

## HOW I GOT MY TATTOO

Every other weekend I ate green olives, crude slices of cheddar, Ritz crackers, smoked sardines straight from the can with the turn-key lid, garlic pickles, and pepperoni dipped in sour cream, spring onions, and hard-boiled eggs rolled under my father

's palm until the shell fell away like lizard skins then rolled again in a mound of kosher salt because these were the foods that coalesced with father's recent divorce status and with beer. When

I hit my girlfriend, Valentine, with the phone receiver (a decade later) I was dead set on having olives as the complimentary topping on our delivery pizza. She wanted green peppers and bellyached

about how we never ate vegetables and we'd stopped going for our all-night walks. We only walked those walks, I reminded her, for the city to become field, or empty parking lot, or a stretch of quiet railroad where we could kiss each other raw and scream and hide from Burgard Vocational High School and god and

daylight. Cocaine is turning you into a fucking asshole, she said and picked olives from her half of the pizza to feed them to me, a few missed my mouth and rolled inside my shirt then onto the gold and denim blue floral sofa, where we slept, a mess of limbs and unconscious youth. I never lost my appetite

as an addict. I'm glad I was a girl and there were horse races  
and truck stops and twenty-four hour diners where a girl,  
with a bit of glitter lip gloss, could count on  
the done-with-their-day men, up-or-down-on-their-luck men,  
ball-busted broken-backed men, plain-sick-of-spending-time-  
with-other-men men to offer a grilled cheese sandwich and a bit  
of pocket money  
so I didn't have to raid the dumpster

behind the Nabisco factory with Petey and Steve.  
They always smelled like corn syrup. Petey had beautiful eyelashes  
that hid the bloodshot like a burlesque dancer  
's feather fans. I would have let him touch me but his hands were  
the kind of filthy that won't scrub clean.  
I wish I could say I've been clean

since the day Valentine died. I was living in an artist loft  
where I made non-wearable ball gowns out of copper wire,  
old costume jewellery, and crayfish  
claws I had saved up over the years and spray painted gold.  
My girlfriend at the time, Jesse, was kind and always lied  
when I asked her if my art stank like fish, she had her arms around  
me before I even hung up the phone. Valentine's little sister told me  
I was the only one she would call, me and 911.

I returned to my old dealer's house with the Confederate flag hung  
in the bay window and the stupid smoke that couldn't find  
its way out of the living room and I told everyone there  
Valentine had overdosed in her sister's bathroom and the funeral  
was on a Wednesday at Our Lady of Perpetual Forgiveness Church.  
My skin itched  
from the second-hand freebased coke  
and I had to go home and take seventeen  
Gravol because that is all we had in the medicine cabinet  
and I wanted to sleep  
for as many days as humanly possible  
but Jesse made me walk  
in circles around the coffee  
table for hours  
before she was sure  
I wouldn't pass out cold.  
I quit

for good up North in a small village where my hosts brought down  
a deer which I volunteered to help them skin and piece the meat.  
I didn't expect the animal to resist the knife the way it did.  
Everyone was amused at how I struggled  
with its heavy leg in my lace-trimmed summer dress, they said  
they had never seen a white girl so willing  
to get blood on her hands since their land was taken.  
The children made up words  
and told me they were First Peoples' words,  
then laughed hysterically  
when I tried to repeat these words back to them. I guess,  
without realizing it,

I escaped by becoming an outsider. Sure, I've travelled  
and gotten the kind of attention a girl gets when she is travelling  
alone. The tattoo  
on my back has been a means for men  
and women to initiate conversation or touch, poking at the raised  
ink peeking out of my shirt collar.  
Junko approached me in a park

in Osaka while I was trying to coax a stray dog to let me pet it, and asked me to come for karaoke and drinks. I ordered cream soda that surprised me by being emerald green.

The cartoonish rendition of Valentine, her half-winking eye, her leopard-print swimsuit, her halo that was supposed to be gold but I got too sore for the tattooist to finish the colour made Junko ask, why did you get this tattoo

I told her to kiss Valentine's lips: my shoulder. We sang Beatles' songs: "I feel the ice is slowly melting, little darling, it seems like years since it's been clear."

## LYING IS THE WORK

“How old are you?” he asks as he opens the door.

There is no right answer to this question, so I guess. “Twenty-seven.”

“Becky told me you were twenty-five.”

Becky isn't a real woman. She is the name that all three of the receptionists at the escort agency use when arranging outcalls. Becky's job is to move product. The product is sexual fantasy, which differs from other products in that the buyer wants to be an uninformed consumer. In this marketplace of attractive inaccuracy, if the client on the phone likes breasts, Becky makes double Ds out of C-cups. If he likes younger women, Becky tells him I am twenty-five.

As the worker—the sex worker—the job is less about embodying the client's fantasy and more about making the imitation seem like money well spent. Lying about my age, breast size, weight, cultural background, hair colour, college education, lust for certain sex acts and so on, is a routine guile that routinely causes me anxiety. Where will the client draw the line between fantasy and deception? The fantasy holds my payment. But finding myself on the side of deception is delicate. Let's just say that in sex work, there is no standardized way for a client to lodge a complaint.

Standing rigid and at least six feet tall in the threshold of his waterfront home, this man begrudgingly decides it is worth \$250 to pretend that I am twenty-five, when actually I am thirty. He hands me a billfold and ushers me in.



My grandfather once lied about his age. He lied in order to sign up with the Navy at the age of seventeen and fight in World War II.

His parents were Casertani Italians who managed to come to the United States in the wake of the Immigration Act of 1924—an act proposed by eugenicist congressmen and nearly unanimously approved by the Senate. Its aim was to limit the number of immigrants of “inferior stock.” Before he reached his teens, my grandfather was given an Anglo-Saxon name (John), along with the scores of Vincenzos who become Vincents, Guerinos who become Warrens, and Perlitas who become Pearls. Italian was no longer spoken in their home; it became a forbidden language outside of the home, and eventually English dominated their dinner table too. As my grandfather reached what would have been his senior year of high school, Italian-Americans were being arrested, sent to internment camps, or issued enemy-alien registration cards. He, however, carried out his all-American assimilation by shipping out to war. He spent “too long,” he said, anchored in the East China Sea.

“Too long” is one of the few things I’ve heard him say directly about his life as a soldier. He has always been a silent gargoyle sitting at the head of our family table. I’ve pieced together his story from what little my relatives have shared in hushed disclosures and from reading other soldiers’ biographies, visiting museums, and watching the documentary channel. I’ve adopted historic facts collected by experts and academics as my heritage. I’ve learned about my grandfather the way many of us (Generation Xers) learn about their elders, whose voices have been muted by dissociation, depression, alcoholism, trauma, and denial.

Only his body holds proof: the faded indigo Navy ship tattooed on his left arm. His crippled gait.



“How much do you think I paid for this house?” is his second question. He lives alone in a detached two-storey home with a relatively unobstructed view of Vancouver Harbour. The safest outcall clients are family men whose wives are out for the evening or whose children are off camping. Family men might even include recent divorcees or widowers. Family men are frequently nice, but more importantly, they have something to lose if the adult transaction they’re engaging in is anything short of discreet and benign. Family men ask you what you are studying at college. Family men offer apologies without explaining what they are apologizing for.

A framed poster of the Eiffel Tower is the only thing hanging on this client’s beige walls. All of his furniture is dark wood, tempered glass, and black leather.

“Close to a million, I’m sure,” I answer.

“Mortgage poor,” he calls himself. “People assume I have it easy.”

We sit with the lights on and curtains wide open, staring out his panoramic living room window. Is he staging a show for his neighbours, I wonder. Will the impending blowjob be witnessed by a senior couple out walking their Bichon Frisé? But he spends the better part of our hour-long session monologuing about the house, his speech punctuated by frequent trips to the washroom. Each time he emerges, he wrings his hands. “Just needed to wash up,” he says. His hastened, nasal intonation tells me he is actually doing cocaine. I assume the coke is hampering his erection.

I am preparing to leave when he pulls out another billfold. I want to refuse to extend our session, but Becky already told him I could stay. In fact, Becky offered him a deal on his second hour. This is an atypical course for a client to take. Normally, the client seeks cues from me. If I appear to be enjoying myself, the client might invite me to stay longer, and then I make the call to Becky. For show, I



often speak as if I'm gossiping with a girlfriend, giddy with the racy details. *Ohhh, Becky, we're just getting warmed up, if you catch my meaning. Please say I can spend another hour!*

Mr Million-dollar-property doesn't want my routine flirtations. He says, "What? You thought the night was over?" as I force myself to keep smiling. We move downstairs to a windowless spare bedroom, and I notice my cell phone loses its signal. His speech about property taxes is now laced with aloof instructions such as "remove your dress" and "slowly." He paces half-circles around the bed and flexes his muscles in a mirror of his own imagination.

Pity is an emotion I hope to refrain from in daily life, but there are times when a little superiority and compassion help me feel in control with my clients. What does this man have to prove? And to whom, I wonder. He is alone in this house, after all. What hurts have caused him to spend his Saturday night with cocaine and a prostitute whom he clearly distrusts? When he touches me, he goes about it as if I am an animal in a cage. He reaches his arm in, handles my body for a moment, then recoils.

"Sit," I encourage him, patting the bed beside me. "I'll help you relax." My invitation goes unacknowledged. He continues to pace, keeping the tension in the room in motion with his rush-drug strides.

He's only half-undressed when he decides to take another wash-room break. I use the opportunity to sneak back up the stairs. I've got my heels on. My hand touches the front doorknob when I realize I left my cell phone in his spare room. If I duck out without it, this client could call all of the people in my phone book and tell them I'm a whore. I consider the potential damages while running through my list of contacts in my head. It's not that I'm ashamed. It's just that this—pardon my language—fuckwad does not deserve the chance

to tell my story. He has no right to reach the people I know and love.

I unlock the deadbolt and, using his leather dress boot as a door-stop, leave the door cracked open. The exit is set for a quick escape. I go back downstairs to the windowless spare bedroom.



My dear reader, if only I could talk to you in more than a narrative direct address and break the fourth-wall monologue. I wish this were a two-way conversation. I'd like to ask if you are worried about the female protagonist (me) of this nonfiction story. I'd like to know why you are worried. How big is this worry? Do I (the protagonist) represent something larger than the 3,000-odd words of this story, the 150-odd pages of this book? And what will we (you and I) do about it? We'll get to that, won't we? What can we do with this big "representational" worry?

You see, I came out as a sex worker (among other things) when I was twenty years old, and have been making public statements about sex work ever since. When I began writing about sex work, publishers and reviewers described my voice as "transgressive" and "no-holds-barred." When issues like decriminalization, the kiddie stroll, and missing women catch the public's attention, the media contacts me for quotes. When I am grocery shopping, young women approach me. "I have a friend," they say, "who would really like to meet you. I think you could help them." I'm honoured, but am I honest?

Can honesty sit side-by-side with omission if I'm always telling only part of the story? If omission is lying, then I guess I'm a \_\_\_\_\_. As a statement-maker and storyteller, I have certain truths that I push forward to demonstrate that sex workers are worthy of esteem,

dignity, and sanction. There are also truths that I believe will disgrace and discredit me and render me an unreliable narrator. I don't tell the stories that might make sex workers "look bad." *How Poetry Saved My Life* is my attempt to tell—not confess—a selected few of my truths.



But, for now, here are a few more statements:

Lying is the work of people who are told their truths have no value.

The labour of survival is laden with myth and misunderstanding.

Silence is the work of people who can't comprehend that change is possible.

(I still moonlight at all of these jobs.)



He has removed his clothes and his naked gym-body is laid out on the bed. Even his erection is posing. He sees I have my shoes on in his house—*his house*—and is pissed as hell. The fight escalates quickly, the two of us screaming over each other, neither doing anything to moderate our rage. When the first blow arrives, everything slows into a sloppy choreography of mistimed swings and awkward kicks.

He backs me into a closet. I jut my leg out before the door closes.



My grandfather's legs look like ghosts. They are shrunken from

nerve damage, disproportionately small beneath his barrel-chested body. From his hips down, his skin is ashy and pale because of lack of circulation. He used to visit us for Veterans' Day at the Erie County Fairgrounds to gather with the other surviving men of his platoon. His spindly legs deftly carried him along the Memorial Parade runway lined with red, white, and blue paper carnations. At this time of year, Erie County was flat, hot, and fetid with algae blooms and pollution from the lake. The setting empathized with the occasion.

As a child, I had one simple duty during these visits: to keep away from him, especially if he was drinking.

Recently I learned that his disability was not from a combat injury. Some twenty years after the war ended, he crashed his car while driving drunk. His back broke. He was lucky that he didn't become a paraplegic. His passenger—believed to be his mistress—died instantly. This discovery baffled me; I felt I had been misled. The admissible excuse for being such a mean, broken man is war heroics. Fallen soldiers are pathos-worthy and therefore romantic. They are commemorated on collectors' coins.

The Royal Mint does not make an Oppression Is Pervasive coin.

A similar bind exists for sex workers. The admissible excuse for being a low, demoralized woman is survivor heroism. She should have a past tough enough to explain her bad choices. She must spend her earnings on education, not on drugs or so-called frivolous things like clothing or childcare. She should volunteer, write poems, care for an aged parent, or otherwise embrace the romantic "tart with a heart" trope. To avoid appearing like she is trapped, she should exit the sex trade by the age of thirty. A pathos-worthy sex worker must be articulate, not exasperated nor jaded, when telling her story.

While I am well aware of such binds, I admit that it is still more comfortable to believe that my grandfather was injured in the war, because wars end. The idea that the battle has an expiry date is very nice. I'm not impervious to those black-and-white photos of the Welcome Home parade down Broadway. The tickertape haze. Reunited couples kissing in the street. Imagine for a moment carrying a banner that reads, "We Won!"

The signs and banners I've carried while marching in the streets have never read, "We Won!" Nonetheless, I have followed the required steps for survivor heroism. I am an articulate former sex worker who—for the most part—used my earnings for personal advancement. From this privileged position, I have been asked many times how this "prostitution thing" happened to me. Often the question is augmented with what I am meant to take as a compliment: How did this "prostitution thing" happen to such a nice girl/such a smart girl/an exceptional girl/a girl with such potential?

This question makes me "feel bad." So in response, I offer facts collected by experts and academics.

At any given time in Canada, an average of two percent of the female population is working in the sex trade. This is the one industry where women earn more than their male counterparts. Female sex workers can earn more per hour than at any other entry-level job. This gender bias, unique to the sex trade, has provided unwed women with financial security and opportunity since ancient times. The first known record of this occurred in 1800 BCE when the Babylonian King Hammurabi decreed that prostitutes had the right to inheritance, savings, and property. Prostitution is the world's oldest profession, as the saying goes.

More recently, it's been estimated that up to seventy percent of sex workers grew up and continue to live below the national poverty

line. Up to eighty-five percent of prostitutes have experienced homelessness. Up to ninety percent of prostitutes were abused as children. The average age to enter prostitution is fourteen. You see? I do represent something much larger than the 150-odd pages in this book.



Through the gap in the closet door, I see his face flushed red and the undecorated beige wall behind him. I see my black stiletto heel is still on my foot. The rest of my body is in the dark.

Slumped feebly inside the closet floor, I am not scared that I will die. The client stomps on my calf and knee, but his beating is somehow indifferent. I get the feeling he would rather that I just disappear altogether. I wait so long for him to tire that I begin to wonder if it feels less cruel to beat a leg than a whole person. Could he half-heartedly hit me in the face for this long? On my end, it feels less painful to be just a leg, and not a whole person.

My dear reader, I have not brought you here to worry about my life. Remember that pity is an emotion that doesn't really get us anywhere. And we (you and I) will get somewhere with this, won't we? Right now, I want to remind you of how this moment represents all of our lives. Part of us is hurting while part of us is unable to see the injury. We must talk more about this disconnect.

It is this disconnect—this lie—that enables me to adopt a brutal tone as I threaten to ruin all the plastic-covered suits in his closet. It allows me to coldly strike him in the face with a clothes hanger and limp out of his house. When I call Becky, she asks me to see one more client for the night, and this disconnect offers me the capacity to agree. “This is my last job. Tomorrow, I’ll quit. I mean it, Becky,” I say.

I stop at a pharmacy, buy a pair of thigh-high black stockings to cover the cuts and swelling, and go to meet my next client.

Over the following months, I see another two or three dozen clients. I pay rent and tuition, and save up a little “retirement” fund. I make myself remember this bad date and make myself remember again. I tell friends what happened. I write it down. Connecting to this memory—owning it—is much harder than living through it, but I convince myself that forgetting is a vocation that I am far too good at. I want a different calling—and I’m not talking about hanging up my stiletto heels. The story you’re reading right now is not about how I exited the sex trade—it is the one I recount to remind myself that I survived and that the worth of my life can be paid back with my truth and my stories.



Normally, when I speak about sex work, I conclude my narrative with a subtle or not-so-subtle call to action. I’ll make recommendations about which sex workers’ support organizations to donate money to. I might illuminate the difference between survival sex work and commercial sex work, decriminalization versus legalization, trafficking, child exploitation, and the many seemingly nuanced issues that are often lumped into the same controversial pile. I can tell you which members of parliament have moved sex workers’ rights forward, and I can name the elected officials who seem content to let us die or go missing in the streets.

I do this because I grew up in a Silence = Death, direct action, *do something!* era. But I also believe that passively reading about or otherwise witnessing injustice injures us—it widens the disconnect. The part of us that is hurting does not heal in the dark; we must turn

on the light to look at it. We must pay attention.

Right now, however, I will not beseech you to write a letter to your local politician or send a cheque to a local charity. Just for a moment, forget the donations or bylaw regulations, moral debates, social conservatism or what God thinks. Forget about hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold stereotypes. Survivor heroism—disregard that altogether. Save charity for another time. Charity is an “us” and “them” concept, after all, and even if you are in a financial position to give, what I’m asking for right now is the opposite of charity.

I’m asking you to entertain that wish I made earlier: to treat this like a two-way conversation. My dear reader, you’ve caught on by now that this is not really about sex work. Sex work is only one of many, many things that we learn we are not to talk about, one of many things we’ve been asked (but never agreed) to keep silent about.

This is about the labour of becoming whole and letting yourself see a wider panorama. It’s about allowing yourself to listen to broader conversations—with your voice included—to visit the places that have been made silent or small or wounded.

Locate yourself within the bigger, puzzling, and sometimes hazardous world around you. You are invited to do this work. You are already doing this work. What combination of facts and lies represent you? What spectrum of identities do you hold dear while the larger world tells you that these identities don’t even exist? What personal and public rituals do you perform to be seen? What truths must you create to fill the gaps? And what will you (you and I both) do with the knowledge we have (or haven’t) been given?

For me, these questions are the same as poetry. They save me.

When this paragraph ends, this story is all yours.