

bare

On Women, Dancing, Sex, and Power

Elisabeth Eaves

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You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.

—Edmund to Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, by Jane Austen

I was naked.

I looked at my reflection in the dressing room mirror. At five minutes to the hour, I noticed faint sweat beads on my forehead. At four minutes to, I patted my face with flesh-colored powder. With three minutes to go, I remembered that I was supposed to punch in. I slipped my time card into the clock, which gripped it for a second, made a loud clunk, and let it go. At two minutes to the hour, I brushed my hair for the fifth time and stepped back into the black shoes that I had kicked aside.

When the clock ticked over to seven p.m., I was supposed to climb the three steps through the narrow bottleneck between the dressing room and the stage. I hesitated, and April, who had been having a smoke down the hall, materialized in the dressing room, liberated herself from a sarong and jean jacket, then strode past me and up the stairs without so much as a glance in the mirror. Venus came the other way, out of the bottleneck, and paused on the landing to punch out. *Clunk!* Even in my apprehension I admired the efficiency. Then Georgia came down the steps, a leggy brunette in a pearl necklace. She didn't punch out; it was her turn to take a break.

The clock was "on the zero," as the managers said, so with one last breath I mounted the stairs and entered a dazzling scarlet and silver womb. The stage was a rectangular room about the size and shape of a hallway in a modest suburban home. The floor was carpeted with red velvet, and every other surface, including the ceiling, was mirrored. The space was lit by hot theatrical lights covered with pink and red gels, giving the three women who were already in it a rosy glow. I joined them with the sense that I was stepping into a well-oiled machine.

Onstage were Sasha, a creamy-skinned redhead in black gloves and thigh-high boots; Satin, a tall, caramel-colored woman in a curly bobbed wig; and April, whose wavy blond hair cascaded to her thighs.

And then there was me, Leila, five feet seven inches tall, in black knee-high stockings, my lips painted “plum wine” according to the label on the tube, my body pale, my blond hair shiny from multiple brushings. I was surprised to realize that I didn’t look out of place. From a quick, sidelong glance at the mirror I could barely pick myself out of the group. I was just one of the naked women, and the anonymity was reassuring.

While the stage had only one entrance and exit, which I had just come through, it had twelve windows. Each window was covered with a mirrored screen when it was not in use. I heard the clink of coins hitting coins and then the low whirring sound of a lifting screen. I turned my head to where the sound was coming from and saw a man appearing on the other side of a pane of glass. First his waist, then his chest, and finally his face appeared as the mirror lifted away. He was white and middle-aged and wore a beige jacket. If he had disappeared a second later, I wouldn’t have recalled a single detail of his appearance. He stared at me expectantly. I glanced around at the other dancers for guidance, but they were all looking elsewhere, so I approached the man, trying to exude confidence that I didn’t feel.

I needn’t have worried. I watched his eyes follow my different body parts as he decided where he wanted to settle them. He seemed to be a breast man. Closer to the window now, I looked down as he undid his pants. I danced for about two minutes, he came, the screen went down over the glass. *Whirrr.*

That was how my hours on the red stage began. It wasn’t my very first time onstage; I had danced for about eight minutes during my audition. The only difference now was that I would do this for the next three hours. The strangest thing about it was that it wasn’t very strange. I had never done this work before, but it felt like a fragment of a dream coming back to me. There was the music, and I was dancing to it; that wasn’t new. There were the mirrored walls, much like a dance studio or a health club. And there were men watching me. Always, it seemed, men had been watching me, assessing, surmising, deciding. Even the masturbating strangers weren’t without precedent—I had run across public masturbators before. Once a taxi driver had done it in front of a friend and me, and we had yelled at him and made him stop. I felt onstage as though a combination of different experiences had been scrambled in a machine and come out as something familiar but new. My only fear was that three hours of this would make my legs ache.

Half of the windows were two-ways, through which I could see the customer on the other side. The rest, the one-ways, reflected my own image. The one-ways were easy, like dancing in front of a mirror at home. The two-ways were harder to get used to. I watched the men behind them watch me, and sometimes one of them looked up at my face, even up beyond my mouth, and made eye contact, and it was hard to say who was more disconcerted, him or me.

Through the two-ways I saw their heads bob and swivel, their attention flicker around the stage before alighting on a particular body. Most of them smiled, and some even tried to talk, but I couldn’t hear them well and didn’t much want to anyway. Some tried to communicate with facial and hand gestures, only some of which I could decipher. One made frantic licking motions, another did a miniature breaststroke intended to convey “spread your pussy.”

“Just tell him you don’t want to go swimming,” called Georgia from across the stage. She was back from her ten-minute break, and now Satin had disappeared.

One guy pointed his finger in the air and circled his forearm, possibly asking me to turn around. My first instinct was to comply—I was in the habit of being accommodating when I was in a new job—but then I remembered that I didn’t have to, and stopped midturn.

“You think you get to tell a naked lady what to do for a quarter?” Georgia asked a man in the corner booth.

The company of the other dancers, and Georgia’s levity, put me at ease. For a while I became so absorbed in watching the other women that the men seemed incidental. I watched Sasha kiss a customer through the window, both of them touching the cold glass with their lips in a bizarre facsimile of affection. That proximity looked perilously intimate to me, even across the glass. It was like approaching a tethered pit bull: intimidating even if you knew it couldn’t escape.

Even so, it wasn’t until the first break in the music that I was hit with a vertiginous jolt. A silence of several seconds filled the stage, during which time we had to keep moving. When the quiet hit, I suddenly felt exposed. The comforting veil of sound had been ripped away and with it my pretense of dance. It was all I could do not to freeze. I felt ludicrous, but everyone else seemed indifferent. The customers continued their movements, supplicating with pursed lips and squinting eyes. The women kept dancing, their mirrored reflections tangling with my own, until, after an eternity, the next song came on. Before the

end of my shift I had learned the trick of keeping a rhythm, any rhythm, playing inside my head.

My coworkers were politely friendly, neither gushing nor taciturn. They didn't talk much; the managers discouraged excessive talking onstage. Having worried that I might, somehow, have been different from these other women, I was relieved that they seemed to accept me right away. But I was also disappointed. I wanted acknowledgment, maybe even congratulations, for getting myself to this glass-walled room. When I told them it was my first day, I expected more of a response than I got, like maybe a knowing roll of the eyes, or a recollection of someone else's first time. But I was just another new girl in a profoundly egalitarian trade. The only reaction came from Sasha, who, leaning her upper body back against the mirrored wall, rolling her delicate white hips, and keeping her eyes leveled on the window in front of her, said softly, "Welcome to the fishbowl."

Almost a year after my first day at the Lusty Lady, a Seattle peep show, I left my job, my boyfriend of four years, and the city where I had lived on and off for seven years. I moved from Seattle to New York, went back to school, and later got a job as a reporter.

At first, after leaving, I talked about my short career as a stripper with a few carefully chosen acquaintances. Sometimes I enjoyed the unsettling effect the subject had, and sometimes I was eager to share a glimpse of what it was like. But I soon stopped mentioning it at all. It was an unnecessarily hazardous topic, likely to cause confusion or unwanted titillation. It was one of those things that others either got or didn't. There was a certain kind of woman, the kind I gravitated to, who would say, "Of course you did. I always wanted to myself." But I discovered that most people didn't understand, and that I was incapable of explaining. For many, it didn't seem to fit in with the more palatable pieces of history that I put on display, like a fortunate childhood or a college degree.

I have always been terrible at revealing anything of myself. I think I was drawn to journalism because I was shy about expressing myself and it offered a sort of refuge. I wanted to ask other people prying questions and then tell their tales. I might splay my name promiscuously across the top of a story, but it exposed others, not me. Journalism never called

for me to say, "Here's what I think"; the most impassioned words I wrote always came out of the mouths of others. Somewhere behind my desire to be both a reporter and a stripper lay an impulse to conceal. Stripping—in competition with acting and espionage—is the ultimate job for someone who's instinct is to present different façades of who she might be. There is nothing more illusory than a woman pretending to be a sexual fantasy for money.

But though I went silent about my one-time job, stripping didn't go away. Certain things continued to vex me. One was the collection of facile stereotypes persistently applied to strippers. These ideas seemed so hackneyed as to be barely worth my irritation. Yet they did irritate me, always surprising me out of my wishful thinking when they turned out to be widely and deeply held. To name a few: Strippers are dumb. Abused. Desperate. Amoral. Sexually available. And one stereotype especially bothered me. A professor remarked to me that I had "gotten out" of stripping, while others had not. I had never considered it a job to escape. I thought it shouldn't be assumed that strippers lacked free will, or that they were trapped. I hadn't felt that way. Part of me even thought I might someday go back.

I also began to see echoes of stripping in my personal life. After quitting the Lusty Lady, I entered and then left relationships, all the while slightly bewildered at my own behavior. It had become a strange mix of submissiveness and aggression, and I often felt that I was watching myself play a role. It was a feeling I had often had as a dancer.

And three years after I left the Lusty Lady a question still hounded me. Why did I do it? It was an aggravating, unjust question. When it was put to me by others, I wanted to reply: "Why not? You tell me why you didn't, and I'll tell you why I did. You might as well ask me why I am the way I am. No one torments insurance salesmen or surgeons or data-entry clerks with questions of why, though I could think of a few I would like to ask: 'How can you telephone strangers all day? How do you stomach being up to your elbows in blood and guts? How do you keep from getting bored? How do you live with a job that gives you no passion, satisfies no curiosity, gives you no sense of higher purpose?'"

But there I was again, deflecting attention from myself. I had always preferred to shine a light anywhere but on me. But now I really wanted to know: Why had I felt driven to do it? How had it affected me? And

what did the existence of strippers say about sexuality and society? Was stripping as seductive a dead end for the dancer as looking at her was for the viewer? Could it be said to be right or wrong?

With these questions in mind, I quit my job and went back to Seattle. I worked again as a naked girl. I looked up the women I had known from the Lusty Lady and put questions to them that others had put to me, far more comfortable pressing them for answers than dredging up any answers of my own. Eventually, though, with their help, I did.

I learned that no one is neutral about female bodies. If they aren't sex objects used to sell every conceivable good, they are political objects, causing bitter debate on how to manage their fecundity. And where not sexual or political, they are imbued with society's ideals and fears, turned into Miss Liberties, Virgin Marys, and Wicked Witches. Everyone has an opinion on what to do about female bodies, and sometimes it feels as if the only people who get in trouble for holding such opinions are young women themselves.

Some of us, though, have to live in them, and we each get by in our own way.

Leila—Part I

Most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of opportunity to be otherwise.

—Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Chapter 1

I had a deep distaste for clothing as a child. The cloth always seemed to bunch up and constrain me, and I would shuck my garments at the slightest provocation. My favorite clothes were leotards, tights, and bathing suits, but if I could I'd wear nothing. My parents have a photo of me at six that they point to as an example of early exhibitionist tendencies. In it I'm seated at a piano, back to the camera, in my short boy's haircut and not a stitch of clothing. They say I jumped out of my bath and made straight for the piano, sat down, and started practicing my scales. They also tell me that when I came home from preschool and kindergarten in midwinter, I would change into a bathing suit for playtime. When we went to Europe when I was nine, I was delighted that all the girls my age still went topless on the beach, and I enthusiastically joined them. There is another photo of me standing next to my shell collection, wearing only a bikini bottom, at age ten or so, utterly flat-chested. When I showed the photo to a friend a few years later, she was shocked at my toplessness; and I thought to myself, What a prude.

At around the time of the shell photograph, my breasts began to make themselves known. They were introduced to me as a medical problem. A tiny lump appeared on my chest near my left nipple, and when I told my parents, they were alarmed and took me to the doctor. "Mammaries," he told us, laughing, and since then I've often wondered what he thought of us. Did other families take their daughters to see doctors because they were growing breasts, or was it just mine? Another lump soon appeared, but they were both so small, and grew so slowly, that we weren't forced to think about them again for a long time.

My parents didn't consider being pretty any kind of goal or virtue, and encouraged me neither to aspire to it nor to think that I was.

Education was the thing, brains and hard work the path to whatever I might desire. Though for a while I coveted one, my mother banned Barbie dolls lest they give me ideas about what women were supposed to look like. Nevertheless, from somewhere I developed a strong wish to be pretty, a sharp awareness of people looking at me, and a deep curiosity about what they might think. I pleaded with my mother until, when I was thirteen, she bought me my first cosmetics and let me buy a fashion magazine for teenagers. I read the magazine word for word, taking to heart every article on what to wear on face and body. It and subsequent magazines presented both a challenge and a promise: If you execute all your grooming and shopping correctly, you will look good, and if you look good, others will think highly of you. For several years of high school, I took an average of two hours to get ready every morning, during which I painstakingly showered, washed, combed, dried, sprayed and painted, and usually tried on several outfits in front of the mirror. Only after this donning of armor did I feel I could be looked at without embarrassment.

Those were the eighties, the years of mesh, fluorescent ankle socks, and plastic shoes, and I followed every trend assiduously. This didn't make me fit in, since Moscrop Junior Secondary, in a suburb of Vancouver, was a mostly jeans-wearing school. I was surprised when I learned that kids my age smoked cigarettes, and that some girls got beat up by other girls in the nearby woods. These were kids with bigger things to worry about than clothes. But I loved my outfits, and in addition to the few new items my mother would spring for each season, I bought stacks of secondhand clothing to add to the mix. When I entered the tenth grade, my best friend, Kristin, and I started a competition to see who could go the longest without wearing the same exact outfit twice. Nonrepetition seemed a great virtue to me, more important than the quality of the outfits themselves. We both made it nearly two months, but I won.

I was much relieved when I successfully petitioned for contact lenses to replace my glasses. When I had to wear a metal retainer that protruded from my mouth and was held in place behind my neck, I was so mortified that I felt nauseated. I always removed it as soon as I arrived at school and was pained even by the risk of being seen in it between parental vehicle and school door. I strategized against every hazard to my appearance. Braces: I would keep my mouth shut. Zits: I would attack with chemicals. Straight hair: I would get a perm.

My mother had a mantra about looks that she repeated to me with increasing frequency as I became an adolescent. Cheekbones, lips, breasts, and thighs were all “accidents of nature” or “of bone structure.” I was slim, long-legged, and, except during the permanent waves, had slippery blond hair. I had full lips and green eyes, and I grew to be five feet seven inches tall. My mother drove home the fact that I had done nothing to merit my looks. I think because she was a psychologist who worked with disabled children, she was acutely attuned to the spectrum of genetic accidents.

My parents expected excellent grades from my younger brother and me and punished mediocre ones. My father, a math professor, enforced a near-total ban on television for years—certain documentaries were allowed to slip through—but I could read anything I wanted to, and I checked out a stack of books every couple of weeks from the library. My life was a triangle of school, library, and extracurricular classes. Our parents lavished us with so many classes that I was sometimes busy every night of the week. Of choir, gymnastics, swimming, ice-skating, and ballet, the last became my favorite. I spent entire summers in mirrored ballet studios, hair pulled severely back, amid rows of girls in identical leotards. We studied our bodies in minute detail, comparing and disciplining, questing for perfection.

When I was thirteen or so, just before I plunged into full-blown self-consciousness, occasionally strangers started to talk to me for no reason that I could discern. This usually happened on buses or at bus stops, the only places where I was alone in public for any length of time, and my usual reaction was embarrassment for having drawn attention and annoyance that my daydreaming or reading had been interrupted. The first time a man tried to start a conversation with me at a bus stop, I was so abashed and disbelieving that at first I looked away and ignored him, as though he were an apparition I had created and could make disappear. When he didn't, I spoke to him haltingly, like trying to talk in a dream. He often took my bus, was only nineteen or twenty himself, and spoke about music and the car he planned to buy. Some months later a man with the lined face of an adult approached me on the bus. Though at first I thought, What a nuisance, I had no training in being rude and no cause to think it might be called for, so I talked with him. I told him I had a dance recital at a community center the next day, and he showed up. When I told my mother about the weird man, she questioned me with tense, controlled interest, and I said something like, “I don't

know, he just started talking to me on the bus." I didn't understand his attention. I still thought of myself as invisible to the world of strangers and adults. But those safe walls were crumbling.

If my parents were overly worried about my body when I was ten, they seemed oblivious when I was fourteen, on a family trip to Turkey, at which time I wore braces and my breasts had come into their own. I was repeatedly pinched and groped by strange men. I was angry, mortified, and, on one occasion, very frightened, but if my parents were aware, they didn't let on. I wondered later how it couldn't have been obvious to them, but reasoned that no one wants to see their child as a sex object.

Within a year or so of that trip I started to put things together, beginning on a warm evening when I went to my school alone, by bus, for a rehearsal. The buses ran sporadically, so I had taken one that dropped me off about a mile away, at a station on a new suburban road surrounded by trees. The sun was starting to set, and there was no one at the stop. As the bus pulled away I broke into a jog because I was running late and wanted to get up to the school where my friends would be.

A carful of boys suddenly came careening around the bend, its revving engine and hollering occupants bursting into the dusk. As it passed a young man with shaggy hair bellowed out the window: "Fabulous set of tah-tahs, baby!"

I heard the crunch of a can hitting the ground, then the car was out of sight and the evening quiet again. I slowed to a walk and looked behind me, trying to fathom whom he was talking to, but there was no one else around. I realized, slowly, that it must have been me. I kept walking up toward the school, thinking about what he had said. I had never heard the term "tah-tahs" before. It sounded like a stupid, babyish word. I wished that he had used something more sophisticated, or at least more recognizable. But I knew instinctively what he was talking about. It struck me right away as ironic because that particular night, until the car went by, was one of the few occasions—perhaps because it was evening, or because I was only seeing a few friends—when I had not given a second thought to my looks.

Before then I had thought that effort or at least some sort of consciousness on my part might lead to sexual attention. Now I realized that I—my head, that is, my brain, my thoughts—had nothing to do

with it. I looked down at my white turtleneck and pink jeans and saw my body in a new light. It was an object of interest to others that was entirely independent from who I was. And now my body became a new kind of object of interest to me. I had done nothing to achieve it. I couldn't escape it. Yet it had quite clearly made those boys—or were they grown men?—behave the way they had. I felt like a child who had been handed a heavy sword and told to learn how to use it before she cut off her foot. Some time after the car had gone by, once I had put this all together, I laughed with a mixture of flattered pride and disbelief.

The incident at the bus stop united my internal and external sexual worlds. I was familiar, after all, with sex, in the sense that you can be familiar with anything you read about in a book. I checked out the seamiest romance I could find at the library, and I had an illustrated tome called *The Facts of Love* that my parents had handed me with little comment. I thought about sex frequently, running through various things I had read and embellishing them with my own detail, and I masturbated often. But up until that day at the bus stop I had not connected what went on in my head with tangible experience. Having sex was a goal, but in the abstract, in the same way I thought I might someday be a lawyer. I had assumed there were many hurdles between me and it. I had not yet discerned the link between my private thoughts and the way others saw me. And then suddenly it became clear that there were no hurdles at all. Sex was there for the taking. It was up to me.

It was a revelation. I understood that boys were now sexually available to me. But just as this world of possibility opened up, other forces rushed in to shut it down. I started to become dimly aware of an unwritten sexual rule book. I was stunned when I discovered that boys and girls were expected to behave differently. It violated my sense of fair play.

In my tenth-grade science class I had what I considered the misfortune of sitting near Tommy, a boy I had known since we were six years old. We had always gone to the same schools, and we had been actively cantankerous toward each other, on and off, for years. Now our large science tables, big enough for messy dissections, sat at right angles to each other. Back at our junior high school I had ignored him as one of the crowd that enjoyed role-playing games, but I no longer had that

luxury. At our new high school he was one of the few students I knew. It was in science class, before our white-haired teacher shuffled in, that he first told me I was a slut.

"A what?" I asked. I had never heard the word. I asked him to explain.

"It's a girl who sleeps around," he said in an insinuating whine, realizing that his words would be ineffective if I didn't know what they meant.

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to take this. I looked around to see if anyone had heard him, but no one reacted. Tommy's voice was malicious, so clearly he meant to insult me. But I hadn't even had sex with one person. And beyond the fact that he was mistaken was a larger, more confusing issue: What would it matter to him if I had?

I puzzled over it that night and came up with what I thought was a good comeback, which I deployed the following day.

"You're the male equivalent of a slut," I told him. Equivalent. Hah.

"Yeah, well you *are* a slut," he replied.

I hadn't seen that coming. That day I asked around but couldn't find a comparable tag for boys.

Our classroom exchanges on sluttiness got progressively more heated. I was frustrated because the whole thing seemed so unprovoked. One day this nerdy kid was, if not my friend, at least a passive ally, and the next day I was under attack. My rage grew until one morning I took a swipe at his face. He shouted in pain, clutched both hands over his eye, and sat hunched over until our teacher doddered in in his lab coat. I had left two neat red scratches on Tommy's eyeball. He stopped calling me names.

I promised myself on my fifteenth birthday that I would have sex before the next one came around. I was curious and horny, but I also had a kind of grim determination about it. I had a growing sense that my virginity was best done away with. Tommy helped forge this view. So did my favorite novels, where I learned that some societies, past and present, had raised female virginity, terrifyingly, to a hallowed ideal. This was the bogeyman lurking under my bed when I was twelve, thirteen, fourteen: That I could have, might have, lived in a time when women were trapped by draconian expectation. I had a feeling that if I kept my virginity, it would become an awful responsibility. It would become *other people's business*. Being other people's business was my

worst nightmare. If I got rid of it, on the other hand, it would be nobody's business but my own.

I succeeded, with my boyfriend at the time, a not-very-bright policeman's son who was handsome enough to resemble a certain movie star, which had seemed like as good a reason as any to go out with him. We did it at his parents' house while skipping a class. It was excruciatingly painful, which did nothing to dampen my resolve. I wanted the initiation chapter over and done with so that I could get on with the rest, whatever it turned out to be. When I got back to school that afternoon I told my best friend, Kristin, who had recently accomplished the same herself, and we hugged and jumped up and down in the hallway while students swarmed around us and lockers slammed. In the following years, when I met nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one-year-olds agonizing over first-time sex, I would congratulate myself again and again for having gotten it out of the way.

As sex improved with each episode I wanted to carve my initials on my boyfriend's torso in exultation. It became both a pleasure and a pastime, and I found it cleared my head of everything else for as long as it lasted. I could forget that I still had undone chemistry homework or a midnight curfew. And the boys—there were three more before I graduated from high school—were attentive and generous. They fascinated me with their mysterious bodies and behaviors. I felt, finally, that I was learning things about life that no book could tell me.

Sex also mitigated an asphyxiating boredom. I lived on a dead-end street on a hillside, where every house sat in the middle of its own private patch of green, with views of the water and the mountains. The street was surrounded for miles by detached houses and an occasional park or school. It took about an hour on city buses to get downtown, and I had no car. People in the neighborhood sometimes went out on foot to exercise or walk their dogs, but no one ever walked to an actual destination because there was nowhere to go. It was beautiful, peaceful, and the urban equivalent of a sensory deprivation chamber. School I had mastered; my family was predictable; and movies and malls, the main cultural attractions in our suburb, failed to entertain. Boys, though, were a world to be discovered. While I waited for my life to begin, I had sex.

In the eleventh grade Tommy and I had a biology class with the same bespectacled, late-arriving instructor from the year before. Now we

shared a desk, but we had made peace and could look back on our tenth-grade antics and laugh. We were older and wiser. I had a new boyfriend, and Tommy had mellowed with the discovery of alcohol. He queried me. "So have you, ah, sullied your cloak?" he asked with mock delicacy. We both laughed, and I didn't try to scratch his eyes out.

Tommy was just one of dozens of boys and girls in my high school who called a girl a slut, I noticed, when they wanted to drag her down. Like Dean, who telephoned me regularly. Our respective groups of friends didn't hang out together, and there seemed to be no real possibility of our actually dating, but our conversations were frequent and flirtatious. Then, like a punch in the gut, he called my house one day and said things about me to my parents. Sexual things. My parents wouldn't tell me exactly what, but they warned me to watch my behavior. I was outraged both with Dean, for getting me in trouble, and them, for concluding that I was the problem. What was I supposed to do, never talk to anyone? I stalked into my bedroom, slammed the door, and fumed. It wasn't only students anymore; even my parents had gone berserk. Aside from the Dean episode, their strictures on what I could wear had started to pile up: no tank tops, even though, as I often pointed out, other girls wore them all the time. No miniskirts. My father, confusingly, had told me I wasn't allowed to wear yellow nail polish. When the men's-wear look—baggy pants, shirts, and neckties—was in fashion, when I was about fourteen, my father had banned that, too. He didn't like to see girls in boys' clothing, my mother explained. When it came to the miniskirts and tank tops, I always nodded and said all right, and sometimes I changed in a toilet stall when I got to school. My mother caught me coming home from school in a tank top one day and yelled at me about deceit.

In my mind my parents confirmed their status as insane on the day they thought I might have had sex in the house. My bedroom was directly under theirs, with a window at ground level. They woke me up early on a weekend morning by knocking loudly on my door and then marching in, both yelling at me before I was fully awake. They were in rages the likes of which I had never seen before, and it was a few minutes before I could make sense of what they were saying.

I put together what had happened after begging them to explain and making distraught phone calls to friends. A boy—I think my ex-boyfriend, the policeman's son, though I would never know for sure—had tried unsuccessfully to get my attention in the middle of the night

by knocking on my window. My father had been awake and had seen him leave. My parents threatened to ground me. It was almost summertime, and I thought I would choke. I can't claim that I had been planning to tell my parents about my sex life, but, if I had been, their reaction to the boy at the window would have convinced me not to. I had to live with them for another year and thought I would surely suffocate if I got on their bad side. My plan was to lie low, get into a distant college, and escape.

The lessons of the window were clear: What you do with your body matters to us and everyone else. Appearances count just as much as actions, and we won't necessarily take you at your word. I felt as though they saw me as a shape-shifter. One minute I was a normal kid, the next a sexual monstrosity. All my parents' distrust of me seemed bound up in sex. My tits, my body, my lust seemed to throw up monumental barriers to their approval. I began to wear the loosest, grubbiest clothes I owned around the house, an effort at camouflage. I stopped showing any affection toward members of my family, or in front of my family—I was furious when a boyfriend gave me a big hug and kiss right in front of my mom. But these habits of dress and behavior, which persisted well into adulthood, were all I could do. I could no more eradicate my sexuality than cut off an arm. So I attempted just to keep it out of sight.

No one explained why my sex life mattered so much. My parents never addressed sex directly. In areas that they made clear were important to them—mainly good grades—I proved myself. Had I not felt I had much to lose by bringing up the subject, I would have said to them: "I'm not hurting anyone. I'm the last teenager in the world who would get knocked up or tied down." I was scrupulous about birth control—pills, foams, condoms, sponges, I dealt with them all. Kristin and I made regular, surreptitious visits to the local Planned Parenthood clinic, often in the company of our boyfriends, where the kind female doctors seemed to trust us. In exchange for whatever contraceptives we wanted, they demanded only that we submit to medical exams.

Sex became my single rebellion. I didn't want to smoke, and I rarely saw drugs. I came across alcohol sometimes but was left only with the impression that too much made people throw up. Failing at school was out of the question; it would just ruin my only chance to get away. But I wasn't seeking attention with my rebellion: I wanted the opposite, to hide. Somewhere between childhood and adolescence I had begun to wish fervently for more siblings so as to escape parental scrutiny, and

this desire grew stronger with age. Sex was my precious private world, the one thing that I felt should have been mine and mine alone. When my right to it seemed under threat, I wanted more. It became fused in my head with notions of freedom.

My obsession with freedom meant it was easy not to get too wrapped up in any one boy. Attachment looked to me as though it led mainly to chores, as in the case of the cat I had wanted for my eleventh birthday. I fed her and emptied the kitty litter for the next seven years; she drooled and shed on my bed. The rewards were slim. Throughout high school I cleaned our house once a week to earn my allowance, swearing through every second of mopping and toilet scrubbing that I would hire someone to do my cleaning the instant I could afford it. Caring for something led to mess and blame; attachment, I was sure, led in a long but direct line to vacuuming. Feeding, cleaning, and responsibility were what went on in households, and I wanted to run as far from them as possible.

I strove for independence. Though my ambitions varied daily, they always included great success in whatever career I chose, and I was positive that they would take me away from Vancouver. Getting attached, I was sure, would only hold me back. This may have been why, with every boy I dated for any length of time, no matter how sweet he was, no matter how kind or fascinating, at some point I felt as if a time bomb went off inside of me. When it did, I had to end the relationship right then and there. The need was absolute.

I had this notion until my teens that my body was my own. How to clothe it, how to gratify it, whether to impregnate it—I had believed these to be matters of personal choice. And I had a notion that the rules of society should be applied fairly to all. With the discovery of a sexual morality especially for girls, equality suddenly seemed to have been an idea meant to go the way of Santa Claus. My shock and anger would have been difficult to overstate.

Chapter 2

The power was exhilarating.

Being young, female, and attractive was one long bout of intoxication, with all the dizzy pleasure and vulnerability the word implies. In the careening, can't-get-off, sex-saturated roller coaster from puberty to adulthood, I discovered I could hold sway over boys and men. They did things for me. It started small, in high school. They drove me around in their cars, bought little things like flowers and meals, and went out of their way for me. In college came more of the same, with the amount of time and money spent gradually increasing. Their gifts and their flattery became a desirability score card, and a constant stroking of my ego.

I tested the limits of my power, seeing how much I could get for how little attention returned. How many times would he call before giving up? How many times could I piss him off and still have him come back? I lined up three dates in an evening, just because I could. I walked out of restaurants on a whim, just because I could. When I was in need of a ride, I had boys drive me to other cities, just because they would. I was never surprised when other young women toyed with exploiting this power; I was surprised when they didn't. It was an irresistible muscle flexing.

I was always a little disappointed when my expectations were confirmed. I was disappointed when the boy telling me tearfully about his faraway girlfriend tried to touch my breasts. I was disappointed when a professor took a more-than-academic interest, and when someone said "just friends" but meant something else. I was disappointed because I held out a small hope that men would turn out to be more complex, that there was something more complicated and interesting about them than what appeared to be a simple penis-to-behavior equation.

But my disappointment was mild compared to the satisfaction I took in having my worldview confirmed. I took comfort in the knowledge that while I may have been out a friend, or a respectable older acquaintance, at least I was in control.

When I became bored with men seeking my attention, I tried asking other men out, and the subsequent rebuffs I took gave me a new respect for them. They were stuck doing so much of the chasing and taking so much rejection; it had to be difficult. But if one man turned me down, I bolstered my confidence with another. And when my advances worked, they worked too well. There was no chase. Men were too easy. They were a foregone conclusion. For a while it seemed as though an entire half of the world could be gotten at sexually. It was a heady feeling.

Few of these hovering males actually knew me very well. They may have known a few choice pieces of information that I had chosen to dispense, but for the most part they understood nothing about me. Therefore, I could only trace their eagerness to my body. However much they might come to learn about me, whatever qualities they might imagine I had, I thought it was all extrapolated from the starting point of my looks.

Being a young woman induces such a high because of the sheer absurdity of reaction to oneself. Men's responses struck me as absurd because, even as I thrived on them, I never completely escaped the knowledge that my body was ordinary. It was that accident of nature my mother had talked about. It was one of some three billion female bodies in the world, an eating, sleeping, mundane bunch of cells. It was hard to constantly regard it as a big deal, and the only reason it was one, the only reason it was anything other than the comfortable thing that I lived in, was because of the way people looked at it. I imagined a world with no clothing, mirrors, or photographs, and I wondered if my body would be such a big deal then.

In a sense I had two bodies. There was the one that I lived with, that had senses, hungers, and a connection to my brain. Then there was another entity, separate from myself, that I could look at as the object others held it to be. This disassociation was essential, because the meanings ascribed to my body were simply too arbitrary, and had too little to do with me, to be taken seriously. That people might think they knew something about me because of the color of my hair, the size of my chest, or the length of my legs was ridiculous, yet they did it all

the time. And it wasn't even as though my body told everyone the same thing. It might cause one person to think I was stupid, another to think I was sexually available, and another to go all gooey and worshipful. It was a blank slate for the projections of others.

Somewhere between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five I developed a split personality, fashion-wise. I had no style of my own but was dependent on my environment. Sometimes I wore outlandish things—up to here and down to there, tight and bright—but my sense of propriety could be acute. At office jobs, or faced with anyone I hoped would take me seriously, I erred on the conservative side, always adding layers to obscure my contours. If I was traveling, especially alone, I draped myself in fabric. Invisibility was a relief. I developed an affinity for overalls and silent, uncommunicative black. Through clothing I achieved some control over when and how people looked at me.

As well as connecting sexuality with power, because it made men do things for me, I learned to associate it with fear. At first this came from my parents, with admonitions not to walk under a certain bridge, or not to wait at a particular bus stop after dark. My father gave me an infuriating piece of advice that I didn't follow: It wasn't safe for me to bounce from place to place, on buses and trains, alone. And then there were the men themselves, the ones I was supposed to fear. The first time I had been catcalled from the veering car I had been flattered after my initial shock. As I continued to get that kind of attention I began to feel vaguely threatened. Sometimes the comments seemed designed to scare—"Wanna fuck?" growled from behind a Dumpster, or a driver slowing his car and asking me if I wanted a ride. And sometimes I doubted they were meant to scare. They were just men, I told myself, trying to make themselves known. But still, every time I heard one, I did a quick mental check. Were there people around? How far was I from home? How far from a telephone? In general, I believed that whatever strangers said, they wouldn't actually *do* anything. Occasionally, though, some small incident would shake my confidence. A man followed me out of a restaurant and down an empty street, and he kept turning, when I did, until I entered a hotel. Another time a man mumbling obscenities in an elevator lunged and grabbed me—fortunately just before the doors opened. In general, though, I was more annoyed than frightened by commenting men. I developed an ability to tune them out. I learned not to turn when I heard a honk, a whistle, or the "ts-ts-ts" noise that some of them made. Walking most places alone

meant putting on a sort of mental armor. I learned to behave: I never wandered too slowly looking lost, even if I was, because it drew attention and invited conversation. I walked purposefully. I kept my gaze straight ahead and slightly down so as not to make eye contact. And above all, I tried not to hear what they said.

I was slow to lose my belief in the infallibility of grown-ups. Fooling around with other kids felt like a natural course of events. But I was surprised when older, married men began to make passes at me, breaking a code of seriousness I still expected from adults. I met the first one at the stock brokerage firm where I worked the summer before starting college, when I was seventeen. At the end of an office party he tried to kiss me repeatedly while his pregnant wife waited for him not twenty feet away. He deliberately got my lipstick on his collar and complained loudly about it, satisfying some marital dynamic I couldn't understand. A year later at my next summer job, when I was a nanny, there hovered a man old enough to be my grandfather, a friend of the family I worked for. He followed me into the water from a crowded beach, grabbed me, and tried to feel me up behind an anchored rowboat with all the finesse of a horny fourteen-year-old. I laughed—at him, at the absurdity—and swam away.

There were others, and their sagging flesh and settled ways didn't interest me the way smooth-chested boys did. But they stoked my view that sexual morality was a giant hypocrisy, as I marveled at the gap between what they said and did. Marriage was a sham, I concluded, and making women responsible for chastity was clearly some kind of hoax. It was a joke, and someone was going to deliver the punch line soon. Weren't they?

I waited.

But it wasn't just men buying into the scam. I arrived at the University of Washington, a three-hour drive from Vancouver, and moved into a sorority house. The mansions of the Greek system filled a network of leafy blocks just north of campus. My mother was disappointed to learn that sororities didn't have curfews anymore like they did when she was in college. But she shouldn't have worried, because they had subtler ways of keeping us in line.

Girls walking home in the morning were said to be making "the walk of shame," a term used readily, to my horror, by the girls themselves. Shame, I thought, as it related to sex, was nothing more than a

transference of responsibility. It was childish excuse making. Boys and girls, I wanted to say, have sex if you want to and don't if you don't, but then don't whine about doing it and wishing you hadn't.

Fraternities permitted the consumption of alcohol, whereas sororities did not. Guys could have girls over to fraternity houses any time of the day or night, but girls could have guys over only under heavy restrictions. In my sorority we could invite boys to our rooms only on Tuesday evenings from seven to ten, and most girls had three or four roommates. The upshot was that boys never made the walk of shame. The rules of the Greek system upheld an intricate web of double standards. Sororities had to have a resident "house mother," a supervising adult; the fraternities had no equivalent. When I asked other sorority girls about this rule, they told me that a house mother was required to get around an old law that classified a group of women living together as a brothel.

If I thought I couldn't have been more disgusted, I was soon to be proven wrong. Sandra, a senior at the university and a sorority officer, lectured us one night in a chapter meeting to be "aware of our reputations." She mentioned seeing certain sisters (she didn't want to name names) entering the house at dawn, their hair disheveled. It was one of those subjects about which people were never very specific yet everyone was expected to know what they meant. And I did, of course, even though I didn't want to. Be "aware of your reputation" meant stop having sex, stop failing to be ashamed, or at the very least, please lie. A few nights later I bumped into Sandra in the stairwell after midnight, minding her reputation while she furtively escorted out a boy. I ranted about the double standard to my freshman roommate. Why did Sandra say one thing and do the other? Why did she have to go through this charade when fraternity boys, her equals in age and education, did not? My roommate agreed that it was unfair but told me I wasn't properly socialized. She was right. How had this happened? What was wrong with me that I should have developed such a sense of entitlement?

My failure to be properly socialized, I think, started young. When I was six years old, my grandmother gave me a children's Bible, which my father read to me every night until we had finished it several times over. He began: "God saw that it was good and she separated the light from the darkness." Right through, he replaced "he" with "she," and

this all-powerful creature became entrenched in my mind as a woman. Other adults disabused me of this notion, of course, but maybe it was never really pried loose.

I moved out of my sorority in the middle of my sophomore year.

I had steady boyfriends. I dated one of them faithfully for the entire twelfth grade, a lifetime in high school years. But it wasn't until Alex that I fell in love, and then only years after we first met. When I was sixteen and he was seventeen, Alex and I had met on an airplane. We were on separate trips with our respective schools, and after flirting at the back of the plane for an hour, we didn't see each other until he called me after my return. He took me to his senior prom and then, shortly after graduating, went away to travel. He sent me letters on ultralight paper with no return address, mailed from somewhere different each time. When I was a freshman in college, he returned to Vancouver with longer hair and darker skin, as though now visibly marked older and wiser. I visited him there, and he visited me in Seattle. He told me about his year of backpacking and odd jobs, and we talked together wildly about all the places we wanted to go. In some ways my surprising, unprecedented feelings for him changed everything. I didn't want to play with him to see how he reacted, I didn't want to manipulate him, and it was important to me not to hurt him. I did want to have sex with him, and he made me wait a long time. When we finally did, he always insisted that we both be entirely naked, as though this were somehow more honest. I was ever so slightly disappointed by this. I was turned on by the slow removal of layers of clothing, or by sometimes leaving a skirt or a bra in place. I resigned myself—I was in love. We had all-nude sex.

My feelings for him had little effect on the rest of my life, because I went away the next summer, and after I came back he left again, and it went on that way. While we were apart I continued as I had before, sometimes remaining celibate for a few months but often seeing different men. I tended not to have one-night stands but to date one person for at least a month or two. Alex mailed me pebbles from a Mediterranean beach and told me to put them in water so that they would look like they had when he found them. I brought him mementos from wherever I went. While we were thinking of each other and writing to each other, I didn't expect him to be sexually faithful either. It was as

though we had silently agreed that we had no right to make that sort of claim on each other. I never questioned this at the time. When we finally moved within closer range of each other—about a four-hour drive apart—we became monogamous, also without discussion. It was as though the subject were taboo.

We had little in common other than a restless love of travel. He wanted to work in outdoor seasonal jobs; I wanted to finish university and maybe live in a big city. He liked dangerous sports; I liked to read. It became a struggle to find things to say to each other, but when he eventually told me that he had fallen out of love, I crumpled with the pain. By rights my heart should have broken, but I was so stubborn that it seemed to flatten instead. While I reeled, I met Erik.

I had gone to a party of ten or so people in a cozy living room strewn with mattresses, where we all took Ecstasy. It was my second time on the drug. A friend introduced me to Erik, and with our psyches well lubed by the E, he and I spent the night talking and staring at each other in platonic admiration. His girlfriend moved out of their houseboat the next day. He cajoled my phone number out of a mutual friend and called me a week later, and we talked for hours. On our first date, I looked at him across the table and wanted desperately to be high with him again, to experience a repeat of that illusory euphoria.

He was six foot four, with broad shoulders and cheekbones. His hair was like Alex's, only wilder, a tangled blond mane like a force of nature, unruly even when he tried to tie it back. He worked with his huge hands, moving from one building job to another, becoming deeply attached to each house. He had been a varsity rower at the University of Washington, where he studied architecture and engineering before dropping out. Some of his friends called him the sun god—he was huge, haloed, and gave one an impression of invincibility.

One of the first things Erik told me about himself was that he had an addictive personality; a second thing was that he was manic-depressive but would never take drugs for it. I wasn't sure what manic-depressive was and thought maybe he was just giving moodiness a clinical-sounding name. We spent night after night talking and sleeping on the floor of his old houseboat. We burned things—wood in his heating stove, candles, incense. He came down with a fever and soaked everything with sweat, and I continued to sleep beside him. Without planning to, we waited to have sex—not years, as had passed with Alex, but months. It was the spring of my senior year, and I was headed to

Pakistan that summer for a foreign service internship. As easily as some men decide to go buy cigarettes, Erik decided to visit me in Karachi. We returned to Seattle together at the end of the summer, and he stayed with my housemates and me. We said it was just while he looked for a place to live, but he didn't look much, and I didn't push him, and we decided we would live together for real. We bought a house and said we would get married. We fought, had sex, bought groceries.

I struggled with the idea of monogamy. I knew that it was required of me now, but I didn't know if I was up to it. Kristin and I had always said to each other, as though joking boastfully, that we could never be sexually faithful. But these conversations always had a worried, serious undertone. What if we really were incapable of it? What would it mean for our futures? I told myself that Erik might be the last man I ever slept with. The idea overwhelmed me, as though I were a recovering alcoholic telling myself that I would never, ever have another drink. It wasn't that I found it difficult to be faithful day to day. But I was tormented by the idea of losing an essential part of myself, my sexual freedom.

There was one thing, though, that I liked about monogamy. It was liberating in that it freed me from all the other men I might be with. I missed the excitement of always having someone new, but I felt calmer and more able to devote my attention to other things. And I was freed, most of the time, from being commented on in the street. Strangers only rarely whistled or said "ts-ts-ts" or tried to start conversations with women who were accompanied by men. I hated to admit that I was more relaxed beside a man—it violated my independent self-image. But I was. I didn't have to wear the armor. I didn't have to concentrate on looking purposeful and pretending not to hear. I could wander aimlessly or loiter on street corners. I could even wear skimpy clothes to walk down the street. It took one man to make me feel safe from the others. Knowing this made me angry with myself for being weak, and angry with Erik because I felt dependent on him.

I was split. I found it hard to imagine life without Erik, but at the same time I felt trapped. I had once had the exhilarating sense that I could go anywhere and be anything, and now my horizons had narrowed to a pinpoint: Seattle. Erik. Our house. After graduating I had taken an office job with a shipping company, and as my salary slowly filled my bank account, I mentally divided the balance into travel expenses—so much for a plane ticket, so much to live on for X number

of months. Almost two years after moving in with Erik, the part of me that had never fully acquiesced to the plan, that had hoarded ambitions and dreams against an onslaught of domestic bliss, rebelled. I quit my job and left the country. I called and said that I wasn't coming home and no longer wished to marry. The morning after I made the call I felt the beginning of an exquisite and long-lasting rush. The pinpoint my life had become expanded back out to a panorama.

But Erik's life and mine were messily intertwined. We jointly owned a house and had a mountain of debt. And he wanted very much to get me back. Some six months after the phone call we reunited in New Zealand, where we got jobs and a basement flat. I felt like a kite that had been reeled back in. Erik and I made peace, but it was different than before. Then, it seemed, I had opened my entire soul to him and lost myself. I had needed him so much that every small insult or argument had felt like an overwhelming threat. This time I guarded my secret urges in a small, hard core. They weren't sexual—after our hiatus, during which we dated other people, we went back to monogamy. My dreams, again, were about escape.

Chapter 3

In 1996 Erik and I arrived back in Seattle with no money or jobs. We both talked about big plans. Erik's involved single-handedly turning our old, charmless house into a thing of beauty. Mine involved graduate school and a departure from Seattle. At first we talked vaguely about a future together, and sometimes we spoke as though he would follow me when I moved away. We no longer talked about marriage. I told him that the delicate heirloom he had given me as an engagement ring was too fragile to wear, and I stored it in a cupboard. The days got wetter and shorter, and winter loomed ahead.

Erik and I were both legally responsible for the money we had borrowed to buy the house. Neither of us was willing or able to pay the mortgage on our own, neither of us could buy out the other, and any failure to pay would result in a permanently ruined credit rating for both of us. It was frightening to think that I could have destroyed my financial prospects by the age of twenty-five. We were forced to cooperate, because the only person who had the power to release either of us from the obligation was the other.

My mistakes had now forced me to wear a mask. For the sake of my future I had to keep the peace, even though I was furious inside at my situation. It would have been impossible for us to buy the house without money my parents had contributed, and for this I harbored a secret, unreasonable anger toward them, too. They had wanted me to settle near home and get married, I told myself. I toyed with the absurd notion that they and Erik had conspired.

Erik and I got along. We still cared for each other; we were still affectionate. But we never talked about the glaring fact that we would not have been back in each other's arms if it weren't for our debt. For the

first time in my life I had let myself be bought. Now I had to live behind a façade. I had to pretend, at least at first, that there was a possibility I would stay. If I was extremely careful, watching everything I said and did, I thought I could gently pry myself out of the situation and part with Erik as friends. But any premature move, any storming out in a rage, and I risked either hurting or angering him enough that he would make a resolution impossible.

I didn't apply for permanent jobs because to do so would have been to admit to myself that I might stay. I signed up with a temp agency for office jobs that paid a high hourly wage without long commitments. I wrote away for brochures from the schools I wanted to attend. And I started working, part-time and for free, in an internship. This particular one was for a nonprofit organization called the Global Affairs Council; I hoped that my job there, which consisted mainly of stuffing envelopes and making name tags, would help me get into graduate school.

My temp jobs paid ten or twelve dollars an hour and were uniformly undemanding. In the worst jobs I had to keep up the pretense of looking busy when there was virtually nothing to do. In one typical job, I was required to sit at the reception desk of a silent, carpeted, twenty-fifth-floor holding company that had only seven or eight employees, who would pass me on their way in and then disappear into vast offices with tall windows. My job was to answer the phone and greet visitors, but the phone barely rang and there were no visitors; on one occasion someone had me type a letter. The man who appeared to be in charge praised me for my skills. In another job, for a windowless actuarial firm, I kept a copy of a book about climbing Mount Everest in my desk drawer, and I read for long stretches between tasks. Nothing, though, was worse than filing, which I did for a construction company in a Bellevue office park. I filed in a small, pale-walled box of a room lined with metal cabinets, sometimes for an hour or more at a stretch, placing manila folders between more manila folders like a robot. Without stimuli my thoughts turned inward, and I wondered if I could actually feel my brain atrophying. I marveled at all the time I had spent in my life cramming facts into my head, and I thought that if I filed for very long all that would have gone to waste. I thought about which directions the freeways went that led away from the office park and wondered how long I could stand working there.

I worked half days at the construction company starting every morning at eight a.m., and I joined a gym near the office. The gym saved me

from spending the entire day sitting still, in my car and at desks. If I rose at five-thirty, I could beat bumper-to-bumper bridge traffic, work out, and arrive at the office just in time, at daybreak. At midday, three days a week, I drove back across the bridge to the Global Affairs Council office, downtown, where I spent the afternoon. In the afternoons I had off I studied for the Graduate Record Exam, the standardized test most schools required. Erik spent his days sketching drawings of our future home, or pacing off the property, lost in thought, smoking cigarettes and joints. On weekends I helped him tear into the house. We emptied the basement of the ancient furniture the previous owners had left. I attacked walls with a crowbar, watching with satisfaction as rotting two-by-fours whined and broke and Sheetrock crumbled under my blows. Wearing thick canvas gloves, I piled Erik's pickup truck high with load after load of wreckage and drove it to the dump. It was satisfying work. We left the upstairs, where we lived, mostly untouched, though in a fit of visualization Erik ripped out the wall between the kitchen and living room. He left its guts of insulation and wiring hanging in the air.

The construction company offered me a permanent job, which I declined. By that time I had found another source of income that would pay me more and bore me less. Though in the end it just came down to answering an ad in the newspaper, my interest in stripping was nothing new.

My natural inclination had been to wear sex on my sleeve. To an extent, through high school and college, I did—I had sex, talked about sex, sometimes wore sexy clothes, and tried to seduce people I didn't even want to have sex with, just to see if I could. But I was always aware of the stifling pressure to conform that I had felt from my parents, my peers, and my sorority's rules. The only women who seemed to be free of the rules were prostitutes and strippers, which I think is why they fascinated me. In high school Kristin and I sometimes cruised the downtown streets where the hookers worked. When we spotted them, we checked out their bright outfits, decided whether they were male or female under their tight skirts, and drove on by, sometimes returning to make another pass. When we were about eighteen, the same curiosity drove us to visit the Marble Arch, a Vancouver strip club, with our dubious boyfriends in tow.

When I saw the first woman descend the staircase from the ceiling to the stage and, under a spotlight, piece by piece, shed her glittering clothes while the audience clapped and cheered, I was spellbound. Strippers were free of the straitjacket. They were not only permitted to be ostentatiously sexual, they were celebrated for it. No one, I was sure, told them that their skirts were too short or that they should be aware of their reputations. They weren't insulted for being sensual and lascivious. Instead they were applauded, glorified—even paid, which seemed, with all the other pluses, almost incidental.

By the time the dancer climbed back up the stairs, now wearing only her heels, trailing her sparkling dress in one hand, the ancient-sounding phrase "women's liberation" had started to mean something to me. It had never resonated in terms of the laws I lived under or the careers I might choose, because I took that kind of freedom for granted. It was only in terms of sexual expectation that I sometimes felt smothered. And the glowing, strutting women in front of me, I thought, were free.

That weekend I was home from university visiting my parents. The next day I had just set the table for supper, and I was leaning against the white-tiled counter while my mom cooked. Our dog buried his head in his dish, heat radiated from the stove top, and my dad poured drinks. My brother, who was in the ninth grade, was in his bedroom studying. None of us were used to the fact of my living away. I savored my newfound freedom even more here at home than I did away at school, like an ex-convict dancing in front of the jailhouse. My parents had suggested a midnight curfew during my visits home, and I no longer even minded their rules. Now that I had escaped, what had once seemed oppressive struck me as quaint. I felt exuberant and untouchable.

"I'm thinking about becoming a stripper," I said. My parents didn't react for a couple of seconds.

"You're not," my mother said, stirring vigorously.

"Yes, I am," I said. Still no answer. "What's so wrong?"

My dad inhaled and exhaled through his nose like he wasn't sure whether to laugh or be angry. He decided to laugh. "Ten years of ballet for this?" he asked.

He concluded that I couldn't be serious, but my mom decided to address the subject. She told me it was dangerous, that I would have to associate with drug dealers and other criminals and cross dark parking

lots late at night. She noted that several strippers and prostitutes had been murdered recently in Vancouver.

"She's just trying to get a reaction," my dad told my mom. He was only half right. I was trying to get a reaction. But I also genuinely wanted to hear arguments against stripping, because I had forgotten what they were. "Go get your brother," my dad said, closing the subject. I called him, and we ate dinner.

The summer after my sophomore year of college I came home to save money to go to Egypt, where I was going to spend my junior year. My parents and I agreed that I should contribute as much money as I could. I hated looking for summer jobs, but with Egypt beckoning, I threw myself into the process. I scanned help-wanted ads, filled out applications, and continuously came up underqualified. I had been a salesgirl in a clothing store one summer during high school and had disliked it intensely. I hated selling, hated pushing miniskirts and leather jackets on uncertain buyers, hated the sterile shopping mall. I had stood around in the store all day, legs aching, never pouncing on the customers like I was supposed to to earn my commission. I preferred to tag clothing or vacuum.

I crossed sales off my list of potential summer jobs, but unfortunately I didn't have any other skills that paid. I didn't know how to waitress, tend bar, or make espresso. I applied anywhere that would let me fill out a form, including a gas station. I lied to employers and told them I would be around for longer than just the summer. In the end I landed three jobs: as a rental clerk in a video store, as a waitress in an Irish pub, and as a nude model for art classes.

The art classes paid the most, at ten dollars an hour. I worked for a pleasant couple who had just opened an airy studio in cobblestoned Gas Town, where they taught drawing and painting. Their students were all polite, sketching quietly while I watched drawing after drawing appear in broad strokes. These takes on my body seemed to have little to do with me. I was just a starting point, a tool like their easels and paints. Between sessions I put on a satin bathrobe and ate tea and biscuits. Despite the air of civility, I was nervous about telling my parents. I mentioned it to them in the kitchen one night before dinner.

"Art modeling?" my mother asked. "Is it nude?"

I paused.

"Uh, yes."

"Oh."

They were unruffled. They asked questions about the artists and the owners.

"Do you remember that photo we have of her at the piano bench?" my dad asked.

That summer, while I wasn't working at one of my three jobs, commuting, or reading about Egypt, I sewed myself two long, loose cotton dresses to wear when I got there. I bought long skirts, big shirts, and baggy trousers, all in pursuit of appropriate modesty, and I saved just enough money to cover my airfare.

At the beginning of my senior year of college, back from Egypt, I moved into a loft on Pioneer Square in Seattle with two former sorority sisters. After we moved in and I settled into my classes, I scanned newspaper ads for a part-time job. A chain of clubs was recruiting dancers—topless, it said—through an ad in the student newspaper. I called and made an appointment. I told myself I didn't have to go through with it if I didn't like it. I would just check it out.

I went to an office billing itself as a modeling agency, where I was interviewed by a fortyish woman with brittle platinum hair and pink lipstick, who told me she had always wanted to be a dancer when she was growing up. She said she started her girls at Razzmatazz, a club near the Seattle Center, which was popular after sporting events. After they gained experience she moved her girls to the Déjà Vu clubs, of which there were several around the city. At Razzmatazz, she told me, dancers performed topless.

A club manager came in to look me over. I said to him, "So it's topless, right?"

"Oh no. You're completely naked in there," he said. I looked back at the woman. She flushed and stumbled over her words.

"Why, I spend so much time in those places I don't even notice what they're wearing anymore."

She explained that, as a dancer, I would be an independent contractor and would pay rent, or a "house fee," of seventy dollars for each shift that I worked. I would work it off by getting customers to buy five-dollar soft drinks—alcohol is illegal in strip clubs in Washington—and by selling table dances for ten dollars a dance. After the first seventy dollars, the money I earned would be mine, except that I was expected to tip the disc jockey and the bartenders. I couldn't get a fix

on how much I was actually likely to make. She said it would be about forty dollars an hour.

My interest was already waning when she started explaining to me that they could help arrange a place for me to live, and that the rent would be taken directly out of my pay.

“What?” I asked, snapping to attention.

Two young women arrived, whom she introduced as her “girls.” Though she had insisted on seeing my proof of age, these two didn’t look a day over fifteen. They were both pale, blond, and slightly built. They wore clumsily applied blue and purple eye shadow. I was reminded of myself playing dress up as a little girl.

I suddenly imagined young girls being conscripted from Interstate 5 farm towns, lured to the city with promises of big money, housed in shabby apartments, gouged on rent, lied to, and made to hustle for table dances. I couldn’t hawk dances. I wasn’t cut out for sales. I said I would have to think about it, left, and never called back.

I enjoyed dancing, being sexy was already something of a hobby, and I certainly wanted cash, mainly to finance future plane tickets. It seemed like such an easy equation on the surface. But this stiff woman and her waifish protégés struck me as sinister, and I was forced to admit to myself that my fascination was just that and nothing more. I was kidding myself if I thought I was going to work as a stripper. I was dipping my toe in the deep end when I knew I was afraid to jump. I had been intrigued, I had investigated, and I was done.

Erik and I had been living together for over a year when I suggested on Valentine’s Day that we go to a strip club. I had been to one other since the Marble Arch, again with Kristin, driven by the same curiosity that had impelled me the first time. Erik had never been to one, and he found the notion bizarre but came along to humor me. We went to one of the Déjà Vu chain, downtown on First and Pike. We paid the ten-dollar cover charge and five dollars each for soft drinks. We sat against the back wall in an upholstered booth, where I felt as if I could watch without being seen. A dancer appeared onstage in high heels and a pink bikini bathing suit. The disembodied voice of the disc jockey introduced her and she danced, first removing her top, then bottom. After two songs, she put her bikini back on and circulated through the sparse audience while another dancer took her place onstage.

Four dancers were working in all, rotating in turn from stage to audience. One was obese, one young and blond, one an athletic brunette with well-honed back muscles. The fourth was called Obsidian and played up a Native American theme with a costume of leather fringe and beads. The disc jockey announced in a velvety voice that we could pay for table dances with Visa or MasterCard.

I watched the athletic brunette do a private dance for a customer. Straddling his lap, she shimmied up and down, closer and closer, then ground her pelvis into his. I winced. He put his hand on her thigh, and she briskly picked it up and put it back on the seat. He put it on her thigh again, she removed it again, and they repeated the game a couple more times before he stopped. Obsidian retreated to a dark corner with a customer. I tried to follow them with my eyes, but they were lost behind a pillar. If I had needed more confirmation that this occupation was not for me, I now had it. These women had to sit on laps, slap away hands, go behind pillars.

We watched from our padded bench, curious but unaroused, commenting to each other about the women’s looks. I wasn’t as taken as I had been on my visit to the Marble Arch, maybe because the audience was so small, or because of the groping customer. But I was still transfixed while I watched Obsidian and the brunette, both skilled dancers, perform onstage. I still had the sense that they were free of something I was stuck with. Despite my visit to the “modeling” agency, I hadn’t shaken the idea that maybe I could be one of them. I could cross from my daily life and become the unabashedly sexual girl in the spotlight.

They all offered us private dances but we left without buying any. It started to snow while we walked to the truck, and it was sticking to the ground by the time we got home.

A short time after the Valentine’s Day when we went to Déjà Vu, I stood in our living room shaking with nervousness.

“Just sit. Just sit on the sofa. Give me a minute,” I told Erik. I closed the blinds on the window that faced the dark street. Then I bent over the stereo, still wearing a ragged sweat suit. None of the music seemed right. “Relax,” he told me. He thought my jangled nerves were funny. This had been my idea, but I had insisted that he tell me, convincingly, that he wanted me to do it. I found a disc that seemed danceable.

"Okay, okay, give me a minute. I just need a minute," I said, but I was talking more to myself. He was calm on the sofa, drinking a beer, watching me. My armpits were damp. I felt I might be about to do something ridiculous. I was going to feel terribly self-conscious if this didn't turn either of us on.

In our bedroom I took off my outer layer of clothing. Underneath I already wore a black push-up bra, a thong, my only garter belt, and stockings. I had had the garter belt for so long that I couldn't remember buying it. The stockings had a few snags. No shoes seemed right so I didn't wear any.

"Press play," I yelled to him. I crossed the kitchen and crept around the corner into the living room, swallowing my embarrassment through sheer willpower. He was smiling on the sofa, legs wide, arms behind his head, his relaxed mood the opposite of mine. I began to dance. I had practiced a little, but most of it was ad lib. I twisted my hips a lot and knelt on the floor. I removed my bra, breathing hard. To my relief, I saw that I had his interest. His lips were parted, and he stared intently. When the second song began, I removed my panties. Sometimes it wasn't easy to arouse Erik, but this seemed to be working. To my pleasant surprise I was also arousing myself. I turned the music down and crawled over to him, then stood up, my thighs inches from his face. I bent to help him undo his paint-cruised jeans. His thin white boxer shorts sprang up at me. He was ready. I danced a little more.

Though afterward we agreed that it had been fun, we didn't repeat the experiment. It was an oasis of pleasure in an increasingly strained relationship, because I, by then, was already planning to go away. I left in May, and we didn't see each other until we met six months later in New Zealand; seven months after that we were back in the house.

I saw the Lusty Lady's employment ad in the back of a weekly newspaper. It wasn't the first time I had seen it—they ran ads regularly—but this time I circled it and underlined the phone number. It said, "dancers wanted," "full nudity," "no contact"—the last of which got my attention. Applicants had to be at least eighteen years old, with healthy hair of chin length or longer, and have no body piercings or tattoos. I let the circled ad sit on my desk for a couple of days. I was apprehensive. I said things to convince myself: "If you never try you'll never know," and "It's now or never." In a couple of years I thought I might

have precluding responsibilities, or even a serious job. My body was still young, taut, and therefore marketable. What if I looked back when I was eighty, wishing I had tried? I might always wonder if I could have played that role. I might wonder if those women had found a sort of freedom that I had not.

On an overcast November afternoon I found myself in the Lusty Lady's small, dim foyer, concentrating on remaining calm and avoiding eye contact with the customers. I felt them look at me as they went in and out. I focused on the paintings of naked men and women along one wall, some of them showing close-ups of genitalia. I stared down at the dark, mottled carpet, then shifted my gaze to a bright display of dancers' photographs. Behind the front desk I could make out a set of black-and-white video monitors. One showed a lingerie-clad woman lying on her side, moving slowly, projected from some far corner of the premises.

I had an appointment with Catharine, a "show director," as her business card read. On the phone, she had said, "It's very important that you arrive on time. We will take punctuality into account in our decision to hire you." Obviously, I thought. Did people really need to be told?

Now she appeared, extending her hand to shake mine. I was surprised by her appearance. She was young, with smooth skin, short mousy brown hair, and an earnest gaze from behind wire-rimmed glasses. Her baggy orange pullover gave her an androgynous look. Looking me in the eye, she told me that first we would watch the show from one of the customer booths so that I would know what I was getting into. The Lusty Lady wasn't a club with a conventional stage and seating area, like ones I had visited before. It was a peep show. Customers stepped into private booths and watched women from behind glass windows.

Opening a black door, we squeezed into a dark compartment designed for one person. I heard a clinking sound as Catharine deposited quarters into a slot, then a mechanical hum as a screen rose to reveal a long rectangle of a stage stretching out in front of us. Its mirrored walls and bright red velvet carpet dazzled me after the darkness of our closet-size space.

Three mostly naked women occupied the stage. A tall brunette turned and walked slowly toward us, swaying her hips. She appeared to be focused on a point just above our heads. Gradually I realized she

couldn't see us through the one-way window. With the floor of the stage at the height of our chests, the dancer's statuesque figure loomed above us as she got closer. Long, glossy hair fell to the middle of her back. She wore only knee-high white patent leather boots.

"That's Korina," Catharine said. Then, after a pause, she added, "She's doing a good job."

Korina undulated to the music, moving nearer, then farther, then kneeling in front of us and leaning so close I felt sure she could see us. Then, standing up, she turned her back to us, spread her legs, and bent over. I was startled and tried not to flinch. Korina turned and backed away from the window again, allowing us to see her whole curvaceous body.

By the time the window closed after a couple of minutes, leaving us in darkness, I was mesmerized—even more so than I had been at the Marble Arch. I felt something similar to desire, but it wasn't that I wanted Korina. I wanted to *be* Korina. We stepped out into the hallway. "Do you think you can do that?" Catharine asked.

I made an appointment to audition. As I left she told me to think about a stage name.

Erik, who had once told me I didn't have a romantic bone in my body, suggested the stage name Ice. "Oh, thanks," I said sarcastically, though actually it appealed to me. I wanted to be unthawable. When I proposed the name Ice to Catharine, though, she rejected it. She said they had recently had another blonde named Ice, who had been widely disliked and left under "difficult circumstances." She thought a new Ice would create tension. I didn't mind, though, because I already had another name in mind.

Leila, L-E-I-L-A. When I told Catharine, she thought I meant L-A-Y-L-A, as in the song by Eric Clapton. The spelling wouldn't matter much to customers but it did to me, and Catharine had to have something to write on the schedule. Once I started, dancers would always mention the Clapton song when I told them my name. One of them, Carmela, took to belting out "Layla, you've got me on my knees" whenever she saw me. But I hadn't had the song in mind at all.

Leila was a common Arabic name that was close to "leil," the word for night. I had studied Arabic in university, and I often used the name

Leila when I was traveling around Egypt and the Middle East. At the time, I had said I did this because the people I met couldn't pronounce "Elisabeth," which was sometimes true. But calling myself Leila had also felt like an extra layer of defense against the overly curious. It made me untraceable. So I took my old play name and applied it to my new secret life, scripting a private joke for an audience of one. I enjoyed imposing this line of continuity from past to present, as though I could turn my life into a story that made sense.

Strip clubs, as it turned out, were full of double-L names. Lilies, Lulus, Lolus. At the Lusty Lady I would meet a Lola, a Lolita, and a Delilah. The two Ls made the person saying the name flick the tongue up and down in a licking motion. As well as having two Ls, Leila was simple and easy to remember, and I knew I didn't want a complicated name. Turning randomly selected syllables into a stage name, as some dancers seemed to do, made them easily forgotten. To dancers with names like Dajah, Tasia, and Anondii, the customers were bound to continually ask, "What's your name again?"

Conventional club wisdom held that girl-next-door names like Jenny, Crystal, and Heather worked best. Fantastical names like Fantasia and Stardust worked against strip-club psychology, which was about suspension of disbelief. Customers wanted the fantasy of a real woman, much easier to provide as an Ana than as an Octopussy. But even with a relatively normal stage name, the men would still ask "Yeah, but what's your real name?" Each guy liked to think he was unique: clever enough to ask and special enough for her to tell him, as if he was not one of ten men on a given night to ask her the same thing. Every dancer had her own policy on this. Some told, some didn't, some told just a few regulars, and some made up new fake names to pass off with coy reluctance as their own.

Not everyone believed in the girl-next-door theory. Jewel names were popular. I would meet a tiny Jade, an awkward Ruby, a baby-oil-wearing Diamond, and a heroin-addicted Sapphire. In precious metals, the Lusty Lady had a Gold who had golden hair and studied geophysics, and I once met a club dancer named Silver. Food names were also widespread. Cherry, Candy, and Cinnamon were the most common, but I would also come across an Apple Jack, a Peanut, a Spice, and a Sauce. Mythology and religion were well mined at the Lusty Lady, which had an Athena (goddess of wisdom and warfare), Atlantis (lost city), Avalon

(Celtic paradise), Cassandra (prophetess, doomed never to be believed), Jezebel (heretic queen), Kali (Hindu destroyer), and Lilith (Adam's first wife, noted for opposing the missionary position).

The purplish end of the color spectrum featured strongly among dancer names, as in Blue, Indigo, and Violet. I would also meet a Tawny and several Ambers. I never met a Red but could picture her perfectly: voluptuous in cowboy boots and a mane of red hair. Clubs were full of Kitties and Cats, and I would also meet a Krickette, a Raven, and a Hawk. Flames and Fires were rampant, and Summers, Autumns, and Winters numerous. One Autumn said that she chose her name because at twenty-nine she was in the autumn of her career.

Some dancers at the Lusty Lady carried on two separate stage personas, distinguished by name, look, and, if they took it seriously, character traits. In some cases they did it because they thought having two different looks would get them more shifts. Others believed a new look would freshen up waning customer interest. And some did it for their own amusement, to play with hairstyles, lipstick, and costumes. Thus wild-haired, nipple-ringed Lucia became Kitten, with a slick ponytail and a pink negligee. Demure Sheeba, who wore pastels and had silky bronze hair, could also be Ilianna, in black hair and aggressive red fingernails.

At most clubs, when a new dancer started, the manager asked for her stage name and expected a quick answer. Names were vetoed only if there was already one of her on the schedule. The Lusty Lady, though, took naming seriously, and when the occasional new hire wanted to use her real name, they forbade it—hence Abby, who always used her real name when she worked bachelor parties, had to go by Delilah at the peep show. Catharine had said to me when I left: "Think carefully about it. It's a chance to try on another identity."

Was a name an identity? I didn't take this too seriously. I would never feel that Leila was a completely different person from Elisabeth. On the other hand, it gave me a small thrill to be called something new. While away from Seattle and Erik, I had spent several months in Australia, where I was called Beth. I had never used the nickname before and hadn't planned to, but most people I met tried to shorten Elisabeth. I didn't like other variations and so quickly became Beth. I felt a flush of pleasure every time I heard someone call my new name, as though I were wearing a successful disguise. The fact that I could so easily shed my old name reminded me that I could always become

something new. When I had a short, intense affair with a man in Australia, I came to think of the name Beth as belonging exclusively to him. Beth was what I left with him—she was me, for him, and would remain so even after I went away.

But if I didn't take the business of names too seriously, others did. I would meet a number of strippers—at least six—who had permanently, and in some cases even legally, changed their real names. With the exception of most married women, I had never met anyone else who had done this, and the dancers weren't doing it to declare themselves tied to a man. One of them told me she just wanted to try being someone new; another hinted at wanting to mark a psychological shift. I understood the desire to self-invent, but I thought permanently changing one's name was drastic. While I might like to call myself Beth in one place or Leila in another, I didn't see them as different people. They were more like different roles to play. I would always go back to being the same actor.

Chapter 4

My stomach had been fluttering with a sense of foreboding all afternoon, as though I had to write an exam I wasn't prepared for. I felt I had no choice but to go through with it, and I just wanted to get the event over and done with. My fear was vague, though, with nothing exact to fix on. I had only one concrete anxiety, which was that I might see a customer I knew. I reasoned that if I did, he should be at least as embarrassed as me. We were on opposite sides of the same equation, and if one was socially unacceptable, the other had to be, too. Other than this one possibility, I didn't know exactly what it was I was going to find difficult. I compulsively ran through the upcoming events, as Catharine had explained them, trying to smooth them out and identify any potential unpleasantness. By the time I arrived I had thought dozens of times about where I would park, how I would announce myself at the front desk, how Catharine would take me to the dressing room, and how I would take off my clothes. But after undressing my enumeration of events hit a blank spot, and my imagination failed. While I knew theoretically that at some point I would go onstage, I couldn't conjure up any idea of what it would be like. I resigned myself to not knowing what was in store.

In the show directors' office, Catharine asked me to strip naked so that she could examine my body. There was no point in auditioning if I had some physical characteristic that would prevent me from working. Her main concern was to make sure I had no tattoos or body piercings.

I turned slowly around while she inspected me. For a moment I imagined myself for sale on an auction block, and I felt an anticipatory thrill of pleasure in knowing that Catharine would say yes, my unpierced, unmarked body would do nicely.

"You look great," she said finally. I put on my costume that made me barely more than nude: Black knee-high stockings, low black heels, and a gold choker necklace. Later I would think back and realize how amateurish I had looked in my scuffed shoes and flat hair, like a girl pretending to be a stripper for a night, but I didn't know this at the time and no one mentioned it. Catharine walked me through the dressing room to the edge of the stage. We had to squeeze around a tall black dancer in a satin push-up bra standing in the dressing room's narrow corridor, talking loudly into the telephone. "We've got to figure out how we're going to market these," she was saying into the phone. The words lodged in my head, and though I was too nervous to give it much thought, I wondered for a long time afterward what she was trying to sell.

I stood at the edge of the stage and steeled myself.

"Whenever you're ready. Take some deep breaths," Catharine said. Then she announced to the four dancers: "Ladies, we have an audition. This is Leila."

I entered at the opposite end of the stage from the window where I had watched the week before. It looked much brighter now that I was actually in it. I was immediately surrounded by reflections of naked women, including my own. In that rectangular, mirror-walled room, it was impossible not to see your own image unless you closed your eyes or looked straight at the floor. Ten windows lined one long wall, with two more on the short wall opposite the dressing room entrance. The bright red carpet and multicolored lights combined with the mirrors for a dazzling, garish effect. A floor-to-ceiling transparent pole stood toward one end of the rectangle, and transparent bars affixed to the walls framed the windows, all acting as prisms for the light. The windows, set in the mirrored wall, were covered with mirrored screens. A quarter raised the screen and kept it open for fifteen seconds. Catharine was going to watch me from a one-way window, but I didn't know which one. She said she would wait one song before she started, which was supposed to give me a chance to get comfortable. As I entered the stage each woman gave me a soft and subdued hello, as though to calm the lurching I felt inside.

My first few minutes passed in a daze. I wasn't the sort of creature to freeze in headlights, and most feelings didn't write themselves on my face. I could go through motions convincingly even when I felt unbalanced. And when I heard music I didn't have to think about

dancing, I just did. So I performed adequately while I waited for my mind to thaw out. All my past recitals and school plays came back to me, distilled into one cardinal rule: Remember to smile. The normal process of observing, absorbing, and reacting slowed to a glacial pace, as though my brain was assimilating so much information it needed to shut down for a few moments while it got back up to speed. After a few minutes it did, and then, playing catch-up, my mind started to race.

I was breathing fast and sweating lightly, conscious of my heart pulsing, blood racing, and a flush rising to the surface of my skin. Any of these symptoms could have signified exertion, nervous excitement, or arousal, and I couldn't at that moment tell one from another.

The stage was small and warm, enclosing me, and started to have a calming effect. I looked at the other dancers and could tell that I was doing roughly what I was supposed to. I realized that in violation of all expectation and common sense, this felt natural to me. It felt so natural that I tried to remember when I had done it before, but of course there was nothing in my memory bank. My mind was playing a trick on me. I was quite sure I had never danced naked for strangers in a red glass box.

With a happy frozen face I circled my hips and ran my hands over my body in a parody of sex. When a window opened, I flirted with the customer in it, dancing farther away, then closer, then right in his face, always turning and moving. I gripped the bars framing the window and leaned back, lifting a leg to rest it on the bar below the window like I watched the others do. When the screen closed, I moved to another window. I tried a few one-ways at first and then moved on to a two-way. Was this all there was to it?

It wasn't. Most of the customers I could see, and presumably the ones I couldn't, were masturbating. Catharine had warned me. She had asked me if I had a problem with this, and I had said no. In the smaller windows, if I looked at them straight on, only their trembling chests and puckered faces tipped me off. If I looked down, though, I could see their penises, wrapped in sliding hands. The two large corner windows displayed the men behind them from the groin up, framed like paintings.

The masturbators unnerved me, but I didn't let myself react outwardly. The phrase "keep smiling" played over and over in my head. Showmanship meant that the show went on even if the theater col-

lapsed around you, so surely I could handle a few men with their pants down. But they were a reminder of what, exactly, we did in here, which had been easy to lose track of through the interviews and introductions. We were paid to help men jerk off.

I favored the one-ways at first. If you got close enough to a one-way, blocking the light from the stage and looking down at exactly the right angle, you could sometimes make out fragmentary body parts, but you could never see their faces. I felt I could make a career out of one-ways, just dancing for my own image. But why were they so much easier, I wondered, when I knew that the men behind them were doing the same things as the two-way men? It was that the two-ways forced an acknowledgment from me. When I saw them I couldn't pretend I wasn't assenting.

My aversion wasn't visceral. Rather, I felt a fear of getting caught. I wasn't opposed to being viewed, I was opposed to others knowing that I allowed it, which showed an immature submission to received morality. So most of my discomfort came from worry over what others would think, and it was my willingness to join in what the men were doing that I knew would be looked at askance. There was very little stigma attached to being a passive sex object. Images of the legs, breasts, and lips of strangers suffused my life thoroughly, from billboards to magazines to television. Far from shaming the bodies' owners, society made them starlets, supermodels, and video queens, glorifying them with money and fame. Yet to actively pursue sex-object status—to say, "Okay, I agree, please look at me"—in this I felt as if there was reproach. The difference between a stripper and a woman modeling bathing suits was that the stripper acknowledged her intention to arouse, whereas the model could pretend ignorance. I felt uneasy at the sight of all these men because I had crossed the line from passivity to engagement.

While these thoughts crashed through my head, I was also thrilled. I had taken up a glove that had been thrown down by the first stranger to shout at me out of the window of his car. These men couldn't get me. I was safe and in control. I felt none of the vague alarm that accompanied stares and comments in the streets. I was taking back what should have been my own, freedom from a sense of menace. I was even feeling vengeful, glorying in the fact that they were down there, trapped in their little boxes, and I was above them in every way. They were a substitute for every man who had caused me fear.

But despite feeling aggressive, I saw almost right away that this wasn't the us-versus-them, black-and-white situation I had braced myself for. The men looked benign. Of the ones I could see, all but one smiled and made eye contact. Only one hung back in his booth with a surly frown. They looked eager and weak, with their puckered faces and intent, needy eyes. I remained wary, but I softened to them.

I was surprised when Catharine called "Leila" from the stage entrance after four songs, snapping me out of my tumbling thoughts. She asked all the dancers to clap for a great audition, which they did. As I came down to the dressing room, which felt noticeably cooler, she handed me a cup, and I poured cold water for myself. I realized I was exhausted and dripping with sweat. I wondered how I would be able to do what I had just done for three hours at a stretch in four-inch heels. My muscles were tense, and I shook as though I had just been on a roller-coaster ride. I felt weak and exhilarated, and my body seemed to buzz. I was pink all over. I guzzled water, splashed my face, and got dressed. It was over.

Sitting in the office next to a video monitor of the stage, Catharine told me that I was good but that I could slow down a little. That was a relief. She said it would give the customers more time to appreciate what they were looking at. I had worn my hair up, and she suggested I wear it down. "Try curling it. Try some different styles," she said. I didn't tell her that my hair was determined to be straight. She asked me how I felt about performing, and I told her what was foremost in my mind, which was that I might exhaust myself well before the end of a three-hour shift. I also told her, more tentatively, that I found the one-ways easier. They were like dancing in front of a mirror. She said it was all right if I favored them at first but that I shouldn't make a habit of it.

Catharine handed me a thick package of company policies and proceeded to go through them at length. They ranged from the specific and obvious, like showing up for work on time, to the vague and utopian, like the requirement to "be supportive" of other dancers and staff. We were required to follow certain dress requirements: Clothing had to decorate, not cover. No more than one dancer at a time could wear all black. Private parts had to be exposed: bras nippleless, tights crotchless; any skirts or shirts had to be brief and arranged to expose breasts and vaginas. Other rules included the break rotation—exactly ten minutes in length, one girl at a time—and the exhortation to never, ever, agree to meet a customer outside of work, or even appear to sug-

gest to do so. It took her about a half hour to go through all the stage rules, and then she mentioned something called the private pleasures booth. It was basically a one-on-one stage, down the hall and around the corner from the dressing room, where dancer and customer spoke via an intercom. "Most dancers wait before giving it a try," she told me. I said I would wait, too.

Chapter 5

Below the hovering firefly lights of the shipping in the sound were other lights that raced and flashed on trip circuits—lights of pleasure and temptation. Down on First Avenue, the Midtown Theater was showing Depraved Innocent and Interlude of Lust. The Champ Arcade (“The Adult Superstore”) advertised LIVE GIRLS—50 BEAUTIFUL GIRLS—& 3 UGLY ONES! Another sign alerted one to the fact that Nina Deponca, the XXX STAR, was playing Seattle LIVE IN PERSON! . . .

This was, after all, the city from which the phrase “skid row” had made it into the American language.

—Jonathan Raban, *Hunting Mister Heartbreak*

Throughout the late 1990s the Lusty Lady became progressively better known to people outside the sex industry. When they heard it mentioned, many Seattle residents would remark that it was owned and run by women, though this was only approximately true. The family that owned it included at least one woman, but June, the general manager when I began, was replaced by a man in 1997. The show directors, though, who had the most contact with dancers, were women.

The Lusty kept appearing in the news for reasons good and bad. The photographer Erika Langley published a book called *The Lusty Lady*, a collection of her black-and-white photos of dancers, and she exhibited her work in local galleries. The Lusty was also briefly in the spotlight when workers at its same-named sister outfit in San Francisco became the first strippers, nationwide, to launch a union, which they did between 1996 and 1998. Unionization never took hold at the northern

branch, but the subject received attention again when the movie *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, which documented the San Francisco unionization drive, came out in 2000. And for a while the Lusty was in the crosshairs of city council member Jane Noland, who launched an indiscriminate drive to have the doors removed from customer booths in all adult businesses with private stalls. She declared the stalls a public health hazard on the grounds that gay men used them for anonymous, unprotected sex. It’s plausible they did that in some establishments, though not at the Lusty.

Much of the Lusty’s growing prominence, though, came simply from its location and its marquee. Though First Avenue was known after World War II as Flesh Avenue, in the ’90s the peep show gradually became an anachronism in a rising tide of boutiques and condominiums. The new home of the Seattle Art Museum opened on First Avenue in 1991 and became an anchor for a brighter, less smutty downtown. The Lusty Lady, dubbed the city’s “aristocratic filth-art gallery” by one local journalist, was directly across the street. (On one occasion the filth actually crossed the street, when Langley showed her work at the museum.) In the plaza in front of its new glass-and-concrete building, on the corner of First and University, the museum installed *Hammering Man*, a gargantuan, perpetually moving metal sculpture. He was a forty-eight-foot-tall, thirty-inch-thick man in profile, made of black-painted steel. Like a giant metronome, the arm that held the hammer moved slowly up and down at the shoulder joint, and he pounded relentlessly from 1991 on.

With the arrival of *Hammering Man* and the elegant museum, the pawnshops started closing and boarded-up buildings came back to life. Next door to the Lusty Lady the Harbor Steps materialized, a complex of apartments, fountains, and shops that included a celebrity-chef restaurant, the Wolfgang Puck Café. The apartments were quickly occupied, even the penthouse suites that rented for more than four thousand dollars a month. As money flowed into downtown, city officials tried to ease out the sex trade. Seattle had passed its first ordinance regulating adult businesses in 1988, sponsored by the crusading Jane Noland. A decade later the city imposed a moratorium on opening new sex businesses, which was extended in 1999. The Déjà Vu on Pike and the Champ Arcade peep show on First closed in 1997, and in 1998 Seattle’s new symphony hall opened on Second. Seattle became a technology boom town, and visitors swarmed in. To get from one of the

city's most-promoted tourist attractions, the Pike Place Market, to another, Pioneer Square, they had to walk right by the Lusty Lady. That meant that the tourists, along with all the shoppers, gallerygoers and classical music fans, could catch a glimpse of its pink, white, and black marquee.

The marquee deserved landmark status. Surrounded by flashing white lightbulbs, it displayed two catchy, lewd slogans at all times, one facing up the street and the other facing down. The slogans were often tied to local news or sports events. When the World Trade Organization met in Seattle in November 1999 and was greeted with violent demonstrations, the marquee read, "W T Ohhhh" and "Nude World Order." After the earthquake in February 2001 it read, "Come Feel the Earth Move"; and during the controversial ballot counting after the 2000 presidential election, it read, "Electile Dysfunction?" Around Christmas it always said, "Merry XXX-mas." The maxims were changed every week without fail. Just below the phrase of the week, permanent smaller black letters read, "Have an Erotic Day!"

The marquee guided me like a lighthouse as I drove down First Avenue. The road was slick and shiny with rain. It was already dark at six o'clock in the evening on a Thursday, and the streets were busy with commuters trying to get out of downtown. At ten o'clock, when I finished my shift, the streets would be quieter, so I wanted to park nearby.

I passed the Lusty Lady on my right and took a left at *Hammering Man*, then cursed when I realized Second Avenue ran one way. I was already nervous about my first shift, and the excruciatingly slow traffic made me more tense. I circled until I found a spot two blocks away. I grabbed the bag I had packed, which contained the same black stockings and scuffed shoes I had used for my audition, and a zippered toilet kit that held hair accessories, jewelry, and crumbling pans of makeup. I figured I would wait to see if I was actually going to stick with the job before investing in new gear.

At the front desk I introduced myself as Leila, as I had been instructed. The guy at the desk picked up a clipboard, scanned the weekly schedule, and checked off my name.

"First shift?" he asked. I said yes.

"Welcome. I'm Jeff."

I walked down a long dark hallway past the customers' booths to the dressing room. Jeff watched the dressing room door on one of his video monitors, and he unlocked it with a buzz just as I appeared on his screen.

I entered the brightly lit room that I had now visited twice, on the day of my first appointment with Catharine, and on the day she auditioned and hired me. She had given me a tour, pointing out the time clock, the coatrack, the music-request box, the complaints-and-suggestions box, the watercooler, the refrigerator, the microwave, the free snacks—usually instant noodles and popcorn—and the "free box" full of old clothes, where dancers could discard or acquire what they liked.

I looked into the show directors' office, which adjoined the dressing room. Catharine was absent, but Debra, the other show director, sat at her desk. I hadn't met her before.

"Hi, I'm Leila," I said.

She looked at me blankly for a moment, then said, "Oh hi. This is your first shift, isn't it?" I nodded. She was what I had expected a strip-club manager to look like before I met Catharine: permed brown hair pulled up in a girlish style and a weary face. I missed Catharine's hand-holding presence already.

"Let me know if you have any questions," Debra said, and turned back to the spreadsheet on her computer screen. Above one of the office's two desks was a black-and-white video monitor of the stage, with a slim, pale body moving silently across it.

The dressing room was shaped roughly like the letter C, with the toilet, shower, and sink off of the short passage that formed the middle stretch. My assigned locker was at ground level in that stretch. It wasn't a great location because it was narrow and heavily trafficked, lying as it did in the path from the stage to the telephone, toilet, or managers' office. But it could have been worse. Dancers assigned lockers next to the hallway door got a whole locker to themselves to compensate for the inconvenience of having the door open onto them, sometimes flung wide.

Two computer-printed signs were taped to my locker door, reading "Leila" and "Sarah." "You'll like Sarah as a locker mate," Catharine had told me. "She only works once a week." Our locker was plain compared to all the others. Except where there were mirrors and makeup counters, much of the available wall space was taken up by lockers. Dancers

had decorated them with exuberant self-definition, as ardently as high-schoolers though with a more sexual tone. Favorite movie stars, favorite porn stars, photos of themselves nude, themselves with boyfriends, themselves as children, catchy photos ripped from fashion magazines, comic book drawings of fantastical sexual acts—all this and more papered both the outside and inside of the locker doors. A few lockers above mine, one with the name tag “Marilyn,” had photos of Marilyn Monroe on it.

I read the combination off the slip of paper Catharine had given me and opened the wooden door. The locker was almost empty. It contained a snapshot of a brown-haired toddler—Sarah’s perhaps?—and an orange vibrator. Never having actually seen one up close, I picked it up warily and turned the dial at one end. The batteries were dead. It was months before I actually met Sarah and found out that neither of the items belonged to her.

I took a seat on a stool in front of the dressing room mirror, which was surrounded with lightbulbs, and started to apply my makeup. It reminded me of getting ready for dance competitions as a preteen, when putting on stage makeup had seemed dramatic and grown-up. It no longer seemed quite so exciting, but watching my face transform still fascinated me. “We like a glamorous look,” Catharine had told me, though she noted that some dancers simply had a “look”—a wholesome or girlish look, I took her to mean—that didn’t require makeup. But she wanted me to aim for glamour.

Once you learn how to apply makeup you never forget. I painted my eyes and lips with delicate, steady movements. Wearing cosmetics had once been a daily addiction for me, until sometime in college when I decided it was a monumental inconvenience. I still regarded it as addiction-like, in the sense that a little makeup always led to more. I could continue a streak of abstinence for a long time. But if I started, with, say, some mascara and foundation one day, maybe some lip gloss the next, I was always tempted to go for more. I became seduced by the idea that I could crank up the drama and polish of my face, and I was loath to go in the other direction, toward the horror of plainness. Before I knew it I would be wearing more makeup, spending more money on it, and feeling hooked. In order to avoid getting trapped in this vicious circle, I tried, for the most part, to abstain, but like addiction it was a touchy, one-day-at-a-time business. Now, though, I had an excuse. It was part of my job.

Makeup made women prettier in the most conventional way, I thought as I outlined my lips. It made skin a little smoother, lips a little fuller, eyes a little bigger. I wondered why more women didn’t regard it as an expensive trap. I hoped that someday it would go the way of corsets and foot binding, but I saw no movement in that direction. Cosmetics companies continued to profit. A woman wasn’t considered “professional”-looking without makeup. And as if makeup weren’t enough, women in their twenties—bankers and lawyers as well as strippers—had plastic surgery, adding pain and danger to expense and inconvenience. Prettiness was as strong an imperative as ever in the lives of women, which was why I admired those who swore off cosmetics completely. I thought they had sprung themselves from vanity, whereas I sometimes had to concentrate just to keep from looking at myself in a shop window. Maybe stripping would get the fixation out of my system. I noticed that many dancers weren’t wearing any makeup when they arrived in the dressing room. It was as though they went so over the top with clichéd femininity at work, gorging themselves on false eyelashes, wigs, and shimmery face powders, that they no longer needed to wear it anywhere else.

I had not come up with any new styles for my hair, as Catharine had suggested. I thought about back combing it now to make it look bigger, but that could veer into messiness, and Catharine had warned against mess. I put on a black headband to hold it away from my face, thinking that maybe I needed to get it cut or lightened. Another job-related investment to add to shoes and makeup.

I began to peel my clothes off, feeling the oddness of the context. It wasn’t like home, even a home where my lover was so used to my body that he barely noticed. It wasn’t like a gym locker room, either, because in those most women were furtive in their nudity, dressing and undressing with quick utilitarian movements and not a hint of pride. It was rare that I had seen a naked woman in a locker room looking casual or relaxed. Far more often I had seen women swathe themselves in towels and try to change awkwardly underneath, or simply duck into toilet stalls.

The Lusty Lady dressing room was an altogether different scene and one that I felt much more at home in. Around me women read, ate, fixed their makeup, and chatted, all nude. Taking my clothes off always made me feel pleasantly unfettered, and here it did so even more because no one thought it was strange. I felt almost eager to get my

clothes off, wanting to assure the women around me that I was one of them. I stuffed my clothes in my locker and put on my black, just-over-the-knee stockings and pumps. I cleaned the soles with alcohol and paper towels, because we were not supposed to wear street shoes on the velvet-carpeted stage, which we crawled around on. I added the gold choker and a bracelet and appraised myself in the mirror. Technically, I supposed, we couldn't be called strippers because we didn't take anything off. We started out naked.

It was only twenty to seven by the time I was completely ready. I was so afraid of being late that I had arrived too early. I took my shoes back off and stood in my stockings, my hands clasped behind my back, looking at the walls. A bulletin board was cluttered with notes: notices from the show directors like "Paychecks are not available until five p.m. on Thursdays," phone messages, requests to trade shifts, and postcards from dancers who were on holiday or had moved away. The schedules for the current and following weeks were posted, covered with corrections in ballpoint ink.

I sat down to wait. A dancer came offstage, introduced herself as Venus, and laid a piece of paper towel on the red easy chair before sitting down. I realized I had forgotten this courtesy, which Catharine had told me about. I was sitting with my bare ass on the wooden stool. I jumped up and looked at the bulletin board some more.

A woman with wavy, nearly thigh-length blond hair arrayed around a slim body came offstage, causing me to check my hair in the mirror. She introduced herself as April, then threw herself on a chair.

"These things are fucking killing me!" she burst out.

She unzipped her boots, but they were so tight she couldn't yank them off. A friend had just given them to her, she explained, and she had thought at first that they fit. She couldn't go back onstage in them; she could barely walk. She asked me to help get them off.

I knelt down in front of her and gripped her calf with both hands, pulling on the boot, and I was struck with a sudden and overwhelming sense of the surreal. I had arrived where I had set out for: completely unknown territory. A pornographic movie of myself played in my head: me kneeling in front of April, straining against her boot, both of us naked. I had been here for only a half hour. What would I be doing next?

Another dancer, Georgia, came off the stage to quickly brush her hair.

"Whoa, what's going on here, ladies?" she asked.

"My boots are stuck!" April said.

The boot eased, and I fell backward. The other one came off more easily.

"Friends for life!" April said, thanking me. She changed briskly into a different pair of black boots, covered herself with a sarong and jean jacket, and took a cigarette from her purse. She was headed for the smoking room down the hall, with five minutes before she had to be back onstage.

Clara Bo, a brunette with curly hair and rosebud lips, returned to the dressing room in giddy spirits from the private pleasures booth, also down the hall.

Smack-smack-smack! She spanked Venus with a multicolored rubber dildo.

"What are you doing? What's gotten into you?" asked Venus, laughing and making no move to get away. Clara Bo giggled and threw the dildo into her locker.

A tall, gangly brunette entered from the hallway, wearing jeans and a rain-spattered Gore-Tex jacket, carrying a bicycle helmet. It took me several minutes to figure out why she looked familiar. It was Korina, the same dancer I had watched perform the first time I came to interview. The Slavic features I had thought were so beautiful now looked flat and square. The figure I thought was statuesque looked awkward as she shed her not-quite-long-enough jeans. Zits crowded a corner of her chin. I stared, looked away, stared again.

"Is it still raining?" asked Clara Bo, pulling on jeans.

Korina said it was.

"I guess I'm taking the bus then."

"Do you want a transfer?" asked Korina, producing one from the pocket of her jeans, which now lay on the floor. Girls taped bus transfers to the mirror, I had noticed, so that others could use them.

The conversations around me provided a much-needed distraction from the fact that I would be walking onstage with April at seven p.m. exactly, on the zero. A digital clock near the stage entrance displayed 6:54 in large, red numbers. I looked at my reflection in the dressing room mirror. I dusted my face with powder, punched in, and stepped back into my shoes. When the clock ticked over, and April brushed past me, I climbed the steps and entered the dazzling red-and-silver room.

* * *

Tight rules and a well-established hierarchy kept the Lusty running smoothly. At the top of the pyramid was June, the general manager, whom few dancers had much to do with. Below her were the Seattle and San Francisco branches, with two show directors each, who were chosen from the ranks of dancers. As well as Catharine, Seattle had Debra, who had a timeless air about her. Over several years, Catharine was replaced by Simone, and Simone by Dorthea, but Debra remained; the two positions gradually evolved so that Debra remained the senior show director and the other woman her junior. If a dancer was interested—because, for example, she was pregnant—and the show directors needed help, they might hire her to do office work, though for much less than her stage wage. Debra and her sister Candy had both at one time been show directors, but Candy had gone back to working onstage and later, when she retired from the stage, took a job at the front desk. Debra's daughter, a single mother in her twenties, also came to work at the Lusty, after working as a club dancer at *Déjà Vu*.

Under the show directors the hierarchy split into two branches: support staff and dancers. The support staffers were mostly men in their twenties. They included Jeff, the guy who had checked me in on my first day. I had formed an impression of him as sweet-natured because of his polite voice. Before being hired at the Lusty Lady Jeff had worked in the restaurants of five-star hotels. At the last one all the waiters had been men, and he had found the milieu overwhelmingly straight and obnoxiously macho—every time a pretty woman walked by someone said what he would do to her that night if he could. Jeff quit and applied to the Lusty Lady, where he knew a couple of dancers. After one interview, during which Debra had asked him if he understood what went on there—“Basically a lot of masturbation,” he had replied—she had offered him the job.

Like most support staffers he did both janitorial and cashiering shifts. On his morning janitorial shifts he started by cleaning the dressing room and stage, making sure it looked good and was stocked with essentials like baby wipes, aspirin, and tampons. The rest of the time he spent touring, going from booth to booth, sweeping up Kleenex and mopping. If there were two customers in a booth, he asked one to leave. Occasionally someone tried to smoke crack or shoot up in one of the

booths, and he threw him out. He kept a close eye on things. Customers sometimes gave him a hard time, calling him a jizz-mopper, which he had found difficult at first. But he came to look at his task as one of simple sanitation, and he compared himself to a nurse, since they had to deal with bodily fluids all the time. He always used rubber gloves and never touched anything with his bare hands. One time on a weekend night, a guy he took to be a frat boy, trying to show off to his friends, asked Jeff what his gloves were for. “The gloves are so that when I fist fuck you I won't get my hands dirty,” Jeff had replied, which almost got his face punched in. But Jeff had been defensive back then. Now he ignored rowdies.

On the cashiering shifts he saw himself as a communicator. He took phone calls from customers asking about the show, screened calls to the show directors, and made sure the girls showed up ten minutes before their shifts. If they needed something in the dressing room, he dispatched a janitor to get it. He watched the video monitors and kept an eye out for unruly men. On his favorite shift, the day shift, he knew many of the customers by name. He became close friends with a few dancers, and he felt protective toward them all. The Lusty gave him raises, medical benefits, and paid vacation, and he never had to pretend he wasn't gay. Once he'd even come to work in drag, which everyone had thought was great. Where else could you do that? Jeff thought the Lusty was a class act.

Regulations existed to encompass nearly every aspect of dancer behavior. The main instrument of implementation was the weekly schedule, and producing it was one of the show directors' most important tasks. Using a spreadsheet program, they organized as many as seventy dancers into shifts of two to five hours, filling the sixteen to eighteen hours the stage was open every day of the week. Each dancer had a permanent schedule request on file, specifying her hours of availability and number of shifts desired. Dancers could also make special schedule requests on a weekly basis, provided they met the deadline.

Once the schedule was made, every dancer received a copy for the upcoming week enclosed with her paycheck from the week before. The back of the schedule listed dancers' phone numbers, show directors' hours, instructions for replacing shifts, and other important information, like the dates of upcoming staff meetings and the names of new

dancers. The week I started it said "Welcome Leila!" in the bottom right-hand corner. The phone list, which ran the length of the legal-size sheet, had an alphabetical column for stage names and a column specifying what name to ask for, stage or real, when telephoning the dancer's home. The letters "PP" next to a dancer's name indicated that she did shifts in the private pleasures booth. Asterisks next to her name told the caller to be discreet and not to mention work to whoever answered the phone. We were instructed to keep the schedules to ourselves and tear them up as soon as we had been paid for the week so that the phone list didn't fall into the hands of crank callers.

As well as accommodating schedule requests, Catharine and Debra tried to make up what they called a "diverse stage," which meant mixing hair colors, skin tones, and breast sizes. "Leila" was underlined on the back of the phone list, indicating that I was busty. If I traded or gave away a shift, I was only allowed to replace myself with another busty, so the underlines told me whom I could call. Dancers made a flurry of changes every week after the schedule came out, wreaking havoc on the show directors' carefully planned shifts. To try to keep the stage something like they had planned, we were required to look for someone who resembled us as closely as possible when trading. A list of dancer descriptions hung by the telephone in the dressing room to help. It began:

ACEE—Busty, curvaceous, brunette

AMBER—Busty, sensuous, red hair

APPLE JACK—Busty, tall, curly red hair

APRIL—Slim, petite, blond

ATLANTIS—Tanned, athletic, brunette

We were also required to consider the overall makeup of the stage when trading shifts. Blond busties had an advantage in getting scheduled, but it was harder for us to give shifts away. Of the four to six dancers working at any given time, they always tried to include at least one blond busty. If I was the only one scheduled, I could only switch with another one. But if there were already two of us scheduled, I had more leeway. There was a system to trading shifts. Keeping in mind the rules on appearance, I first had to call dancers until I found someone who agreed. Then each of us had to call the show director on duty and

inform her. Then I had to write in the change on the dressing room master schedule and inform the front desk.

Once at work, the system of breaks was similarly precise. We took ten-minute breaks in rotation, which came after no more than fifty and no fewer than thirty minutes onstage, depending on how many of us were working. Remembering the order of the breaks, Catharine had warned, could be difficult. She said she had been terrible at it when she danced. On my first day, my break followed April's because she had returned from hers when my shift began. But the order changed as dancers started and ended shifts every half hour. Sometimes dancers traded breaks, jumbling the sequence even more.

We had code words to communicate with each other onstage. If someone said she was "getting a perm," it meant her shift was over. We were not allowed to announce the end of our shift in any other way in case the customers overheard us. This was partly for our own safety but also for legal reasons. Telling a customer I was getting off work, even unintentionally, could be construed as soliciting. If a dancer said she was "getting lucky," it meant that her break fell right before the end of her shift, allowing her to leave ten minutes early. And if she said "Gordon" it was short for "Flash Gordon," meaning she had seen a camera flash go off behind one of the one-way windows. If that happened, one person was supposed to continue dancing for the window so that the culprit wouldn't leave, while someone else called the front desk to have the customer ejected and his film destroyed.

There was a system for the music, too. The sound system played a set of a hundred songs, changed weekly. A dancer named Cinnamon was responsible for putting the music list together. To make her job easier and to add variety, dancers were encouraged to put together lists of fifty songs from the Lusty Lady's collection and submit them to Cinnamon, who would then add the other fifty. Dancers could also make specific song requests. The result was a mix of everything: top-forty pop, obscure local bands, old jazz singers, world music, everything.

My hourly wage increased according to schedule. When I started, I earned ten dollars an hour, about the same as I had made temping. Provided I showed up on time and didn't break any rules, it was slated to rise by a dollar an hour every month for my first six. After that raises were granted based on performance, and most dancers who stuck around reached twenty-four dollars an hour, the top rate of pay, within

a couple of years. (By 2001 the ceiling had increased to twenty-seven an hour.) I moved up to eleven an hour, then twelve, thirteen, and fourteen as the months rolled by. Some dancers complained about not getting enough shifts, but I had no trouble. For one thing I didn't want to work as much as some—three shifts a week were often enough for me. I could easily get that, partly because of the blond busty rule and partly because as a new performer I was still relatively cheap to have onstage. Blond, busty, and cheap. Except for the fact that I didn't do the private pleasures booth, in management's eyes I was perfect.

Chapter 6

The dressing room was warm and collegial. We had talkers, readers and studiers, snackers, a knitter, and women who fussed with their makeup and hair. I often brought news magazines but rarely read much, since our breaks were short and the distractions many. The strangeness of meeting people for the first time while naked vanished quickly. One woman introduced herself to me by saying, "You have beautiful breasts." She was matter-of-fact, as though complimenting me on a dress. New faces always introduced themselves, with everyone observing the rule that we use only stage names. Despite or perhaps because of this anonymity, along with the fact that most conversations were easily overheard, openness reigned. Boy problems, girl problems, home, health, school, and aspirations were all up for discussion. This may have been fostered by the fact that, for many of us, the one thing we might have kept secret from others was already known and considered unremarkable.

The stage, smaller than the dressing room, hung off of it like a bright Christmas stocking. The managers discouraged talking out there because the customers could overhear. My dancing settled into a routine: Window opens. Start three feet away. Turn, twist, bend. High kick. Sink to floor. Approach window on knees. Stand up. Raise foot to bar, show pussy. Crouch down, show face, lips, tongue. Stand up, turn, bend over. Sometimes they were done in one minute, sometimes it took half an hour. I could do this consciously, which I often did at the very beginning of a shift, or right after a break, or if the customer piqued my interest. But I often did it mindlessly. The stage could be relentlessly monotonous.