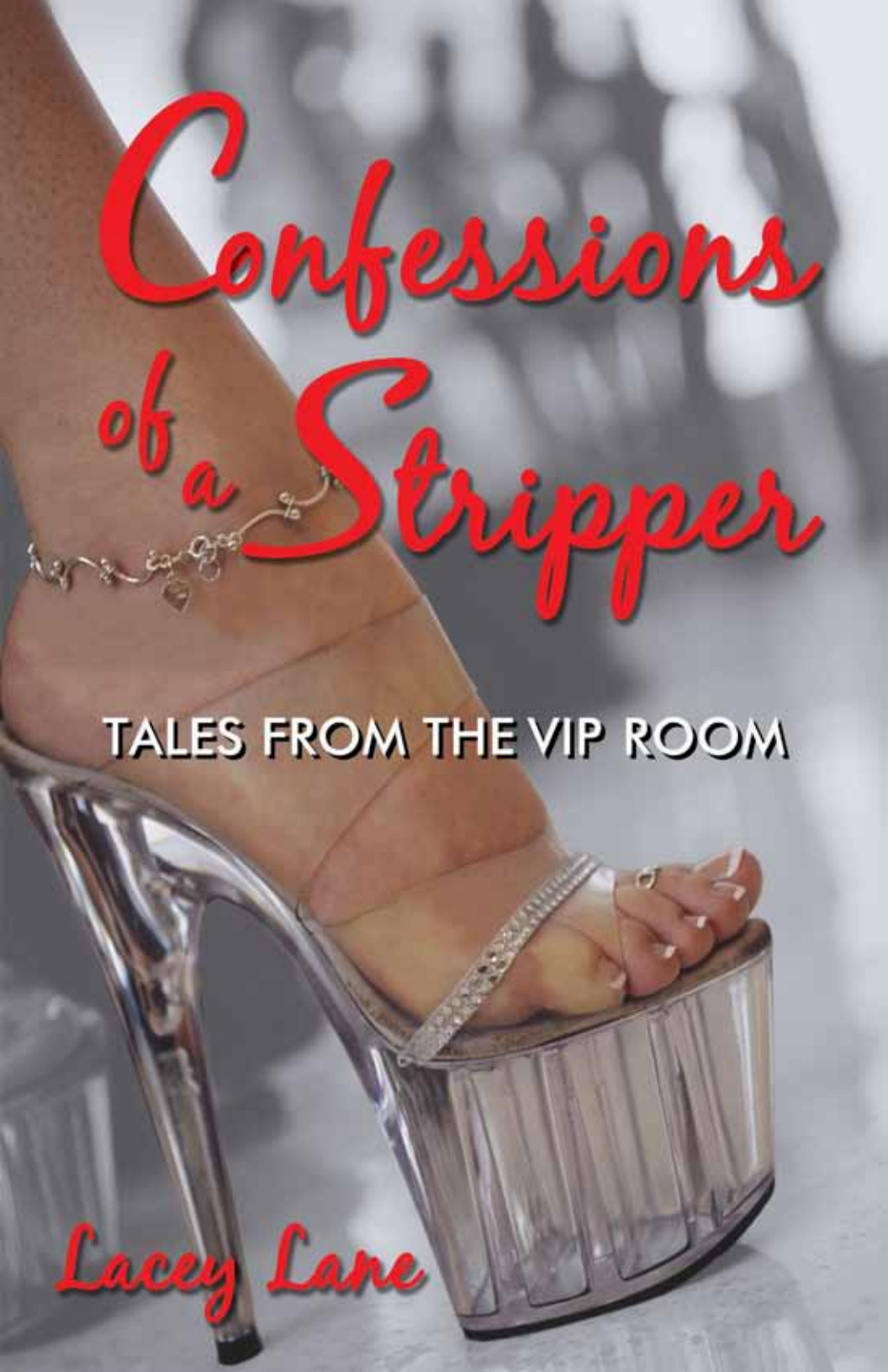


A close-up photograph of a person's lower leg and foot. The person is wearing a clear, high-heeled shoe with a thick, faceted platform sole and a thin stiletto heel. A silver chain anklet with a small heart charm is wrapped around the ankle. The background is a blurred, bokeh-style image of what appears to be a stage or club setting with lights.

Confessions of a Stripper

TALES FROM THE VIP ROOM

Lacey Lane

Confessions
of a
Stripper

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TALES FROM THE VIP ROOM

by Lacey Lane

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Dedication

To all the girls baring their bodies
and their souls. Show it while you've got it,
make it while you can, and never
be ashamed of your profession.

Acknowledgements

I'm indebted to my publisher, Anthony Curtis and Huntington Press, for giving my project a home. To my editor extraordinaire, Deke Castleman, for giving my manuscript clarity and direction. And to my husband, Adam, for giving me love, support, and understanding.

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Introduction

*M*y name is Lacey Lane and I take off my clothes for a living. At least, I used to. I retired my g-string awhile back and said goodbye to the stripping scene. During my seven years of topless tenure, I performed at a plethora of strip clubs, bikini bars, and exotic entertainment establishments throughout the country, using more aliases than any ten participants in the federal government's Witness Protection Program. As you can probably imagine, I met thousands of interesting and unusual people along the way—heavy stress on unusual—and the stories I took with me deserve to be chronicled, if only for their entertainment value. Those who have had the pleasure of watching me strut my stuff already got more than their money's worth.

This book is full of outlandish tales from my time in the peek-a-booty biz, but it's more than that. It's a Strip Club 101 of sorts; not only will my accumulated wisdom furnish you with a little extra insight into the world of the topless

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dancer, but it should help you get more bang for your buck the next time you visit your favorite skin palace. While it's no secret that all you macho hairy-chested testicle owners rule the modern world (although Oprah Winfrey and others are clawing their way into serious contention), when you step inside a strip club, the roles are immediately reversed. Here, the dancers are the hunters and the men are the prey. So trust me when I tell you, you need all the help you can get.

Tales from the VIP Room isn't a scathing tell-all or some tawdry tabloid-esque exposé, so all names and places have been changed to protect the innocent—or the guilty, depending on how you look at it. But don't think for a second that this account is any less accurate or entertaining. Quite the contrary, actually. Omitting true identities has actually afforded me the literary freedom to serve you my memories on the half-shell. In essence, raw and untainted.

Somewhere between inanimate smut magazines and full-service prostitution is the niche occupied by strip clubs. This fascinating industry, an equal mixture of endless fantasy and hardcore reality, is different for all those involved in it—be it for business or pleasure. For me, it was a combination of both. And so, without further ado, I give you *Confessions of a Stripper: Tales from the VIP Room*. Enjoy!

Part One

Confessions of a Stripper

Welcome to the Show

A close friend of mine once said that there are more strip clubs in America than Chinese restaurants. I believe he's correct. But as you might expect, no two are alike.

Some strip clubs are posh megabuck establishments routinely frequented by superstar athletes and major celebrities from the music, television, and film worlds. Other clubs are sleazy skankfests, little more than fronts for nickel-and-dime prostitution, which appeal to the minimum-wage set. Some are architectural marvels with elaborate décor. Others seem to have been thrown together overnight, haphazardly furnished courtesy of a bargain-basement yard sale. Some have world-class menus with cuisine that rivals four- and five-star restaurants. Others serve grub far beneath the standards of what you'd expect to find at a decrepit service station along a seldom-used roadway. Some are chock full of beautiful and talented dancers, women you could easily find on the pages of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. Others offer up scary-looking

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hags who conjure up spells and ride on broomsticks. But regardless of their differences, all strip clubs have at least one thing in common: They're recognized throughout the world by men (and women) as locales where fantasies can be indulged, legally.

Every now and then, a strip club comes under fire for some violation or another—owners and employees have been indicted for everything from drugs and prostitution to racketeering and extortion—but for the most part, the laws are obeyed and the clubs remain in business. Legal issues aside, the people who work at the strip clubs have been branded by many as perverted and loathsome denizens of debauchery. The truth is, those descriptions can be appropriately applied to anyone—from jobless vagrants to members of Congress and everyone in between. It simply depends on the specific individual. At one point, William Jefferson Clinton was said to be perverted, loathsome, and debauched, along with a host of even more critical adjectives, and at the time he was the leader of the free world!

Prior to my submersion into the world of topless dancing, I, too, bought into the “badge of dishonor” stigma that most strippers and their associates are forced to wear. But my ignorance quickly gave way to enlightenment when I saw with my own eyes what really happens on the inside. Still, certain generalizations surrounding the positions within the topless industry, and the people who fill them, are strangely accurate. And due to these consistencies, I often wondered if there were established criteria for a club's personnel.

For example, strip club managers almost always seem to fit that Guido-esque image: Tony Soprano wanna-bes long before *The Sopranos* hit the small screen. Maybe it's the aura of power and respect that goes hand in hand with those who are, or claim to be, mobbed-up, but whatever the reasoning, I was amazed by how many club bosses shared the modern gangster persona. One club manager who was as Italian

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as Woody Allen went so far as to speak with an obviously adopted “fuhged-daboudit” lilt and came off sounding like a bad version of a Budweiser commercial.

Those club managers who didn’t play at being wiseguys usually looked as if they belonged in a circus sideshow. With elaborate tattoos that would make sci-fi animators envious, eyebrow and lip piercings that caused problems with airport security, and a dress code that Marilyn Manson would shy away from, these creatures of the night would never be found in the boardroom of a Fortune 500 company—unless they were there to collect a tab that some executive flaked out on. Ironically, some of the sweetest strip club managers in the business, those I dealt with, at any rate, are of the freak-show variety.

Generally speaking, a club’s clientele determines what the owner/manager looks like. If there are a lot of expensive cars in the valet lot, I’d bet a week’s worth of tips that the man making the decisions wears a loose-fitting gold watch and a thick gold chain around his neck with some kind of oversized gaudy pendant. Also, his thinning hair is probably slicked back and he perpetually chomps on a \$20 cigar. However, show me a club with a “Nude Girls” sign out front and a self-parking lot filled with beater cars and broken bottles, and 99 times out of 100 the boss is someone who always looks like he’s dressed for Halloween.

When it comes to bartenders, the strip clubs certainly get their fair share of characters. The majority of those I encountered were always yammering about some elaborate get-rich-quick scheme, usually involving real estate, and when they finally made it, they’d come back and take me away from all this, as if I were some damsel in distress needing to be rescued. Bartenders across the board are known for constantly perusing the Help Wanted ads, looking for better gigs. Strip club drink-slingers are no exception, except there’s just as good a chance that they’re looking in the sports

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section for a spread on an upcoming game; most of the bartenders I knew were always betting on something. And every bartender had his special little trick, a well-rehearsed move he performed for you right before asking you out, thinking that it would improve his chances of getting the date. Over the years, I witnessed many. One had a bottle-juggling routine that would have put the antics in Cocktail to shame. Another regaled you with obscure facts, a la the mailman from Cheers, while mixing your drink. But the best was the bartender who doused his thumb with grenadine, then lit it on fire so he could showily light your cigarette. If I remember correctly, he was missing part of an eyebrow! Those guys would use the same moves—and the same pick-up lines—on all the dancers. For the record, I never dated a mixologist from a club I was working at. From my experience, bartenders were the biggest “trophy-date” hunters out there, far worse than the customers. And they weren’t even paying for the privilege!

Bouncers—notoriously big and dumb—were always complaining about that one major injury that kept them from reaching the pros. I’m sad to say it, but in all my ass-shaking years, not once did I meet a doorman who could carry on a meaningful conversation for more than a few minutes. Too bad, really, because many of those guys were major hunks—chiseled facial features with bodies to match. A shame that they had the intelligence of lampposts. That’s not to say their imposing size and strength weren’t greatly appreciated. Dancers depend on the presence of these dimwit gorillas to keep them safe. Every now and then a customer (usually a drunk) gets unruly and an example has to be made. You don’t guard Fort Knox with water pistols. Well, the dancers are a strip club’s gold bars and keeping them safe requires an effective means of protection.

Only once did I go out on a date with a bouncer I worked with. He had asked me out a few times, but I’d always turned

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him down. It's not that I wasn't attracted to him—I was—but I didn't like mixing work and play. However, he was persistent and I eventually caved in. Big mistake.

He took me to a prime rib buffet, my first indication that it was going to be my last date with him. Not that I'm some prissy missy, but I could have thought of a zillion other places for a solid first impression instead of a \$9.99 all-you-can-eat heart disease festival where every patron looked like a stand-in for the Hindenburg.

After watching him devour approximately half a cow (I almost became a vegetarian that night), which he washed down with what seemed like an entire keg of beer, and listening to his endless tales of playing football for a major college in the Midwest and how he should have been drafted in the first round except for some kind of problem with his back, not to mention his falling out with the coaching staff, he suggested we go back to his place to catch the end of the Monday Night Football game and get to know each other better. I quickly chimed in with a better plan: Take me home immediately and never ask me out again.

Finally, there are the dancers, the most important people in any strip club. Without mincing words, dancers always have drama in their lives. I was no exception. But given the nature of the profession, it would be hard to imagine it any other way. Regardless of what you think or what you know or what you think you know, earning a living as an exotic dancer (regardless of how exotic you really are) is no easy mission. It's hard on the body and hard on the mind, even if you have no problem with showing yourself off to total strangers. When working, dancers are required to always be "on," like an actor or actress filming a five-hour scene (or longer) without interruption. Ask any of the most respected thespians on the planet and I'm sure they'd agree—such a task would be nearly impossible to pull off, let alone to do

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effectively. Yet this is precisely what a stripper does on a nightly basis.

There are many reasons women gravitate toward this profession: the lure of big money; the prospect of meeting wealthy men; because they are exhibitionistic in nature; or simply because they can't see themselves settling into the drudgery of a traditional nine-to-five job. Whatever their reasons, and the varying backgrounds from which they hail, it's easy to imagine how a few nights a week of portraying flesh-and-blood visual sex toys for what literally amounts to an audience of wallets with heartbeats could create some tension. Perhaps that's why the turnover rate is so high and why women come and go from the different clubs—and the profession itself—like addicted gamblers from an OTB. Bottom line, it's a tremendously difficult profession, but one that can be extremely rewarding—for the right individuals.

It certainly was for me.

2

The Psyche of a Topless Dancer

To truly understand the world of topless dancing and all it entails, you first need to understand—or *attempt* to understand—the dancers, themselves. I touched on this briefly in the Introduction, but I have no qualms about stating it again: The strippers are the very core of the exotic entertainment business. Without them, the tassels just won't twirl. Obviously, like the clubs they perform in, no two dancers are ever completely alike. But one commonality shared by the overwhelming majority is their love of money. "Greed is good" is how Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*) summed it up. In today's MTV-inspired lingo, "Dollar dollar bill y'all" would be the slang translation. Regardless of how it's conveyed, the message is the same and cold hard cash was the sole reason I shook my tight toned ass and firm (at that point, natural) boobs at every Tom, Dick, and Harry (and occasionally Jane) four to five nights a week for the better part of seven years.

Although it didn't start out that way.

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Not even close.

Growing up, I had a severe problem with self-esteem. I was extremely attractive. I had a killer body and tons of friends. And I never once had difficulty getting a date. Forgive my egotistical self-touting, but I had to beat the guys off with a stick. However, self-doubt absolutely consumed me. I had a terrible time making decisions, believing whichever choice I made would be the wrong one, so I opted to have someone else take the reins. I worried a lot, too, about anything and everything. Like chronic depression or some form of addiction, it wasn't something I could control. For example, I worried about getting bad grades in school, which would get me into trouble at home. Of course, I never did receive those bad grades, but the knots in my stomach were always present, ready to constrict at a moment's notice. I was also plagued by separation anxiety, but that has just as much to do with being a twin as it does with what I believe is the root of my evils: my abandonment issues.

My mother and father divorced when I was two years old. Six months later he remarried—a woman with two children. Instant family, just add *my* father. His new family consumed him and, for all intents and purposes, we were completely forgotten. Child-support payments were also forgotten. It was as if to him, we'd never existed. Over the next 11 months, wherever my mother went, my sister and I went with her. The grocery store, the dentist, the *bathroom*, you name it—we were both total cling-ons. But then my mother started dating again, leaving the house for hours and days at a time, and my feelings of loss and abandonment began to manifest. Now, it wasn't as if my sister and I were left alone in some dark decrepit basement without food or water. Quite the contrary. We were living with my grandparents at the time, in a luxurious house on Long Island, chock full of maids and attendants, ready to wait on us hand and foot. But that didn't affect my yearning or quell my feelings

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of being left behind. Many times I woke up in the middle of the night and went to the stairs or the front door to wait for my mother to return, and that's where someone would find me in the morning, asleep on the floor.

This went on for the better part of seven years until my mom remarried. That union effected a new emotion in me, one that came from deep within—anger. I had always been the sweet one, a total Pollyanna, always looking for and finding the best in any situation. But my new stepfather was a harsh taskmaster, not to mention extremely over-protective. So over-protective, in fact, that leaving the house was impossible. My friends had to come up with ingenious ways to smuggle me out. Authority had been passed to my stepfather and it infuriated me that he was now the disciplinarian. One incident in specific I will take with me to the grave. My stepfather found a few small pieces of a Devil Dog dessert treat on the carpeted stairs. He gathered my two sisters and me to find out who the culprit was. When no one confessed, he snatched up the crumbs and angrily rubbed them into our hair. But despite his overbearing nature and cruel disciplinary tactics, my stepfather had a very strong work ethic. Early on, he taught me the value of money, although putting me to work at the age of 13 (after-school jobs at grocery and ice-cream stores) to help contribute was a bit much. It's not like we were even close to being poor or destitute.

Throughout my high school years, I didn't think about my real father at all, although I'm relatively certain that the ease with which he erased me from his memory contributed largely to my self-esteem issues, issues that were like rusty daggers in my side. I knew I had to do something to overcome them—otherwise they would most assuredly overcome me, to the point that I wouldn't be able to function normally. What exactly does that mean? I couldn't really tell you. Would I crawl under my covers and wait to die? Would I go on an eating binge and balloon to 900 pounds? Would

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I put a gun to my head and pull the trigger? Who knows? At the time, I certainly didn't.

I read a few books on depression, thinking they might help me to work out the issues for myself. From them, I took comfort in the fact that other girls (and boys) out there had the same feelings I did, and that helped me to feel less like an outcast, but they didn't do a damn thing to "cure" me. A shrink was also on tap, but for \$250 an hour he just regurgitated things that I had told him and suggested possible roots for my issues, the majority relating to my father and stepfather. No duh, Doc! A stranger on a bus could have told me as much—and saved me \$249 in the process. What I desperately needed to know was how to make those feelings go away. And as the years passed, I realized it was something I would have to do for myself. Sadly, I wasn't getting any closer to an answer.

One night, during my sophomore year in college, a bunch of my guy friends decided to go to a strip joint and asked me to come along. I'd never been to a strip club before—in my mind, they were reserved for drunken bachelor parties or horny old men who never got to see live naked women unless they paid for the privilege. On top of that, the thought of a woman—and not just any woman, *me!*—going to one of those lewd dens of iniquity was a completely alien concept. Understand, I wasn't prudish, or prissy, or stuck-up. I just had old-fashioned views on sex. Some of my girlfriends were real boy-toys, piling up one-night stands like they were designer outfits on closeout sales. I, on the other hand, was always relationship-minded and monogamous; for that reason, I didn't lose my virginity until I was 18. It was the most sacred thing I owned (next to my Trans Am) and I wasn't about to let anyone get a free ride until I was plenty good and ready to have a passenger.

But whether I wanted to admit it or not, I had always secretly wondered what really happened inside one of those

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places. I had heard so many stories that I often wondered what was fiction and what was fact. And now that I had the opportunity to find out for myself once and for all, I was not about to let it pass.

On a scale of Phyllis Diller to Marilyn Monroe, the strip club we went to that night rated a solid Carmen Electra—what I would consider the perfect combination of sleazy and sexy. The guys each paid a cover charge of \$10, a bargain when you consider what they got to see. My admission was free, but the gorilla-like doorman's reptilian stare-and-smile combo made me feel as if I'd paid the full fare—with my soul.

Inside, the set-up was impressive. I'd been in numerous bars before, but nothing like this. There was a large, sweeping, ebony-colored bar off to the right with about 20 stools, thickly cushioned oversized booths around the room's perimeter that looked as if they could seat six adults comfortably, and a host of two-, four-, and six-top tables. Three stages dominated the room. The two flanking the main stage were smaller by about a third and each had a gleaming silver pole—like the kind you'd find in a firehouse—running from floor to ceiling. The main stage jutted farther into the room than the two pole-stages and was connected to what I presumed was the dressing room by a narrow disco-light catwalk seemingly right out of *Dance Fever*. To the left of the catwalk was the source of the sounds: a raised glass-encased DJ booth. The entire club was bathed in an orange-amber glow that reminded me of a snifter of Grand Marnier. It's too bad the club didn't smell as appealing—just a sweet-and-sour commingling of cheap perfume, cigarette smoke, and sweat. But there was an additional aroma in the room, an overpowering bouquet common to casinos, card rooms, and racetracks. Now that I really think about it, perhaps it was more of an aura than an actual smell. I'm talking, of course, about money.

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At the moment we entered the club, the pole stages were empty. All eyes were locked in rapt attention on the main stage where two centerfold-quality blondes, naked except for their colored-dental-floss thongs, were smearing each other with iridescent body paint. Under the many pin-spot black lights, which were trained on the girls like snipers' sighting lasers, the body paint reacted like the skin of chameleons walking across a Twister board.

My guy friends whooped, hollered, and high-fived each other, as if their favorite football team had just won the Super Bowl, before making beelines for an open table not far from the stage, leaving me behind as if I were nothing more than a rusty car part on the side of the road. But it wouldn't have mattered. I don't think I could have followed them under my own power if I had wanted to. I was actually frozen in place, assaulted by a mixture of emotions: shock, fascination, and embarrassment.

Shock: Two women were doing this in public!

Fascination: Two women were doing this in public!

Embarrassment: Two women were doing this in public and, based on my initial visual recon of the room, besides the dancers and the cocktail waitresses I was the only other woman in the place!

Eventually, my legs thawed and I was able to walk to the table my buddies had selected. With the two dancers now bent over, butt cheek to butt cheek, grabbing their ankles and coating each other's buns with the funky fingerpaint, I could tell that my friends, along with every other hot-and-bothered male in the place, were envisioning a quarterback-and-center scenario unlike any you'd ever see on Monday Night Football.

After another 30 seconds, the lather-fest ended. The two girls were showered with applause and whistles, not to mention swarms of tossed, handed, and tucked bills. It took the two of them nearly ten minutes to snatch, pluck,

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and scoop all the greenbacks that came their way. It was at that moment that a new emotion forced its way into my consciousness: awe.

Standing on the raised platform before me were two five-foot-nothing featherweight girls, seemingly not much older than I was, and they had every swinging dick in the place basically licking their boots. (I'm sure that, had one of the girls actually been wearing boots, she would have had plenty of volunteers to tongue-scrub them 'til they shined!) Even my friends, muscle-bound tough guys who played football for a major Division I school, were reduced to the equivalent of gelatinous masses in a matter of seconds. Wow! Had I not seen it for myself, I wouldn't have believed it. But the proof was right there in front of me—and they were still raking in their dough.

It was truly empowering. I felt proud to be a woman. My thoughts momentarily turned to my Political Science 101 class where, a few days before, we had briefly discussed the Equal Rights Amendment. Eyes locked on the strippers, I thought that it was a crying shame America's political process wasn't based solely on the happenings inside a strip club. If that were the case, the balance of power in this country would be vastly different.

As I watched the girls fetch the last of their cash, I started wondering what kind of iron constitution was required to step out on stage and let it all hang out—literally—in front of what amounted to a pack of hungry lions. I was certain that not one single woman who performed in a strip club thought of herself as ugly or worthless. Perhaps this was the solution to my self-esteem problem. A far stretch, I admitted to myself, but if I could somehow work in a place like this, maybe I would subconsciously break free of the issues that were hampering me—issues I didn't even have a handle on. Unfortunately, while it sounded like a reasonable consideration, the thought opened a fresh can of worms.

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The problem: There wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that I would shed my clothes for money. I didn't care what they paid me. I didn't have a problem with my body—at least, not one that I *knew* of—but that didn't mean I wanted to show it off to total strangers. However, I did have some experience as a waitress. Maybe if I could get a job cocktailing in such a sex-crazed atmosphere, wearing one of the skimpy outfits the drink-chicks wore—fuck-me pumps, a barely there skirt, and a bikini top that left nothing to the imagination—maybe that would be enough to get me over the hump (a fitting word considering we're talking about the sex industry). At the very least, I figured that by delivering drinks dressed like a call girl I'd be able to put some cash into my pocket instead of shelling it out to a psychiatrist.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. So while my friends got their dollar bills ready for the next show on stage, I sought out the club's manager. The bartender pointed him out to me and I immediately wished he hadn't. Growing up, my younger sister was a huge fan of professional wrestling. Well, this guy was the spitting image of greasy manager Lou Albano, complete with a red rubberband around his pubic hair-like goatee. How this guy thought he looked good was beyond me. Think of a short fat dildo with hair. Anyway, had he not been looking directly at me when the bartender pointed him out, I would have gone back to the table where my friends were in a heartbeat. I mean, this guy *really* creeped me out!

But it was too late, so I took a deep breath, mustered all the courage I could, and walked up to him. Respectfully, and trying to be professional, I reached out to shake his hand. He took my hand in his, brought it to his lips, and kissed it. Not like a gentlemen would, mind you, but open-mouthed, making certain I felt his hot slimy tongue on my knuckles. When he pulled his mouth away, a filmy strand of saliva remained connected for a few moments before snapping. I

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thought I was going to vomit. Somehow, I choked down the nausea building up inside me and was about to pop the question when he beat me to the punch.

“Lemme guess, sweetie,” he said, talking to my tits. “You wanna work here?”

“Was I that obvious?” I replied, unsure of how else to respond.

“Every girl who comes in here wants to be one of *my* girls,” he bragged. The way he said it was reason enough for me to look elsewhere for my therapy, but I knew that dealing with a scum-sucking pig like him was, in all likelihood, part of the process that might ultimately cure my mental ailment. So I stayed put.

“Are there any openings?” I asked.

“Funny,” he said with a grotesque smirk. “I was gonna ask you the same thing.”

I looked at him curiously, as if I didn’t understand the comment. But inside my mind, I was kicking him in the nuts repeatedly with a steel-toed boot.

After nearly half a minute of awkward silence, he asked: “Got any drug problems or felonies?”

I shook my head, no.

“Any jealous boyfriends I might have to throw out of here?”

Once again, a shake of the head did the talking.

“What kind of dancing experience do you have?”

I smiled. “I don’t want to dance,” I said. “I want to be a cocktail waitress.”

It was his turn to shake his head. “Don’t need any drink-schleppers, honey. What I need is dancers. And you look like you’d do real well ...” Once again, he addressed my chest: “Assuming your body looks as good *out* of clothes as it does in them.”

I blushed and thanked him for the, uh, compliment, but explained that I had never danced in a topless club before

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and that I had no desire to show more skin than the cocktail waitresses did.

He shrugged, then threw up his hands. "Then I can't help you," he said coldly. "Try Denny's. They're always looking for waitresses."

Dejected but relieved that I wouldn't have an Albano-clone for a boss, I started to walk away—but he stopped me with a firm hand on my shoulder and spun me around. "You really should give dancing some thought." He gave another sick grimace. "If not for your benefit, for mine."

I didn't respond verbally, although I wanted to. In the worst way! Instead I pulled away and went back to my friends' table. When I arrived, a tall pretty redhead with a billion freckles, small boobs, and a big ass was giving them a table dance. Excited by my return, the guys thrust me into a chair and had the stripper dance for me. My cheeks turned brighter than her hair, but I saw that all my buddies were getting into it, so I sat there, let the girl do her thing, and let the guys get their money's worth.

I watched closely as she gyrated and swiveled around me. I got the feeling she had somehow detached herself from the action. She simply treated the table dance as a chore for which she got paid.

When the dance was over, the stripper collected her fee and tip, then moved on to another table. My friends all high-fived me and asked me if it was as good for me as it was for them. They said other things, too, all on the subject of threesomes. It started out funny, but after a while my earlier nausea returned. I like one-on-one affairs, with men only. Not that I have a problem with homosexuality, but I've always preferred the company of a man.

After I'd had enough of the sailor talk, I excused myself to go to the ladies' room. When I came out, I saw the red-headed stripper sitting just a few feet away at a small table by herself, sipping a glass of wine. I walked over and asked

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if I could join her for a moment. Although she wasn't as congenial as before—when money was involved—she nodded and motioned for me to sit.

"You're a good dancer," I said, more as an icebreaker than a compliment. In truth, I thought her dancing ability—at least, what I had observed—was about average. Paula Abdul, she wasn't. "How long have you been stripping?"

She took a sip of wine. "Three years, on and off."

"How do you do it? Where do you find the courage?"

"I've got two kids to feed," she stated matter-of-factly. "And an ex-husband who wouldn't know child support from fairy dust. This puts food in their mouths, clothes on their backs and still gives me plenty of quality time with them."

I was impressed. Here she was, a single mother, grabbing the bull by the horns and providing for her kids the best she could. This was hard work. I started thinking of her as a good role model for women. Looking at her more closely, I could tell she didn't live a pampered life. Makeup, even the excessive amount she used, can only hide so much.

"Do you ever get nervous when you dance?"

"When I started I was scared shitless," she said. "But I got drunk a lot during my first few months, which really helped." Okay, so much for the role model. "Now I look at it like it's just another job. Same as working in a restaurant or behind a sales counter. Trust me, I did both. They're boring and the pay is lousy."

Well, she was right on both counts. I, too, had worked as a waitress and at a cosmetics counter. Boring? Big time. Lousy pay? You betcha.

"You're thinking about giving it a try, huh?"

"I'm thinking about it," I said. "Don't know if I'm cut out for it, though."

"Some girls are, some girls aren't," she said and drained the rest of her wine. She stood up, then looked me square in the eyes. "But if you come to work here, just stay the hell

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out of my way. I've got enough competition as it is." She walked away without another word.

O-kay. However, I took her statement as a compliment. If she felt I would be competition, that had to be a good thing, didn't it?

Based on what I'd seen and what I knew about women in general, it wasn't hard to picture the business of exotic dancing as ultra-competitive, where dancers fought with each other tooth and nail for the wealthiest best-tipping customers. In fact, it was impossible to imagine it as anything else. Think about it. Women are catty enough as it is when it comes to their looks, bodies, and outfits. But throw money into the mix, in an industry that I guessed would be largely visual-dependent, and it wasn't hard to envision a continuous World War III. While working in a topless club might be just what the doctor ordered for my beleaguered self-image, that method of treatment could very well lead to other ailments—for example, a bleeding ulcer, or a broken nose if I happened to get on Ms. Pale-n-Pasty Redhead's bad side, which I might already have accomplished.

After another hour, we left the club. The guys were flat broke, dead drunk, and hornier than rabbits on Viagra. On the way home, with me at the wheel, I suggested they seek out some freshmen football groupies, the kind of girls who would even screw the kicker just to say they'd made it with a member of the team. Either that or hit the showers. *Cold* showers. All I know is, as soon as I parked the car, I got the hell out of Dodge. Sure, they were my friends, but remaining in the company of four seriously drunk and horny guys, all of whom weighed 230-plus, after they'd spent the better part of the evening at a strip club would not have been an intelligent move on my part.

That night, I gave the idea of working as a topless dancer a lot of serious deliberation. It was something I'd never even considered before—not even remotely—but the thought

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of potentially working out some problems and making some decent money along the way certainly had its merits. I began to envision all the fantastic things I would buy myself—after my student loans were paid off, of course. The more I considered it, the more it seemed like a good idea (bleeding ulcers and broken noses aside). But I still wasn't wholly convinced. So I decided to do some more research.