

The Shaker

Published in *Narrative* magazine; spring 2020

I'm forty and still working at The Shaker where men can have a good time and get a little extra on the side for a good price. I started working at the club when I was eighteen (Eighteen!). I washed glasses, cleaned toilets, floors, and counters and cut up fruit for the drinks. It was shit work, but I did it because I needed the money, and not for luxuries like new clothes and car insurance. It was just my mother and I living together in those days. My crazy sister would come by looking for a handout, but we didn't have enough money to cover the bills each month. We ate a lot of pb and j on Wonder Bread.

I started waitressing at age nineteen. I was 5'11" with bobbed raven black hair and bright red lipstick, so I looked older than I was. I wore my denim shorts short and tight. Most men would tuck the money in my back pocket. I'll always remember the guy in a suit who squeezed my ass, not hard, and pushed a bill into my back pocket. I expected it to be five bucks, but it was twenty. Mom and I splurged on Chinese take-out.

At age twenty, I started stripping and giving lap dances. My mother didn't know. She thought I just waitressed at the club, and didn't ask questions. I lived with her until I was thirty-two when she died of a heart attack at age fifty-seven. Mom's ashes are in an urn on my

dresser. I say, “Hello” and “I miss you” to them sometimes and give the urn a gentle touch. I once confessed to the urn that I am a stripper, but it didn’t really matter at that point. The dead know everything anyway.

. . .

My friend Angela who is also my roommate got me into stripping. She said that with my long legs I’d make a killing, and I did. Angela, who has a great rack and beautiful brown skin, also makes a good chunk of change. Sometimes we clear three-hundred a night, usually on the weekends. I should say that in the past tense because I don’t make as much as I used to, but it is a living. I can pay my bills all in one month.

My body has changed over time, but I still attract men; they still want lap dances, still tuck bills into my thong when I strip, still take me to one of the private rooms in the bubble-gum pink trailer behind the club. (Our boss Sammy calls it the VIP lounge.) Men rarely touch me in a way that turns me on, but it does satisfy me when they say I’m pretty or that I feel good, even if they’re full of shit.

Josh, who I dated for a messy year, was the only guy who ever had a wisp of sincerity about him. I felt his touch through my whole body. He didn’t mind that I was a stripper, not at first, but then he started asking questions about how many guys I took to the VIP lounge where I’d taken him three nights in a row. He wanted me to be a waitress at the Applebee’s or Friday’s in town, or even the Number One Bar and Grill where women kept their clothes on. I argued: the money wasn’t as good. He said he could carry us on his military pay, but I wouldn’t listen. He left, his redeployment to Iraq the end punctuation to our relationship.

. . .

Mostly, we get our business at The Shaker from the locals who live on the Army base. We're only fifteen miles out, and I'd guess that many of our customers have wives and children. I can understand that these guys want a lap dance, but I wonder how many I take back to the trailer are married. It makes me sick to think about it.

The vets or guys on leave are always gentle enough; most are grateful, it seems, maybe because we girls are their first anything after they come home from wherever they were stationed. If the guys get a little rough in the VIP lounge, like the one guy did with me last week, I can call Sammy on the walkie talkie and he sends Tony to help me. But, like I said, most guys are nice enough. And we get steady work because we take them cheap compared to what the fancy city girls charge, the ones with fake tits.

Every eight months or so, when he's on leave, a chubby but cute guy named Pete, probably age thirty-five or so, comes in and gets a lap dance from Angela and takes her to the VIP lounge. He's been doing this for years. It's like Pete and Angela are a married couple. She tells me that he pays her well, better than some of the other guys. Our going rate is between thirty and seventy-five, depending on the service and level of nudity. Kissing is never part of the fee. No kissing, not ever. I don't see what the big deal is, but I follow rules.

One night Pete brings in a kid who looks like he's about eighteen. A brown camouflage Carhartt baseball cap hides his eyes. I can see his round chin, the small curve of his nose. His Nike t-shirt, jeans, and work boots give him the look of a skilled worker, someone who can

handle power tools or operate heavy machinery. He stretches out his long arms on the table, leans on his elbows, and drinks down his beer quickly.

Pete sees me and calls me over, a five-dollar bill between his fingers. He pays me and gestures me toward the kid. I straddle him, rubbing my hands on his chest, which I don't always do. Mostly, I keep my hands on their shoulders and just move my hips the way every guy likes.

Tonight, Sammy plays eighties' rock (last night it was seventies; he alternates). It's hard to hear over the music, so the kid gestures with his finger and moves toward my face, almost as if he's about to kiss me. But then I see he's moving toward my ear.

"You're great," he says. "Can we go somewhere else?" He looks over at Pete who nods at him. Is this some kind of bet? It's clear that he and the kid have planned this out.

I think about saying no. He's too young. To test him out, I ask, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," he yells over the music.

I tilt my chin and raise my eyebrows. "Yeah, right."

He shrugs. "I'm not lying," he nearly shouts.

I get off his lap and take his hand. It's warm and dry. I lead him outside. It's a muggy night, the air thick from the day's heat. The cicadas buzz and fireflies wink in the darkness. The trailer has a small light by the entrance. We're still holding hands. I warn him about the gravel. "Most people trip," I say. He nods and holds my hand loosely.

Inside, all the good rooms are taken. I have to take him to the one with the ratty couch, its recliner broken, fabric ripped on the seat's arms. The room doubles as a supply closet. Rolls of

paper towels, toilet paper, and cleaners are stacked in the corner. A mop in a bucket gives the room a vaguely rotten smell.

He tells me what he wants. We agree on fifty, which is probably what he'll spend on beer and liquor for the night.

I get a condom from one of the drawers and tell him to take off his pants. He does. "Your underwear, too," I say. He does, and I'm surprised he's not ready for me. Unless they're drunk, guys are usually ready. I take him in my mouth until he is hard and then I put the condom on him and turn around. Guys usually like to take me from behind.

But he turns me back around and says, "I want to see your face."

"Take the hat off," I say, curious about his face.

He has a buzz cut. His brown eyes are big and intense as they fix upon me. His lips are a tight line, as if he's affecting an attitude to appear tough. He's about my height without my shoes, maybe an inch or so taller. While we're still standing, he puts his firm hands around my back and pushes into me. I shiver. He finishes quickly, as most guys do, and apologizes. The apology is new.

"For what?" I ask.

"I finished too soon."

"It's not on my timeline, sweetheart," I say. I normally call guys sweetheart and it feels natural, but not this time. I feel like I'm treating him like a child and don't want to. He has probably been away from home for a while. I want to show him respect, even if only because he

thought enough of me to lie about his age. Or maybe he wasn't thinking of me at all. He just wanted to prove he could drink legally.

I take him back to The Shaker and he sits at a table alone and orders another beer. Melanie brings it to him. She is hot, but he doesn't turn around to check out her ass. He sits back in his chair, his legs crossed in front of him. He sips the beer more slowly this time, and looks around the room. Tanya passes by his table, brushes him on the shoulder, and whispers something in his ear. He nods. She whispers something else. He shakes his head. She walks away, hand on her hip. I smile.

Someone behind me touches my leg. "Can we get a little action over here?" he asks. It's Johnnie Lehy who owns the feed store downtown. He's with his son Owen whose wife, Cami, just had a baby a month ago. I won't take Owen to the VIP lounge no matter what he pays me. Let Tanya take care of him.

I give Johnnie the lap dance he pays for. I glance over at the kid, but he is looking at the empty stage.

. . .

Two nights later, a Monday, the kid arrives alone, dressed in jeans and work boots again; it's a Levi's t-shirt this time. No cap. He holds out five bucks for a lap dance. Tanya approaches him because she's closer, but he looks past her to me. She turns to see me and scowls. I'm a little creeped out. Tanya is closer to his age than I am.

I straddle him, whisper in his ear that it's good to see him. "I'll pay you more this time," he says, trying not to speak too loud. At first, I don't hear him, so I lean toward him. His lips are so close to my ear he could kiss my neck.

In the VIP lounge, I get the best room, the one with the flowered couch that actually has a bounce to it with no stains or ripped fabric. He asks me to lock the door.

"It's already locked," I say, walking toward him. He takes off his shirt. His muscles are so lean I can see the outline of his ribs beneath his swollen pecs. Why does he have to pay for it?

He takes off his pants and underwear and sits on the couch. "Come here," he says. "I want you on top."

I want to ask why, but don't care. I do what he asks and when he tells me to come I do that, too. (I've been asked to do this before, and I wouldn't. Not part of the deal.) I make the mistake of leaning my head on his shoulder. He turns toward me and kisses me on the cheek.

I sit up quickly as if he'd bitten me. "You can't do that," I tell him.

His eyebrows wrinkle. He shakes his head and smiles as if to say, "It figures." He says, "Whatever."

I put my hand on his chest, not to console, just to feel it.

I stand up and put back on my clothes. He does the same.

"How much?" he asks as he pulls his shirt over his head. "I said I'd pay you more."

"Fifty is fine," I say.

“What if...?” He looks at me, then down at his unlaced boots.

“If... what?”

“If... Can you stay longer? I can pay you more.”

“You want to go again?” I ask. It’s not a common request, but one I’ve heard before.

He shakes his head. He ties his boots and looks up at me.

“You knew Josh? Josh Rider?”

I press my lips together. “Yes.”

“I knew him. I mean, he wasn’t in my squad, but—”

“Is there some reason why you’re bringing this up?”

“I didn’t know you were his girlfriend. Not before. I mean, Pete told me. Yesterday.”

Josh and I were ready to break up. We’d had such a nasty fight the night before he went to Iraq that I assumed we were broken up anyway. He’d called me a bitch during our fight and grabbed my arm. Before he finally left, I threw a glass at his head from across the room. I missed.

Josh’s mother told me three weeks later that an IED hit his squad’s tank and killed three of the five guys inside. Josh, age thirty-six, died instantly. His mother hugged me and wept. I tried to absorb some of her sadness since I didn’t feel enough of it myself. Though I’d loved him (I must have loved him), I couldn’t cry, not even at the funeral when they covered his casket with an American flag.

“Can we not talk about this?” I ask the kid, pulling my half-shirt from the bottom, wishing it were longer. I want to cover up even though my skin is damp.

He rubs his scalp. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I just wanted... He was a cool guy. I wanted you to know that.”

“How do you know he was cool?”

“Everyone calls me ‘the rook’ because I look so young. He didn’t. We played this drinking game at Christmas, the whole platoon. I won; he told everyone not to underestimate me. ‘He kicked all our asses,’ he said. It was a good thing to say, a nice thing. He didn’t have to say it.”

My face feels hot. I say, “He was kind of an asshole. He knocked me around, here and there. He was a mean drunk.”

He squints his eyes. “Really?”

I nod.

We stand there, looking at each other. I want to ask him why, if he liked Josh so much, he’s paying me for sex. But I don’t want to dig into that mystery.

“I don’t understand,” I say as if to myself. “You could’ve had Tanya. She’s young. She—”

“The one with the nose and lip rings? Forget it.”

I smile. “I’m old. Forty.”

He smiles back. He has a dimple in one cheek. “The way I see it, we’re all lucky to be alive.”

I put my fingers under my eyes so my mascara doesn’t run. He comes up to me and takes me in his arms, not holding me tight. Just holding.

He releases me and I feel his lips on mine. I know why the rule is no kissing. It’s not just that it makes me feel good, and I don’t have the right to feel anything, but now I have to ask him for money. A kiss is more intimate than having him inside me.

I pull away.

“How much?” he asks, taking his wallet from his back pocket.

He has a hole in his boot. “Fifty is fine,” I say.

He hands me a few bills: three twenties, a ten, a five.

“I said fifty.” My voice is rising. “No more.” I put the fifty in my bra and hand him back twenty-five.

He opens my hand and gives me the remaining cash. “And I say seventy-five. You deserve it.”

I know I’m looking at him like I want to rip his head off. I had given Josh a similar look; I can feel it in my face: the tension in my forehead, my eyebrows.

“I don’t want your pity cash.”

He shakes his head and takes a deep breath. Exhales. “It’s not pity cash.”

I look around the room, the peeling pink paint the color of a ballet slipper; the garbage can with the used condoms; the throw rug, pink in the center, the rest gray with dirt.

The night after I threw the glass at Josh and he left, Angela, Tanya, and I got drunk on rum and Cokes after The Shaker closed for the night. When I was happy and hammered, I confessed that Josh once told me he wanted to marry me. “Can you imagine?” I slurred. “Me!” I don’t remember how Angela or Tanya responded. They probably laughed.

“I want you to have it,” the kid says, holding out the cash.

I take the money and squeeze it tight, making a fist.

“This ends here,” I say. “Pick one of the other girls next time.”

He looks at me hard. Then his expression changes as if he’s forcing himself to be casual. He shrugs and says, “Fine. Whatever.”

I sit on the couch to put on my strappy heels, and when I look up, he’s gone.

. . .

The kid comes in a few nights later with Pete who immediately circles his arms around Angela’s waist and takes her to the VIP lounge. The kid wears his Carhartt cap so low I wonder how he can see. I have a side view of him. He downs his beer and shot and orders another round, all without looking at me. He must know I’m here, close to him.

Tanya passes by his table; he holds out a bill; she straddles him, puts her arms around his neck. She takes off his cap and goes to put it on her head. He grabs it from her. She laughs like

it's a game they're playing, but then her smile fades when she looks at his face. I can tell she's going through the motions, her movements stiff.

After she leaves, I go up to his table, put both my hands on it. "Hey. What's your name?"

He looks at me as if I've asked him to whip out his dick right there. "My name? You want to know my name?"

"Yeah." I guess he's a Mike or a Steve.

"Robbie," he says.

The loud music partially drowns his voice. "Robbie or Bobby?" I say in his ear.

"Robbie!" he shouts.

I take his hand and pull him out of his chair. He follows me to the VIP lounge where I select the room I like the least. I tell him to take off his pants. He's ready for me. I put my mouth on him. He moans. He holds my head until he's done.

"How much?" he asks me, zipping up.

I get up and walk out of the room, nearly run, difficult to do in heels.

He follows, grabs me by the shoulder.

He stares at me hard. "How much?"

"My name is Haylee," I say, my face burning. "Thank you for asking."

He follows me outside, pulls at my shoulder again.

I turn to face him. “What?” I nearly yell.

He steps back. “You know what. I want to know how much.”

“It’s free! You’re welcome.”

He moves closer, lowers his voice as Tanya and a guy pass us. “It’s not fair to you. It doesn’t matter if I asked for it or not.”

I shake my head. “Nothing’s fair.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, searching for my eyes, but I look away. His hand moves my chin until our eyes meet. “Hey. I said I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I should never have brought up Josh, never should’ve come here.”

“And yet here you are. This is your third time.”

He toes at the gravel with his boot. The cicadas drone in the background, a grating chorus.

“I know. I wanted to ask... Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Did he mind it... you know, the stripping? The VIP trailer?”

“Not at first. He was one of my customers, but then... things change.”

He nods.

I can't help asking: "You would mind it, wouldn't you? I mean, it would bother you, having a girlfriend like me?" Used up. Tainted.

"I think so. I mean, yeah."

My stomach falls. "Thought so. Can't say I blame you." What an idiot I am, acting as if he could be attracted to me.

He puts his hands in his back pockets, rocks back on his heels. "I'm an asshole for being with you after Pete told me about Josh. I shouldn't have—"

"Forget about it," I say. "Maybe you're just lonely."

He takes my hand and pulls me close to him, puts his arms around me. I relax into him. Even at our best, Josh never held me like this. His touch was always rough.

Robbie tips my chin up to kiss me. His tongue is in my mouth when I hear Angela's voice behind me. "Careful, girl."

I turn to see Pete with his arm around her waist as they descend the steps from the trailer. She calls out into the night: "Don't go falling in love."

