

# Bring what You Need

It's New York City. Late 1980s. Madonna is still Like a Virgin. And after five years in undergrad, a further four years at The Juilliard School, then one year on the road with The Acting Company, I am an actress, who was acting.

I am also broke.

The Acting Company job finished less than two months ago and I've already lost two waitressing jobs.

One because I spilled 5 a.m. over-easy eggs on Jon Bon Jovi's lap.

The other because one of my boobs got in the mousse. Maybe also the soup.

Ok. I'm a terrible waitress.

For the past decade, I've been making up the short- fall between work, tuition, and expenses by living off my student loans and credit cards. I'm into my second month behind on rent, with no solution. And I now have this humongous new debt called Student Loans: An entire week's salary, at least, to be paid every month. Possibly for my whole life. Probably even after I die.

Also, just to make sure I fall entirely apart, Mean People have been calling. I learn they are called Debt Collections.

I didn't know that.

I think they are just being mean. To me, specifically. Me and only me.

I don't understand why they are so mean. Why would a big company like Chemical Bank need to yell at someone who is obviously struggling, to hurry up and give them \$183 dollars? Are they going to go out of business if they don't get my \$183 by Monday? I mean, I understand I owe it. What I don't understand is the very, very, meanness, especially over something like money.

I offer up my guitar. It's the only thing of value I have. Also, I don't play guitar.

I meant to learn, but besides it hurting my fingertips, I can't hear the difference in the notes.

They decline the guitar and inform me they'll call again. And again. And again. Later.

Nothing will be different later. I don't understand why they are being so mean. I cannot function under 'mean.' It paralyzes me.

And don't they think the world needs artists? Don't they know that by crippling us with their meanness, they will hurt our creativity? Do they not understand the peril the world will feel if there is no art?

Sitting on my floor in a mess of overdue bills, hic-hic-hic crying, searching the Want Ads, I notice a large ad in bold letters on the back page of the *Village Voice* that reads:

“GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS! Earn \$1000.00 a week! Escorts Wanted. No sex involved.”

I'd seen this ad a week before, and after the first barrage of threats from the Mean People, I called the number but hung up after the female voice on the other end asked for my measurements.

“Thirty-four C” was as far as I got.

Somewhere inside, I know there is sex involved.

Ok, so? I mean, I've had sex before. But sex with strangers? No. Yes. Sort of. One-night stands.

I didn't *intend* them to be one-night stands. I would be thinking we were at the beginning of a beautiful romance, with more to come, no pun intended. The ending always took me by surprise.

But so, yes. Sex with strangers. And so...so...

The thought of sex with strangers can actually be titillating. It is the aftermath that makes me feel bad. The encounter has to *mean something*. Or it just feels empty. Even mechanical sex can be elevated to something sweet if it has meaning.

And it isn't just the emptiness that makes me feel bad.

It's the dumping.

It's not that people can't leave, it's just that when I've had a nice time with a man, laughed, talked, connected enough to want to sleep with him, but then he doesn't call again even though it seemed like we were dating, I feel confused, foolish. Disposable.

So what is this then? Instead of having sex in exchange for some sort of relationship, men pay so there's no romance or relationship? Just the sex and the dumping? Why would they want that?

Is this (gasp) Prostitution?

Prostitution is bad. Sex is a sacred thing.

How can a man treat a woman like someone to serve him, and use her in that way without concern for a mutual experience? Men and women have a special role in each other's well-being. We need each other. We are not to treat our relations as transactions.

Ok, as I said, I've had some men treat me like that. Deceit and dumping, but no money involved. Maybe I would have felt better if I got paid?

I mean, what are they paying for? The right to dehu- manize you?

Is that what this job is – ‘Prostitute’? Does Escort mean Prostitute? Now I’m terrified. I know what prostitutes are. They are not well-educated girls from good families. They are not girls who have people who love them.

I know what prostitutes are. I’ve seen movies and TV shows and read books.

And I know what happens to them.

If I do this, in a year from now will I be diseased and dying, lying in a gutter with a needle poking out of my arm, beaten regularly by an enormous Pimp who owns my life? But, even if I get a waitress job tomorrow, it won’t be enough to pay my debts. It won’t be enough to keep me from being homeless. Even if I work three jobs, eighty hours

a week, I can’t catch up. I can’t even live.

I’m terrified of being homeless. Being broke, being poor, is so hard, but being without a safe shelter, without a place for your stuff, without a place to bathe and go to the bath- room? It’s almost impossible to climb out from homeless.

Oh my god! How is this happening?

Maybe sex isn’t involved. Maybe that’s why they call it “escort,” not “prostitute.” I have to think that or I can’t make the call.

The same female voice answers.

“I’m calling about the ad in the *Village Voice*.”

“What do you look like? How tall are you?” “Five four.” I lie.

“And how much do you weigh?” “Hundred and fifteen pounds.” I lie. “And your measurements?”

“Thirty-four C, twenty-four, thirty-four.” I lie. “Age?”

“Twenty-six.” That’s true.

“Can you come in for an interview? In an hour?”

I write the address in black marker on the back of an overdue bill. Tears hit the words, smearing the ink. I’m a mess, and I am forced to call back to clarify the location.

Now wait. What do you wear to an interview to be a hooker? How about ... a Victorian white lace button-down- the-back blouse ... with long sleeves and throat-high neck? Maybe ... a mid-calf-length black skirt with pink elephants on the trim, purple tights, and ... old lady lace-up shoes? ’Cause that’s what I choose.

The look: “Spinster with a secret life.”

And of course ... my pink vinyl backpack! That gives it a contemporary feel. Yeah, that comes with me.

Hidden behind my dresser on my windowsill is a glass jelly jar with a handful of change—all the money I have until my next job. I'll need one dollar for the subway to the interview and one dollar back. In pennies, nickels, and dimes, I have 96 cents total. Not enough for a token.

I guess I'm walking. Across Central Park. In summer.

Like wading through a sauna full of insects and garbage.

A sweaty hour or so later, I turn the corner off speedy- cab-crazed 1st Avenue onto the quieter residential block of 63rd Street to the address on the back of the overdue bill.

Not what I expected.

An evergreen awning shading two glass entry doors of a brick, ten-story, no doorman, elevator building—a building like so many others in New York City's Upper East Side. I don't know what I was expecting. Something seedier?

Instead of the gruff, life-hardened floozy I expected, the door is opened by tiny, ballet-thin Tina. Clean cut with a brunette chin-high bob, wearing a tutu skirt, no makeup, holding a Hilton Hotel ashtray in one hand and a lit Marlboro in the other, tiny Tina shows me into the daytime-quiet, unlit, one-bedroom apartment. She offers me hot tea but I decline. AIDS is a new disease and I only know you get it from sexual germs and what place if not this place would have a lot of sexual germs? And there's probably some left over on the tea china so no thank you to the tea.

Sitting on the white-turned-gray L-shaped leather sectional sofa, I fill out a normal job application while Tina hurries into the bedroom-office to answer the phone. Through the open door, I see two desks facing each other, with phone lines, boxes of index cards, and a credit card machine hung on the wall. It looks like a real office.

Where real business takes place. I don't know, I just thought guys call and there's a room and you go in and do stuff and hand money to a lady. Or a man. I didn't think of this part. This being so much like a real office and a real business.

Finished with the application, I tuck my driver's license under the clip of the clipboard, as instructed by Tina, place it on the glass coffee table, and scan the living room. No TV. Lots of you're-not-good-enough magazines like *Cosmo* and *Elle* in a neat stack. On the walls, a huge bulletin board, every inch of cork covered with index cards screaming commands and barking rules in large-font black permanent magic marker.

“You must throw away your food after eating and before leaving. Anyone who leaves garbage will BE FINED!!!”

“You may not go on a call without supplies. No exceptions. Anyone who is found without supplies will BE FINED!!!”

“No loud talking while waiting for calls!!! I mean it!!!” “You must remember to give a business card to each client at the end of each call. I will check on this.

No business card—you WILL be FINED!!!”

“Stockings. NO Pantyhose! EVER!!!”

“If you go to a credit card call without your slips, YOU will pay for the call!!”

“If you are on the schedule for a shift and are not ready or can’t be found, you will be FIRED and I will personally BLACKLIST you from the business!”

Then there is a kinder list. I know it is kinder because it has a smiley face on it. On an index card stating the month of June is a list of girls’ names. After each name are points with a letter after it—either R or E. At the top of the list is ‘Julie: R111 E1111...’ and so on for each girl’s name below hers.

Tina comes out to find me looking at it. She explains the girls get points for each repeat (R) client and a point for each time they extend (E) their stay with a client past the initial allotted hour. The girl with the most points at the end of each month receives an extra fifty dollars in her check.

I don’t say so, but I’m confused. I am actually headachy trying to put this information someplace in my brain that I can draw a reference from. I have none. It’s so new and so not what I expected. I didn’t expect the structure—the absolute business quality of it all. Paid by check? Like a real job? I was imagining tucking bills in my bra, in my tattered stockings, not pantyhose.

Do the movies and TV and books know about this?

Nothing like this is ever shown.

And all the rules. This is just like Juilliard! Maybe stricter. And getting FINED. How can anyone have the heart to fine a girl who has just had to have sex for money? Isn’t that the lowest someone can fall?

Tina asks if I have any questions. I have ka-billions of them but none of them will make their way to my mouth so I just say no. She shakes my hand, tells me I am hired and to come back at seven tonight to meet Susan—the owner—and start work.

Tonight?!

So soon? I need time to think about it. I need time to learn what to do. I need time to learn how to make love—if there is even lovemaking involved. I mean I know how... but how do you do it when it has to be so expert it’s worth paying for?

I mean, what are they paying for anyway? Surely men don’t pay so much money for regular sex. There must be something special you do that is better than normal sex to make them want to pay so much.

Tina says, “See you at seven. Don’t forget to bring what you need.”

I need to read up on this. I should have read all those Cosmo articles that tell you the fifty ways you need to know to please your man in bed.

Tonight?!

Outside, I turned onto loud, honking, grimy 1st Avenue, almost jogging, weaving in and around the hordes of people clogging the narrow sidewalks made narrower by Hefty garbage bag mountains. There is so much to do before seven. I have to decide if I am even going back. I have to vacillate. I have to have a panic attack and recover. I have to wash my hair. I have to shave my legs. I have to shave my bikini area! This will take some time.

In rhythm with my feet as they pound the cement and the blood that pulses in my temples, questions, thoughts, fears, drum inside my head. Will I go back? I'm not sure. I almost have to. In two weeks I will be without a place to live. I just need enough money to hold on to the apartment. I need enough to keep pursuing my dream.

Or, I could say it's not worth it. After all these years of study, despite living for my dream, I could drop all hope, get a job somewhere, giving away all my time and life force, living paycheck to paycheck until it doesn't hurt anymore.

But, I can't even do that. Nine years of study and I'm skilled for no job in the real world. I am an actress. That's all. I just need money enough to keep me doing it until it becomes my career.

I will do this for just a week. If the ad was true, and it actually is \$1000 a week, well, I was usually making \$200 a week so the \$1000 would last a really, really long time. It could save me until the next acting job.

It would save me from Homeless.

And maybe there isn't actually sex involved. They said there wasn't, in the ad. Tina didn't say anything about it. If there was, wouldn't she tell me? I mean, this could actually be a great job. It is called 'Escort,' so maybe that's what you really do. Escort men to Dinners and Galas, Charity Balls, Picnics and Yacht Parties. Things like that.

What a turnaround if that were true.

I've always had this sense with men, that if I wanted them to be with me, I had to pay them *with* sex. A man would gladly hang out with me, take us for a meal, but he was just biding his time till the sex. And there had better be the payment of sex at the end or he's just wasted an evening. In his mind, I would have taken advantage of him. Why else would he be with me if not for the eventual sex? I have nothing to offer him that's as valuable as sex.

It puzzles me that men do all that just to get to the sex. It seems a waste. Like buying a lovely bottle of wine only to dump the contents and admire the bottle. Aren't the contents the best part?

So this would be a turnaround. A man paying *me*!

From 63rd and 1st to 50th and 11th where I live takes me almost an hour. I take the five flights of stairs to my apartment two at a time. I will have to leave by six to go back, so I have a few hours to prepare for what I am sure is going to be the most terrifying experience of my life to date (other than my audition for Juilliard).

Shower. Shave. Hair. Makeup. Clothes. "*Bring what you need.*"

What does that mean? What do I need? I have my vagina.

Breasts. The basics. That's pretty much it, right?

No, really. What to bring? What 'supplies' were the memos talking about that would get you FINED if you didn't have them? Maybe condoms? But no. Because a) sex isn't supposed to be involved, and b) I don't have any, and

c) I don't have enough money to buy any. And, if there is sex, isn't it usually the guy who brings the condoms? That's how it is in real life, right?

I take one last glance at myself in the mirror, memorizing the way I look. Later, when I get home and look again, *if* I get home, and *if* I'm alive, I may no longer be the same person.

Oh god. I think sex is involved. I want to vomit.