

SHANA GRAHAM

## **Waitress Contest**

The mirror behind the stage is still streaked with handprints, smudges of sweat and body oil. The girls still climb up every few dances with spray bottles of glass cleaner and rags, wiping it up and down, back and forth, like slutty Cinderellas in their G-strings and bras. There are still black vinyl benches strewn about the room and tucked into dim corners that stick to bare thighs when you sit down. There's that same odor of slightly rancid perfume, of roses blooming in a pasture of cigarette butts, even though smoking was banned here over a year ago. There are still wide-eyed college boys whooping it up in the front row; still solo men farther back, slumped low, their stares hard and needy; still bored girls sitting around the bathroom in slinky gowns, crushing matches into floor cracks with stiletto heels. Nothing has changed.

Of course, there's still Walt and Denny. I picked them out as soon as I walked in, even after five years. Walt, the rotund frame with wisps of white hair and enormous dark shades like a costume-party aviator, and Denny one bench up (they never sit beside one another) with his little red rat-tail, eight-year-old grin, and toys—plastic hand clappers, blow-horns, and feather ticklers—scattered about. Denny always brings toys to celebrate waitress contest night. He whistled and cheered and tooted those horns the first time I got up on stage, terrified and exhilarated, to bare my stuff and compete with that year's flock of newbies for the prize of becoming a full-fledged stripper. And Walt, gentle Walt, guided me patiently with his hands by his sides as I performed my first, awkward lap dance, and tucked two twenties into my thong instead of one.

"I always wondered what became of you," Walt says, recognizing me instantly as I slide onto the bench beside him. He burrows me into his arms, I kiss his forehead, he strokes the bit of bare skin between my jeans and my shirt, I rub his large belly. It is an odd familiarity that has no place in my current life, with my current acquaintances. Yet, it is comfortable, even pleasant, here.

I tell him about my life, my professional, somewhat public, career in politics and nonprofits. I tell him things I thought I wouldn't say for fear of having them somehow catch up with me on the outside: where I've been, what I do, where I work. It's part blind trust and part lack of shame, but also this place feels like a cleft in time, a room that will always be dark, warm, anonymous, peopled with the same cast; a secret home that's too far away to ever seep into my daylight world. I tell him about my wedding last summer and point out my husband, who accompanied me tonight, sitting near the front beside a girl in a pink, cherry-speckled bra who is leaning in, whispering something, probably trying to tease out a dance.

"How does he feel about your nefarious past?" Walt grins.

"He's fully supportive," I say. "We actually met while I was dancing here. He came, with three friends, to watch me strip on our second date, if you can call it that. Both our lives were so different then. He was unemployed, playing shows, trying to be a rock star, and I was a stripper. Tell *that* to the kids. I never thought we'd last because I knew that wasn't going to be the rest of my life. But we changed together."

“I’m sure he enjoys the perks of your training,” Walt winks. “I’m glad you found someone. It’s too easy to get wrapped up with a person and not know who they really are until it’s too late. That’s why I only got married once.”

Walt tells me about his triple bypass surgery. How he was out for eight days, but it was even worse because he wasn’t “all the way out.” He squeezes my hand and stares off for a moment into a corner where there’s nothing but scattered chairs. “Don’t you worry. I’m not going anywhere. My sister and my son would miss me too much.”

“And I couldn’t bear to come here and not find you. I knew you’d still be here.” I tell him.

“That’s right. They just wipe me up off this bench at night and I crawl back in the next morning. See that girl over there,” Walt points at a bored looking brunette, sitting alone, massaging her bare feet. “She’s nineteen. Her mother worked here until a month ago and then she started. Once, a few years back, there was a mother and daughter here at the same time. They seemed okay with it, but sometimes men would get dances from both of them at once, and that was a little weird.”

I raise my eyebrows; try for a moment to picture my own mother here. I can’t. I’ve never told her, or any of my family, about this part of my life. I came close once. Took my mother to see a documentary about dancers unionizing at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco and felt my cheeks grow hot during a scene where the narrator comes out as a stripper to her own devastated mother. In the car after the film, my mother said, “I know I raised you and your brother to be open minded about everything, but I couldn’t imagine that!” I smiled, shook my head in agreement, and didn’t tell her because I realized she didn’t need to know.

“I knew you’d be okay,” Walt says, his fingers in my hair. “Some of these girls, they get eaten up by the lifestyle. But I knew you’d get out. You’ve always been one of the most special girls to grace our little club.”

I nod, erect with pride. Don’t we all go home to measure how far we’ve progressed? But there’s also homesickness for the selves we’ve left behind. On the bench in front of us, Denny is tickling a ponytailed girl with a miniature plastic hand. She turns around and catches sight of me, the only non-working female in tonight’s sparse crowd, and introduces herself.

“I love to dance for girls, girls make me happy!” she giggles, bouncing on the vinyl like a kid on a trampoline. “Oh, I love these benches! Oooh! Don’t you think it would be fun to have sex on these benches?”

I rejoin my husband in the front row as the waitress contest begins.

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It was curiosity, foremost, that led me to try out this most taboo of professions. It was also a self-dare: Would I go through with it? I’ve always had a tendency to place myself in the most uncomfortable, foreign, dirty, unnerving places, ideally alone, to test my mettle—and also to see what would happen.

And, I needed the money. The classic story: down on her luck, she flips through the weekly rag and comes upon that ad: Earn \$300+ per shift; No experience necessary. I’d left my job in California and moved to Seattle on a whim, for a final shot at rescuing a battered relationship and the vague ambition of taking classes and pursuing a law degree.

Within a few months I was single and digging into my final, secret stash—two crumpled \$100 bills in a little sack where I kept library cards from four different cities and a few auspicious fortune-cookie promises—to pay rent for my little room in the basement of a shared house.

The Talents West employment agency was a shack of a place, hidden among the car dealerships, Teriyaki joints, and hourly rate motels of north Seattle's sprawling Lake City Way. Nothing about the building, other than the block-lettered TALENTS WEST sign out front, gave any clue to the nature of the establishment or the business that transpired within. I parked at the restaurant next door and walked into the shoddy, but pleasant-enough office. There was a desk covered with paperwork and photos of someone's kids, pictures on the walls of women, fully-clothed, in tacky-elegant evening gowns, and a couple of girls in jeans and sweatshirts sitting on a couch, chatting with a middle-aged man with a thick Boston accent who appeared to be the receptionist. One of the girls bounced a bored looking toddler on her knee. It smelled like Chinese take-out, and, indeed, a table in a room just off the front was laid with a buffet of Styrofoam containers filled with Chow Mein, sweet and sour pork, and fried shrimp.

The receptionist asked me to fill out some paperwork, photocopied my driver's license, and led me to a small, back office where a red-faced man behind a huge desk nodded for me to enter. A half eaten plate of noodles sat in front of him. He looked me up and down, slow, confident, saying nothing. Stupidly, I extended my hand to shake. He took my hand in both of his large, damp ones and didn't let go, gave me a gentle, *Don't worry, I'm going to make it all better*, smile, and winked. I started as a waitress the next night.

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Here's how it works: You start out as a waitress, serving Coke and apple juice because no booze is allowed in Washington's fully nude clubs and house rules say customers must buy a \$5 soft drink every half-hour. You lean in for a little squeeze to score an extra buck or two. The bartender tells you to make sure to smile pretty; they're sure as hell not getting any of *that* at home. Dancers prance around like diva queens while you bring them cigarettes and sop up their spilled drinks. You show a little ass as you do and wink at their customers. When you get to know the performers better, they let you borrow their little skirts and back-up stilettos and give you tips on how to shave your pussy so you won't cut yourself or end up all red and bumpy. You hang out in the dressing room with them, sharing vodka and diet Coke out of plastic soda bottles and watching them finger their stacks of twenties folded into baby-doll purses. You know you won't stay a waitress for long.

Once a week, it's waitress contest night. Technically, you can't get naked on stage in Washington without obtaining an Entertainer's Permit, a process that entails a daylight visit to the Department of Licensing downtown where they also process marriage licenses, pet licenses, and taxi-driver licenses. You explain to the clerk behind the desk exactly why *you're* there, fill out a slew of forms, get fingerprinted, pay your \$100 fee, and walk away with a glossy photo I.D. as a keepsake. This is all recorded in the state's public records.

For some reason, there's an exception to the license requirement for the waitress contest. You are free to vie for the prize by showing any part of your body you please. Management's explanation is vague, and you don't ask questions.

Waitresses sign up for the contest at the beginning of the shift by filling out a card: name (a good chance to try out would-be stage names), age, hometown, turn-ons, and song choices. "Next up, sure to keep *you* up, is Janie from, oh boy, Janie is from sweet, sweet heaven, folks. She's eighteen, just barely legal, and she likes teddy bears, back rubs, and older men. Here comes Janie!" There are two rounds, about an hour apart, and each waitress gets to dance to one song per round after which she's scored one to ten on ballots passed out to members of the audience. Lots of men come regularly just for waitress contest night.

It takes you a few weeks to work up the courage to sign up, despite pressure from the management and dancers. When you finally do, you decide that the best way to ease your nervousness is to not take it at all seriously. You dress in a fuzzy purple halter and when the deejay announces, "This next young lady's turn on is men who have even more hair on their chests than she does," you stroke your purple fur seductively and blow the audience a kiss. Then you strut across the stage to the groove of P-Funk, bringing on hoots and shouts from a crowd accustomed to Madonna and Shaggy. You're flying with adrenaline, shaking and twisting like you're at a dance club, a little too fast to be sultry, but they're cheering you on and it feels great. You relax into it, get a little more daring, take a test-spin around the pole (it's slippery!), turn to face the mirror and give yourself a little smack on the ass. And you're smiling, grinning, a big huge grin, that's what they all tell you at the end, that no one ever smiles on stage, and you, you just were laughing the whole way through, having a grand old time. When you pull the tie at the back of your halter and let it drop to the floor, you're not even scared anymore. You feel free, triumphant, and you raise your arms in victory. You never get around to taking off your panties. You win the contest anyway.

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When I needed a break from the hustle of the floor, I'd slide in next to Walt and nuzzle up like a good little kitty, grasping his big hand and purring into his meaty shoulder. He always smelled good, like baby powder and musky grandpa-cologne, and I told him so. He had thinning white hair, a bristly beard, and a large, round belly that felt firm, as if inflated, when I rested my head on it. He'd pat his chest and say "Oh, oh!" when we talked about my dancing, my body.

"I don't know if my poor little heart can take it!"

"Don't worry. I've been practicing my CPR."

"Oh dear! Now that could be even more dangerous."

Walt rarely ever bought dances, but he was at Sugar's almost every night. Usually that was not looked upon kindly. The show on stage was just the advertisement; the lap dance was the product and that's the only way we earned anything. But Walt was different. He was a safe haven on the murky floor. He did buy a dance from me once—my first dance on my first night as an official dancer. I was scared as hell, shaking a little as I rubbed myself over him and blew warm breath in his ear. He smiled gently while I hoisted myself up near his face like the other girls had trained me and whispered, "You

know what I want you to do to me...,” then nuzzled my cheek in the nest of his pants and hummed a little vibrato. I felt like I was the one violating him.

One night I went to work with a bandage on my back, covering a minor cut.

Walt said, “Don’t tell me, dear, you’ve had your wings clipped. But you’re working on growing back a new, better pair. And have you got that halo yet?”

Walt told me I was the only one he’d ever given a ten to in the waitress contest. Once I graduated to full-fledged dancer, I sat in the front row with Walt and Denny on waitress contest night hooting “Take it off!” at the new girls. I recognized their shyness, their exhilaration, the particular progression of this rite of passage.

“You’re never the same again after you take off your clothes up on stage,” Walt said.

“Yes,” I nodded, poked his thigh. “Why don’t you try it?”

There’s a real subtlety to how much you take off, and when. The first waitress in the contest kept teasing, pulling her shirt up, pulling it back down, sliding the back of her G-string down a little, then back up. She’s gonna do it, no she’s not. It worked for a while, but eventually we lost interest. Points were deducted.

Number Two was a retired dancer who had recently had a baby. Her breasts were huge against her chest and her stomach was layered and ripply, but she could still drop into a split from 7” heels. We whooped and yelled and tooted on the little toy horns Denny brought in as props even though we knew she wouldn’t win.

Emily was cute—short with bobbed brown hair and big, 1950’s style, lacey undies. She played a great, demure, good-girl-gone-bad, glancing shyly over one shoulder and letting her bra fall off as if, whoops, she didn’t mean to. I was rooting for her.

Danni was a tiny Asian girl with attitude who always took off her panties first. It was her third time in the contest and she had it down. She giggled, teasing the audience; sat with her back against the mirror and knees together, then opened her legs and winked. She was the best, by far, but she’d won last week and the club would rarely let you win more than once. The idea was that you take your \$100 booty straight to the Department of Licensing to become an official “Entertainer” and start bringing in real bucks for yourself and the club.

The last waitress was new that week and she had that Britney Spears, schoolgirl thing going on with a little checked skirt and suspenders. She was pretty enough, but she didn’t smile and she took everything off way too quickly. Within thirty seconds she was already naked and we all turned back to our conversations.

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There was a man who liked me to grind my heel into his crotch as I danced for him. He winced and moaned when I did it and asked for more. He came in looking for me regularly, a nondescript, overweight man in shorts and a sweaty T-shirt. He brought me gifts like nipple clamps and leather spankers and held me on his lap while I giggled and played with them. He emailed me fantasies in which I was the protagonist. It was all slightly creepy, but you get used to these things and making a living at the club was all about keeping them coming. I set boundaries and then dissolved them, and it barely seemed to matter.

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Sometimes I loved them. The men. Not in a romantic or sexual way, but with a tenderness that was almost maternal. Sometimes I was overwhelmed by the heaving sadness of all these men, scattered like islands across the dark benches. Floating from island to island, teasing and tending, their intense need to be touched, my body like a salve. One night, a man I'd never seen before beckoned me over after my stage show. He was young, mid-thirties or so, attractive in a clean-cut, square-jawed kind of way and dressed in suit pants and a white pressed shirt like he'd just come from an office. His wife had left him a few weeks ago, he told me. He'd never done this before, wasn't sure how it worked, if it was okay to touch, if he should even be there. Was he telling the truth? Or just trying to elicit my sympathy, score some special treatment? So many stories, I'd learned to be skeptical. But as I danced for him, his lips trembled and his eyes filled with water and I stroked his hair, held his cheeks in my palms, whispered, "It's going to be okay. Shhhhh. It's going to be okay."

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I liked getting ready, painting myself with thick black eyeliner, glitter, fat glossy lips, sliding into little outfits in white and pink, lace, tiny gemstones, thigh-highs and heels that made me so very tall. I liked playing what I've got. I liked prancing around the room in my G-string with the new girl from San Diego, the one in the vinyl mini and top hat with long blond braids, whipping each other and giggling like it was a grand slumber party. I liked the moment when I first walked onto the main stage and took you by force. I liked you looking at me and seeing girl.

I liked to count the money when I got home. Sitting at the kitchen table, the rest of the house asleep, there was a delicious pleasure in the piles of twenties, hundreds, grimy bills covered in fingerprints, my body coated in those same sweaty fingerprints. In the 3 AM bathroom mirror, my face was unbeautiful, smudged eyeliner and matted lipstick, and my body bruised. I was raw, patchy, worn, not the smooth spectacle the red lights created. In the shower I scrubbed myself hard.

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I miss the deviance. And I miss the glory of being watched.

Yes, parts of it were dark, sometimes unbearably so. The girls who were strung out and trapped, there because they had nothing and nowhere else, babies to support, snorting coke off the lipstick-smearred dressing room counter while pumping a halfhearted, "Pussy power!" fist in the air. The way the nighttime world and its particular economy takes you over from the outside in, charring you with a crisp armor, a wariness of the motives of men, a lingering expectation that sex should beget compensation in one form or another.

But I also left with many surprisingly useful and transferable skills. A brazen confidence: once you've grown accustomed to trotting up to strange men wearing only a G-string, plopping yourself on a lap, and whispering "I'm wet for you already," it becomes far less daunting to cold call reporters, or debate politicians, or negotiate for

exactly what you want. A mastery of the art of shape-shifting: I know how to size up what a person needs or desires in seconds and transform myself accordingly, a skill that is fortuitously suited to both politics and business. And a compassion that extends into difficult places. Places that others write off as squalid, depraved, unworthy. There is both barbarity and grace in the boardroom and in the gutter. I've hung out my shingle in both. I know.

I like having a secret past. A deviant secret that lies beneath the surface of responsible, adult life. In a culture more and more focused on creating some illusion of safety and control—sin taxes, nutritional supplements, bottled water, baby yoga, smoking bans—I yearn to be naked in public. To feel that exalted chaos that comes from losing control and gaining a different kind of control all at once, while everyone watches. I know I can't go back. I don't want to go back. But I want that beautiful deviance.

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A visiting spectator after five years, I sit with my husband in the front row of Sugar's on a rainy Tuesday night, waiting for the waitress contest to begin.

"She's a nineteen-year-old slut from Spokane. Give it up for Shayla!" the deejay booms from his corner nook.

We watch this first waitress take the stage, slowly at first, leaning into the mirror and her own reflection as if surprised, pleased by the nubile, red-lit girl staring back and the rapt adulation of the audience behind. She brushes a flop of dark bangs from her forehead, smiles, gyrates a little and runs her hands up and down her body, growing more confident as the crowd cheers her on. Strippers prance up, one by one, to the rhythmic grind of the music and tuck dollars under her skirt. I am suddenly overcome by the joy of this initiation, this space where a young woman can be utterly sexual, can revel in it and be celebrated for it. I know, even as I think this, all the reasons it is false: that the glory is short-lived, that once these waitresses "graduate" to strippers they'll be furniture like every other sticky bench in the room, their nakedness no longer a spectacle to themselves or anyone else.

But I know this moment well, the freedom and victory of the first time. As Shayla lets her bra fall to the floor and cups her breasts with a triumphant grin, I clap and hoot as if it will never end.