

MAGIC GARDENS

The Memoirs of Viva Las Vegas

Dame Rocket Press, August 2009

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Magic Gardens: The Memoirs of Viva Las Vegas
Dame Rocket Press, August 2009
\$14.95 * 6 x 9 softcover * 176 pages * ISBN-13: 978-0980141948

This book is “Pure Viva.”

—**Gus Van Sant**, filmmaker, *MILK*

“Viva’s memoir/novel is as affecting as Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*,
and has more than a passing kinship to the work of Anais Nin and Jack Kerouac.

Hers is the classic American tale of wanderlust, updated for the 21st Century
with additional layers of heartbreak. . . . In the sea of memoirs. . . Viva’s story is an island.
You’ll circumnavigate it breathlessly, like I did, reading first for the titillation
then rooting, with increasing sympathy, for the utterly charming and
oh-so-hip and so-sad ingénue.”

—**Andrei Codrescu**, *Jealous Witness: New Poems*

“Seeing life through this broad’s eyes is a strange and beautiful blessing
the likes of which words bring.”

—**Nick Tosches**, journalist and author of *King of the Jews*

(*Note: This blurb appears on the front cover.*)

“*Magic Gardens* is no mere memoir—all snap, verve, and eloquence, it is
the how-to manifesto of a Diva of the Demimonde, and a love song to life
on the shady side.”

—**Katherine Dunn**, *Geek Love*

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INTRODUCTION: ON SALVATION

My decision to move to Portland was like a game of pin the tail on the donkey. I blindfolded myself, ran at the wall, and shoved a pushpin in the ass of America.

Less than two months beforehand I'd been in New England, sweating under a polyester graduation gown while George Bush the First admonished the members of my class to pursue their dreams. For most of my peers that meant donning suits and ties and commuting to sterile offices in order to keep the status quo chugging along. But for me it meant something else; for me it meant *anything* else.

Up on the dais to collect my diploma, I looked George square in the eye as I shook his hand and thanked him for his address. I wanted him to know that I'd heard him loud and clear. From that day forward I was done with the talented and gifted program and was going to do whatever the fuck I wanted.

My poor parents beamed unsuspectingly from the audience. The eldest of their four children, I was anything but easy. Still I'd managed to become valedictorian of my high school class and, now, a graduate of Williams College. I was a health nut and even made it to church half a dozen times a year. For all my agonizing growing pains, I appeared to be turning out quite nicely. Mom and Dad probably thought I was going to get a nice job, meet a nice man, and have a nice life. They should have known better.

My dad is a preacher. My mom is a teacher. They gave me heaven and earth. By the time I was out of their house I'd lived on four continents, spoke five languages, and had learned to look for beauty, truth, and salvation in all things. I knew that my sole responsibility on this earth was to let my little light shine. It seemed a no-brainer to me that my little light would shine

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brightest, was most needed, in the darker corners of life. I don't think it's surprising at all that I ended up naked, glowing, incandescent in one of the darkest corners imaginable.

So many colors make up the everyday wash of appointments and moorings. During the day, the huge white light from the sky dilutes them all. The green palm trees, pink pigs, and purple elephants look sickly in the sun with their faded paint and broken bulbs. But at night they're tarted up like the perfect whore. At night the giant neon signs on North Interstate promise a life that throbs and crackles and doesn't disappoint. At night the electric lights fire up and taunt God with an energy and perfection born of our gluttony, our devotion to extravagance, our fear of nothingness.

The West was founded on the promise of easy money, and its most successful citizens are still its outlaws, shysters, and thieves. Pornographers find especially fertile ground here, and so do titty bars. Portland, with its endlessly gray, wet neon night, has held the title of "most strip clubs per capita" for well over two decades. Most of the bars are housed in grungy clapboard or cement hovels on the outskirts of town. They are warm, welcoming places in the midst of a depressed and lonely collective consciousness. With names like Beavers, Jiggles, Roosters, and Bottoms Up, they don't promise much. But in this industry, you don't need to. Sex sells. Add beer and you sell more.

Everything looks surreal when there's a real live naked woman onstage. Suddenly you've transcended polite society; protocol is refreshingly warped. It's exciting, possibly dangerous.

Everywhere there are mirrors, reflections of you, of her. Plumes of cigarette smoke give shape to

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breath, to words. The nicotine haze adds to the subterranean surrealism. Everyone is alone—pondering the dancer or his drink. Life’s traumas and dramas ebb and flow in consciousness as dancers come and go. Some mesmerize completely, and everything else falls away.

Get a whiskey with a beer back. Light up a smoke. Sit at the rack...

So many girls pass through this crucible. They are perfectly ripe, teetering on the brink of “hard-won maturity” but not yet sullied by that certain cynicism that rains from heaven when you are precisely twenty-three and three-quarters. So many girls enter this industry pretty and hopeful beyond belief. Freshly weaned from troubled adolescences, they giggle and smile and wiggle out of their panties, and overnight realize they have the world by the balls. The tricky thing is knowing what to do with it.

There was this curve of a back in a deadbeat Western town

On a wet night in a smoke-choked Chinatown

There was this curve of a back reflected in the glass

Reflected in the glass reflected in the glass

This curve of a back slowly snaked down to the ground and hid

Under a smooth creamy belly and an arabesque of a throat

This curve of a back arched on the floor, lips spread in pleasure

Body twisting slowly...

So beautiful in the light I thought my heart would break

And the world would be saved entire.

WELCOME TO PORNLAND

I lit a cigarette and eyed the junky, mustard-yellow Victorian boarding house from across the street. I'd been pounding the pavement all day in the searing August heat, meeting building managers and touring nice normal studios for rent. But I kept coming back to the Lawn Apartments.

“This place is totally beat,” I said, just to hear myself talk.

The sky clouded over suddenly and an angry little thunderstorm broke. A woman in a short white skirt, nylons, dirty white heels, and a faux fur coat raced by. She wore ribbons wrapped around her pigtails like a Valley Girl, but her grisly expression shot the whole look to pieces. A little ways behind her followed a younger black man in a Chicago Cubs nylon jacket, visibly seething. This neighborhood—once pretty tony, judging by the dilapidated Victorians and gothic mansions—was now the provenance of pros, pimps, and pushers. Bums slept out the midday shower on the steps of the old cathedral.

I sucked down the last of my cigarette and turned my attention back to the house. It was enormous and awkward looking, three stories high with gables poking out in every direction. Some of the windows were broken and sections of the moss-covered roof looked ready to fall into the street. Hippie doodads peeked out of garret rooms. A row of chairs and a beat-up old guitar hung out uneasily on the second balcony. The place appeared, frankly, uninhabitable. The only thing that looked stable at all was the orange and black FOR RENT sign in the window.

I crossed 18th Avenue and climbed up the heavily warped and broken steps to the rickety, sloping porch, the hundred-year old wood rotted by so much rain. A cat piss-mildew perfume accosted me in the doorway.

The lobby's carpet was threadbare and stained. Bits of ancient flowery wallpaper showed through where years of paint had fallen away. On the back wall was a tall row of metal mailboxes, festooned with punk rock stickers. Paintings and anarchist treatises covered the other walls, and a long string of multi-colored origami birds fell three full stories from the top of the stairwell.

In spite of its tiny studios with filthy shared bathrooms and the fact that it looked like it should be condemned, the Lawn was tempting. The front door was always open, so I could waltz right in and explore on my own, undisturbed. After several visits, my nose had become more accustomed to the overwhelming stench that greeted me in the lobby, and tiny little Apartment #2, tucked under the enormous *Gone with the Wind* staircase and vacant except for a sleeping bag in the loft, was really starting to grow on me. In fact, more and more I had my heart set on it, with its fifteen-foot ceilings, bay window converted into a kitchenette, and single bare bulb.

I stood some forty feet under an open skylight and felt the rain on my face. My heart whirred like I was in a sacred place. I knew I was home. I hadn't been home in five years.

The next day I charged an eight-hundred-dollar money order for rent and deposit. Being a college brat had paid off in the end. "This credit card is the only thing separating me from the streets," I mused, laughing off the momentary dread that always accompanied signing the receipts. I wouldn't be able to coast on my credit much longer. Then I'd starve, which would be romantic and possibly fruitful in a Henry Miller sort of way.

I headed back to the Lawn, money order and application in hand. Twilight crept across the western hills, turning the magnificent evergreens grey and smoky black, and cloaking the bleak street in gorgeous pinks and yellows. The lovely wash of color made the needle-strewn sidewalks and sad, lonely faces look even more poignant, like hopeless inhabitants on the

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frontiers of purgatory, heaven so visible, so gorgeous, so pink and yellow and deepening cobalt blue, but just beyond reach and getting further away with every breath.

I walked down to Union Station where I'd stowed my guitar and my bag. Then, with my few possessions and a six-pack of cold beer, I officially moved in.

I played guitar for a while, sitting on the dirty black painted-wood floor, a new pioneer in the age-old idea of the West. Funny I didn't find it hackneyed in the least. I was young and invincible. Anything could happen here. It was the end of the earth, and it was deadbeat. The stories I'd seen already in these people's sad faces! There was gold in those hills, I knew it.

JESUS CHRIST, PART ONE

One of the great perks of stripping is the delicious sleep that comes after an exhausting five-hour shift.

Only two girls worked the Magic's stage per shift. That meant that over five hours, each performed approximately ten fifteen-minute sets of four songs, a total of forty emotionally, physically, and mentally challenging performances. I'd been an actress all my life and had performed on some pretty grand stages, but not even my leading roles compared with the intense focus and connection that stripping required. At the end of each shift I was so drained that the thought of one last costume change—into my street clothes—was often unbearable.

Somehow I'd summon the strength to pull on my blue jeans, my socks, my boots, walk my bike out of the Magic and ride the fifteen blocks up Couch Street past the brewery and the Cathedral to the Lawn. Then, in a somnambulistic trance, I'd scrub off all the makeup and glitter, climb the ladder to my loft, and slide between the sheets. Every muscle ached, every bone felt bruised, but my soul was satisfied and my heart swollen with contentment. I'd fall asleep before my head hit the pillow and sleep the sleep of the dead.

But not that night...

I'd been asleep maybe two hours when I awoke with a start. A siren had perforated my dreams. I sat up in bed straining my ears. Outside the first rain of fall fell softly, but flashing red lights filled my room.

I climbed down from my loft and wrapped my kimono around me. Just as I went to open the door, someone knocked. Pink.

"Viva!" he whispered loudly. "The Jehovah's Witness jumped off the roof!"

Most of the Lawn's tenants were already milling around on the porch in their bathrobes. An ambulance and a fire truck lit up the night. Pink and I rushed to the front stairs just in time to see Monique being wheeled away on a stretcher, fighting against the restraints like a devil. She was covered in blood. Mona, wrapped in a red terry cloth robe, cried like she'd lost her own sister.

“What the hell happened?”

“Jackson said she took a whole bag of mushrooms and freaked out. She jumped out his window. Most of her teeth were knocked out.” Marc, the sweetheart who lived in the third floor apartment, had taken it upon himself to hold onto Monique until the paramedics came. He had blood all over his hands and shirt.

I wondered what drove Monique to downing a whole bag of 'shrooms. A twenty-year old waif of a girl, she was very religious, tightly wound, and supremely straight-edge. She'd never had a drink or a cigarette in her life. I looked around for Jackson—the drug-dealing, ticket-scalping hippie from the third floor. He was the only person likely to know what the fuck was going on but, like every other time there was a drug casualty at the Lawn, Jackson was mysteriously absent.

The ambulance drove off into the night and the slumber party moved back into the lobby. Mona and I followed Pink to his room, where we sat in silence until I decided to try and go back to bed. I set my alarm for 9AM. For the first time in almost a year, I would be going to church. My life was getting a little too freaky.

When the alarm went off I lay in bed for a few minutes, replaying in my head the events of the night before. Marc had said that Monique was likely paralyzed. I felt partly responsible.

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Maybe stripping was indeed an unforgivable sin. Maybe the gods had thrown Monique out the window as a warning to me to clean my shit up.

As I crawled out of bed I felt a peculiar twinge of stage fright. Evidently going to church was going to be a performance.

The morning sun seemed unseasonably hot for fall. I rifled through my limited wardrobe and settled on a vintage baby-blue baby doll slip I'd bought at a thrift store. It was short and diaphanous and not at all church-going material. I felt rather like the whore of Babylon, though, and wanted to dress the part. I ferreted around in the shoe pile for my matching vintage Chanel knock-off sandals, then smiled delightedly at my reflection in the mirror. I looked adorable, feminine and sexy. The new me was armed and ready to contend with my history.

I munched on an apple on the way to Immanuel Lutheran and couldn't avoid its symbolism. Eve had been cast out of the Garden of Eden for eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Stripping seemed something of a parallel. I felt enlightened in my new career, like the wool had been pulled from over my eyes. I doubted that God would be pissed at me for dancing around naked, but I wasn't sure. My father however would be furious.

A block from the church my stomach turned into a flock of butterflies. At the entrance I kept walking, deciding to scrap the whole idea. I'd go across the street and pray for my salvation in private at Junkie Park. But my knock-off Chanel sandals did a 180 against my will and I soon found myself walking up the Immanuel's red-carpeted stairs toward a welcoming usher.

Goddammit, why had I insisted on wearing what amounted to a negligee? I felt terribly self-conscious. The usher didn't seem to mind, just handed me a bulletin. I passed the sanctuary and headed for the all-but empty balcony, feeling that enlightened sex workers probably ought to be segregated from polite folk.

The inside of the church was, strangely, baby blue. My outfit matched perfectly! The bloodred carpets looked especially bloody in contrast to the pastel walls. My inner anthropologist mixed with my inner child as I started to deconstruct the familiar and comforting rituals of my childhood. But when the organ struck the first notes of the opening hymn, a sob welled up out of nowhere.

My dad and I had had it out long ago. The eldest and most headstrong of his four children, I was also the only daughter. He and I fought constantly. The problem was that he knew everything and I knew everything.

When I was eight years old I once insisted on wearing jeans to church. They were cute jeans—more knickers—which I paired with a stylish blue-and-white striped blouse that had puffed sleeves and a little necktie. I thought I looked great. My dad, who was then pastor at a large parish in Wisconsin, said I couldn't wear jeans to church. I refused to change my clothes and so the family left without me. Feeling I'd betrayed him utterly, I rode my bike the mile to church, holding back the tears. Then I sat in the balcony alone, in my blue jeans, and silently begged my father for forgiveness. Eight years old and cast out already!

Now, fourteen years later, I was that eight-year-old all over again, bleary-eyed and begging my dad for forgiveness from a church balcony.

The sobs welled up throughout the service. I knew all the prayers and liturgies by heart. When it was time for communion, I steeled myself for the walk down the red carpet in my ridiculous dress. Perhaps the communion wine would burn my throat like acid. Maybe lightning would strike me dead. But, as the Holy Spirit accepted Mary Magdalene at its altar, so it accepted me.

“The Body of Christ, given for you.”

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My mouth was so dry I nearly choked on the wafer.

“Blood of Christ, shed for you.”

I could’ve used a bit more wine. I lingered at the altar for a while, praying for guidance and for Monique, and thanking all of heaven for being so understanding about everything.

Finally the postlude played, an airy Bach cantata I’d learned on the piano as a child and taught myself on guitar in college. I walked home contemplative. This whore of Babylon thing really didn’t suit me at all. Stripping was a walk on the wild side, sure, but my feeling I’d traded my clothes for a scarlet letter was just more unnecessary socialization bullshit. Even as a stripper I was still my daddy’s little girl. I knew it, God knew it, and I had faith that one day even Dad would understand.

WILLAMETTE WEEK

I was getting pretty comfortable in my dancing shoes.

I loved my job and my job loved me. I worked two five-hour shifts a week. The rest of the time I scribbled religiously in coffee shops, writing manifesto-like letters to college pals and professors and filling journals with the magical details of my wondrous and inspiring new milieu. At night I'd bike around listening to bands and dreaming of having my own. In the meantime I survived on hummus and beer at Fellini, the rocker hangout next to Satyricon, an infamous club on gritty 6th Avenue. I loved being a stripper, loved the cowgirl identity. I loved heading to work on my bike with my huge duffel bag, riding down Everett Street in the midst of traffic, stopping for a shot at Fellini, all made up for battle and buzzing like a pretty bee. I loved watching my coworkers take it off, losing myself in the curve of a back, the beat of a song, the reflections of humanity. And I loved stripping. I loved talking about stripping, loved arguing about stripping, loved championing its cause. I truly believed that stripping was art, and I rejoiced that I'd found my niche.

Mona and Teresa had different philosophies. Teresa's party line was that stripping was a job. Therefore, strippers should be respected as workers and accorded basic worker's rights, like on-the-job access to health and safety supplies. Teresa didn't have time to talk right or wrong. She said where are the rubber gloves, the bleach, the first aid kit, the biohazard disposal containers?

To tell Mona that any kind of human behavior was wrong was like talking to a brick wall. If animals are going to rape and murder, love and hate, cheat and steal, so be it. Mo saw the bullshit inherent in civilization from birth. You could sooner reconcile the Palestinians and

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Israelis than stop Miss Mona from doing exactly as she pleased. She was a force of nature. Tell a hurricane to go away. Tell a flood to skip your basement. To Mona, stripping was stripping. Not good, not bad, just a means to an end. Try telling her otherwise and you were likely to get an ashtray in the head.

Me, I was all peace, love, and understanding. The naked way was the only way! Provocatively normal, abundantly life-affirming. I felt confident people would see this eventually, if only I could show them. I was a preacher's kid; preaching was in my bones. When I believed in something, I became evangelical. I hadn't believed in much of anything in a while.

I believed that stripping was art. At the strip clubs, I was preaching to the choir.

Enter Jill Portugal.

Jill was in her mid-twenties, a graduate of Brown, a somewhat spoiled, sheltered girl who held the indulgent belief that if a stranger admired your body they were uninterested in your mind. (They're STRANGERS! Praise Jesus they notice anything at all. Most folks are blind, deaf, and dumb to anything outside of their cell phones.) Provoked by an off-color cartoon by off-color cartoonist John Callahan, she penned a letter to the local weekly.

To Whom It May Concern,

The Callahan cartoon in the Dec. 4 issue confused me. Was the cartoonist urging that feminists be killed and stuffed into mailboxes, as the illustration showed, or was he suggesting that feminism is dead? So I stared at it for a while, trying to understand what was funny about it. But nothing was.

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I guess it doesn't much matter what the great Callahan intended, since either interpretation amounts to the same thing for me: Oregon doesn't exactly have a female-friendly climate, and feminism's pretty comatose here.

Plus, it's not the first time Willamette Week has blithely printed something obnoxious and offensive to its female readership. Over the summer, in their "Best of Portland" issue, the editors saw fit to publish some quasi-pornographic paragraphs under the heading "Best Nude Dancer." The entry explained the award-winning technique of a local stripper in comprehensive detail. I understand WW prides itself on its "irreverent" and "edgy" news. Oh, how very playful to write about strippers. How wonderfully cutting-edge to describe naked women in print. Oh, what a naughty little newspaper you are!

This is what I hate about Portland: exploitation disguised as innovation, degradation parading as freedom. For me, there's nothing very freeing about living in a state whose consumer-to-porn ratio ranks the highest in the nation. There's nothing particularly liberating about being in a place where adult bookstores can set up shop next to schools, so boys can get a jump start on porn consuming. There's nothing enjoyable about walking down the street and waiting for the bus next to a newspaper vending machine selling naked women to anyone with two quarters, right next to a machine that sells USA Today. And there's nothing especially wonderful about riding past a strip joint on the highway that boasts LIVE NUDE GIRLS in huge red letters, the same way supermarkets advertise GREEN BEANS 79 CENTS A POUND.

As you might guess, I abhor the porn industry with violent intensity. Because it exploits and hurts women. Because I believe it's fundamentally impossible both to consume porn, and to respect women as people. And because Portland is so steeped in porn culture, I know I can't stay here.

In New York, where I'm from, porn theaters and shops are zoned off into one seedy district where drug dealers hang out. Porn use is slightly stigmatized and nothing you'd readily admit to. But here in Oregon, I see that porn's been thoroughly mainstreamed and rendered remarkably accessible, and watching strippers is just another entertainment option. It's an acceptable evening activity—should we go bowling, rent a movie, or pay to look at naked girls tonight? Even worse, it's become a viable career choice for women. These things do not make for a female-friendly climate, nor a safe one. Living in a city where porn is sold out of vending machines on street corners is fucked.

At this point people usually cut me off by saying, it's the woman's choice and all that. Not much of a choice when the sex industry pays three or four times the rate of a job that any ordinary Oregon woman could do with her clothes on. It's not about "art" or "feminine power," as some would claim. It's about cash and the sale of naked women. Tell me, ladies, would you dance around naked for my wage, \$6.50 an hour? Would you do it for minimum wage?

Everyone wants to make a nice living, but please understand that your choices affect others. If you strip for cash, you help feed Oregon's porn culture, which means that overall women cannot be respected as people here, which leads to my getting harassed on the street by men I don't know. Which means I can't walk down to Burnside at night to return a video without four different guys giving me shit about my face or hair or body. They don't care whether I'm a preschool teacher or a prostitute—to them I'm just nice scenery.

At this point people usually cut me off and talk about free speech. So great, I've got the freedom to publish trash on the World Wide Web. That's supercool and real consoling to me as I'm waiting for a cab to take me home from a concert because it's not safe for women to walk

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alone at night. All the free speech in the world won't make women safe. I'd trade some of my so-called freedoms if you could make me feel safe. But that's a freedom I'll never have.

I can see all the things I've written about as an interconnected chain of phenomena, because I've been thinking about this stuff for five years. And after five years, one's opinions are unshakable, so please don't waste ink or breath arguing with me.

[Jill Portugal

Willamette Week 1/22/97

Letters— "Reviving Feminism"]

I read her letter over coffee and a scone at Umbra. Soon I was shaking all over, my heart pumping adrenaline to every extremity. I was pissed, sure, but mostly I was thrilled. Here was an invitation, an open door. The gauntlet had been thrown. I reread the letter with my pen, underlining with fervor and making notes in the margins: What did she mean by feminism anyway? If feminism didn't allow sex workers into its ranks, then it should be dead. Was naked dancing so reprehensible an occupation that a local gal shouldn't be honored with "Best Nude Dancer?" Were *USA Today's* portrayals of women so much rosier than *Exotic Magazine's*, in which self-employed women flashed their privates and a smile?

Finally it was time to put my mouth where my money was and preach to a bigger flock. Everyone from punk rockers to politicians reads the *Willamette Week*. If I could show them just a little bit of what I loved about my work, give them a peek at an industry that many preferred be invisible, it'd be a huge coup for my crew.

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I worked hard on my response at the little hippie coffee shop above Jazz de Opus on 2nd Avenue. I chose my words carefully, typed them up at Kinko's, then hand-delivered my letter to the weekly's offices.

Dear Jill Portugal,

I'd rather not dignify your puritanical self-righteous misogynistic opinions with a response, as you suggested, but HELL you put them into the public forum where they did sufficiently enrage me and mine, so here goes...

1. *MONEY IS POWER*

If you choose to prostitute yourself to capitalism for \$6.50 an hour, that is your business. My time is worth more. A hell of a lot more. So I get naked for \$40 an hour. Still not enough (what is?), but at least my creativity, intelligence and effervescent wit are more highly appreciated than they would be doing data entry for a pittance.

2. *MONEY IS POWER!*

Where is the \$6.50 you earn coming from? Which environments and/or nations and/or peoples are being economically and spiritually raped and plundered to profit the man who doles out your righteous wage? I believe, perhaps naively, that the dollar bills I earn are more honest than that. I know where they are coming from and why. Taking five hours out of my day to dance to rock'n'roll sans apparel is worth approximately \$200 to me. Capitalism, straight up. I'm not thrilled about working for the man, so I've found a way to do it as little as possible.

3. *MONEY IS POWER!!*

The first feminists were sex industry workers. Often referred to by the ironic misnomer “prostitutes,” these women traded sex for money and thereby became self-sufficient from the man. Even today women caught in patriarchal situations can find escape through this tried and true route, be it in tribal Africa, urban Asia, or right here in the U.S. To me, this sounds more like empowerment than “degradation.” Consider: it was once thought a violation of woman’s purity and her sacred feminine nature that she work outside the home or vote. Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics!

4. NAKED BODIES ARE BEAUTIFUL

This is one of the few beliefs cherished across cultures and time. Why not own up? Places where naked bodies are subverted and nudity considered degrading are precisely those wherein women’s rights and other freedoms are the most in jeopardy. I would advise you to examine the misogynistic opinions you may have been unconsciously inculcated with in this admittedly inimical society. Misogyny is much more than skin deep.

5. I AM SORRY YOU GET HARASSED ON THE STREET

We all do. But you only become the victim when you call it that. Have you ever been to a strip club? You might find that you are in fact more highly respected and celebrated in one of Portland’s deplorable titty bars than at your degrading (\$6.50 an hour!?) job.

6. USA TODAY IS FAR MORE MISOGYNISTIC THAN EXOTIC MAGAZINE

** Is your precious human soul more offended by seeing its body cut up and stuffed with bullets or in a T-back and pasties?*

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* *Which of these periodicals is devoted to and primarily paid for by self-employed women?*

* *Which has a higher female-to-male writer ratio?*

Jill, my definition of a feminist is a free-thinking woman (or man). According to this definition, there is room for both of us in the movement. There is not, however, room for misogynistic thinking in a fight against misogyny. Unlike yours, my opinions are not set-in-stone, and I hope they never will be. Because I am confident that my free-thinking feminism could only benefit from some discourse, I'd like to invite you out for coffee. Your choice—the safe, PC world of Northwest 23rd or the sin city of Northwest 4th. I frequent both, but if you want to find me, I call the Magic Gardens home. Best titty bar in town. Northwest 4th and Everett.

[Viva Las Vegas

Willamette Week, 3/5/97

Letters, “What Is Feminism, Anyway?”]

Several days later, in the midst of a dull day shift at the Magic, the phone rang. It was *Willamette Week* asking for Viva Las Vegas. The barkeep squealed with excitement as I took the phone.

Would I be willing to meet Jill Portugal in their office, with a tape recorder, for a debate? I tried to sound blasé, said “Oh-sure-why-not,” but again my adrenaline surged. This could be a coup d'état.

I prepared meticulously for our meeting, dusted off Foucault, read new sex texts in the coffee shop at Powell's Books, and made detailed notes of points I wanted to bring up, knowing full well that in the heat of the moment my temper might get away from me.

The day of the debate arrived. I dressed carefully, choosing what I felt was representative of me and of the sophisticated yet anarchic strip scene I loved: black wool turtleneck, Levi's 501s, motorcycle boots, bleach blonde hair, and dark red lipstick. I screwed on some vintage ruby and rhinestone earrings to add a smidgen of glamor. Then I pedaled my ass to SW 10th Avenue, giving myself a pep talk on the way.

I had tried to anticipate what it would be like, figured Jill would be catty and dogmatic and that we'd have a strong man present to separate us and a docile lady reporter egging us on. It was sort of like that, except the newsweekly evidently thought every male staff member would be required to restrain us. Or, more likely, they wanted to see the show.

I do better performing in front of crowds, especially when the high and mighty are present, and here they were. Both of the paper's founders sat at the long office table, along with a bunch of reporters. One fellow looked vaguely Midwestern and was wearing a wedding ring. I instinctively moved to chat him up, hoping to make the situation less intimidating and more human, a trick I'd learned at the strip club.

"Pardon me, sir, but are you from the Midwest?"

He looked a little taken aback. "I was born and raised in South Dakota, though I haven't been back for years."

"I knew it! You look a bit like my dad. All my people are from South Dakota."

Voilà, the ice was broken, the room had thawed. Except for Jill Portugal, who sat across from me, snarling.

“You must be Jill,” I said warmly. “Nice to meet you.”

She shook my hand disdainfully, as if it were disagreeable for her to even touch me. She wore the usual post-collegiate Gap gear: elegant brown jeans and a snug brown t-shirt, little makeup and shoulder-length curly brown hair. I wouldn’t catcall her, but it was conceivable that others would.

The group was called to order by the editor-in-chief. I flipped through my handwritten notes trying to focus my head and calm my stomach, but to no avail.

“Don’t be nervous,” the lady reporter said calmly. “We’ll make this as quick and painless as possible.”

“It just feels weird to be wearing so many clothes in front of such a big crowd,” I quipped. The assembly laughed politely and the tape recorders clicked on.

For ninety minutes we engaged in polite debate. Portugal, à la Women’s Studies 101, focused more on her personal background than on the world around her. I tried to dodge that, but the reporters wanted dirt. What did my preacher father think about my new career? How did I feel about my mom? I sensed the trajectory of the article from the questions, and tried to calmly throw in the points I felt I needed to make—the Teresa/Viva/Mona points: stripping is a job, stripping is art, stripping is stripping.

After the debate Jill and I were led into the hallway—all the pee-ons lined up with their tongues on the floor—for a photo shoot. I reapplied my bloodred lipstick and punked my platinum hair. Jill didn’t want to be photographed, but consented to being scenery—her arms sternly crossed across her ample bosom. I smirked for the camera, then hopped on the back of my bike and rode like a bat out of hell to Fellini.

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I was sure they were gonna make an ass out of me. It would be difficult not to, considering some of the asinine questions I'd been asked. I ordered some whiskey, the bar bought me a beer, a cute boy appeared, and I gave him my address. That might have been the biggest mistake I made that day.

I got tipsy and biked home. I changed into a black velvet pantsuit and, rubber bands around my ankles, biked in the rain to the Keller Auditorium where I saw *The Magic Flute* for the fifth time. And wept. Afterwards I visited Pink at the porn store and went back to Fellini for more whiskey. My destiny was again in someone else's hands. I could drink.

Several long weeks passed and the *Willamette Week* still hadn't run my letter to the editor. I worried they wouldn't, would instead skip straight to the debate and my carefully plotted diatribe would be subsumed by the prurient catfight. Whatever. Maybe they wouldn't run it at all.

I drank a lot. The cute boy with the address all but moved in. He drank a lot, too.

Finally, in early March, they printed the letter. It was a knockout. Nothing more to be said, I felt. I was so proud. My heroes were proud of me, too.

Then, a week later, the debate ran. Cover story.

ANOTHER SATURDAY NIGHT

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three shots rang out, piercing the Saturday night festivities like a dagger in a wedding cake. I jumped up from my hummus plate and headed outside, where the usual cacophony of Fellini's colorful peacocks was suddenly stilled into an echoing silence. Across 6th Avenue on Davis Street a car peeled away into the night. In the glare of the parking lot lights I could make out a body. I ran across the street and scaled the fence along with several others.

The Hispanic man was mortally wounded, gasping desperately for air as blood soaked his jacket. One of Satyricon's resident rockers cradled the man's head while I held his hand.

"Don't worry, mister. You're gonna be just fine. Help is on the way," I said calmly, then turned to the bystanders and hissed, "Call a fucking ambulance!"

Mona scampered the long way around the lot in her platform heels. Both she and Teresa had been at an art opening and were dressed in full showgirl regalia, with elaborate headdresses and fringed bras and almost nothing below the waist. Mona's superhero was clearly visible through her fishnets, and Teresa's pussy was festooned with a big red flower and nothing more.

"Oh my God. Holy shit. Does anyone have a light?"

"Mona! Shhh!" I shot her a look and she bit her fist.

The wounded man had a look of terror in his eyes. I worried that he didn't speak English but hoped he could understand at least three words. Thinking that I would like to hear them if I were about to die, I pressed his hand tighter and said, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

The man couldn't take in air. His eyelids fluttered, his eyes rolled back, and he stopped struggling.

“He’s gone,” said the rocker.

I covered my eyes with my free hand.

“Oh God,” whimpered Mona.

Suddenly a platoon of police descended along with an ambulance, but silently, without sirens or lights. A lady cop approached us.

“Clear the area. Nothing to see here. Clear the area immediately.”

I tried to speak to her, to tell her about the car that sped away, to file a witness report.

“Just clear the area, ma’am. Now.”

Stunned, our little gang crossed back to Fellini, where a crowd had gathered. We watched as paramedics removed the body and the police cordoned off the parking lot.

“Jesus, Viva. Somebody gets shot and you just run right over there? That’s not exactly safe. Are you okay?”

The last thing I needed was a scolding from Johnny. “No, I’m not okay. That guy just died in front of me, and I bet it won’t even appear in the paper.” I was deeply moved but preferred to exhibit anger rather than grief. I headed to our usual corner table, where Mona’s headaddress was buried in Lucian’s lap. Teresa arrived with a tray of shots.

“Kamikazes. Jesus Christ. Did anyone know the guy? Did he have a name? No? Well, then. To our departed friend! May he know peace...”

Mona interrupted the toast with a heartbroken wail, but roused herself from Lucian’s lap long enough to down two shots. I did a shot and turned to Angel.

“Johnny baby, can I have a cigarette?” I didn’t smoke but my nerves were stretched so taut I thought they’d snap. “On second thought, can we just get the fuck out of here?”

Angel threw a twenty on the table and grabbed our coats. My legs felt like leaden weights and my heart like a dead flower. I leaned on Johnny heavily as we walked to the Park Blocks to the car.

“Angel, this town is too dark for me. What the fuck? That guy fucking died. I was holding his hand...”

I didn't want to cry. I was not gonna cry. I went on the offensive.

“You know what, Johnny? I don't think I've seen a sunrise since I moved here.”

“Baby you get up earlier than anyone we know. I've never known anyone to jump out of bed like you, raring to go.”

“I know. But I could get up earlier. I want to see the sunrise. I've always loved the dawn. I love to get up when it's still dark and nobody else is awake and the world is mine. I love to live healthfully. I love healthy people. Johnny, we live in fucking bars!”

The sob lodged in my throat wasn't going away.

“I wanna get the fuck out of here. Let's move to Minnesota... I bet you ten bucks no one reports on that murder. That guy has a family somewhere and they won't ever know...”

I choked on my words and collapsed into Johnny's arms, shaking with emotion, howling like a weebegone dog.

“Give me the keys, baby. I'll drive. And I'll move to Minnesota with you in a heartbeat. Just please don't cry. I hate to see you sad.”

Back at the house I washed the streaked makeup off my face and climbed into bed. I looked at the clock. 1 AM. What time did the sun rise anyway? 5:30 AM? 6 AM? Would I ever see it again?

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I woke up at 8 AM the next morning and went for a run. I checked the PM edition of the *Oregonian* for several days, looking for information on the dead man. Eventually I searched the Internet for “Man shot on bus mall,” but to no avail. Just another nobody, sacrificed to the night.