

LEAVING THE STAGE

by *Katherine
Frank*



TO CELEBRATE MY RETIREMENT FROM STRIPPING, I decided to work one last ritualistic shift on a Friday evening at my favorite club. I wanted to be busy but I didn't want my last night on the stage to be tainted by the antics of the rowdy and demanding bachelor parties that dominated Saturday nights. Fridays were always better for me. I prepared a week ahead of time by inviting all of my favorite regulars to the club and arranging to spend a certain amount of time with each of them - for the usual price, of course! Our goodbyes were emotional, and I promised to keep in touch and let them know how graduate school was progressing. Between regulars, I

circulated through the club informing the other customers about my eminent retirement and was able to generate significant sales through my enthusiastic pitch: "Would you like a table dance? It's your last chance ever to see me naked in public!" I brought all of my most beloved costumes, even though I was too busy dancing to change more than once the entire night. At my request, the DJ played my favorite songs when I took the main stage (even if they were 'owned' by another dancer—a special favor) and my last set of the night was dreamy and slow, a calculated indulgence of nostalgia before hanging up my fluorescent g-strings forever. I cleaned out my locker and said my goodbyes to the other dancers after the shift, passing out some

costume jewelry and garters that I wouldn't be using again. In the car on the way home, I cried, thinking about how much I would miss dancing—the other girls, the satin and silk dresses, the smell of the money, the music, the challenge. The next day, still in a sober mood, I threw away my most outrageous stripper heels (they hadn't been replaced for a while anyway, in preparation for this moment), packed away my favorite dresses in a sentimental box and gave the rest to friends, and prepared myself for a life without sex work.

The second time I retired from stripping, I made much less of a scene. This time I was again headed for the supposedly greener pastures of academia and even though it was just a predoctoral teaching fellowship awaiting me, I didn't anticipate wanting to dance again. My regulars still gave me flowers, cards and gifts, and the DJ played Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher" for several of my sets, announcing to the audience that I was heading off to teach college, believe it or not, and didn't they wish they could be students again for that one. There were fewer tears on my part, as my body was feeling tired and I was looking forward to working more with my mind than my body for a change. The next day, in a more cautious mood, I again threw away my stripper shoes, packed up my dresses and glitter, and calculated how much I would need to curtail my expenses to avoid beginning my new life in debt.

But I retired again when I turned 31, when I finished my dissertation, when I got my first "real" academic job, and when I moved to the upper northeast, where the nearest strip club was over an hour away. (In fact, the lack of possible venues was probably the only reason that particular retirement lasted so long). The last few times that I retired, I didn't even mention my plans to do so to anyone in the club, even the managers. What was the point? Girls were always "retiring,"

quitting in anger or frustration, not showing up for work for weeks on end, even being fired, only to trot back into the dressing room a few weeks later toting their freshly dry-cleaned costumes and a few new pairs of cheap stripper heels (it seems that I'm not the only one with a tendency to toss the shoes a bit too quickly) and smiling sheepishly. Retirement took on less of an aura of possibility and exciting transformation and more of an air of inevitability—one of these days, it was going to happen (perhaps even in the form of being dragged offstage by the managers and customers), and if I was going to choose it myself, I had to move quickly. Well, I didn't move quickly, but eventually I did stop showing up for work.

Now, even though I haven't danced in years, I still keep a few costumes in my closet (and I still buy them occasionally when I pass a particularly enthralling sale). I keep some vials of glitter underneath my bathroom sink—just in case. Sometimes, when I'm completely alone or watched only by the wide eyes of my seven-month-old baby, I do a few dance moves as I towel off from my shower. I have a cohort of friends that are also retired, and I see them sporadically to visit clubs as customers—a quick fix, but one which often just awakens my sleeping desire to dance again. We laugh about fantasies of disappearing for the weekend and stripping in Vegas or Dallas or Tampa, returning home with a purse full of bills and less of an ache for the thrill of the red light.

For some women I've known, continuing in sex work is a financial necessity and remains so long after the work loses its allure (if it ever had any allure for them in the first place). I definitely do not want to downplay the fact that sex work is sometimes the best, or the only, option for some women (and men) to support themselves. But why is it so hard for so many of us to retire from dancing or other forms of sex work even when we do have other opportunities? Why does it remain a fantasy afterwards? After all, much of it is hard physical labor, whether we're working as escorts or in strip clubs. I've ruined my legs from kneeling on wooden tables and from doing dips in 5-inch heels. I remember returning home many nights feeling tired, drained of emotional energy, dirty, bruised, and longing for the day when I would hang up my g-string permanently. The customers can be wonderful, but they can also be emotionally draining over time; the similarities between regulars and boyfriends or husbands are often underestimated by outsiders—both groups of men may require a great deal of validation, affirmation, and emotional support. It isn't as if I don't remember the more frustrating aspects of the work.

The money, I'll admit, is extremely difficult to part with, and I have yet to make as much money doing anything else. The

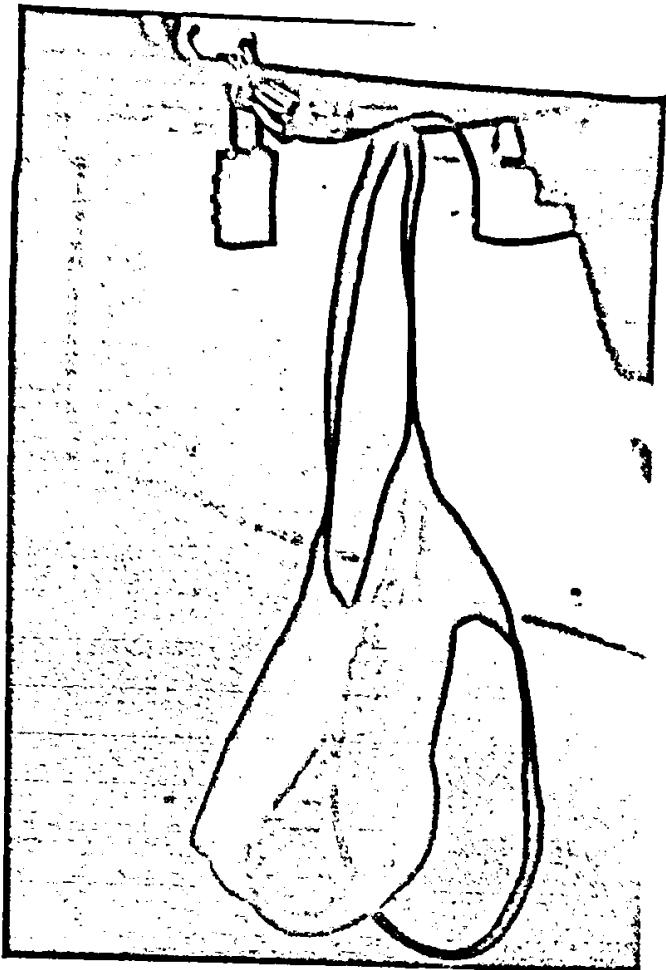


Photo by Erin Siegal

freedom is also a constant draw—the freedom of scheduling, of strategy, of movement, of self-representation (too often dictated by the fantasies of the audience, of course, but it was fun to play within those confines and to take on different roles). And of course any kind of retirement is difficult, because work tends to be so wrapped up with our identities and sense of purpose. But one of the most significant reasons that it was so difficult for me to quit dancing was because retirement meant, in a sense, giving up my youth. For me, dancing was a feminist coming of age, a discovery of my sexuality, and a challenge to many of my beliefs about nudity, money, love, marriage, desire, power, and men. During those years, I learned a lot of things about life and developed skills that still draw on today. I learned that men had a much more diverse understanding of beauty than I did—even though the women that I worked with were within certain physical boundaries, they were certainly more varied in body type and attractiveness than the models you'd see in magazines or on television. I became more understanding of male desire and less afraid of men's fantasies, looks, and bodies. I learned how to become a good salesperson, how to handle rejection, and how to really listen to people. I developed an understanding of sexuality as a kind of market and an ability to negotiate and to believe in the value of what I bring to the table during those negotiations.

I also learned to appreciate the effect that my body could have on others instead of being afraid of the response it generated. But part of my appreciation and enjoyment meant also recognizing the fleetingness of those moments. Now every sex worker knows that creating magic with customers is mental as well as physical, and some strippers and escorts continue to work well into their forties, fifties, even occasionally beyond, perhaps changing clientele or specialty along the way. But there is a glow and a beauty that comes with youth that I started to recognize and appreciate while I was working and that I feel a certain wistfulness for now, at times. After all, I do see something different in my face and body now, especially after having a baby, though I would never want to trade what I have now for what I once was. But I'm sure that I'll continue to feel a certain longing to take the stage again, to see my skin under black light, to feel defiant, desirable, graceful, and young. Wild. I know there are just as many times that I was actually feeling tired and bored, but those memories fade into the background—such is the nature of nostalgia.

And perhaps that is why I still fantasize about returning, for a weekend, a night, even just one set. And perhaps that is also why I won't.

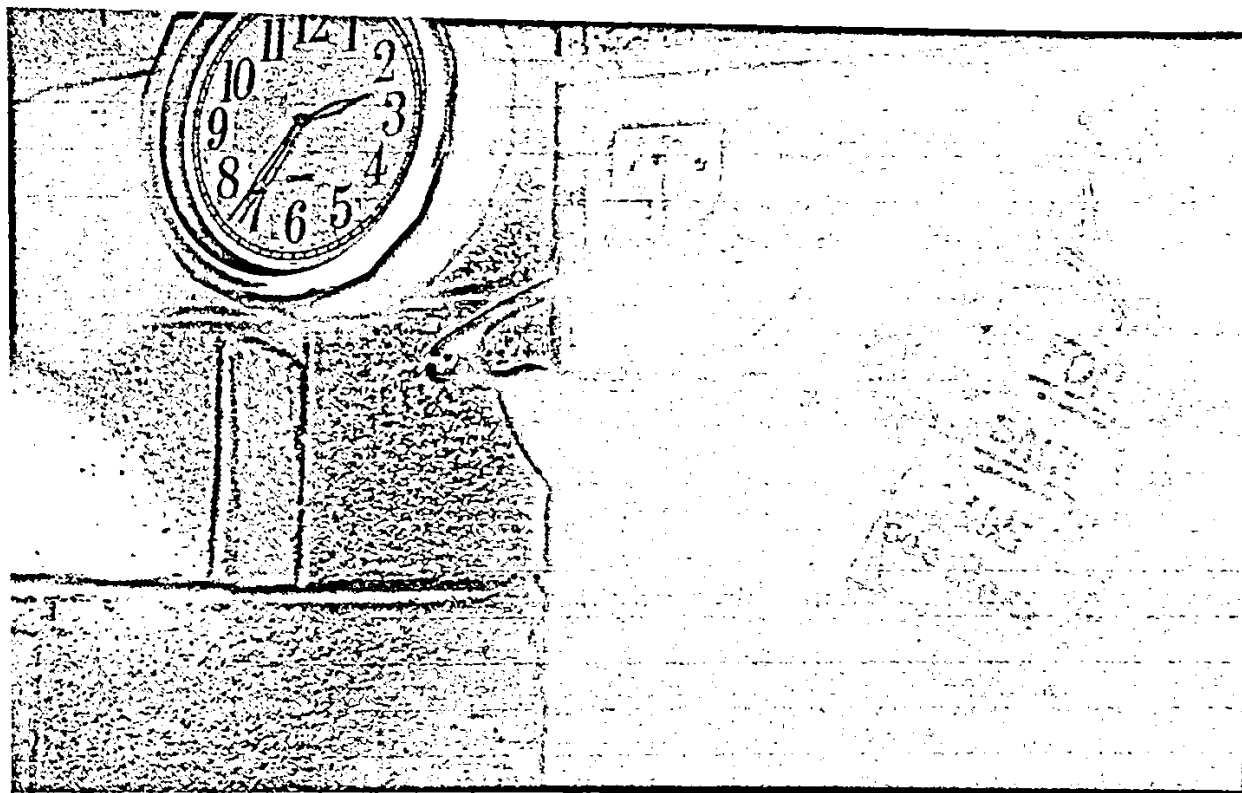


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*Katherine Frank is a cultural anthropologist, fiction writer, and former exotic dancer. Her first book, *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire* (2002), is an exploration of the motivations and fantasies of the male customers of strip clubs. Her current research focuses on understandings of monogamy in contemporary marriages and she is also writing an ethnography on swinging.*