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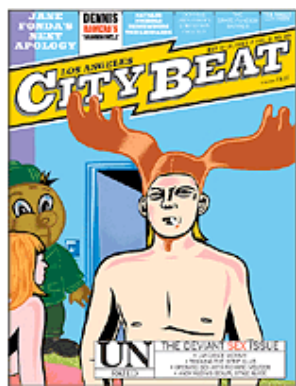
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COVER STORY

JOURNEY TO ANOTHER GIRL

A night out for one local mom means getting a round of lap dances at the neighborhood strip club

~ By ERIKA SCHICKEL ~



Illustration by Jordan Crane

Kathleen picks me up at my house for our evening out. My daughters are bathed and in their pajamas. “Where are you guys going?” they ask.

“Oh, just out for a drink,” I say, kissing their damp, fragrant heads. I grab my purse and blow a kiss to my husband. He knows Kathleen and I

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are not off for Cosmos and girl talk, but are headed to a West L.A. strip club to get lap dances.

We go to our usual place, 4Play on Cotner, located close to schools and shopping. Coming here feels like running an errand. As we pull up to the valet, I reflexively check my lipstick in the rearview mirror. Years of going out have trained me to prepare myself to meet the male gaze. But tonight I will be the one appraising women's looks. The only looks I get here are looks of curiosity, like the one the valet gives me as I hand him my keys. I wonder how many station wagons he parks with booster seats and "Outstanding Student of the Month" bumper stickers.

I always feel a little nervous going to strip clubs, like I'm getting away with something. Though Kathleen and I are not officially breaking any rules, we are definitely fucking with the code. Middle-aged mothers don't usually go to strip bars on weeknights. We should be home reading bedtime stories to our daughters, doing the dinner dishes, making nutritious bag lunches for tomorrow. The taciturn ticket girl collects our cover charge without batting an eyelash. A bouncer holds open the door for us, and I feel a giddy rush of excitement as I step into the gentlemen's club.

The 4Play vibe is kind of English Country meets Z Gallerie. Picture Ralph Lauren hip-deep in Victoria's juicy Secret. The decor is louche, plush, and just a little bit naughty. Heavy burgundy velvet drapes hang like swollen labia from the doors and walls. Over the bar a series of plastic female torsos hang like hunting trophies on a brick wall. They are headless and legless and have only arms and hands to clutch at themselves in randy bas-relief. They look like the pervy mannequins that got kicked out of Bloomingdale's window for misbehavior.

It is early in the evening, and many tables are still empty. Kathleen and I choose one on the far side of the stage. A redhead in a bustier comes over to take our order. "Good evening, I'm Rose. Can I get you a drink? We're all-nude, so we don't serve alcohol here." Down the street at a panty bar called Plan B (a name I love, implying that Plan A was to actually get *laid*), the guys are knocking back Screwdrivers and watching girls dance around in their G-strings with no problem. But add a shot of live pussy to the mix, and the situation gets instantly combustible. Male chemistry never ceases to amaze me in its simplicity. We order chamomile tea.

The 4Play stage is bare but for the burnished, vertical brass pole. On that pole, spinning like a flesh-and-blood whirligig, is, of course, a naked woman. She has her leg hooked around the pole, and she swings off it in a silky arc, her back arched, her bottle-blond, blunt-cut ends sweeping the buffed floor.

The dancer's overstuffed breasts shine under the Klieg lights. This girl is pure stripper – all hair extensions and overdrawn lips. As she dances, men get up from tables and move to the bar that rims the stage to get a closer look. Her pussy is neatly shaven, flawless, and looks as though it were sculpted of latex, not flesh. It is a textbook cunt.

Though Kathleen and I are the only female patrons, between the dancers, the hostess, the bartender, and the waitresses, the women outnumber the men. The sexual behavior code is clearly defined and enforced here: look, don't touch. It liberates us from the stress of having to draw boundaries.

Rose brings us our chamomile tea, which is what I'd be drinking if I were at home. Prohibition makes strip joints a lovely place to hang out. There are no drunks to pester you. This feels like the calm eye of the male sexual storm that rages outside in the world. Everywhere else men are leering at and harassing women in bars, fueled by booze and acute horniness. But here the men are calm, their eager attention focused



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honniness. But here the men are calm, their sober attention focused intently on the appropriate target – the dancer onstage.

The G-string-clad dancer is having a Narcissus moment in the mirror, fondling herself and getting off on her reflection. She presses her breasts into the glass, pushing out her ass. Her augmented breasts ridge and shine bizarrely from the pressure and look as though they might pop.

"Ouch," Kathleen says with a grimace.

"I know. That's gotta hurt." The dancer turns around, hoists a boob and suckles herself.

"Is it even possible to nurse a baby with those?" I ask Kathleen.

"Well, it depends on whether the implant was done under the pectoral muscle or not." My friend is a painter of nudes and married to a doctor. She knows her anatomy.

"Well, at least her breasts won't sag from nursing."

"Not necessarily. Nursing compromises the Cooper muscle," Kathleen informs me, lifting her arm and pointing to the muscle running alongside her own nicely shaped breast. "The Coopers are droopers." I laugh.

A leggy brunette in lacy bra and panties comes to our table and leans into us. "Hi," she says, smiling and offering a long-fingered hand to shake, "I'm Alexis." Alexis has a broad, wholesome smile and shiny Breck-girl hair. What's your name?"

"I'm Erika," I say, shaking her shapely hand. "This is Kathleen." Alexis puts her little purse on our table and pulls up a chair. A gentleman would have offered her a seat, I reprimand myself.

"So, is this your first time here?" she asks in a pleasant SoCal twang.

"Actually, no," Kathleen says, "we've been here before."

"Oh really?" Alexis says with a raised eyebrow. "You're regulars?" I look to Kathleen to maybe run with the conversational ball, but she is untalkative tonight, so I jump in.

"Well ... this is only my second time *here*."

"Oh, what other clubs have you been to?" Alexis asks brightly, like we're talking about shopping malls.

"Crazy Girls on La Brea and Star Strip on La Cienega."

"Oh, how is Crazy Girls?"

"Actually, I thought it was a little seedy."

"Oh! Yeah, well, most places aren't as nice as this."

In my own, limited sampling of strip clubs, I'd have to agree. 4Play is indeed the aesthetic exception to the rule. Most places are a cheesy assemblage of flat black paint, smoked mirrors, and rope lights. Slatternly girls there dance in pits, rimmed by a bar of leering customers. Worst of all, the lap-dance areas at these other clubs are just big rooms banked with couches, making them more like mosh pits than private places.

A male voice purrs over the P.A., "That was Kyra, everybody. Open up your wallets for Kyra." Kyra crawls on her hands and knees to gather the bills men have thrown onto the stage. The business of boners involves a lot of subjugational body language on the part of its workers. There was

a time when it set my teeth on edge, when I railed at every sexist ad and double standard. Now, one of the thrills in coming here is the moral tension it creates in me. Who really has the power here, the men or the women? Am I boldly taking control of my sexuality by being here, or capitulating to a male standard?

I'd like to think it's the former, but I believe popular feminism got stalled at sexual power. Women claim their sexuality proudly as though it were some big coup, when really it's just a basic human right, coupled with a cultural loosening of the sexual codex. Sexual power is merely the bottom rung on the ladder of social influence, well below financial and political power. To claim that and nothing else feels like a capitulation.

"Well, you let me know if you want to dance," Alexis says, sensing Kathleen and I are not yet ready for our lathering up. She's moving on to hotter prospects. I feel a pang of guilt, because it's true. Alexis is too wholesome and friendly for my purposes. I'd hire her to babysit, but not to give me a lap dance. She is simply not my type. Do men ever feel this kind of guilt when rejecting a lap dancer?

The dancers who are not onstage are circulating around the room. At 4Play there is a girl for every taste. There is a black girl in a leopard-print bikini, a Latina with hoop earrings and hair down to her waist, an Asian beauty in smoky eye makeup. It's an Erotic Epcot Center.

Our household budgets allow Kathleen and I a mere two dances each tonight. We want to continue looking, talk to a couple more girls before we buy. It is fun to shop for girls. That I am playing into the objectification of women is perfectly clear, and though it makes me uneasy, it doesn't stop me. In a culture where every other girl has a tattoo over her ass crack and a stud in her tongue, getting hung up on the politics of lookism feels quaint and as pointless as using a turn signal at an empty intersection; you would be alone and irrelevant in your principles.

The challenge of choosing a dancer lies in the fact that these girls were not created with my aesthetics in mind. They have been grown in the petri dish of male desire, and they are pale and moist as mushrooms that have never seen sunlight. Like any purebred, they have a strangely mutant quality. Their prize-winning traits are accented – tits, hair, lips – while less important traits become recessive.

My mojo tends to center on intangibles. What attracts me to men is personality, not pectorals. I like a man with a point of view, an esoteric hobby, a sense of humor. I like boxer guys, not Speedo guys. Among the things that attracted me to my husband was the careful way he held guitars and the fact he could bake a pie from scratch.

I don't hold women to the same standards. Which is why I, a heterosexual woman, am here and not at Chippendale's. Chippendale dancers have the sex appeal of chipmunks. But the Chippendale Dancer and the stripper are essentially the same product: sexual hybrids. Why am I so much more willing to accept a lady stripper as sexy than a guy in a weenie-sling? Have I % simply been shaped by our sexist culture to have some kind of Pavlovian response to hot chicks?

The faceless emcee croons, "And now folks, let's bring to the stage that lovely vixen ... Ava!"

The lights and music change. The syntho-pop beat is replaced with the lickety-split strum of a guitar. A blonde with a retro, peroxidized up-do sails onstage. She is dressed in strappy pumps and a fetching teddy, and is draped in a diaphanous, boa-trimmed boudoir duster. Her lips are painted candy apple red, and her skin is creamy-white. She's got a Marlene Dietrich-meets-Mae-West vibe. She does a swing strip to a

song by the Squirrel Nut Zippers. Here is a girl with an idea or two, I think admiringly. She pivots up onto the pole with astonishing grace and strength, and wraps her legs around it, spiraling slowly down. I catch my breath. This girl is powerful. She has clearly put a lot of time and thought into her act. Kathleen and I exchange a look

“She’s hot!” Kathleen says.

“She’s mine,” I reply. It’s not just that she’s pretty. It’s the music. The swing guitar reminds me of my husband, who is probably out in our garage right now playing a similar riff. My husband, has a weakness for cool blondes. He’d want me to go for her. There is a strange crossover between my desire for my mate and my desire for this stranger that creates a circuit in my libido. For the first time this evening, I feel a jolt of arousal.

When the song ends, Ava collects her underwear and her tips and exits. I watch the stage door anxiously for her to reappear. She does, and I flag her over to our table.

“Hi,” she says with a sultry smile. “Would you like a private dance?”

“Yes, please,” I say, getting up. She leads me to a room in the back of the club. In it is a series of stalls with chairs. “Maneater” is playing over the P.A., and, since songs time lap dances, we make idle chitchat as we wait to for it to end.

“I loved your act.”

“Thanks.”

“It was very original.”

“Well, I try to have fun with it.”

I am nervous around Ava, and not sure what to say next, so she asks, “Are you straight, gay, or bi-curious?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just curious.”

The song finally ends, and Ava drops a token into the box at our feet. The next song starts up, “Independent Women” by Destiny’s Child. I know this song from the *Charlie’s Angels* soundtrack, which my daughters dance to at home. I push the thought of my children out of my mind as Ava straddles my lap and gets to work. She rolls her hips and slides her hands over my body. At first I just watch as she does this to me. It is interesting to be this close to this kind of person. She is as perfect in close-up as she is from a distance. Her skin is soft as velour. I can see no sign of blemish or blackhead. Strippers are bizarrely perfect creatures. Their skin cool to the touch, their breath a blank. They smell not of pheromones, but of air-freshener, sickly-sweet and faux-fruity. How do they do it? It’s not so much that they are made of plastic as they seem to have been dipped in it.

My powers of observation begin to ebb as Ava works on me. Libido trumps rationality when another human being is running her lips over your neck. She breathes into my ear and runs her hands down to my hips, pressing her breasts into me. The flutter in my groin becomes a full-on beating of hooves, and I start moaning a little, grinding her back.

I am cognizant of the house rules, so I keep my hands to myself, but she moves them onto her ass, and I stroke her like a cat, making her purr back at me. I chance it and flick my tongue over her shoulder, and she’s fine with it. Then I flick at her nipple. The beefy guard at the door of the dance room pays no attention; female customers are given a lot of leeway. Ava tugs at my stretchy top, exposing my bra. She reaches

down into it and strokes my breast, which causes me to croon into her ear, “Oh sweet, sweet”

I am fully in touch with my inner strumpet now, and it is like meeting an old friend. There were times, before I married, when I would indulge in sex for its own sake. It wasn't always about love, or infidelity. It was just about the simple pleasure of bodies discovering each other. This feels like that, and it brings me back to my old self, as it simultaneously frees me from who I am now.

The song ends too soon, so I stay for another. When that one is over, I long for one more. But this is how they get you. I have reached my financial limit for the evening, and I pull myself away from her. I've gotten what I came for, and it's not like this is going anywhere. Not that I want it to. I am attracted to the women in the same way I am attracted to luxury cars. I appreciate their beauty. I love their lines, the softness of their upholstery, their purr. But I don't have a burning desire to drive one. We stand up and rearrange ourselves before picking up our purses and exiting the booth. I return to the table to find Kathleen waiting for details.

“How was it?” she asks.

“Divine,” I say, sitting down.

“Then I'm going for it too.” Kathleen flags down Ava and disappears into the back room with her.

As I sip the dregs of my tea, I feel very different. I am tingling, alive, centered. I think of all the money women spend on pedicures and facials, body scrubs and reflexology. I wonder if we wouldn't all be better off just getting a lap dance. The strip club is a kind of spa for the mojo. Fifty bucks gets you two dances, a soothing cup of tea, and leaves you feeling sexually recharged.

A redhead in pigtails, knee socks, and a crotch-length pleated skirt does a dirty schoolgirl pole dance, which reminds me this is a school night. I'd like to get home and fuck my husband before I crash. My spouse doesn't have to come to the club (though that's good, too) to benefit. Just the idea of me being here turns him on. He will undoubtedly be up when I get home, waiting to reap the rewards of an equally stirred-up wife. Post-strip-bar sex is a special treat for longtime lovers.

Kathleen is gone for two songs and comes back looking a little sheepish. “I was going to dance with Alexis, but Ava was too good.”

“I know, I had the same problem.”

“Yeah, but I really swore to myself that I was going to dance with two different girls tonight. Why am I always monogamous in these places?”

“I guess we are all creatures of habit,” I reassure her.

“Let's go home,” my friend says.

When I get home, I find a note on the dining room table from my younger daughter. In her chunky scrawl she has written, “Mommy, I missed you. I love you so . . . much.” I smile at her use of the ellipses. Though only in first grade, she has somehow intuited that this punctuation will communicate her deep, inchoate longing for me. She wanted my body next to hers at bedtime. Tonight was hard for her. Her desires were sacrificed for my own. I suddenly see that this is the logical, if somewhat ironic conclusion of my own sexual appetite: another girl who yearns to be held.



Cover illustration by Geoff Grahn.

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