

ORIGINS

KIRK READ

Over the years, I've developed an Adam and Eve story of my working life. I believe in story—whether it's to describe what you ate for lunch or how old you were when your mother died. Stories are one of the few things I trust because you can draw your own conclusions. I once trusted journalists, but their forum has been so contaminated by the marketplace that unmitigated truth is barely possible.

Who's the story for? Conversations about sex work, for me, vary from person to person. When I talk to my mother about sex work, it's very different than when I talk to my boyfriend or my therapist or fellow sex workers. I want my mother to be assured of my physical safety. I want my boyfriend to be reassured about my emotional well-being. I

want my therapist not to dwell on sex work because I have other concerns that are more pressing. With other sex workers, I want to talk shop or trade helpful advice.

If I'm telling my story to someone in the healthcare industry, especially a mental health person, I feel a responsibility to be a goodwill ambassador for all sex workers, to single-handedly dispel the stereotypes that we were all sexually abused, even though some of us were. I feel like I need to disabuse clinicians of the notion that we have low self-esteem, whatever *that* is. (People have way too much self-esteem these days.)

When I'm talking to anyone, really, I turn into a lobbyist for sex workers. I start worrying that this person could somehow affect the lives of other sex workers. Maybe this person will be in a position to vote on a bill decriminalizing prostitution. Maybe this person has a family member who is in the industry. Maybe my presentation of a likable sex worker—a *human face*, as they say in the nonprofit world—will help the person I'm addressing to treat other sex workers with respect.

The consequence of wanting to be liked as a sex worker is that I scrutinize my speech and edit the stories I tell. For instance, let's say I have a stressful client situation. Maybe a client tries to bargain me down over the phone, leading to fiscal tension once we're together. Maybe I'm feeling self-conscious about my weight and the client says something about how I look different than my pictures. Maybe the client makes rude comments about homeless people who live near his hotel. When I'm with the client, I try to maintain a neutral demeanor so that our interaction will be smooth. I suppress whatever irritation, body shame, or anxiety I'm feeling. Then, later, if I talk about the interaction with

someone else, I take on an additional responsibility to reframe the situation so that I'm ultimately untroubled by it. I don't want to hear a non-sex worker tell me that s/he's concerned about me or that I should think about leaving the business. I don't want people to think that every client causes that sort of anxiety. Every job causes a certain degree of social friction, and I feel a relentless duty to normalize sex work as an occupation so that non-sex workers are less threatened and are shielded from my day-to-day concerns. It's exhausting.

So where did this sense of obligatory public relations come from? Why can't I just maintain a baseline of Absolutely No Bullshit? I was given extensive training in how to be presentable in my Southern family and got a graduate degree in niceness in the LGBT movement—especially the smiley-face gay '90s—when everything became camera ready. Suddenly the mantra of "We're your sisters, we're your neighbors, we're your teachers, we're everywhere," closed in on us and queer people started walking around on their best behavior. At least I did. I remember being twenty-two years old and delivering a version of that "We're just like you" speech to various committees of the Virginia General Assembly. The jury is still out on how effective these mainstreaming strategies are. Gains in likability have deep costs in personal integrity.

What if I just narrated the stories as I remember them? It's not a perfect method. I'm inevitably going to hide details or reconstruct memories inaccurately or change things or collapse three people into one character or conceal some of the times I went into a client's wallet and tipped myself an extra sixty bucks. I'll do what it takes to make a more compelling story or tweak things to make myself seem more heroic.

After I've told these stories once or twice, I get confused about the original truth. I become convinced that the way I arrived at the story is the way it actually happened. Sometimes the messy, complicated details of a story get altered so that they will fit into a three-minute anecdote. I grew up surrounded by masterful Southern cocktail party storytellers. We'd be in a room with eight people drinking. You had maybe thirty-five seconds to hook people into a story. If you didn't succeed, either by virtue of your charisma or the drama of a fresh tale, someone would change the subject. They'd enter your story midstream and make an associative leap into their own story. But if you were a good storyteller, people would let you finish. Part of being a good storyteller is knowing the difference between an anecdote and a story. I'm still learning that one. Sometimes being a good storyteller is as simple as knowing when something isn't going well, when it's time to stop in the middle of a paragraph and let someone change the subject. That's a real benchmark of human evolution, that sort of self-awareness. *Enough analysis, already.* I'll leave that to the clinicians. I'm not a clinician. I have no letters after my name. I'm a hooker. I'm good at it. Most of the time, I still enjoy it.

Thanks to my utter compulsivity, I have documentation of much of my sex work history. I have day planners with appointments and what I was paid. I have all the America Online instant message chats I had with clients, other sex workers, and fuck buddies. I have photos of most of these men. I have every email I've sent and received at the various screen names I've had over the years. This is a digital black book, but its footprint stretches into the gigabyte range. So when I think I might be fudging my story, I can go back and look. The dates and numbers, the

screen names and places—those are all there. The details—the couch covered with cat hair, the guys who cranked the volume on their hotel television sets, the one who took me to dinner and forgot to wear a belt—all that stuff is archived.

I started doing sex work in December of 1998, a few weeks after I moved to San Francisco. Even that point is arguable. *Very* arguable. So arguable that it's untrue. That's the first line of my sex worker narrative and I've already misspoken.

In various ways, I've been doing sex work for years. I went on dates with older men who I knew would pay for dinner, who gave me presents or sent me plane tickets to visit them. There was a man in Canada who read one of my self-published books when I was twenty-one and started sending me money, like \$200 and \$400 at a time. He sent me a plane ticket on two occasions. I flew up that first time and he handed me \$500 in cash as we stepped into a motorboat to go to his summer house, which was built on huge rocks in a remote lake region. The second time I went to see him, when I was twenty-four, he bought me a laptop. It wasn't a clearly stated sex-for-money relationship, but it was understood that we'd play when we got together.

There was a time in Norfolk, Virginia. It was two in the morning and I was negotiating with a man who wanted to come over to my house and fuck me. He mistakenly thought I was a sex worker simply because I was a twentysomething guy talking to a fiftysomething guy. He wrote me an instant message that said, "How much?" I almost corrected him, but I just went along with it. He wrote another message: "Is 100 okay?" I said, "That would be great!" and sent him my address. I don't remember the sex. I was probably playing Shawn Colvin or Sarah McLachlan, be-

cause those were frequent sex-music choices of that time. It was the late '90s. Lilith Fair and all of that. I didn't tell anyone about my first incall.

When I moved to San Francisco, I continued to do cater-waiter work, which I'd done in New York City, D.C., and Virginia. I got paid less in San Francisco than ever, even though it was the height of the dot-com boom and mad money was everywhere. I worked for three weeks as a cater-waiter upon arriving in San Francisco. I was living rent-free in a tiny room under the stairs in an apartment with my new adopted family, a gay couple named Richard and Asa. I was working at catering jobs, then going online to hook up with men over forty. That was my age boundary. I'd loved older men from the time I was a teenager. In San Francisco, I'd come home from a catering job, then go to South of Market bars to hunt for sex. I went to sex clubs. I went to arcades. I picked up guys on the street. I met guys at Safeway. I was fresh off the plane from Virginia and I was up for anything.

One night I was finishing work at a twelve-dollar-an-hour catering gig. It was December, which is the season of office parties. There were all these drunk yuppies at the Exploratorium, this hands-on science museum for children, and adults on drugs. The yuppies were making a total mess—spilling beer on the floor, leaving empty cups and bottles all over the place. Those of us on the catering staff had spent several hours rolling in heavy round tables and arranging place settings. Caterers always overcharge their clients for waitstaff. It's the ultimate fuzzy math. Like they'll charge \$25 an hour per waiter for fifteen waiters on an eight-hour shift. They'll pay the waiters \$12 an hour, only use ten waiters, then cram all the work into a six-hour shift. The companies never pass along tips. No one in catering is happy. They smoke cigarettes, drink too

much, and do drugs they can't afford. At the end of the night, everyone becomes a thief, taking it upon themselves to self-tip with stolen bottles of red wine, votive candles, flower arrangements, plastic containers of food. The catering companies would rather throw food away than give it to homeless people, let alone their own employees. When people talk about prostitutes being exploited, abused, and violated, they're really talking about the catering industry.

It was the end of the night, and I was being chatted up by this drunk thirty-eight-year-old yuppie. He gave me his card. I knew I'd never call him, but I was being polite. I looked around at the other waiters and realized I had yet to roll all those heavy tables out to the event equipment rental trucks. I had yet to lug milk crates full of generic white dishes onto the loading platform. I had yet to gather up all the stained linens into garbage bags. This would all happen under duress—some cranky failed actor would be barking orders at us the whole time. We'd all be scared that we wouldn't be hired again, so we'd move quickly.

This drunk yuppie lightly smacked my ass after he gave me his card. He said, "Call me later." I looked down at his card. He'd written down his cell phone number, presumably so I could call him later that same night. The cuffs of my white shirt were covered in red wine. It looked like blood. Earlier, I'd had to bus sludge trays from the bar. My shirt was ruined.

I knew I wouldn't call this man. I knew it would take me an hour to get home on the bus. I knew this catering company would shave my paycheck. I looked around at all the round tables yet to be broken down and rolled away, then back at the drunk yuppie who was looking me

up and down like he was staring into a soft pretzel machine. I thought, almost out loud, *I should get paid for this.*

I ended up getting a ride home in one of the catering vans. All of us were exhausted. Sore feet, insufficiently padded black socks, black tuxedo pants, and splattered white shirts. The man driving spoke very little English. I can only imagine what the catering company paid him.

That week, I had been kicking around the idea of becoming an escort. I did what I always did, which was to research and gather information like I was doing a term paper. I sat in the gay and lesbian reading room at the public library and read John Preston's book *Hustling: A Gentleman's Guide to the Fine Art of Homosexual Prostitution* in one sitting. I went to A Different Light bookstore and bought *Hustlers, Escorts, and Porn Stars: The Insider's Guide to Male Prostitution in America*, by Matt Adams, which was a more up-to-date how-to guide. I'd made lists in my diary about what I would need: a pager, business cards, a little bag for supplies. I'd looked in the weekly papers to find out how much these things would cost.

I got home from my catering gig and went online. I created the screen name sfescort25@aol.com because I was twenty-five at the time. I probably could have passed for younger but I didn't want to be dishonest. Which strikes me as sweet, in retrospect, because it is a sex worker's prerogative to self-market as s/he deems fit. Everyone is creative with objective truth. Why should we be any different? I was naive enough to use my real first name, thinking that I didn't want to create a persona that would compartmentalize my psyche. I headed into the AOL chat rooms of San Francisco. That was the moment I first self-identified

as an "escort." This was no longer about me being a broke student that some guy was "helping out." I was now a *professional*.

For years I told people the apocryphal story of my first client. He was an extremely kind man. He smoked Benson and Hedges 100's. My client apologized for smoking but I quickly reassured him that it was fine, that I wanted him to feel comfortable. We didn't fuck, just cuddled and sucked and kissed. He took me out to Ruth's Chris Steak House after we played. I had no idea how expensive that place was. I didn't really understand why, either. It was just steak. You can get that at a buffet place like Country Cookin. When we got back to the hotel, he gave me \$200, even though my rate was \$150. I wouldn't have thought of charging for dinner. I just figured it was really nice of him to take me out for a meal. He put his hands on my shoulders and said, "What you're doing is healing work. Don't let anyone tell you different." It was a perfect first-client experience.

Over the years, I've been able to offer people this story as heart-warming proof that sex workers are healers, that I was a good person, that I was a sort of community servant, that clients were uniformly kind and compassionate people, that I wasn't in any physical or emotional danger, that I was legitimate, that I was appreciated by my clients, that the world is a place of perpetual serendipity and harmony.

Armed with this poignant narrative, I became a one-man revival for emancipation from stereotypes of both sex workers and clients. I could see how moved people were when I'd tell the story. I could sense how lucky I was when other sex workers told me the often awkward stories of their own first clients. Non-sex workers would hear the story and somehow, I was assured, Earth would be a better place.

But this is the thing. My first client was actually my *second* client. I turned him into my first client because it made for a better story—a more attractive story to non-sex workers. It took less time to tell. For seven years I actually convinced myself that he *was* my first client. I didn't discover the truth until I sat down to write about my initial sex work experiences.

Here's my recovered memory of my real first client. On the night of my last catering gig ever, I was in the San Francisco AOL chat room with my new screen name. I was getting asked voyeuristic questions by a lot of men who either wanted to be with an escort, or wished they'd been an escort at some point, or both. Chat rooms in San Francisco are lousy places to hang a shingle. Everyone's there to give it away for free.

I got an instant message from this guy saying, "Looking for an escort." This is not from memory. This is based on saved documents. He typed in a large yellow outlined font and his grammar was so bad that I couldn't determine much about him. He said things like, "How long you do it for, me, pig, you?" I started calling *him* "pig" because I thought that was the scene; I thought that *he* wanted to service *me*. He spoke in clipped phrases like "long time" and "just like to lay back." I couldn't really tell whether he meant *me* or *him*. Either way was fine with me—I just didn't know. He asked me whether I liked to party. I had no idea what that meant. I said, "Sure thing." He said, "Party here." We didn't negotiate a solid rate. He knew I wanted \$150, but we didn't determine how long I'd stay for that amount. I arrived half an hour later at his basement studio in the Castro.

This guy, Nate, had told me to let myself in. He was sitting in front of a small television that was playing porn. He had a dog, this sleepy

golden retriever. The place was crammed with boxes and stacks of papers. The room felt like it had been slept in a lot. It felt like the kind of place where you hibernate during rainy months.

As soon as I arrived, he pulled his sweatpants down to his knees and sat back down on the couch. He leaned against the back of the couch and closed his eyes. No words. No acknowledgment. Nothing. Which is actually one of my favorite ways to proceed.

I sucked on his cock for about ten minutes. He was semihard, which made sucking a lot easier. It's the really hard cocks that tire out your jaw, stretch your throat, and cramp your neck. When a guy's not fully hard, you can do miraculous things with the muscles in your throat, the roof of your mouth, your tongue. It's like the difference between ballet and breakdancing.

He pulled out a pipe and we each smoked a few hits of pot. Pot has never been my thing. It can get me paranoid. I just never know. It's a long story. I'll just tell you the anecdotal version. My brother was the commonwealth's attorney in my hometown. In the early 1980s, he led a huge grand jury investigation to root out all the drug dealers and users in the entire county. He put a lot of people in prison. I was around ten at the time and my parents told me that journalists would try to get me to smoke pot so that they could write a huge exposé that would destroy the entire family. From preadolescence, I internalized the message that my experimenting with drugs could bring down my family altogether. Thank God they never said the same thing about sucking cock.

After we smoked pot and I sucked on him for another fifteen minutes, I started taking little breaks and working his cock with my hand, hoping he'd come or at least give up and send me on my way. Maybe

the "work" part of sex work was going to be more intensive than I'd initially envisioned. He brought out a little wooden cutting board, the kind you put Brie and crackers on. He sprinkled a little powder on it and handed me a piece of a plastic straw he'd cut from one of those flexi-straws. I thought that was incredibly smart. People who do drugs are so resourceful.

I was so excited to be trying cocaine. I'd always wanted to try it but had been too afraid of getting hooked. I'd read *Less Than Zero* when I was thirteen and those cokeheads were a mess. A lot of my favorite people had been on cocaine. On the Stevie Nicks *Behind the Music*, she says, "The doctor told me if I did cocaine one more time, I would die." But I was in San Francisco. I'd been here for two weeks. I was trying all sorts of new things. Why not try cocaine? The journalists who were looking for me all lived on the East Coast, anyway. I took the end of the flexi-straw and snorted some of the powder. It tingled. I thought about how people do so much cocaine that the mucus membrane between their nostrils rots out. They start bleeding when they sneeze. I certainly didn't want to be like that.

He snorted a bit of the powder, which was a little yellowish. Cocaine with jaundice. I thought maybe it was cheap or something. Maybe it was the lighting? Cocaine in the movies is white. Everyone knows cocaine is white. What was wrong with his cocaine?

I went back to sucking his cock. After a few minutes, I started really getting into it, putting his entire cock and balls into my mouth and looking up at him like I was a puppy. He wasn't looking down at me at all. He was totally fixated on the television. This only made me more devoted. After about an hour, he started putting Vaseline on his cock,

maybe because it was getting rubbed raw from all the contact and saliva. I thought that was strange. Who uses Vaseline for lube, other than teenage boys? A kid I grew up with was a drummer in a heavy metal band. Everyone knew he used Vaseline. He had a plastic tub of it right by his bed. He had a pet rat who didn't have a cage. The rat would shit all over the carpet, then Scott would walk in and out of the room and track rat shit all over the house.

After my initial bewilderment, I went right to it. Suddenly, I liked the taste of it in my mouth. Every ten minutes or so, I'd get a few fingers full of Vaseline and slather up his cock so I could get back on it. It was 4:30 AM by this point. He was falling asleep intermittently. I'd keep sucking his cock, even when he was asleep. Every now and then he'd push my head away from his cock, sometimes even say, "Stop."

At 5 AM, there was a knock on the door. He motioned me to stay where I was. He went to the door. A guy stepped in and the door closed, but not all the way. Nobody was talking. After forty-five seconds, Nate closed the door and returned to the couch. He reached behind the couch, presumably to stash what had just been dropped off. He reached for his dick and shook it in my face. I noticed that behind me, the television had gone to snow. I don't know how long it had been like that. Probably hours. Nate didn't do anything about it.

At 5:15 AM, we did another bump of cocaine. I was amazed at how long cocaine lasted. I'd heard it only got you high for fifteen minutes. This was *very* good cocaine. Maybe Colombian or something. No wonder people could go through their life's savings snorting that stuff. If I'd tried it in college, I would never have left my dorm room.

I sucked him for another three hours. Again, he was falling asleep,

pushing my head away. I'd wait long enough for him to stop resisting, sitting there like a dog who's been told no, like a dog who knows if he sits there long enough he'll get a treat.

At 8:30 AM I was still sucking him. It had been eight hours. Usually I would have gotten tired by this point. Usually I would have gotten bored. Sucking cock had never been more interesting. This man was kind of an asshole, but drugs turn assholes into brothers on the road.

He woke up one last time and looked at the clock. He said, "You've got to go." I just sat there. Didn't get dressed, didn't move. He went to the phone to tell his boss, I guess, that he was going to be late. He put down the phone and said again, "You've got to get out of here. *Go!*"

I said, "Do you remember inviting me over here?" He said he didn't.

"You said you were going to pay me," I said. I hadn't figured out an overnight charge. I was starting to calculate eight hours at \$150 an hour. I figured it was going to be a *lot* of money.

He started rifling through drawers. "I don't know what I have," he said.

I looked around the apartment, thinking about what I could take. There wasn't much of obvious value. A half-empty jar of Vaseline, a bag of drugs, and a shitty little TV. The place looked even worse in the daylight.

He walked over to me with sixty dollars. Two twenties and two tens. Barely minimum wage. I thought about causing a scene. He could sense that was a possibility. He sat down on the couch and said, "Please just go. I'm sorry."

I got dressed and left. I didn't slam the door. I walked home to my little room under the stairs. I got online with my hooker screen

name and looked for a guy who wanted his dick sucked. I found a guy who wanted that but didn't want to pay. He said he had a nine-inch dick. I told him I wouldn't charge him and got his address. I'd been online for an hour, jerking my limp dick with the door open. Richard and Asa weren't awake yet. Any moment, they could have walked by and seen me.

I took a cab to this man's place in the Outer Mission. He lived with his twin and kept a bottle of Jim Beam at his bedside. He took intermittent sips and smoked Winstons while I serviced him. His dick was so hard that it hurt my throat. I was longing for Nate's soft cock. With this guy, I knew I wasn't going to last very long. The guy talked about how he liked going to Puerto Vallarta and finding teenage boys to fuck in the bathrooms on the beach, using just spit. He said the last time he'd done that, the kid had bled all over his dick. He said he wanted to fuck me like that, with just spit. I wanted him to fuck me, but I insisted on him wearing a condom. He couldn't get hard inside the condom and we gave up.

As I was leaving, he said, "Have you been doing crystal? I can taste it in your spit."

"What's crystal?" I asked. "I did some cocaine last night."

"Crystal is speed. *That's* what you did last night."

"Oh," I said.

He'd given me something to think about.

I went home and got online again. It was 7 PM. I was still buzzing really hard on whatever it was I'd snorted. I'd never heard of crystal. Did Stevie Nicks ever do crystal?

I saw Nate online and apologized to him for how awkward things had gotten. I offered to come over and service him some more. He must

have been surprised, and said, "Come on over." In that moment, I rewarded the bad behavior of every client who's ever fantasized about an escort throwing up his hands and saying, "You're so hot, I just want to have sex with you for free!"

When I got there, we smoked a little pot but didn't do any crystal. I sucked him for about five minutes. His dick was too hard. It was hurting my throat. I had a really panicky reaction to his penis. I started shaking. I curled up in a ball on the floor and made primal whining sounds.

"I need to go," I said, worried that I would be disappointing him.

"Okay," he said.

I dressed, then walked home. On the way home, I remember thinking what a huge mistake it was to have moved to San Francisco. I was going to kill myself in this city. I wasn't strong enough. Maybe I'd just get it over with. I thought about ways I could do it: I could overdose on over-the-counter sleep meds; I could step in front of a bus. I reached Church Street and turned left. I started jogging home, feeling like if I didn't get home in the next five minutes I was going to freeze to death or get beaten by a lynch mob or expire in some humiliating public spectacle. I ran the rest of the way home.

Richard was making dinner—one of his trademark dinners where he takes all the leftovers in the fridge and turns it into something magical. I told him a little bit about what had happened to me in the past twenty-four hours, but not all of it. Not even close to all of it.

He said speed was a hard drug, that it had taken people who'd lived in the very room where I was sleeping. People who could have been famous. People who might have been, should have been. He made me a cup of tea in the oversized mug he usually used himself.

After a lot of frenzied writing in my journal, a lot of compulsive online cruising, I finally got to sleep.

That was my first client. It's not a short story. It doesn't play well at a cocktail party. If I'd told that story at my parents' cocktail parties, someone would have interrupted me. The man who took me to Ruth's Chris Steak House called two days later. He was my second client. When he told me that I was doing healing work, I did not yet feel like any sort of healer. His words were a source of great comfort to me. At the time, I felt reassured that I wasn't just some aimless waif with a looming drug problem. "Healing" sounded respectable. I was a good Southern boy with a degree from the University of Virginia; it was my second day on a job that struck me as far from respectable. If I could see myself as a healer, I could head off some of the tremendous shame that was bubbling up. The first few days of sex work are emotional enough without the physiological impact of crystal meth comedown—depleted levels of serotonin, dehydration and low blood sugar from not drinking or eating enough, mania and exhaustion from not sleeping. I was a mess and this man, God bless him, was telling me otherwise. He gave me a useful mantra: *You're doing healing work.*

In the months that followed, I would begin to disclose to family and friends that I'd started doing sex work. If others could see me as a healer, maybe my family wouldn't disown me. Maybe my friends wouldn't be disappointed in me. Maybe someone would tell me I'd made a good decision. The story of my second client provided a much more attractive set of talking points for these conversations.

Over the years, as I told the story of my second client, he turned into my first client. The tale took on a mystical, archetypal quality, like

the universe had sent this man to deliver a message. It became my creation myth. There was a clear hero (me, of course—what good is storytelling if you can't be a hero?), a kindly wizard figure who helped me along, and a clear moral trajectory. Gone were the scary complications that distinguish a story from an anecdote. My first client . . . now, *that* was a story. My second client was an anecdote. Anecdotes are comforting, emotionally contained. They feel complete at the end of their telling. Stories ring in your ear. Stories reverberate after the telling is done. Stories get away from you.

The two clients got mixed up in my mind and it wasn't because I willfully neglected the truth. It just made for a cleaner, more compact story, one with an upbeat ending, an emotional punch line, a moral outcome that was compatible with my new profession. I don't know when I started calling him my first client. I just know that it made people feel better about my sex work, thinking I was a healer and that my first client had confirmed this fact. It made *me* feel better about sex work.

On some level, I still see that man as my first client. He wasn't. He helped me recuperate from my real first client. I can still see the scene of us in that hotel room, even though his face has gotten blurry—I'm not going to lie and say that his features are burned into my memory, even for the sake of a better story.

He *did* put his hands on my shoulders. He *did* take me out to dinner. He *did* tip me. He *did* say, "You're doing healing work." Didn't he?