expressions of his love and a commentary on how beautiful I was. ("You should be happy that I want you so much," he often said, and I could tell that he believed it.) His insistence that it was love also made it harder for me to recognize what was happening. Even semantics would trip me up, for example, when he said he'd pay his portion of our bills if I had sex with him, it *sounded* like he

was offering to pay for sex, which he felt was okay, based on my job. But to me at the time, it was a threat—if I *didn't* have sex with him, then he'd allow our utilities to be shut off. Because he still isolated me quite a lot, I didn't have a lot of outside perspective, so I internalized everything he said. It was like he was raping my mind along with my body.

Please don't misunderstand and think that Frank was powerful or imposing. He was whiny and pathetic and failed at everything he tried to do, shame over which may have been what made him treat me so badly. But it also compelled me to want to take care of him and later made me question whether he was as bad as I thought. When I finally got up the courage to leave, I felt like a terrible person for abandoning him. I was ashamed of wanting anything better than the life we had together. But the women at the Crazy Horse pointed out that Frank was manipulative and controlling and though possibly unaware of it, an evil shit. Nonetheless, I was neither completely blameless nor powerless in the toxicity of our relationship. It was more that I was confused. I didn't understand the boundaries between what was mine—my body, my desires—and what belonged to someone else to appreciate, love, or use as they saw fit, whether that someone was Frank or a customer in a club or just the ever-present male gaze.

There were two main cliques of women working the day shift at the Crazy Horse: single mothers working while their young children were at school and the group of artists, students, and intellectuals with whom I hung around. One woman was a volunteer at the public library, another a graduate student and poet, and another an activist who'd previously worked in Africa, feeding refugee children. My closest friend, Nikita, was in business school. Ruby was an artist, as was Paige. (Ruby made Christmas cards one year with festive watercolor penises

on the fronts and holiday wishes inside such as "Jingle Balls" and "Deck the balls with boughs of holly.") My point is that I wasn't "slumming" at the Crazy Horse, as Frank often accused. Those women were astounding, exemplary humans I'm proud to have known.

As immersive and formative as my experiences exotic dancing were, I was still writing, quite a bit, in fact. I wrote and published my fourth book, *Tomorrow Wendy*. I reviewed young adult books for the San Francisco Chronicle, and I was a keynote speaker at a national conference on young adult literature. I also had a straight job as a massage therapist in a health club. Though Frank tried to keep me on a short leash, the influence of my new friends from the Crazy Horse meant that I was spending more and more time away from him. Nikita and I started going clubbing on Saturday nights, and Paige and I spent afternoons we had off at Osemo Women's Day Spa in the Mission district, where women-only could spend the day luxuriating in tubs and saunas for only \$7. Paige also taught me to surf.

We surfed and body boarded in Half Moon Bay, an inlet down the peninsula with calmer currents, warmer water, and gentler surf than the beaches in San Francisco proper. The sensation when I caught a wave, of skimming fast toward shore on my belly, riding a sheen of air compressed between the ocean and my board, felt like flying.

One afternoon when we arrived, the ocean was too crowded for amateurs, so Paige and I sat on a squat beach wall, ogling the cute, white-blond, tattooed surfer boys until near dusk, when the shoreline quieted, and we would no longer bother the real surfers with our ineptitude. We probably weren't the last surfers on the

isolated beach but were just about. By the time the sun began setting, we seemed to be the only ones left in the water. Paige rode a last wave in. I tried but missed mine.

The sun sank with unexpected speed into the horizon. Because the cove was isolated, and with no lights along the shore to guide or comfort me, I was suddenly alone on the water in the pitch-dark. I could neither see the oncoming waves nor the direction to shore nor even my own body, and the next several waves hammered me until I choked on sea water. The Pacific Ocean is a beast, and the boogie board attached by a cord to my wrist gave the ocean a large surface to grab onto, yanking my arm as if to pull it out of the socket, waves smashing me under and over and around, and for a moment, I nearly unhitched the Velcro wristband, but thankfully logic prevailed—*Shelley, it's a flotation device. You'll need it when you drift out to sea.*

Terrified, I clung to the boogie board, crying and sputtering.

"Are you okay?" said a voice in the dark, surprising me. "You look like you're in trouble."

I'd been ready to give up, to allow the ocean to do whatever it wanted to me, which was happening anyway, might as well accept my end. The stars had risen—though, no moon—and when I looked toward the voice, I saw the dim outline of a surfer-boy, floating on his board near me. He seemed to have come out of nowhere. For a moment, my pride flared, and I almost said that I was fine, but again, logic prevailed, and I said between breaths, "I don't know, which way the shore is, and I can't, see the waves coming."

The surfer-angel took hold of the nose of my board. "I'm going to point you toward shore and give you a push when the next wave comes. Hold your breath and hang on and don't let go until you're lying on the beach."

I nodded. He did as he'd promised, and I held on as instructed, tumbling and tossing in the waves, my eyes squeezed shut with daring faith, until—after what seemed like a long time but probably was not—I skidded to a stop on the sand. I was still lying there, shaking, still clutching the sides of the boogie board, when Paige ran toward me, crying, saying she hadn't known what to do—go get help or wait for me on the shore (remember, this was the 1990's, pre-cell phones)—Oh my god, Shelley, what *happened?*

I told her about the surfer who'd rescued me, and we looked for him to say thank you, but no one had come in with me, and Paige and I seemed to be alone on the beach. Later, I'd make up a proverb to accompany what had happened, one that expressed my hope at the time—that I wasn't going to become so hardened that I couldn't return to myself: *Every wave lets you up eventually, so just hold on and don't let go until you reach the shore.*

As had been the case at most other clubs where I'd worked previously, stage performances weren't the main event or how dancers made their money but were more of a preview geared to get customers to later pay for various types of other services and private dances. At the Crazy Horse, those services ranged from sitting with a customer and talking for five dollars a song, all the way up to an \$80-\$100 "private dance" in a single-occupancy booth, where hand jobs and other technically-illegal things occurred (probably not actual sex because it was the 1990's and the height of the AIDS crisis, but other than that, we all knew that some gross shit was going down in those booths; however, the only time the police ever busted the club was when they caught the dancers smoking indoors—go figure). Many of the services were conceived of by the dancers themselves as ways to make more money or simply to amuse ourselves during a slow day shift. Monica, who was on methadone and

regularly had her breasts surgically enlarged, came up with "wall dancing" (you don't want to know), and Renee, who had an impressive number of genital piercings, created a room for sex shows in which she was "fisted" (you *really* don't want to know) by Erica, a lesbian who had once been with a traveling carnival and had shared her trailer with the *lion*. The oddest—and most hilarious—of the Crazy Horse's entertainment options occurred in a small room rented out by Shavonne, a belly dancer with a pet pig who used to sit at the edge of a stage in her room with a speculum inserted in her vagina (usually with the Cranberries playing in the background: "Zo-o-ombie, zombie-ie-ie"). Men would line up to pay Shavonne something like \$50 apiece to peer through the speculum at her cervix. Surreal!

Management didn't care which room you worked in or how much you charged—we set our own minimums and policed ourselves. So long as you paid your "stage fee" (women had to pay \$175 a week for the privilege of working there) and showed up onstage to dance two, 10-minute sets per four-hour shift, they didn't much care what else you did or how much customers paid you to do it. The only absolute rule—which was enforced by management as well as us—was that men were not permitted to touch the women, not in any room and not for any reason, in fact, men were directed to sit on their hands. It was a safety issue more so than a moral one, but also served to maintain a power dynamic wherein we women retained some control over our bodies and actions. Whether or not it actually was a choice, it felt like one when we were the only ones doing the touching. Our agency made it bearable, especially when contrasted with the uninvited touches we'd encountered all of our lives as women living under the patriarchy.

I personally never gave a hand job (or touched customers with my hands anywhere, at all—it felt too personal) or starred in one of the many live sex shows, but I did wall dances, lap dances—all that shit. It was

survivable because my entire body would go numb. Sometimes alcohol helped with that, but even sober, I learned to detach and leave my body. I got really good at separating from myself. Sometimes I'd see my reflection in the mirror as I swayed and touched my hips and pushed my pelvis to within inches of some dude's face, and I didn't recognize myself—who was that tiny girl with the shuttered eyes and slack mouth, and where did *I* go?

Many years later, when I was long gone from San Francisco and long out of the sex trade, I heard a speaker who argued that women in sex work were degraded regardless of the "lies" we told ourselves about having power or control. I rejected the idea that I may have been a victim at my job. I thought to myself that the speaker must not have worked in the right place, with the right women, because despite the disgustingness of the work itself, we *laughed* a lot at the Crazy Horse, both at ourselves and at customers—though yes, it was a bit of a gallows humor—and we often entertained ourselves by playing pranks on the men. For example, there was a cheap wig shop across the street from the club that we frequented when bored, and sometimes we'd change wigs and pretend to be someone else, a favorite prank being to switch wigs and pretend to be each other to our regulars. (That prank was necessary to our emotional safety—regulars often treated us as if we were their real-world girlfriends, a fantasy that made them feel safe and cared for but messed with a dancer's head. Fooling customers into not recognizing us in different hair was a reminder and reassurance that we were fungible—thus, not real girlfriends, nor even genuinely friends.)

Once when a man tried to get handsy, Ruby pulled off her wig to swat him with it, which ended with the man rushing out of the club, traumatized. Another time, I swung around the stripper pole and my wig

accidentally came loose, flew off my head and through the air like some strange species of tropical bird, and landed in a horrified customer's lap. Having been professionally trained—the show must go on—I affected a lusty look as I slowly pulled out the bobby pins that held back my real hair, tossing them into the audience as if it were all part of my striptease. (Look! She's naked down to her scalp!) I guess my performance worked, because when I retrieved my wig from the customer's lap, he tipped me pretty well.

Of *course*, we laughed at the Crazy Horse. Being human is a funny thing.

As I've said, we also chose our own music, and sometimes the music to which we chose to perform was in itself a joke. I was fond of dancing to They Might be Giants—"Mr. Horrible / Mr. Horrible / We're not done with you yet, Mr. Horrible." Other times, I'd dance a sort of slow, erotic ballet to depressing Tori Amos music—"and this little masochist / is lifting up her dress." The favorite of many of the women was the Yeastie Girlz song, "You Suck" ("suck it hard, go doooooown baby), and my friend Nikita sometimes danced old-school burlesque to a song sung by the local drag queen Pussy Tourette, "If I can't sell it, I'm gonna sit back down on it / I ain't about to give it away." Nonetheless and in spite of our kidding, if a customer was polite, generous, and played by the rules, we were generally kind and sympathetic to their loneliness and misery (if you're going to a strip club in the middle of the afternoon, you're not a happy guy). For day shift women, it was often our compassion and empathy more so than our bodies that kept customers coming back.

One time while I was onstage, a regular stood up to proudly show off a tee shirt he'd made and was wearing that had my face printed across his extra-large belly with the caption, "Cuddlesome Sheila," surrounded by hearts. They brought us fancy chocolates and baked goods and jewelry and take-out food (bowls of ramen and shrimp from the Vietnamese restaurant around the corner, vegetarian burritos from Cancun Taqueria) and

sometimes even things they'd made. Most were less interested in us for sexual fulfillment than for our youth and vitality and above all, our *care*, so those things were what we sold most, and also what were the hardest to part with. (In the book, *Revoltin' Prostitutes*, by British sex workers Juno Mac and Molly Smith, they explain that some opponents to sex work incorrectly believe that sex without love takes something essential from a woman, like a piece of her soul. But it wasn't sex or simulations of it that took so much out of me; it was the emotional labor—I genuinely cared about making even my shittiest customers feel wanted, which created a cognitive dissonance that was exhausting and sometimes difficult to mediate.)

In spite of the freedom and agency and even love for each other that we had working at the Crazy Horse, we still had to endure a crazy, mean-assed boss. The owner, Jim, was big and cruel, an asshole and a threat who, besides being mean, was a crystal meth addict who would stay awake for nights on end coming up with ideas to improve business at the Crazy Horse. When Paul Verhoeven's movie, *Showgirls*, came out, Jim ranted that he wanted *his* club to look the way *that one* had. (To which Paige had joked, did he mean that he wanted a club full of actors and extras?) Often, Jim would pick up itinerant workers from a spot near the Embarcadero and have them build whatever he'd imagined and drawn on a napkin or in the margins of a take-out menu. Once, he had several rows of seats ripped out and replaced with six wooden circles, each about two feet in diameter and four inches high. Ruby stood in the center of one of the platforms and announced, "Beam me up, Scotty." We never figured out what the platforms were for, but we enjoyed watching customers trip over them in the dark for weeks, bouncing from platform to platform like pinballs. Another time, Jim had a 20-foot-high brass stripper pole installed. One end was secured by going down through a hole in the main stage, and the other end

disappeared into the high theater ceiling. Most of us took one look and said no freaking way, but Roxy's whole act was on the pole. As you might guess, the first time she swung around it, the top of the pole also swung—apparently it wasn't secured to much or perhaps to anything up above; it had been merely shoved up into the soundproofing ceiling tiles. When the pole moved from Roxy's weight, a ceiling tile came crashing down and broke against a customer's head. Hilarious!

In the mid-90's, a group of dancers from the Lusty Lady organized and started a union to fight for us and our rights to salaries instead of stage fees. As commendable as that was, when the stripper union won, my friends and I knew that we were done for. We knew that the owners—and Jim was considered to be one of the kindest and most accommodating—were nasty as fuck and would never allow their dancers to get one over on them. We were right. When the strippers won, requiring that we receive wages, several owners made use of a loophole that wasn't likely legal and didn't make sense when it was explained to us—sure, they'd pay us, but that meant that they could also withhold money against our estimated taxes, based not only on our paychecks but also on the owners' estimates of our tips. Of course, their estimations had no basis in reality. The owners had no idea what we earned in tips, nor did they care. Instead, they estimated how much to *claim* a woman made in tips so that they could then withhold her entire paycheck *and* make her additionally pay out from her tips in cash.

It was time for my friends and I to move on. Paige's husband's company had grown into a multimillion-dollar business, employing something like fifty people by that time, so she went back to being an artist and the wife of a tech mogul. Nikita finished college and got her MBA. I separated from Frank and moved to L.A., where I began to rebuild my life (I was still stripping and doing some dumbass, dangerous things, but I was also

beginning to re-learn who I was). Eventually, I married my current husband, had a baby, moved back east, and started my journey toward where I am today, an adjunct English instructor at a public university—my dream job.

There had been a book that came out when I was in high school titled *All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten*. As I look back over my nine years as a stripper, I sometimes joke to myself that all I needed to know, I learned in those clubs. Those beautiful, creative, strong women taught me to accept myself, to allow that to make me brave, and how to shine in spite of the ugliness of a situation or circumstances. These are skills that have served me well in all areas and times of my life.

That doesn't mean that I didn't suffer as well during my time in San Francisco. I've mentioned the numbness of my body. In addition, Frank's abuse combined with my own alcohol abuse shattered my mental health. By the time I left San Francisco for Los Angeles, I was dealing with debilitating panic attacks and depression and worst of all, an insidious writers' block that curled around my spine and took bites out of my soul. The trouble with compartmentalizing as I had done—to survive the lap dances at work, and the rapes or instances of empty consent at home—is that you have to cut yourself into pieces to do it. The exploitation of my body over time took a terrible toll on me physically as well as mentally—I had an ulcer at one point, and near the end of my time in San Francisco, I landed in the hospital for a week with pancreatitis.

One day, as I shuffled down a hall in the indigent wing of San Francisco General Hospital toward the smoking-porch, wearing sweatpants and a johnny coat and dragging along a pole from which hung my IV bag and a quart-sized cup full of stomach glop attached to me via nasogastric tube, a man lying on a gurney in the

hall—*bleeding*, no less—lifted his head to call out, "Ooh baby, nice tits! Wanna sit on my face?" for no other apparent reason than that he was a man and I was a woman.

I recently saw the movie, *Hustlers*, based on a true story about a group of strippers working together during the economic crisis of 2007-2008 who ultimately had to resort to criminal activity to survive. I cried watching that movie, for what those women went through (their con and criminal behavior were soul killing) and because that could have been me—there were many times when desperation pushed me to act out of character. As hard as I'd worked at maintaining who I was, it was, ultimately, nearly impossible not to change into someone much tougher than I wanted to be.

As I finish this piece, I am preparing to return to on-ground classes, post-quarantine. Sitting in my office on campus, I ask myself, why now? What brought this story up in me now? I think it's that while the memories have been sitting in me and percolating for a while, I wasn't ready to dive so deeply into my past—both the traumas and the triumphs—until the pandemic, when isolation and lack of physical nearness and community became the norm. In my loneliness, I started thinking a great deal about the communities I've been blessed to be a part of, such as I'd experienced with my fellow dancers in San Francisco, and how unfair it has been for me not to talk about that time and those women. It's as if I'd erased them in my mind for many years, and in my pandemic isolation, I realized that I didn't want them to disappear. I think, then, that I wrote this piece as an homage to them, as well as a reminder to myself that even in times of darkness and isolation—personal or worldwide—there is hope in the community of each other.

Maybe this is too sentimental an ending to this story, and maybe you won't understand the softness I still feel toward those years when I survived as a topless and nude dancer, despite the shittier parts. True, once the business had hardened me, it was difficult to soften back to my true self, and I'd be remiss if I didn't say that sex work is difficult, often devastating, and always dangerous. I had a lot of healing to do before I could move on from the lingering effects of those difficult years. But there's a little bit of light in every darkness, and I choose now to focus on the light that shone through the bleaker moments of those years, a light that shone brightly in the women I was fortunate enough to encounter on my journey through the darkness, and a light that I still carry with me today.