

DAVE BARRY IS A WIMP

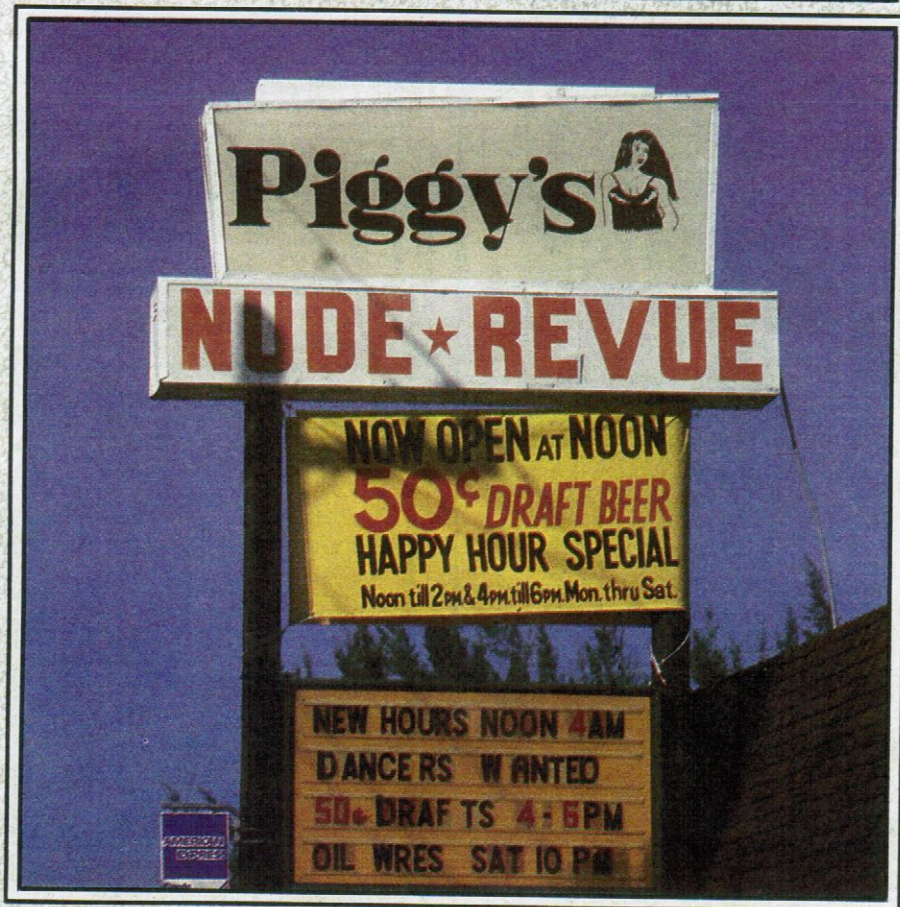
TROPIC

THE MIAMI HERALD

MAY 27, 1990

DANCING IN THE DARK

A STORY ABOUT LOVE



BY TOM SHRODER AND MICHELLE GENZ



The women who dance at Piggy's are not air-brushed fantasies, but real human beings who bear the scars of the battle of the sexes. Left, a dancer called Jo-Jo enjoys a moment of glamour. Opposite page, a customer loses himself in the show. "You see those men staring up at you, they're like, glued."

THE DAILY GRIND

After A Few Minutes In Piggy's, The Glamour Is Stripped Away Like A \$10 Teddy. The Naked Truth Is That What Goes On Here Is Not About Beauty, Or Sensuality, Or Even Sex. It Is About Loneliness. It Is About Anger:



INSTANT CASH! In the monotonous blur of vacant lots and forgotten storefronts way the hell down U.S. 1, a harsh light glares suddenly off a pink building. A pawn shop. Dollar signs, dollar signs five feet tall, are struck by the setting sun. **INSTANT CASH!** Makes it sound so easy. But it's never easy. Cash comes only at a cost, and to those who need it instantly, the cost can be very high indeed.

A little farther down, another squat pink building, another sign: Nude Revue. This is Piggy's, where cash does appear suddenly, instantly, with no clear exchange of commodity — just the tug of a man's fingers on a grateful woman's garter, a touch of the thigh for every dollar.

An old man pulls into the area between the highway and the building, a narrow strip of parking spaces. Empty. In a moment, he will walk out of the day's lingering heat into a darkness fragrant of stale smoke, spilled alcohol and disinfectant. And there, without introduction, persuasion, or even a request, a woman will step onto a platform and strip naked to her high heels, to dance for him, and him alone.

The front door, a wrought-iron lion set preposterously in the pink plaster, opens into a wall covered with snapshots of the Saturday night oil-wrestling matches — a brainstorm promotional concept aimed at battling Solid Gold, the flashy new upscale strip joint that opened five months ago just three miles up the road. At Solid Gold a valet takes your car, a young stud in a tux walks out to shake your hand, calling you sir. The \$5 cover and \$5 beers keep out the wrong type. The interior gleams with chrome and polish, the lights flash and swirl and the dancers all look hothouse raised for just this purpose; flawless beauties of the type used to decorate everything from the Playboy centerfolds to \$50,000 cars. Their act is as smooth as their skin. Everything about the place says money, a lot of money, the kind it takes to encase what is happening in a hard shell of illusion.

At a place like Piggy's, there is no illusion. The garish white and yellow sign



BY TOM SHRODER AND MICHELLE GENZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL CARLEBACH

that leaps out at the highway multitudes fools no one. *Nude Revue. Dancers Wanted. Oil Wres Sat Nite.* The term "Nude Revue" suggests Las Vegas, fans and feathers, glitz and glitter, choreography. But put the name "Piggy's" in front of it, and the frills evaporate. What's left is nudity, as lewd and unadorned as it comes. A strip show without much tease.

Today the dancers include: a woman the manager describes as "a schizophrenic on medication"; one who is 30 pounds overweight; one who has the caps from her two front teeth missing and can't afford to replace them, leaving a gap filled only by a pair of darkened, chiseled points; and two women who are visibly pregnant, one of them five-months along, with twins. The class touches in Piggy's range from the skimpy women's bikini briefs tacked to the wall that feature the legend: "I'm a Piggy's Piglet," to the Lava Lites over the deejay booth, to the display case in one corner in which a fluorescent light shines on a royal blue satin corset, crumpled up, topped with a torn piece of notebook paper that says: "Not new: \$15." Once, when a rat appeared on stage and the women refused to dance, the manager chased it backstage with a baseball bat. The thumping resounded behind the thin wall until the manager emerged, swaggering.

Since Solid Gold opened, Piggy's business has all but disappeared. The bar's management struggles to hold on with boffo promotions they hope will turn the tide. It's been slow going. Despite its prominence on the sign, oil wrestling is already history — it drummed up customers, but not much money — and is supposed to be replaced by something called "Foxy Boxing." Watching seminude women beat each other up will theoretically attract a thirstier clientele. But for now, Foxy Boxing and plans for Piggy's first-ever TV ad, to air on ESPN, are still hypothetical. And so, apparently, are the customers.

It's already into the evening, heading into the peak hours of the noon to 9 p.m. day shift, but the chairs on either side of the long runway in the dim heart of Piggy's remain stubbornly empty. The

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girls are past being anxious. They are downright put out. They have gussied themselves up in brand new gear in the hopes of drumming up dollar bills; one has a present from her boyfriend, a fringed black nylon bandeau that she must practice popping off her big bust; another is loosening a jangling coin belt to its most provocative drape on her pelvis. Another, a former dancer who is now tending bar, is showing off an impulse splurge: a pale pink trousseau from Frederick's still fresh in its tissue, complete with fingerless white lace gloves. She is so short on tips that she is stripping again for the first time in ages.

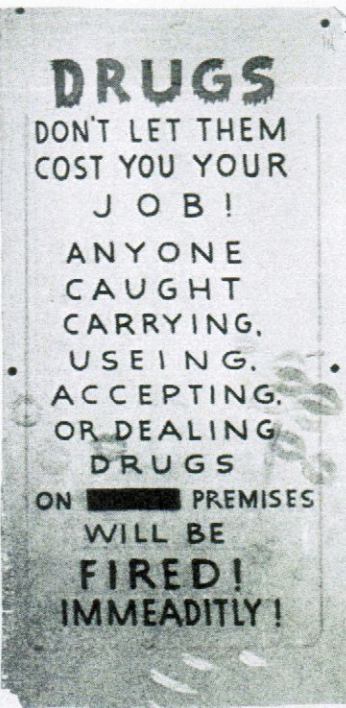
Blue's been dancing here a long time, and it's never been as slow as it has this hot Tuesday. Blue is the one who is pregnant with twins. She was pregnant once before with twins, but lost them in a motorcycle accident; with these, she says, she is being especially careful. In deference to them, this is her last week dancing. Her last chance at instant cash. But it's not materializing.

The colored lights that rim the strippers' runway are blinking in disbelief, its illuminated floor flashing quadrants of color like a traffic light on a lonely night.

"Under the boardwalk," croons the jukebox. "Down by the sea." The song turns sad in the stale air. The end of her shift and not one man for Blue to bare her brown bosom to, not one face to ogle her swollen belly. What's the use? She sits in the back dressing room, idly fluffing her black hair for the 50th time, waiting for word that someone has walked in.

Then someone does: the old man, who has come in from the lingering heat and thinks he has found respite in the darkened hole of Piggy's entrance. He hesitates, appears confused as his eyes try to adjust. The word has reached Blue in the back. A man is here. As if in answer to his aimlessness, she appears on the stage. She, too, is blinded from the fluorescent glare of the dressing room. But then they find each other. Blue zeros in on the old man, tries to hold his awkward glance, but in vain. The man can bear only to steal a glimpse, and Blue knows instantly that he would die rather than touch a bill to her proffered leg. But the music plays on, and so she takes her clothes off anyway, staring, staring at the old man, not giving up.

But when the song ends, she turns her naked back to him, gathers up her G-string and heads for the dressing room door, disgusted. Eight hours in the stale



dark. Eight hours stripping herself naked for strangers. Twenty-five dollars.

A dancer named Taz should be next, but she is leaning on her elbows at the bar, and she makes no move to go on. Taz swallows the pink end of a pickled egg, and hollers her appreciation.

Blue half grunts, half laughs. She turns to look over her naked shoulder. Taz is still leaning, still clapping. "Oh yeah," scoffs Blue, cranking her sweet round face into a picture of sarcasm. "Right."



Piggy's is the kind of place that makes women cringe, men wonder, and politicians rage; the kind of place that has spurred an orgy of local legislation in recent months, legislation designed to get around the sticky constitutional protection of freedom of expression. (What could be more expressive than a woman's naked body in seductive gyrations?)

You can hire women to get totally naked for your customers, the new laws say, but you can't sell alcohol while they're doing it. It is a clever approach. Apparently, nobody wants to watch these shows stone cold sober. The law has virtually driven bars like Piggy's out of Broward County, and provoked a handful



Blue, foreground, is five months pregnant with twins and still dancing. "Morally, it's wrong," she says. "But then, dancers are people too. They do get pregnant and they do have families." Above, a sign in the dancers' dressing room.

of cities in Dade to write their own laws for fear that nude bars would descend like a plague from the north.

But in the wilds of unincorporated South Dade, Piggy's is so far unaffected by anti-stripping laws. The people who work there will say, feelingly, what a shame it would be to shut the place down. Some ask, Would you rather have the perverts out on the street? Others insist that there is no harm in displaying the beauty of the female form.

For the most part, in Piggy's, that particular type of beauty would probably elude any but the eyes of an artist, or a drunk. The bodies at Piggy's are battle zones of stretch marks and C-section scars, of tattoos and yellowed bruises, and inside, the wounds of catastrophe, of motorcycle wrecks, broken necks, and miscarriages. These are bodies that don't quit easily.

"We accept just about anybody," says the owner, Billy "Piggy" Miles. "Just to let them work here."

"Let them" is the operative phrase. The day shift women are paid nothing except customers' tips. Piggy throws a glance over his shoulder at the big woman on stage, writhing around a metal pole in front of two grinning men. He gives a nervous shrug of his shoulders at the practicality of his policy. "The fact is, there's generally something for somebody." Piggy's manager, Richard Steele, is less politic in explaining the lack of model good looks in some of the dancers: "Sometimes," he says, "you just have to have a body."

"Piglets" are what the strippers call themselves. Miles, a city of Miami fireman who opened the bar four years ago, says he got his nickname when he emerged from a fire exhausted, sick from smoke inhalation, and covered in soot. Some neighborhood kids pointed at him saying, "He looks like that boy Pigpen in the newspaper." They meant the perpetually filthy character in Peanuts, and the name stuck. From then on he was Piggy on the job, and everyone in the bar calls him Pig for short. When Miles explains the name, he never mentions the obvious reference, the one that begins with Male Chauvinist.

In one corner of Piggy's, where the bar forms an L that faces a wall of extra stools, gathers an unlikely bunch of men. A biker, a businessman, a construction worker, a long-haired man on crutches. These are the regulars; men who have stopped by here after work for months, years. They have their backs to the naked dancing girls, and hardly turn their eyes to them, even when the dancers strut down the end of the T-shaped stage that lands them virtually in the regular's circle. The men can let their guts hang over their jeans, leave the plaster dust in their hair, ignore the motor oil in the cracks of the calluses on their hands. They can holler crudely obscene jokes at the top of their lungs, and not turn a head. They can leave their wives at home — if they have wives — and know they wouldn't want to come anyway. And those who don't have wives aren't reminded of their loneliness here; they aren't at risk of finding out that girls don't want them. There are no cold shoulders at Piggy's.

Robert works construction for a living. At 41, he has never married. He stops in most nights after working, chases shots of whiskey with beers for a few hours, then drives alone the seven miles to his home and goes to bed.

"Piggy's is conveniently located," he says.

The charm of Piggy's for him is not the women, but the lack of them.

When Gigi arrives for her dollar-fetching ritual, she swings a gartered leg up onto Robert's stool: "OK, boys," she hollers. "Time to pay the rent." She cackles; Robert smirks. If he pulls out a dollar from his hip pocket this time, he likely will not the next. For these men, the dancing girls are a backdrop to their raunchy conversations, like pinups in a frat house.

"I come in these bars because I don't have to deal with anybody," he says. "The girls come up and you give them a dollar, and I can say, OK, here's your dollar, and they go away. I don't have to talk to them."

It is the sort of thing you hear again and again.

Two air conditioning technicians have stopped into Piggy's after work. Larry, the big one, is single and proud of it. Thomas is married, but doesn't think his wife would mind. "She's been out to those male strip shows," he says in his defense.

What do they like about Piggy's? The only women are on stage, naked. "We used to do those singles bars," Larry said. "We went to Club Oz once and I swear three women in 15 minutes all asked the same three questions: How much do you make? What kind of car do you drive? And, do you have any cocaine?" He laughs derisively. "We used to play a game there: Go ask a girl to dance, and if she said no, say real loud, 'Thank you. I just won a \$50 bet with my friend that you wouldn't dance because you are a bitch!'"

Ask Richard the manager point-blank what's the biggest problem in running a bar like Piggy's and, pausing for dramatic effect, he says: "Women."

Richard is mild-mannered, polite in a way that seems more like what you'd expect from someone managing a spotless McDonald's franchise than a strip bar. But he takes his job very seriously, and he sees the biggest part of it as keeping the dancers in line. "I have rules," he says. "They're all in the back, up in the dressing room. No hustling, if I catch them they're fired. If I find drugs, they're out. I don't go for that at all."

Richard stands out among the people who work for him and the regular customers for the length and stability of his marriage. "I'm the only man in the world who can look you straight in the eye, hand on a stack of Bibles, and say never once in almost 10 years of marriage have I screwed around on my wife."

"Does it pay off?" someone asks. "You bet," he says. "My wife will never have a reason to drag me into court and clean me out of everything I've worked for."



Distrust and bitterness between men and women is epidemic in our society, a roiling ferment visible everywhere: in more than a million divorces every year; in families fractured by custody wars or abuse; in the opinion polls that show more women than ever believe men are slime; in the way most men respond to that statistic. "Give us men a survey of how we feel about our women," was one of the typical responses quoted in the newspaper. "We'll make it even."

But nowhere are the results of the

disease more visible, more openly and poignantly displayed, than in a low-end roadside strip bar. The destructive obscenity of sexual anger so carefully veiled in swankier venues is laid out raw on Piggy's scarred linoleum stage: Screw me, screw you.

"They're d--heads," says Taz. "Guys who don't tip are d--heads. There's d--heads, and there's a--holes. A--holes are the ones that proposition you."

The outburst is not typical of Taz, who is generally sweet as can be. She is muscular and compact, with a big gap between her front teeth. She doesn't seem to care much about looking glamorous but she likes to take advantage of the shower in the dressing room because by the time she gets to work she's all sweaty and she likes to feel fresh before she goes out to dance. And her makeup goes on better.

Taz is straddling her chair, smearing lotion over herself while her electric curlers heat up. She is completely oblivious to everyone around her. She likes being naked, prefers it. The lotion is to give her skin a sheen, and you would think it is a sensual thing. But she is slapping it on like a rubdown, bracing herself with it like a man might slap aftershave on his face.

She and another dancer, a towering black woman who said to call her Sugar, are discussing how white men sometimes refuse to tip Sugar, how they just turn and look away when she comes around to collect. "I guess they just don't like me because I'm black," she says.

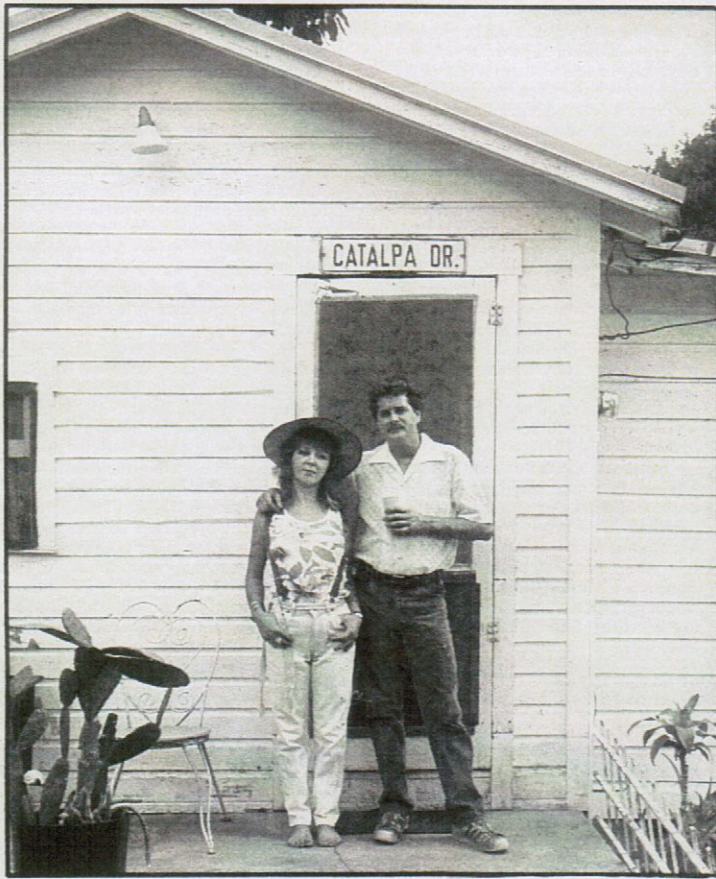
That's when Taz makes the crude remark about men. Maybe she's just a little stressed out. She is involved in a tough custody dispute with her ex-husband who is in the Air Force. He is alleging heavy drug use, which she denies. She has been to court five times, her legal bills are up to \$1,500 and it's not over yet. The subject of her job is becoming an issue.

"It's a shame somebody would use dancing against me. Because it's a living, it's a legitimate living. This is a profession. It's for them" — she means them, as in men — "to admire the human body. They're not supposed to make accusations. They think just because I dance, I'm a slut. I show my body to anybody; that's no big deal. But I wouldn't sleep with 99 percent of the guys here."

Taz, like some of the other dancers, has a perverse innocence about her. In the midst of all this loveless squalor, she still has standards, still has illusions, she still dreams. Taz is very proud of her pickled eggs. She bought the eggs from Sara, the

Gigi from waist down: This is not a posed photo. She was having a good night.





The two faces of London: (Right) Flirting with the customers is part of the job. Above: At home with her boyfriend of five years in their rustic cottage she's "a one-man woman."



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cocktail waitress, who raises chickens. There is a sign at the back of the bar that says: Farm Fresh Eggs: \$1.25. In the middle of the afternoon, with customers standing around, Taz gets this huge bag of wet peeled eggs out of a cooler. This really looks bizarre, since she is all decked out in her long black chiffon skirt and strapless top, with her blue underwear showing through. Someone jokingly suggests that the eggs may somehow be part of her act. London, another stripper, the one who lost her teeth, said with dead seriousness, "That's illegal now, you know."

Anyway, these eggs were destined for something Taz called the "juice" from an empty Mason jar of pickled sausages. She and the bartender have a kind of partnership in their sale, like kids opening up a lemonade stand.

Later that night, Taz was handing out samples and having one herself. This was the pitch: "They're really good if you've had too much to drink," she said. "You can eat one of these, and it'll suck up all that sour feeling in your stomach."

This was at that unbelievably slow hour around 8. Taz had had her turn on stage and things were so pitiful that the disc jockey had to say: "OK, the first guy to put a \$5 bill in Taz's garter wins a free beer. That's right, a free beer." No one moved.

Taz was doing the funky chicken on stage stark naked. The deejay starts in again, begging, and Taz just stops cold, in front of the only two guys sitting by the stage. She sort of plants her feet and throws her arms in the air. Nothing. She's really getting discouraged now, dances about five seconds then stops and does something silly again. Finally, Sara, the egg-farm girl who is now playing pool, puts a bill in Taz's garter. "All right Sara," yells the deejay. "You win that beer!"

"But it's only a one," hollers Taz, checking it out, completely serious, like Sara really shouldn't win the beer.

As soon as her dance is over, she runs off to play pool, shimmying to *Sex is Natural*, *Sex is Cool*. She is apparently a real shark, and loves, just loves to beat men.

She's wearing a new skin-tight black cotton knit mini dress that has oval cutouts all down either side, just a G-string underneath. All the dancers are complimenting her on it. She faces off over the pool table against a very good-looking man in a white shirt and tie, wearing a beeper. Why is she spending so much time with him? Has she finally found someone who's tipping tonight? Her answer is: "Cause he thinks nobody can beat him."

Gigi passes by and rolls her eyes in longing: "He is so together," she says, nodding her head at the handsome man. "I

gave him my phone number one night. But he didn't call. Thank God." Meaning, she would have done something with him. Something, inevitably, stupid.

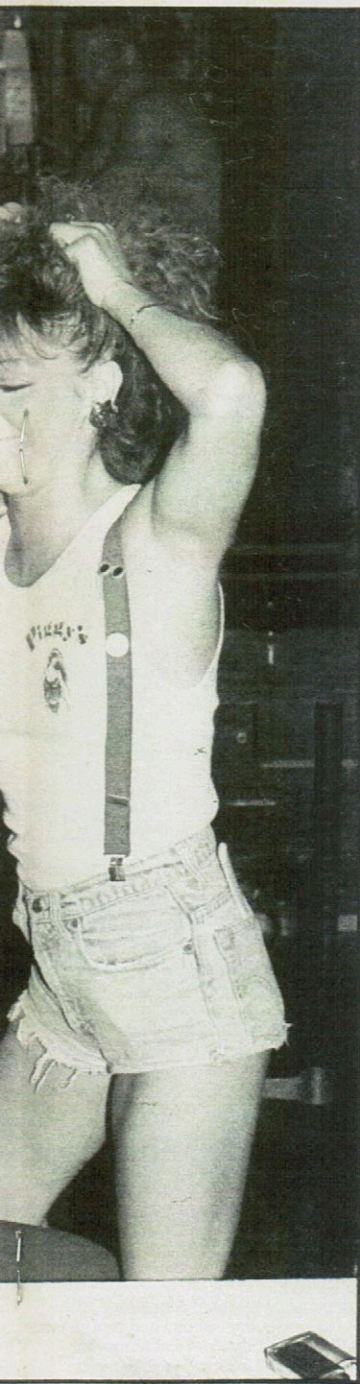


Piggy's is a sad place, but it also serves a purpose in a world where men and women still need each other as desperately as ever, and so often hate each other for it. There is hostility here, but there is also something touching about the decency that survives in such an indecent enterprise. The great preponderance of people, dancers and customers, who come

through Piggy's overwrought door are not rip-off artists, druggies, perverts or prostitutes. They are well-meaning people in difficult circumstances, trying, however maladroitly, to make a life for themselves.

Gigi says: "If you have a little feeling, you look around. I do. I really can't look nobody in the face, but you look around and you can tell: this one's horny over here, this one's lonely, something happened to that guy there. If you're nice and you show a little respect, you'll get it right back."

Clearly, the goal is to have the same guys coming back for them. It's almost as



because we're being two different people. Oooh, honey. I go home and I wrack my brains for about an hour. I just want to be alone."

All the dancers have found tricks to make them feel it isn't really them on stage. Gigi never looks men in the eye; Blue makes a joke out of it; other girls go by nicknames they don't use in real life. By moving around from bar to bar they can say to themselves, this is just to get by, it isn't really what I do. If a stripper talks crude and vampy, it is as much a role as when she is pretending to be a strange man's best friend. It is all an act.

A dancer named Jo-Jo is posing for a man with a camera. A drunken friend is egging her on: "Look slutty, Jo-Jo. That's different from slutty. Slutty means you like it."

Jo-Jo looks slutty.
Click.

It's a night when Gigi's really working, a real bump and grind for a change, a Saturday night, and she's feeling decidedly unsympathetic. She has been drinking. Normally she throws the glasses of wine men buy her down the sink, but this night she has had too many and is washing her face to sober up. It is barely 10 o'clock. Earlier, a very ordinary looking fellow in a sport coat and black shirt came a-calling, and she is hooting backstage about all the flowers he's sent her, jiggling a gold bracelet he'd just given her that night, and pointing to rings on her fingers and chains around her neck.

Guys come on to the girls all the time. But this courtly romancing is rare here. It is almost touching, but not to Gigi. To her it's meaningless, worse than meaningless. An insult. She knows she's done nothing to inspire these supposedly tender feelings but take her clothes off in public. If this man wants to pretend that what is happening here is actual intimacy, fine. Gigi just doesn't feel like playing along with a stranger's fantasy.

"You should see my house," she says. "F---ing flowers everywhere. I've got four in my bedroom, five in the living room, one in every bathroom. He musta spent a thousand dollars on flowers. Why doesn't he pay my f---ing phone bill?"

Gigi talks about doing this for her kid, about it paying off because she makes plenty of money. "I have a nanny, I live in a townhouse, I drive a Caddy. Well, it's not a new one, it's '77, but it's in mint condition. I've been offered \$3,500 for it. I have a beautiful townhouse in Kendall. My daughter is the most beautiful thing on Earth, and she wants to sing and dance, you know, professionally. I don't hide my work from her because she likes that I tell her the truth. Our home, our area, and her school, everything is so perfect for her that that overcomes any weird feelings she feels. I don't know. I don't like to lie to her."

A week later, Gigi stopped working at Piggy's. Her phone had been temporarily disconnected.

She was right. Roses don't pay the rent.



Marie is dancing in dingy white tennis shoes, slip-ons. The effect of being flat on her feet instead of prancing in heels is close to comical, but the fact that her shoes are dirty is downright depressing. That may be why she has made only \$15

today. Sunday, she only made \$10, and she worked for four hours. She says she's going to give it another three days, and if things don't improve, she's going to have to find something else.

She is also four months pregnant. She is staying with a friend right now; she had been renting a room at a motel up the street — a dive of free-standing units like a migrants' complex — for \$160 a week. After two weeks, her husband left her "holding the bill." He has left her many times before, but this time, she says she's getting a divorce. She blames her crankiness for his leaving: "He wanted me to cook his meals for him, and I was too tired after working and being pregnant. I think that's why he left."

To celebrate her new beginning, she got her hair cut. "And I loved every minute of it." She is very proud of the new 'do, a nondescript, blown-back, longish style. Still, it really hasn't cheered her up much. She's on the brink of tears.

"On the inside, I still love him, but on the outside, I hate his guts."

Her parents won't help her until she divorces him because, "They hate his guts."

Marie and her husband are smiling in the wedding pictures, a good-looking family. He is a pixie-faced blond with a cute mustache in his wedding picture. She was 18, he was 19. She says she met him in a restaurant when she was 17 and praises herself for waiting a year to get married. She finally proposed to him, then got pregnant two months before the wedding. In one photo she is wearing a white cocktail dress with a wide-brimmed hat. You can't tell that she is in excruciating pain: She had just miscarried, for the second time since the relationship began. When the picture was snapped, her mother had just told her she had to go through with the ceremony. She got drunk to kill the pain, but never made it to the reception; she passed out and was taken to the hospital.

"They dissected it, and it was a boy. A baby boy," she says. Her thick lower lip is quivering and her dull eyes are glazing over.

Meanwhile, her new husband wouldn't speak to her because he blamed her for the miscarriage; says she didn't take care of herself. As she's saying this, she is smoking a cigarette. She is afraid this

Blue and Taz clowning around on a slow night. Says Blue: "I do it for the money, honey."



if, that way, they're not taking their clothes off for strangers. "We get our regular customers by a lot of guys coming here not for something to look at but because they're lonely and they want to talk," says Gigi. "And before they go and either hurt themselves or do something they don't want to do, we sit and we BS and we have a drink and then he goes, 'I feel a lot better.' At the same time, I made a little money. But I feel I gave him more than I made. I look at it that way."

In other moods, Gigi will admit that it's not always so easy. The duality drives her nuts after a while, the bad girl-good friend dichotomy. "We're tortured either way

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baby will look like her husband, remind her of him. Still, she wants him to have his blue eyes.

Marie dropped out of school at 15, before she ever got to high school. She was a cashier at Zayre for a while, and she worked filling bags in a kitty litter factory in St. Pete making \$3.35, minimum wage. She was bored stiff and broke. Her husband did construction work now and then. For a while he was working at Subway, and could bring food home for them to eat. She says he drank a lot and lost all his jobs eventually. Once she told him to quit drinking by cracking a beer bottle over his head. It didn't work.

She slept in her car for two weeks in a parking lot. At another point, she lived on a bench on Central Avenue in St. Pete, washing herself by jumping off The Pier.

She finally got a room at the YMCA, but lost it when she missed her curfew. Then her husband snuck her into his halfway house for a night. But afterward, she was back on the street.

They were so broke that he told her to dance or he would leave her. She calls his threat "a bribe." Now that she's on her own, she is still dancing, even without the ultimatum, and the money is obviously lousy. She says, "It's hard to function around guys when you're going through what I'm going through."

One guy today told her she reminded him of his ex-wife. "I want your body," he said. She didn't want to hear that garbage, after all she'd been through.

She says, though, that she has found a new boyfriend. She is 22 now. She met him two or three weeks ago. They haven't slept together yet; that's a thing with her, not to sleep with someone right away.

Same with her husband: She waited a month.

It's better that way. It makes it more like love.

Joann has found love too. "I finally got my diamond," she says, holding up her left hand, and for a second she lights up, though she has a reputation with the other girls of being constantly in a bad mood. She says her fiance works for a supply company, and is great with her two girls, who are only 1 and 3. But the light mood doesn't last long. It's another empty noon and Joann is obviously upset, chain-smoking and tossing back another draft at the bar.

She is propped on the stool in a gold micro-miniskirt slit up to her waist. She has dyed blond hair in a short pixie cut, heavy rouge over her prominent cheeks. At 27, her upper body has begun to shrink in on itself. ("I'm wasting away," she'll say later, when she catches a glimpse of herself dancing naked in one of the mirrors surrounding the stage.) Only her legs look like they still have the strength for her oppressive schedule.

This morning, like every morning except Sunday, she got up at dawn in her Homestead apartment, made breakfast for her two little girls, then drove them two hours north to Miami in the traffic to drop them off at a baby sitter she found through a friend. It's the only all-day sitter she felt she could trust "what with all the stories you hear these days." Then she drove another hour and a half back south to the bar. She'll reverse the insane commute after she gets off tonight around 9, which will get her home around midnight. Six more hours and the alarm will go off and start the whole cycle all over again. She tosses back the last of the draft. "It sucks," she says flatly. "And what do I get for it? Things are so slow I'm lucky to make \$20 to \$30 a day."

Joann has a headache. She has a lot of headaches.

"When I got to the baby sitter's last night my 3-year-old was holding up her arm in a cast saying, 'Owie, mommy, Owie.' She broke her arm riding a trike. It kind of made me mad, you know. The sitter wasn't really watching her." She has a fresh beer and she's staring into it, rolling it between her hands. Then she looks up. "Hey," she says. "You can't watch them every second. Kids are going to get hurt. It's just part of growing up. Right?"

The girls' father, a Navy man, "took off for Scotland," she says. He doesn't send money, though every once in a while he'll come "play daddy." She's bitter about it, and gets even more bitter when she's asked about her own father. Her face darkens, the skin reddening to match the rouge on her cheeks. "My father hit me. He beat me," she spits the words through her teeth.

A man walks in through the front door. A customer.

"Who's up?" someone asks.

Joann pushes away from the bar stool. "But hey, you know, it's all part of growing up. Excuse me, I've got to go dance."

All the dancers are asked a thousand times, sometimes by the guys who have just been craning their necks at their nakedness, Why? Why do you do it? They all have an answer. Blue's is: "For the money, honey."

Blue is 28, grew up in Brooklyn, came to Miami her last year of high school. She

took a secretarial class that could have gotten her an office job, but she went to work instead in her parents' Indian grocery and restaurant. When her family sold the business a year and a half ago, she was out of a job. Her Monte Carlo SS was repossessed, and she was flat broke. She decided to try stripping, and went to work at the Pink Pussycat, alone, knowing no one, telling no one.

"Believe me, I can get brave when I need to." But the shock sent her scurrying for cover: She rented a room for a week at the beach to "clear my brains." Not even her boyfriend knew what she was up to, nor her roommates. She told them she worked at Beefsteak Charlie's near the airport, even though there was no such place. She cackles at this. When they would find her garters in the laundry, they would look at her puzzled: What the heck is this? I don't know, she would answer. She laughs some more. After that, she had to sneak around to wash her clothes. She thinks this is all very funny.

Blue keeps putting back the date when she's going to quit dancing in deference to her unborn children and go find a secretarial job.

"Morally, it's wrong," she says. She hesitates. She's thinking this out as she says it. Obviously, she hasn't quite got to the bottom of it yet: "But then, all dancers are people too, and they have lives of their own. They do get pregnant and they do have families."

Still, "It doesn't look very nice," she says. "Nobody wants to see somebody with a big belly on stage. Some say it turns them on, but I don't see how." Blue talks about older men getting off on her being pregnant: One man in his 50s told her he hadn't been physically aroused in 10 years, until he saw her dance. "I told him, that's great! Twenty dollars, please."

Even on good days, the dancers still don't make much more than they could caddy hash in a greasy spoon. But at Piggy's, even on bad days, they can take the edge off their depression with a little something from the bar. What other profession encourages drinking on the job?

"It is sort of like going to a party every day," London says. "And I just love to dance."

It's true. When London's on stage her nudity seems completely incidental. She throws herself into it with enthusiastic energy, but it's not erotic energy, it's more like an athletic little girl putting on a show for her parents. She does handsprings, leaps, spins, these ballet sort of flourishes.

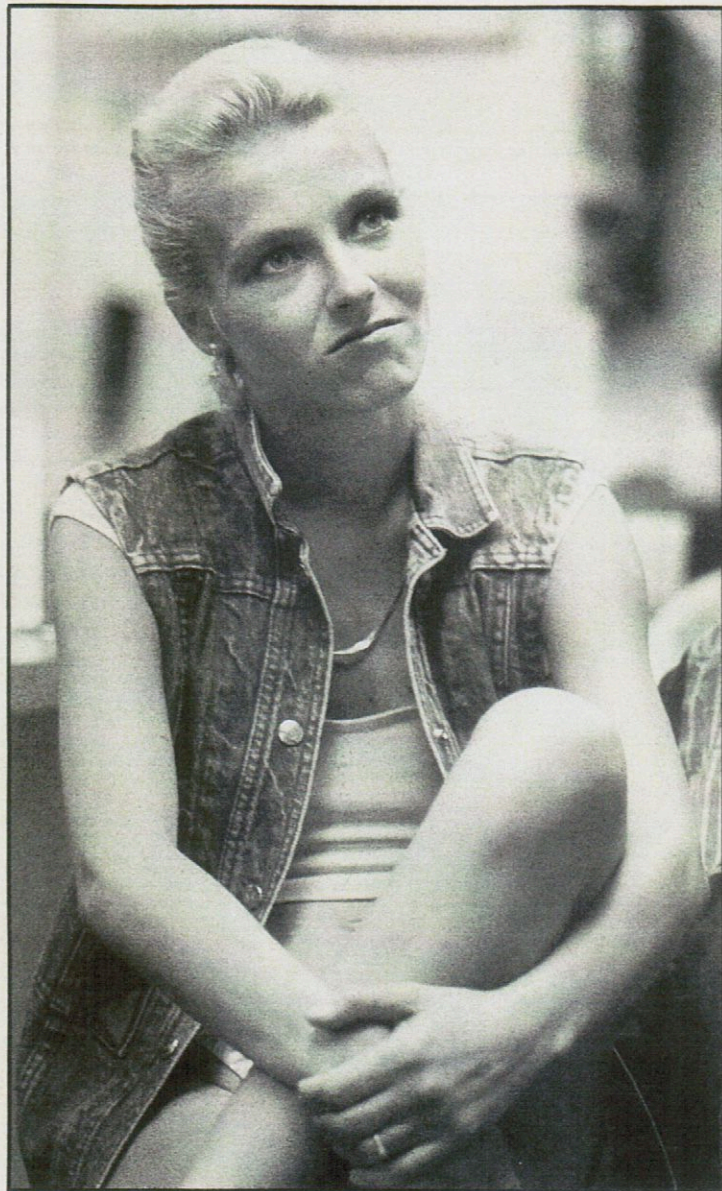
"I don't want to sound conceited," she says, "but sometimes when I audition at a club, all the other dancers just stop what they're doing and watch."

At 36 her body is still trim. Her face is beginning to show the oncoming puffiness of age, but it is always lit by a theatrical brightness, which is not put on, but a permanent part of her personality. She is the type who just naturally seems to look on the bright side.

"I look at what I do as an art form," she says. "I know a lot of people look at it as a dirty, sleazy thing. But did they condemn Marilyn Monroe? Would they condemn an art class at a university?"

London says she was teaching tap and ballet to 5-year-olds in Detroit and rooming with a woman who was a go-go dancer. "I got a look at her paycheck. And

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Joann: The tips are drying up, her 3-year-old has just broken her arm. But when a man walks through the door, she has to dance.



Blue is 28, grew up in Brooklyn, came to Miami her last year of high school. She

DAILY GRIND

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I went down and auditioned. In those days, it was just topless."

Now it's these days, and London has decided that for her second set — the nude set — she'll wear blue panty hose and just roll them down to mid thigh. It's an unusual effect. And she's really giving it her best, partly because this is her last performance of the night, partly because Tommy, her boyfriend, is watching.

Tommy, who fuels jets at the airport, is a big, affable guy, clean-cut, perpetually chuckling. He's standing, elbow on the bar, sipping a beer and watching London with clear admiration. "When I watch her dance sometimes, I just can't believe it. And she's my girlfriend."

If Tommy never lets the ogling, the grabbing, the innuendo get to him, it sometimes gets to London. Every once in a while, London will get fed up and need to take a break. The last time, she pushed a hot dog cart outside of Home Depot for \$40 a day plus tips. "Some guy would drive up in a muscle car, stereo blaring, and London would start dancing like mad. Before long, there'd be a crowd around her."

A few months ago, Tommy and London moved out of an apartment in Kendall, and into the middle of a mango grove. "Oh, it looks like just a shack," London said, nervous at the prospect of visitors. It is, in fact, a two-room caretaker's shack from an era when this part of South Dade was deep in the country. And from the front porch, you wouldn't think much had changed, but

U.S. 1 and Piggy's are just two miles away. "When we fix it up . . . I have a real Oriental carpet, and we can buy a four-poster brass bed . . ."

On the wall is Tommy's present for London's 36th birthday: a 16 by 20 framed portrait of Jesus holding his bleeding heart. "My Lord is important to me," London says.

The dance is over, and so is London's shift. But London and Tommy are going to stick around at the bar, have a few nightcaps before they head back to the still blackness in the mango grove. London is starting to feel pretty good about things. But there is one hard fact that keeps baring its ugly incisors.

"Something terrible happened the other night," London says, pointing in her mouth to a dark gap between her upper teeth. "I was a little tipsy when I went to bed, and when I woke up, they were just gone. I looked all over, and I couldn't find them anywhere. The worst thing is, I'm going to need a lot more of these," she points to the handful of dollar bills placed individually in her garter by loving hands, "before I can go to the dentist and get new caps."

But in another instant, someone cracks a joke and London is laughing again, her face shining in the dim glow of the Lava Lites, forgetting all about her teeth until someone gets up to leave. London turns, places a grave hand on the departing shoulder. "Pray for me," she pleads dramatically. "Pray I find my teeth."

"Know why I like dancing?" Christy coos. You can hardly hear her, that husky whisper of a voice. Christy's *stick* on

stage is drop-dead glamour. Her long brown hair falls down over one eye like a '30s movie queen. She is wearing layer upon layer of black lace, long sleeves and black lace cape. She barely moves, and never completely undresses. "I used to stick my butt right in their faces, but my boyfriend said, 'Anyone can be a slut. Men appreciate a little mystery.' I want them wondering: What's under that black cape?"

Christy was a cheerleader in high school, and at 17 married the boy voted Most Popular. The marriage dissolved two years later, and she moved back in with her parents.

"I always knew I was going to do something sexual for a living," she says. "When I was 15, I used to say I was going to knock on Hugh Hefner's door."

This is not quite the Playboy mansion, but a man has just brought her a second split of champagne, a graying businessman type in a white polo shirt. He huddles with her in a corner of the bar, gesturing, running his finger lightly up the outside of her shoulder, staring into her face.

"What were you discussing, the meaning of life?" someone asks. "No," she says. "He was asking me whether I thought he should use a condom or not use one when he had sex with a new woman. You know what some of these men think of dancers? They think of us as sexual mentors."

Now her eyes are gleaming from under the tresses. "Know why I dance?" she repeats. "The three M's. Men, Music and Money."

When she dances again, her cape sways

open and reveals something that would have looked like cellulite if she weren't so slender. Later, in the glare of the dressing room, she can no longer shield herself in mystery. Her body is covered with eczema, "the heartbreak of eczema," she calls it. "Overactive skin cells." Nothing helps but hydrocortisone, which she hates to take, and the sunshine.

"In eight years, I haven't ever not had it," she says. It does recede to just one patch now and then, but it always flares up again. There are dime-sized sores visible under her torn black stockings. Her tiny hands are cracked and scaled and her fingernails are bitten to the quick: She chews them to keep from scratching. Her lovely face has nearly imperceptible raised areas. It's just enough to destroy the perfection that is so baffling in a place like this.

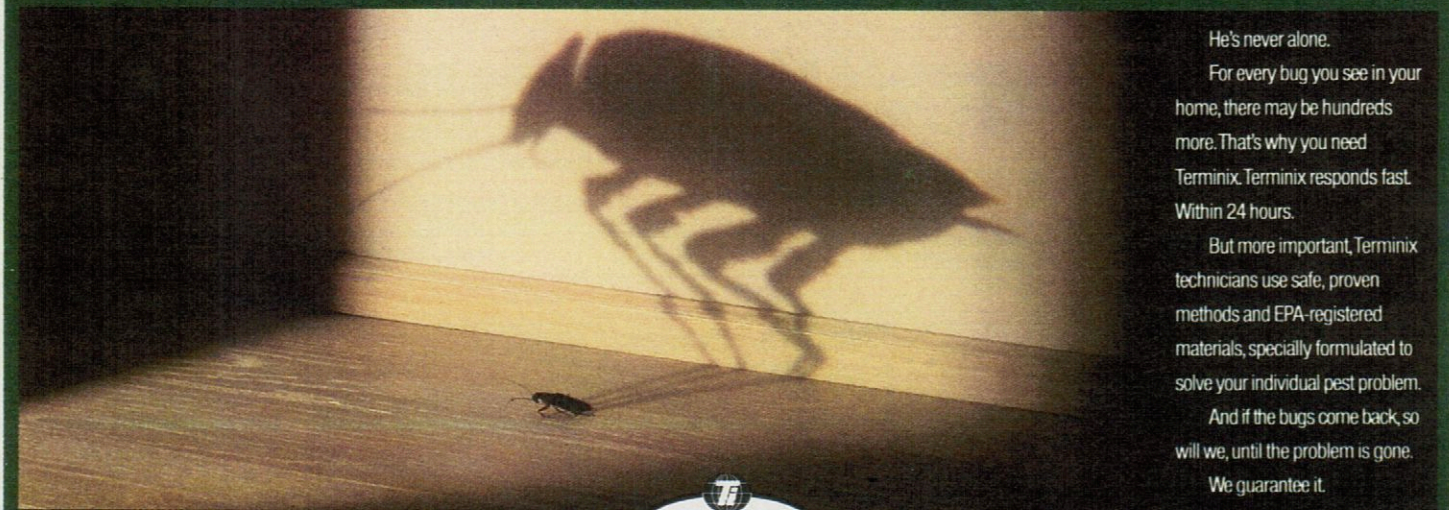
Christy lives with her boyfriend, a chef, down in the Keys. But when the bartender — a dancer who quit because her boyfriend was getting jealous — says she misses dancing because, when she was in the right mood and focused on the right man, stripping on stage could be a turn-on, Christy has to admit that it's sometimes true.

"It's like a kind of power. You see those men staring up at you, they're like, *glued*." She pushes her hair out of her eyes. "Why does it affect them like that?"

She is asking a man. This is genuine curiosity. After seven years as a stripper, Christy still hasn't figured it out.

TOM SHRODER is *Tropic's* editor. MICHELLE GENZ is a regular contributor.

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