Superhooker

Secret Selves and the Sex Industry

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Ashley

Freedom is money. To go anywhere in the world. To do anything you want to. To buy anything you want. Yet we are slaves to money. We are slaves until we have money.

I am a slave; negative, isolated, chained; an ordinary job, getting on the metro at seven in the morning, sick and strained from trying to fit into a mould that is not really my size or shape. Thirsty for love, tired of my lovers. Left out in the cold. Claustrophobic and distorted. Secretive. Following the faith of my own religion. Then, again, the sex industry pulls me, draws me towards it, pulls my chains. I use sex, men, my body, to make money. I am sick, strained. I know, not again, will I ever be free? Demons in my head hustle and fight.

Then I am free. Just for a short while. Flying high on adrenalin. Dirty wings. Flying free, soaring across the sky. I can do anything. I can do anything I want to. My alter ego is all powerful.

I *am* Superhooker.

Zoe

February: ripe oranges, some black, chewed, rotting in the cinnamon dirt. A cyan Algarve sky. Possibilities. This possibility. Being able to see both the sun and the moon at the same time. The positive and the negative. How ordinary things like this, like nature, are the most extraordinary. Beetles with black shiny plastic backs, pink-yellow blue-purple flowers, cacti, that I pass, whilst kicking at a pine cone the size of a clenched fist. I stand in the centre of the orange tree field, between neat rows of bountiful trees. One orange tree stands out from the others, it is larger, more abundant with healthy orange globes; yet like women or cats, each tree has similarities and each one innate with its own personal and original charms. The five o'clock pale yellow sun casts its early evening glow, across the field, across my back, my shadow stretching before me. Large shadow hands twist at the end of long, thin shadow arms. I could be thirteen again and walking in the village fields of my English childhood home, with the same sharp shard of hatred and sense of the unjust that mars my innocence.

I want to get lost; it seems impossible, passing the same reddish-yellow rocks, horse-shoe prints in the sand tracks and thick-grey-barked pine tree where I had sat and cried some days before. Possibilities, yet obstacles. This place is limited, fences and barking dogs protecting the white-walled villas that stand aloof from each other and I can still hear the cars along the main road that lies in the same direction as the sun. As I walk, I get lost, finally, purposely, amongst the green and the bark and start to run, away from the house, away from claustrophobia and malignant, unborn deceits, jumping over logs, feeling light, feeling the wind, feeling thirteen again or eight, wary of the pine trees because they harbour processionary caterpillar. Their spiked hairs hold a poison for their own protection and irritate the skin.

The Portuguese sun is warm to me yet *muito frio* to the Portuguese, the Brazilians. I know which direction to head. I do not really want to go back because I hate the house, with its weirdness and damp. The sun will go down soon and there is nowhere else to go, not here, it is a long walk into the town. I walk with a vague, slight panic in my step yet my instincts are sharper now that I am raw, more animal than before. A private time, away from the prying eyes and minds of the others. A quest to be alone, even though I was already isolated, in a different way, amongst people. It seems implausible now that only an hour, two hours before I did not want to be alive anymore.

Now I am wearing a cheap, black PVC jacket, which is peeling at the elbows. My legs are long; slim yet muscular in black leather ankle boots, that have platform soles and perilously high, thin heels. I have applied obscene, glossy crimson lipstick. There are spots on my chin, some bearing ripe, white heads and others merely flat, red scars. *But what can I do?*

He is a large man- a heavy build and a heavy brow. His nose is flat and thuggish. Dark eyes, kind and dangerous. He has a big heart and wide Brazilian smile. He walks with an ungainly limp due to the car accident where he broke his neck, about eight, or so, years ago. I hold his hand, walking slightly behind him, sometimes resting my head on his thick arm, other times fluffing-up my hair with my free hand. My hair is shoulder length, sexy with fuzzy split ends from where I have had dyed it from brown to blonde to red. His hair is black, wet look and well kept, a razor thin goatee beard outlining his chin. He wears a black suit, a red tie and a white shirt. The jacket is buttoned over his wide stomach. We look like prostitute and pimp. Gangster and moll.

What is my life like? I am a circus act. An exhibit. The men watch me and ask themselves, each other: *What can her life be like? She is strong, has toned biceps and thighs. She is not*

Brazilian. No, English. She dances well. Does she do private? No? Just dancing? See how she flicks her head back, a sculptured silhouette in the strobe. Her face is young, unsmiling. She stares ahead, focused and dangerous. A streetwise stripper, parading now up and down the room, exaggerating the movement of her hips as she walks in those ridiculously high boots. Sexy and independent. On a different level from those good girls. Yes, this is a bad girl. Dirty. Desirable. Yet , see how she walks cautiously away, now, like a foal, naked, show over.

Of course, I am not bad. Not really, even if my family made me feel that way. I no longer keep in contact with them. I am not streetwise- more like 'street stupid'. But I need to pay my rent, have money for a college course in Lisbon. If I can pass this course I will be able to teach English instead of taking my clothes off for money. I need a lap top computer. I want new clothes like any girl. I need, I want.

If you passed by me in the street, away from this place, you would never know. Here though, in some part of my mind, I use my erotic imagination to conjure magic, dancing alone in the centre of the room; a hand resting for a moment on the vertical, silver pole. On the opposite end of the scale to magic is harsh reality and I know all about that.

Zoe

This is *Vale do Lobo*, Valley of Wolves. They tell me that there are no wolves, only rich people with villas and Mercedes. Perhaps they are the wolves.

I am squeezed, confined. A tap is dripping somewhere in the house. I need a dump but feel reluctant to use the toilets. They do not flush properly. The Russian is watching the TV with the bad reception. He has picked oranges and arranged them in a rough pyramid shape in the kitchen, and lemons too, in a blue plastic carrier bag. The girls are sleeping. They knocked on my door earlier on and asked me if I wanted to go horse riding with them but I did not want to go because one of them is a real snake. It is true that snakes come in all shapes and sizes. This snake is called Claudia. Yet when she is working in the club she resembles a giraffe, rather than a snake, with her short body and long legs, wearing an animal print dress and strappy sandals, stalking around, towering above everyone else, seeking clients. What is snake-like about her is on the inside, beneath those blue, blank eyes. It is her ability to shift, slither and shed a skin at will depending on who she is with and as long as it is all to her advantage. A treacherous snake in the grass. Yes, I am watching her. There is no trust here. This is no 'Little House on The Prairie'.

The Russian is a simple man, in a good way, uncomplicated. When I said that St J's club was full of snakes, he thought that I literally meant real serpents, “Cobra?” he asked, eyes wide with alarm. I am learning Portuguese from him, with a Russian accent, whilst he is learning English from me. He lives in the garage below the house. There is a radio, clothes washer, a wardrobe and a bed which he says is never cold because he has surrounded it with a shelter of blankets, hung from the ceiling like a teepee. He has a wife in Russia and a Brazilian lover in Portugal. The Brazilian likes to be tied up during sex; something he would never do with his wife or indeed, with any woman in the whole of Russia.

I lie on the narrow bed watching two thin, stringy cobwebs hanging from my ceiling blowing back and forth, even though there is no window open. The off-white walls are an unsightly black in the corners. My emotions are emptiness tinged with slight fear. My heart is beating faster than normal. This is the ghost house, the Big Brother House, Amityville House (that horror film used to scare me so much, especially when the blood started pouring down the stairs). I smoke another *Portuguese Suave* and flick ash into an upturned, coral coloured fan-like shell.

Rumours spread quickly like a nasty virus through the club- truth and half-truth become mutations, deformities of reality. It only takes one little thing to trigger it off, like a tiny morsel of information and like a sneeze, rumours, like germs, expand through the air with wide and frightening rapidity. It is ultimately an unhealthy air to breathe. It was Claudia, the snake, that started off the latest rumour about me. I felt sick and had a funny taste in my mouth. I said that I hoped that I was not pregnant. I told her that it was unlikely though because I had been using condoms and, anyway, my period was not even late. She asked me, “Who? A client?” I told her that, *no*, I was having sex with one person only, Lopes.

I shrugged and said, “Everyone knows about him and me, anyway.” Now the rumour is that I am pregnant with Lopes' baby because we were not using condoms. Claudia knows that I came on my period the next day.

I have stomach cramps and deep red blood which chafes my thighs. I will not do any private shows tonight because of my period. I will do one show on stage, I will tuck the tampon string up inside, and drink champagne with the clients. It is always a fear that the tampon string will be illuminated under the ultraviolet lights whilst dancing, for all the guys to see. I suppose it is better than wearing a sanitary towel. *Ha, ha.*

How I hate this house. An off-white villa, the inside walls grey with creeping mould and a smell that is a concoction of Brazilian spices, stagnant perfume and damp. I itch at night, waking, scratching, red bumps forming beneath my skin, *pulga,* fleas from the cat or bedbugs writhing invisibly in the dirty blankets. I feel so ugly, I cannot stand those grimy blankets next to my skin. *Pulga* suck from my skin leaving their poisons. This house is sucking energy from me. I zip myself

up in a bed at night, like a soldier. Lopes said that I was crazy when I unrolled the sleeping bag from out of my suitcase and placed it carefully on the bed. He does not understand what it is like to sleep here. He does not know how I have to dehumanise, de-womanise myself, as the poetry is sucked out of me too, sucked out of my soul, until I am afraid I will become like them, a soulless bitch. One who is never able to escape and lives only for money. One who hides her loneliness and pain with cocaine, drink, sex, plastic surgery and designer clothes.

The cat, Gaspar, belongs to the Brazilian girl. He is limping, holding up his back right paw so that it does not touch the ground. There is a pink gash on his leg where the fur and top layer of skin has scraped off, a wound matted with dirt, blood and scab. His white fur is dirty, his tail is grey, green eyes which are pink rimmed and watering, leaving black residue in his calm , accepting eyes. He is semi-feral, unlike spoilt British moggies, often forgotten, undeserving of love and food because he is just an animal. “They treat you just like an animal, don't they, G?” I say, stroking his wide white forehead as he purrs appreciatively.

I have decided to pass the evening by getting quietly and surreptitiously drunk. There are no clients and I sit at the bar drinking glasses of beer and talking to Rachel, the only other English girl. She has got a stiff neck and cannot move it to the left and I tell her that I will bring her some `Tiger Balm` to put on it tomorrow. You can buy small tins, the size of a coin, from the Chinese *lojas* here for one euro. When I have muscle pain I have a long hot bath then rub the potent, waxy lotion into my skin. I can feel both hot and cold, simultaneously burning and cooling, passing through my senses and my skin like lightening and ice, like a tiger and a dragon. Rachel has been at St J's for the longest, about two years. She says that she is a professionally trained dancer and has worked on cruise ships and casinos. She has a boyfriend who hits her and has sex with men in the private rooms. She is masculine in her attitude, very loud and domineering, always sighing loudly as she walks through the club, arms folded. She has short, blonde hair, an orange suntan and small screwed-up over-painted eyes. Lopes has warned me that Rachel is “danger”. He said that one day she is nice to him, the next day nasty, “I no like, she got two faces.” I said that it is OK.

“I am here,” I placed one finger pointing upwards, “and she is here.” I held up the other index finger, with a gap between the two. He speaks only a little English, I speak hardly any Portuguese, although I am trying to learn.

When I first started at St J's, Rachel asked me if I could lend her some money for the cigarette machine. “Thanks darlin',” she said, as I gave her the coins, adding that she would pay me back the next night. The following evening I had been talking to a young guy, a golfer from Manchester. He said that he was not a typical golfer. He was a manager of an old people's home in the week and a musician at the weekends. He was telling me how he hated the snobbishness and cliquishness of the golfing clubs, how they had to wear the correct clothing, like knee high socks, to fit in or they would be branded a rebel of the golfing world and ostracised. He just played golf for the sport, for personal enjoyment, not for social status. He was in his twenties, very easy to talk to, said he came to St J's just to chill out. He liked to watch the pole dancers and I agreed that some of them are very talented. We watched the dancer in thigh high white boots dramatically sliding down the pole. We sat, laughing and drinking champagne and I was running short of cigarettes, so I went over to Rachel, who was sitting on one of the sofas by the bar watching me. I asked her if she could give me the money I had lent her for the cigarette machine. She looked at me coldly, arms folded, and asked, “What money?”. I reminded her of the money I had lent her the previous night for the cigarettes and she said, dismissively, that she would pay me back later. Later on when I was standing at the bar, I asked her again. She started shouting at me, slammed the money aggressively down on the bar and walked out into the dressing room, yelling that I was having a go at her, “Why do you keep harassing me? It's only two euros.”

“Whatever.” I picked up the money from the bar and put it into the cigarette machine. Why should I give her even one cent of my money? She was acting like a brattish teenager, regressing back into a child...*Well at least my face did not look like a squashed satsuma that had been trodden*

on about a million times. What happened to her? Had she been attacked by the orange people or something? Miguel, the barman said that she was jealous because she used to be the only English girl in the house. The girls switch all the time, like bitches do. One day acting like the best of friends, the next day mortal enemies. Handbags at dawn.

St J's used to be a restaurant. Then an ordinary bar with a disco. There is still a neon sign outside, on the roof, with a figure of a gentleman in a jacket and bow tie with the words, '*Bar, Restaurant, Club*' in red lights. Strictly speaking, it is no longer a restaurant, although Twiglets and peanuts are available on request. The building is old, built in 1909, which is carved on a stone above the wooden door. The style is more antiquated rather than modern. The boss of the club, a Frenchman called Amadieu, has painted murals on the walls which are intricate, 1920s style, pictures of women with bobbed hair and gentlemen with moustaches, with beaded shades over the candles placed on every low white covered table. The atmosphere is relaxed, like that of a hareem rather than a raunchy strip club, although there is a pole for dancing in the centre of the dance floor. They only have regular strip shows when it is busy and it seems like not many of the girls want to strip. The clients are always asking when there is going to be a show. They should have them regularly like at the other clubs that I have worked in.

Through to the right of the club, at the back, where the main door is, and where Lopes stands, are the private rooms. There are rooms with white sofas and bright pictures on the walls, these are well kept and clean and an extension of the design of the main club. When these are all full there are other smaller, dark, dingy rooms; following Lopes through the corridor where there is a plaster statue of a man with a small penis, until he opens a curtain leading into the cubicle with a strange, unpleasant musty smell, a dim red light in the corner and a radiator. I call them, 'The Dungeons'.

When I first started here, a group of Londoners came in. They were on a business trip, at least that was the excuse they told their wives and girlfriends. I had a private show with one of them, Richard, in the dungeons. When we walked in he exclaimed, "*Blimey*, it don't 'alf pen and ink in 'ere *gel*." Richard said I had cold hands and that I should put my bum on the radiator to warm up. He really enjoyed the private show. We were laughing and talking the whole way through. His friend was in the next cubicle and was annoyed as he could here every word like a running commentary.

Whilst I am talking to Rachel at the bar, she suddenly says, "Oh my God, it's Captain Cook." A regular client has come in. He is in his fifties, portly, with one arm cut off at the elbow. He walks over to me, smiling, putting his other arm around me and telling me that he has not seen me before and that he would like to talk to me and might buy me a drink. I am told by Arabelle, Amadieu's niece and sort-of manageress, that he is a good client and buys a lot of drinks, which is good because I get commission on every drink bought for me.

In fact, he has spoken to me before but he cannot remember because he was drunk. He bought me a bottle of champagne and wanted to put his hand down the front of my dress. I said, *no*, and he still tried to touch my breasts and said, "Well, you haven't got anything there anyway." Now he is resting his stump around the back of my neck and saying that he will buy me champagne and not Rachel because he wants to see her suffer. It is all a game in here. That is how I see it now. That is how I play it. Like a game that I will win but even if I lose I do not really care because I am not like the other girls. I have my own game. They do not like me because I work on my own, just walk up to a group of men, talk to them, make them laugh, listen to them and they buy me a drink. I am one of the few girls that do not have sex with the clients. It is not that I am against it, I just think that I should charge more. Anyway, I might decide to have sex with a client if I felt like it.

Captain Cook's real name is Leandro. He tells me about his wife, his two daughters and many other things in a low, convoluted mutter. I am nodding and smiling. He asks me to guess his age. "Forty two," I say to flatter his ego and Miguel is behind the bar, smirking. Leandro tells me that he is fifty eight and that he has just had his birthday. "Many happy returns," I say, sipping champagne. Suddenly a small, pink piece of sausage is held to my mouth on the end of a cocktail stick. I stare at the disgusting morsel for a shocked second or two then tell Leandro, "No thanks, I'm a vegetarian." Everyone standing around the bar- Lopes, Jessica, Arabelle- start chuckling because they know

that I am not a vegetarian. I simply do not fancy nibbling on Leandro's Portuguese sausage this evening.

Although Leandro is a good client, the downside is that he is irritating too. He stays until late, until all the other guests have left, and all the girls are waiting for a taxi and the bar staff are yawning. Miguel has got changed ready to leave and is sitting at the front of the bar whilst the other girls have got their money from Arabelle and are sitting with their coats on ready to leave. Lopes is leaning on the bar, chin resting on his hand, and he checks the time at increasingly regular intervals whilst watching Leandro running his hand down my back. Leandro tells me to say stop, *para*, if he goes too far. He is giving me his number- it is not allowed to call clients- and telling me that I must ring him or he will kill me and that we will go out together. Then, just as we think it is all over he offers to buy another bottle of champagne. "Ok, why not, *one for the road!*" I say loudly, conscious of how annoying this is to the bar staff who want to go home and to the other girls who know I am making money from this regular client whilst they wait for a taxi home. Lopes watches me closely as I offer Leandro some of the sausage that is on a plate on the bar. "*Para!*" I shout as he runs his free and only hand down to the top of my g-string.

Michelle

A hotel foyer: large, dark. Black and white portraits of Crete mounted behind shiny glass, brown leather seats. The early morning sun is bright, though, and palm trees shade the tables and chairs outside. My arm rests on my suitcase as I stare at the pages of the book in front of my face. The man who had just met me at the airport, short and dressed in black, is arguing in Greek with the other people on the reception desk. I am waiting for George. I have never met him before but my agent on the phone in England said that he was fat. *Fat?* I scan the foyer across the top of my book. *How fat?* They are all arguing over something. *Is this where I am supposed to be staying?* It looks like quite a good hotel actually. The short man enters the lift with a man who I presume is the owner. They are gone for a very long time.

I wait. *Yawn*.

I take my make-up bag and put face cream over my tired skin. My nails are chipped. I am hot, lethargic. A different climate, Mediterranean tempers. I stare at my book, smiling at anyone who I catch looking at me. Nobody smiles back. The short man and the owner come back down. Shorty is talking on his mobile, walking out into the street, still talking on his mobile. A brunette girl in hotel uniform is folding her arms, talking to the group who now encircle her. The owner, an older man, with hair of varying shades of grey is opposite her. He is also folding his arms and speaking in a tone which means he is either disagreeing with her or angrily agreeing. The brown haired girl goes out into the street and comes back carrying an iron and some crumpled up clothes. I have no idea what is going on. I wait some more. This is not the scene that I expected.

Fat George arrives with his sister who is of the same build. He sits next to me and explains briefly what is happening, *"Baby, a girl she get drunk she angry she want to fight she say she don't like work she don't like hotel and she fight."*

Some girls come down in the lift with the police. One girl, a black girl, looks like she has been crying.

I go outside with George. He is asking, despairingly, *"I look after my girls, why they do this? Why?"* We put my things into the back of his car and drive through Iraklion, over to the other side of the dusty city. The streets are full of noise and happy chaos. People on mopeds, most not wearing helmets, long hair flowing freely. A man riding pillion, freehand, rolling a cigarette. Fume-filled warm air. George is saying that if there is no room at this hotel I will have to stay at his house and use the shower. "Baby, the club will be close tomorrow, girl in prison, big problem." I make a silent vow to myself that I will not speak to these girls. They are obviously trouble and will only get me into trouble. Really not the kind of people I would ever want to mix with. I am here to make money I do not have to speak to anyone else. George tells me that I should start work the next night at eleven o'clock. I tell him that I have worked in Copenhagen and Iceland. He does not answer me. He is not listening. Anyway I was only in Iceland for three weeks. I did not really make that much money. There was no basic pay and so you had to hustle for drinks and dances. The men were really weird. I was talking with one guy and he picked up a bundle of notes and started burning them in the flame of the candle on the table, telling me how he hated money! I tried to stop him but it was too late. I had a big fight with some Hungarian strippers on the second week, who came into my room and started to move all my stuff out and their things in, and from then on it was ongoing war with these girls. I also did not take my knickers off after my show and the DJ went mad at me. I went to the mud pools and fooled around with him and another girl, a black stripper from London, the next day but I had already called my agent and decided to leave. I somehow got back to the UK without having to change my ticket but when I got off the plane at Glasgow they told me that I should never have been allowed out on that ticket and I had to get another ticket to Birmingham airport or wherever it was. I was depressed for a few weeks after getting back from that club.

A sign: Hotel Mark. Then more arguing. Fat George and a dark haired woman at the door shout at each other whilst a teenage boy watches. I do not know what George is saying really but to me is sounds like he is repeating, *"Down by law, down by law!*" Eventually I follow George upstairs to a room. He stands in the doorway and hands me the key. He warns me to stay in my room, to lock the

door and to not answer it to anyone unless it is himself or his sister.

I have a shower and go to sleep.

Nine PM: I am hungry. I am not sure if I am supposed to even be here. I do not know whether to go out or not, try and get something to eat. I get dressed and creep downstairs. Beyond the reception there is a dining area. It looks like some kind of party is going on, a family do. On the bar there are tempting dishes of moussaka, souvlaki, salad, feta cheese and chicken. Everyone in the room turns around to look at me when I walk in, whilst I am looking at the food. The dark haired woman is with them. “I have money,” I drool, and a middle aged man with a moustache, her husband, approaches. I tell him that I am hungry.

“Three thousand drachma,” he says and for that I also get two beers. I explain to him that I would rather have a coffee but he just laughs. His wife fetches some fresh moussaka. I pile it onto my plate with the salad and chicken. They fetch me a can of beer. I tell them that I will come back for my other beer and I go up to my room.

I bring down the empty plate. The man with the moustache is also called George. He insists that I have another beer rather than a coffee. I sit at a separate table from the rest of the party and smoke a cigarette and drink. Some of them start dancing to the traditional music, others sit and clap. George suddenly pulls me from my chair and I place my arms behind the necks and on the shoulders of the people on either side of me, stepping sideways, then forwards, attempting to dance to the traditional Cretan music. Yet I am laughing too much.

I go back to my room and sleep.

The next morning. No sign of George. The sun is shining, I look out from the balcony. I *must* go out and have a look at the beach.

Walking down a long, dry lane. On either side are tall plants, like huge corn. There are horses tethered to a fence, cosy white houses. I reach the sand and suddenly find myself being followed by about twelve small dogs, barking and yapping around my feet. I carry on walking, ignoring the dogs until I am finally out of their territory. The beach is off the tourist track and the sea is turquoise. I walk along the shoreline, passing a naked couple, then looking out towards the ramshackle skyline of Iraklion.

Eventually I go back to the hotel and ask the teenage boy at reception if I can use the telephone. I call Fat George's number. “Hello, is that George? This is Michelle.” I hear giggling in the background, people talking.

Someone repeating, “*Miselle, Miselle*”

“Yassou? *Hello?*” Then just more giggling. I place down the receiver and decide to call later. I go back to my room and open the sliding doors and go out onto the balcony. I read for a while, have a shower and soon get bored of just lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, watching the flies. *If those girls had not been so stupid I could be working by now instead of being trapped here*. I walk down the road to a small shop. I buy Bake Rolls, a Mars Bar, some cigarettes. There is a pay phone on the counter. I telephone George. This time he answers. He tells me to wait. That he will be at the hotel in one hour, maybe two.

Six hours later George arrives to take me from the hotel to a different apartment. I am working in the evening.

The new hotel in the centre of the city looks like it was once opulent and teeming with tourists. Now it appears that I am the only one staying there. There is an old man with a white beard behind the reception area, perhaps a relic of times long gone. He stares, unblinking. He is also the porter and the cook. There are storage boxes filling up the reception area.

The strip club is small with a stage running down the centre, three poles and a cage like area at the end. The whole place is painted a pale blue apart from the painted pictures of women in G strings at the back of the club where there are worn out leather chairs and small tables. This is where we do the lap dances. The dressing room has cracked mirrors, boxes of junk, Christmas decorations, fans, hats and odd shoes.

The two black girls walk in. The one that had been crying and a darker girl with blue braids in her

hair. They tell me that they have just got out of jail. They all got drunk and threw some stuff over the balcony. They went into some other guy's room and starting shouting at him and the police were called.

Another girl walks in the dressing room. She is white, but very tanned with tied-back brown hair. Suddenly the girl with the blue braids, Rebecca, is calling her a bitch. They pounce on each other and start pulling each other's hair and they are on the floor fighting. I try to run in my very high over the knee boots to fetch someone but can only sort of tip toe and slide really fast into the club. George splits them up and takes the white girl away to another club. Apparently they were supposed to all stick together but in court the other girl changed her story and said they were not friends, merely colleagues and she had nothing to do with the incident. The other girl, Fiona, is complaining that all she ate in prison were Bake Rolls which are like dry bread rolls. When they asked her if she wanted any Bake rolls, she thought the guard had said 'bacon rolls'.

We all go out into the club, drinking strong mix drinks. We laugh at the ugliest men who walk in, "He's yours Rebecca!"

"No, he's *yours*!"

Rebecca is from Nottingham and has a conviction for grievous bodily harm after a taxi driver drove off with her bag in his car. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors. She has lots of brothers. Fiona is from Liverpool. She shows me a photo of her family. Her mother is black and her dad white. She says that if she was in Liverpool she would not be doing anything, just signing on. Her relationship with her boyfriend finished so she thought she would dance and let everyone have a piece.

I swing around the bars and the cage like a possessed monkey as the other girls laugh. They have to pay a fine from their wages every day. Fiona and I talk to a man at the bar. We make fun of him and tell him that he looks like Bruce Forsyth. He does not know who Bruce Forsyth is. He buys us a drink and Fiona continues to joke about a 'Brucey Bonus' and the fact that he has a big nose, disrespecting him to his face. Another girl called Lucy comes in later and sits at the bar. She is thin and blonde and is wearing a leather waistcoat and small, black knickers. "Oh, come on," says Fiona with mock pity, "why don't we all club together and buy her a pair of trousers?"

I sit at the back on the club with the most boring man in the world who looks like Hugh Grant, who I have never fancied anyway. He buys me a lot of drinks and then tries to make me feel the size of a cockroach by asking me why I am working as a stripper and insinuating that there must be something wrong with me for working there. *Thank you, Hugh.*

We all go back to the hotel in a taxi at four in the morning. We find a small, white kitten out on the street and take it up to the hotel room; Rebecca hides it inside her jacket. We laugh and scream "Yassou! Yassou!" at the silent old man with the long, white beard. In the morning we find that the kitten has shit everywhere and chewed up the wire on Lucy's hairdryer so we put it back out on the street and it runs away.

We all start to hang around together and go to the beach the next day. "Look at her, *look at her!*" whispers Fiona in her Scouse accent about a woman on the beach. The woman is quite attractive, with naturally dark skin, dyed blonde hair and is wearing a lime green bikini. Fiona adds that she looks like a bulldog sucking a wasp. We go to the pizza place near the club. Fiona likes the man who works there but he has a girlfriend with buck teeth. Fiona calls her 'Rabbit' and pulls faces, making her teeth protrude over her bottom lip whilst we are waiting for the pizza .

I have a long black dress that I wear in the club. It has a delicate, lacy texture to it, so my underwear can be seen underneath. I take it to the launderette with some other clothes.

No-one knows where I am. I did not tell anyone I was coming here.

I share a room with Lucy. Our beds are close together. I wake every morning and count my money, Lucy lying next to me or stretched out topless on the terrace. Her boyfriend is in Athens where she usually works in a club called 'Diamonds and Pearls'.

I fetch my clothes back from the launderette and to my horror the black dress has shrunk to less than half its former size.

Zoe

I wake late in the afternoon. I sit on the balcony, drenching myself in the sun's rays, I have stripped, naked, on all fours, then crouch, an animal, a savage, wishing the sun to banish the ugliness from my skin. I inspect my skin close up, magnified. Stubble on my legs, red flea bites. In the mirror I check the spots on my chin, the white heads, a cold-sore forming on my top lip. I am dirty, poisoned, venom, toxins, bubbling up beneath the epidermis, forming those white spots on an inflamed chin. "You are beautiful!" the men at the club exclaim between champagnes and glances at the strippers dancing skillfully around the silver pole. They stare into my painted eyes, bewitched, stroking my legs in the dim light, infatuated. They want me to touch them, touch them like their wives never will. I feed their egos, seize each compliment and twist each nasty little criticism around with a joke or intelligent comment. Most of the men are looking for sex.

I have sex with only one person, Lopes. A Brazilian, so different from any other man I have had sexual pleasure with. He is intense, twisting me around into positions I never even knew existed, licking me from my neck down to my toe, all the time whilst fucking me hard with his small, firm cock. I love to be his bitch, I know that is what I am. I cannot fight nature. He made me scream so loud that the other girls in the house stopped talking to me and then complained because of the noise. I went downstairs one afternoon after Lopes had stayed the night and Alexandra, who cannot speak English, did not say *ola* but looked at me as if I was a nasty insect, a processionary caterpillar, that had just unexpectedly crawled into the kitchen. I presumed that she had family or boyfriend problems as she has just been speaking animatedly on her mobile telephone. Jessica came into the kitchen and instead of saying *boa tarde* began, "*It's like this*. When you have a shower do not leave water on the floor. Be quiet and don't slam the door and have a shower late so you don't wake us up. It's like this. When you have used a plate wash it, like *this*, then rinse it and leave it *here....*"

"Fuck you," I walked out of the kitchen, taking my plate of cut-up oranges with me.

I began to cry after my initial anger, hating the house, hating them ganging up on me, hating them not wanting me to have any happiness in my life. Jessica did not mention Lopes but I have seen the way she looks at him when we are working in the club. One small moment of happiness had to be spoilt by the jealousy of others, who wanted to snatch that happiness away from me, they want that happiness and joy to be theirs instead. I am different from the other girls but we are all emotionally desperate in one way or another. "If you wanted to make me unhappy, then you have succeeded!" I called down from the stairs. I tried to explain to the Russian man what had happened. I was crying and shouting.

"*Nao compreendo!*," he kept repeating.

"*Yeah*, but I'm going to tell you anyway!" I yelled. And I wondered why, and when, seemingly overnight, a new cleanliness regime had started.

I told Miguel about our argument and he said to Jessica, "Don't make her cry."

Jessica said that some new girls were coming to the house and they would not even discuss the matter but would just start fighting. She said that is why they wanted to keep the house tidy. However, when the new girls arrived, two Brazilians, they were kind and generous. They shared their meals with me and gave me some gold nail varnish and a home-made summery top. I danced with Mel (Portuguese for *honey*) on the dance floor as St J's. We discussed the unpleasant odour of the house. Mel disliked Jessica and her bossiness as much as I did.

I walk into Almancil to the gym for a sauna. I have got my MP3 player on so the sounds of the men shouting or hitting their car horns as I march by the side of the heavy-trafficked road are submerged in heavy hip hop beats. The shamans, the Native American Indians, used saunas for their well-being and it was like a religious ritual for them. They would say a prayer for their family, or their future or any other concern that they had as they entered.

I want the poisons to be drawn out from my skin. I sit, head bowed with heat, wrapped in a thick beach towel. A layer of filmy sweat forms over my skin, dripping down my face, I lean forward, towards the red wooden floor, head on hands.

Out, out, out, this is a prayer for my future, out, out, out, the dirt, the nicotine, the bitter venom from the hookers, the alcohol, the strangers' hands on my body, dirty lips on my face, strangers, foreigners, complete strangers, mind games, jealousy, bitchiness, lies, out, out, out, let it be drawn out until I am clean again.

I take a cold shower afterwards, they say that is the best thing to do as it leaves you more alive and refreshed. The skin on my chin looks a lot better. I inspect it closely in the mirror.

When I first arrived here, Lopes was waiting at Loule train station. I did not take much notice really. He was just very tall, dark hair and serious looking, a typical heavy in a suit. A fleeting thought was that he was a gangster-type, part of the organization of the strip club and someone who I should be wary of. "Hey, you like Dire Straits?" he asked, grinning, taking both hands off the steering wheel as he talked, singing along to 'Money For Nothing' as we wound along the dark, rural streets to the house. I was afraid, slightly turned on by the danger of the situation and I had a feeling that I was about to embark on a new adventure with this man, although the logical side of my brain was tutting knowingly and patronisingly, warning me not to get involved.

We got to the house and he told me that I had half an hour to get ready for work. I quickly took my hair out of its plaits so that it was wavy, put on some make up, a short skirt, a denim jacket and knee high boots. Lopes was five minutes early and I dismissed his comment that I looked beautiful as an insincere form of flattery because that is what all these type of men in these clubs say; they are all the same. When we got to the club Jules asked me if I had any clothes for dancing. I said that *no, I did not have anything to dance in*. He showed me around the club and asked Lopes to drive me back to the house because I seemed tired. On the way out, Lopes asked me if I liked St J's. "*Sim*," I replied yet thought, *not bad for a whorehouse.*

Driving through Almancil, the police stopped the car. "*Fuck you!*" cursed Lopes as the pistol-wearing *policia* urged him to stop at the traffic lights. He asked Lopes for ID and then wanted to see the papers for the car. Lopes did not have the correct papers and the men continued their heated diatribe for a while. Lopes told the *policia* where he worked. "See how he say I can go when I tell him St J's?" he smiled.

"Why?" I asked but got no reply.

Back in the house, my room was very cold and depressing. An unwelcoming bed with a grim, grey sheet and a couple of inadequate blankets. It had the atmosphere of a prison cell, only more fun. I expected the Algarve to be hot and I had even packed my bikini. With a disappointed sigh I turned the radiator on and began to get changed. Suddenly, sinisterly, the light went out. I guessed that the fuse had tripped and began to search for my cigarette lighter, then walked slowly down the stairs, burning my thumb on the lighter's switch as I pressed it down for too long. Perhaps there was a spirit in the house trying to tell me something by turning off the electricity. I had entered the underworld after all, doing something not strictly legal, beyond the mainstream where sex was exchanged for money, where anything could happen. I looked for the fuse box yet could not find it. Continuing to burn my thumb, I went back up to my room, to my opened suitcase and discarded clothes and crouched over the small orange flame. I looked into the flame, questioning the reasons why I was there. The answer was simple: money. The northern phrase, 'Where there's muck there's brass' seemed appropriate and reassuring. I searched in the dark for my clothes and got dressed again, including my jeans and coat and got into bed, arms folded across my chest, still cold and with the transient thought that I was *getting too old for this*.

In the morning I realized that the glass sliding-door leading to the balcony was partially open,

which explained why I was so cold. The sky was overcast and on the wall there was a picture. A print of a semi-naked woman reclining. Perhaps when this place was fresh and new, the boss had a fantasy of it to be some time of boudoir for his ladies to relax and pamper themselves in before entertaining the gentlemen at the club. How different male fantasies of women can be from reality.

A few days later there was the party. The other girls in the house were mad at me for dancing in my room with my MP3 player on. I did not know that every move was ricocheting around the whole house. The girls told Arabelle and she decided it was time for a party. I had started it off without even realising it. There were Jessica, Alexandra, Arabelle, Lopes and Miguel; I brought down my CDs and we all got drunk and danced. We all had problems and secrets to hide but for a short while we were united and free. I danced with Lopes. He was trying to kiss me but I was telling him, *no*. He took out his gold hoop earring and put it in my ear. Miguel was dancing with a sanitary towel stuck to his forehead and an expanding tampon in his glass of beer. He took the tampon out of the beer, put it in his mouth and sucked on it. Alexandra showed me how to dance to Brazilian music. She is exotic- dark skin and died-blonde hair- with a loud catlike voice. During the night I got a definite feeling, a feeling I have had before in other houses, that there was another presence in the house, another person or spirit.

When it got light, Miguel drove Jessica and I to the garage next door to buy more beer. There was music playing in the forecourt and I danced to it in front of the car, smiling and waving at him through the car window. Jessica opened the fridge in the garage and she accidentally smashed a bottle of beer on the floor. The shop assistant remained undisturbed in a typically laid back southern Portuguese manner and told her not to worry about it. Then Miguel and Jessica smoked a joint in the car. We got back to the house and Arabelle took photographs. Lopes took off all of his clothes apart from his underpants. There are now photographs of Jessica trying to pull his underpants off. In one of the photographs she is kneeling in front of him and it looks as if she is giving him a blow job.

We all raised our glasses and gave a toast to our friendship, vowing that we would always be friends. These friendships have since been tested, they have either lasted or expired.

Miguel began to strip for Arabelle, slowly pulling off his socks first and spinning them around. Arabelle lay on the sofa bed giggling. They are lovers and have been for three months. Her uncle could not find out because he does not want staff to be involved with each other. I rested drunkenly against Lopes. He felt so safe and comfortable, always laughing. He kissed my forehead and put his arms around me. Lopes leaned back, watching Jessica dance in front of him. Then she flopped onto the sofa, annoyed because he was with me. I reached forward and stroked her auburn hair. In the arms of Lopes I felt safety and protection, almost as if I was a child again, yet I had never felt that way as a child. I did not know him but he gave me love.

I lay in bed after the party and cried hard and long. I did not have any cuddly toys or photographs of my family in my room. I am not like the other girls….

Take it
Take it all in
Take a piece
Another piece of me
Yeah another little piece of my heart now baby
Oooohhhhhh Ooooooohhhhh

Touch my breasts
Come on
Touch my tits
Fondle my thigh
Oh, you can try
To get what you can for free.

I know

You see me as a whore
Something to be adored
Abhorred
Abused

You think I just want your money
And we both try not to be the one that´s used.

You see me as a queen
Something obscene
Dancing for your green
Yet
I am blue
I am you
This isn't even my scene.

A fun girl
On-the-run-girl
With no brain or shame
Dancing for your money
To, 'I Can´t Stand the Rain´.
A shady life
You cheat your wife
You are all just the same

Take it
Take it all in
And please buy the champagne.

Zoe

Three men are sitting by the small dance area watching the show. I walk up to them and say *hi* and sit between two of them. They are from New Zealand and are physiotherapists. The man to my right tells me that I have great patellas and an attractive clavicle.

His friend sitting opposite says that he is, “more of a tits man.”

One of the men buys me a Martini and *Seven Up*. It is cheaper and I get less commission yet I have a feeling that they will buy more in the long run. They have been watching Rachel dance and they ask me how old she is. “In her twenties,” I reply. In fact she is twenty eight. They had guessed her age to be at late thirties because of her hard face. “No way!” I said. They had concluded that life as a stripper- late nights, cocaine, excessive alcohol- had aged her. The man to the left says that he will get up and do a strip tease on the pole. His friend, Tits Man, says that he will buy him a drink if he pole dances to The Bohemian Rhapsody. They always do this; talk about getting up and dancing on the pole, not daring to get up until eventually they get a little bit more Dutch courage and predictably do a forgettable dance around the pole whilst thinking it is amusing.

Francisco, the new barman brings our drinks over. He has a new joke. “With all due respect,” he says, “fuck you.”

I tell the tall, skinny kiwi to my right about the great sex that I am having with my boyfriend and how he makes me scream out loud. He says, whilst glancing at my attractive knee caps, that some men are intimidated by screaming. He tells me that I should hold onto him. I inform him, quietly, that it is someone that works in St J's. He starts looking around, “It's Francisco isn't it? *Isn't it?*” Then he sees Miguel and is convinced that it is him that is making me scream. He takes out a napkin and unfolds it. One of the girls has written on it, *'I said hello to you but you ignored me'*. I ask him why he does not go and speak to her. He says that he does not want to, he wants to speak to me. Then we are making camp jokes about him being unfaithful to me and how jealous I would be if he had another girl. I then tell him that I have been bitten by insects or something and he edges away from me, “*Cooties!*” he yells, “*Oh my God!*”.

It is time to do a show. I rub my patellas provocatively for the tall, skinny physiotherapist and at the end of the show I am laughing because I have trouble getting my knickers off and they get stuck on the heel of my boot. After the show he says that I am a good dancer but I seemed a little bit nervous. He constructively criticises that I should “make friends with the pole” a little bit more and also practice taking my knickers off. He goes to the bathroom and I sit sipping Martini with the other two guys, sinking further back into the sofa. When he comes back he tells me that a blonde woman stopped him and said, “You're wasting your time with her.” I ask him who it was and discover that it was Ana C. I say that she has been here for a while. He observes that it looks as if she has.

Ana C and Rachel are best friends. I do not really speak to the other girls. The nicest girls here are two tall slim African sisters. They are from Tunisia, not blood sisters but in spirit. They are both very tall and slim and look alike enough to be real sisters. One has short slicked-back hair and the other has long, thick, wavy hair. She is the most naturally beautiful woman in the club yet she always wears a pair of very thick-lensed, black-framed glasses which dominate her long face and mar her beauty.

Tits Man indicates that Ana C is coming over to the table to join us. I add that she is just brushing off the cobwebs. Tall Skinny Guy says that when she comes to the table I have to pretend that he is my boyfriend and kiss him. Flicking her white hair extensions and ash from her cigarette, she comes over to the table.

“This is my boyfriend,” I put my arms around the physiotherapist and we feign a French kiss whilst stifling our laughter. Ana C stares blankly and flicks her hair extensions.

“Oh, *really*, well, if you are that insecure.”

“No, he really is my boyfriend,” I turn to my fiance, “She doesn't believe me!” A few moments later I tell her that we have broken up and she gives me a bitchy look.

“Yes,” adds Tall Skinny Guy, “the relationships over. I've moved on.” By the end of the night his friend has danced around the pole-with clothes yet without The Bohemian Rhapsody- and my 'ex-boyfriend' has complimented, “It's nice to meet a stripper with a personality.”

With all due respect.....

In my first few days at the club I was tricked. I was drinking champagne at the corner table by the dance floor with a man with dark bushy hair, probably in his forties called Nuno. He told me that he worked at a bank. I had seen him the day before talking to one of the African sisters. It was deceptive watching them together. It looked as if they were having an intimate and convivial conversation, that everyone in the club were friends together. Yet, when I mentioned the African sister, he could not even remember her. Much amiability in St J's is fake and not so benign. Nuno bought another bottle of champagne and stressed with immense sincerity that he respected me and would not force me to do anything that I did not want to against my will. Then we discussed the difficulties of Portuguese and English grammar and he aided me with my pronunciation. We were laughing, having fun and I was half way through a funny story about the time I went to work in a strip club in Crete and all the girls were in jail, when I realised he was not actually listening. I asked him what he was drinking. He said, “Whisky.” When I picked up his glass and took a sip it was water. He said that he *was* drinking whisky, he was suddenly drinking whisky in the past tense (continuous) and had now moved on to water. He wanted to go to the private rooms with me and bring along a bottle of champagne. I said that I was only happy with doing the fifty Euro show, which lasted the length of two songs and only drinking champagne out in the club. He responded that he totally respected my decision. He asked if I was good at massage and we went through to the private rooms. We walked past the bar and Lopes was standing talking to Arabelle. I leaned my head on his broad shoulder and said, “Don't let me drink any more.”

We went into the better rooms, the one with the large white sofa and deep crimson walls to match the velvet curtains, which Nuno pulled across. “We can stay here for as long as we want,” he said whilst taking the white cushions from the sofa and throwing them onto the floor. I asked him how much he had given to Arabelle. He had paid her for a one hundred euro show. I lay beside him on the cushions. I felt light-headed from the champagne as I took off my jacket and unclasped my bra. He ran his hands over my body and I could hear the music playing; rock vocals of Pink singing about getting the party started. I lay back and he kissed me on the mouth. It was unappealing. The champagne had led me to this situation which was not in my control. He took his trousers off and took out his cock. I started to stroke it, knowing that he had paid for the hundred euro show which was the length of four songs. He was touching me through my g-string. He touched his cock again. As he put his fingers to my mouth I felt dirty.

I pulled away, walked silently to the other side of the room and started to put my clothes back on. He asked me what I was doing. I did not answer for what seemed like a long time then asked him, “What do you want from me?”

“You said that you'd give me a massage.” He said that I had spoilt everything now and that I was treating him like a common client. He added that he should ask them not to pay me.

I sat on the chair opposite him, crossed legged and calm, “I am not a hooker, I am not professional.” He replied that I was good, very manipulative and that I was playing a dangerous game. *Me? I was not the one that said he respected my decision to do a fifty euro show, then promptly pay for a one hundred euro show and try to get me to have sex when I did not do it. How was I supposed to know that when he said he wanted a massage that he wanted me to massage his penis? He should have been more specific about which area he wanted me to massage. Anyway, he got his money's worth.*

“Yes, I see that this could be a dangerous situation,” I said, taking one of his cigarettes out of the packet and lighting it. I put my hand on his shoulder, “Hey, come on, why don´t we talk about it? I'm sorry that you feel this way.”

“I treated you with respect and this is how you treat me,” he stood up whilst I remained on the low white sofa. “We'll forget about this. You live your life and I'll live mine. We are animals, after

all.” He left and I used up a whole box of baby wipes that were on the table to clean my hands.

Lopes is the doorman. He hands out tickets to the girls when they do a private show, he acts as protection for the girls if they have trouble with a client. He shows the guests to the private rooms as well as doing any dirty odd jobs that Amadieu asks him to do during the day. He was standing outside the private rooms and I said to him, “Problem.” We went into the kitchen and Miguel interpreted for Lopes to understand. Lopes looked angry and left. I began to worry in case I would get into trouble. When he came back he told me that everything was OK. He had spoken to Nuno and I would get my money. The club always take half, so it was fifty euros.

I did not think that Nuno would come back to the club again yet he was there the next night with a friend of his, a short, grey-haired man with round, thick glasses. Jules asked me if I would go and sit with them. I walked over to the corner table. Nuno said, “Remember me?”. I sat between Nuno and his friend. His friend said that he wanted to do a private show with me. I said that I was not doing any private shows that night. Nuno replied, “I understand. You are on your monthly.” I walked off back to where I had been standing by the bar. I did not want to be passed around like a piece of fresh meat. However, after the incident with Nuno I was left feeling rather stale.

Later Jessica told me that Nuno has something to do with the finances of the club. I think that he is part-owner. That explains why he said that I was treating him, “like a common client.” His girlfriend is a best friend of Arabelle. I have now renamed him 'Nono' and he does not speak to me anymore.

Zoe

It started off as a joke. On the first day that I worked at St J's, I was standing at the bar. Lopes put his arm around me and announced, “This is my wife.” Everyone knows that he has a wife and children in Brazil.

Via Jessica- who is from Porto yet speaks good English- he would propose marriage to me.Via Jessica, I would say that I would be a terrible wife; I cannot cook (apart from spaghetti bolognese) and I am frigid (“Lopes says that he will warm you up”).

Every day he would bring me a flower. A wild flower he had picked from outside of the club. “Look, my flower has died,” I said, picking the withered stalk and sparse petals from my handbag- I keep everything that he gives me.

Via Jessica he said, “Unlike our love which will never die.” Although it was a joke, perhaps a corny romantic line, I could not help feeling moved by what he had said.

“Whatever,” I lit another cigarette and tried to act nonchalant. Then he handed me another flower. A white flower with a leaf made out of one of the serviettes from the bar.

Another night at St J's, Miguel made an origami hopping frog whilst Arabelle made paper aeroplanes and threw them around. Lopes handed me another flower. It was beautiful, a tulip with a leaf on the stalk. It was so clever and artistic that I realised there was more to him than just the appearance of a thug on the door. He is also a singer and wants to go to Lisbon to do some recording.

Red roses followed; teddy bears; a note written in English, '*I was thinking about my live than I realise that was something missing and that thing is you*'; the photograph of Lopes staring blank-eyed in suit and tie from a frame that had the words 'Frisky Devil' and flames surrounding it- I do not think he understood what those words mean.

Then the gorilla came into my life. A cream-furred gorilla that made an irritating whistling noise and its eyes would light up red when noise-activated. Once I had removed the batteries, I loved it. It was as if it had a spirit because it had been bought with love. I could feel its spirit which seemed to animate the brown fur face and plastic eyes. We called it 'monkey' and I slept with it in my arms.

After all, nobody had ever bought me a gorilla before.

I began to look forward to going to St J's so that I could have fun with Lopes and joke about our crazy pet gorilla.

“When I was a young boy...” I was joking with an English client. I was telling him that I was really a man. I said that we could do a private show together to prove that I was really a woman. We had the private show, then his shy friend. We went into one of the dingy, dungeon rooms. I said that he could put his hands around my waist and we danced together. He was married, saying that his wife probably would not mind. He had red hair and in my high boots I was about a foot taller than him. He was looking up at me, coy and smiling. When the man had gone, Lopes came through to ask if everything was OK. That is when I started kissing him for the first time. I was in the private room, up against the wall, pulling him towards me with his tie as he threw his tickets and money down onto the table and kissed me back, hard.

Lopes says that this has never happened to him before. When I kissed him he just felt, “*Boom!*”. His fantasy is to have sex with me in a private room.

When the new girls came to St J's, I stopped talking to Lopes. “*Bonita*, yes?” he asked rhetorically about one long-haired, dark-skinned, petite Brazilian. I felt jealous, although she was fatter than me. There was another dark Brazilian girl with braids, a red beret and a smile the same as Lopes'. The other new girl was Claudia, the blonde Polish girl. I watched from a distance. How he was sniffing around them. How he tapped Claudia on the arm as she made her grand, sweeping entrance into the club. “You look beautiful,” I imagined, almost could hear, the words he said whilst gesturing with open arms.

Lopes had brought chicken and *batata fritas* round to the house where Claudia was staying temporarily. We sat down to eat. He was telling her, warning her, about the girls that gossip in the club. I remained silent. I watched him watching her. I heard him saying the same things that he had said to me, “I speak English, you speak Portuguese.”

I thought perhaps that I was a joke. Perhaps he was the same with all the new girls and now that I was not a new girl he had someone fresh and new to play with. Fresh meat. I could not tell him any of this, of course, and in a way I was glad because I am argumentative, fiery like the Brazilian girls.

Claudia asked Lopes what she should wear. He was telling her to be sexy, glamorous, to wear a short skirt. “Dress like a hooker, basically,” I added, picking up a piece of chicken and eating it sulkily, “Just joking.”.

Lopes was sitting opposite me and I was ignoring him. He asked Claudia if she danced, “No, only sex. I don't dance. Only for my boyfriend.” He told her about the private dances and that he was there to stop the men from touching.

“Sometimes I let them touch me if I want them to,” I said looking at Lopes, looking into his dark brown eyes that are kind yet dangerous.

Later on, Claudia was complaining about being bitten by fleas. I sprayed her bed and a large toy dog with insect repellent.

In the evening I still was not speaking to Lopes. As Claudia came into the club he asked if he could speak to her, outside in private. Arabelle ad I looked at each other curiously. Claudia and Lopes walked back into the club laughing together. I followed suit, repeating their laughter, sarcastically and jealously. Arabelle, Jules and Francisco thought this was amusing, yet I was shaking. Lopes leant against the bar in a black suit, white shirt and red tie. “It's *finito*,” I said.

“*Que*?”

“You and me. *Finito*.”

“I know, jealous.”

“No, not jealous. You are always looking at other girls. *Always looking*.” I wanted to explain that it was difficult that we were working in this kind of environment. He is an intelligent man and he would have understood. “*Finito*.” He looked at me, expressionless. I was angry at his lack of response. He did not even care that it was *finito*. I walked through past the girls: Alexandra, Ana C, Val. “If you want to know the latest gossip, it's *finito* between me and Lopes.”

Later on I was sitting with Claudia in the corner of the club by the dance area. She is larger than me; thick arms, a thick waist and big backside. The animal print dress stretched tightly over her body. She has a babyish face and the arms of a man. I was wearing black, a short black skirt with a zip at the front which is very convenient for private shows, very high black ankle boots and a black blouse which I had tied up around the waist, with black frilly collar and cuffs. I told her that I had finished with Lopes. We ordered a drink from Jules. She had asked for Vodka and I asked for beer. “Beer?” she asked.

“Yes, I like beer.” *What's wrong with drinking beer?*

Whilst waiting for clients we had a cushion fight. I ask Claudia if she ever got scared doing this work because I did. I told her about the miscarriage I had, two years earlier that I had never really got over. I started to dance by the bar and Claudia looked at me coldly, with Eastern European reserve, and said, “Don't drink any more.” *What?*

Then Miguel came over and told me that it was time for me to do a show. “Just vun thing,” said Claudia, “I used to dance a long time ago but I promised myself I vould'nt do it again. I'm not a lesbian but try, be more sexy.”

“I'll try,” I said and went out quickly to get changed.

As I was walking from the dressing room wearing a short black mac and my ankle boots Claudia walked through and said, “Are you vearing *that*? Is that all you have to vear?”

“Yes.”

“Are you *sure*?”

“Look, this is *my* show.” I changed my music to hip hop and took it to the street. I took my boots off for the second song, I climbed to the top of the pole and swung round, naked. *That fucking bitch*.

After my show I sat alone, drinking a glass of water. Claudia snaked up, sat opposite me and said, “If you vant, I 'll show you how to dance.”

“No, I do not want. Why don't you get up there and do a show?”

“Vat's ze matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

“No, it's not nothing. Don't drink any more.”

“I'm old enough to drink as much as I want and, anyway, this is water.”

Some English clients walked past and said, “Nice show,” as they were leaving. I did not speak to Claudia for the rest of the night. She got changed into a white shirt and very short black and red kilt. Her legs looked out of proportion with her short body and babyish face. Three men walked over to one of the tables and sat down. Claudia called me over to her and I ignored her, smoked my cigarette and walked over to them on my own and started talking.

Two of the men were identical twin brothers, pleasant, probably in their twenties. A few minutes later, Claudia stalked over, an actress, suddenly acting girly, hustling the guys for drinks. One of the twins bought me a bottle of 'champagne'. “Oh, come on, you have bought her a drink, vy not me?” She was loud, insensitive and annoying. The men did not buy her a drink and she eventually walked off.

One twin said, “It's all a game.”

“That’s how I see it, a game,” I agreed. Yet I did not feel triumphant at my small victory because I know that in this game no-one wins.

The next morning I went downstairs and asked Claudia: *if she was such a great dancer, why doesn't she do shows?* She told me that I did not listen to her properly, “I said, 'If you *vant*' I'll show you how to dance.”

“No, *I do not* want you to show me. The clients like my shows. Don't play your games with me.”

“I don't understand. Do you vant to fight with me?”

“Oh, *whatever*.”

The following night I did not go to work because I was going to catch the early morning train back to my apartment in Porto, at half past seven. I heard Rachel come in the house and go into Claudia's room. Claudia had moved all Rachel's things out of the room and moved in. “That is so out of order. That's so fucking out of order,” I heard her telling her friend and they soon left. My sleeping patterns were mixed up from working at night and I was still awake, yet started to fall into a relaxed, light doze when Alexandra and Claudia came back from St J's. Claudia knocked on my door.

“What do you want? I'm trying to get some sleep.”

“I vant to talk to you.”

“What?”

“I vanted ze insect repellent.” (*knock, knock, knock*) “ I'll give you money for it.”

“I've left it in the bathroom.”

“I can't get any out of it.”

“Why don't you go to the chemist and buy some like any normal person? Why don't you leave me alone? Why are you so fucking selfish?” I put the blanket over my head.(*Knock, knock, knock*)

“I just...”

“*Shut the fuck up!*”

“I can't believe you are so stupid…” I heard her walk down the stairs.

“Do you want your teeth still in your fucking mouth?” I lay in bed and calmed down because I knew that I really would be stupid if I had hit her.

The next morning Lopes drove me to Loule station. We were silent. Then Lopes told me about the rumour that Claudia was spreading about me being pregnant with his baby. “*Hey*? I want to get hold of that bitch and strangle her. I want to snap her fucking legs. She looks like a fucking giraffe.....” We waited outside Loule station in the car. Lopes told me to go back to Porto and relax. Then we

kissed.

"Never *finito*," he said.

"Never *finito*." The sky was a brilliant orange. A sky that I had never seen before. Not in England.

The skies are only like this when I am with him. He is different. He shows me how different life can be. His smile. His sadness. How he misses his family.

I placed my head on his chest; the fast beat of his heart revealed his true feelings for me.

Zoe

The processionary caterpillars are outside the house. They live in the pine trees. There are long lines of caterpillars clinging together by a silk thread. "*Mau*," warns Lopes as I point to them. Lopes tells me that his favourite animal is a wolf. That is what he would be if he were an animal, *lobo*.

The cat is ill. He is thin and silent, forgotten by his owner in the empty house. It is night, I am isolated in the surrounding darkness and woods. Friends and familiarity are a distance away. Gaspar's leg is raw and painful. I pick the cat up, he is very placid for an unneutered tom, and cradle him in my arms like a baby. I shake him gently, up and down, he does not purr like he usually does. "Poor leg, poor leg," I say, tears running down my face. He is looking at me like a helpless green-eyed baby. There is no food or water left out for him I pour water into a margarine tub and hold the cat to the water until he starts to drink, and drink greedily. It is like he is ill yet is unaware that he is. He is mangy and smelly and seems to have stopped washing himself.

I make the cat a sick-bed in the corner of the front room using the cushions from one of the chairs, then pulling the chair across to make a den for him. I put a bowl of cat biscuits and water inside the den. I place Gaspar carefully onto a cushion, stroking his grey-white fur. *How unloved he is, how undeserving of love he seems to feel. He is just an animal and treated as such.* I stand up to leave. As I walk away, the cat follows me, limping. I place him back onto the cushion. I leave again. The cat follows me and lies down on the kitchen floor instead.

I think about what Nuno (Nono) said, "We are animals, after all." Is that what I am reduced to here? An animal.

A dark, clear sky and the large white moon. I feel more powerful just before the full moon. The shift in tide, mood and moon during this evening making me more able to make money from the men that come here. I dance for the men, they are away from their wives, from their jobs, their families, their other lives and they have changed, they are changing still as they are watching me, calling, clawing, baying. They howl at my shows as I strip down to my skin.

"Vampires," the young, arrogant blond man holds money in his hand. The girls hang around him. "You'd better be very nice to me, as I might be about to spend a lot of money on you." He is drunk. The girls are stroking him, laughing at his jokes, flicking their perfumed hair. He gets a kick out of it. It makes him feel powerful. "You're bloodsuckers."

"No," a red haired Estonian woman speaks to him softly, truthfully "*you* are the vampire." He is sucking their time, touching their skin, snorting up their scent and the remnants of white powder in his nose. He chooses a blonde woman in a pink, shiny dress. He puts his hand on her breast. They go together into the private rooms. People are not supposed to have sex in the private rooms but I heard that a cleaner had found a condom in there.

Melissa tells me that a Swedish girl got fired for giving blow jobs in the private rooms. Melissa said that she had a milk moustache.

A lot of the Swedish girls come over to work here. Brandy is from Malmo and another girl who used to be really fat but is now slim is also Swedish.

A skinny stripper with fluffy blonde hair dances slowly and stiffly to Whitney Houston. Ultraviolet light makes her costume and hair glow. The other stage lights flatteringly colour her limbs a deep tan. She lies on her back, hoists herself up onto the palms of her hands and thrusts white-clad hips to the ceiling, frail, slowly awkwardly, making love, feet on the stage floor in high shoes. What, who is she making love to? Her eyes are vacant. She is making love. Yet there is no love in this place, this whore house. Her eyes are dark. She is making love for money. It is not love. Like Tina Turner sang, *What's love got to do with it?* Some of the girls dance to Tina Turner: *Private Dancer* and *Simply the Best*. The stage is behind the bar. Men sit and drink. Girls talk to them, show them the champagne menus. When the men offer a price and the girl accepts, I have seen the girl's eyes change dark too, during the close of the negotiation.

Melissa has brought me a fruit tea from the kitchen. We have it with milk in large glasses whilst around us others drink champagne, girls stumble, kiss and laugh with their clients. Yet underneath they are sharp, ready. They stretch their arms around the men, hungry for money, waiting for an opportunity, ready to bite.

Melissa is dark skinned with large eyes. Her mother is from Barbados, her father an English magistrate. Her hair is really very short, I saw her taking her long hair off once, she was brushing it outside. When she dances she brings a chair onto the stage. Sits astride it and moves her body like a serpentine, grinding her hips into the chair. Then she always stands up, pours a bottle of white lotion over her body and massages it in with her hands. The other girls complain that she leaves the stage slippery. Her psychic saucer eyes scan the room, making contact with her friends.

Some girls are here for money, they think that it is easy money. They enjoy the dancing, the attention and the flattery. Others come because they have been disappointed by love. Others have been abused or raped. There is a woman here who has an eleven year old son, conceived when she was raped.

Some just do it because they do not want an ordinary nine to five job. Life is bitter-sweet here.

Lady Jane has been here for years. She is forty now or older. She goes out for two hundred. Every Christmas she does a Christmas show. She says that she loves Christmas in Copenhagen. She looks better with her clothes on; her tits are getting saggy.

The stripper on stage mouths the words to the song as she takes off her bra. She is very pretty. Close up her face is lined. Her eye sockets are grey, skin tired beneath the make-up. Yet she is sexy. She has sexual power. A power which manipulates men into buying champagne for her as she snuggles up to them, strokes and purrs, flatters them, stimulates them, draws money from them. She reminds me of a cat I had in England, a vacant bimbo, sweet, attractive yet hollow. Slowly being eaten away by cancer, an hidden illness only noticeable by its too thin body under the fur and too dry skin. The woman is married, probably happily, yet on stage she appears to be the epitome of the Copenhagen red light scene. She appears vulnerable, a lonely prostitute, almost pathetic apart from that power, that real power that she has inside which is hers.

Her name is Annie. In the elaborately tiled ladies' room she asks me if I '*go out*'. She is lining her thin lips with a red pencil. I said that I would, probably, but only if I was with another girl. In a week I have sold *no* champagne. I love dancing on stage, yet I hate talking to the customers. I can usually talk to men easily, yet in this environment there is a barrier. They are not like normal men, not the kind of men I usually talk to. They perceive me as a stripper or hooker. I see the men here as animals, scary beasts. They are big, loud, clumsy. I flee from them, watch them from afar, from above.

Lana is the best, most charismatic dancer in the club. When she dances the men at the back of the room stand up on tables and chairs to watch the show and those sitting around the bar give tips as she stretches one leg over the gap between the stage and the bar. She is pretty but too bleached, too tanned. Her body is not perfect, she has cellulite. “I've been out three times,” she says, adding, with a shrug, that it is no different from going to a club and having a one night stand with someone you fancy. Yet, I see her reflection in the mirror, her face looks sad for a moment, pausing in applying her mascara, as if she knows that she has crossed some unspoken line. I could never do it with someone that I find attractive, not for money I mean. It would complicate matters too much. He would have to be ugly- keep it businesslike, keep feelings out of it.

We work in shifts. The club opens from four in the morning till four at night. Some girls work double and continue through the whole day or go to another club after this one.

Not all the girls that work here have sex for money. Most do though, eventually.

Some girls do not go out at all and just dance and sell champagne, usually the English girls. Some go out or do a private strip or a massage. I think that more girls have sex than they say. Some girls promise the men an hour in a hotel and run away after taking their money. The older, more professional women would never do that. Jane would never do that.

Money: the root of all kinds of evil. The women here want money, men's money. Men who have hurt them, lied to them, cheated on them, neglected to call. Male lust leads custom to the women. The men's egos are stroked, they drink champagne, and the girls persuade them to buy more with promises and smiles then kisses and gropes.

Often the men get so drunk that they cannot get an erection. They pass out and their wallets are taken. Most of the men that come here are despised.

I am in the dressing room. Swedish Nelly asks me to talk to a customer. “I can't,” I tell her, staring into the mirror, sulking. The mirror is crowded with exotic faces and the women talk in strange Eastern European languages. This place is different from clubs in England. In London the rules are that men are not to touch you or stroke your hair. Here, the men are always touching. Some of the women encourage it and treat the customer as a lover. Full open mouthed kissing and intimate caressing.

The men come here to watch the women strip, or to find a woman to take to a hotel. They find the women desirable and will pay a lot of money for their company yet at the same time they think the women are just bitches, tarts. “What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” some of them like to ask. If it is such a bad place, then why are they here?

Melissa is in the private booth with a man who has bought champagne. The dark red curtains to the booth are closed. I sip the cold fruit tea. I try to relax and smile but I feel desperate. I need to sell champagne. I need to speak to one of these men. I need money.

A Thai woman dances on stage. She has had a sex change. All the girls like her, they think she is beautiful. She goes out all the time. She has a heart-shaped face and small, round elegant shoulders. She hates men. Particularly Asian men. Her girlfriend works behind the bar. There is another Thai transsexual called Lynda. She is not so well liked. Her shows are good when she can be bothered to make the effort. She has stage presence, dancing dramatically to a James Bond theme tune. She can

do the splits and bend her back leg upwards at the knee.

The men come here is groups-Thai, Korean and Chinese. Local gangsters. The older European businessmen seem willing to spend money on bottles of champagne and an hour in a hotel in the city. Most of the men that come here look the same. Have you heard the lyrics to *Private Dancer*?

Athena is a ballerina with long, black hair. She is elegant, dances barefoot. She says that she came here "to be bad for a while." Last summer a woman was strangled to death in a hotel room, she says, another girl hanged herself. She swings barefoot around the pole and upside down from the bar on the ceiling like a bat. She travels the world, spending her money on designer clothes. She is lying to her boyfriend who thinks that she is touring with a dance company. Melissa says that she lies all the time. About her family, small things. Melissa is scared of her lies.

Some more men enter the club. Just the same old bland faces behind anonymous metal glasses, short brownish hair, a suit and tie, some dull job in insurance or accounts or a partner in some dreary money-making firm on a business trip. They will do. The crazy West Indian DJ welcomes them in over the mike, "Some new fresh girls for you tonight gentlemen!", sometimes he disperses each sentence with indecipherable *patois*. The girls hold the drink menus in their hands, some using them as a fan to attract attention. The skill is to try to get them to buy the most expensive bottles of champagne, Le Grande Dame or the Magnum. All these men that come here look the same. Looking down on you slightly, yet wanting you. They clap after every show.

I hang around, thirsty, desperate. Struggling to step over the barrier that separates me from them. I cannot speak. Isolated, out in the cold. A spare part.

Smuk. Danish for ´beautiful´.

"Are you alright?" A gold wrist chain jingles at my ear. A pimpy guy who gave me a lift to my apartment in his sports car is smiling, his arm around my shoulder. Men in business suits sit around the bar, surveying me.

"No," I say, "No-one is talking to me."

"Just talk to someone," he says, "smile!"

"How can I smile?" I hiss and stamp my high heel into the ground.

"Smile!"

"I'll smile for you," I answer. He walks around the club talking to the other women whilst I sit up at the bar, smoking a cigarette. *Fed up. Fed up with this place, with its cheap soft porn on the walls, its cheap lights framing the pictures. Fed up with feeling cheap and poor and thirsty inside. Smuk. Smuk. Smuk.* An arm rests on my shoulder. It is him again.

"Sexy woman," he says, hugs me with his arm and leaves.

Annie asks me what is wrong. I tell her that *I can't, I just can't talk to them. No, no, no, nej, nej, nej.* At this point 'them' are the animals, the other species, the predators who are ruled by their dicks. 'Them' who have always seemed to hurt me, taken what they wanted, then humiliated me, put me down. The selfish other species. They are not like the men I know, they do not even look the same.

I sit in the dressing room, my arms, like wings that cannot fly, wrapped around my body. There is a shower in the dressing room and it is good to have a shower after a show. Billy Jean is getting ready for her show. She used to be a glamour model. She has done photo shoots for all the major men's magazines in England. She comes from a small town. She says that once she was walking through town and a man recognised her from her photo in a magazine. She always wanted to be a sex symbol. She designs her own clothes and used to have her own business until it went bust. She got depressed after that. She does not have many friends in the town where she is from and lives with her brother who is schizophrenic. She is thirty five, looks about twenty four, and goes out. She gave one man a blow job for two hundred pounds. Today, Billy Jean is wearing a basque with a feather boa and high black heels. Stage costumes are very important. As are the clothes worn to walk around the club to attract the men. Some girls wear evening dress, a couple of the Estonian girls dress formally in business suits of fitted jacket and skirt. I am wearing a black PVC dress with a zip at the front. I like to wear my red bra and g string on stage as I have a good toned body. There are shoes and boots lined up underneath the dressing room table and lockers of clothes. Knee high

white tie-up boots, silver sandals with high glass heels.

"Let's party!" a tall dark haired Swedish girl, green eyes painted like a cat, is ready to go out. Carolina is with her.

"What if he wants to fuck?" asks Carolina.

"I don't care if I fuck him, I just want to party."

"Let's go party!" shouts Carolina, screaming and laughing, holding the Swedish girl by the hand as they walk back into the club. Lady Jane tells me that Carolina used to be shy and dance slowly, innocently to *Purple Rain*, then standing next to the DJ in a cowboy hat sipping on chocolate milk or coke between shows. After two years of working here she has lost that innocence and is sexier and dirty. She has had a boob job and wears a black dress that they are always dropping out of. Her real hair is very thin now through over-dying it so she wears an almost waist length dark wig to cover it and lines her eyes heavily with dark eye-liner. She is twenty one and goes out with men who pay a thousand or more. She does not care if they are old or ugly. Or at least that is what she says, and anyway, it is only three times a week. Another girl asked her once if she ever got scared. "No. They could kill me but they would be stupid if they did."

I sit at the mirror, checking for lines on my forehead under the unflattering light. I get out my make-up bag and put on some lipstick, really not wanting to go back out into the club. "Come," Nelly comes into the dressing room and leads me by the hand to the men at the bar, "you will learn." One looks old, a face like a shrivelled monkey, the other, some businessman, just like all the others. Nelly teases him, flicks his tie into his face. I sit down with the men and Nelly walks off, smiling. I talk to the monkey man. He is so boring. I am so false and bored and he buys the first champagne. We do not talk about sex, just about how much he enjoys skiing. His friend keeps looking at me and smiling as if we are familiar. I sip the champagne. It tastes like bitter apples. Then we dance.

Voyage, voyage. The bland mouth of the businessman sings along to the eighties club tune; that same familiar, vaguely ironic manner, behind the same metal framed glasses. Everything else in the club has disappeared. I am alone with him lip-syncing to the music. We have our arms around each other. Monkey Man is joined by Sarah, a young blonde Swedish girl who came back to Denmark after spending a week dancing in Portugal, returning after being told that she was too fat. Then Annie joins us, persuading the men to buy more champagne so that we can sit in the private booth at the back.

We all go into the private booth. A small box-like room with a curtain to pull across. We all drink and smoke and talk. "*Tak*," I thank them as our glasses are refilled and cigarettes lit. They only have enough money for two girls. Annie asks if I want to go with the men. I just look at her. "Don't just look at me. Tell me if you want to go out." I say, *yes*. *Ja*.

Annie wants to play a game. She wants to play truth or dare. The man with the glasses does not want to play. I sit between the two men.

I hear the DJ call my name. Loud, brash, Jamaican, "Shelly, Shelly to the stage! A beautiful English rose for you tonight! She's *fresh!*" I am feeling quite drunk. I walk across the club, go into the dressing room and change then walk up the stairs to the stage. I can see all the people sitting down below in the club, the girls, waiting for the show, for a bit of fun. I dance to two songs, three minutes each, one fast, one slow. On the second song I take off the bra and dance topless. I spin around the metal pole, some of the girls are watching, they like my music. I finish the show, get dressed, put on a spray of perfume and go back to the private booth. The other two girls are now topless, dresses pulled down to their waists, the men are smiling, drugged from women and champagne. I take down my top. The men sit with their arms around each girls' shoulders. Monkey Man is caressing Sarah's breast with one hand. More champagne. It is taken from the silver ice bucket and we all scream and laugh as the cork is popped. Annie is wearing the other man's tie. When it is her turn to dance, she wears it on stage like a trophy.

We are now the predatory species.

We know we are making a deal.

A stroke here, a smile there.

The men have to choose two girls to take to the hotel. They choose Sarah and me. Annie seems annoyed. Especially as she has been doing most of the hustling for champagne. I thank her. The men pay for us behind the bar and go to the toilets. “If they want a fuck then fuck them,” Annie shrugs then passes me some condoms. We will give her some money tomorrow when we get paid.

We get a taxi to the hotel. Sarah has been going out for a year yet has never had sex with a customer. They are either too drunk or she makes some kind of excuse, tells them she has a period. We go up to the men's hotel rooms, two small adjoining rooms, with a separate bathroom for each. Sarah picks up the telephone and asks reception to bring more champagne and some peanuts. The champagne arrives and Sarah shakes the bottle, spraying the drink over us and laughing as she pours it down the front of my dress. It may have been a better idea to drink it.

Sarah and I go into the bathroom and tell the men we are having a bath. She pulls a face, says that the man she is with is disgusting, that he looks like a monkey. As we take off our clothes to get into the bath, she tells me that it is OK, that she is not a lesbian. We step out of the bathroom and Sarah cannot hide her disgust as both men stand there in their white, baggy underpants. Sarah stays with Monkey Man and I go into a bedroom with the other man.

We are on the bed. I am on top of him. He has got an erection. I get a condom and put it on his cock. I lie down and he licks my cunt. I am moaning, drunk, I let him do it. I am enjoying it, the first time in a long time. He gets on top and we start to fuck. I am moaning, exaggerating. “Take off your glasses so I can see your eyes,” he takes them off. Then he comes. “You're so good,” I lie.

I ask him if he enjoyed it. He says, *no, he is no good, he was too quick*. He is devastated. He lies on the bed, his head in his hands, totally depressed.

Sarah knocks on the door. She is dressed. I get dressed and hear her asking Monkey Man for taxi money. “Bye,” she says and sounds disdainful. We step out into the corridor. She tells me that the man hurt her. He was on top of her and could not get it up. She is bleeding. She had kept whispering her boyfriend's name over and over and the man had asked her what he was saying. He was rough and she said that if he could not get it up on the third go she was leaving. So she left. Outside there are no taxis. It is cold. We are lost. It is very windy. “Run with me,” says Sarah and we run and run fast through the streets.

Alexandra, Jessica, Arabelle, Miguel, Lopes and I have started to hang out together. We go to the 24 hour bistro or Cadillac after work to eat chicken, giant toast and drink beer. I am going back to Porto again soon. I can only bear a few weeks here at a time and then I escape, cleanse myself. Jessica said, “Don't worry, I'll look after Lopes when you're away.”

He gives me single red roses, on a regular basis. He picks flowers from the wild and gallantly places them in my hair, kissing my hand. I place the red roses in a glass of water until they become dark, dry and dead. I pick the petals off the wild flowers that he gives me, asking, “He loves me? He loves me not? He loves me?”

He takes me out and will not let me pay for anything. I sit beside him in the bistro where the black boys hang out at night. He dips fries into mayonnaise and he feeds them to me, one by one, without speaking. I cling to his arm like a child. My hands are large, fingernails metallic blue, sometimes gold, sometimes red. The sky turns to pink and orange, then a pale pastel blue, an Algarve morning sky of colours I only ever see with him. I work at night and see a lot of darkness.

I asked Jessica one night, back at the house over a cup of milky coffee, whether she thought that Lopes really did like me, more than just like me, or if he was joking. “He's joking,” she said sharply, a deep voice with a Portuguese accent, “he has a wife in Brazil. He tried to kiss me on the mouth and I told him to stop because I'm a lesbian.”

“*Yeah*, right.” I hid the cold shiver running through me, that cold shiver which usually is to do with love, like an icy fear of rejection or betrayal. Like the slither of a snake.

A few days later, Lopes and I were making love and Jessica was complaining to Arabelle about the noise.

I liked Jessica at first, a small, plump gossipy Portuguese woman with henna-red hair. She had problems in her family, just as I have. She told me that she was raped when she was fourteen. After the argument that we had, we made up and I told her, “You're like my sister.”

For her first show she dressed as her Nancy Spungen-like alter ego in leather with black Gothic make up on her eyes and lips. A group of English men in the club complained and Jules told her that she could not dance any more until she lost some weight. She did not seem hurt by this. She just said, “Fuck 'em, wait 'till they see me in a few months' time, I'm going to do sit ups every day for fifteen minutes.” She said that once a man in a champagne club in Porto said she was ugly and that she began jumping around happily shouting, “Yes! I'm ugly! I'm ugly! Thank you so much! I've always wanted to be ugly!” When she was in Porto she ate a box of chocolates a day, “If I ate as much as you do I'd be so fat. It's not fair. You're like the German girls. I said the same to a German girl once and she said that I'd look like a ball.”

Jessica has a cocaine problem. She did not start doing sit ups and she promised to do some yoga with me but we never did. She had cut her wrist putting her fist through a mirror two months earlier after an argument with a girl. She has a girlfriend in Porto who looks like a boy. She came down to the club once. She is pretty with short bleached hair, piercings and a tattoo of Frankenstein's monster on her neck. Although Jessica made me laugh, I found there was also a heaviness about her, a dominating dark energy that made me cry. Soon, Alexandra- who was sharing a room with Jessica- fell out with her and complained to Arabelle that she wanted her moved. Jessica talks too much. Amadieu found out about Miguel and Arabelle. He is not happy. It is Jessica that must have told someone. Lopes tells me that Amadieu does not like her because she is always gossiping. She talks too much.

Lopes likes to slap me. On the thighs, the buttocks, pulling my hair whilst we are fucking. Two nights before I left for Porto he hit me harder, making me cry out loud. This time he got too nasty, slapping me all over my body. He struck me around the face, repeatedly, as he was on top, inside of me. I lay back, stunned, arms by my head. When he finished I hit him back, hard and quick in the face. “Never has a woman hit me. *Never*,” he began to get dressed. A round belly over a small,

round penis. I Threw a coffee cup across the room, smashing the handle, then a shell ashtray which shattered into pieces.

"Leave me alone, go away!"

"Come on, we go to beach. Don't cry. And monkey is where?"

"I don't want to go to the beach. *Leave me alone!*" As he turned to the door to go, I stood in front of it, wanting him to go, wanting him to stay. Hating him yet kissing him on the lips, realising then, his foreignness. The difference between us, yet the bond that we had. He left and I cursed as I picked up the broken bits of cup and shell and threw them in the bin. I got out the small blue canvas bag that I keep my money in and began to count, note by careful note. After all, that was the reason for my being there.

The next day I spoke to Jessica. She said it was better not to be involved, "What's going to happen when his wife comes to Portugal?" One of the other girls had told her that Lopes was good in bed. I do not know who, she would not tell me. I said that he was but it was too much sometimes. I wanted more than a thousand different positions in fifteen minutes. After all a while I could not feel anything anymore. I told her that I had thrown the stupid monkey and all the stupid teddy bears in the bin. Later that day I took the stuffed animals back out of the bin and packed them in my suitcase to take back to Porto with me.

When Lopes drove me to Loule train station we were silent. All he said was, "Sorry, come back. Sorry." I noted then how wide his shoulders were and how small his feet, how vulnerable he seemed. How dark his eyes were. I imagined him as a small boy on the streets of Rio De Janeiro.

How different our childhoods must have been. How different we are. I took his hand, squeezed it firmly, grinned and looked into those beautiful eyes, "*talvez*". Maybe.

Zoe

The landscape and the atmosphere change as the train travels from Porto, through Lisbon and down towards the south. Between Porto and Lisbon, the green fields, warehouses, often dank, night skies, sometimes clouded in the day, like England. There is still an oppressive, pervasive air, left over from before the days of the peaceful revolution in 1974. Secret police sought opponents of Salazar's authoritarian *Estado Novo*. I learned from the Portuguese that people were not allowed to smoke in the street, some got arrested for belonging to the wrong religion and more than two people together meant threat of revolution and so was outlawed in public. All these things have changed now, yet I feel the imprint left on time, seeped into the faded grandeur of the grey, peeling Porto buildings, with broken mosaicked tiles and balconies hanging with washing. Here, in the North, even when it is sunny, with clear blue skies, I do not feel compelled to remove my layers of clothes, to relax, to feel truly at ease. Only sitting on the rocks by the sea I can feel free, yet not for long, if a lone man comes towards me, I move, like a seagull taking flight. On numerous occasions it has appeared to be the cultural norm for a man to get his cock out and start playing with it if a woman just happens to be is sitting alone on the beach.

The air is always fresh, the gulls healthy, the people living in Porto-time, always slow, no need to rush and impatience is pointless. Waiting in the *correio*, for a coffee, to get credits for the phone, they stop, they talk, move slow because that is the pace that they have been borne to. English and frustrated, I just wait in a queue and sigh, shaking my head, incredulous. The sea is different in the North. It is more turbulent, there are jagged rocks and grey boulders. I am cleansed here, the pain is deep. It is like a religion. Sitting on a rock I see a rainbow over the sea. Then walking through Porto, trapped by the spider-like energy of the city, its webbed streets and gloomy Gothic unwashed buildings. Sun shines onto the dusty brickwork. Everyone is brown eyed.

The train stops at *Lisboa Oriente*. The modern design- self-consciously twenty first century- of the station, surrounding streets and shopping mall in contrast to the elegant, antiquated architecture of *Baixa Chiado* or *Ajuda* palace. The train heads towards the Algarve, initially flat lands, sweet white farmhouses, storks building nests on the tops of pylons. Then past Fatima, Tunes, orange trees, hills, a field of sunflowers, a sense of freedom, tired, the rhythmic noise of the train, eye contact with strangers in the carriage, a weight lifted, a sense of opportunity. I am a cowgirl, free, travelling along the track, watching the farms pass by, the workers on the tracks, more black faces as I head further south. The air is warmer, not muggy, but light. Brown eyes are friendly, accepting. Deciduous trees mix with cacti. Cork trees, with their bark removed to reveal red, raw insides. The ground more parched, white houses on the hills at Loule with the stubby trees. The skies are more obvious, sunsets fading finally into inky, blue night.

Zoe

Jessica was being friendly to me when I got back to the Algarve. She was sitting on my bed telling me that she liked my hair. Her hair looked nice too, she had it straightened and died a deeper, silky red. “I'm so glad you're back, I missed you.”

“I missed you,” I totally lied. In fact the thought of her domineering nature whilst alone in Porto had made me cry. I could not stand the thought of sharing a house with her any longer. Jessica said that there was a new club that played techno and house every Friday. I said that I would go. In St J's there was a definite change in her. She was wearing softer make up, a more feminine dress. She walked slowly past Lopes, close, swinging her hips; there was a change in the way they looked at each other. Arabelle later in the evening asked Jessica to go into the kitchen to have a private word with her.

The attraction between Lopes and I was still there. As we got back together and had noisy sex in the house there was another noticeable change in Jessica. Darker, more harsh make-up, jeans, chunky shoes, sitting hunched over the bar, twisting her hair around with her finger like a young girl.

Arabelle had taken some photographs whilst I had been away. One of Jules the barman sleeping on the chair near the door way of St J's; Jules sleeping with a Brazilian dancer flashing her breasts at the camera; Jules sleeping with Lopes with his pants around his ankles pulling a moony; Jules awake with Lopes still baring his large buttocks and laughing. “Very funny,” I commented, stony faced but when I went into the dressing room I laughed to myself. I had missed him during the two weeks that I had been away.

I am sitting with Rachel and Ana C. Rachel is complaining because she had been on a sun-bed for too long and has got blisters. She says that her face is burning. I wonder which of her two faces she is talking about. We remark on how quiet the club is, like it is full of ghosts. “Ghosts of private shows past,” I joke.

Mirella does a really good show. She can climb to the top of the pole, wrap her body one way, then another, all in time to the music and then slide down, her legs out straight on either side of the pole. Rachel watches her then storms off bitching that Mirella has stolen her show, “Why do the girls have to steal my fucking show?!” Then she is bitching, again, about how she has been at St J's the longest, two years. *So what*.

Shelly

I live above a strip club called 'La Dolce Vita', *the sweet life*. I like my room, a nice view of the lake, a good size. I can look out onto *Gammel Kongevej* and see the cylindrical shape of the planetarium, which holds four thousand stars, the sun and all the planets of the solar system beneath its weird sloping roof. At night I hear the bass from the club booming through the floor. *BOOM B-BOOM BOOM B-BOOM.* Some nights I can hear the whole song, can even sing along. Usually I am working at night, so it does not really bother me. Sometimes I work in the afternoons from four o'clock until eleven. I share the apartment with two other girls. Natalie from Norway and Rat Girl from Sweden. Rat Girl's dancing name is 'Silver'. The other girls do not like her. Natalie is paranoid that the vice squad are following her. She thinks that they are listening on her mobile phone. She hates the fact that she lives above a strip club and gets her boyfriends to drop her off elsewhere. She goes to Christiana's to party with her friends. The apartment is only a short walk from the City Hall Square which lights up with neon at night. I can walk through here at any time of the night, get myself a hot dog or some take out from China Box and know that I will be safe.

There is a sign in the kitchen with a picture of a rat, with a reminder to remove all garbage from the kitchen. The rats nibble away at my food at night, leaving crumbs and torn up bread in the cupboard. They search through the bin at night and leave litter on the kitchen floor. Rat Girl told me that she had a domestic rat back home in Malmo. She wanted to catch a rat and take it back home with her to breed it with her rat to make a super species that would not get ill like her pet rat. She left a bowl containing nuts and a potato beneath the kitchen sink and also fed the rat with marzipan, as this is apparently like a drug to them. When Natalie found out she was horrified and told the younger girl that rats were dirty and she should not try to encourage them.

The stage is high up behind the bar. When dancing you have to be careful not to hit the bar tender with your high heels. Behind me and to either side, there are mirrors. I place my hands on the glass, curl my body, street and snakelike to the music and watch myself. I am also watching the men sitting around the bar. I like them to watch. Sometimes they talk all the way through the show and do not even watch. Sometimes when they laugh, you think they are laughing at you. You have to learn to be divine. That is the best way. Annie says that in one of the clubs there is a revolving stage. One night she got so drunk on champagne that she fell asleep on it.

Black roots, blonde hair. False nails which shine ultra violet as the woman runs her hands over her body. The black women dance naturally, know their roots, and laugh when drunk and get up on stage and dance spontaneously whilst everyone laughs and screams, all girls together. And it is snowing outside.

When there are no customers we sit around. Some girls quiet and alone, others in groups of three or four. Like cats, moods change and sometimes the girls fall out and fight with sharp nails and sharp tongues. There is gossip about one muscular black dancer, who uses the stage name Beautiful, that she bit off another girl's nipple in a fight and took out a knife on someone else.

Most of the girls here are kind.

Athena is getting sick of Poco the DJ. He keeps touching her up and making suggestions to her. “Blood clot,” he murmurs, in a quiet nasty tone. He is an old black rude boy and lived in London. He will not tell us how old he is. There are no clients and he fills the silence with music and MCing. We make fun of him, “She's *fresh!*” we mimic and laugh, “*blood clot!*”

We sit over in the corner smoking and talking. One of the girls has brought in some playing cards. I play a game of snap with Laura, laughing as we scream *snap* across the empty club. There are night lights, flames behind glass balls. The velvet seats smell of stale champagne. The DJ is putting his hand up Athena's short dress. Suddenly she puts her hands around his neck and he falls over and out the side of the DJ booth. He is small and thin, his head poking out the top of her clenched hands and his flash white suit, like a turtle. We laugh at him being strangled.

Nelly then dances on stage. The black, flowing gown and the abortion, which she had a year ago, bounds her in erotic darkness. She is witch-like.

At three in the morning, a group of men still sit, drinking champagne. One of the girls that they want is ill, she does not want to go out, she has period pains, so they ask me to join them. Victoria from Estonia leaves the table for her show. She looks like an elegant model with long curly hair and endless legs. She lies back and opens them wide on stage. She is married to a rich old man who she met at the club, apparently to get her visa. Laura is sitting with us, laughing and having fun. The men are young, dark-skinned. It is one of their birthdays and they buy the biggest bottle of champagne. The man I am sitting with keeps lighting my cigarettes. We make conversation. “She is the best,” he leans back, motioning towards Victoria. Athena then joins the table.

“Here's to bad sex,” drawls Victoria. We clink our glasses together each time they are refilled. After the first glass, there is always an elation, the making of a sale. We drink glass after glass. We are fearless.

The DJ saunters over, wearing the matching white suit and the brimmed hat that he never seems to take off. He asks the men to fill his glass with champagne.

I do not want to go out. The DJ comes into the dressing room to tell me that the men want me to go out. It is the end of the night, past four in the morning in fact. I am dressed in just my ordinary clothes, casual and sporty. I say that I am not going out. Athena has gone off to a Russian bar with one of the other guys. As I walk back through the club, the man that I was sitting with asks me to go back to the hotel with him so that he can look after his brother who is with Victoria. He gives me the equivalent of three hundred pounds. I walk back to the hotel with the other three. Victoria gives me some condoms.

I turn on the TV and take a drink from the cabinet in the hotel room. He says that he is going to be sick and asks me if I mind if he goes to the bathroom. I say, *no*, and he goes into the small en suite. He lies back on the bed and tells me that he has been taking cocaine. He takes off his shirt and he is wearing a vest top. I flick over the remote control, swigging on a can of beer. Boxing comes on the TV. I tell him that he has a good body, I ask him if he is a boxer. He says, no, that he has his own business. That he deals cocaine. I ask him if he is a gangster. He says that he is not a gangster, he only deals a little. He is ill again. I am playing for time, waiting for the hour to pass.

I take out my small scented bottle of massage oil and give him a massage as he lies on his stomach, then turns over. I tell him that the oil is very special and that he has a very good body. He is totally wasted. He asks me to stay. He offers me about two hundred pounds to stay the night. I say that I cannot stay. I say, “Why don't we check on your brother in his hotel room?”

I did not even have to take my clothes off.

We go out into the corridor and find the room and knock on the door. They are sitting very close together on the bed.

I leave the hotel arm in arm with Victoria. She says that we have to pay the porter a fee. I say, “Let's leave that to the boys.” We say goodbye and go our separate ways back to our apartments.

The next morning I feel ill, poisoned and depressed. I walk through Tivoli gardens. There is a theatre here. Jane goes to the pantomime every year. When I get to the club I feel better when I see all the girls. The DJ helps us hustle the crowd for tips and I step off the stage, one foot balanced over the gap between the bar and stage, as a young man puts tips in the top of my thong.

The police come into the club. They are checking to see if all the girls have ID. Sometimes the Russian girls have to hide or flirt with the police when they come. The police always check the clubs as a matter of routine. This club has been in trouble before for letting girls work without their correct papers. There are rumours that the owner of all the clubs will be put in jail soon. The police ask me why I am here. I say, *dancing*. They tell me that they want to see my passport. I have left it in my room so I walk back as they follow and wait outside. They just look at my passport and leave. After that, the night passes quickly.

On stage, I laugh with Melissa who is standing by the bar. We are going out after the strip club closes to Mantra.

We wait for Melissa's Danish boyfriend, who is on his skateboard and so we roll all the way there. I am the only white girl at Mantra. The black boys dance close to me, showing off, thrusting their

bodies close to me, sexually, overtly, loud and posturing. I love it. I feel the music. I fell happy and relaxed taking the good vibes into the club the next day, sitting behind the DJ booth playing the tunes for the girls before Poco gets here and takes over. *Blood clot*.

You get so tired of talking to the men. Tired of the same old bullshit. Sometimes you approach a man and he just looks at you and shakes his head before you have even said 'hello'. Sometimes you talk to a man for a while and it is all a waste of time. No tips, no private shows, no drinks. Sometimes you hit pay dirt.

Where are you from? What's your name? How old are you? They all ask the same old questions.

I'm from England. My name's Shelly. I'm twenty four.

England, yes, I've been to London. On Business. What do you do in London?

I play the violin.

The violin?

I do not know why I said it, probably to amuse myself. Yet, suddenly at this point the customer turns from being semi-interested, to surprised, then intrigued. Sudden fantasies of Shelly in ecstasy playing my instrument cross their minds. They imagine my earnest learnings, being scolded by my teacher. I am cultured, my English accent is exciting, foreign.

Then I ask them for my private show. I lift my leg in its shiny thigh-length heel or lean my leg across their lap.

I do not play the violin. I am not twenty four. Shelly is just my stage name. I must save a piece of myself for me. These men do not know me. The trick is to let their dicks rule them. Dress up, be a predator. Invite them with English humour and thigh-length boots, my face behind its shield of make-up. Let them think I am a dumb hooker. Or even dress down when all the girls are wearing evening dress, in jeans and t-shirt. Talk with them about the other girls as if you are not one of them, but an ordinary girl, someone better. They like to talk about the girls on stage. They ask you, *is she a man? Are her breasts real?* If you are a real bitch you can tell the dancer afterwards what the men have been saying about them.

Crystal, one of the black girls, has her arms around a drunken fortyish man. I put my arm around him too. Crystal's soft, deep brown hand grips mine behind the man's back. Our eyes are dark. Souls empty and minds full of mischief and alcohol enhancement. We ask him if he would like a lesbian show. He is too intoxicated and cannot find his money, so I put my hand in the inside of his jacket and pull out his wallet and place it on the bar, my arm around him, smiling. He is leaning over the bar, staring into his leather wallet, stumbling, fumbling for money. He pays for a private show and we go into the booth. He sits on a chair whilst Crystal and I dance together and undress until we are topless. He stands up, floundering, we dance with him. Smiling, teeth shining, ready to extract his money, aware of our power. He is so pathetic, falling to his knees, cannot even talk properly. "Kiss here," I say, pointing to my pussy and he falls forward to kiss me.

"Tips. Tips?" Enquires Crystal and looks at me. "Tips." She checks his jacket pockets. Then the inside ones. "*Tips*". She gets more forceful, pushing him back against the wall, pressing her breasts in the tiny gold boob tube in his face. He slides down onto the floor.

"Tips", I say, tapping the side pockets on his trousers. Then I put my heel onto his chest and he lies motionless onto the floor as Crystal takes out his wallet. Opening it up, she reads his ID. He is a policeman.

Zoe

I have had a few bad experiences in clubs like this. One place in Lisbon. I was met at the metro station at the end of the yellow line by a short dark-haired woman with blue eye-shadow behind her round glasses and dark hair gelled back into a pony tail. “This is my big man.” She introduced her eighteen year old son to me. The area was grim, blocks of identical light brown apartments. Boarded up windows. We carried on walking through until we got to The Alpha Club. I knew the name of it from the broken, dead neon light, and a rough hand-painted sign that was carried into the club as we walked through.

I said “hi” to Lidia, the woman I had spoken to earlier on the telephone after I had seen the newspaper ad. She was wearing tight, Lycra leggings and had oriental eyes, a face lift and bleached-blonde curly hair. She was friendly, at first, warm and welcoming. Inside the club: a Michael Jackson 'Bad' poster- framed on the wall, a glitter ball, a pole and small private rooms. Lidia put on a cassette, dance music from the late eighties. The leggings, the Michael Jackson Poster, the music. It was an eighties revival, although they did not realize that the eighties were actually making a comeback.

Lidia mopped the floors and sprayed a lemon air freshener. Afterwards, I tried to remember what the smell of the club reminded me of; that of a public toilet. The other women showed up. They were thin, old and blonde. The first night I went into the private room and drank champagne with a weird man whose eyes glowed glassily in the ultraviolet light. He was animal-like, sticking out his tongue, try to lick me. I was animal-like, in a place where harsh street reality and magic meet. I made money just for drinking with the weird man. I waited with a thin, blonde sad woman. We sat with our arms folded watching TV on the large flat screen in the top corner of the club. She said that she had a daughter in England but she did not know where. The TV programme was a drama showing eerie scenes of a man wearing a neck brace in an electric wheelchair and another woman being stalked by a violent man.

Later, a couple turned up and I did not want to dance for them on the pole if they were not paying. I would only sit with them if they bought me a drink and they complained at the over-priced cocktail but wanted to sit with me and get to talk to me. The man had an irritating moon face and my skin crawled as he traced his finger over my shoulder and my neck. The woman, his ex-wife, was drunk and emotional. They argued together in Portuguese, then the woman started crying. She felt sorry for me. She said that she knew why I was there. I was there because I was lonely and I had no family. She cried as she said that she hoped that I would find a better job. I sipped the cocktail. I thought it might be detergent, by its thick texture and strange colour and taste. It had a hint of cola. I felt cold inside.

Even though the woman was crying for me, she was the one that had paid twenty five euros for a 'cocktail', so maybe I should have felt sorry for her. The man wanted to meet me the next day. I said that he would have to meet me at the club. The dark haired woman joined our table and I felt bored and waited for them to go and smiled every time they spoke to me. The sad, blonde woman came over, the one that I had sat with earlier watching TV. They spoke to her and there was something wrong with her. She was spaced out and she nodded as they said that they were leaving soon and walked off looking like a little girl.

The next night I went back to see if I could make any more money. I was tying up my boot in the small bathroom. Lidia told me to go and speak to a man. I was not ready, I only had one boot on. The door of the toilets swung shut. The dark haired woman came in and told me to hurry up. I replied that I could not go through with just one boot on. “Don't close this door,” she said, “Never close this door.” I said her that I did not close it. It had swung shut.

I walked over to the man sat at the bar. Youngish, brown hair, slim. He bought the large bottle of champagne and we went into the private room. We were drinking and this time I poured the champagne away to try and get rid of the cheap, tasting fizzy drink so that he would buy more. He touched me, and I danced , he wanted me to take my clothes off but I told him that a strip is *ciquenta* euros. He said he would give me thirty. He touched his cock and pulled me down onto the

sofa. Every time that I put my hand on the blue, checked fabric, black flakes would stick to my skin. I took the money but said I would not strip, not for thirty and I do not do sex. Then he got his cock out and he wanted to have sex. He was being very forceful and I had to push him off. The woman with the greasy pony tail came back and he acted very calm and hid the fact that he had just had his dick out. He told the woman that I would not do sex. She told me to sit next to him. I *had* been sitting next to him. She left again. The same thing again; he wanted to have sex with me and I was sitting down on the dirty chair with him in front of me with an erection. When the woman came back he complained and said that he was not going to pay for the champagne. The woman with the pony tail told me to give him his money back, which I did. Lidia came in and started shouting at me in Portuguese. I walked off. I told them that the place was shit and I went to get my things to get changed. Then, I walked back out and into the private room where he was still sitting. I started hitting him, he was so shocked he could not really fight back. Then we were fighting. I had his head locked in my arms and we were stumbling out of the private room. The women realised what was happening. They spoke to him and were consoling him; all the while I was behind the bar, near the door, changing out of my boots and into my trainers to make my escape before he saw me and could stop me. I ran out. Out through the grim tower blocks. Down the street, then hid down some concrete steps by a block of flats, shoving my boots in my bag, my breath, rasping. I thought they might come out to get me. I saw a man walk past, he looked at me, I looked at him; crouched by the steps, animal, survivalist.

I ran to the metro station. A police car slowed down, so I made it look like I was simply running for the train because I was going to be late. I got onto the next metro back into the city, sunk low in my chair, in case they tried to follow. I was still breathing heavily. A black boy in front of me turned. We made eye contact, he moved a few rows ahead, away from me, away from trouble. I relaxed for the rest of the journey, feeling high from the fight. My left hand was sore so I knew that I left him bruised. My only regret was not keeping the money.

I have never seen such beautiful skies. Precious gifts. How the colours creep slowly from the darkness and unannounced there is suddenly a pale blue-pink sky at seven o'clock in the morning. I look over my shoulder out the window of the 24 hour bistro. Miguel goes to the jukebox and dances to *Grease Lightening.* I am laughing, arm in arm with Lopes. He is drinking beer and more beer. I am drinking water. I have a pineapple for breakfast. Then we are facing each other, foreheads touching, I am self-consciously covering the spots on my chin with my hand.

As Lopes had driven me to Loule train station, silent with a struggling pride, I watched orange rays seeping through inky blue-black clouds like bruises; my cheeks still stinging from where he had slapped me. Another night at St J's, Jules called everyone to go outside and look at the sky. In the clear sky shone the full moon; a wide, white magical circle surrounded the moon. There were stars sprinkled inside. All of us witches, naked dancers, looked up, amazed.

The skies are sometimes flat blue or flat grey and overcast. Then suddenly they are dramatic, new, unexpected, escaping the claustrophobic confines of the house, which is miles from a cafe, the sea or Almancil, with my smoky room with the dirty, itchy blankets. A crimson morning sky, just as I arrived from Porto off the train, sad and tired. Then laughing, laughing with Lopes, his Brazilian nature making my spirits high. He got on his knees and said , “Marry me.” I had to remind him that he was already married. “Not in this country.” The Brazilian nature, smiling, volatile, fiery, happy; never sad for long.

I can, and have, walked the three kilometres to the sea. Down the road with the cars flying past on one side, sporadically placed cacti on the other, then turning left down a minor road with woods on either side, sometimes lemon and orange trees, past the perfect villas built for perfect lives, a building site with nautically designed semi-constructed apartments and down, finally to the sea. It is always calm, flat and bright blue, so different from the sea in the North, which is rougher and more dangerous and changes every day. I like both seas, both beaches.

Sometimes, driving through Almancil with Lopes and around at the small, white house he shares with Miguel- watching DVDs and eating pizza, and laughing- I think, *this is my new life. I will be with him for all my life, knowing that he will always make me laugh so much.* Then, when alone, I see the photograph on the wall of his wife, who looks like me but with a harder face, and his children with wide Brazilian smiles. Usually I can forget about them.

I do not feel guilty about it at all. At first Lopes told me that he had started to argue with his wife in Brazil; they were separated, he had left her and come to Portugal. Later he told me that our future together was complicated because his wife was coming to Portugal. Perhaps I misunderstood him at some point. Perhaps he felt that he had to lie about being separated from his wife and then he forgot. *Whatever.* I did not speak to him for two days after he told me that his wife was coming to Portugal. When he came to see me at the house I was angry, my head in my hands, asking, “Are you just joking with me? Is this all some big joke?”

“No, no, no joking,” he said, concerned, sitting down on the bed. Then we were laughing again. I was tickling him then throwing bears and the monkey at him across the room as he dodged behind the door.

Lopes wants to know the difference between *'beach'* and *'bitch'*. We have driven down to the beach. Lopes cannot believe that I walked that far. We communicate between our sparse shared vocabulary using mime, a Portuguese-English dictionary and the occasional sound effect. Lopes has been working for Amadieu all day and he is wearing an old Nike tracksuit and baseball cap. “Problem with *psssssssss*,” he explains, making pissing noises and holding an imaginary penis. I realise that there have been problems with the men's toilets at St J's. “*Frio*,” he says and we walk slowly along the beach, always laughing about something. “Oh, my god!” he laughs as I flash him my right nipple. We sit outside a beach-side restaurant and I ask him to interpret something on the menu. “Moo!” he says loudly, the waitress laughing, and I understand it is beef.

Eight years ago, Lopes was in a car accident and broke his neck. He was in a coma for four

months. He woke up with metal and wires all over him. That was when he put on the weight. My eyes explore his face; thick, black eyelashes, goatee beard and a smile I think is typical of many Brazilians. A wide mouth, full lips with strong, square teeth with gaps in between. He does not know that I like his smile so much. I do not know how to say it in Portuguese. Until I met him I did not realise that Brazilians spoke Portuguese- yet slightly different- like how the Americans and Australians speak English.

We are eating hamburgers, fries and salad. I say, "Look at the sun!" The sun is behind us, pink and orange just disappearing into the blue of the sky and ocean. The next moment I look, the sun is gone.

Lopes says, "Bye, sun!" and I put my arms around him and kiss him.

We walk back to the car, kissing, as another couple walk by. "Oh, no, danger!" he laughs. He has an erection and I am standing in front of him, laughing too, pressing close to him, so the passers-by cannot see his hard penis his tracksuit pants. His car is parked in a small car park, not far from the site where they are building the new apartments. He is sitting behind the wheel. "Blow job," he says; a new phrase that I have taught him.

"O.K," I say, surprising him. I go down on him. He is calling out my name.

We drive back, laughing. The builders are sitting, waiting lethargically on site to go home. He got a kick out of the fact that we could be seen. He is high, shouting, whooping, hands off the steering wheel, veering, left and right along the road.

Jules the barman- like Arabelle and Amadieu- is French. He speaks fluent Portuguese and English. He is having problems with his marriage. He likes to fool around with the girls, having a grope and a feel when he can. His wife hates the fact that he works here. "Here, say this to Lopes," he says and as I repeat the Portuguese phrase to Lopes everyone, including the Brazilian girls, start laughing. I ask Jules what I had just said. "Fuck me, fat boy," he smiles. He also tells me the phrase for "I want to suck you off" and various other rude repetitions which I repeat to Lopes in *muito mau* Portuguese, causing much hilarity.

A lot of golfers come into the club. I now always ask, "What's your handicap?". I know that eight or above is good. I know that it is all in your grip, your swing and your stance. I also know that when you are in the bunker- the sand pit- you are not allowed to hit the sand with your club. An Indian businessman with connections in both Portugal and England and who once had a passionate affair with a James Bond girl, told me that once he was playing golf in a storm and his umbrella got struck by lightning. "Really? You were in the bunker?" I said, sipping champagne and feigning interest, "I never realized that golf was such a dangerous game." I always pretend that I think golf is a fascinating subject, that I would love to play but never have.

It is good to keep a conversation going, talk about the first thing that comes into your head, "What a nice shirt", smile, be friendly, let them buy you a drink. The more drinks they buy, the more commission is earned. When they ask you to guess their age, deliberately say a few years younger than you really think. Let them touch your leg, give them a kiss, a stroke and more drinks should follow. Sometimes you get sponge biscuits to dip into the champagne or bowls of Twiglets that you pick out seductively and hold to their mouths then sometimes a private show. However, avoid wearing tights during a private show. Dancing with the crotch of your fishnets halfway down your leg and sweaty feet as you take off your boots is not attractive.

My mentality is different form the Brazilian girls, Ana C or Claudia because everything is not leading up to sex. The Brazilians generally do not do the conversation thing. They use body language, such as crotch grabbing or little noises to attract clients. Some clients like this, for others it is a turn off. However, the Brazilians always appear completely unconcerned when rejected by a client. A trait which is admirable.

Lopes gets jealous when I am with a client. He sees me with my arms around a man, hears me laughing at his jokes. I tell Lopes that he should not be jealous: it is all for money, not for love. I get jealous when he is with the other girls. He is their protection, so of course they flirt with him, dance

with him. He tells them that they look beautiful and he hears them having sex in the private rooms. Relationships are more difficult in this environment, it is complex. The atmosphere is that of corruption; married men getting laid by hookers, drunkenness, cocaine in the private rooms. Things that I do not know about. Local mafia, undercover police and pimps.

Lopes is married after all

Lopes tells me that Jessica will be leaving soon. Amadieu says that she talks too much. She is always watching, whispering. She got the taxi back to the house, leaving Mel behind at St J's. Mel wants her to leave too. Alexandra no-longer speaks to Jessica.

Jessica goes out with clients: a young married English man who I joked with because he asked me, “Do you work here?” after I had been talking to him for quite some time, *like no, I just enjoy hanging around strip bars dressed like a hooker*; an older black man called Stanley who seems to know Arabelle and a Portuguese boy. He is thin with a light moustache and slicked-back hair. He comes in with his brother who looks like he could be a Latin American bandit, yet actually is an optician.

The Portuguese boy is always talking intensely about 'energies' and collects guns. He says that Jessica has got a lot of dark energy and that is why she paints her face like a mask, with heavy dark eyes and purple and black lips. She really likes the Portuguese boy. He came into the club and bought me champagne, held my hand and talked about energies. She said to me, “Don’t steal my boyfriend.” She gets clients and boyfriends mixed up. She then said that Stanley was her boyfriend.

On Valentine's day she did not get any cards or presents from these 'boyfriends'.

On Valentine's night at St J's, Lopes told me numerous times that he had a surprise for me at four o'clock, closing time. “Four o'clock, four o'clock,” he constantly reminded me, “Surprise!” I tried to explain to him that it was no longer a surprise if he had already told me that I was getting a surprise. Then at four o'clock: “Surprise!” In one of the private rooms there was a heart-shaped cake and a bottle of wine.

I gave Lopes a present. An ivory-look heart-shaped pendant with my name written across it. I bought it from a street vendor in Porto who paints the names on himself. I had to carry it in my hand until the ink dried.

Later, outside, a van turned up with costumes and sex toys for any of us to buy if we wanted. I looked but did not find anything I really wanted. Lopes picked up a blonde blow-up doll and gasped mock-erotically , “Lopes, *oh Lopes*, I want you, I want you!” in a female tone whilst holding up the bizarre, open-mouthed doll to his face.

Although Jessica's client (who I call 'Uri Geller') is weird and always so intense, talking about energies all the time, he did sense something between Lopes and I. It was probably the time I was drunk and telling Lopes to '*kiss my ass*' because I was jealous that he was salsa dancing with one of the girls. He said that he senses an energy between us. He is also right about Jessica. Dark energies surround her and manifest themselves into her life.

Some Englishmen came into the club and I had a private show with one and she went for a half hour show-which usually means sex- with the quietest one. After a while the quiet guy came back and I sat drinking champagne (actually cheap, over-priced cava) with Jessica and the men, joking that the quietest ones are always the worst. When I had finished my drink, Jessica said that her client had shit in the private room whilst she was dancing for him and she had been throwing up in the toilets. I felt sick after she had told me and wished that she had not. I felt dirty sitting on the same chair that he had been sitting.

Ashley

I get home. Well, back to the apartment that I am renting for a few weeks. It is always this way. I look in the mirror and my eyes are different. My pupils are wider, as if I am on some sort of drug. My brown irises are more contrasting, shiny, a pale golden brown. A good night, a Saturday. One of the girls said that it is not always this good. I run the bath. Hot lather. The bathroom is the best thing about the apartment.

There are plants around the bath tub.

In Germany they call oral sex 'French kissing'.

Shoneburg, West Berlin. Shops selling bondage gear, gay porn. Black, shiny. Then green, parks, families, health food shops. Glamorous Turkish girls in groups, good-looking, loud Turkish boys. Modern, rebuilt, yet if you look carefully you can see the history, taste it, smell it. Remains of grandeur, whole streets survived, white angels intact, my door heavy, oaken. An ornate high ceiling, more angels, birds. Black with grey wings, a constant cawing, circling ahead above the high, high towers in the purple sky. Office buildings like forts with their large bricks and small, dark castle-like windows from the Nazi era. Steel, neon. Cafes, Latte Macciatos, fur-lined walls and men holding hands.

I have my own religion.

I am sacred. I am holy. I am feared. I have fear. Fear of disease. Fear of men. Fear of others finding out my secret.

We are different. We are loathed. We are misunderstood. We are wanted by men.

I have made an exchange. Money for sex. In society's eyes this is degrading. I am degraded. I am disgusting. I am sexy. Dangerous. Even admired by some. The image of the happy hooker. Like heroin, or gangsters, it has a kind of inverse cool. Admired by men.

Of course, though, I am not degraded. I have power. That is why we are feared. The oldest profession. It will never go away. It takes different forms.

A whore. A slut. A slag. Shunned and not viewed in terms of being a human being, of being a woman with needs and feelings. Just a prostitute, all labels placed onto a shadowy, stilettoed silhouette until the stereotype emerges from the darkness. A drug addict, a dismal life, someone to pity. Someone to hate. This is not to say that these stereotypes do not exist.

There are hookers who are married, who have children, who have been to university, who are at university and need the extra cash, who are young and carefree, who are rich, who are desperate, who are curious or just fucked up. High class, low class, escorts, girls standing on the street corner. It is all the same. There are different levels of lifestyle, danger, safety and acceptance. I have made thousands in one night and a few euros for half an hour. Hey, sometimes I even do it for free.

There are other types of sex workers. Strippers, those in the telephone sex industry that talk dirty for money- I have done both. Web cam girls. Can these people be put in the same category as prostitutes? Do they view themselves as being the same?

Right now I am Ashley, aged twenty seven, sometimes twenty four, a 'natural' blonde. Ashley, who does most things with a condom but will not do anal.

I do not feel experienced. With me it is an on and off thing. It takes different forms. The first time was over ten years ago. I was like a child then, overshadowed by it all. I still feel like a child now. I still fear men. I do not have full control over them. My new breasts are red from their kneading, their rough bristles, their pinching and pulling.

The house is next to a solarium, above a small restaurant. From the outside you would never guess what is contained within. The studio, which is a black and mirror lined room full of S and M equipment. It is not what everyone, most people are into, but you do get paid more for 'bizarre' things. *Blau, grun, lila.* The Gold room, the Silver room. My favourite is the Blue room. I seem to

have most of my clients and my best times in there. It is not blue, however. It is mainly deep red, a double bed with a maroon throw and cushions, tasteful erotic pictures in black and white on the walls, red roses and petals strewn beneath them. There are more rooms, the apartments next door in the same building. These are just as beautiful. Curtains draped, a king-sized bed, always clean. The Tropical room has mirrors on the ceiling. There is another room that I have not seen. It is for when clients want to play doctors and nurses, full of surgical equipment and hospital paraphenalia.

The business is run by women only. They offer erotic massage and an escort service. We all have a locker. We are treated with respect by the house lady, who varies, who answers the telephones and greets guests. The house takes forty percent of everything that is earned. I am not earning a lot but in four days I earned the same amount, if not more money that I earned in a month in Prague working in two 'normal' jobs. I worked so hard there that I was constantly exhausted. I am still tired here, though, on my days off. Perhaps that is because I am new, or because I only got to Berlin a little over two weeks ago. However, the idea was that I would be free to do whatever I wanted on my days off. Freedom- that is what I was longing for. However, at the moment, the prostitution seems to be all consuming. It seems to be all that I think about; mulling over reasons why a guest chose one girl over me, feeling fear that I may have picked up some terrible disease from a man, wondering whether the redness of my breasts will recede. I hope my breasts have not been damaged for good, they cost me a lot of money. They are like two bruised apples. I have been to the solarium and fried them too, just for good measure.

I am the only English girl in the house. The others are German. There is one smiling Brazilian, her friend an older Portuguese woman, a sexy blonde Russian who wears tiny skirts, a Polish girl. A pale skinned, dark haired woman with Marlene Dietrich eyebrows and startling blue eyes. A svelte, overtanned Victoria Beckham lookalike in underwear. A Czech woman in her forties, two Asian girls, one from Mongolia, the other I am not sure. The women's ages range from about twenty to forties. Some girls are so young, they look too innocent. One sweet, blonde girl always gets changed back into a formal white shirt for when she goes home to her family.

There was one scraggy old hen who did not get any clients the other night. She wanted to travel back with me on the *U Bahn*. I was stressed out because I had sex with probably about six different men and then I could not find my locker key because she was rushing me to get changed. I have promised to give her the number of the escort agency that I know in Portugal. She wants to be an escort for high class clients. She cannot get any clients here, so I think her self-image is somewhat distorted. I do not like her. There is something weird about her. The way that she stares at everyone and giggles all the time. She would have been attractive if she was not in that environment, yet she just seemed desperate. Wearing a dress too short for her bad legs, taking too long in front of the mirror choosing which necklace to wear. We got on the metro together and I was angry because I still could not find my key, rummaging around in my bag whilst she giggled again. Looking around at the other people, catching a glimpse of myself in the black windows of the train, still wearing lipstick, slightly smudged, the taste of mouthwash, the smell of condoms, sweat. Exhaustion and mistrust. I got off at my stop and left her with a brief, irritable goodbye. I never saw her again.

I try not to be unkind to the girls. One girl, who has just turned twenty said that there are occasional 'bitch wars' amongst the girls. I do not care about that though, it bores me, I have been there before and I really do not want to get involved. The girl was telling me about how she has a boyfriend who has no idea what she does but she does not want to tell him because she told her last boyfriend and they broke up over it. Then she told me that I had really big feet. *Yawn, yawn, bitch wars.* I could have perhaps retaliated and said that she had a big mouth, or that she looked like a real geek with her glasses perched on the end of her nose and crouching over her book but I would rather stay silent. That is my tactic and I am only here for a short time. I cannot stand doing this work for too long.

Most of the girls seem friendly. Two of them like to play backgammon whilst waiting for clients. I read through the German fashion and gossip magazines, mainly looking at the pictures of Kate Moss, Paris Hilton, Brad Pit and Angelina Jolie. Apparently Mariah Carey's sister is a prostitute.

Mariah Carey is really cute.

The client sits in one of the rooms. Each girl visits him and introduces herself and then he chooses. If I am not chosen, generally now, I do not care, or try not to care, unless there are not many guests and too many girls. I should not care because when I walk out the room I cannot even remember what they look like. If I am tired I am not chosen as often and there is one girl who I think always gets chosen over me. She is younger, wears less clothes than me and has been here longer. I get chosen a lot though.

If I am chosen, the house lady tells me and also which room, “Ashley, *blau*!” I go back into the room and ask him how long he wants. I take the money and write my name down on a form, along with the room, the amount of money, the time and then I have to write down the time that he leaves. The house provides the condoms. I put them in my bag. Every organised hooker needs a 'fuck bag'. Big enough, yet not too clumsy, to carry the condoms, wipes, lipsticks and whatever else a good hooker needs.

I go back in the room, ask him if he wants a shower, which is not included in the time, or a massage. When they go to have a shower I make sure there are no other clients around and when they have finished washing they press a bell on the inside of the bathroom door and I go and walk back to the room with them. I walk in front and can hear and feel an annoying click in one of my knees.

I put a towel down on the bed. We start stroking each other and the music starts. I am spiritually uplifted as my hands run over his back, my status as a prostitute clear and pure. I am relieved to have been chosen over the other girls, to have made some money. I look in the mirrors at our bodies together. I am slavish, a servant. I take the lubricant, the condom. Place the condom onto the penis.

Sex this way is never the same as with a lover. This way it is emotionless. The man is emotionless. I am emotionless. Perhaps, though, it is not lack of emotion but it is sex devoid of sexual passion, of erotic love. I have to be very sensitive to know when they have come, so that I can make sure I remove the filled condom from my body, as often they hardly show a sign, not in their faces, which I try not to look at, or their physical actions. Not like a lover at all.

However, Germans are renowned for their reserve.

Then, quite often, we have an ordinary conversation about his occupation, or Berlin, he may ask me questions about my life, or he may say that he is not usually that quick, or that slow, or that limp. We get dressed, I show him to the door with a friendly 'goodbye' . I change the towels and make sure that the room is tidy with no stains or wrinkles on the bed.

My role is subservient, like a maid, for straight sex. Customer service is important. I ask them if they would like a drink, if they need a shower, if they need another towel. Smiling, laughing, pampering.

Jules is telling me his life story. He is leaning on one side of the bar wearing a floppy leopard skin hat, a curly green wig poking out of the bottom of it and badly applied make up. I am leaning on the other side of the bar wearing a long hippy wig, heart shaped purple glasses and carrying a huge bunch of plastic flowers. It is carnival time and everyone is wearing fancy dress and we are all going to Black Jack when St J's closes. I was going to get dressed as a dalek or a scuba diver but it would have made private shows a little bit difficult.

Jules says that he has a drug problem, cocaine, and that Amadieu knows about it. Not so long ago he had nothing and he was on the streets. Now he has everything: a Scottish wife ("Not a top model or anything but she has a big heart"), a three year old son, another baby on the way and a home. He does not want to lose them.

"I've told you my life story now."

"Yes, in about five minutes."

I have decided to do a hippy strip tease, bare foot and carry a joss stick, handing out flowers to the clients as I dance around the pole. I have fun handing out flowers and singing Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin songs with a guy at the bar. Ray, an English client, who sometimes comes in with his twenty six year old son, is so surprised by my groovy costume that he picks me up and swings me around. "Hey, take a chill pill, man," I tell him and he lets go. He tells me that people did not say that in the sixties. He should know. He was there. He buys me a drink.

Rachel and Ana C are sitting at the bar, bitching about me to Ray. I overhear Rachel saying, "I'm not being bitchy or anything but she is *so* weird."

"Weird? *Weird?* What's so weird about me?" I enquire, dancing, spaced-out, carrying a fusion of multi-coloured flowers, donning a waist-length hippy wig, purple shades, flowery psychedelic handbag and turquoise kaftan. Later, in the toilets, Rachel asks me if I have any drugs. "Only because I am dressed like this doesn't mean that I've got drugs. I don't do drugs." I answer, incredulous. She asks me not to tell anyone yet I repeat the conversation to Jules whilst smoking a joint in Lopes' car on the way to Black Jack.

Lopes, Alexandra, Miguel, Arabelle and I had gone into Faro that day to look for costumes. Lopes picked up a pair of round, pink plastic clip-on earrings. He put them on, calling effeminately, "Miguel, oh, Miguel!" as we were walking through the shopping centre, then gave him a big kiss on the mouth. The dangly earrings were an amusing contrast to his heavily built, over-six foot frame.

I was looking for flowers, flowers, flowers. I planned to hand them out to clients and walk off, dreamily, wishing them, "Peace and love, man." Alexandra was looking for a fairy costume. Lopes and I waited in his car whilst the others went into a Chinese *loja*. I kissed him and stroked his leg, singing, '*If You're Going to San Francisco*'.

Back at the house, I tried on the hippy costume in front of the Russian guy, Rachel-who had fallen out with her boyfriend and was staying at the house- and Alexandra. Alex cut the hair on the blonde hippy wig a little bit shorter, as it was too long and kept getting tangled up in my flowers, door handles and everywhere else.

That evening, Francisco, Jules, Miguel and Lopes all dressed as women. Francisco wore an elegant black dress and black, feathery afro-like head-wear. Miguel was sophisticated and very convincing, even down to the wiggle in his walk, and the clients were looking at his good legs in red leather knee-high boots. He fooled one of the taxi drivers, Johnny, into believing he was a new Brazilian girl. Miguel was joking all evening and asking men for private shows. Lopes became 'Jennifer Lopes'. He wore a black wig, slightly askew, a tight black skirt, black stilettos and a thong, which at one point he pulled out a tampon. Arabelle had applied his make up in one of the private rooms. He flirted with Amadieu and sat on his knee and then leaned on the bar, in a tight spangly vest-top, looking like a scary butch lesbian.

Rachel dressed as a schoolgirl, boring and so unoriginal, and Arabelle, ironically, as a nun. I have

no idea what Ana C was supposed to be. She was wearing a weird blue and white wig, gold hot pants and was carrying a small drum. Alexandra's Brazilian friends, Cece and Val, dressed as an Indian squaw and a belly dancer.

On the way to the club I could feel the fear inside; my stomach churning. Lopes driving, serious, hard-faced, broad shouldered, black wig and Elizabeth Taylor make-up. Jules- like a green-haired Calista Flockhart- sitting in the back with a joint.

I danced all night with Lopes. Rachel said that when he came back from the bar, he was watching me for a long time, open mouthed. All the girls saw us kissing together and we are no doubt a serious topic of conversation with the gossips. The nightclub was a colourful, animated rhythmic chaos of bees, gangsters in pin-stripes, feathers, clowns, men in drag and wigs. Miguel and Arabelle danced together in a pseudo-lesbian way. My wig became very irritating, the hair got everywhere, and I do mean *everywhere*. I placed it on a table where we were all dancing, and a pile of wigs soon formed. My flowers had scattered over St J's and the nightclub floor, glowing in the ultra-violet light. I danced, drank beer, smoked and kissed with my Brazilian man.

We were driving back from Black Jack when Lopes got a call on his mobile. It was Cece. After we had left, Cece, Alexandra and Val had a fight with some girls and the police had to be called. I tried to imagine an Indian squaw, a belly dancer and a fairy having a brawl. *Whatever happened to peace?*

The following night, in St J's, Rachel was gossiping with Jessica, who did not take part in the carnival. Jessica laughed loudly and slightly forced when Rachel told her about Lopes watching me and how everyone seemed to be in love and she had fallen out with her boyfriend. Rachel had spent most of the night talking with Jules, who got chatted up by a man who thought he was a Brazilian woman. It was Jules' fault for standing by the bar like a cheap hooker all evening. Rachel told Jessica about Val having her hair-piece pulled off, with a girl on top of her and how, now, she has got scratches on her face. Val turned up at St J's, sheepish, still wearing furry dog slippers. Alexandra, Cece and Val were talking and laughing excitedly all evening, high from the adrenalin of the previous night.

Ashley

I can forget the faces. When I am walking in the street in the day, the anonymous unknown faces could be the men that I fucked, sucked or had given a hand job to. I do not know. They look the same. I can remember the bodies, hard and taught-muscled, soft with folds of fat. The skin textures; hairy chests, bumps and weird scars. That does not bother me. I cannot forget the smells. The rubbery condoms, the stench of hot breath, my slightly acidic smell as the client removes his fingers from between my legs. Sometimes these smells haunt.

I have made an appointment to have a full health check on Monday and get a new set of contraceptive pills. I got the number from an organization that supports prostitutes which I found out about from one of the girls; she was looking at garish close-ups of cauliflower shaped STDs which she had downloaded from their website. The charitable group have a logo: a stiletto heeled shoe with a snake winding around it. Prostitution is legal in Germany. It is no longer a crime but it is still a surreptitious choice of occupation for the majority of women. It is not something that they would put on their CV or mention in a job interview. “Oh, yes my last occupation as a prostitute was very interesting. I was skilled at blow jobs and gained immense knowledge of sexual positions, oh, I'm very versatile.”

I am trying not to make contact with any bodily fluid after reading up on sexual health on the website. I have come into contact with semen twice so far, once on my hand because the client could not feel anything with a condom when fucking me and another on my back during a spanking session. I am going to stop letting men go down on me as well after reading that saliva as well as vaginal fluids could carry the HIV virus. I started shaking when I was reading this. The fear was immense.

In this business nobody tells you how to do it correctly. You have to make mistakes and learn from experience. The young girl who told me that I had big feet worked in a swingers' club about a year ago. Nobody told her the right prices for sex. She earned one hundred and fifty euros after fucking about ten men and after a while realized that this was not the right price.

The spanking session is something that I will never do again with a client. I was asked to keep most of my clothes on as he spanked me whilst bending over the bed. I had to tell him not to spank so hard, although I do have a high pain thresh-hold. Two of the other girls refused to even consider it. I wanted to do it. I wanted to be punished for being a bad, dirty girl. I deserved it. I was red afterwards. There was a warm sensation that lasted after the session was over. When I lifted up my short dress one of the girls lifted her face to her hands and gasped. Someone gave me some cream to rub on my butt. I had the imprint of finger-marks on my buttocks the next day. It was supposed to be 'soft' spanking. Spanking is classed as 'bizarre' and so I got more money for it.

The only other time that I have done anything similar with a client is when I was bitten on the bum in the private rooms of a strip club in Portugal.

I have dominated men before, whilst working as an escort in Portugal. One man was white haired, middle-aged, a millionaire who liked to be totally humiliated. He had a glass eye. I could not leave any marks on his body in case his wife saw them when he went back to England. We watched S and M lesbian porn in his villa, drank wine and explored his fantasies. I tied him up, beat him with a paddle and poured hot candle wax over him, although I had to be careful not to spill any on his pristine white carpet. His wife telephoned him. “I'm just going for a walk, darling,” I heard him say, whilst he was standing in his kitchen wearing a red silky negligee and nipple clamps.

Another client was different. He had been beaten very badly as a boy with a leather belt. When he was fourteen, he was beaten so badly by his father that he passed out. He still had the belt. Now he liked to be beaten hard. As hard as possible on his buttocks. He had a selection of belts and whips lying on a table along with the old, worn thick leather belt that bred such fear in him as a child. I had to pretend to be a teacher and punish him for playing truant. Occasionally I would pick up the

old leather belt and hold it to his face menacingly, threatening to hit him even harder.

After the session, as I was saying goodbye, he was smiling widely.

It is a game. All the bullshit they say. It is best to disregard it- all positive and negative comments. Just focus on the money. I have been offered five thousand euros to go out with four guys, marriage proposals. One skinny guy with halitosis who looked like a weasel telling me that he used to be a model. A dentist asking me to open my mouth to look at my teeth and telling me my left incisor was too short. I told him that I had great teeth. One of the African sisters had a private show with a man who loved her black skin. He kept telling her how much he loved her skin. Then he started saying how he wished that he was black.

One night I was talking to an Irish man. He said that he would come in the next night too and buy me a drink. The Irish always like you to have a drink in your hand. They buy round after round, taking it in turns to pay. The following night, I saw him and sat next to him. The giraffe, Claudia, in her animal print dress sat with his friend. The Irish man was saying that she had the best legs he had ever seen. He was round, shifty, with narrow blue eyes that darted quickly from left to right. “I don’t like fishnets, myself,” he said, his arm around my shoulders and looking at my fishnet stockings. “You've got too much on. You looked ten times sexier last night.”

“That's because you were drunk.” I answered, unsmiling.

“No, no, you still look good, though, don't get me wrong.” Cece was sitting to the left talking with his grey-haired friend. “Great girl, great girl,” he looked shiftily at her, “No tits, but a great girl.” He then got offended because he wanted to kiss me on the mouth but I pulled away. I said that we were not allowed to kiss- which I think is one of Amadieu's rules- and he appeared to be slightly consoled. When I finished my pole dance he said that it was a good show and he got a bit turned on. I told him that I did not do sex but that is what he wanted.

Another time, a youngish man, balding and wearing a suit and tie said, “What happened to you?”.

“What do you mean what happened to me? I'm not talking to you anymore.” I laughed and then he laughed.

“I wouldn't have thought that an English girl would end up here. I thought the English were successful.”

“So you think because I work here, it's the only thing I do?”

“Well, you could be a model or something instead of working here.” *Yeah, right, next he was going to get his armour and white horse and ride me out of here. Then afterwards go back to his wife and children.*

I noticed as he sat casually, so coolly, one leg crossed over the other knee that he was wearing garishly patterned blue and white socks, the white glowing furiously under the club's ultra-violet lights. “Nice socks,” I remarked. “Did you get them for Christmas?” He started to pull his trouser leg over them. Later on, I am sitting at the front near the bar and notice that he is leaving. “Bye!” I shout, “Nice socks! Did your gran buy them? Do you just wear them on special occasions?”

The men who come here think that they are original with the line, “What are you doing here? You don't belong here, you're different.” Also, “You're different. You're not like these other girls. You're classy.” *Ha, ha*.

It is a game. The men slag off the other girls all the time. About Leah: “Look at that great fat piece.”

About Alexandra: “I would've thought she'd be slimmer with all that dancing.”

All the girls say that I eat a lot. I do not get fat. I am too nervous. There is not a day that goes past that I am not nervous. My nervous energy burns off calories and I walk everywhere. I walk into Almancil buy two large carrier bags of groceries and walk all the way back to the house. When I get back, my arms are numb.

Another part of the game is the champagne. I get commission on every drink bought. The small

bottles of champagne, either white or black, I get ten euros commission. I can drink it, or pour it away. There are various secret places in St J's where the champagne can be poured away discreetly; the client sees the empty glass and so buys more. Behind the seats near the dance area, there are plastic troughs. As I am having an animated, fascinating discussion on golf or something with an amazingly charming and humorous man I can smile, flirt, laugh, place my arm just behind the client's back in a more intimate way, hold the champagne glass in that hand carefully between finger and thumb whilst making eye contact and I can pour the champagne into the trough. There are also two large urns that serve the same purpose and Arabelle can pour champagne in the sink behind the bar and replace it with something non-alcoholic and drinkable.

Ashley

Prostitutes are disrespected, despised. All manner of crimes, blame, hatred, placed onto our pretty little heads. When we are shown respect, we remember it, often surprised. Respect, like money, is a scarce yet valuable resource. Is it something within ourselves, also, that tells us we are bad, unworthy of love? A self-fulfilling prophecy. A client, a rich businessman, said once that men who pay for prostitutes are different, women who are in this business are different. Not the same as the others, the mainstream.

There was a man in the blue room who had read about Kama Sutra positions on the website. The house lady, Caro, asked me if I had any knowledge of this. I admitted that I had not actually read the Kama Sutra but I could always make it up as I went along. I had been sitting there for two hours with no clients. It was half past six in the evening. I went into the room to find out if the client would like to explore the Kama Sutra with me. He paid for half an hour. I fucked him on top with my back to him. He said that he had done that one already, so I leaned back, arching over him still in the same position so I could see a reflection of myself in the mirror behind. I asked him to come over to one of the wicker chairs. He sat down and I fucked him with one leg over his shoulder. “What's the name of this position?” he asked, mid-fuck.

“The chair,” I replied. Then I sat on the chair and he fucked me after we had negotiated the correct position. It ended up on the bed, like the standard missionary position but with my legs almost wrapped around his neck. I told him to buy the Kama Sutra so that he could bring it in and we could practice some more positions. Afterwards the house lady asked me how it went. “He said it was *interesting*,” I replied, feeling somewhat invigorated.

Cocks vary in size, shape, memorability. Often when the cock is quite large it loses its appeal as it is being squeezed into the condom. Trussed up in latex, with grey and red veins, it looks like the packaged meat that you buy in supermarkets. Some cocks lose their firmness and become pathetic and flaccid as the condom is fitted, with the round rubber tip hanging loosely, so that I have to give a vigorous hand job to get it hard again. One cock was bright red at the end with unhealthy globes around the tip.

A young guy wanted to try 'dildo play'. He said that he did not like sex. He wanted to watch the woman using the dildo on herself. The house lady gave me a choice of two vibrators to use. One which was skin coloured and huge, then a normal-sized, more familiar-looking vibrator that was similar to one that I used to have. I chose the latter. I had to use it with a condom because it is shared by other people. I put lubricant on the condom and lay on my back as he watched me. I tried out different positions. He pushed it into me hard as I was on all fours which hurt. I made him come by sucking his cock. It was the smallest cock that I have ever seen, and very thin. I can see how, psychologically, his fantasy had emerged. He feels that he cannot satisfy a woman with his tiny cock so he uses a dildo instead.

I had an hour with a big, fat man who went down on me and then fucked me. Afterwards he told me he was a doctor. I was going to ask him, then, if he could tell me what the small, white spots were on my outer labia, just near the entrance to my vagina. Then he explained that he was a radiologist who x-rayed people but it was interesting because they were all ages. He has to look at the x-rays and then diagnose the condition.

When I go home I have a cup of tea, listen to the radio. Have a long bath. Do whatever. I can take my 'home' with me anywhere that I go, providing that I have privacy, no violations or depending on the people that I am with or feel close to at that time. Then other times, when something is unbalanced- something wrong or frightening that I cannot see only feel- I feel homeless, even when

I have an address, a bed, a place to cook and clean. Everyone out there is out to get me, they are staring at me, touching me, slimy and ugly.

After meeting up with the woman who runs the house and making the decision to start working there, I could feel the colour being drained from my world. Perspective being adjusted like a television screen, giving everything a harsh, greyish tint. The colour of concrete, of streets. I could feel a cold breeze, harsh reality.

It is not that bad, though. Not all the time. Not at all. Not when you just do it, get into it. Do what you have to do.

I have put more highlights in my hair. Depilated, stroked my skin with oils and lotions. It is my period but I am working tomorrow. I have to buy a special sponge to put inside before sex. I can buy one from the brothel for one euro. I have heard of women putting lubricant up there too, to stop the blood. Some women take the pill without a gap. I am not sure if I can go through with putting the sponge inside, I do not even really like using tampons. Hopefully my period will be light tomorrow.

Today I used the sponge. “Oh, no the sponge!” I cried as the small, squashy packet containing the round, pink object was handed to me. It was easy to insert yet was difficult to pull out again. I had to sit on the side of the bath and prise it out with one finger inside, then two. I used lubricant on my fingers. I never put two fingers inside myself, never that deeply. Right up and far back. Like going on walkabout. *Where the hell was I going? And what the hell was that?* I did not know that was how I felt inside, how the soft, flesh enfolded, encased my fingers, sucked the sponge in again after I had prised it further out. Eventually I retrieved the small, round blood stained sponge and flushed it down the toilet.

I had three clients today. I worked from around ten until five. It was a very slow day, just sitting around most of the time drinking tea, smoking and talking to the other girls. The Polish girl is looking forward to having plastic surgery on her breasts and nose. She is going to one of the best surgeons in Poland. I tell her that it will be a lot of pain, both beasts and nose. She does not care.

My first client liked to talk dirty and told me an erotic story about us being in an elevator together. The second man was a good fuck. He was what I call a 'normal man'. Quite nice looking, friendly, large built, balding. I asked him if he wanted a massage. He said, “No I just want you.” He had a memorable cock. Very fat. There was a wet stain on the bed in the Gold room where he had been fingering me. When he came I was on all fours on the bed. I was watching in the mirror. I looked slim, a real slut, round breasts, open mouth and hair falling over my shoulders. This client was different, he was shouting out really loud when he came. The third client wanted to talk most of the time. I sucked his cock the rest of the time. He went out beforehand to use the shower. One of the other girls was angry and told me to take him back to his room. She was with a client, who looked out from the bathroom door, and they actually saw each other. I was never told about this aspect of retaining clients’ discretion. I apologised to her afterwards and said that I really did not know that clients were not supposed to see each other. Anyway, my client was from Holland. They will never see each other again.

The spirit of sexual intercourse is different due to the exchange of money. When I am being fucked I am pure. A pure prostitute. Spiritually pure. Prostitution is as ancient as the history of man. Persecuted, hated but always wanted.

Yet never loved.

When I am fucked I enjoy it. Though, it is never the same as with a lover. It never can be.

I quite enjoy being a hooker. My pain is being gradually exorcised. When I am not working I do not feel a totally different person than 'Ashley'. I still dress sexily. I still wear make-up, high heels.

There is sex in my hair, on my skin.

I have had three cocks inside me today.

The prices here are eighty euros for half an hour, one hundred and twenty euros for three quarters an hour and one hundred and sixty for an hour. I keep sixty percent. I cannot put a price on sex. I could work in some clubs that are dangerous, dirty and run by coke heads, the mafia, be treated like shit yet make a lot of money. I could take risks, like the girls in the Denmark strip clubs that I know, and go out for an hour with someone and make hundreds; I have done it before yet I ran the risk of being harmed or killed. I could go back to England and do the same thing there for much more. The thing is, I am not in England or Denmark. I am in Germany in a house that is safe, professional and clean. There is no stealing, no cheating, no male dominating involvement or corruption within the business. I am doing it for my own survival. I am a survivalist. The knowledge that I am gaining here is invaluable. Overall, I make good money.

Perhaps I could go into doing freelance private massage. I think that this house will also offer me some escort work.

Some days I want to leave the business for good. Always telling myself that it is temporary. That it is a shit life, no way to live. Then I want to find a way to better what I have achieved or experienced. To use my experiences in a positive way. Other times I think of my future plan. A plan, I think, rather than a dream. It is to have my own house of girls, either a club or a simple house. I was thinking of Portugal as a location. The idea is so simple. I know that it will work. Other times I think of the boy that I left in Prague. I imagine sharing a home with a husband, cats and safety. A home full of love. Not like the relationships that are formed in the sex industry. These relationships are unique yet often transient. We all have different names.

What did my parents believe in? They were atheists. To them, then to me as their beliefs became my reality, Jesus was a lie, God just religious crap that I should disregard as nonsense. In junior school, one day, I decided not to join in the prayers before lunch. I think it had nothing to do with my religious beliefs at all, I was just being naughty. I had to stand up in front of everyone and pray before lunch could commence. What prayer was it? I never pray. *For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful.* When I told my mother, casually, what had happened, she got angry and told my father. My father spoke to the headmaster, it was always my father who had any dealings with the school. Then, I did not have to say prayers anymore. I was the only one in the whole school. Everyone said prayers, it was normal, even if we did not know what the words meant.

I would go into the big old creepy churches with my best friend in the village where we lived. Always a brassy, musty smell and the fear of ghosts. We wrote our names in the visitors book: 'Mickey Mouse', 'Donald Duck'. We scribbled on and ripped up some of the pages. My friend took a shiny brass cross from the church. I cannot remember what we did with it. We would go into the local grocery shop and steal things: some blocks of raspberry jelly and 'hundreds and thousands' cake decorations. I sprinkled the cake decorations over my friend, crying with laughter as they went into her mouth. We ran, hysterically laughing, after we had thrown a block of jelly and it stuck onto the side of the vicar's car, the residue of it still fruity, sickly in my mouth.

What did my parents believe in? Thatcherism, probably. Gardening, Coronation Street.

I was abused by my father. He would hit me. He would touch me. My mother is disengaged from emotion, she lives in a state of denial. I have not seen my parents for twelve years. I do not know if they are still alive, if they think about me. I am rootless, yet not directionless. All I need is the money. The money to fund my future project, future travels, to keep my fridge full of food, to keep me from sleeping on the streets, to buy a new pair of shoes. I can do ordinary work. I have never

had a job that is fulfilling, that fills my loneliness, that makes me feel I belong. I am different. I have led a double life. A life of pretence. Even when leading an ordinary life I feel as if I am hiding something. I feel empty, my other life an image that I know exists, like in a mirror, one that I step into sometimes.

I do not know if anyone would pity me or think my life was desperate. Perhaps not if they met me, normally, had a conversation in a cafe with me, saw my stylish clothes and my enthusiasm for travel. Perhaps if they knew some of the truths of my life, they would be shocked, disbelieving and feel sad for me. I am the only one who harbours these truths.

I have my own religion.

A lawyer was looking at my breasts. He said that they looked great, that they added to my attractiveness. He said he could see the scars. He was lying underneath me after a massage. The scars take several months to heal, a dark line just underneath the breast. Sometimes I cover the scars with a concealer that I use for spots. Sometimes I do not bother. He was from Canada, a lawyer for the entertainment industry. Property rights to scripts. He gave me a massage, yet scratched me with his nails. I told him that he looked Irish and he was pleased. His wife had died several years before. He always takes off his wedding ring when he comes into the house. I asked what she had died of. Breast cancer.

Slap, slap, slap.

I'm listening to the sound of the guy's knob slapping against his receiver. He's breathless.

Did you hear that?

Yes...very erotic.

God, I'm so sarcastic.

'One to one: hard' prompts the recording for the next call. Then I can hear the sound of a bath running. *Hi, this is Nicola, 36c-26-36. I've got long dark hair and green eyes*.

When I began working as a chat line operator I decided to go for the sultry brunette image rather than the typical thirty eight *DD* blue-eyed lusty, busty blonde. It doesn't really matter; they usually pick me for my voice. They tell me that it's sexy. The man in the bath informs me that he's fifty six, medium build with short black hair and- wait for it- shaved balls. I tell him that maybe I could join him in the bath. And I want to stroke those shaved balls. He hangs up. Hey, is it something I said?

Last month I had about seven hundred calls. Seven hundred men coming on the phone. Some come quietly. Others yell down the phone. Some make weird weasely animal-like noises, or grunt like they are lifting weights in the gym. All that semen spilt over my voice. Occasionally I come too. One guy wanted to dominate me. He told me to stand up against the wall with my thumb in my pussy. He was shouting at me, telling me to come. Telling me that I was no better than a street whore and he wanted to see me come, wanted to see my legs shaking. He started counting to ten, telling me to come, *nine, ten*, come, *bitch*, I had to come. *I've come, baby*. I was lying on the floor, face down. Dave, from Manchester. I gave him my code 0732 and said that he can call me on a regular basis. Usually though, it's dead boring and repetitive. What's dead boring? Necrophilia. *Ha, ha. Ho.*

Sometimes I'm doing my ironing when they call. *Oh, yes, baby, I'm ironing my jeans right now and it's really turning me on*. Actually some men would get off on that, yes, really; they get off on the whole housewife thing. Other times I sprawl on the floor, watching TV with the sound down low, or reading a newspaper or magazine.

Is your boyfriend well hung? Asks the next caller. Well spoken; a lot of them are. Accountants, lawyers, the occasional teacher. It's a turn off. If they're going to talk dirty they might as well sound like a real stereotypical, gruff, unintelligent pervert. But then again I can picture Hugh Grant getting it on down the other end of the phone. *Is it all right if I take my pants off*? After he comes (sorry, in this case 'ejaculates') he says*, got to dash.* Some come then talk about the weather in a typically English fashion, or my mythical college course (men think that college girls are hot, don't they?) or world current affairs. Most just shoot their load and hang up.

The phone rings three times and I have to answer it or I miss the call. *Hi*, I slur sexily after the recorded prompt, quickly putting down my cup of tea or trying not to crunch on the crisps I've just shoved in my mouth.

One to one: hard.

Hi.

Silence. *Hello? Hello?* I don't mind if they don't want to speak, they're paying a pound a minute for that call.

The men tell me their fantasies.

I want to drive out into a country road and you can use my cock as a gear lever.

We are in a restaurant, you take off your thong and I wipe my brow with them then drop my fork on the floor and look up your tight skirt.

Slap, slap, slap, can you hear that? It's my knob.

Some guys want detail, lots of detail, what underwear I'm wearing, what my pussy's like, what my labia are like. 'Shaved', 'pink' and 'wet' are good adjectives to use along with 'protruding' or even 'protuberant' for the more literate wankers out there. Some guys get uncomfortable. They suddenly feel guilty or dirty or scared. After one lengthy call describing how we would like to fuck each other- how we would do it standing up against the wall, how I would suck his cock until he came-

there was a sudden 'profound' silence and a drawn out , "*I think you and I are worth much more than this*" with that same 'profound' silence between each word. Well, fine, honey, but I was sitting here reading the Daily Mirror. What were you doing? He then profoundly zipped up his flies and profoundly put the receiver down.

I tell them that I'm twenty-two. It's funny how I haven't aged for about a year and a half. Belief is suspended. They build up the image they have of me in their head. One guy, Charlie, has fantasies of Nicola walking in front of him, always one step ahead, coquettishly wiggling her bum as she walks. He likes to wear black, ladies knickers and always calls when his wife is out, once from a call box out in the countryside. He wants to be spanked in his black knickers and to *fuck Nicola's bum*. Most of his fantasies are about anal sex. When he comes he screams down the phone. He's supposed to be happily married but he must be so repressed.

I get callers from all over the UK. Scouse accents, Cockney, gruff Midlands, lilting Welsh tones, Geordies, Indian, Bristolian, Scottish. Sometimes they are whispering so their wife can't hear. Other times they're crying out in orgasmic rapture. Sometimes no voice a tall just *slap, slap, slap, argghh.....*

Some of the men want to meet up or to give me their number. When I was bored one time I made Charlie believe that I was going to meet him. Then I let him down at the end of the call after getting him all excited. I never meet the men and I even lie about the town that I'm in. I lie about most details: my age, my looks, my dress sense, what I like to do in my spare time, my sexual experiences. Some fantasies, though, are really mine.

A lot of men like the lesbian fantasy and so I tell them about my mythical tall, blonde girlfriend, Alison. Others like to hear about how I was fucked by two men at the same time. A surprising number want to suck cock. Most, but not all men, have bisexual tendencies.

Then there are the foot fetishists. One guy fantasises about a girl called Annabelle and gets hard over her feet. Some men like women who smoke. I have to light a cigarette and to explain to the caller how I'm inhaling that smoke- exhaling, then inhaling. *What brands do you smoke?* It's that detail again.

Some men are into pissing. Tom from Lincoln would call from his office at work and ask me to pee into my little bowl. I used to pour water from one glass into another, holding the receiver close to the pouring water. He would come imagining me crouching over the bowl pissing. Yet he became disillusioned when I accidentally chinked the two glasses together. Other men fantasise about being shit on. Whatever turds you on. I get older men calling, sometimes in their sixties or seventies. One old man explaining how he was into 'queening', when a woman squats over his face. I was talking about water sports with another elderly gentleman and convinced him that 'scuba diving' was a sexual act. He said that he'd never heard of it. I told him to go and find out all about it, explore those sensual pleasures for himself, and then to phone back to tell me all about it.

Have you got a budgie? I can hear it tweeting in the background. Some of these men are lonely. They are divorced after a long marriage and have forgotten how to date a woman or they just don't get the opportunity to meet anyone. A man called me from the canal boat that he lives on, spending his days travelling the canals of Britain, staying just a day or two in each location. He was OK, someone who just rang for a talk rather than a wank.

Most fantasies are straightforward: threesomes, straight sex, voyeurism. The ever popular anal sex scenario. Others are more bizarre, or obscure. One man called and asked if I had ever kicked someone in the balls. I made up some story, loosely based on the truth, about kicking a dude in the balls outside a nightclub because I (mistakenly) thought he'd stolen my purse. *What happened?*

Well, he fell to the floor and started groaning, then I realised that he hadn't taken my purse at all. It was in my handbag all along. He said that women being strong and overpowering men by beating them up turned him on.

Tell me about another time you kicked someone in the balls? How would you beat me up?

Well, I would do a left jab to your nose, grab hold of your head, knee you in the solar plexus and balls, push you down on the floor, put an axe kick in your floating ribs then stamp on your head.

Oh, yes, oh yes, then what would you do?

By then you'll probably be bleeding to death. It was the detail he wanted. It's the little details that turn some men on.

Other guys call and tell me that they have a small dick. I tell them that their dick isn't big enough to please me. They want me to tell them to wank off their tiny little dick. *How would you please me with that small dick? Play with your tiny little dick.*

The sound of a porn movie plays in the background. *A French film,* he says. *A nice French bird with a hairy pussy.* I can hear the porn actress screaming.

Some want me to scream. I fake orgasms semi-successfully. Make enough noise to please yet which won't alert the attentions of the neighbours; it's only a small flat and the walls are thin.

I suck on my fingers and make squelching noises also. I pant into the receiver. To an observer of these practices I would appear insane.

Certain things are not allowed. Animals and incest are forbidden. I have had to tell callers that, *no*, I can't talk about the time I was in the stable with a horse, or about a dog called Max.

Callers have to be over eighteen. A boy called up who only sounded like he was about ten years old. He said that his name was 'Roy' and he was 'forty'. 'Roy' said that he worked on a farm. I told him that I was going to go round to his house. He said that I couldn't because he had to get up and shoot the pheasants in the morning. I said that I could help him. 'Roy' wasn't too happy about the thought of me going round to his house. Then there was 'John' from, er, 'Los Angeles'. His voice was way too high to be over eighteen, unless he had testicular problems. He said that he was twenty.

No you're not...

Yes I am...

No you're not...

Yes I am...I wanna parddy with some hot bitches. Will you be my bitch?

I asked him why he called women bitches. He just insisted that he wanted to *parddy.* The only party that he would be going to would be one with jelly and ice cream on the menu. I asked him if he was studying for his GCSEs. I sometimes get giggling groups of boys calling up, usually in the day. They take it in turns to speak and I can hear them laughing in the background. They are just young boys being curious.

Hellooo? This man is very posh. He sounds like Kenneth Williams. He is sucking my nipple. He tells me that the other is 'lonely' and needs a suck too. *Would you like to sit on my face and see it trickle down my moustache?* Errugghhh!

Hello, a recognisable, quiet, meek voice, *it's Robin your chicken here.*

Yes, er, hello, again, Robin. He likes to imagine he is a chicken. Long pause. Yes. He gets off on the idea of being cooked and eaten. Sometimes he's chicken chow mein, barbecued drumsticks and once, the rather inventive *chicken a l' orange*. Every time it's the same scenario. He's in his coop and I feed him up and look after him. He's my pet and trusts me and thinks that I love him. I turn nasty and tell him that I'm hungry. That I never loved him. He is nothing but a chicken rissole. I gnash my teeth and he tells me that he's frightened of my teeth. Robin, of course, has only a beak. *I'm going to pluck you Robin!* Then I gruesomely wring his neck, chop him to bits and throw him in the oven. The oven has a glass door, he's pleading with me, telling me that he's hot, asking me to save him, he's pecking pathetically at the glass, clucking. He thought that I loved him but I only wanted to eat him and turn him into a Sunday roast; he's trapped, scared, with the spuds and baked parsnips never to feel the wind on his feathers or to run around in his little coop again. I lay the table, dish out the chicken casserole or curry, gnash my teeth and eat him all up.

Thanks, Nicola, that was lovely, he says, quietly, with a sigh. Then he asks me about college or my exams. I asked him once if he ever thought of dressing up as a chicken. He said that would do nothing for him. He just wanted to be cooked and eaten. He just wanted to play the role of a betrayed chicken. I don't think that this can be classed as bestiality.

I've done a lot of domination. I don't really enjoy it that much, although verbal humiliation is sometimes fun. To tell the guy that he's a wanker, arsehole and a cunt is quite a cathartic experience. Many want to be dressed up in stockings, dresses and high heels and fucked with a big strap on. Some call me wearing rubber or ladies underwear, occasionally plastic pants or nappies.

Gross. My usual routine for the domination fantasy is to throw them down on the bed, handcuff them and strip them naked. I generally tend to walk over them in high heels or thigh length boots and get them to lick my boots. *Come, you must come for mistress Nicola, you pathetic little slave, you wanker, you worm!* They love it.

Then you get the knicker-sniffers. They go through the laundry basket when the wife/the wife's friend/the daughter's friends are out. At least they say that they do. They want me to send them a pair of my knickers. They want to know how sweaty and stained they are. Eugh...

Some are abusive and get off on it. *Tell me you want me to fuck you up the arse, tell me you want me to fuck the shit out of you.*

I want you to fuck the shit out of me you fucking shit.

I like it when girls call me. It's fun, more erotic. I like to tell a woman that I want to lick her pussy. I had a couple once call me, some guy was getting his cock sucked and they gave me a call. That was fun, too.

Some old dude. He asks me how old I am. He says that he has been married for longer than that. He's never cheated on his wife, he says, but he goes to massage parlours. *Is that cheating, is that wrong?* I tell him that I'm not here to judge him. He says that he usually gets a hand job. Sometimes he has to wait his turn in the massage parlour, particularly the busy weeks leading up to Christmas. Whilst he's waiting he chats to the other clients, asks which girls were good and which were not, reads porn and watches the women in their high heels and tight clothes walking past. He asks me if women know how sexy they look in high heels. He has travelled the world, been to the red light districts of Germany, Amsterdam. He says that the sex clubs are well run and not too expensive because of the competition between clubs. The sex clubs are blatant; one girl was sucking off a guy under the table and then moved onto him. He says that the scene is harder in Britain, but girls make a lot of money. He likes the lap-dancing clubs but they lead the men to prostitutes because it gets them horny. He found a card once in a phone box in London for a dominatrix. He called the number and went round to her place. He said she was just sitting there reading a women's magazine then told him to take his clothes off and left the room. He found some porn magazines and started wanking off and when she got back she told him off for looking at the porn. She told him to bend over and hit him on the bottom with a ruler. He came, but it wasn't what he expected. He expected something more than just a ruler on the bottom. He wanted to be verbally humiliated so I went into my dominatrix routine. He said that he'd never had that done to him before.

Sometimes I'm like a counsellor. When another man called and I told him to play with his cock whilst I was stroking my shaved pussy, he said that he wasn't hard. I said that it doesn't matter. We don't have to talk about sex; we can talk about whatever he wanted. Anyway, it turned out that he couldn't get hard at all, not at all in the last five years. He witnessed a shooting- black on black- and saw a man get killed. He called the police. He suffered from post-traumatic shock and hasn't had sex since. He said that the other day his wife had told him that she never wanted sex with him again, or with any man. He'd got some Viagra from the doctor and that still didn't work. He said that he had pleased his wife orally but now nothing he tried pleased her. He wished that he was with a woman, a real woman, his wife may have had a bad childhood and he'd provided for her in every way, houses in the country, he even changed his image, got a Harley and leather and that still didn't turn her on. He wished he had a girly girl, with stockings and silks. In fact, he too wanted to wear stockings and silk and maybe, maybe he was gay and he just needed to be fucked by a man. And his wife, she never wore skirts, or high heels or stockings. He thought she might be a lesbian and when he asked her about it she just got angry. She never wore make up and she was a lorry driver. And now he was fifty and she made him feel ugly and fat and she never wanted children and he'd provided everything for her and he had no future. Just a life of celibacy. All he wanted was a woman, a real woman....And so on for two hours. Another guy, thirty one, lived with his mother, had no job. Was joining a dating agency as he hadn't had a girlfriend since he was twenty four when he had a girlfriend for six months. He's worried about the stigma attached to living with his mother at thirty one and of having no job. He just didn't have the confidence to talk to girls. He liked to watch the adult movie channel on Sky and cut out pictures of women from newspapers and

catalogues. He asked me what I was wearing. *A tight black lace dress, red lace bra and thong, black stilettoes*. I asked him what he was wearing.

A scarf, a woolly jumper and tracksuit bottoms.

Ring, ring, ring.

Another regular caller (bored sigh). It's Sam or Carl, or like today some other name as he wants to remain incognito. He asks me if I can remember the band 'Incognito'. *Maybe, were they a bit like Bucks Fizz?* Sam/Carl works in a bank, never has a girlfriend and thinks that life is garbage at the age of twenty eight. He has a theory about life. 'The Zero Theory' : if you were predestined, no matter how hard you tried you would still be a loser and have bad luck. He says that all the good and bad luck balances out anyway and you are just left with a great big zero and it all means nothing. He also suffers from road rage.

I start to get pissed off with him saying how life sucks. He is starting to depress me and I tell him that he is being negative, why doesn't he just lighten up? I've enough problems of my own with these jerk offs jerking off down my ear. He carries on telling me how life is shit. I say, *no, life is cool*. He carries on with his karmic doom and gloom zero theory and starts to really get me down. *Only because your life sucks doesn't mean my life sucks. If it's that bad why don't you kill yourself right now? Why don't you do it?* I tell him that there are people with diseases and disabilities and all kinds of tragedies to deal with and he should feel just happy to be alive. Ooops. Won't hear from him again.

I haven't heard from William for a while. He's a writer. He told me that he's quite well-known. He's appeared on TV and he wouldn't tell me his real name but he said that one of his books has got 'experience' in the title. *William Blake?* I queried. I asked him what his favourite position was. Usually men say doggy style or the woman on top. William's favourite is 'The Lord Montgomery Cliff'. If a woman was a musical instrument his favourite would be a French horn; small, shapely, nice curves. He fears going swimming because there is an old man at the local swimming baths there who always stares at his bottom and follows him into the changing rooms.

Another guy was also well known and I did actually see him on TV. We had phone sex, he came and we got chatting. He said that he was an impressionist and began to do his Frank Spencer and Inspector Clouseau for me. He told me that he was going to be on a talent programme later that week. I turned on the TV and by coincidence caught the end of his act. Playing the mustachioed Peter Seller's character.

Ring, ring, ring. Hi, what's your name? Where are you from?

I'm on The Wirral.

On the Wirral, huh?

Put your finger in your pussy, then two, then three. Now see if you can get your whole hand in. Now the other hand. I play along with the fantasy but how big does he think my pussy is? And how am I going to hold the phone if I've got both hands up my cunt? I suppose I could always get a hands-free.

It turned me on when I first started phone sex, the first time I heard all these strangers talking dirty down the phone. Then it turned me off. Too much information. Too much everything! Do I really want to know about the pre-cum on the end of someone's dick? Do I really want to hear that *swish, swish, swish* of them wanking off down the phone? *My sausage wants to know if your cunty hole is ready for a bit of sausage....*gross. Sometimes it would make me cry. I would feel scared, late at night, men telling me that I was a bitch and they wanted to fuck me up the arse or had rape fantasies. Then I would take it personally. Once or twice switching out of my Nicola character and telling the dirty bastards to fuck off. It would only make things worse. Like it was a devil talking on the phone, an egotistical devil, and all I had to do was stroke his ego and pacify him. They were not individual voices but one demonic voice. The more I spoke the more money I made from him. They sometimes ask me what a nice girl like me is doing on a line like this. Hypocrites. Now I just get on with it. I can work when I want for how long I want from the comfort of my own home. I've been

on holiday three times this year: Spain, Ayia Napa and Tunisia.

Hang on baby, I'm just ironing the sleeves of my blouse...*argh,argh,eeeeergh...*

I'm five foot eight..medium build...dark hair...hairy balls.. Hey, where did that come from? Hairy balls?

Is it just your balls that are hairy or anywhere else?

My armpits.

Is your chest?

*A bit, yeah...I love it doggy style...woof...woof, rrrrrrhhhggg!...*Where did that come from? Growling noises and everything. I imagine a big hairy wolf on the other end of the phone.

Yet another man is in the bath. He says that he wants to wash my back and my tits then....*how about putting chocolate cream eggs all over me?* Where did that come from? *Why don't you put a cream egg on the end of my dick and eat it?*

Some callers ask me if working on the chat line has changed my view of men. I tell them that it has made me more open-minded and knowledgeable of male fantasies. I don't tell them the whole truth of course. I certainly understand the male psyche, and that secret sexual side a lot more. And it has certainly altered my perception of men. For a while it turned me off them completely. I could not understand why they were calling me and humiliating themselves when they had a wife or a girlfriend. I also had to be strong and not believe they were talking to me when they called me a bitch and a whore.

I've not had a boyfriend for two years. I know what they're fantasising about. No matter how clever or witty or sophisticated they are I just can't get that image of a man secretly wanking off over a telephone out of my head.

Miguel has seen how the girls change. Ana C used to just dance in the private rooms. Now she has sex. It is the money that draws the girls to it. “Some things you do change you, you can never go back,” I say to Miguel. I have got bitchier, less trusting towards the girls. Not that I particularly trusted them anyway. I am more competitive, not with the girls but with the game. Getting clients as they come into the door as the other girls sit around, yapping.

Ana C used to be a professional dancer. “I've got a great dance C.V, I can speak three different languages and all for what?” she says whilst applying her mascara in the mirror at St J's. Her skin is tired in the white light. She is all fake. Fake hair, thick foundation, long white hair extensions. She is an alcoholic. The men think she is beautiful in the dim lights of the club. They all put their hands on her. Even the local, ugly losers. Even the four foot fat man who looks like a ball with arms too short for his body. He told me that next time he will see me in St J's he will kiss me. I told him that I would look forward to it, glancing at Jules who was laughing at my subtle sarcasm. Ana C has an apartment in Almancil yet she comes from Porto. She is a great supporter of Porto F.C and often wears the blue and white scarf after a match and is heard chanting, “Porto! *Porto!*” Sometimes she is sharp, bright, with witty conversation and dazzling humour. Other times, usually at the end of the night, she is shaking and frail with too much alcohol, sometimes falling onto the floor. Her laugh is cackling, hag-like and consistent. She always tells the same joke, “Oh, come on, it's like a funeral in here” and laughs and hits the arm of the man that she is sitting with as if it is the first time that she has told it.

Eventually I said, “Oh, *god*, I haven't heard *that* joke before,” and I heard her afterwards telling the client how much she disliked me. However, I found out recently the St J's is built on the site of an old graveyard, so perhaps her joke has more black humour and depth to it that I first thought. Sometimes when there are no clients I can see flickerings and shapes like phantoms in the dark corners of the club.

Jessica, although she is supposed to be her friend, said that Ana C is, “a real prostitute, she does it because she likes it. She meets a guy in a nightclub and fucks him there.” Jessica does not see herself as a prostitute, not like the girls who work on the streets. She has a six year old daughter and sends money back to her family in Porto.

Miguel has noticed a change in me.

Nono's friend, the grey haired man with round glasses who lives in Almancil, is always asking for a private show, “Maybe, after a couple of bottles of Dom Perignon,” I said. A week or so later, he asked me again. In the private room, he wanted me to touch him, he would give me extra money if I would. I said that I would not touch him but he could touch himself if he wanted to. He wanked himself off.

I have become colder inside, more masculine. Another thing that changes is your perception of men. A lot of the men that come into St J's are married. A young English man, with red face, plucked eyebrows and spiky, gelled hair, married for only sixteen months; another middle-aged man, I cannot remember what he looked like, who just wanted to touch another woman and be touched.

The young Englishman was sitting next to me as his brash, older golfing companion was egging him on to have sex with one of the girls, Mirella, who was wearing a white, fluffy bra and hot pants. They were saying that she looked very Christmasy. “Ho, ho, ho!” she said, walking past then leaning on the bar. *Yes, you are*, I thought. The young man was telling me how nervous he was and that he might not be able to “get it up.” He was afraid that his friend would laugh at him.

“Just enjoy yourself,” I urged him, “That's what you’re doing it for.”

A few days later, the same group of men came back into the club. The older man, obese and rude, was standing next to Ana C as he paid for a half hour show with her. “You need a good fucking,” he told her as she looked bored and disgusted, smoking a cigarette. I drank with the younger man and

he told me that he had sex with Mirella. “It's true that the prettiest aren't always the best.” We went *for a private strip. He said, “I wish I’d gone with you now.”*

When a group of men walk into the club you can see them looking at each girl, knowing that most, if not all are available at the right price. They can pick and choose, turn down offers as if they are sex gods. They can have blondes, red heads, black girls, lesbian shows. Only if they have the money, of course.

I do a one on one full strip. I have to keep in shape and keep my pubic hair trimmed. Should I wax? Do they care? I tell the clients that I enjoy every private show that I do and that I want them to enjoy it too. I dance for them, stroke my hands over their chest, sometimes they dance with me or I sit on them, grinding my body into them with the music. Two songs: fifty euros. Four songs, one hundred. I get half of that and Arabelle takes the rest. Sometimes they have their hands around my waist, sometimes on my tits, kissing my nipples. I go with the flow. I used to be very reserved, freaking out or fighting them if they touched me. When I first started working here, nobody told me the rules, if there were any. I do not know if the other girls let them touch during a fifty euro show. Most of the girls have sex. Some have anal sex. Others do not. Everyone soon gets to know who does what. I turn the men on but I do not go further, so it is a tease. One guy, Luigi, stripped off with me in the dingy, dungeon rooms and had a hard on. “I love being naked, don't you!” I said, just for something to say, really, dancing with him, making sure he did not put it anywhere that he should not.

Another old English man who sold villas- I still have his card- wanted to bite my buttocks. We had been drinking together for a while, I had been sitting on his knee. We had several private shows and he gave me twenty euro tips as I let him touch me. Some of them just get a kick out of giving the money. Eventually I let him bite me for a larger tip.

I got bitten another time too. On the back of the neck by a Scouse gangster who was high on cocaine. He told me that he was a 'fun-loving criminal' and kept putting his fingers into his pocket and licking off the cocaine, then singing at me which developed into screaming at me followed by the bite on the neck. He was in the club with his rowdy sons, spending a lot of money but eventually none of the girls would sit with them and they were predictably throwing chairs around by four o'clock in the morning. Things like that change you.

Sometimes I get scared. Sometimes I think that I am out of my depth. I lie on the narrow bed in my room, like a prisoner, my heart beating too fast. My door locked, ready to fight anyone who wants to start trouble with me. I could kill or get killed.

I knew a dancer, two years ago, when I was working in Copenhagen. She would bitch and play mind games like a lot of the girls do. She was also very talented. She had been in music videos and she told me that she believed in herself. She believed that she was going to make it. She got killed by her boyfriend who worked on the door of the club. She was a black girl, twenty one, just about to leave to go to dance school in London. Her boyfriend lost control one night. He broke down her door.

When her friends called the police, they went round to his house and found her body in the bath. There was a photograph of her on the front page of the national newspaper and the caption, “Hear the Stripper's Death Screams”.

I have found out that Gaspar is not Alexandra's cat. He turned up at the house, two years ago, as a stray and has lived there ever since. He is starting to look a lot healthier. He is beautiful now. His fur is whiter and cleaner and although the leg is not fully healed, it is a lot better. I have been feeding him scraps of ham, burger, chicken, cheese and some milk. I have been cleaning the leg with salt-water. I have been told not to feed him inside the house, so I have been throwing bits of ham and burger out of the window for him. I empathise with Gaspar, how he felt when he was ill. That on-the-edge pure survival level. Feeling totally minging, forgotten and unloved.

When I first arrived at St J's I was so lonely. So lonely that I wanted to be with the clients. I

wanted them to touch me, to tell me I was beautiful, talk to me about anything. Many of them were lonely too- divorced, living alone- we needed each other. I had spent Christmas alone in bed, eating chocolate, in my apartment in Porto, talking to no-one. When I was with a client I was laughing genuinely, high from the talk and the buzz of cheap, sweet alcohol. I wanted them to tell me that I was sexy, I wanted to be a slut. Only, I know that is not what I really am. That is not what I am when I am away from there, by the sea in the North, five hundred kilometres away, hair tied back, no make-up on. I am sexless, androgynous, like a child, free, with money in the bank. Then I got together with Lopes and I did not need the clients to stop my loneliness anymore. I had Lopes instead.

Lopes had told Amadieu that I was a beautiful woman. "*Danger*," Amadieu warned him. Amadieu asked Jessica if I had any problems. I would always sit alone in St J's. He thought that I did not get on very well with the other girls. I did not realise that it was some kind of social occasion. I was there to make money. Most of the girls could not speak English anyway so it would have been difficult having a conversation with them. Amadieu also remarked on my large hands. I know that I have big hands but I cannot do anything about it. I can change the size of my nose, breasts, the colour of my hair, my eyes and even my skin if I wanted to but I cannot change my hands to a more petite, elegant pair. Lopes told Amadieu that I did not have sex with clients. "Big hands, no sex," he replied, "she's a man!". I laughed when Lopes told me this.

"You know that I'm not a man," I said to Lopes. We had a joke together that I would scratch my balls, speak in a low voice to Amadieu and ask him about the football.

It is hard for me. I am faithful to my lovers. Totally faithful in spirit. Yet Lopes looks on when I am with clients-strangers. J*ealous*. I taught him that word. One evening at St J's, Jules was massaging my neck after I had pulled a muscle pole-dancing. We were in the kitchen. Lopes picked up a large pair of knives and began slicing them together. It was a joke, yet it was not a joke at the same time.

Amadieu does not like the situation between Miguel and Arabelle. He was going to tell Miguel to leave but he is trustworthy and a good worker. When Francisco started work here I thought that he was going to be replacing Miguel but Miguel is still here. I joke with Francisco because I always ask for the black bottles of champagne rather than the white and he can never take the corks out of the black ones. If Amadieu knew about Lopes and I there would probably be trouble. Amadieu seems to like me though. He told me not to tell anyone how much basic pay I am getting, as I am getting more than some of the other girls. I have told no-one. Not even Lopes when he asked me.

Ring...ring...ring..one to one HARD...

Hi, I'm Nicola.
(*Oh, fuck another wanker on the phone. Why is he whispering in that weird pervy tone? Oh he's feeling reallllly hoooorney*)
Are you?
(*Dirty bastard. I can hear him wanking. Splash, splash, splish*)
Are you feeling horny?
(*I often repeat or reiterate. Easy, the more time they spend on the line the more money for me. Oh he's been feeling sooo hooornny all day. He wants me to make him come.*)
Yes?
(*Wanker, literally*)
Well I'm feeling horny too.
(*Not. I hate that word.*)
Ha!Ha!Ha! Mmmmm...
(*Yes, ha, ha..funny..you reckon your cock is ten inches do you? Have you been measuring it, Adrian Mole?*)
Well, i'm just lying on bed here, brushing my long, dark hair...
(*Actually I'm lying. Just lying. I'm sitting in this crummy flat smoking a fag and drinking a now cold cup of coffee listening to some stranger wanking off down the phone*)
...wearing a white cropped top and denim mini skirt...mmmmm
(*Tracksuit bottoms, chav hooded top, Nike trainers. Sexy, huh?*)
CROPPED, no, cropped TOP...
(*You deaf, thick twat*)
Yes, honey, 36 C, oh, yes, my nipples are getting hard...
(*It's cold in here. I'll have to turn the central heating on*)
OK, baby, I'm taking my tight white t-shirt off right now.
(*I'm just putting my fag out and rustling my hooded top a bit against the receiver for authenticity*)
Is it? Oh, is it hard, baby?
(*All 'ten inches' of it. Why are cocks still measured in inches, haven't they joined the metric system yet*?)
Yes, baby, oh, oh, yes. I'm playing with my tits right now...
(*At least he's not like some of the freaks you get on here. One guy likes to wear a nappy; he says his girlfriend makes him wear it. Another likes to be dressed up in a pink silk dress and fucked with a dildo. And then there's Robin...the...er...chicken....*)
I'm twenty two.
(*I was twenty two, once*)
I'm stroking my, ohh, ahh, ahh, tits right now and playing with my hard nipples..ahh...ahhh
(*This heavy breathing is giving me a migraine*)
Shaved, yes, baby, my pussy's shaved.
(*Actually there's a forest down there at the moment and you're not getting anywhere near*)
OK, baby, I'm pulling down the zip on my tight skirt. I'm touching it now, baby; I'm stroking my shaved pussy, now.
(*I'm scratching my crotch*)
Is she? Your wife is downstairs. She will never know.
(*She will when she gets the phone bill*)
Well *I* will, baby. I'll suck your cock right now.
(*He says his wife never sucks his cock....like I'm supposed to feel sorry for him...*)
Yes, my wife will never know that I'm sucking your hard cock.

(*I'm making ludicrous slurping noises down the phone in an attempt to simulate oral sex*)

I'm touching my shaved pussy and I'm getting wet, yes, baby, I will suck it hard, real hard. You can come on my big tits. I will suck your cock, take it in my mouth. *Oh oh ahhhh yes yes YES grrr ohohoh,ahhhhh..ahhhh...ahhhh, ohhhhhh, owwwwwww, ahhhhhh....*

(*Where's my fags?*)

Ahhh, ahh, yes. Yes!

(Here they are! I was nearly sitting on them!)

Yes, YES, BABY!!!I'M COMING TOOO. Oh, oooohhh....mmmm...you turn me on soooo much...ahhhh....that was unbelievable.

(*Oh my god...I'm holding the receiver away from my ear and I can still hear him making that gargling noise.*)

You've come? That's OK. Great. You can call me again on 1732. Bye, baby.

(*Freak. Where did I put the remote? Is it time for Eastenders?)*

It is Amadieu's birthday. Arabelle is carrying a large cake through to the bar. It is the shape of two large breasts and has pornographic pictures of women pasted onto it. Everyone claps and sings whilst bringing Amadieu presents: a glass tankard, a mobile phone holder in the shape of some golf clubs and a metal penis-shaped object with a padlock on it, the male equivalent of a chastity belt. Amadieu is about forty five-*ish* with gelled-back wavy hair, which is dark with a few grey hairs, a large build and is wearing a red tie, a white shirt and long trench coat. He has a villa in the Algarve which is worth about a million and property in France. He is tall and friendly with a smiling, slightly mafioso appearance.

Jessica looks upset because she is not the centre of attention. She has bought some new shoes. They are high, sparkly strippers' sandals. She stands by herself, dancing to Madonna and admiring her own feet. Jessica now uses the name, 'Zelda' for when she is working. I secretly find this rather amusing. As a child I used to watch a programme called *Terrahawks* on T.V; a bit like *Thunderbirds*, using animation and puppets to create a fantasy land somewhere in space. The baddy was an old grotesque crone with grey, manky hair. She was really wrinkly and evil. Her name was Zelda.

Jessica has moved in with Leah and they hang around together in the club. They bring out the fat in each other. Jessica is trying to outshine Leah. It looks as if she is borrowing her clothes. Leah looks less attractive than usual as if Jessica had told her before they went out, “Oh, yes, wear that, it looks great and tie your hair back it looks *so* much better”. Leah tells me that she feels bad because she cannot sleep, there are few clients and she is worried about money. I think that it is because Jessica and all her dark energy have moved in with her.

I am talking with one of the African sisters at the bar. She speaks English with an American accent because she used to live in Chicago. She is thinking of getting breast enlargements. I say that I like my breasts small because they do not sag as you get older. “Like Leah,” she adds.

Another woman is sitting to my right. She asks me if I work here. I ask her if she works here and she tells me that it is a long story. Her name is Caroline. She has arched brows, dark hair tied back, an Essex accent and is wearing a black fur jacket. She has a fifteen year old daughter and has suggested to her that she should come and work at St J's. Her daughter said, “I'm not taking my clothes off for anybody, mum.” Caroline says that she had liposuction and that is was the most traumatic experience of her life. She had to sleep on plastic sheets that got covered by fluids seeping from the wounds every night for days and that it was so painful. She said that it did not even work. Val at St J's has had her breasts enlarged and when she touches them they make a clicking noise.

Uri Geller is hanging around, talking about energies again. He translates in English that he is telling Jessica to take off her mask and be herself. She is looking deeply into his eyes as if she is in love. “Isn't that right?” he asks me. He is slight, dark-haired with a thin face. Jessica is telling us both that she *does* want to show him her true self.

“Yes, that's right, *er*, Zelda,” I say.

Amadieu is talking with Lopes. Amadieu says that he wants me and the African sister to do a lesbian show. I say that I could wear a strap-on dildo and I hold an imaginary dick in my hand whilst making a buzzing noise. This is an obvious cue for Lopes to hint about our private joke about Amadieu thinking that I was a man.

As everyone is leaving at around five o'clock in the morning, Jessica walks up behind Leah, who is sitting at a stool by the bar and puts her arms around her. Leah looks annoyed. Jessica tries to do the same to Ana C, who flinches and backs off.

I stayed at Lopes' house last night. He rents it from Amadieu. It is small with one bedroom which he used to share with Miguel, before he was seeing Arabelle. He began to pick out a DVD to watch and unsuccessfully tried to hide the porn that he had been watching under the other DVDs. I just laughed. I do not mind if he had been watching porn. In fact, it would have been great to watch

it with him. He asked me if I had been with a woman. I said, *yes*. He lay back on the sofa as I lay next to him, leaning on him, with his legs wrapped around me whilst we drank beer and ate hamburgers. Lopes said that the word, 'cold' is gay and that the Portuguese word for cold, *frio*, is better. I laughed and disagreed. *Frio* is far more gay than 'cold'. He also mimicked my attempts at Portuguese, he laughed at the way I said s*apatos*, 'shoes'. The Portuguese, and the Brazilian, rhythm of speech is different from English, as is the rhythm of life. He has a tattoo on his bicep, a yin and yang. There is an 'L' in the circle of the yin and a 'G' on the yang. I asked him what the 'G' stood for. He said it was for 'Gracie', his wife in Brazil.

Triste is Portuguese for 'sad'. It is said that the Portuguese are sad by nature. I look Portuguese. I have large, brown, sad eyes.

"Fist fucking?" "Golden showers?" I pull a face at the house lady, who has her hand covered over the mouthpiece of the phone and is asking around. There is one girl, Amelia, into trying all these things. She had an appointment for golden showers and was drinking from a litre bottle of water an hour before. She asked me if I had ever fist fucked anyone.

"Have you seen the size of my hands?" I said. They are in proportion to my feet.

"I have herpes!" The polish girl, Romy, is upset. She has a sore on her mouth. I am sitting at the kitchen table.

"Oh, don't worry, don't worry," I say. Now she has to wait another three months for her operations.

A memorable cock night. Two good fucks. There was another man, a Turkish man who the girls were laughing at and making fun of because he was not very good looking. He had a large nose, greying, with a paunch. They thought it was amusing that he had chosen me and even funnier when I told them that he wanted an hour. "Beauty comes from the inside," I preached, writing my name down and putting the money safely in my locker. It transpired that he was a pleasant client to be with. He was very gentle when touching me because I told him that my breasts had been bruised. We mainly talked whilst I gave him a hand job.

I am working a double shift tomorrow, from twelve in the morning until eleven at night because I did not work on Monday because I felt sick, depressed and my period was due.

We are keepers of secrets. We are keepers of other people's secrets. Like the guy that came into the house and wanted to have sex with a woman whilst she was wearing little, white ankle socks. Like the men that come in to have anal sex because their wives do not let them. I have had some very high profile clients. Powerful business men.

The Algarve is a place where you find yourself doing things, quite naturally, that you would not normally do. Like driving around in a blue BMW, with a millionaire high on crack cocaine and a Brazilian hooker in the back seat. He was a client of mine, or rather a client of an escort agency that I was working for. He could not have penetrative sex, either because of the copious amount of crack he smoked or perhaps for some other reason. He had cancer a couple of years earlier and that may be why. He could still come. He was very good-looking. I would stay overnight with him, lying next to, or on his hairy body with the chemical smell of his drug of choice pervading the hotel room, as he lit his pipe, and lay back. He would start twitching, nodding his head like a parakeet. He would lose small chunks of crack and start searching for them, with his hand groping over the double bed, at regular intervals. He always got very paranoid and would peer out of the window to see if his car was still there, or check the door to see if it was locked and that no hotel staff would come in. He liked attention and massages, the occasional blow job on his defunct penis. Once he took ice cubes, put them in my pussy and sucked them out. He was the only 'overnight' client that I had. He would call up Marie at the agency and ask for more hours of my time, so sometimes it extended to two nights. That was strange. Lying next to him, he having consumed no water or drink, only crack cocaine. Asking me questions, truth or dare. Asking me what my fantasies are, asking me what he can do for me. Lying next to that hairy body, like a jungle, *stalking through the undergrowth*. He having no sleep, *creeping through the jungle*. Him sulking because I was not giving him enough attention.

I would order wine and food whilst he showered in the en suite bathroom. He would send me out on errands to the cash-point machine, giving me two cards and the pin numbers. I never took more than he had asked. I never took advantage of him. Once I came back with a toothbrush for him as he only seemed to bring crack and his pipe for these overnight stays.

I told him one evening that I would enjoy a threesome. He started looking through the newspaper and we began ringing up a few of the numbers advertised by prostitutes, laughing because he could

not speak any Portuguese. And I knew Marie would not like it, so it was my little act of rebellion. Some girls did not do threesomes. I called up a DJ called Jorge that I knew from a strip club in Lagoa. Eventually, we called a Brazilian girl who said she would do it and told her the name of the hotel. A taxi driver that the client knew, he had loaned him money to start up his taxi business, drove her to the hotel. I answered the door. She was clean-cut, coffee skinned, pleasant, no make-up, a headscarf tying back her naturally dark hair. I then had to leave, go out by the pool to the bar and wait for his text. We had made some kind of agreement, like a code which meant that he did not want to go through with it, something like "It's lovely weather isn't it?" and that would be the signal to drive her back. I waited and ordered a sandwich that cost seven euros. The client text me to come back. He did not want to do the threesome with her because she was not slutty enough. Also, she did not drink or smoke. I had to pretend that I needed to leave suddenly, so that we could all get in the car together and drive the girl back. In true Oscar-winning style, the client demonstrated great disappointment that I had to leave so suddenly. The girl could not remember where she was staying, we were driving around for a while, lost, through the orange, dusty lanes until the client had to park and call up the taxi driver to find out where she was staying. Later that evening we were lying back on the bed, flicking through to the porn channel on the TV and remarking on the girls, "*She's* slutty enough...."

Ashley

I hate working as a hooker. All day being a servant to men's desires. It becomes tiring. The wearisome, inane groping of my breasts. The hand around the cock. Up, down, up, down. It is Sunday. Some people go to church. I go to the whorehouse.

He is unknown to me in the darkness, he is behind me, touching my skin. His touch, his voice, he is no-one, he is a spirit, he is a devil that resides here, drifts in the house, watches the girls get whipped, smiles at the dominatrix humiliating her sex slave. Listens, at doors, to the fornicating.

Some people go to church, ask God or Jesus to take away their hurt, sorrows and sins. I come here to relieve my own pain, I am drawn here like a witch. I fuck and suck. I am base and humiliated. I am beautiful.

The first man was a Dutch man, here in Berlin on business, to see a trade fair. He wore his gold wedding ring. I gave him a massage, he stroked me gently, slowly, sitting behind me. He spread my legs in front of the mirror and put his fingers inside me. He came over my back.

One old, skinny man wanted to see me because I was new. My first impression of him was that he was ill and unattractive. He was with another girl yet wanted me to present myself to him. Later, he asked me to guess his age, which I would have said was in his fifties, maybe even older. I refused to guess and said that I always got it wrong. He told me he was forty six. I said that I did not want him to do 'French kissing' on me because that was reserved for someone special, a boyfriend. He went as far as my clitoris and started to go lower and I stopped him. When I took off my bra he said that on first impressions one of my breasts looked slightly bigger than the other. He said that I was very athletic, inspecting my body, my muscular legs as if he was a superior being. I asked him again about my breasts. He said that they were sexy but one was probably ten to fifteen percent larger. What annoying German preciseness. Most men would think on first impressions: *what a nice pair of tits*.

I have found that in Berlin, the metro map is covered in intricate lines and dots and dashes criss-crossing over each other that at first glance it is too complex and difficult to understand. Even the bath lotion had instructions on it to say that the temperature of the water must be between thirty six and thirty eight centigrade and that you have to bathe between fifteen and twenty minutes. I do not usually have a thermometer when I am running my bath and quite often it is difficult to time myself. Why not just say, *a hot bath*?

We smoked a cigarette together. He was an unsavoury wizened man. I forgot that some men who come in here hate women and want to debase them. He asked me if my boyfriend liked my breasts. I said, *yes*.

I feel nothing. Nothing.

Nothing. Some people put their faith in Jesus. But Jesus was a man.

One guy wanted role play. In the Purple (*lila)* Room which is a dark room. He picked me from all of the girls and gave me eighty euros. I did not have change. I went out to ask the other girls if they had change. They did not. They said they did not. I went back in to tell him. He said that it was strange, to ask again, someone must have change. Eventually one of the girls offered to lend me twenty. There is a double bed with a black iron bars at the head and foot. On the bars are chains and leather manacles for the hands or feet. It is a dark room. The role play was simple: pretend that we are at a party and I see a man and I want to fuck him, talking all the way through the fantasy as the man eventually fucks me.

I have knowledge. Knowledge that I can never share. I have visions. An ordinary house. An

ordinary street. You would never guess from the outside what was contained within. Pleasure, pain. The intermingling of both at the point of orgasm. Energies released, restrained released and unleashed. Energies channelled, skin, wet, stroked, semen spilt. Sex for money, not for love. The exchange is made. I will never be the same. I was never the same again. I will never be the same again.

There is something, someone. A spirit to torment, telling me I am deformed. Trying to kiss me in the dark when it is fucking me. It tells me afterwards, in the purple room, that I must feel some change. *Change?* That I must have some change, that I should bring my own change. Twenties, tens, fives. Bring some change of my own.

I take a look in the mirror on the wall. A man is waiting inside the room, choosing. *Meat market*, I think, as one girls exits, fluffing up her hair, and I enter. The man is old, large, wearing glasses and has a beard. I smile, "Hi, I'm Ashley," yet the man is not looking at me. He is looking over my right shoulder at the noise the other girls are making. I have left the door open. One is laughing as another leaps to the side, sticking her tongue out at him, jokingly.

He chooses her. I sit in the room where the lockers and TV are, looking over the open pages of the magazine as she writes on the form and puts her money away. Next time I will have to be more careful.

They choose a girl as if they are choosing a cake from a colourful variety they have seen in a baker's window. Nobody wants to be the dried-up, unappetising flapjack that gets left, uneaten. Some of the girls have their tricks, I suppose, of getting chosen. The younger and more lithe ones just wear skimpy underwear. This would be primeval instantaneous appeal, a turn on for men who have come in for a quick half an hour.

I often sit in the kitchen, alone. Or some other girls come in to cook, make tea, smoke a cigarette or put their make up on in the round mirror that is attached to an extendable metal holder that comes out from the wall. One side of the mirror shows the face enlarged.

I have a large, pink mouth covered in faded red lipstick. A girl comes in to peel some potatoes and put them on to boil. She has a client and asks me to watch the potatoes for half an hour. The water is bubbling over. I turn them down. "Back to the potatoes," she laughs when she returns.

Lopes has gone to Madrid to renew his visa. He will be gone for two days. I am upset that he has gone. Arabelle gives me a beer as I sit at the bar next to Rachel. A group of Englishmen come in. One of the men has brought his son with him. He is tall, about eighteen years old with dark hair and eyes. He tells me that he likes my red nails. His dad is with Rachel and asks me to look after his son.

We drink champagne and go over to the dance area. We dance to hip hop. Then we get really close and wild, his hands all over me and we both dance around the pole. I tell him that I have a boyfriend. There are not many other clients so the other girls will be watching. “Fuck this place,” he says, “you're too good for this place.”

I look around to see if Miguel, or Jules are watching me. “Who are you looking for? Who are you scared of?” he asks and we dance and drink some more. I kiss him, sitting on his knee, rubbing my body against his thin, muscular body. I put my arm around him and play with the thick, silver chain around his neck. “Who are you looking for?” He wants me to go back to England with him. I tell him that if I did, it would not be like this all the time. “You can do anything, you're too good for this place.” He says this again, when he rejoins his father at the end of the night as Arabelle gives me my money.

I hold up the money and say, “I'm not too good for this, though.”

The following day, Lopes calls me and asks straight away if it was a good night at St J's. “I danced to hip-hop and drank champagne with one client. No private shows,” I say, briskly. He does not call me the next day and stays in Madrid an extra night.

Jules is complaining because I was doing a private show and forgot to pull the curtain across and he walked in. I was sitting, straddled across a client. When I tell Rachel she says that Lopes walked in on her once. I feel jealous.

When Lopes gets back he tells me that he met a hippy in a park and smoked a joint with him. That would explain the weird text that I received: ‘*I missel you. I lake you.’* I explain to him what 'lake' means, *largo*. “I lake you, too,” I say and we both laugh.

St J´s is different from the other clubs that I have worked in. It is better in that the ambience is good, it is clean (yet not the dungeon private rooms) and the clientele are generally well behaved and can be fun to speak to. However, between the girls, there is no camaraderie, only a paranoid/friendly conversation here and there, potentially explosive bitchiness, jealousy and competitiveness. *Or, hey, perhaps that's just me.* There have been only a few times when I have felt a togetherness with the other girls. The African sister calls out, “You go girl!” when I am stripping. Once when I took off my bra I threw it at her and the men she was sitting with. When the friendly match was on between Portugal and England at the new football stadium in Faro (a draw: one, one), I suggested that Rachel wore her red England t-shirt her show. She danced with the t-shirt on and I yelled, “England! *England!*”

Lopes and I joke about Ana C. Lopes mimics her hair-flicking-cigarette-smoking-samba-dancing persona. Then I say Rachel is so orange, her face looks like a squashed satsuma. Lopes does not understand fully yet he stops smiling and says, “I don't like Rachel.” I sometimes see him looking at her, though. Perhaps I am paranoid. St J's is driving me *louca.*

I am crying in Lopes' car. I do not want to go into the house. I hate the house with its damp, the electricity that keeps turning off, the girls that take over the kitchen then say that I eat a lot if I eat more than four grains of rice, the Russian who tells me to rinse the dishes again when I am washing up, the fleas, the horrible smell and the ghost.

I suddenly feel very lost. It is dark, the woods surrounding the house, full of wolves. I tell Lopes that I have no family. He tells me that he had problems with his mother, his father. He tells me to

relax. I cannot relax, not in that house. I do not know what to do, where to go. England, Porto, Spain. I feel that my life is full of danger and that I smoke and drink too much. There is no-one to trust. I do not want to be like those hard-faced girls, aged and wasted, like Ana C, having nothing else to talk about than the other girls. I hardly see the day. I get up at three in the afternoon, catching glimpses of the Algarve and happiness. Lopes driving me back to the house after sleeping with him, feeling happy. I miss the sunsets in Porto. It is ironic that I make myself look beautiful every evening like a ritual in front of the mirror yet I have never felt so unattractive, with my night-damaged skin and insect bites. I go into my room and lock the door. When I count my money, I feel a whole lot better.

"*I'm not gonna be a whore no more!"* The men around me are laughing. They are trying to persuade me to go back to their villa for a few thousand euros. For the ridiculous price they are offering they will not be expecting to be sitting around watching T.V with me. They are calling St J's a whorehouse and because I work here too I am labelled as a whore, even though I do not have sex. The men that come in are the outsiders. It is different though, when you are on the inside. I am just like anyone, hustling to try and make money.

An Irish man called Gary offered me two hundred euros to give him a blow job. We were drinking together. "I must admit," I teased him, after telling him, 'no', "I haven't done it for a while. With these lips I'm sure I'd be very good at it." He said that if I gave him a blow job he would recommend me to all his friends and send a bus load down. We were having fun negotiating and as he left he gave me a ten euro tip. I did not suck his cock, however.

Lopes told me that a client offered to pay four hundred euros to have sex for half an hour with me. "Why didn't you tell me?" I replied jokingly- kind of. Another guy wanted to take me back to his house in Leeds to work as an au pair. He wanted to have an affair with me, not telling his wife where he had met me. I did not want to move to Leeds.

I use all the skills that I have to make money in a way that I feel more comfortable with. I use conversation, dancing, hustling and flirting skills. The price that the men pay for sex here is too low. I would be afraid that the condom would burst. Abortion is illegal in Portugal and it would be so awful to become pregnant by a client. I am sure this happens. I can make enough money without having sex.

The men often ask if this work makes me horny. The truth is, *yes*, sometimes it really does. I need Lopes to make me come. He is hard, pimpy and very good in bed. Where do the Brazilians learn their technique?

Amadieu asks Lopes to do some promotional work and to take along me and Alexandra. We drive to a few bars, have some coffees and beer, put some flyers on the tables and under the windscreen wipers of cars. Alexandra is wearing three-quarter length white denim jeans and white leather boots. I am wearing a short black leather skirt and my black boots. Lopes is wearing a black suit. We go to an Irish bar where two karaoke singers are singing a duet, a *Coldplay* song. One of the men starts laughing halfway through the song. As Lopes and Alexandra drink their beer and coffee, I go up the wooden stars to put some flyers on the tables. A group of Irish men are there. One of the men, an old man with smiling face, grey hair and glasses, is asking me where I am from. I tell them to all come down to St J's.

Later, the group of men turn up at St J's. I talk to the old man. He buys me a drink and whilst we are talking he remembers that I was the girl handing out the flyers. His friends are all with girls. They are musicians from Dublin. He wants to buy another drink. "OK, Miguel! *Miguel*!" I shout to the bar and other clients are turning around and looking at me. When Miguel comes over to the table he tells me that there is no need to shout like that. I defend myself by saying that otherwise, he would not hear me. As he is walking away to fetch the champagne I yell, "*I'm sorry, Miguel, I won't*

shout again, I promise!"

The old man tells me that he wants to be satisfied but with no penetration. I tell him that I only strip. I persuade him that I could be the "warm up" and also find another girl for him to go with. He keeps giving me money. Jessica is watching as I put the tips into my bra. I do the private show and the old guy gives me a fifty euro tip. Lopes comes into the private room to open and tie back the curtains. As I am getting dressed I casually say, "That was nice of that man to give me a fifty euro tip." When I go into the bathroom, I ask Leah if she wants to do a half hour show with the man that I am drinking with. Leah says, "Ask Jessica, she needs the money."

I go to the table where Jessica is sitting and tell her about the client. I say that he is nice and seems harmless. Jessica says, *yes*, and goes for the half hour show with him.

Later on, I am sitting, waiting by the door. I am ready to go and a couple of girls are still in the private rooms. Lopes tells me that Jessica has been asked to leave because she was calling a client on her mobile. I thought that she was leaving, anyway. One of the African sisters consoles her as she walks past, angry and cursing. Miguel and Arabelle begin to row furiously behind the bar. Lopes sits beside me and takes my hand. "It's about Jessica," he says.

"That bitch," I laugh coldly, "why doesn't she just hurry up and leave?"

Leah rushes in from the private rooms, screaming. Blood is gushing from her foot. She had knocked a champagne glass over and cut her foot during her private show. Arabelle and Alexandra dress the wound whilst I put my arm around her to calm her down. I say that glass always makes cuts bleed a lot and so look worse than they are. The client she was with comes through into the bar. He has lost his coat. I go into the private rooms to look for it and I can hear Claudia having sex with a client.

Zoe

I go back to Porto to pay my bills and put money in the bank.

I pick up a shell on the beach. It has black and cream stripes and is shaped like a unicorn's horn. *This shell is free,* I think, as I put it into my pocket, *this shell costs nothing.* I am by the church at Miramar. It looks like the palace of a princess, on the rocks by the edge of the sea, a pink-hued white. I climb up the stairway winding up and past the church, to where I have a platform, overlooking the rocks and the wide, wide sea, the waves crashing, spraying over the dark rugged rocks. Some local Portuguese girls told me that this place was known for witchcraft, that witches gather here and do spells. There is melted candle wax over the rocks. Once, on the beach I found pieces of a photograph and melted wax. The cleansing air, the noises of the sea, and the gangs of sea birds, that inhabit the beach with sharp instincts and movement, staying out of the way of humans, strengthens me.

As I walk away the silhouette of the church is like a mini *Taj Mahal*, against a backdrop of orange dispersing into the blue and purple sky. There *is* magic here. Nature is magic.

Lopes calls me. He is having problems. He has argued with Arabelle. He said, "Fuck you, Arabelle," and she told Amadieu about Lopes' affair with me. The rumours about me being pregnant with Lopes' baby are still lingering. Amadieu has told him that he must leave by April. He has to leave the house that he has been renting from him. I tell him that he can stay in Porto. I say that he always has a home with me, "*Sempre,*" I add. Always.

"Thank you, very, very", he says and asks me when I am going back to St J's.

"April."

"Thank you, very. I call you, tomorrow." Lopes did not call back. I did not call him. I received a letter saying that I had got into college.

Ashley

I wake. I have to get up because it is my health check today. I feel depressed. I make a cup of coffee, instant cappuccino with honey, put the radio on, rub oil onto my breasts. I love my breasts. One has always been slightly bigger than the other, even when I was fifteen years old. You can hardly tell. It is someone, something, praying on my worst fears. Trying to tell me I am deformed, putting suggestions in a weak mind. I love my body. I look slim, tanned. I love my hair, almost waist length with different colours streaking through. One client said that he loved my wild hair.

I am Godless.

The two spots on my vagina are *condyloma*, commonly known as genital warts. Very common. The doctor looked up from her microscope and also told me that I have unspecified bacteria in my vagina. My vagina is sick. She put the spatula inside and said that it was very dry. The rest of me seems healthy. But my vagina is sick. I have a plaster on my arm where she withdrew the blood from me. The blood looked dark, almost black. I have to wait for the rest of the test results. I also supplied them with half a cup of cloudy urine.

I have never prayed. I would like to read the bible. There is no God that protects me.

I have to go to a doctor and get the warts lasered off. The doctor gave me some tablets to put in my vagina for two days. One of the women at the health centre told me that it is best not to wash with soap or any special creams after sex. She said that it was best to just use water, which surprised me.

I am not working again for another week, until I get the warts removed and the results of the test. Some results I get after a week, others after ten days. I cannot remember which diseases I get the results for first. At this point I feel as if I have probably got them all. If I have HIV or AIDS I think that I would do something crazy. I definitely would do something crazy. I would almost certainly attempt suicide, or disappear.

I phoned the woman that runs the house. She is about fifty, hippyish with curly dark hair and glasses. I went for a Thai meal with her on the first day that I met her. She told me about a friend of hers who found a young, injured greenfinch and raised him, keeping him in a cage with a budgerigar. I told her that I will be unable to work for a week because I have some warts. She said that she felt sad for me. She asked if she could take my photo to put on the website. She digitally alters them so that they are a likeness of the girls but not exact. I said I would call her. I am not in the mood for photos.

Some would call us 'good time girls'. I am a bad time girl. The good times I have had are outweighed by the bad. The three months I spent working as an escort in the Algarve were amongst the good times. I would never worry about disease. I had an African boyfriend who was a Christian. I would swim in the blue sea every day. It was fun, light-hearted. Now my heart is heavy. Although I am always laughing and joking with the other girls, I am sad inside. I know it is a bad life. A trap. A web. Alone, I am pulled towards it. I am mauled and kissed and fucked and stroked by strangers.

Am I dying? Am I full of bad energy? Bad magic, negative karma. I know my chakras are unbalanced. The energy is flowing around my body and cannot reach some parts, there is a replete of energy in others. Sacral, root, there is no energy. This is because I have no loved ones near to me and I have no real home. I have visions because the energy is dammed in certain areas and moving up to and through my third eye chakra. I see way too much.

I know who gave me the warts. A boyfriend in Prague. An ex-boyfriend. A Czech man who screwed me hard then did not telephone for a week. Afterwards, for days, I had a burning sensation as if my womb was being turned inside out, like my cunt was on fire. The lonely pain lasted longer than the pleasure; sending him texts, waiting for his call. Getting a telephone call from his number, laughter and “Do you speak English?” from a stranger. Then he would screw me and my cunt

burnt like fire again. I thought that if I pleased him, if we had sex without a condom, like he wanted to, he would be mine. He said that he loved me. That I was his bitch.

"So, how long have you been working on the streets?"

"I don't work on the streets, I work in a brothel," I told the doctor indignantly, slightly hostile and defensive. There I was, legs open again. This time on a chair, with a harsh white light glaring onto my private parts and a leg resting over each stirrup. Dr Herzler inspected my labia and found a further cluster of warts, just near where the hole is and hidden by folds of skin. She said that doing my sort of work she was not really surprised that I had something. She introduced me to the nurse, who wheeled in with the laser machine, "This is Marina," she said, as if we were at a social gathering, a dinner party.

"Hi!" I turned to the left, with a slight wave, "I've got genital warts!"

"Pardon?" said the doctor, from between my legs.

"I said, I had genital warts."

"*I* didn't say that."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm so depressed." I lay my head back down with a sigh.

"I see a lot of people with these kinds of things, you know." She said that the nurse would hold my hand as she put the needle in. I flinched at the three sharp points of pain and the nurse rested her hand on my shoulder. I asked to see the warts again, in a mirror. She held the mirror so that I could see the raised skin, and the blood seeping from the pin-pricks. I think that she had given me a local anaesthetic because I could not feel anything as she removed the warts. It took a matter of minutes. I have to put a cream on them every day for a week and she has given me a brown lotion to apply if the warts come back. They are a virus so they may return. I told her about the ex- boyfriend who gave me the warts. It must have been him because he is the only one that I had sex with, without a condom. She told me to forget about him. I asked her if the warts could be a sign of AIDS. She said that fingers crossed, *no*, even couples get warts. She said that you can even get warts from touching someone's infected scrotum. "Scrotum?" she asked, wanting to confirm that her English vocabulary was correct.

"Scrotum," I confirmed, looking through my thighs. I have to return in a couple of weeks. It seems that I will be unable to work for a while because of the wound. I do not want to work. I may have to find something else.

The first thing that the doctor had said was that she was not sure if she could remove them straight away. She said, coming from England, I should know that sometimes there is a six week waiting list. I told her that the other clinic said I could get the warts removed today and that I had not lived in Britain for three years so I did not know about the waiting lists; in six weeks' time my vagina will look like a cauliflower. Then suddenly there was no waiting list and she laughed slightly- I do not know why- and told me fifty euros. *No problem.*

I told the doctor what this life is like. A trap. She sees me as a stereotype. Another hooker living a desperate life. A promiscuous slut who has picked up warts from somewhere or other.

I know *exactly* who I got them from.

I think of him standing alone at the bar. Deni, the Czech man, waiting. I did not show. Again and again he would text and call. Always at the wrong time. One, two o'clock in the morning, the infamous 'booty call'. There is a joke about these kind of calls, "Hi, baby, it's me, I want to see you. Yes, I know it's two o'clock in the morning, baby, but it's OK, I'm standing outside your door."

I do not know his second name. I could not speak his language. He could speak a little bit of English. I met him at the smokers' bar. A walk away from the Old Town Square with its famous cluster of Romanesque, Baroque and Gothic buildings. Along the streets where Kafka and Kundera have stepped and shopped. Through the bustling boulevard of Wenceslas Square, past the fiery ghost of Palach, then beneath the watchful eye of Good King Wenceslas. At the top of a dark side street there were the strip clubs, women sitting in the windows, Russian mafia and black boys

standing out in the snow. Two sports bars at each side of the street, women walking by in furs, and the smokers' bar cheekily placed next to the police station. Down the stairs, following the reggae bass line, I would then order a beer or a tea or coffee, and I would buy a gram, smoke a joint, he would stroke my leg, touch me up. He was shorter than I was, even more so when I had my heels on. He was tough, macho, with a smile like a little boy. Local gangsters, dealers would watch us as he lay his head on my shoulder. Muscles, shaved head yet balding, ready to fight anyone else who tried take me from him. They would watch us leave together. When he returned alone he would have purple bites on his neck, on his firm, taught forearm. I asked him one night about his mother or a father. He pointed up to the sky, to heaven, like a child. His hands and feet were small. His parents were killed when he was fourteen, in a car crash.

As I applied the dark brown lotion over the three flat grey scars I noticed a raised lump of skin on the lowest part of the hole, with what looks like a white spot on it, and another next to it. These have only just become noticeable, or perhaps they are just where the laser has changed the shape of the skin. Perhaps she has left some warts on purpose so that I have to go back and pay even more.

My future is in limbo. Waiting. I feel as if I am dead already, I am depressed and so tired. This is not what I wanted. This is not why I came here. Tiredness, a slight sore throat. Is this a symptom of a deadly virus? I lie on my bed, holding a cup of tea in my hand. The cup is green with a glazed design of round, spotted plants on stalks. The plants remind me of scrotums covered in genital warts.

I was floating on the water. Looking back at the sand-coloured cliffs. The pier to my left. I swam out further yet felt no danger, adjacent to the end of the pier. The water got colder and darker. I could see my towel, the one with the dolphin on it, covering over my bag, and my mobile phone. I knew I would have to swim back to check for texts from the agency. If there were any messages I would have to go back to my little room, with the fridge, the sandwich toaster and kettle and get ready within the hour, go to a hotel, or a villa, or meet someone at a restaurant. No-one ever bothered me on the beach. No-one ever followed me, harassed me or stole. I could forget the clients, wash them away. Wash everything away. The green flag was flying showing that the sea was safe for swimmers. The sea was flat, with the occasional larger waves, further out, that I turned my back to and spread out my arms to either side, as the water rode beneath. The Cape Verdean street sellers, who sold sunglasses and wooden giraffes would stop and speak to me as I dried in the sun. I would perhaps go to a cafe, where the owner remembered my name and told me about the Old Town, before the tourists came. I was never lonely, or dirty, or judged.

There was an Irish man, a South African, a German. Also a man from my home city. He was a retired businessman. He retired at forty after working hard all his life. He was in Portugal to go on a sailing course. I met him in a restaurant in Vilamoura. Linking arms with him on the way back to the hotel. He was a novice and I was joking with him that he would be the tea boy, or is it the skipper? I met him again when he got back from the sailing course. On the balcony eating cold fried fish and salad. When we had sex he wanted me to click my fingers at him and tell him what to do, just like he had been doing all week on board. We later had sex on the balcony. There was a great view of the hotels, the lights surrounding the building, and the dark distant shore-line as he fucked me from behind. We had a drink in the bar as I waited for the taxi. He went back home to the city where I am from, back to his wife who knows that he is unfaithful.

The men who were 'French kissing' me did not realize that they were also getting a mouthful of warts. I asked one of the girls if she let them go down on her. I was wondering because of hygiene. After all, you cannot ask him to put a condom on his tongue. She said that there is a type of condom that you can place over your vagina but the man will think that you are crazy if you use it. If she thinks the guy is OK, she lets him, but if she does not like him she will say that she does not do it.

I do not have to be as secretive about working as a prostitute here or lie so much to the clients.

Yet, the other girls have husbands, children, lovers. I still do not feel comfortable, though. There is a coldness to Berlin. This can never be my home. When I speak aloud in a cafe or shop I look around to see if there are any men that I recognize from the brothel. They all look the same. A grey, dull hue about them. I feel that my life is not my own, my soul is not my own.

Keep faith. The words appear out of nowhere. *Keep faith*.

It was Christmas and I was lying on a spunk stained mattress. The house was cold, so cold. The lights kept going out. The kitchen was disgusting, dirty. There was another room next to the bathroom. A red light. Anne-Marie slept with Mario in the other room. She slept most of the time, if Mario was out. Jorge, the DJ worked in the club across the yard. I was sleeping in the rooms where the girls take the men. On a shelf I had laid out my wash things, my long brown clip-on hair piece draped down, brushed and ready to wear. A small bag full of condoms and lubricant.

In Lagoa: a small village. A skinny, old farmer bought me drinks and wanted to take me into the room. I said that I was on my period. Anne-Marie stood at the bar next to her boyfriend, who served drinks. Hugh Heifer. The girls were rough. The club was rough. I did not make much money. I did not have sex. I somehow felt that it was below my dignity. I smoked joints with some clients and a couple of the Russian girls in the corner of the room. The next morning I wrote poetry in my room. There was a rainbow outside.

A prayer for the Godless. Faith for the faithless. Waiting. There is still something else wrong. A discharge, dark grey and a slight pain when I pee. I think of the stupid chances I took, just to gain pleasure for a few snatched moments. Just a few stupid risks. A blow job, swallowing, smiling, a chance for the virus to enter the mucus membrane. The Czech man. Such hot sex, one night, one morning, without a condom. Now, what is it all worth?

It was the breakdown. The breakdown that I had in Prague. Working all the time, waiting for his call. Working as an English teacher. Travelling around the city from school to company to company to school. Exhausted. Lonely. Then I cut my wrists, there was blood. I lay down on the bed, with the window open. When I woke there was distant thunder, occasional flashes of light. The storm got closer. I went out into the night, to the trees. I lived in *Hlubocepy*, in the suburbs, where if you walked for five minutes you could forget you were in a city. Black sky turned white then black again. The rain began to fall. *"What are you doing here, child?"* The voice was from the trees, or from within. Perhaps from the sky. I crouched down. Cut wrists held around my knees.

The next day, I met him. In the bar where he worked, where people smoked weed. You could buy it from the African dealers or from behind the bar in one gram bags. I was wearing knee-high, black leather boots, and tight, three-quarter length trousers. Someone once told me that those trousers should be illegal. I showed him my wrists. He said that I was not thirty three, I was thirteen. We went to a hotel room and fucked. "No condom," he threw the small, square packet to one side. It felt better without a condom.

That was the last time that I saw him.

Hope for the hopeless. Whatever the results are, they will change my life forever. I am living in the shadows, living in fear. I see nothing around me. At night I talk to ghosts, see snakes crawling, dream of fucking another nameless, faceless man.

There are zombies riding on the *U Bahn*.

Turquoise is for protection. I am wearing my turquoise ring. Also, I have a small stone that I have taken from the metal pendant, which would make my skin flair up when I wore it around my neck because it contained nickel. I have released the stone and I hold it in my hand. It is the shape of a heart, a pagan head or a small blue heart.

I have my own religion.

I thought that I would be brave, play it casual, bring a newspaper and read it whilst waiting for the test results. It is all anonymous. I am a number on a piece of paper. A charitable organisation; looks like it could have been a church once yet it was a hospital. Built by a priest, one of the first hospitals in Berlin for the poor.

I thought I would be casual. Play it cool. They would tell me the results and I would shrug, walk out, without a word. Instead, I was crumpled, weeping, breaking down with fear. The newspaper still rolled-up on my lap, tissue covered in smudges of mascara as the social worker asked me if I wanted a drink. *Why? Why did I have to wait so long, a week for the results? I would have paid money to get the results the next day.*

Chlamydia, syphilis. At least these diseases have a cure.

I looked at the paper with the results. *Negative. Negative. Negative.* I did not have to go back in three days as they could give me all the results at the same time.

I held the small turquoise stone in my hand. I have no other diseases. I have only my warts.

I can see again; the small brown sparrows pecking around the sunflowers growing high outside the cafe where I drink my coffee. I have now the same old problem to address: money.

Most of the girls have changed. The other girls have been abducted by some alien force and replaced by blonde clones. I have not spoken to Lopes for seven weeks. For my first night back I took it easy. I was tired from the journey and I was chatting with some men, selling only one drink. I tried to keep it professional with Lopes.

Alexandra had an argument with Arabelle and walked out of the club by herself into the dark. I called after her but she carried on walking in her high PVC stripper's boots and a bottle of beer in her hand. I needed to get the taxi back with her but instead I had to wait to get a lift with Lopes and a couple of the new girls. I had told Arabelle that I needed the key for the front door but she just shrugged and said, "Ask Alexandra." It did not seem important to her, or occur to her, that Alex had walked off and I would not be able to enter the house.

"*Precisa chave*," I said to Lopes making turning-key-in-door miming actions. He, too, did not appear particularly concerned. "*Precisa* fucking *chave*," I repeated, louder, "I need a fucking *chave* to get into the fucking *casa* for fucks sake. Fuck it, fuck this fucking shit." All my suppressed anger at Lopes for not calling me was oozing out, like poison, like puss from a nasty whitehead that I had been trying to ignore or cover up yet now was repulsively splurting, splatting, leaving behind redness, ugliness. We drove to the house, the two other girls in the back of the car. I was still furious. At the house, I rang the doorbell and no-one answered. The windows were dark, the house was empty. Lopes turned the car around on the orange dirt-track by the side of the house and was about to drive off. I waved at him to stop, screaming, redness, ugliness. I rang the doorbell again, bashing it with my fist hard, as pieces of white plastic shattered and fell to the ground. Yet the door-bell still worked and I pressed onto what was left of it and rang continuously. Lopes got out of his car and rang the Russian guy who lives in the garage on his mobile and then he walked around to the back of the house and knocked on the garage door. The Russian man smiled as he let me into the house, yet I walked briskly past, upset, tired and angry.

Lopes treats everything as if it is one big joke. He seems to think that everyone should be smiling and laughing all the time whilst avoiding serious issues. I think he gets off on working at St J's. Seeing the situation on a fantasy level, only seeing, or wanting to see the world in these terms, surrounded by sexy women. I am closer to him, more real, insect-bitten, stubbly, emotional and insecure. Different from the image that I project when I am in the club, or in front of a roomful of guys all clapping and whistling. When I am not working, I do not dress like a fantasy women. I wear jeans and trainers, very little make up.

Perhaps it is the natural ebb and flow of need and power that runs between pimps and prostitutes. He is lonely, he offers them protection. They are lonely, often living a secret life that they can tell to no-one. The prostitutes both flatter his ego and offer affection. He tells them that they are beautiful and does not judge them for what they do. They bitch about him. He does not care. Perhaps he does still feel something for me. I do not know why I even care, why I still feel jealous when he speaks to other women.

Other things have changed, besides the influx of blondes. I am in a different room on the ground floor, with a small bathroom opposite I can use all to myself and I am nearer the kitchen. I like the room very much and I have not yet been bitten. I have brought some extra strong insect repellent with DEET in it. St J's is different. The atmosphere is lighter, less sinister; probably the influence of the blonde clones or it could be the lighting. New glass doors have been built into the porch in front of the main door, with chairs inside, so you can sit there and feel like a fish in a tank as people pass by. Also, Rachel has left but I do not know exactly why. There are a lot of new dancers and I have to make my show good. There is an underlying sense of competition between us.

I drank champagne all night with the Indian businessman; the guy that had an affair with a James Bond girl. He told me that he was so lonely that it was painful. He had a beautiful house, yet when

he woke up every morning, it hurt. He wanted me to go back to his house. “I want to lick you from here,” he said putting his finger on my forehead, “to here,” he kept repeating, touching the pointed toe of my boot. He got quite drunk and we decided to move to another table by the corner of the club. He tripped over the table knocking it over, as I held out my hand to help him from the floor I noticed the other girls were watching and laughing at him. Lopes still likes me. He was watching me with the client, *jealous*.

I woke up the next morning with a hangover which was cured by pizza and a three kilometre walk to the beach. When I got back, the Brazilian girls were talking in the kitchen. They were speaking loud and raucously like parrots. They are spirited; either laughing, dancing, fighting (not very often yet when they do it is vicious) preening (in front of mirrors or men), cooking or sweeping. They are not like the soulless hookers that I have met before and would hate to be. To them sex is a trade. It is practical. They can make money to send back to their children in Brazil. Alexandra has got two children. Sometimes she cries after speaking to them on the telephone. She is very beautiful with cinnamon skin and slightly slanted eyes.

Claudia the snake is watching my show. As the clients clap and cheer I feel a slight sense of triumph. Another new English dancer tells me that I can dance. I just need to learn more pole tricks. Later on in the night I notice Lopes talking and joking with Claudia. I pick up a cushion from one of the chairs and put it under my red off-the- shoulder top. I walk past her and say, “Oh, Claudia, I'm pregnant.” Claudia laughs and I throw the cushion at her. I tap Lopes on the shoulder and ask him what he thinks that he is doing. He says that he does not understand, that Claudia is his friend. I decide to use non-verbal communication instead. I grab hold of his nuts and walk off giving him the middle finger in the air sign. I think he understands me now.

A man at the bar tells me that I have a great face. He likes my nose. He calls these sorts of clubs *cat houses*. He says that I should go all the way and have sex with men, to make as much money as I can. He works with steel and his export business is doing really well. I feign interest in steel as we drink champagne. “You have a great face.”

Two toffs come into the club. “Chin! Chin!” toasts the fair-haired toff as we clink our glasses together. He tells me about his beautiful, blonde girlfriend who wants to have sex with another woman. Then he tells me that he is married. I have a private show with him. Later on, he wants to massage me so we go to another private room. I lie on the couch, face down as he massages my shoulders, all the way down my back. He lies on top of me a talks dirty, close, into my ear. He tries to touch my pussy but I pull his fingers away. Those teenage years all over again.

I walk back through to the club and realise that I have lost one of my gold-hoop earrings. I try to tell Lopes. He says nothing. I feel sad. I have to wait until the private room is unoccupied so that I can look for it. It is a sign. Although I have gained money with the client, I have lost in other ways.

I walk over to the corner where Uri Geller's optician brother and his friend are sitting. I sit with them in the hope that they may buy some champagne. His friend warns me that he will start talking bullshit soon. He is young, looks a little bit like Jude Law, slightly smug and unsmiling. “You're older than the other girls,” he says, “Did you come into this business because you had some kind of accident in your life, with your boyfriend or something?” I feel cold inside. I try to smile.

“Why, how old do you think I am?”

“Twenty eight, twenty nine,” he answers. There are lots of girls older than me, Ana C, Barbara, Patricia. I tell him that I have done this kind of work before in Copenhagen, Crete and Iceland. *An accident in your life.* How words can cause pain. How words can cause damage and threaten to destroy. How words can echo inside, for days, weeks, even years. Words that are flippant, forgotten by the speaker, yet their echo remains, resurfacing, resounding louder in times of vulnerability, loneliness and insecurity.

As I am leaving I see him standing with Lopes at the door. I wonder if he had been speaking to Lopes previously about me, prompting him to say those things. I get into a taxi and Lopes signals for the taxi to stop so that the man can get a lift with me. I shake my head and the taxi drives off.

I have a cigarette burn on my leg. A dark v-shaped scab. The lonely Indian businessman came into the club and I walked past him and he caught me, accidentally on my thigh, with his cigarette. Later on he asked me why I had ignored him. I said that I was busy with a client. I found my earring. It was beneath the sofa cushion in the private room, next to a used condom.

Ashley

Cities scare me. Sometimes, they seem so vast, inhumane, although inhabited by many people, many lives. I need to go to the city to make money, any city, yet at the same time make sure that the city does not drain my money away again. Cities suck out my energy. I have to work hard, think fast, apply my energy to getting funds. Usually I have money; I am making sure I have more money, for my future. I see some clothes that I want, buy a coffee, a newspaper, a few tickets on the metro, a book or two. It gets sucked away.

At night the lights of Berlin, shop signs, cast a blur across the modern, almost sterile architecture, adding a streak of colour to geometric shapes, semi circles of metal. Then walk a few metres and the old high-ceilinged buildings still remain. Some with painted facades. Follow the graffiti in the east, layer upon layer of posters for punk bands, parties.

I am not a city girl, although people would easily mistake me as such. I am never happy when surrounded by high buildings, glass walls, fumes. I can never relax. I met some people today, sat around in the grounds of a university somewhere near *Alexander Platz.* A young man with long black hair asked me if I had a cigarette and some others joined us. One tall, blonde guy is a actor. He has been in soap operas here in Germany. In one show he played a cocaine dealer who got caught on his way to boarding the plane to Colombia.

I went back to my apartment and felt so lonely that my head hurt. The isolation will not go on forever, I know that. I will make another connection; something strong, emotional and real. Then I will leave, or lose them again, yet remain with their spirit and memory for the rest of my life.

I feel like a rat, maybe a cat. A feral animal, surviving, scuttling onto the metro, stopping by in the shade, always living by instinct.

I buy a smoothie and wait. At the *Zoologischer Garten*, not the zoo itself, but where the cafes, tourists, hustlers, energies are. The crumbled silhouette of the church, known as the Rotten Tooth stands as the hub in the centre of modern activity. A boy walks past. He says something in German. There is a black fly in my pale, yellow drink in the paper cup. He walks past a bit later, calls me a sexy woman, a girl, I cannot remember. I ask him if he has got any marijuana. I buy a small bag, he asks for thirty five, then thirty, then he says that he will give me it for free. I could go to his house and stay for free. I buy it for twenty yet I know that this is too much. He tells me that this is a normal price for Berlin. I take his telephone number. We go to *Los-Angeles Platz,* a park nearby and smoke a joint. There are those large birds, the ones that are like ravens with black beaks and dark grey patches on their feathers. He tells me that I am sexy. He kisses the mounds of my breasts above my t-shirt. I never had these mounds, a cleavage, before the operation. In fact I hardly looked at, or thought about my breasts at all. I remember that when I lay down, they were completely flat, nothing and I could feel bumps, sinews, my ribcage beneath them, they were two small, empty pouches.

The man is young, half-Turkish.

He tells me that I have beautiful hair, like a horse.

Zoe

Ana C, Arabelle and Val were in the bathroom looking at shoes. I did not want to buy. I have to be in the mood to buy. They were in a pile onto the floor, strippers' sandals with glass heels, leopard-skin strappy sandals, white leather boots. Ana C was trying on a pair of white PVC sandals with exaggerated heels. I got changed for my show. Claudia was drinking champagne with a guest. He picked up his chair, carried it close to the pole and watched me dancing, with his back to her. He was young, good looking, arms folded and relaxed. Claudia walked away.

It was really hard trying to sell champagne. I only sold one vodka and orange to a Portuguese guy. He thought that I was about twenty two, not that I am getting hung up about my age, or anything. Before that I spoke to some arrogant Englishmen and also some teachers. The teachers were fun and I sat and talked with them for a while. I did not get a drink but I got a chewing gum, “Thanks, a *Chicklet*, that's a great start...” I said before moving on to the Portuguese man. It was as if everyone I spoke to had no money, or a girl would talk to them later and get a drink from them. Amadieu asked Arabelle to give me a drink. I only wanted orange yet they insisted I had vodka and orange. I stood drinking it at the bar, watching and listening. Listening to the voice of the street because it was trying to tell me something.

I am stripping naked every night in front of men for money. I am primitive. I am raw and street. I have to listen. If someone says that they have no money and only five euros to buy a beer, this is not necessarily the case. It is funny how the same guy can later buy champagne and have a half hour show with a girl. I have to learn, to listen. Also, the thing about having physical contact with clients in the private rooms. I found out from a couple of clients that a girl told them that contact would be seventy euros. I started to feel bad about letting clients touch me. I just did what I had to do at the time, or what I felt like doing because I enjoyed it. Perhaps they should offer more money once we get inside the private rooms if they want to touch me. What did these guys mean exactly by contact? Touching her pussy? I never let them touch me down there.

Lopes was sitting in the glass porch, concentrating on something that he was writing. He looked up, as if he knew that I was watching him. As if he wanted me to see him writing. I smiled at him.

Later on, Claudia tried to speak to me. I told her to go away. She said that I was lonely and I needed a friend. I told her to go away again and tried to ignore her. I was sitting down and she was leaning over me, “Look, you obviously have problems. If you need a friend you can tell me your problems venever you like.”

“I haven't got any problems and even if I did I wouldn't tell them to you.” She never stops playing games.

There is a new doorman. Lopes has left. Some people say that he has just had enough of it, others say that he talked too much about the other girls and told lies. There is talk of new ownership. Caroline, the woman who had the traumatic liposuction, who I was speaking to before. Some people say that she did not want to employ Lopes and that there will be more changes.

After two quiet nights a guy comes in who tells me that he has seen me before. He is twenty eight, big built with a flat nose, like a fighter. He is with his friends, a trendy fortyish nightclub owner and a techno D.J. They are handing out flyers for an event with D.J Jiggy in Club Trigonometria. The man buys me a small bottle of champagne. He is half South African and half Portuguese and talks fast, convoluted, almost mumbles, looking down to the ground, telling me that he really likes me. He works hard running two liquor stores. I can tell that he works hard when I take his hands and feel their rough skin. He says that there are only two things that make him angry: business and family. Everything else does not rile him. We talk about music. He likes 80s bands like Depeche Mode and early U2.

I like him too. I am looking into his eyes. We have a private show so that he can spend more time with me alone. I kiss him and take off my top and sit, straddled on top of him. He wants me to give him my telephone number. Men are always asking me for their number. “Eight, six...nine.....” I just make one up. This guy really likes me. I really like him too. I will go out with him another time, if he asks, if he pays.

An English dancer called Jolene has recently started with her friend Cassie. Jolene is very loud. She is not pretty but she has got large eyes, a wide smile and a good body. She wears a leather hat with a peak at the front and lacy knickers. She knows a lot of pole tricks and can hang upside down. Both girls are dark haired and natural looking in contrast to the fake blondes.

Miguel calls Jolene a 'show off'. She calls him a 'dick head'. She says that of course she is a show off, she is a dancer. She kept a tip that one of the clients gave her and Miguel called her a thief. There appears to be a sudden rule that we cannot accept tips. The bar makes no profit from this. Jolene is very angry and is telling Miguel, “I am a dancer, not a prostitute, a *professional dancer*.” She used to hang out with black girls when she was a teenager. She acts like a black girl.

Jolene is always saying that she does not let the clients touch her. I tell her that I let them touch me, if I wanted them to but not here, I point to my crotch area. I say that sometimes I get on top of them. She says, “I do too.” I tell her that I let them touch me if I instigate it. She says that when she was drunk a man did a lap dance for her. So, when she says that she does not let them touch, they do touch her. She dances in the clubs in England where there is strictly no contact at all.

Jolene is a friend of Rachel's, or an ex-friend as they recently fell out. I tell her about the time that Rachel stormed out when I asked her for some money for cigarettes. Jolene said that Rachel told her the story too but she said that she had borrowed five cents and that I was hassling her for five cents. Jolene has told Ana C that her so-called friend, Rachel, used to bitch about her all the time. Rachel used to give Ana C a lift home and as soon as she stepped out of the car she would be bitching to Jolene and Cassie.

There is an English man standing at the bar. He is from Monaco. He is in his mid-forties, about five foot five, rotund with mousy hair, loud from drinking too much. He wants me to go back to his hotel. He refuses to buy me a drink and I say, “OK” and sit at the other end of the bar.

He starts to get lonely by himself and calls, “Oh, the lovely Arabelle, get her a champagne.” I drink with him and we discuss going back to his hotel. I tell him that I cannot go because I have another appointment. He says that I am lying.

We drink some more and eventually I say, “OK, five hundred euros.” One hundred euros would be given to the bar and the other four hundred for me.

He points to Claudia, who has got changed out of her dress and into a grey tracksuit, ready to get a taxi home, and says that she had already offered two hundred. He says, “Oh, go on then, you crazy fool, five hundred euros,” yet I think he is talking about himself rather than me. Claudia is listening.

I want him to pay up front and so he gives the money to Miguel and Arabelle behind the bar. They keep the money for me to collect the next day.

The taxi driver takes us to what is known as the 'Millionaires' Triangle' and as we are driving through the grounds of a hotel complex the client tells me that he used to own it all once. He starts kissing my neck and is holding a bottle of champagne that he bought in St J's. When he gets out of the taxi, he drops it on the floor as he is drunk. He tells the taxi driver that I will be calling him at ten in the morning when he has got to get his flight but I know that I will be leaving way before that. The *Quinta Do Lago* hotel is large and modern with a lot of fake pine, thick new carpets and prints on the wall. We go up to his hotel and pour out some of the champagne. I tell him that I am not professional. I do not usually do this. I go onto the balcony and there is a view of the sea. It is getting light. He has an MP3 player and asks me what music I like. I say, *Missy Elliot* and *Outkast*. He starts looking for the music, concerned that he will not find it. I tell him that I do not have any condoms if he wants sex. He wants me to dance and I dance to the music coming from the small, white plastic speakers of the MP3 player.

I get undressed as he lies on the double bed and starts taking off his clothes. He pats the bed next to him and I lie beside him. He tells me to take off my boots and runs his hands over my body. I feel nothing. No fear. No repulsion. No sexual excitement. I suggest going into the shower together. We go into the adjoining bathroom and rub lotion over each other. Then we go back into the bedroom and I rub his cock. He does not have a foreskin. He tells me that I will not make him come like that. He wants to see me in leather and P.V.C. He asks me to sit on his chest. A hairless body, a scar running across his abdomen, salmon-pink skin and pale blue slightly protruding eyes. *An ugly bastard.*

He wants to see me come because that is what makes him come. He asks me if I 'squirt', that is what he wants to see and if I do not come then he wants to see me piss. I am sitting on top of him, playing with my clit. I am not wet at all. He gives my clit a lick. I am just coming off my period. I am becoming more vocal, totally faking. He keeps asking me if I am going to come. “Squirt, go on squirt for me.” It is really tedious. He is playing with his cock and he wants me to give it a suck and lick his balls yet I decline. We talk dirty to each other as he plays with his cock. Then he closes his eyes and starts snoring.

I look down at him, snoring quietly, his eyes flickering. I wonder whether to move now, carefully climb off him. I am hoping that he has fallen to sleep and that I can just leave. I quietly move off him and go into the bathroom. There is a large gold-rimmed mirror and a dresser in front of it with a variety of hotel soaps and lotions. He calls out, wondering where I am. I call back that I am in the bathroom. I walk back through with a bottle of lotion. I tell him that he fell to sleep and I start dancing around and laughing. “Come here,” he says. I get some of the lotion and pour it onto his cock. I start to wank him off and stroke his balls. What he really wants, though, is to see me come or to see me piss. I sit on top, pick up a glass of champagne and pour it over my pussy so that it is dripping down. It starts to sting. He says that he wants to really see me piss because it is warm, not cold like the champagne. I am getting bored of being on top, faking being turned on and tired of him repeatedly telling me to come to squirt, “or do that pissing thing, go on.” I look around the room, cream walls and carpet, his clothes in a pile on the floor, a framed map on the wall, his lap top computer on the table. After a few minutes, he closes his eyes and starts snoring again. I wait for a while to see if he has fallen asleep so that I can leave and then he opens his eyes. He tells me that he was not sleeping, just dozing. Then his eyelids semi-close and he begins dozing again. When I try to leave he wakes up again.

It is nearly seven o'clock and I tell him that I have to leave soon. “Why?” he asks, “I want you to finish me off.” I am sitting beside him playing with my pussy and his cock at the same time and eventually he comes. I have another shower and get dressed. He is lying spread-eagled on the bed. I start to pull the bed-sheet over him but he says that it does not matter. I ask him if he has any taxi money and I take some euros out of a dish on the table. I kiss him on the cheek and tell him to have a good flight to Monaco. I go downstairs to the lobby and call a taxi.

I am drinking and having fun with a group of English men. Claudia is sitting, drinking with one of them. I am laughing with my client, Mark, because he is joking that his mother is a pole dancer and that she is not bad looking for ninety. We talk and joke together for about an hour. He tells me that his friend, the one talking to Claudia, has recently been divorced and that he has never had sex with another woman. Mark and his other friend have decided to set him up with another woman whilst they are on holiday. He asks me who I recommend. I suggest one of the Brazilian girls, for something a little bit different; a little bit of an exotic flavour.

Jules tells me that it is time to do a show. I get changed then do a pole dance and when I get back to the table my guest is saying to his friend, "I don't trust her, I don't trust her." Mark tells me that Claudia is "a real nasty piece of work." Whilst I was dancing she started saying bad things to him about me. Mark knows that she was lying yet the guy she was sitting with still seems to believe whatever Claudia had been telling them and is sitting close to her with his arm around the back of her seat. "Fuck Poland," Mark says. I laugh. Claudia and Mark's friend go into the private rooms.

When Claudia and her client come back she sits at the table and asks me which was her glass of champagne. "What are you talking to me for?" I say, "fuck you." I give her the middle finger sign, and she gives it back. "You're just jealous of me," I say, my arm around my client, "*you've* got problems. Why don't you go and see a psychiatrist?"

Mark wants to make her even more jealous. I sit on his knee and he compares our legs. "Beautiful legs," he says touching my leg lightly, "and chunky thighs," he points to Claudia's thick legs in her short white skirt. "Beautiful legs, great big chunky thighs," he repeats. Claudia walks off to the bar. She speaks to Arabelle and then Arabelle and Miguel ask me to go into the kitchen.

I am leaning against the metal worktop. I tell Arabelle and Miguel that Claudia was saying bad things to my client and that before she said that I could not dance and that I was pregnant with Lopes' baby. "She lies," I say.

"She's a good girl. You're a good girl," says Arabelle, "The problem is Lopes."

"No," I say, "It's her, too."

I go into the toilets. I cannot stop crying. I feel so sad. I walk back through to the bar and hand in my tickets for the drinks I have had that night. I say that I cannot stand it anymore. I run out into the rain, howling. I crouch in the driveway. Rain falls down. I howl like an animal, a wolf. I know that I cannot fight her because I need to work, I need the money. If I fought her I would have no job. I really want to beat her to the ground, kill her if I can. It will do no good, so I crouch here in the rain. Somebody puts their arm around me and says in a kind, male voice, "You can't stay here, it's raining." He leads me back towards the club. Miguel is waiting in his car outside to drive me back to the house. I get in the car, I am too upset to look at or to know who it was that led me to the car. Miguel gives me the money that I earned the night before, five hundred and sixty euros.

The next night, Arabelle asks Claudia and I to sit down together. She starts to speak, "You must forget everything, forget Lopes..." Claudia stands up but Arabelle tells her to sit down. "Forget Lopes, forget what happened yesterday." Claudia stands up again.

Later on, as I am standing at the bar, Claudia tries to talk to me. She asks me about my family in England. I tell her not to underestimate *me*.

"But Arabelle said..."

"Shut up," I say and walk away.

I think that there is a rumour going round that I have 'the lurgy', or something. I am sitting on a stool by the bar and Ana C pointedly moves the stool by my side away from me, sits with her back to me and orders a coke. I continue to sip my drink as if nothing has happened. There is a bad atmosphere in St J's. I feel a lot of hostility being directed towards me, venom from the snakes. I think that I know who most of them are by now. Since I went out with the client the other night, there has been a shift of mood within the club. Word has got around that I received twice as much as is normal for going out, and the girls are jealous. There is negativity from elsewhere. A group of young Northern Englishmen come in to the club. They are in holiday mode and rowdy, with their

own in-jokes. I sit with them. “How much is it for a shag?” asks a dark haired, hard-faced youth, and they all start laughing. I give a quick run-down of the rules of the house and the dark haired boy tells me that he will buy me a drink. He asks me what I will to do him if he buys a drink. I stroke my fingers over his knee and thigh and say, “I'll do this, maybe more”. I go over to the bar and fetch Jules. “A drink for the lady?” asks Jules when he walks over.

“A glass of tap water, please,” says the dark haired boy and the rest of the group start laughing.

During my show I try out some new songs. I dance to Pink and Sinead O'Connor. The English boys start heckling me. “Get 'em off” they call and I think I hear a derogatory, “poor girl.” I walk over to them, stand right in front of the dark haired boy and take of my bra. “Pathetic!” they call as I walk back through to the dressing room. When I come back from getting changed, they have gone.

The next night, after my show, none of the girls clap.

I am sharing the taxi with Caterina. She has just arrived here from Porto and has moved into my old room. She says, “Can I ask you a question?” She has an innocent face and short bleached-blonde hair. “Why do the girls say that you're weird and intimidating? I don't think that you are at all.”

“I don't really care what they say or think. In fact I'm glad that they think I'm weird and intimidating because then they won't bully me like Claudia. Claudia's been lying about me in the club.”

“Oh, no, I don't think so..”

“Yes she has. These people are not my friends. I've got people who love me, I've got *mine.*” I try to convince myself, too. “When I dance, the girls say I can't dance. If you look, you'll see I hardly speak to any of the girls.”

“Maybe it's just rumours. I really don't think that it's malicious.”

“Of course it is, it's *totally* malicious,” I stare out of the taxi window into the dark. *It's great to be hated*.

I see Jules in Almancil. He is standing at the bus stop outside the supermarket. He has just missed his bus. I have just been to the sauna and I am dressed casually in jeans and a *Nike* t-shirt with my hair still wet. “Where's your best friend, Claudia?” Jules asks then laughs. He says that he thinks Claudia is stupid. I tell him that she is going to get into trouble one day. I say that I am experiencing a lot of hostility from the girls in St J's. He says, “I know.”

“Everyone is there for their own reasons and when I get out that place I just forget it all, leave it all behind.” I mean it. When I leave Jules waiting for the Faro bus, I walk back towards the house. There is a loud roll of thunder, then another. It is April. The weather is changing, fluxing between sun and storms. I turn to face the hills, with the white houses dotted across the brown scrub mounds. There is a low, grey mist surrounding the hills.

Ashley

I am celibate at the moment.
However, a man has just jerked off in front of me.

I called him up. His name is Nabil. The half-Turkish dealer. He told me to wait at the place where we had met before. I sat around the square near the Rotten Tooth cathedral. As I was waiting a young, dark skinned boy and his girlfriend in army combats asked me if I wanted any marijuana. I said I had called someone, that I was waiting for them to buy some weed. The boy said, *yes, yes,* that the man was his friend. So, I walked with them and gave him my money, and waited outside the Erotic museum whilst they went away somewhere. After a while they came back. The boy said that we must go two stops on the *U Bahn* because he was worried about the police. Two stops later, we got off. He went away again, up the steps, and I waited with the girl near the entrance. He came back down and gave me two small lumps of hash, "No fire! no fire!" he said, because the hash was crumbly and did not need to be burnt, "two stops, two stops!" he called, running off and away up the steps with his girlfriend, intending me to go back on the metro. I was not sure if they were coming back or if they had gone for good but I walked out from the station and rolled a cigarette in a park, feeling disappointed yet not surprised at the bad deal. I smoked my cigarette and went back down to catch the train.

I got onto the carriage and when I looked through the glass door to the next compartment, the boy and his girlfriend were there. They came out of their carriage at the next stop and went into mine, standing at the door whilst I sat. He asked me where I was going. "*Berliner Stasse*".

I got back to my apartment and telephoned Nabil. Straight away he said, "Where are you?" I explained that a guy told me that he was his friend. He said that he was not his friend. He said he would come and meet me.

I met him at the *U Bahn* station, *Keistpark*. At my apartment we rolled a joint mixed with hash and marijuana that he had brought. The apartment is rented and the owner is back in a few weeks, so I have to be careful when I smoke joints in here or spill anything. He told me that I was stupid. That the hash deal was only worth five euros. He said I should never hand the dealer money before I see the deal. Nabil said the hash was good quality, though. He held the joint to my mouth.

I told Nabil that I wanted to buy regular weed, a gram a week and get a good deal, weekly. He mentioned something about a job stripping in a club. He said that I could earn two hundred euros a day, dancing only. He would also be earning one hundred a day. He wanted to see me strip. I put on some music. *D12*, hip hop. He said that it was what he used to listen to when he was in prison. He was in a German prison for four years for drug dealing. We had a smoke and drank green lemon beer. I danced but I did not strip. He started stroking my thighs. I pulled up my vest top. He was sucking on my nipple, stroking me, turning me on. I could not have sex, I am still sore. He came in front of me.

After he had a shower he suddenly left, leaving water all over the bathroom floor.
He left behind a bottle of green lemon beer.

Ashley

My legs are spread, mirror held. I am stretching and pulling. Searching. There is another, then another. Across the fleshy-pink landscape there is a mountain ridge of them, warts; white, pimply, scattered mountains. They are spreading around the scabbed over tissue, a lake that is dry and outlined in a whiter-skinned ridge. Over, across my anus. I see them, everywhere. *A whore's cunt*- that is what anyone would say if they could see it now. Dirty, scabby, diseased, deserved.

It is happening again. Something contorting me reminding me of the past, all the violent men. All the violence. Something twisting me. I am deformed, look at my breasts, one bigger than the other. Oppression, trapping me, covering my body in warts, then they disappear. Tears fall, my breasts are not deformed. I am beautiful, look, normal, sexy. Go to bed, shiver. Have a cigarette.

I *let them out. I must let them out. These demons. These ghosts. A grey man, bald, saggy stomachs, fingers groping. I let them out. I have lit incense, stroking my papery, diseased, used vagina until it is young again, wet again, desirable again. Let them out.*

I open the window. Out they drift with the perfumed cloud.

I am more polite to the doctor this time. I am afraid of her laser, the way our lives and moral views collide and meet. How she makes me feel like I am inferior. I will not let her mutilate me anymore. She inspects my body closely. She says that she cannot see any more warts but that I may have to have laser treatment again around my wound. She reassures me that it will not leave a scar.

It has not healed. It is too soon to tell if the warts have gone altogether. It still hurts. I am unable to have sex. I have more lotion to put around the entrance to my vagina. The healing flesh is white; the strange lumps where she lasered are not as visible.

I need to start work soon. I am ready again- mentally yet not physically.

Jolene and Cassie are sharing a room downstairs. I am in the next room. Upstairs, there is Caterina with my old room to herself and in another room, Alexandra and Vicky, a dark haired Brazilian girl. Caterina has made her room look cosy, putting up photographs and has kept the arrangement of plastic flowers and pine cones that I left in there. It almost looks like a different room.

Every day, Alexandra cooks dishes made up of rice, beans and chicken. "*Comer!*" she calls and knocks on my door- once startling me by knocking on my window as I lay in bed, oblivious listening to music on my headphones. Jolene and Cassie laugh when I tell them that the Russian man lives in the garage. They cannot believe it. Then they feel sorry for him. They do not understand the hardships some people face. They spend most of their time going out into the sun. Their shared ambition appears to be to achieve a deep suntan to show their friends when they go back to England. They are very focused on this aim. They spend the rest of their time doing their hair or going out and having fun in the bars.

Caterina thinks her room is haunted. Her things, like her lighter, for instance, keep going missing and turning up in other places. She has seen a figure on her balcony and we both think that it is strange that the lights keep going off.

There is a pool at the back of St J's. We are going to ask Amadieu if he will open it up so that we can have pool parties over the summer.

There is a green lizard in my room, scuttling across the wall, holding on with its suckers. "Caterina! Caterina! There's a lizard in my room!" Caterina comes down and looks at the lizard. She says that it is a young gecko. She gets a broom to chase it out of the room but she does not want to kill it. She touches the gecko with the broom and I start screaming as it runs, gliding rapidly and smoothly, across the wall. She starts screaming and we are both laughing as she chases the swift-moving gecko with the broom.

"I don't want to kill him," she says and then she accidentally hits the gecko with the broom and it is on the floor, motionless. Caterina believes that the gecko is playing dead and picks it up and puts it on a rock outside. One of its eyes is black and its tongue is hanging out of the side of its mouth. We leave the gecko and believe it is playing dead because Caterina says that she has seen it on *The Discovery Channel.*

When I go back about half an hour later the lizard is still playing dead. When Caterina picks it up and throws it over the fence into the woods, it is still playing dead.

Jolene is the loudest girl in St J's. She just wants to be a star. I am sitting drinking with her and some clients, polite Englishmen. Jolene is really drunk and she starts singing to a house tune- gospel style and slightly out of tune. The Brazilian girls are looking at each other, they can hear her from the other side of the room. Alexandra looks glum, glancing to Jolene and resting her head in her hands, her hair tied in two pigtails which stick out from each side of a black leather cap. After five minutes Jolene is still singing. "Well, that's enough of that, now" says the client that I am with, a large bearded, quiet man.

"There's no need for a microphone is there?" I add. She is standing on a chair and looking into the big mirror that covers the wall.

"I'm a wanker aren't I?" she says to her client, "I don't care." Jolene carries on singing for another five minutes which develops into some kind of 'rap' as Ana C stands up from her client and starts dancing in a pathetic *girls in da hood* style attempt at solidarity, yet she just looks a little bit cross and slightly drunk. *So much for girl power.*

Jay tells me that I am "sound". She asks me if she has been singing too loud. I diplomatically tell her that she has a lot of talent and energy and she just needs to direct it the right way. Later she is talking with a regular guest, the black guy, Stanley. He has tapped her shoulder and she is squaring up to him saying, "Don't flick me, don't ever flick me again."

“Or what?” he says and taps her again.
“Just don't flick me.” I am a laughing as I leave to get the taxi.

Jolene and Cassie call Nunu *'Muff Head'*. He has a round face, with a smarmy smile, an upturned nose and black hair with a look, and I imagine, texture, similar to that of black, pubic hair piled on top of his head. When a new girl starts at St J's he always buys her champagne and takes her into the private rooms. The other night he went into the private rooms for half an hour with Caterina and Vicky. Afterwards, Caterina said that it was , “a night from hell”.

I tell the English girls that I call him 'Nono' and about the time that he tricked me and then blamed me. “Nono don't go go!” laughs Jay.

Jolene is alright. I told her to be careful of Claudia. We start making fun of the clients: Nono, Leandro the amputee (“He's armless”) and the client that I call Hannibal Lecter. When I drink champagne with him he is always analysing my personality and everything that I say in an intense way, whilst staring intently. He is in his forties, possibly older and has a successful interior design business and wears trendy clothes, like the black trousers he had on with little pockets and zips all over them. He gives the impression that he is laid back and unconcerned with ageing yet Jolene told me that he told Cassie that he had botox injections and that he is thinking of going to Brazil to get hair implants. We laugh about him and I imagine him suddenly walking into the club with hair like Cassie's, which is dark, straight and waist-length. Yet next time I see him I suddenly see how sad, how pathetic he is. How sad and pathetic a lot of the men are. They talk about their businesses, their travels and breaking up with their wives. When he comes over to say *ola* and to kiss me Portuguese-style on each cheek, I am smiling back, yet thinking about my conversation with Jolene and my name for him, *Hannibal*.

I am the last girl to make a show. I know four pole tricks now. I practice every day before there are any clients. Tonight, I dance to heavy hip hop. Some local black boys are watching. There are not many guests left, it is gone four o'clock in the morning. Two other men are watching me. One looks typically Portuguese, with slightly olive skin, dark eyes and hair. He is with a mousy friend who wears glasses.

After my show, I wait for a taxi. Claudia is there, hanging around in track suit bottoms and trainers after going out with a client, drinking beer. Another man is hugging her up against the wall. To me she looks lost. As if she thinks that she knows what she is doing but she is really lost. The Portuguese man who was watching the show asks me to come over to him. “Speak Portuguese,” he instructs, rather than suggests with underlying aggression in his voice. I can see it, too, when I look into his eyes. His friend with the glasses walks over. They ask me if I will go to Faro with them for two thousand euros. I say, *no*. There is something about them that does not seem right, as if they could both overpower me and do what they wanted.

When I get back to the house Alexandra says that the men are *policia.* They have been going around all the clubs. We both laugh when I tell her how much they offered me to go out. Then I think about how careful I have to be.

Why do I always worry about shit? Literally about shit. The toilets do not flush properly in the house and the turds never go down.

The cat is injured again. His ear has got blood on it. There is a slight infection. He is getting thin, his head looks out of proportion with his body. Caterina buys him cat food. I feed him sardines, chicken and milk. Caterina wants to give him a bath. He has been spraying in the house like a semi-wild animal and smells like one too. Caterina decides to give him a wash in the sink. She used to do that to her cats when she was young, so she knows how to hold him and keep him still. She washes him with shampoo and conditioner.

Vicky and Caterina take cocaine. Most of the girls do. Caterina sometimes snorts a line before going to bed. She tells me that she only takes it once a week as a treat when she goes to Black Jack

but I have seen her take it more times than that. I do not care who takes cocaine. Personally, I do not like snorting white powder up my nose yet I always smoke some of the joint that Caterina passes around, although it makes me feel even more nervous than I already am. Caterina started taking cocaine four months ago when she started at St J's. A client in the private rooms offered her some. She did not even know what it was. Now she sells it occasionally for an old, rich American client who she goes out with a lot.

I have started to hang out with Caterina. She is good fun. We sometimes go to the beach or the shopping centre and drink milkshakes and *cafe com leite*. We talk about vampires, werewolves and scream as we run past the creepy woods on our way back to the house. There is another lizard in the house. We think that it is the dead gecko's cousin seeking vengeance for his death.

After working at St J's, I am sitting on the balcony upstairs with Caterina, Vicky and another Brazilian girl, who is slim and dark-skinned and looks about eighteen. I know that she has a son, as she brought a photograph of him into St J's to show everyone.

There are noises in the woods. At night, various types of cricket, at different frequencies, always as a backdrop of sound. Other noises, perhaps birds, and bats flying. The sky is clear and I look for the plough constellation as that is the only one, apart from the swan, that I know. The girls are talking in Portuguese and passing around joints. "We're talking about fisting," says Caterina, casually.

"*What?*" I ask in surprise, thinking that perhaps I had misheard. The other Brazilian girl tells me about the first time that she had gone out with a client. The Englishman got on all fours and asked her to put a finger up his bottom. She put three condoms on her hand. She put one finger, then two and finally the whole hand. The girls are laughing and she adds, "I've never met an Englishman who doesn't like a finger up his ass."

"You see, we make most of our money from going out. We're more experienced at going out than you. Would you do that?" asks Caterina.

"No, I would *not*," I say, feeling shocked and suddenly prudish, unable to hide the disgust in my voice, "didn't it put you off your lunch?" and as she passed me the joint I could not help wondering where her hand had been, and if she had washed it. My going out experience seems quite tame in comparison.

The next day we go to the beach and as it is a warm day, we go into the sea. The thought of innocent-looking Caterina fisting a man for money keeps coming back in to my mind. "What's the matter?" she asks me as we lie on the beach and I look into her beautiful baby face, "You look sad."

"Nothing. I'm not sad." She is wearing a bright pink bikini and has pasted two diamonds onto her eyelids. She gives me a *Marlboro Light*. She knows that I get nervous.

We get to the house and I share a joint with Caterina on the balcony. She is sorting out her clothes. They are all crumpled up in the bottom of her wardrobe. The old American man is coming to pick her up. He wants her to wear the clothes that he bought her but the jacket is too big and the dress is dirty. She picks up a sporty gold zip top. I tell her that I like it. She throws it over to me and tells me that I can have it. I wear it at the club that night with a short black mini skirt with a zip down the front and my black boots.

Gaspar is starting to look healthy and beautiful again. He is still limping slightly, although his leg looks healed. He goes out into the woods and when he comes back he has a black, chalky stripe across his white forehead as if he has brushed up against something. The stripe on his head lasts for days.

I have got used to the smell in the house. I do not notice it anymore. Caterina has found a devil's costume in the cupboard in the room downstairs. The room where I had the fight with Lopes. One morning she put on the devil's horns and red feather boa, and ran carrying the plastic fork into the kitchen to scare the Russian man. The Russian is our friend. His voice is loud, he always shouts

rather than talks, yet he is innocent and sincere. He has always been a balancing, male, grounded influence in the house. He tells us that Amadieu asked him to spy on us and make a note of the cars that came to the house; Amadieu does not want girls to go out with clients in their own time. He laughs, miming surreptitious note-taking. He would never spy on us for Amadieu. He sits outside his garage on a white, plastic garden chair in the sun. He is at peace, despite his hardships and the pain of missing his family. He watches a pair of azure-winged magpies in the pine trees. Gaspar climbs onto his knee.

I learn Portuguese with Vicky. We smoke joints at the kitchen table. I eat fruit and continuously drink camomile tea from a tall glass. We have books on the table. We both have dictionaries. She speaks English to me, I speak Portuguese to her. “Sorry, I don't speak very good English,” she says clearly, with a low, intelligent voice. In Brazil she is a student. She has got a Japanese lover who is in prison for stealing cars. She is dark skinned, large-eyed, and has long, dark natural hair, which she says she wants to grow longer because she is fat.

A guy in the club is telling me that I look like Barbara Streisand. I cannot see the resemblance, myself. I guess that Barbara Streisand is sexy, though, in an unconventional way. It is Sunday. A rich client comes in and buys champagne (cava) for everyone. He tells Arabelle that when a girl has finished her champagne, to give her another one. All the girls are sneaking up to the bar and pouring the champagne away into the sink. He is in his sixties, grey haired, looking for a Brazilian girl. He retires to a table at the back of the club with two Brazilians, drinking real champagne.

Claudia is going out with the doorman, Tony. Jolene says that he is her pimp. He is twenty two, a tall Portuguese man with bushy eyebrows. I do not trust him.

Amadieu comes into the club with Nono. Amadieu walks over to the chair where I am sitting. “Oh, my God!” he exclaims, stroking my legs and then parting them. One of the African sisters comes into the club with two black girlfriends. She left ages ago and is living in Albufeira. I stand up and take her hand. “Wow, you look great!”

“You're still here!” I tell her that I am saving up for my college fees for September. I ask her if she is coming back to work at St J's and she says, *no*. She is going to have laser treatment on her eyes so that she will not have to wear those thick-lenses any longer.

Later on, Amadieu is talking with Nono and another client with his arm around me. With one hand he deftly unhooks the fasteners on the back my lace top and tries to pull it off. I laugh and then run into the dressing room.

Jules keeps asking if he can lick my pussy. Eventually I pull him towards me, pushing his head down towards the aforesaid part of my anatomy. “Now!” I demand.

“You have to be clean,” he says.

“No, I want it dirty.” He tells me about the first time that he went down on a woman, a German girlfriend. He said that she was not clean and he started gagging and she asked him if he was alright.

I sit with three Englishmen. One of them wants to watch me masturbate in front of him. I tell him that I will do it in a private show. He wants me to do it there in front of everyone in the club. I say that I cannot do it in front of everyone. Then I tell him to ask the boss. The guy goes over to Amadieu and asks him. When he comes back he asks, “Why is everyone always looking over their shoulder in this place, watching their backs?”

The dysfunctional family relationship come into St J's: Ray and his twenty six year old son. His son is tell me that he feels guilty because his dad is always asking him to come over to Portugal and he does not want to. He thinks of all the other people who would love to have the chance to go to the Algarve. He lives with his mother in England who pays his credit card bill. When she sees that he has been spending money in St J's she says, “You're just like your father.” I ask him if he thinks that it is strange that he comes into the strip club with his dad. He says that it is all he knows.

I am sitting on Ray's knee with his son sitting beside me. Ray asks me if I have heard anything from Lopes. He says that he has heard that Lopes has moved to Lisbon to do some recording. He is surprised that I have not heard from him as he thought that I was close to him. It *is* weird how Lopes left, like he just mysteriously disappeared. Hardly anyone even mentions him anymore.

Ray is asking Jules about the music that is playing and arguing with the other guests, lightheartedly, that it is not Portuguese music. His son is shaking his head and says, "Fucking twat," then hides his face in his hands. Then he asks me if I am his new step mum.

"That was a great show, you have great presence up there," compliments the thirtyish, heavy-built Irish man, "and I'm a sucker for brown eyes." He has a goatee beard and blue eyes. His friend, Owen, is sitting watching the next show. We had been drinking champagne together. He has been married for twenty years. All the time he was telling me that he had never been with another woman and he wanted me to "lead the way". After each glass of champagne he would urge me again. "You just lead the way." Then he changed his mind because he was too drunk. Now his friend is sitting back in his chair staring at me. I smile as I drink the champagne. It is dripping off the bottom of the glass, onto my chest. I am wearing a purple and black lace fitted top, that used to be underwear until I adapted it and cut off the suspenders. He leans forward. "You have great legs and your thighs..."

"What? Are they too big?"

"No, your thighs are great. You're all in proportion. Your hair, your legs and if you had bigger tits you'd be Hollywood."

Hey, Hollywood, here I come.

Ashley

All that pain. One moment I was lying on the surgical bed, breathing in gas, covered in black lines where they were going to make the incisions. Then it was dark. I was in another room. "*There's a pain in my chest!*" I screamed, like I was having a heart attack. "Have I had my operation?" The Czech nurse with the short black hair would not give me any water. I had to wait. The room was dim, a clock, a wardrobe, a side table. Then these things were all animate, female. Surrounding me like guardians, like something from '*Alice Through The Looking Glass*'.

I sloped off to the bathroom. There were two plastic tubes, one on each side, below my armpit and next to each swollen breast, hugged tight by a wide, white sports bra. On the end of the tube there was a small ball. There was blood at the end of the tubes, blood in the transparent balls, which followed me as I stiffly used the loo, looking in the mirror bolt upright and regimental arms to my sides. The nurse made a few appearances but all I requested was water, not magazines. I was dehydrated.

There was a thunderstorm outside. "Water, *please*." This time she brought me a small piece of cotton wool soaked in water and dabbed it around my mouth. *No*, she scolded me gently, when I took the cotton wool into my mouth and started sucking it like a thirsty newborn. I was not allowed water for another couple of hours.

The clock- the female, melting, animate clock- was moving too slow. Eventually, I was allowed water. The nurse passed me the cup and stood by my side. Then I threw up over her. "It's OK," she said, "it's just water." Another nurse brought me a pizza. There was pain on each side of my breasts where the tubes went in. I was sore when I stood or moved.

The smell of pizza, heat, the tubes, the balls full of blood. All that pain.

I went to the sauna today. I was too tired to go to the gym and one time that I did a man kept watching me and following me everywhere. Another time, the gym instructor was like a sergeant major, shouting at me to lift heavier weights, telling me that I was not working out hard enough and that I could have a different body in five weeks. I did not want a different body. I wanted my body.

The owner of the gym came into the sauna and we talked. I was wrapped in my towel, hair slicked back with conditioner, perspiring heavily. He asked me where I worked. I lied and told him that I worked at Black Jack in Vilamoura. He was dark haired, in his thirties, he told me that he liked to party.

The club has just opened. The floor is wet as it has just been mopped and one of the clients is a bit drunk and is sliding back and forth across the floor on a chair. He comes back to the corner table to join us, grinning. He is a good client and spends a lot of time with Alexandra in the private rooms. I think that he is the guy that she once spent two hours wanking off. I am also sitting with Alexandra and two other Brazilian girls- one of them a pole dancer, my old friend NoNo the Muff Head and two of his *amigos*. His friends are very polite and fun to be with. I sit on one of the men's laps. He is good-looking with a shaved head, muscular, about forty. We are all drinking Moet.

Fernando the barman brings over another bottle. The bottle is wrapped in a white cloth, “That's to hide the *Mini Preco* label,” I joke as that is the local supermarket. Nono is with the pretty pole dancer. She is screaming because he keeps putting his hand up her skirt. He continually has the same smarmy smile on his face and he had earlier walked into the club wearing sunglasses, obviously under the self-delusion that he is cool. The dancer stands up to get changed for her show and is screaming as he puts his hands up her skirt again. He then moves in on the other Brazilian girl and pulls off her gypsy-style bandanna whilst trying to get his hand up her skirt. She readjusts the long, tasseled red and white bandanna and it sits in a stern, triangular shape on her head and looks even more ridiculous than it did in the first place.

The pole dancer is drunk and strips very slowly and is uncoordinated. It is the worst strip that I have ever seen, although usually, she is quite good. She looks like a stereotypical pole dancer: blonde hair, silicone tits, cute with a friendly personality. When she comes back we are all drinking together and I am smiling at Nono. Every time I look at him, however, I imagine blowing his head off with a shot gun and his brains splattering all over the wall. When I mention this to Jolene later she says that it would be impossible as his hair would deflect the bullets, as well as any other attacks such as lightning bolts and stray golf balls.

Leandro comes in to the club late, as usual. Arabelle tells me to go over and speak to him. I tell him that he looks smart. He has combed his greying, dark hair into a vague fifties style. He is wearing a suit and carrying a large leather wallet under his stump. He is telling me how he used to live in England, in Bristol. Then he says that my skirt is too short and that he is not going to buy any champagne because he thinks that I am horrible. I laugh with him. He puts his arm around me and buys a bottle of champagne. He tells me that he wants to touch my “special secret place.”

“Keep your hand off me,” I say.

“I only have one,” he answers.

“Yes, and it's wandering.” He buys another bottle of champagne. I am careful to dodge, weave and avoid his wandering hand. He then asks me to put my hand, palm down, onto the bar. Before I know what is happening he bangs the end of his stump hard down onto my hand. It really hurts. “Ow!” Then he tells me that I have got nice legs. “Yes, I have two of them,” I answer sarcastically, then cringe as I realise what I had just said. I really did not mean to refer to any lack of body parts at all.

I get a taxi back with Leandro as he is passing by the house and after all, as Jolene said, he is 'armless'. Yet his wandering hand does not cease and he continues to grope behind his car seat to try and touch my legs.

I am sitting at the bar with Caterina. She puts her arms around me. She smoked a joint in a service station toilet on the way back from Porto and she is really tired. We are laughing and discussing why blow jobs are called '*blow*' jobs when you actually suck. “Is that OK? Is that doing it for you honey?” we joke as we hold onto an imaginary dick, and blow on it. Caterina tells a guest that her luminous orange fishnet stockings are for catching shrimps. The guest owns his own perfume business and buys us champagne. We move on through further into the club and sit on either side of him. I put my arm around him and become bored and do not speak to him very much. He builds up a rapport with fellow Portuguese-speaking Caterina. I go to the toilets and when I return, they have moved. I sit with them yet after a while I realise that my client is blatantly ignoring me and so I go and sit at the front near the bar and talk to Jolene.

Jolene tells me that she has not sold any champagne all evening but then an Englishman comes in who she had met at Monty's a few nights before. He tells her that she was really drunk and dancing on tables. “Yeah, I was a real arsehole,” she says, “I knocked over a load of glasses. I can be a real dickhead sometimes. It's vodka, I turn evil.” He buys her a champagne and they walk through to the back area of the club. I am last to do my show, *again*. I complain to Miguel that I do not like being last all the time. There are a few people watching including Caroline. There have been a lot of rumours going around about changes that are going to take place when she takes over the ownership from Amadieu and she has been a major subject of gossip.

Caroline is talking to Claudia. I am watching her whilst I am dancing, wondering whether she is talking about me, or saying something manipulative. Afterwards I hear from Jolene that Claudia really annoyed Caroline by telling her that English men do not like English girls, only Polish girls. “She's so full of shit,” I say with venom in my stage whisper.

I must know every detail of this bar. How many hours do I spend, sitting here, waiting for clients? The white Cutty Sark ashtray on the bar. The framed black and white photos of women, semi naked, pouting, holding onto a pole, hung onto a background of dark green. The vases where women pour unwanted champagne. The dried twigs sprayed gold that I end up getting caught on every time I sit on that same couch. The porcelain Laurel and Hardy on the other side of the bar, wearing black and white convict outfits and ball and chain. The low tables with their reserved signs and waiting, empty ice buckets. The candles upon the clean, white table cloths. Miguel dancing in front of a few of the girls, as they clap and call his name. Now that Lopes is subconsciously ousted, he gets all the attention. Fernando clowning around and wearing corks in his eyes. Arabelle arguing with one of the girls. The cigarette machine, spitting out noisy change. My dim night-reflection in the mirrors behind the bar and on the wall near the main door.

“I've got something that will make you laugh,” says Jolene. I feel down. Working here every night is really getting me down. I feel lonely.

“What?” I say, “Can I have some of your fag?” Jolene passes me the cigarette and tells me that Claudia had gone up to her in the dressing room.

Claudia had said to her, “*You should be very careful around here. My boyfriend he know every vun.”*. Jolene dramatically recalls the dialogue in a mock-Polish accent, *“All zee girls hate you. I know because my boyfriend he told me.”* Jolene had asked her who it was specifically who hates her, *“Everyvun.”* Jolene is one of the most gregarious girls, along with Caterina and talks to everyone in the club.

Jolene replied in true British style, “Listen here, you bitch. Don't start playing your fucking games with me or I'll fucking knock you out.” After Jolene tells me this I laugh, yet my laugh is forced. I look over to Claudia, who is sitting with a group of Brazilian girls. She has the body of a woman, and a mind and face like that of a small, spiteful child. I suddenly feel intensely angry.

“You fucking bitch, if I had a gun I'd fucking shoot you,” I shout. Claudia stands up.

“You vant to fight me?” she says, suddenly advancing towards me and towering over me as I stand at the bar. “*I kill you!*” she screams, slamming her hand down onto the bar.

“Not before I kill you, you fucking bitch. You're a fucking snake.” Suddenly Miguel is standing between Claudia and I. I am shouting at Claudia and all the Brazilian girls are watching. Jolene is telling me that it is not worth losing my job over. Tony is there too and tells me to go into the kitchen. Claudia is still asking me if I want a fight. “Oh, *whatever.*” I turn my back to her and lean on the bar. I calm down as quickly as I got angry but Arabelle still orders me into the private rooms to separate me from Claudia. I have to wait in the private room until Amadieu comes in to speak to me. He tells me that if either Claudia or I start fighting then we are out.

As I am waiting for the taxi Claudia stands in the doorway, arms folded, staring at me. “What are you fucking looking at?” I say and Miguel and Arabelle tell me to be quiet, “She's staring at me, she keeps staring at me. What does she keep staring at me for?” Claudia suddenly bursts into tears and walks towards the toilets. As I get my taxi I see Claudia being comforted by Tony and the taxi driver is looking at me as if it is all *my* fault.

In my room at night I have bad, bad thoughts. I see bad things in my mind. A body with its arms and head cut off. I know that Claudia wants to kill me. She will tell stupid Tony lies about me. I am nervous. I am always nervous in this house.

There is something weird about the house. The girls stay for a while, make their money and leave. There is blood on the outside wall. Feline blood, streaked across the white paint. The house will never be a home no matter how much it is cooked in or cleaned. The Brazilians clean the whole house with a water hose and sweeping brushes but the ghosts still stay. The spirits still stay inside the house, attach themselves to the potent energies of the women. The women take cocaine. They laugh and get high. The walls are black with damp. When the sun shines everything seems better. The Algarve evenings the are pink, orange and cosy. Cacti and lemon trees. Large black and white birds flying in the pine.

We go down to the beach and drink sangria. When we get back we play our music loud, cook and get ready for work. We lock our doors, do our secret rituals and spells to make money, light joss sticks, maybe a joint, spray on perfume and then the taxi comes. Johnny hits the horn loudly but the other girls are always late. He always has to wait.

Ashley

I sit in *Dunkin' Doughnuts* smoking a cigarette. I have just left Dr Herzler. Stern, with glasses and cropped grey hair yet a youthfulness that doctors always seem to have. I saw her skidding along the waiting room, chasing after a colleague who had just stepped out the door. The clinic is next door. I have refused further laser treatment. She said that it looked like some more warts were going to grow. She asked me if I could afford ninety nine euros for some cream that will help them- the virus- go away. Of course I cannot afford that just for some cream. Then, she gave me it for free. I have to put it on three evenings a day.

Every time I call Nabil he asks me to call later, asks me how I am, tells me he will call me back, he cannot speak to me right now, he cannot hear me, he is getting on the U Bahn. So, I have decided to go out and look for any strip clubs, any other places I can work.

The first place on my list of clubs was shut, I was too early. I had already been to the second place, which was supposed to be nearby, yet it did not exist anymore

In a boring area of the city. I could have been anywhere in Europe. A pedestrian area, grey concrete. I sat in a cafe to pass the time. The man behind the counter had misunderstood my request for a hot chocolate. I had also asked for a choc-chip muffin. He gave me the muffin on a tray with a small carton of ice cream with chocolate sauce over it. I could not be bothered to argue over the mix up. I paid, put my tray beneath the big screen showing a football match and then went back to the counter to buy a cappuccino. By the time I had eaten them, alternating cold scoops of ice cream and sips of coffee, I decided that the table dancing club around the corner would be open.

I turned the corner and I noticed that the neon sign for the BonBon Club was now lit up and two large bouncers stood outside the door. I spoke to them, asking in English if there was anyone I could speak to about work. They were being deliberately austere, answering just *yes* and *no* with grim expressions. Unfriendly, unhelpful and unnecessary. I eventually just laughed. They said I could leave my number and I walked into the mirrored front reception area, as girls began walking past. I wrote my number down and one of the bouncers put it in the drawer near the desk. Left forever and forgotten.

I went over to The Ciro Bar in another part of the city. The doorman thought he was a character from a gangster movie and he told me to go inside and speak to “Tony, the big boss.” Of course, his name had to be 'Tony'. I walked through the bar, where women were sitting and looking at me silently with dagger-eyes, to the bald man sitting by the bar. He summoned over one of the girls to translate. I told her that I wanted to work. She asked, unsmilingly, “You know what sort of place this is, don't you?” I had to be prepared to do everything at this bar. Tony asked me if I danced. I said, *yes*, and noticed the pole on the small podium. I told the girl that I could not work yet because I had a problem. “What problem?” she asked strictly. I told her that I had an infection. They said that I could work when I was better.

As I walked out, about twenty pairs of dagger eyes followed me. No-one seemed to be having much fun. It also seemed too early for clients. “*Danke*,” I said as I walked out. No-one responded. The gangster wannabe at the door joked with me the that the man I spoke to was not the main boss, that there was another Tony. “An even bigger boss?” I asked and walked back to the *U Bahn*.

There is a real chilliness from the places that I have visited to find work. I despise these men who have watched *Scarface* too many times, these Tonys, these fake, stereotype gangsters. It is all quite depressing. Prostitution is not even illegal here anymore. Neither is smiling, yet they seem to think that it is. The whole scene bores me.

Ashley

I am in love again. With the Czech man. The bitter sweet, wholesome fruit that I had bitten into when sad, lonely, hungry and living in Prague. I have spent the last couple of days in the Czech Republic. I had to visit the surgeon who did my breast augmentation and go to the bank where I still had an account. I arrived in Prague and went to meet Deni in the smokers' bar. I had text him on the train journey from Berlin. He had sent a text back: *Come to me*. He asked me if I had been having sex in Germany. He knows what I do. Yet, he knows I am intelligent too. That I work hard. I love him. He is beautiful. I cannot speak Czech. I tried to explain the STD that I had. He is adamant it is not him, it cannot be him. He looked at me innocently, large brown eyes, smiling, laughing like it was not even serious. He still wanted sex. "Small sex," he explained. How can I be so sure that it was him that infected me with the warts? They came from somewhere, someone. Now I wish they would just go away.

The doctor at the clinic agreed that my left breast was larger. He took a photograph of them with his mobile and showed me. Telling me what a beautiful shape they were. He said that if he had breasts like these, or his wife had breasts like these he would be happy. He put his hands around my waist, stroked his hands down my thighs. "They are great, *Playboy*!" he laughed.

I came back on the train to Berlin with four grams of weed hidden in my knickers.

I got a call from the BonBon Club.

A Jamaican girl with strippers' shoes with see-through heels and blue flashing lights inside them showed me around. A very narrow, metal 'stage' just in front of the bar. There were rooms at the back for sex. During the shows the men gave the girls on stage fake dollar notes. I thought that I would be OK working there, although bored and jaded with the same old thing. They think it is so exciting and original. I have seen many clubs like these all over the world. The same old faceless boring men standing gormlessly around the bar. The same old bitchy girls. One dancer had horrific breasts, really bad plastic surgery with nipples too high up and visible scars. She was old, over-tanned, bleached-blonde and ratfaced. I knew that although I looked young, I was getting too old for working in a place like this and I did not want to end up like her. One girl had no breasts at all. She tied her hair into plaits on either side of her head and looked like some twisted, deformed child. Later she walked around the club with the Jamaican girl and they both wore the same shoes with flashing lights in the perspex heels and chunky souls.

After my first show, a couple of the girls said I had nice breasts and they did not even know they were fake. I had told one of the girls that I was on my period before I got on stage and she told all the other girls. They were bitching about me, saying that they could see my tampon when I was dancing. I know that I had tucked the string inside. I walked out after two dances because they kept hassling me that I did not take my g string off. I said that the music finished and I had to get off stage.

Ashley

I will just have to go back to the other house where I was working, depending on Doctor Herzler's verdict. The cream that she gave me has made me itch. I have been very red and sore. Berlin is not the place for me to relax and really enjoy myself. I am going to go over to the Netherlands as soon as I have the money together. Attitudes are different there. At least I will not be looked down upon as much and I can smoke a joint without being afraid of being caught and treated like a criminal. I hardly ever drink and the effects of drinking are far more dangerous. It makes me more likely to be in a situation where I would have sex without a condom, or sex with a complete stranger I had met, and then cannot even remember their name. Yet I would be the one to leave early the next day, without leaving my number. Yet I would feel no shame.

The STD has finally gone. The doctor told me to be careful and to check the clients for any diseases. I told her that I will always use a condom as just a few moments of sex without a condom could ruin my whole life. I have called up the house that I was working at before I discovered the warts. I will be working there twice a week for a while. The doctor shook my hand and told me to have fun.

The lifestyle has the potential of being lots of fun. It is not a 'normal' life yet it does not mean that you should not be happy, or shameless.

Zoe

The sea is made of gold. We are swimming. Caterina is further out than me. We scream as the waves come rolling towards us, anticipating whether to force ourselves up, over the wave, float or- as Caterina does- go underneath the wave. She is muscular and brown, with mascara smudged around her eyes. We both lie on the shore, legs straight out towards the sea as the waves lap at our feet. We have been drinking sangria and smoking joints on the beach. She tells me that my eyes are shining.

We go back into the sea to wash off the sand but we end up swimming again, far out into the ocean where we cannot touch the bottom. I lie on my back and feel the waves pull me over. Then I float, we are facing each other in the water. I am a pirate, an outlaw. Timeless and intoxicated. This is how it was all those years ago. Magical. We are outlaws. We float in the water, looking at each other, grinning. Beneath the shimmering gold the water is dark turquoise.

This was the beach that I found in February, when the sky was overcast and the sands deserted. I discovered the beach. This beach with the red-rocked cliff. Then, no-one else was here and I knew no-one. Now it is summer. The beach is crowded for as far as I can see with colourful umbrellas dotted along the coast.

There is the usual selection of creeps and freaks. Hannibal Lecter, Nono, his grey haired friend with the comical, round glasses. They are becoming less like real people to me and more like surreal cartoon characters. The local young men are here. A tall, thin gangster-looking dude with long hair. The girls follow him around and sit with him for free.

The guy is here that I really like. The South African-Portuguese man. He is watching me dance. I feel happy that he is here. After my show, when I am sitting at the bar, he comes to speak to me. Some of the young men in the club come up to him, greet him and shake his hand. He tells me that there is something about me that he likes but he does not know what it is. I tell him that I like him too. He asks me my star sign. We are both Librans. He is telling me that he is sick of the bullshit that women say and adds that as a Libran I too should understand and see things differently than other people, as we can see through people and situations. He says that he can see that I like him. He had a good night last night, helping organize a friend's club night yet he had been taking cocaine and had no sleep.

Although I am enjoying my friend's company, I am distracted the whole time by trying to get Miguel's attention so that the guy can buy me a drink. After all, I need the commission. He is drinking brandy in a big, round tumbler. “What's the matter?” he asks me, extremely concerned, “You seem to be... elsewhere.”

“Nothing,” I smile, “There's nothing wrong.” I place my hand on his.

“Yes there is, tell me,” he insists, “Is it me? Is it something I've said? Please, tell me what's wrong.”

“No, no. I was wondering...could you get me a drink? That's all it was.” I confess with a smile. He buys me a champagne. I relax and stop looking shiftily about me. Instead I look into his brown eyes, admire his fighter's profile; put my arm around him. He is really attractive and turns me on. His arms are thick and muscular. We go into the private room together. He takes a handkerchief out of his pocket, sniffs it then asks if I do coke. I tell him, *no*. I strip down and we kiss. I sit on top of him, stroking his cock through his trousers. We run over time and Tony calls me to come out. I tell the guy that next time I want to do a hundred and fifty show with him.

A middle-aged Portuguese man wants me to do a show for him. He has bought me a drink and now he is asking me to kiss him where his hands are, which are on his penis. I ask him to pay for a one hundred euro show. When we do the show, I make sure that I am in control. He hardly touches me, he does not even get his dick out. I just do a slow strip tease and lap dance for four songs. I call it *recouping*.

Sometimes you get men coming into the club looking for sex yet they still cannot pull. How sad. Arrogant lads who are too scared to talk to the girls and so put up and front and be rude to everyone instead, or they do not want to put their hand in their pocket and buy the girls a drink. You see them sitting by themselves at the end of the night. Cassie was talking to a man for a while and he asked her if she would have sex with him. When she said, *no*, he replied abruptly, “I'll move on now.” He was fiftyish, balding with glasses. He was not exactly Robbie Williams. Later on, he was sitting by himself and I went over to speak to him. I requested a Martini and Seven Up. “How about a blow job?” he offered.

“No,” I said, “a Martini and Seven Up.”

A couple came in looking for a woman. They hung around for a while buying drinks. The man asked me whether he knew anybody that would go back with them and wanted me to help them. All they had to do was pay the right price. The girl, in her late twenties tried to walk out without paying the drinks bill yet as Arabelle called her, Stanley prevented her from leaving. They had not found a woman and they were humiliated in being unable to fulfill their fantasy. “It's not my bill, mate.” She insisted. The couple were prevented from leaving until they had paid. “I could buy a hooker for that price,” she said scornfully, as if she was some kind of an expert.

I want to get out of this business. This double life. Having to make myself attractive to men for money and put up with their put downs and cheesy comments. Having to lie to people about the job that I do. The money always draws me- and the other girls- back. I am a slave to money until I have acquired enough money and then I am emancipated.

I wake in the morning with a pain in my rectum. It will not go away. It feels like a muscle cramp yet inside my body, starting off as a mild ache and progressing until I am lying on all fours in pain. It really hurts. I am being fucked in the arse by an invisible devil. I twist and turn as the phantom cock sears into me, unceasing, punishing me for something I have, or have not done. I go to the bathroom, dizzy and sick. I tell myself that it is normal constipation. I am defecating yet I want to be sick as well. I must be poisoned by all the alcohol that I have been drinking recently. I think that I might be going to die on the toilet, like Elvis. I am moaning, heaving. I really think that I am going to die. There are bad spirits in this house. The spirits are in my head. I am going to die.

After I empty my bowls, the pain resides but I still feel faint and sick. I drink the unsavoury tap water. I cut up some oranges fresh from the trees outside and suck out the juice. I think that everyone in the house must have heard me heaving.

I cannot even take a sip of alcohol. I pour it behind the seats. There are no private shows or pole dances tonight. Arabelle says this is because the police are coming to the club. I sit with a group of Englishmen. When they ask if there is going to be any pole dancing I tell them that the police are coming so there will not be any shows. Most of the group soon leave. Later, Arabelle says that I should not tell clients that the police are coming. I lie and tell her that I did not. *How was I supposed to know?* In the taxi on the way home Caterina asks me who it was who told the clients that the police were coming. I tell her that I do not know and for some reason Arabelle thinks that it is me.

I sat with Miguel, Arabelle, Jules, Miguel and Fernando watching TV in the empty bar whilst waiting for clients. We were tuned into a fashion channel. Fernando was chuckling at the ludicrous men's fashions, such as the underwear collection. Strutting, serious catwalk models wearing underpants with the bottoms cut out or a gun stuck on the front. A ridiculously camp jacket made out of hundreds of fur animals' tails. The oversized woolly jumper and matching ski hat.

The gym owner that I met in the sauna at the gym walked into St J's. I started laughing when I saw him and said, "*Hi!* I don't really work in Black Jack."

We talked for a long time and he bought me two or three champagnes. He said that when girls from my kind of business fill in an application form for his gym, they write, *vendedor*, salesperson, under 'occupation'. Which is true in a way. He used to work as a stripper in Australia. He told me that he was in jail years ago and because Almancil is a small town, he is worried that people are going to find out. I said that it is no-one's business, anyway, and that it is no-one's business what I do. He lit a cigarette and mentioned that he does not smoke much. I laughed, teasing him that I knew all his secrets now. Miguel and Arabelle were laughing behind the bar. "Black Jack, *huh?*" laughed Miguel. The gym owner said that next time I come into the gym I could have a discount.

Amadieu followed me into the dressing room after my show. He kissed me on the mouth, sucked my nipple and then tried to touch my pussy. "*Oh my God!*" he kept repeating. *He is turning into a real twat.*

Almancil *is* a small town. You go to the post office-you see a client. You go to the bank- there is a client that works there behind the counter. Alexandra says that he has got a really big dick. You go to a restaurant- you see a client; like a very tall man, who looks like a giant, who had a half hour show with Ana C. He was there with his wife. I was in The Melting Pot with Caterina. Ray was there and I said *hi*. A little later on the Indian businessman came in for a drink. Sometimes we go out client-spotting just for fun. Caterina says that the Algarve is an extreme place: it is either really creepy or really cool.

Luigi, the guy that stripped off with me in a private show, is obsessed with Cassie. He buys private shows and champagne to be with her all night. She gave him a fake telephone number and he said that he tried to call her twenty times in one day and that he had been driving around Almancil looking for her. She liked him at first yet now she calls him, 'The Slug'. He eventually found out her real telephone number from a boy that Jolene went out with a couple of times. He called her up and told her that she was clever to give him a fake number. Yes, *so* cunning. He became more possessive, not wanting her to talk to any other clients and Arabelle was not pleased with her spending all night with him.

Last night in the private rooms, he said that he was going to kill her. She just laughed. He said that he was not going to go back to St J's anymore because she does not like him. She never lets him touch her. He was asking Jules about me.

I have taken a knife out of the kitchen and kept it under my bed. He knows where we live.

I sleep until late in the day. I sleep so that I do not have to feel pain. It is back. That hopeless fog. The thoughts that trap me, pull me under, isolate and taunt me. Sometimes I think I will be better off dead. Memories of my family never bring comfort or support. Only pain, misunderstanding, anger. A twisted mess. I am sick of doing this kind of work. I am sick of feeling poor, putting on a glossy front when I go into the club when I know I feel so empty inside. I have found a way out of the trap: my college course. I will be able to get other work, start a new life. Yet the money is not as quick and as easy in any other job in this country. I get dressed up for St J's; making my eyes dark, putting on gold eye-shadow. Caterina's pop music pumps from behind her closed door.

The South African-Portuguese guy comes into St J's. This time when we go into the private show,

he gets his cock out.

I have gone off him now.

Zoe

Alexandra is cooking and she asks me if I have the large knife from the draw to chop some vegetables. I take the knife out from under my bed and bring it through to the kitchen along with a plate
and a cup, so that she would not suspect that I had been keeping it in case the client came to the house.

I smoke a joint with Caterina and we go out for a pizza.

Today is a good day.

Ashley

I am back at work and having lots of fun. There is a new black girl and a lot of the old girls. The black girl, Adele, said that I was loud. She means when I am talking to the men in the rooms. I like to joke and laugh with them. Yet now I am aware of keeping a distance, of lying more about my personal details and making sure that they do not steal my soul. That is what it felt like before, when I got ill. It is true though, I am loud.

Luise, with her pale skin, black bobbed hair and bright-blue staring eyes, hardly ever speaks. Yet she is always here. Every time I go to the house she is either folding towels in the shared locker room where everyone sits and waits- colourful blankets over knees- or she is answering the phone, perhaps taking food out of the fridge in the small kitchen and putting it into the microwave. She seems at home and comfortable. Sometimes she sits, listens to the German girls gossip and laugh, her large eyes glassy. She is quiet, secretive, as if she has undergone a private transformation, and is knowing of the erotic arts, of the spirit of prostitution.

I am not the only noisy girl though. Kata is always laughing when we are queuing outside the rooms, giggling even when she goes into the rooms to introduce herself to the men. She jokes that she is not chosen because she is ugly. It is not because she is ugly, it is because she always starts giggling, hand over mouth, when she walks into the rooms. The men must think that she is laughing at them. Some of the men here though, are quite comically unattractive. It is always a surprise when you open the door; you never know what freak from the streets is sitting there.

It was nice, actually, to see the girls again. When I first stepped into the room with the lockers and the TV, the girls were frosty, sitting around, covered in the stripy blankets that they have lying around on the sofas and chairs and flicking silently through the magazines. Then after a while there was a good atmosphere and everyone was having a laugh.

I try to understand what the girls are talking about and a lot of the time they practice speaking and improving their English with me. Most of the girls are intelligent and want to get somewhere in their lives. One woman works in a bank and has debts to pay. She always brings in a newspaper to read and healthy salads and fruit in a Tupperware bowl. She is an older attractive blonde. I notice that she has a hairless pussy.

The older, more experienced workers must be happy that they have found a clean, safe brothel to work in where they will not be abused by the bosses.

I sit next to Adele. She is wearing a type of black, sheer sarong, with jangly bits of metal that tinkle when she walks. She takes it off after a while because the jangling and tinkling is getting on her nerves. Next to me there is the bookshelf which contains the games, like backgammon and solitaire, books, which are mainly in German, and a pile of magazines. Among the magazines I find a catalogue for sex toys, lingerie and really weird rubber-wear. We laugh about the large, latex, bag that is used to cover the entire body, leaving only the head free. The model is smiling from the head of the bag. We are imagining what type of 'fun' you can have with that type of 'garment'. I can really only imagining rolling around in it. Very kinky. The house-lady, Caro, makes a joke about it being 'safer sex'. I show Adele a picture of the ridiculous, crass vibrator with lights and swirling motion that a man once bought me as a surprise, romantic gift; the relationship had ended soon after that.

The first client that I had was a German man, the typical look that I do not like; tall, thin, serious with glasses. He had a large cock and the condom was ludicrously tight. He started to have sex with me but stopped as I do not think that he could feel anything. I told him that he could take the condom off and come on a paper towel. He said he would rather have a massage as a paper towel is too artificial.

Amelia is still here. She has worked here for six months. She likes working in the house. She does not go out, she works and stays at home, not seeing her friends but calling them up on the phone. She is very curious and interested in the business and sex. Perhaps she is addicted to the high that

you get from money and sex. Her brown eyes have that same shiny look as mine have sometimes, pupils large.

A man requested that I have half an hour with him and he also chose the oriental catlike girl to go in after me. He wanted her to walk in five minutes before we finish, for her to watch for a while and then take over. He wanted her to wear a black, open crotch body stocking that he had bought especially. She sits at the table where the house-lady sits to answer the telephone and quietly puts it on. Amelia thought it was all very interesting and wanted me to tell her about it afterwards. I was not really into it. I feel like a novice, I am even having difficulty putting condoms on after my long time off. When the other girl came in, she sat watching me sucking the man off and then joined in, kissing his body. I never kiss the men's bodies. Only my lovers. Or, I should say, my lover, my boy in Prague. I did not tell Amelia about it. It is private.

The hooker look: black PVC mini skirt, pink and black lace low-cut top, a red bra, and the pointy black ankle boots with silver heels that I bought to work in the BonBon club before my hasty departure. Sabine tells me that it looks good. She is thinking of giving up prostitution and going over to Ireland with her cats.

A large-built bearded man is in the Green room. He is looking around the room, at the Chinese lanterns, a cactus in a pot, the erotic batiks. He has a neutral accent. I am not sure where he is from. He tells me that he is from Boston, USA. We mainly talk. He is a journalist and writes on the web. He tells me how Berlin is in sixty five million debt and that soon the arts will start to suffer. I stroke my hands over his large, hairy body as he tells me how the underground system was flooded during the second world war. He used to come to the house and see a Portuguese girl for two years. He said that he had feelings for her, that it was mutual. She had sent him an email the day before and that is why he started thinking about making a visit as he had not been for a while.

Beardy goes down on me. He comes before his cock is inside me.

Another client is in the Green room. Sex hurts. I am almost growling with pain. On all fours on the bed in the green room so he cannot see the expression of pain on my face. He slaps my buttock. If he hits me again I will hit him back. He is just a normal man, though, and pleasant enough. We talk as he is waiting for the shower to be free. He has his own business in cigarette vending machines. He fears that his business will decline as less people are smoking and smoking is banned in many public places in Germany. I think that it is strange, outlawing people to smoke. I notice that one of the fake plants in the green room is actually a marijuana plant. I joke with the client about smoking it. But it is just plastic. He says that there is a lot of home grown in Berlin.

Staring at the cactus. It is on a table at the foot of the bed. A glass-ball ornament. Mirrors all around, fake plants. Music, subtle, atmospheric. Feeling the man from behind. Flicking my hair back. Clenching my teeth. Clenching on him, as he fucks. Thinking of the other girls, they know that pain, staring ahead, hands on either side of my shoulders. Yet, now, not fear, no it is a job. I am professional. Smile afterwards, take the roll of paper towels, put the condom inside and place it into the small swing-bin. He gets dressed, maybe has another shower. I feel normal, happy. Think about the other girls. Go back into one of the bathrooms, wash myself, gargle with mouthwash. Spit it out. Then maybe I have a cigarette in the kitchen. All the girls have to smoke in the kitchen. Sometimes I sit there alone, drinking cups of tea, sad, smoking. Looking through the magazines; Britney Spears, stars on holiday gamboling in the waves, spiteful close-ups of cellulite. Other times the kitchen is crowded and I am laughing with the other girls.

The house-lady is making a cake in the kitchen. It is sponge-based with some type of yellow, cream over it. She offers me and another girl a slice. We look at each other. She offers a strawberry cordial drink to the girls. “Oh, *ja*!” Juliane clasps her hands together and takes a sip. Caro may be funny sometimes, and seem nice, hugging the girls and joking. Yet she looks down on us still.

I am in the dungeon. A large, faceless man, grey haired. I am his slave. Worshipping at his feet. Kissing his feet. He wants me manacled, around the neck. We search through the assortment of chains and collars. There are mirrors all around. It is all black, leather, arm-holds on black chairs. Masks, whips. He wants me on all fours. I am his slave. A good slave.

So what did I do at the weekend? I worked in a brothel, became someone's sex slave for half an hour in the dungeon-like studio room (although the client could not find a neck collar that fit me without it restricting my breathing), smoked some weed and went to a bar. I met up with the young blonde actor that I had met in the park. And the weekend before? I went to a hotel room with some guy. He looked like Santa Claus.

I was at home and the telephone rang. It was Klara who ran the escort service using the girls from the brothel. I said that it would be no problem to go to the hotel. When I knocked on the hotel door a girl answered. Klara had told me the wrong hotel and I had to get another taxi back to the right one. This time I got the right room. The man wanted to order tea. *Very civilised. A nice cup of tea and a shag.* I asked if I could go into the bathroom. When I came out he was pretending to idly read a book . I knew he was pretending because when I walked in the room I saw him suddenly open it and glance down. He kept asking about the tea, wondering where his pot of Earl Grey was. The long awaited tea finally arrived. We ended up in some type of tedious sixty-nine position on the bed. I then had to play with myself, rubbing my clit as we lay in the sixty-nine position, as he told me that I was not trying hard enough, I had to try harder, that I had nice big tits.

A young boy chooses me. He is the kind of person that I would get on with in my 'normal' life. He has shaved hair with dreadlocks at the back. He has a good body. We are on the king-size bed, lying on the Indian-patterned throw. Music is playing. I ask him if he wants a drink and he follows me into the kitchen, as if we are at home together. We talk as I make a cup of coffee. He has been waiting outside for an hour. We go back into the room. Everything is going well. We are fucking, I am lying on my back, he is on his knees, head held back a body taut. Suddenly he stops. He says that he is sorry, “I can't do this, I can't do it.” He gets his clothes, gets dressed in a hurry- *sorry*, *sorry*- and runs out.

Sabine is making a hot chocolate in the kitchen. I ask her if it is better than sex. “Oh, yes,” she says. I liked Sabine the first time that I met her. She was sitting on the sofa in underwear, pale skin, dark hair. Not classically beautiful, or as young as the other girls, but attractive and with a sense of humour. We are always laughing together. Sometimes so loud that we get told off by the house-lady. Sabine is worried that a man entering the house saw her outside when she was wearing her everyday clothes. She felt ashamed when a few minutes later she had to present herself to him. She thought that he looked embarrassed too. She keeps this life and her ordinary life totally separate.

“By day an ordinary woman, by night...*Superhooker!*” we joke. Sabine flashes her robe open, “*Superhooker!*” she yells as the house lady, Caro tells us to be quiet and I hold my hand over my mouth to try and stop laughing. Sabine says that she has to dye her hair again, she thinks she is getting too old for this job.

“You can do anything you want to,” I say “You're Superhooker!”

Lora is telling us about last night; she was working as an escort in a hotel. She has a deep, slow voice and draws on her cigarette as she speaks in almost perfect, accented English. Lora is dark haired and pale skinned, like Sabine. Her hair is very short and black, she looks like someone from the chic 1920s. Last night there was a storm. Wind whistling around the buildings, umbrellas twisted inside out, tiles falling, accidents. The man she was with wanted to be dominated. His wife had died a year ago. He wanted to call her by his wife's name. They had anal, he dominated her, then he fell to her feet, crying, she was crying. And he was wearing a cock ring. Sabine said he was a switcher in human disguise; like vampire taking her energy. An older Portuguese woman and a curly-haired German in a red dress come in to the kitchen and we laugh about the weird guy and his

cock ring.

Sabine brings in her own CDs to play instead of the music they automatically have over the speakers. She tells us about the time that she had an hour with a guy that was pure hell. The CD that was playing was '*Aha*' and it got stuck on the track '*Hunting High and Low*'. As the man was pounding away unimaginatively, '*Hunting High and Low*' repeated over and over again for the whole hour. She cannot listen to that song now without it bringing back bad memories. Laura and I sing in unison, "*Hunting high and low!*"

"Life is hard enough," says the blonde woman in the red dress, whilst rolling her own cigarette, "we have to have a laugh sometimes."

Why are we hated? Are we harming anyone? Conning anyone out of their money? Are we thieving from them? No, it is a straight exchange. A deal. No one is harmed, are they? Really? Why are we seen as dirty? We are more than aware of our bodies, any changes in them that may indicate ill health. We have to use condoms, to be clean, to stay beautiful. Why are we pitied? Stereotyped? Why are we stigmatised? Why, why are we seen as different, hardly human at all? Does the exchange cheapen us? Why are we seen as exploited when many of us have been treated in a derogatory manner in 'normal' types of work and in 'normal' sexual relationships?

Yet, we *are* different. Why?

A young, sexy man chooses me. He is not German. Some Eastern European country. He wants champagne and an hour with me. One of the oriental girls looks sulky and jealous as I grip the fizzy wine yelling, "We're going to have some fun!". We have to take a key and go to the other rooms in the converted apartment next door as all the rooms are occupied- climbing the stairs, being careful to respect the neighbours, who are a family. We go into the 'Tropical Room', with its flora and fauna, murals of birds and mirrored ceiling.

His cock is unnaturally, supernaturally large, with huge veins sticking out. Even where it joins his body at the base of his cock, there is a huge ridge of flesh. He says that his last girlfriend had finished with him. I think it was because his cock was too big.

Snow is falling outside. The other girl, Mina, does not care. She looks sad. Somewhere else I imagine her to be an intellectual, a newsreader. Here, she wears a slight scowl, a low cut top and counts her money, puts the house's percentage in the envelope. There is a young blonde girl here called Gisela who is very popular with the quests. She has had her breasts enlarged as well. I do not think that she is happy with them because they are still not very big. Not as big as mine, which look more like a D than a C cup. I tell Gisela that I smoke weed. Her boyfriend sells weed for only five euros a gram. I tell her about Nabil. She says that Turkish men are all the same. She invites me around to her apartment. She has got really bad cystitis. She is drinking lots of water. She has an escort service to do. As soon as she goes into the hotel room she has to piss on the client.

A man walks past wearing bright red plastic pants. They glare against the grey atmosphere and sky. A few brown leaves roll around. The pants are not even stylish. They look ridiculous and are unintentionally three-quarter length. Only in gay *Schoneburg* do people seem to dress like this. All these apartments on this street, all these respectable dentists, antique shops, book shops and hip cafes used to be gay brothels until AIDS changed everything in the eighties and they were shut down.

Gisela lives the other side of the city. There is a sex cinema, then to the left, up some graffiti-covered stairs I find her apartment. Her boyfriend is Russian. I smoke some weed with them and buy four grams. They ask me a few questions. I do not like being asked questions. I will not tell them my age and they try to guess. We look at the website for the brothel. She shows me the photographs, with slightly altered features, featuring her with another girl in the blue room. As I have no photograph, there is just a cartoon character of a sexy girl with the name 'Ashley' underneath. So that is who the clients are expecting when they come to the club.

I am in the kitchen talking to Romy. Someone asks her, in German, *where did she learn to speak English?* She says that she is an "educated hooker." She trained to be a lawyer then had a baby by her English boyfriend, although she is not with him anymore. There are problems because he is violent. She has to go to court to testify against him but she does not want to and she wants her son to be able to see him; she does not think that her son is afraid of him. One of the other girls in the club reported him to the police because they thought her child was at risk, so now there are bitch wars between the two of them. She cannot go to Poland now to have plastic surgery because of the court case and when she called up the doctor he told her that it is the second time she has postponed this and he will have to cancel for good.

Caro wants me to work another hour. I tell her that I am tired and want to go home. She says, "Why? What's wrong with the house? It's a nice house. You could be out there fucking on the streets."

"Is that what you think I'll be doing if I wasn't here?" I ask, angrily. Caro says that she is joking. I could hear the irritation in her voice. She was not joking. It is what she really thinks, it is what most people think. They look down on us.

I can spin around the pole on my stomach, a trick which Miguel taught me. I can climb up the pole and slide down upside down. I can spin elegantly around, both clockwise and anti-clockwise. I can climb up and stop half way down with my leg out straight. I can spin backwards, legs folded beneath me and head held back. The girls watch me practice every day. I get hot under the lights and wipe my sweat off the pole with white napkins from the bar. My arms ache and I get bruises from practicing but it is worth it. Sometimes some of the girls get up and join me. I get an amazing reaction from the guys in the club, huge cheers. I never let it go to my head though because I know that there is always someone ready to pull me down. I move slower and more sensually to R 'n' B. Even the girls have told me that my shows are a lot better and far sexier.

St J's is not very busy at the moment and I am getting sick of talking to the men who come in here, having to put up with their rudeness and their boring conversation. I concentrate on my shows instead.

There is still jealousy from the girls. Some are snakes, others, weasels. If Ana C was a member of the animal kingdom, she would be a weasel. Her features are not dissimilar and she has too much hair to be a snake. She is always bitching about me to clients and she gossips to the other girls. Then she talks to me or we hang out together with Caterina at the beach. Caterina is less of a weasel. More of a mink. A small, deceptive, glamorous Mink.

One night I went into the dressing room and some boots that I had bought off Cassie, that I wear for my show, had been taken. They are knee high tie-ups, the sort that J-Lo wears. I told Arabelle that my boots had been taken. She appeared unconcerned. I looked around for them and found that someone had dumped them in a bin just outside the dressing room. I told Tony. He said “What can I do about it?” He is *supposed to be* the security guard.

I have bought a new hairpiece, which is long, dark and wavy. I slick back my own hair then clip the hairpiece onto the back. It looks sexy. Caterina, however, told me that the girls are jealous. How can anybody be jealous of a nylon hairpiece?

A group of Saudi Arabian men enter the club. There are about thirty of them. They sit in one side of the club. The girls gravitate towards the back of the club, first sitting opposite them in a group, and gradually sauntering individually or in twos or threes over to their table. They are all dancing and drinking. They all party together on the dance floor. I watch them. Most of the girls are with them. I do not care anymore. I am bored of the men. Bored of the competitiveness between the girls.

Later, Tony is talking to one of the Saudi Arabians outside the private rooms. His friend is doing a half hour show with Claudia. “I respect your religion,” Tony is saying, “I have a friend, he is a Muslim and he doesn't drink or go out to clubs. I suppose there are nightclubs in Saudi Arabia?”

“No.” he replies.

“Oh, yeah, I really respect your religion because of the discipline that you have and everything. I think It's a really good thing to do. I really respect your religion”

I am in the kitchen back at the house. It is dark outside. Caterina is sitting on the work surface. There is a pan of rice and a frying pan of dark meat with onions on the cooker. A slimy t-towel hanging over the edge of the sink. I am at the table drinking a cup of tea and eating a bread roll with cheese, ham and olives. Caterina said that the Saudi Arabian man that Claudia was with was going to do a half hour show with Vicky. He wanted to have anal sex. When Vicky saw the size of his cock she said, “I don't do that.” Claudia went with him instead. Tony had asked Vicky whether the man had a big cock. “There are some real sickos about,” I say chewing on my bread roll, feeling slightly nauseous. *Eurghh, vomito.....*

Ana C has been talking to Ray. He pulled up his shirt to show her where his son had attacked him with a knife. Whilst I am talking to her, the South African-Portuguese guy comes into the club. He

is standing at the bar. Eventually I walk up to him. He looks away, then, looks on the floor and mumbles something. I feel like I do not want to be with him and I say, “OK! You don't want to talk to me today!” and walk off really quickly. In fact I do not feel like speaking to any of the men that come in here.

Arabelle had told me to go up to a table and ask a guy if I could join him. When I walked up to him and said, *hi*, he just said, “I'm not interested,” with a flippant, dismissive flick of the hand. I said that I only had come over to say *hello*.

Jules found it amusing and made fun of me about it all night. “But, Jules, I thought I was irresistible.” Although I was laughing about it with Jules, it does undermine your confidence, particularly knowing that you are being judged purely on your appearance. A client made a comment about Jolene, saying to that her body is good but her face is not that beautiful.

Vicky starts talking to the South African-Portuguese. They go into the private rooms for a half hour show. I feel that he is doing this to deliberately get at me. Or perhaps it is because they both take cocaine. I have left in the taxi by the time they finish and so he cannot have his moment of lame glory when he comes back out and sees me sitting there.

The following evening, a Portuguese man approaches me and tells me that a friend of his told him that I will let him touch in the private room. *Whatever.* I tell him that I can do a fifty euro show. There are not many clients and I am thinking of the money I need to make. I tell him that he can touch a little bit. As I strip for him in the private show he will not take his hands off me. I am backed up in a corner and he will not stop. He is a large man with brown, wavy hair and is heavy handed. He is hindering my strip show with his constant groping and after two songs I still have not taken off my g- string. He tells me that we had an agreement. When we go out he complains to Arabelle. He says to her that I did not let him touch and that I did not strip fully. I tell him that everyone knows me in here and that I did let him touch. I am arguing with Arabelle and she is taking his side, “I *did* let him touch.” She asks Alexandra to come over and the guy is given a free fifty euro show. I tell Miguel what happened. He says that Amadieu's rules are that the client is always right. I tell him that the client is ripping them off. When it is time for Arabelle to pay me, she hesitates at the till, firstly only giving me my money for pole dancing and drinks. I ask her if I am going to get paid for the private show. She reluctantly gives me the twenty five euros and says that she is going to speak with Amadieu.

I am waiting for the taxi with Caterina. Arabelle is shouting at me. “I suppose it’d be alright if I was being FUCKED UP THE ARSE,” I say, within earshot of Tony, referring to *you-know-who*, “I suppose it’d be alright then, *wouldn't it*?” Arabelle carries on shouting at me and I cover my ears. There are clients standing around the bar, listening and watching. Vicky says that Arabelle made her cry for a whole day once.

It is six o'clock in the morning.

Outside the white villa. Gaspar is sitting by the door. He knows this house, these woods better than anyone. He has been here the longest. The sky is pink. Bats are flying around the tall pine trees. I am nervous, waiting for my taxi to take me to the train station. I stand up. Bats encircle me and fly really close. I hold out my arms.

The End.

Thank you to all the Superhookers and their secret selves.

Amber Libra is a British writer. She has worked in the sex industry as a stripper and a prostitute. Documenting what she saw and experienced in words, this novel gradually emerged. Amber Libra has lived a duplicitous, double life. She no longer works in the sex industry as she could finally break free of the chains that once held her and kept pulling her back. Some women can never break free, some do not want to. Yet they all have a voice, they all have a story and they all have a reason.