

NewOptions

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Some of Our Daughters, Some of Our Lovers

I didn't plan on making this a special "theme" issue. I didn't plan on spending two months writing it. I was just going to write a brief cover story on female prostitution, and more specifically on the ways three prostitutes' rights groups look at prostitution.

But it quickly took on a life of its own. I found it difficult to believe any of the prostitutes' groups, and realized I had to discover for myself what prostitution is all about. That meant I had to get to know some prostitutes.

And then, without my fully realizing it, the theme of the issue shifted. On one level it is still about prostitutes. But on another level it is about our need for love, and about what happens when many of us are incapable of love.

Some of the language and images in this article may be offensive to you. I didn't see any way around that however. All the names have been changed, but for better or worse, everything else is the absolute truth.

We've all seen them, stared at them, wondered about them, more than we like to admit.

Short-skirted, high-heeled women endlessly walking certain streets in our cities and towns. Heavily painted women in too-tight jeans asking if you want a "date." Women with sad crazy smiles saying they want you *now* and adding that they won't charge much.

In Washington, on the blocks around 13th and N Streets (10 minutes' walk from the White House), you can see them getting into men's cars; going down stairwells with men; taking men into alleys. You can see them kibitzing with each other on the street corners. You can see them sipping soft drinks to wash away the aftertaste of their last man.

And as a matter of fact, they don't charge much: \$25 for a b.j., \$50 for a half-and-half. And even that is negotiable.

But is it news?

The best guess is that there are a million

homeless people in the U.S. For whatever good it does them, they are a constant media concern. They are "news."

The best guess (by the most competent prostitute advocates) is that there are a million female prostitutes in the U.S. — a million women who earn at least part of their income by having sex for pay. But they are not a media concern. They are not "news." They are simply *there*, like the weather.

It is very convenient to treat issues like homelessness as news but issues like prostitution as not-news. Homelessness is a relatively easy problem to solve. We can solve it with some clever combination of money and policy. But prostitution cannot be addressed so easily.

We've always had prostitutes; perhaps we always will. Their presence, therefore, does not just say something about our nation's policies or leaders. It also says something very fundamental about us.

And not the kind of thing you want to dwell on, on the six o'clock news.

Whores R us

What it says about us begins (but does not end) with the fact that prostitutes are not some mysterious and distant Other. They are deeply implicated in our lives. They are *many* of our daughters; they are *many* of our lovers, or our husbands' lovers.

If a million U.S. women work as prostitutes in any one year, and the turnover is 10% a year — then at any one time, *five million U.S. women* either are or have been prostitutes.

Nobody knows how many men use prostitutes. From talking with men, I'd estimate that one out of five of us sees prostitutes in any one year. That's *20,000,000 adult men*.

That is not an implausible figure. We know that the average adult street prostitute sees 1,500 men a year (women working in massage parlors, or as call girls, or out of their homes, may see fewer). We know that most

of these men go to prostitutes more than once a year. But even if the ratio goes down dramatically — to 20 men per prostitute — with a million prostitutes that works out to 20,000,000 men.

That is a lot of women and men.

Three "explanations"

So — what does prostitution say about us? What's it *really* all about?

To come up with a convincing answer, I thought I'd have to look no farther than the work of the three major prostitutes' rights organizations. But they do not agree among themselves as to the answer. Each is promoting a different "line":

- **It's about women's freedom.** According to COYOTE (acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics"), the important thing is that "women have the right to determine, for themselves, how they will use their bodies," as COYOTE co-director and lesbian activist Priscilla Alexander puts it. For Alexander and COYOTE, prostitution is just another kind of work — "sex work" is the politically correct designation.

In Alexander's anthology *Sex Work* (1987), she adopts an unusually matter-of-fact and surprisingly accepting tone: "Some [women] get to like the work as they become skilled at it. Other women hate it from the beginning to the end. And still others like some aspects of the job while hating parts of it." Similar sentiments abound in a more recent anthology, Gail Pheterson's *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (1989).

- **It's about economics.** Another leading prostitutes' rights group, the U.S. Prostitutes' Collective (U.S. PROS — terrific double entendre), argues that the economy encourages and even forces some women to become prostitutes. "Prostitution is about money," says U.S. PROS spokeswoman Rachel West. "If women's basic economic situation does not change, then women will continue to

work as prostitutes.”

• **It's about male oppression.** The third major prostitutes' rights group, WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), believes that no woman ever really *chooses* to work as a prostitute — that prostitution is an institution created by men to control and exploit women.

“There has been a deliberate attempt to validate men's perceived need, and self-proclaimed right, to buy and sell women's bodies for sexual use,” says Sarah Wynter, founder and editor of WHISPER's national newsletter. “This has been accomplished, in part, by euphemizing prostitution as an occupation. . . .”

“Both the conservative right and the liberal left male hierarchies collude to teach and keep women in prostitution. . . .”

Too pat

All three organizations are doing good work. But I did not trust their politically correct positions on prostitution. They seemed too shallow and pat.

I mistrusted those politically correct anthologies, too. Behind both of them I detected a pernicious assumption: *The sexual love relationship between men and women is neither sacred nor special.*

A spokeswoman for the Women's Organization for Equality (WOE) let that assumption out of the bag in Pheterson's anthology: “What's the difference between being promiscuous and being paid for it, and just being all free and not being paid for it? . . . I can't see any difference.” *You can't?* Priscilla Alexander also made that assumption explicit when she wrote, in the introduction to her anthology, “[M]oney has become the main factor that distinguishes prostitution from marriage.” The *main* factor?

“Community of complicity”

All of a sudden, an article that might have been relatively easy to write became much harder. If I could not rely on the major prostitutes' rights groups and the standard anthologies on the subject, there was only one thing left to do. I would have to interview some prostitutes myself.

I began hanging out in the neighborhood around 13th and N Streets — a neighborhood full of streetwalkers. At first I was afraid to even approach them. So I spent some time just observing . . . and plotting my strategy.

I had noticed that all the prostitutes whose words found their way into the Alexander and Pheterson anthologies sounded just like they were talking to — and for — radical-feminist and lesbian activists. I was sure that, to some extent, the prostitutes had shaped what they said and wrote in order to meet the expectations of their anthologists, and I was deeply

committed to not making that same mistake. The last thing I wanted was for the prostitutes I interviewed to shape their thoughts and feelings in order to please me, a male journalist and “concerned professional.”

So standing there on the streets at night, watching the prostitutes get in and out of their customers' cars, I realized that if I wanted to come close to anything like the truth about their lives, I'd have to break down, as much as humanly possible, the barriers between us. To the greatest extent possible I'd have to come across to them not as an ideologue and not as a Journalist, but as just another flawed and vulnerable person.

I further realized that there was only one way to do this and maintain their interest. I'd have to come up to them like any other trick and ask to have sex with them.

The way I liked to put it to myself was I'd be entering into a “community of complicity” with them.

I was too afraid of catching sexually transmitted diseases to propose having intercourse with them, but I figured I could ask them to whip me or something. And then — so I thought — at some point I'd interrupt the proceedings, say I didn't feel in the mood that night, mention I'm a journalist, and ask if they'd mind being interviewed — if not that night, then sometime soon.

It was an unorthodox approach, I know. But it worked.

Over the course of the last two months, I spoke with 15 prostitutes, and conducted long and searching interviews with six of them. (I confined myself to whites, whom I felt I'd be able to understand better, and confined myself further to those who didn't look completely blown away by drugs or suffering.)

Most of the interviews lasted several sessions and all took place in my apartment. Each of the prostitutes got to know me first as a (very) flawed and (very) vulnerable human being, and only then as a Professional Journalist. And each of them, in turn, revealed themselves to me in ways that were touching and illuminating and even, I believe, accurate (I checked parts of their stories with *other* streetwalkers — they gossip incessantly about each other — just to make sure I wasn't being led astray).

Of course, 15 white D.C. streetwalkers is hardly a representative sampling of all the prostitutes in the nation. But I think they conveyed enough of the depth and texture of their lives to allow me to begin to understand prostitution beyond the “correct lines” of the ideologues.

Beginner's luck

I wasn't real successful with the first prostitute I tried to take home. But the experience

unforgettably confirmed for me the limitations of all three correct lines on prostitution.

I'd seen Amy in the neighborhood for weeks. She was hard to miss. She usually dressed in a black leather jacket and rode a bike, pedalling right up to cars and asking guys if they wanted a date. (If they did, she excused herself while she chained her bike to a post.) A Green prostitute!, I thought, with my heart on my sleeve. And she was a genuinely attractive woman, small but well-built, with soft cheeks and big brown eyes and a mouth that puckered expressively and often.

Around midnight I was walking in a particularly run-down part of the neighborhood when I saw Amy on the corner. I walked by her slowly and tentatively and she asked if I wanted a date. My heart was pounding wildly. I said I was just walking around but she looked so attractive I was willing to change my mind.

Her mouth puckered. What was I into?, she wanted to know.

I'd like to be abused, I said, trying to follow my “strategy.”

I thought you might be into that, she said, 'cause of the leather you're wearing.

I only have \$25, I said, but I have a nice place we can go to.

Well I live just down the street, she said. And she took my hand and started leading me there. *What do I do now?*, I thought. *Maybe just play along with her for a while, then invite her to my place some other time?*

Do you share the place?, I asked, terrified I might be jumped by some pimp. No way, she said, relax, it's all mine.

I continued trying to figure out how to get out of the situation without making it impossible to see her again. Meanwhile, she kept walking — faster and faster, it seemed — and began telling me about herself. She was 24 years old, born and bred in Baltimore, had been “tricking” two years, and also had a

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Groups

straight job (her phrase!) as a hairdresser in a suburban mall.

We got to her apartment building — one of those new but already shoddy-looking tall buildings around 14th and N with 24-hour security downstairs. The security guard glared at us as she whisked me into the elevator.

Now I was really panicky. *What was I doing? How could I stop this?* She got off on the third floor and yelled into her apartment, “Is anybody there?” But I thought you said it was yours, I said. Be quiet! she said. Stand here in the hall. My girlfriend might be visiting.

She walked inside. Hello! she said; and a thick male voice said something drowsy and unintelligible. I can’t stay now, she said, and went out to me again.

Let’s go up to the seventh floor landing, she said, and she led me up the stairs. Nobody ever goes up there, she said. I’ve taken plenty of dates up there, and they have a great time. Once a guy spread a blanket on the floor and we stayed there for nearly an hour!

The seventh floor landing was dingy and cold, and it didn’t look private to me. And I didn’t want to be there in the first place! Amy, I said, listen, I’m too nervous to do anything here, it’s not private at all. Let’s go to my place. I’ll pay for the cab.

She looked at me directly for the first time, and her big brown eyes turned cold as ice. She demanded the \$25 that I “promised” her. But you promised to take me to your *apartment*, I said.

Then she draws the knife, with a motion so swift and smooth I can hardly follow. It’s got a nasty curl at the tip of the blade, and an eagle’s head on the handle, and she’s holding it in a way that makes it clear she knows how to use it.

I can tell my knees are beginning to buckle, from the fear. I’m sorry, I say to Amy. Of course I’m gonna pay you. Here!

She takes the money and mercifully, miraculously, puts the knife away. She’s only had to use it once, she says — on a guy who tried to take his money back from her. She slashed his face and chest, she says, “but didn’t jab it in”; she is very proud of that fact.

She goes to the foot of the next flight of stairs and gets down on her knees. Now that you’ve paid you can finish your date, she says. She pulls up her sweater, revealing a red see-through brassiere. Her nipples are taut. She puckers her lips suggestively.

Uh, Amy, I say, thanks a lot. But after seeing that knife I no longer feel like it. Why don’t we just go now?

She gets back on her feet. How much money do you have left?, she asks. Just enough for cab fare, I say. Yeah, well your place is walking distance, she says, and pulls out the

knife again.

My eyes become as big as hers. She sees this and says she needs the \$4 because she has \$1 of her own plus my \$25, and \$30 will allow her to buy a “D” (for “dilaudid” — a potent drug). Unhesitatingly, I hand it over.

When we go out she’s all charm. She thanks the security guard for watching her bike (which had been sitting in the lobby). She tells me to get my hair done at her studio sometime. I tell her I’m a journalist and might like to interview her, and she puckers her lips and gives me her phone number. Then she gets up on her bike and is gone.

I begin to walk home and realize I’m trembling. I walk the streets for hours, thinking about all that happened.

I knew I didn’t have any idea why Amy was working the streets. But I’d already seen enough to know that all three of the “correct lines” on prostitution were useless as guides to understanding her.

It was inconceivable to me that she was living that life by choice. She claimed to have a job as a hairdresser (something I later confirmed), so she didn’t need to sell herself to make a living. And she had too much spunk to be purely a victim — of men, “the patriarchy,” or anything else.

Heart of darkness

If Amy definitively taught me the limitations of the three “correct lines,” Beth helped point me toward a better, deeper understanding of prostitution.

I often saw Beth sitting on the stone wall at the corner of 13th and N — a thin woman with an intelligent, angular face overlaid by pimples and pock marks. We talked occasionally; I’m sure she thought I was a regular. One day I went to the neighborhood hoping to bring someone home for an interview, and there Beth was, sitting on her stone wall in a short denim skirt. Although it was bitter cold, she wasn’t wearing underwear.

I told her I was looking for someone to beat me, and she told me she was real good at that. In the cab she held my hand, then started rubbing my thigh.

By the time I got her upstairs, though, I began dreading any kind of physical contact with her. Something was off about her — something was not quite right.

So what would you like?, she asked me.

You’re the expert, I told her. And besides, I’ve never been beaten before. I’d just like to feel less . . . *responsible* for a while. (I thought that sounded pretty realistic.)

She seemed to be spacing out; she was clearly on some kind of drug. Lemme think about this, she said. You’re different. I wanna come up with the right thing for you.

Her head began weaving back and forth.

Are you all right?, I asked.

Am I all right?, she said, mimicking me. Lemme tell you something. You don’t know shit about problems. I don’t have nothin’ but what I’ve got on my back. I don’t even know where I’m gonna sleep tonight.

Look at my legs!, she says. She pulls up her skirt and I see that they’re covered with cuts and bruises. My body can’t heal itself anymore!, she shouts.

She leaves her skirt up. I’m finding it hard to look at her, and she knows it.

I’m a heroin addict! she shouts, knowing it’ll horrify me to hear it.

You want a little ass-whipping? That’s nothing — nothing. Lemme tell you something. I’ve had three coathangers stuck up my ass! I’ve had a red-hot poker up there! . . .

You are so lucky you chose me! There’s bitches out there who’d see this place and stake it out! There’s girls out there with the AIDS virus! I was sitting with one this morning. . . .

I really wanted to calm her down. I brought her some After the Fall sparkling fruit juice and asked if she’d ever been to college. It wasn’t a spurious question; there was an intelligence in there somewhere.

Yeah, she says, finally covering her legs. I spent a semester at Stanford. At 18. My dad had lots of money, she says — virtually spitting out the words “dad” and “money.”

I had a great advisor there, she says. She thought I’d be a real good psychologist. But I dropped out to be with my boyfriend, and he had a drug habit. And I’ve been into drugs for 10 years now.

She clutches her side and puts a bit of lower-class-black intonation into her voice. Now the doctor say I’m gonna die in two or three months. From cancer!

Oh my God, I think — instantly suspecting that her “cancer” is, in reality, AIDS. Beth, I say, listen: I can’t ask you to abuse me.

I am abusing you, she says. And you lovin’ it!

She launches into a long explanation of why men feel they’re raping her when she’s whipping them. Her advisor was right, I think: she *would* have made a good psychologist.

Then she launches into a long rap that sounds like she picked it up verbatim from the black pimps she claims to have had.

Whites are mad at black pimps for pimping their white women, she declares. But blacks are just pimping to get some money to build up their own economy. That’s how everybody does it!

Your landlord pimps you for rent, right? Boss pimps his workers. Whites pimp blacks every day. . . .

Sure, the blacks are pimping our bodies. But that’s *all* they’re pimping. You go to work,

the white man is pimping your body *and your mind* . . .

Behind Beth's hip rap

After I got Beth out of there, I bolted the door and sat down on the rug — once again, trembling.

She certainly sounded “politically correct” at times. Parts of her rap would have been great in the Alexander or Pheterson anthologies. But seeing and hearing it all in context gave a different impression entirely.

Beth's anger was real. But it was also a protective coating. Beneath it I sensed (I could almost reach out and touch) an emotional pain so great that to have felt it fully might have killed her. In fact, I was sure that it *was* killing her, no less stealthily than the AIDS or cancer or whatever.

You could hear the pain in her voice. You could see it in her face, in her eyes. Doesn't it come bouncing off the page at you?

I didn't understand the ultimate source of the pain — though when she spoke of her dad with contempt, I felt I was getting a clue.

But I did understand one thing. Beth's emotional hurt was the key to *why* she was on the streets. It was a lot more key than all her politically correct insights about the universality of pimping.

The task redefined

After talking with Beth I realized my task would be even harder than I thought.

It wasn't enough to take prostitutes home and ask them the questions a reporter might ask. I had to talk with them long enough — and listen to them closely enough — to detect where they hurt, and why . . . to uncover what Hemingway used to call the “broken places.”

That became the purpose of my taped interviews. The first were with Nancy.

Getting to Nancy

I'd seen Nancy around for years — as a 19-year-old she'd been tricking near our first office — and if you met her at a party or something you'd have never guessed she was a prostitute. She looked like your typical corn-fed Midwesterner, straw-colored hair, winning smile, slightly overweight but almost intimidatingly wholesome-looking. Acted like your storybook Midwesterner too — “nice” almost to a fault.

The first time I took her home she had her clothes off before we'd hardly said a word. I'm more comfortable this way, she said, smiling and laughing and sitting with her legs crossed on my couch. It was genuinely hard for her to get into the whipping, and after I told her to stop she spent a lot of time in my bathroom, fixing her make-up, combing her hair, trying to look wholesome again.

“Why do you choose this way of life?” I shouted, over the running water.

“Money,” she said. “No boss, I can work for myself. I can work when I want. . . .”

“Were you a happy kid?”

“Very! I come from a very good family.”

Damn, I thought. I've done this whole thing with her and she's still talking to me like I'm a do-gooder. But after a few weeks she came over again, more ready to be real.

Nancy's happy home

“I *was* a real happy kid,” she said, sitting at my big kitchen table in an oversized knit sweater. “I had everything I wanted, I had a lot of friends in school, I made good grades.”

“Uh — my father wasn't around much. But my mother and I were very, very close. My mom and him were total opposites. She was very caring and understanding, gave people a million and one chances.”

Tell me about your dad, Nancy.

“My father owns a car business, an auto body repair shop and a car rental service. And he's doing very, very well for himself. But my mother passed away four years ago — she was only 41. That was real hard, when she passed away.”

“He's remarried now. I don't know how long it's gonna last [laughs]. My father's not the marrying type. . . .”

Why wasn't your father around much? “He was more into workin', trying to make money. We didn't communicate much. [Voice is flat, no emotion.] We still don't. Even when I was in rehab and had to stay with him, it was hard.”

“Now don't get me wrong. There's nothing my father wouldn't do for me. As far as money's concerned, I could have whatever I wanted, as much as I wanted. He gave me a beautiful car; he gave me a beautiful home, in Virginia, I had a four-bedroom house all by myself. But [laughs] I don't have it any more.”

Can you sum it up, Nancy? “He gives me a lot of material things. That's it. As far as being there when you need someone emotionally, uh, you know, he's just not there.”

Was he like that with your mom, too? “Yeah.”

Nancy can't seem to stop scratching her wrist; I pretend not to notice.

Nancy's descent

Nancy was introduced to drugs in junior high school, and by high school she was hooked. “Back when I was growing up,” she says, “there wasn't all this talk about drugs. People just overlooked it. And I just said, Oh, I don't have a problem” [laughs].

Her drugs of choice were (and still are) dilaudids and cocaine, and they are not cheap. She says that's why she took a job at a mas-

sage parlor — the one just across the street from the Washington Hilton, where President Reagan was shot. “I made anywhere from three to five hundred dollars a day, and spent it all, every day,” on drugs. But she didn't get along with the owner, and “had to” start turning tricks on the street. She was 19 years old.

Then she went into rehab. “I stayed off drugs for about a year and nine months after going through treatment. And then my mother passed away, and my boyfriend and I broke up, and, um, I don't know; I didn't really like myself that much; I turned to food to feel good, and I overdid it; and I knew in back of my mind, well, if people use drugs they lose weight real fast; so I started using drugs again. And that's when I went back out into the street. And then I went back into treatment, but I left again.”

“You have to have the will power to say no. It's kind of hard when you're working out on the street.”

Nancy smiled sadly and looked down at the table.

The men in Nancy's life

Nancy's love life is no happier than her mother's was. “In two relationships I've come close to getting married. And then something along the line causes me to relapse. [Voice goes way down.] And I start using drugs again. And the relationship ends. . . .”

“I don't have a boyfriend when I'm doing this kind of work. . . .”

But there is one special person in her life, and don't you dare call him a pimp. “I have someone that I hang out with who — he's not a pimp, but a lot of the pimps will think that he is, because he's black. So they leave me alone.”

“He's a real good friend. And he doesn't let anything happen to me [laughs]. You know, we don't always get along too well. But, uh [her voice trails off].”

“One thing my friend does do is he follows me. You know, the person I'm with won't know he's following me. Once in a while they'll see; but if they're not up to anything it shouldn't bother them.”

Oh God, I think. “Is that guy out there now?”

“No,” she says, “he dropped me off and left. I'll have to catch a cab.”

What does he get out of the relationship, Nancy?

“It depends. Like say I get a hundred dollar date, you know, I'll give him twenty bucks for his time. Or I'll give him gas money, you know? But it's not like I give him all my money! I don't believe in that.”

How did you meet this nice man? “He helped me out and gave me some money one time [laughs]. So I went ahead and dated him.”

But this was before I *knew* him. And then I saw him a couple of months later, and, you know, he just started helpin' me out with rides and stuff, and we started talking. And we just ended up getting close after a while.

"He's a nice person, but — if and when I finish school and I'm not out here any more, I don't really think I'm gonna hang around him [laughs], to be honest. . . ."

I thought back to Beth and some other prostitutes I'd talked with who sounded like they were repeating lines fed to them by their black male "friends," and I asked Nancy what was going on. "Most of these black guys have no job," she said. "Most of them want to get high themselves. So these girls — I don't want to say they've been brainwashed, but a lot of them have [been], in my opinion.

"And my friend tells me the same thing. He knows a lot of black guys who live with some of those white girls. And they tell them how much they love them, and all that. He says it's a crock of shit, you know."

Nancy reflects

For years Nancy has been in and out of a community college. Currently she's studying business administration. "Eventually I want to be a legal assistant," she told me bravely.

But she has a hard time envisioning even that for herself. "A lot of time I put myself down and I think I'm not good enough," she says. "Like, I'm thinking I could start out as a receptionist, although I have a lot more skills than what's required for a receptionist. . . ." She's scratching her wrist so hard I get up and bring her some lotion.

Did you ever *want* to do anything, Nancy?, I ask. "I wanted to be a lawyer [laughs]. Yeah! I did real well in school. My grandfather [on my mother's side] always said I'd make a good lawyer. And, uh, *he* was a lawyer.

"That's what I wanted to do. But — it's kind of strange how things happen. You know, how it progresses. Drugs — being out on the street —"

No, Nancy, I thought, it's all too predictable how things happen. If your parents don't love each other, and your dad doesn't communicate with you, then once you become a teenager it's hard to imagine being or doing anything special; and the temptation to abuse and obliterate yourself can be overwhelming.

I didn't know how to communicate any of that to Nancy, and in any event I wouldn't get the chance. Someone called up on the phone from the lobby. It was Nancy's "friend," and he was hopping mad. Something about her taking too long. Something about another trick waiting.

Like a good soldier, I insisted on going down with her. By the time the elevator brought us down there he was already in his

car. It was a real nice car, and he was dressed like someone out of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*.

"C'mon shorty!" he hissed at me. "Let's go!" he shouted at her in a menacing voice.

Nancy tried to flash me her patented wholesome smile. I have to catch my cab now, she said.

It was only then that I realized how massive her denial of her reality was. She'd not only tried to put me on about certain things. She also tried — needed — to put herself on. If that wasn't really a cab out there, then by God she'd make it one. For both of us.

The receptionist in my lobby wasn't fooled a bit. She glared at me every day for weeks afterwards.

Getting to Gail

If Nancy was pretty representative of the (formerly) middle-class streetwalkers I met, Gail was pretty representative of the lower-middle-class ones.

It's hard to miss Gail when you go down to 13th and N. She's the short woman with the semi-punk haircut and the rebellious scowls. She's the woman bursting with so much energy that she sometimes seems to be dancing on the sidewalk, and always seems to enjoy the banter with the drivers in the passing cars.

She's even harder to miss these days. She's six months pregnant.

I didn't have it in me to ask a pregnant woman to whip me. So I haggled over price with Gail a couple of times — just to establish that "community of complicity" with her. Then one day I saw her sitting quietly (!!!) on a brick wall, and asked her to come to my apartment to be interviewed. She looked kind of skeptical, but said sure.

Her first words could have come straight from Alexander or Pheterson: "I used to think hookers were low-life women who thought nothing of their bodies. And that's not so, that's not so. . . ." But as the interview progressed her doubts and unhappiness became more pronounced, until the whole thing resembled a symphony of sadness.

Gail's happy home

"I'm 25," Gail is telling me, "I'm from Florida, was born and raised in St. Petersburg. I haven't seen my father since I was 15.

"My mother is what they call a 'transit informant.' A snitch for the po-lice [Gail always puts the emphasis on the first syllable of "po-lice"]. Yeah.

"Evidently — what I found out happened was — our house burned down when she was living in Ohio. And to my surprise, I had a younger brother [laughs], and he burned up in the fire. She was [off getting] some drugs for herself. And [becoming an informant is

how she was able to] beat that rap, you know.

"She kidnapped my two kids. She set me up on 14th and W to go to jail, and I went back to get my kids, 'cause I was moving them away from her; and all my shit was on the porch [lowers voice], and they were gone.

"And the po-lice here won't let me press kidnapping charges even though I have legal custody. It's not the fact that I'm a hooker, it's that she's a snitch! Evidently she says she wants her grandkids otherwise she's stoppin' [being an informant]. And she's good, she's real good at snitchin'; at bein' naive and playin' the game."

And what about your father, Gail? "He used to be car parts, auto parts, something like that." Did your parents get along? "Naw, they divorced when I was 12.

"And then my mother remarried. A man named Larry Osha. And he was molesting me an' she didn't *believe* it, you know [smiles]. And I went to the state, you know, the authorities, and they didn't do anything because he was so 'respectable' — he was production manager [on a kids' TV show down there, and] up here he worked for public television.

"He died of a heart attack, thank God!"

Gail's descent

Gail loves to speak of her "wild" (her term) childhood. "When I was 13 I always ran away, I was ungovernable. I got expelled from school [switches to a seductive sing-song voice] 'cause I was in the boys' bathroom smokin' pot and drinkin' beer, the only girl in there, you know [raucous laughter]. Got expelled. Failed the eighth grade three times."

She eventually did graduate, went to Tampa College for a while, and learned to type 90 words a minute. But to no avail. "Secretary is boring," she says now. "And I can't stand bein' told what to do. I'm very rebellious. I'm like a cat in a corner, I come out scratching. . . . So rather than do that, I started dancing.

"People liked the way I danced, and I made a lot of money, and it made me *feel good*. And I didn't have people telling me to do this and do that. Cause when you dance, you know, you do it the way *you* want to do it. You come at 11, you leave at seven, you dance for 10 minutes an hour and that's it."

Gail also started doing hard drugs. "A girl down in Florida [got me involved]. She was quote-unquote a friend of mine. Anybody who knows what this shit can do to yuh and would then turn you on to it, after sayin' they're your friend, is nothin' but scum."

And then one day "I was hitchhikin' down the street, a guy picked me up an' offered me money an' — it just went on from there. . . .

"I was in a situation where I needed money. I'd lost my ID, I didn't have my birth certificate to get another ID, somebody'd stole my

[dancing] costumes. And my kids needed to eat, and I needed to eat and pay rent. . . .

"And then I came up here. I'd sent my kids up here to be with my mom, cause I knew jail and all that would come real quickly. And then I was hooking up here. And a year later my mom took my kids, and [a stillness comes over her voice] — here I am now."

The men in Gail's life

I asked Gail if she'd ever been in love with a man, and, softly, she answered "No." Had she ever loved a woman? "Nope. Never been with a woman. Never *be* with one. . . ."

What about the fathers of your kids? "It was very short, I just couldn't get into it. I just couldn't let my feelings out. . . ."

"I've come closer with some black guys. The father [of the baby inside me]!"

Are you still seeing him? "I see him all the time. He's the one that brought me back here" [Gail had excused herself at one point during our interview to go off and buy drugs].

Another nice guy, I thought. Uh, Gail, I said. Do you really want to do hard drugs when you're six months pregnant? "Please, no lectures. Ple-e-ze! Hey!

"Not every baby born is gonna be a crack baby! I was shooting up a lot when I was pregnant with my first baby. And I gained five pounds the whole pregnancy. And they told me if she came out with 10 fingers, 10 toes, and could spell her name by the time she was 20, she'd be lucky. They expected a mute, a total nothin'. And she came out an' she was so healthy, and she was so-o-o smart. Oh! She was smart! Disney Duck Tales, who-o-o, she knows the whole song; every day, got to watch it. I mean she's very, very smart."

Will her friend be helping her raise their baby? "I'll take care of this baby by myself. I love this baby enough for the both of us!

"The father *chooses* not to be around! I *chose* to keep it! It's what I want! I don't need a father who don't want to be a father. I'm not gonna make a man do something he don't wanna do."

Gail reflects

Gail's defiant personality serves a very practical purpose: It keeps her going. But talk with her long enough and a more reflective, more self-critical side comes to the fore.

"At first it's the excitement," she told me toward the end of our afternoon together. "I mean, the thrill of breakin' the law and getting away with it. I love doing that! But after a while it gets old. . . ."

"If I had a real boyfriend — my boyfriend is a kingpin drug dealer, you know [laughs], I mean he didn't live the normal 9-to-

5 life. . . . Um, lemme think, can't put this into words. . . . I *miss* bein' a square — they call 'em a 'square,' you know, normal life. . . ."

Yes, Gail, I do know. I used to use that language too. My friends and I once tried to give intellectual legitimacy to the kind of visceral rebellion your life seems — on the surface — to be about.

And to whatever extent we helped put you in the bind you're in, I am truly sorry.

Brutes and boors?

Many of the pieces in the Alexander and Pheterson anthologies imply that the clients of prostitutes are dangerous or pathetic or both.

And that's not just the left's correct line. The tone *most* of us adopt when discussing men who use prostitutes is one of disdain and contempt. We seem to want to feel they're all brutes and boors — the better to put distance between them and us, perhaps.

I knew enough before I started this article to be skeptical of that attitude. Still, it was a big revelation for me to hear my prostitutes talk about how *ordinary* most of their customers are — and how starved for affection most of them are.

"Most of the people I date are middle class," Nancy told me. "Most of them work with computers, or in an office, you know. Accountants. I've met a lot of lawyers. . . ."

"There's a few young people I date, but I'd say most of them are over 30 and are married" [laughs].

"They're all different kinds," Gail told me. "Most of 'em are married. And married men come out and pay for what their wives won't give them.

"If the wife don't give head, that's what they come out and pay for. The wife cut 'em off completely, they'll come out and pay for pussy. . . . It's all whatever they don't get at home."

"Most of them are very nice," Nancy says. "They just wanna be with someone young, I guess" [laughs].

"I have a guy who just likes to hug and hold, you know," Gail says. "Affection! Another guy who just likes to talk."

Don't they have you do weird things sometimes? "Oh, I've jacked a guy off with my feet," says Gail, laughing. "Yeah. I date a CIA guy who likes to be ripped right before he goes in for the kill, cause he's a pussycat, and — you know — all kinds of stuff."

"I try to make friends with them," says Lisa, interviewed below. "And sometimes I get into 'em, you know?"

"I get to know a lot of 'em," says Gail, "cause you get what you call 'regulars.' They keep coming back. You know, if you like the way I give head, you come back and see me

knowin' I'm not gonna rip you off. And you get to *know* me, I mean, person-to-person.

"I have guys who are fallin' in love with me, literally. And some of 'em, they start to feel like I'm their daughter, I'm part of their family. They come close to me and feel like they're committing incest" [laughs].

"I've met a few who are real jerks, really nasty," says Nancy. "But when they get nasty with you, you have to get really nasty right back, you know, and you have to act like you're not scared."

"I gave a guy head right back in the alley on 14th and Rhode Island," says Gail. "And, uh, after I was done datin' him he starts pullin' my hair; he was gonna take my money back. An' there was a mickey bottle, Budweiser, unopened. And I took the bottle and hit him over the head and knocked him out. . . ."

"And I dated this other guy for over a year. He was a regular. And then one time he hit me over the head with a lead pipe, and I had to have stitches. . . ."

So the prostitutes have to be constantly on guard. But the politically incorrect fact is that the vast majority of their clients are *not* brutes or boors. Most of them are just like you and me, and desperate for female affection or attention of a kind that they can't get in real life.

Or that they don't know *how* to get.

Getting to Lisa

The first time I saw Lisa I knew she had a very revealing story to tell. It was midnight, and she was *limping* up and down N Street in a yellow jogging suit; she was a pretty sorry sight. But her thin, angular face was alert and incredibly expressive — I knew there was a sensitive being in there somewhere.

We talked several times over the next couple of weeks, and other times I sort of spied on her. Once I saw her hobbling down the street with the help of a metal walker; another time I saw her sitting in her beat-up old Chevy, presumably waiting for tricks she knew. Finally I asked her to come punish me, and she said she'd drive over that night, and asked me to wait for her outside since she might need help crossing the street.

She arrived half an hour late (on a very cold night), and she looked worse than I'd ever seen her. Her yellow jogging suit was stained all over, and she couldn't even get out of the car without my help. Also, she was trembling. I put my jacket around her shoulders and my arm around her waist, and guided her across the street and past an appalled receptionist in my lobby. She apologized to me for going so slow.

I sat her down on the couch in my apartment, made her some coffee, brought her an ashtray. She apologized for asking me to

bring the ashtray. She tried to relax and asked me to tell her what I wanted her to do. I was sweating — Christ!, I didn't want to go through with this. But I felt I had to. She apologized for asking me to help her take her shoes and pants off.

Even getting them off was painful for her, and I soon saw why. Her arms and legs had been chewed up by something; they were covered with deep scars. I tried to not let her see my horror. I gave her my belt and let her beat me a little, and then told her I just wasn't into that night.

Then we just sat there on the couch, both of us half-naked, both of us uncontrollably trembling. She apologized for what she feared was the poor quality of her discipline. I asked if she'd mind being interviewed.

Lisa's happy home

Truly, life is more astonishing than fiction. I have confirmed that Lisa, 33, is the daughter of a man who was once one of a Southern state's most ambitious conservative politicians, an outspoken foe of abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. Lisa remembers seeing Jack Kemp and operatives from the first Reagan campaign in her father's home.

"I do come from a nice family," she began. "Just because I've tricked and all of that. . . ."

"You know, my father was in the [legislature]. But my mother drank a little bit, and that caused problems between them. And there was a divorce. I was seven years old. . . ."

"I couldn't take my mother's drinking and depression and stuff. So I moved in with my father. He got married to someone 12 years younger. . . ."

"Eventually we got on pretty well. [But then] he turned Christian. One day he was going to the races and having a lot of fun. Drinking but not abusing it. And the next day it was church, church, church; I mean, everything was Jesus Christ this and Jesus Christ that, and I don't mean in vain. . . ."

"My mother committed suicide a couple years back. She never got over that my father remarried. . . ."

"My father wanted me to go to college, and I mean I tried, but it just seemed like [I was having] more and more problems. [My father and stepmother] didn't have a lot of patience, and they just got tired of it all. And I felt deserted and alone. . . ."

"If I really need money I can get it from him. As far as going [home] Christmas and Thanksgiving, no. And he calls himself one of these Christian people. That's what gets me. . . . I mean, there's no second chances."

Now Lisa stays with her uncle, who's in advertising. "I can be honest with him. But he gets mad. And I'll take the car for a couple of days [and go on binges], because I have a

hard time living with him. I can't live in clutter, with food around. . . ."

"He kind of gets off hearing about the dates where I've beat and yelled at people."

Lisa's descent

Lisa is still sitting on my couch, pants off, belt in hand. The words come cascading out of her, she's totally caught up in what she's saying.

"I got married when I was about 19. Had a baby when I was 24. My husband was into drugs. He got into drugs in the service, in Germany, before I met him, but I thought the problem was over.

"I used to watch him get high. But I never did. For like years. And then it was like, I'll try it [*coughs*]."

"He would use heroin and I would use coke. And then he got into trouble, you know, real trouble to support his habit, stealing and so forth. And he got locked up.

"I waited [for him] as long as I could. And then I just got tired of it. And — I always pick the druggies for some reason. I don't know why. I mean, I think I can make them better, or change them, or [*voice deepens and thickens here*] — and it just doesn't work that way.

"So I came [to D.C.] with this other guy that I was involved with. And then I was down in [the N Street neighborhood] and I ran into a girl friend and I think she was tricking for money.

"And then one day I was going to job interviews and stuff, and I went down there to talk to her. And I was dressed in a nice suit and stockings and high heels, and looked fine. I was just standing on the corner, looking for her. And some man just propositioned me. And that was it. I just got into it, off and on.

"Sometimes I thought it was a joke. I'd gone to an all-girls Catholic high school and was deprived of being around men, you know [*laughs*]."

"But then I went to jail — prison — for this. And my daughter went to court with me. And I got 45 days. And that guy I was with took my daughter to my father. And I haven't seen her since. . . ."

Two years ago another disaster befell Lisa. "I was coming [in] from Virginia, on the last [subway] train to MacPherson Square. I was the only one to go [up the escalator], they closed and locked the gate, and I got on there and they turned it off and on, and it shimmied and shook. Next thing I knew I was unconscious. Ate my arms and legs up."

An orthopedic surgeon installed an artificial hip. And that was only the beginning. "I got better — I was in a wheelchair, and then I could walk. And then, out of the blue, I dislocated it.

"And I've dislocated it two or three times

[since then]. I've been having operations every three or four months! I'm beginning to think that my body can't adjust to it. You know, some people just can't."

Oh, Lisa, I thought. How *could* your body adjust to it, given your lifestyle?

The last time I spoke with Lisa she was in the hospital, awaiting yet another operation. I was going to go see her, but at the last minute she got some terrible news. The surgeon had decided to remove the artificial hip. If she couldn't stop him, she'd be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

She was in no mood for visitors.

Lisa reflects

More than any of the other prostitutes I talked with, Lisa is *continuously* aware of what it is she's missing — of what she needs to (begin to) be happy and whole.

"Hey, everybody needs a family, huh?," she told me on the couch, her scarred legs drawn up under her body.

Some of what Lisa cried out to me when she was whipping me was clearly meant for her father and ex-husband, and I've been playing it back in my mind ever since:

"You think you're something, don't you? Well, let me tell you you're shit! You're good for nothing! You always let me down!

(CRACK!)

"How come you always let me down? How come you're never there when I need you?

(LASH!)

"You're never there when I need you! Never there when I need you!"

The problem revealed

The prostitutes' rights organizations I mentioned at the beginning of this article see prostitution as an economic problem, or a civil liberties problem, or both. After spending hours and hours with all kinds of prostitutes, I certainly agree that there are economic and civil liberties issues that need to be addressed. But I also see, now, that prostitution is an even larger problem, one that speaks volumes about who we are *as human beings*.

Most of the prostitutes I talked with had marketable skills. Certainly most of them could have made it economically in "straight" society.

Most of my prostitutes had good relations with the police. "If you're honest with them, they're there for you," Gail told me.

But none of my prostitutes — not one — had ever been exposed to a healthy male-female sexual love relationship.

None of their parents had had one.

And none of them had ever managed to achieve one on their own, either with their husbands or with any of their boyfriends.

And we should not forget that their clients

are — for the most part — ordinary men who simply aren't able to meet all their needs for female affection.

The largest cause of female prostitution, then, isn't sexual discrimination, economic exploitation or male oppression.

It is that too many of us do not know how to love.

Husbands and wives, parents and children, boyfriends and girlfriends, same-sex partners — for too many of us, it's just not all there.

Old options

Of course, the way you define a problem determines what you'll want to do about it.

If you see prostitution as largely a civil liberties or economic problem, then you'll feel comfortable with the agendas of the three prostitutes' rights organizations.

COYOTE wants to decriminalize prostitution.

U.S. PROS wants to abolish all laws against prostitution (it suspects that "decriminalization" would still allow the state to control prostitutes' working conditions). In addition, it supports "economic independence" for all women — by which it means bigger welfare checks and fewer immigration laws.

WHISPER wants the state to stop arresting prostitutes and *start* arresting their clients, and all other "men who traffic in women's bodies for their own pleasure and profit."

New options

If you see prostitution as largely a problem of lack of love, you'll be drawn to a different agenda.

You might support decriminalization, but *not* legalization. You'll want cities to determine where women can and cannot solicit tricks, for example. And you'll want to prosecute the pimps and hangers-on, the *real* exploiters.

And you *won't* support decriminalization because you see "sex work" as just another kind of work. As this article makes crystal-clear, it isn't! Your rationale will be more pragmatic — nothing is being gained by having the *police* try to stop it. "They're out there tryin' to bust the hookers," Gail said knowingly. "As long as there's a man willing to pay for pussy, there's gonna be a woman to take the money."

You'll certainly support greater economic security — but not just for welfare mothers, or illegal immigrants, or whomever. If our problem is lack of love, you won't want to exacerbate a situation in which interest groups brutally fight each other for resources. Instead, you'll want to support some of the *universal* economic-security schemes we've discussed in NEW OPTIONS: the Universal Stock Ownership Plan, for example (#29), or the

idea of separating work from income (#21).

In addition, you'll want to support decriminalization of drugs (#62). With decriminalization, prostitutes won't have to earn nearly as much money to support their drug habits.

Above all, however, you'll want to support measures that can build a society in which people *learn to love* each other . . . and themselves.

There are such measures; NEW OPTIONS has written about a number of them.

Some *pre-schools* are making training in social and emotional skills a regular part of their curriculum (#27).

Parental leave, family counselling and new-parent programs are helping us "rear gentler and more compassionate people" (#42).

Empowered teachers, visual/spatial teaching methods and democratic classrooms are helping schools reach the "whole person" and not just the left brain (#59).

Multicultural trainings — often held at the workplace — are helping to foster solidarity across ethnic and racial lines (#68).

Finally, John Vasconcellos's *Self-Esteem Task Force* has come up with a myriad of suggestions for promoting self-esteem (#67).

These approaches do not offer a "quick fix" for prostitution. But nothing can. The problem does not exist only in the prostitutes and their clients, but in nearly all of us to some degree. We're each going to have to clean up our acts.

Afterword

When I started this article, I still had a romantic view of prostitutes and prostitution. A couple of years ago I'd have gone as far as prostitutes' rights activist Lynn Hampton when she said, in the Pheterson anthology, "I think that the woman who defies her family, her country, her religion — and often, her husband — and becomes a prostitute by

choice is the most liberated of all women."

Now that I've finished this article I have a very different view. There is nothing I can say that can fully convey the pain, the sadness, and the futility of the lives of the women I interviewed. And most of them claim that their stories are typical.

I've spent many nights wanting to go back to 13th and N and talk with some of them again. I want to see if Lisa escaped that wheelchair. And I want to bring Gail — now in her seventh month — some hot chocolate. I wonder if she drinks the stuff.

But I know enough, now, to know that there's nothing I can do for them, really. And I know they know that, too. So I have kept my distance . . . a "journalist," at last.

I've also spent many nights thinking about this: That in my own life I have not made room for the love, the intimacy, the generativity, that I claim This Society so desperately needs.

I am still working 80 hours a week, for a pittance. Still trying to save the world. I do not have time to love someone fully. I do not have the resources to be a good provider. I do not have the psychic space to be a father.

Now that I've written this article, I notice these things more. And they make me very sad.

What I am saying is that writing this article has made me want to change my life in ways that will allow me to get married and have children, and love my family with my every breath. It has made me realize that that is a good and important and even (may Alexander and Pheterson forgive me) necessary thing, a major clause in the human contract.

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