

'The night I became a prostitute'

Im 24, alone in a Soho hotel room with my pimp, and he's taken all my money. His name is Louis, he's Albanian and he has a tendency to be violent, but I'm trying not to cry as he drills me on how many clients I've had that night and how much I've made.

In the past month, I've witnessed the darkest underbelly of London life, steps away from the smart offices and restaurants where I used to socialise. I've listened patiently as respectable businessmen with perverse sexual tastes drone on about their wives and children. I've serviced a German economist who sought me out for S&M; a Californian oil trader who left his Tiffany wedding ring on the dresser while he had sex; Saudi tourists with various sizes of belly; and a pair of Russians who came for sex, then robbed my brothel with guns.

I never imagined I'd end up on the streets. I was brought up by jet-setting middle-class parents, attending international schools. As the only child of an Italian mother and German father, I spoke several languages and studied at the French Lycée in Berlin. By my twenties I was a student at Yale, the great Ivy League university of old money and privilege in a sleepy Connecticut town.

How does a Yale student end up as a London sex worker? POLLY TROPE describes her descent into a sordid world of sex and drugs, and how she finally escaped

Photograph by IAIN MCKELL

I had a glamorous career ahead and a sweet American boyfriend with sea-blue eyes.

I came to London to study Classics, but it was after moving in with my new French boyfriend, Jonathan, that my life went off track. We rented a flat in Soho's Frith Street and were insanely happy for a while, but money was tight and life became full of explosive arguments. Three months in, Jonathan became abusive and, cut off from my parents in a city I barely knew, I felt totally isolated.

I found the strength to leave after one particularly violent row and moved into a house share with three girls. It felt like a new start. But shortly afterwards I had my handbag stolen and, for days, just couldn't stop crying. In the weeks that followed, I struggled to find a job to support my studies, aside from bits of translation work,

and found myself drinking to get through the days. Things escalated and I began taking painkillers, cocaine and cocaine. I realise now I was in the grip of depression. After several rows, my flatmates kicked me out and kept my deposit. My credit cards were maxed out, the banks were sending threatening letters and I was begging friends to let me couch surf. I reached my lowest ebb one night in March 2010, when I felt such a sweeping desperation that I almost called my parents in Berlin to beg them to come save me, but I was too ashamed. Instead, determined to escape the pain in my head, I withdrew my last few pounds, met my dealer and scored the cheapest thing he had – heroin. I shot up in a Soho alleyway and fell asleep.

The following morning, desperate and sick, I went to see Sylvia, a casual friend ▶

from a tattoo parlour on Berwick Street. I'd met her when I arrived from America and had a row of anchors tattooed on my back. 'I've lost everything,' I confessed. 'Can I hang out here for a bit?' She agreed and we chatted about my options, before she jokingly said: 'You're attractive. You could always have sex for money.' It wasn't something that had ever crossed my mind.

That night, wandering around with £5 in my pocket, I ran into one of my dealers, fresh out of jail. He suggested I help him with his business and, despite being scared, I said yes. 'We could go around clubs offering a joint package of Charlie and a blow job,' he said. 'First you're gonna give me one.' I was skint and stuck, so I agreed and he gave me £40. I felt sick and dirty, but drinking through it seemed to help. By 5am I was so drunk I could barely distinguish reality from what was going on in my head. I remember sitting at the table in a casino with a group of men as they played poker, holding a cloudy lemonade. It brought back memories of my childhood summers in Italy, watching men in my grandma's village sitting around playing cards over coffee, and I quietly cried to myself.

That night, I was introduced to a man called Louis, who claimed he came from Sicily, but he looked and sounded Ukrainian or Belarusian. 'I want to offer you something,' he said later over pancakes at the bar. 'I can see you're lovely and fresh. I'll show you everything you can make £500, £1,000, every night. Rich businessmen, all polite. They'll pay you just for a dance. You can do this for a few months and fix your situation.'

I had nothing to lose. I thought I could do it for a while to avoid having to file for bankruptcy because of all the debt I'd run up. It wasn't like I'd been kidnapped and brought here to work like the other Eastern European girls I met. I was in control.

The next day, Louis took me to a flat in Mayfair. My first client was a posh gent in his seventies. He was wearing a pinstripe suit and reeked of cologne. I drank some wine, forced a smile and let him undress me. I mentally cut myself off as he touched my body. It was like being in bed with somebody's grandfather. We talked for half an hour without having full sex and I made £150. 'Let me be your sugar daddy and take you shopping,' he suggested. But afterwards, Louis picked me up and took me to a Knightsbridge flat with silk-draped rooms, where I had to service more men. There was bags of sex toys behind

sofas, Viagra in vases, menstrual sponges in cupboards. I felt strangely curious in this bizarre new world. A pretty, childlike blonde appeared, who said she was 19 and worked all hours to send money home to Romania. 'You don't know how many ugly things I've seen in my life,' she said bluntly. And with that, I was led away to a client.

Within weeks, I had slipped into acceptance of my new reality. Prostitution steadily breaks your spirit as your body is invaded by strangers every day. I was weaning myself off prescription drugs and constantly upset. Leaving the Savoy after torturous anal sex with a fat Saudi, I broke down in a cab, tears streaking my make-up. I was so distressed the driver thought I'd been raped and tried to call the police.

As a high-end escort, I was earning £2,000 to £3,000 a week, with few expenses aside from new clothes. My education

'Leaving the Savoy after torturous anal sex with a fat Saudi, I broke down, tears streaking my make-up'

and language skills gave me access to more discerning clients. But two months in, I was having suicidal thoughts. At 25, I was spent, disconnected from the world and trapped. I saw things I still can't talk about, and got insights into the lives of so many rich and famous, but disturbed and twisted men. The worst were the businessmen on coke, who got paranoid and aggressive. One guy locked the door to the hotel room we were in and forced me to do drugs with him. Navigating the constant dangers was exhausting.

I always expected to find sex with random strangers repulsive, but you soon learn to disconnect. Mostly it was just bad sex, like the sort anyone might encounter in the course of her sexual life. Many clients, aside from being moneyed, were unremarkable. Then there were the average punters, one brother in West Kensington. I serviced a stream of shiny insurance salesmen and builders who would attempt to haggle the prices. These men repulsed me the most.

Home was the various places where I conducted my business. For ten months, my days passed in a blur of chic hotels

or red-lit basement brothels that smelled of air fresheners, Durex oil and sperm, with malodors from sink estates whose bodies had been remodelled by plastic surgeons. Between clients, I glanced tips such as how to give quality blow jobs. I'd spent most of my life feeling insecure about my looks, but the more clients that chose me, the more attractive and desired I felt. Sometimes I'd put on a nice dress and go to a hotel in Park Lane. These visits were dangerous, but a change from the dinginess.

Louis was controlling and worked me hard but, as the money rolled in, I gained a new confidence. I secretly got some advice and planned my escape. The first step was renting a flat in Kensington. It was the size of a fishbowl, but peaceful and a change from my own. Louis confronted me one night, unexpectedly appearing during a shift to demand 'a private chat'. I had £400 stuffed in my tights and he jumped on me, punching me until I handed him the money. Bruised and battered on my way home, I took a taxi to my new flat, my education and how low I'd sunk. I couldn't bear it. I had to get out of this situation.

The next morning, possessed by a new determination, I woke up, went to the hairdresser, and had my hair cut and dyed. I changed my number and moved out of my flat. In the following weeks, terrified Louis would find me, I barely slept or ate. I thought many times about asking my parents for help, but I never did. I found a credit in Stephen's Bush, paid off my debts with what money I had saved up from my sex work, and signed on. I was delighted when I got a call inviting me to an interview at a call centre. The weeks afterwards were like slowly returning to the daylight world from the twilight one I'd inhabited. Once back on my feet, I called old friends and made plans to meet them for coffee, go to the cinema or for walks in Regent's Park. I would never tell them or my parents what I've been through, but I began documenting my experiences in a book, writing up more every evening. It has been hugely cathartic.

If you saw me today, two and a half years on, you'd probably never realise what I've been through. The other day, a colleague said to me, 'You're brilliant, you should be doing more than working in a call centre, you could be rich.' I smiled. It marked a big turning point for me. It feels good to be earning again for my intelligence instead of my body. ■

Cured Meat by Polly Trope (£10, *Oniro Books*) is out now