

## The Continuing Saga of Scarlot Harlot V

*Carol Leigh*

Hank just stopped by. I've seen him for several years and he's one of my favorites. We've never actually had a conversation, but I think he has a sense of humor because he smiles when I make jokes. Today I greeted him in my apron (saves time dressing) and I told him that I was just cleaning the house and forgot to put on my clothes. He seemed amused. We embraced at the door. I turned around and said, "Look, no panties. And I've been exercising."

We discussed my muscles and flab as he fell to his knees and kissed me all over.

"Take off your clothes," I said, and hopped like a bunny into bed.

He stroked and kissed and massaged me everywhere. I said it was good, and it was, because Hank has a warm, loving touch and no ejaculatory control. Within minutes he was up, dressed and darting out my front door. Easy come, easy go, as we used to say in the Tenderloin.

"See you soon, darling," I called after him. I do have a fondness for this man. But he makes me a little nervous. I mean, who is he?

## Silence Again

*Judy Helfand*

I have worked with Women Against Rape for nine years now and in all that time I have talked with only three women about my experiences as a nude model and topless dancer. I was never ashamed of myself while working — I felt proud, cocky and powerful. But today I feel ashamed and afraid to bring it up. We're not a bunch of social service minded liberals, either, but a group of women out to change the world. We talk about rape, racism, incest, classism, homophobia, pornography, fat oppression, wife beating, lesbian battery and, of course, sexism. We do not talk about our experience of prostitution — selling our sexual selves or bodies to make it in the world.

In reading *off our backs* I came across the following: "Cleis Press is now accepting contributions to an anthology by women who have worked or are working in the sex industry." My stomach jumped. A book from a feminist press by women who may have shared my feelings and experiences. I could read their writings. I could submit an article, too! Finally, a release from that sense of isolation. Cleis Press has recognized this as an important area for feminist discourse.

Then I read on: "massage parlors, encounter studios, escort services, pornography, street prostitution, as well as other areas of sex work." Another clench of the stomach as I saw that topless dancing wasn't in there. Neither was nude modeling. Maybe my experiences weren't really "sex industry." I couldn't waste people's time with my writing because what I had done was too "tame" to be legitimate. And anyway, my experience didn't really count because I was a college student; I wasn't tied to it; I was really above it all, not part of it.

Then I affirmed, yes, I had been part of the sex industry. My denial was part of what needed to be examined. I needed to share my experi-

ences if for no other reason than to find other women who felt the same. In our own experience we hold the keys to deeper understanding of the oppression of women in the world. Silence. Guilt. Isolation. I needed to participate in breaking through these three barriers.

The summer I was to be twenty-one, my boyfriend and I got an apartment together, a daring counter-culture move for me in 1966. In the back of our duplex lived a woman who worked as a nude model and topless dancer. To me she was exotic, exciting, extremely independent and powerful. I wanted the same assurance she expressed about the sexual attractiveness of her body, her allure to men. By the end of the summer, I was working as a topless dancer on Broadway in San Francisco, and as a nude model for an art professor/photographer. The money was lots better than I'd been making as a bookkeeper's assistant and counter girl.

Working in the sex industry, I experienced many different, often contradictory feelings, some of which I've never fully acknowledged before. My expressed feelings at the time were total ease and a kind of sarcastic humor about how ridiculous men were if I would make twenty-five dollars a night for showing my tits for thirty minutes max. At the topless club, I spent my time off stage studying, or sitting at the bar feeling superior to the poor jerks who patronized the place. Occasionally, I visited the snake dancer and her snakes upstairs.

Tasha, the snake dancer, was small breasted, athletic and trim. She was my idol. At the time I looked down on women who injected silicon to increase their breast size. I never considered dieting to maintain my five foot seven frame at one hundred and ten pounds. I was proud of my athletic, small breasted body in such a sea of breast-mania. Somehow it tied in with my independence, my stubborn refusal to see myself as an exploited woman, a down-and-outer like the other "topless co-eds." Having a more masculine figure was the final hold out against victim status. What I never did see was that my body type was in vogue at that time, emphasizing my look of youth and innocence which was a real turn-on to men. They were probably not seeing the independent, powerful, sexy butch I wanted myself to be.

The independence was definitely tied to money. I felt I'd solved the dilemma of how to go to school and earn a living, too. Twenty-five dollars a night as a topless dancer. Ten dollars an hour as a model. I took one job for moving rather than still pictures but it was too sleazy for me. The guy was really creepy. He did all my make-up and then had me dress in black lace underwear. He filmed fifteen minutes of me taking off stockings. The pay was fantastic but I couldn't main-

tain my illusion of the proud, independent woman in such circumstances. I stuck with "art" photography.

The issue of power interests me a lot. Having a presence and physical body which men found sexually attractive was important to my self-esteem. Having men pay to get turned on by me was an affirmation of my sexual power. At times I would dance for a certain man, trying to make him uncomfortable by flaunting my body at him. I really liked to win the amateur contests. Men could want and need me. I wouldn't fall into the traditional female role of pining after men, trying to ensnare them with various schemes. I'd just be so sexy I could have any man I wanted. Although, of course, I didn't want any of them. What I never saw was that in basing my self worth on men's desire I was far from developing a true sense of worth based on self love.

I see this false sense of power as one way internalized oppression keeps us down. For years I isolated myself from other women and put my considerable energies into men. I wanted to feel on a par with the most important, powerful people. Being sexually desired was the fix I needed to feel in control, to feel powerful. Now I see how this worked against the recognition of my own real oppression as a woman. I see that wanting men to want you sexually is what men want.

There has been so much silence surrounding this issue. As feminists we have learned to talk about how sex is taken from us by force, manipulation, coercion, and whatever else conveys "taking." We do not discuss how we find giving it away necessary to our self-esteem. Shame seems to be a factor. Although I thought I wasn't ashamed of my sex industry jobs I never told my mother. I told her I smoked dope and took drugs, that I had sex with my boy friends, but I didn't want to upset her needlessly by telling her I showed my bare body to men for money.

Somehow we need to find a way to talk about what we do of our own volition. Possibly we can come to see our participation not as collaboration but as — what? Self-illusion? Making it in the system? Finding a way to feel good about being a woman given the few options offered? I want to understand the process whereby I refused to buy into the lies of wifehood, self-sacrifice and living for a man, but never saw that the mirror-image lies in buying into the patriarchal version of independence — power and not needing a man.

It makes me angry when feminists lump all sex industry workers into a pile of poor, exploited, brainwashed victims without minds of their own. I was a young woman who needed to earn a living and chose to pursue the highest paying, least demanding jobs I knew of. I

was successful. I felt good about myself. Today I have different values and a clearer understanding of my position as a woman in the world, but this doesn't invalidate my past experience. What I can do today is examine those unexpressed, unacknowledged feelings from the past, the feelings which co-existed with my previously discussed feelings of power, independence, sexiness and ease. This is the hardest part, the home of those barriers of silence, guilt and isolation.

I never felt a part of my work world. I had no friends, talked with few of my co-workers, and never interacted with any of them outside work. To some degree I felt superior: I was a college student doing this temporarily. But in truth, I didn't know how to relate to people other than sexually or intellectually. To have sexual passion enter my workplace would have been too scary. It would have threatened my "tough-girl-don't-touch" stance. I also played on my "sweet-young-thing" looks, another image which would have been hard to maintain in a sexual relationship. I did find a couple of men to discuss "intellectual" issues with, existentialism or the Free Speech Movement, but the North Beach sex industry was quite different from the university. I know now that to maintain my positive outlook and self-esteem in that environment I had to remove myself from my deeper feelings and essentially wall myself off.

Guilt and shame were certainly among those walled off feelings. I worked in sleazy places with people I had no respect for. Of course, I didn't really know the people, but because of their work I saw them as failures, as society's dregs. With few exceptions I felt superior to all around me. This was how I protected myself from the shame and guilt of offering myself visually to men, doing what I had been raised to think was socially degenerate. Somehow, it seems to me that being a sex worker was a way of denying the feelings which were tied to sex at an unconscious level. This is still an open question for me. Topless dancing, nude modeling were never neutral experiences. Despite my avowed ease there was always a certain stridency, a feeling of daring which must have been the cover for fear and vulnerability. I was a lost young girl co-existing with a powerful, independent woman.

Guilt and isolation contributed to the silence. My isolation kept me from talking with the other workers, learning how they felt, exploring our roles as sex workers. And although I didn't keep my work a secret I didn't talk about it a lot. I was really terrified my parents would find out and I simply didn't know how I would handle that. Embarrassment was the closest I got to naming that confusing well of emotions which rose up at the thought of my parents judgment. Embarrassment is what rises up today in trying to talk openly about

my sex worker experiences. I feel like a naughty little girl, half confessing to, half bragging about, some misdeed. What is the well-spring of this embarrassment? Another very open question for me.

People have always been shocked to learn that a nice girl like me could have been a sex industry worker. "I never would have thought . . ." For years I found a kind of defiant pleasure in their astonishment. Now I want to shout "Why not? What are your stupid stereotypes that deny my experience?" But I realize that I shared in the denial, felt as if my work was not the true me but a part I was playing. Now I know it was truly a part of me. I'm learning to know that part concurrent with becoming aware of other aspects of my inner self. In time I may be able to integrate all my parts, to understand how I got here. This article is only the beginning, raising far more questions than it answers. But in overcoming the silence and isolation it's a very important first step.