

Jane, the Call Girls and Diane

Jane was a rather tall operator who I worked with in the Overseas Department at the Telephone Company, just over six feet with thick long hair, gleaming, creamy blonde, much longer than ever needed, but not my call, falling past her waist that she seemed so self conscious of. Without blemish she never wore makeup. She had a uniform that I never saw her differ from --- blue jeans with light pastel men's style long sleeved shirts, buttoned down collars, sleeves half rolled up with tails never tucked in. She was far from fat but just thick at the waist. Her face was flawless with startling green eyes and a smile she owned with a caustic cynicism and perfect teeth, as anyone could wish for.

Her fingernails were long and natural due to a fixation quality that, I heard from reports, could scratch backs in frenzy. I never saw her without dangling earrings favoring silver and gold cylinders, small bullets pointing down which I suspected, well actually knew, stored her cocaine, which was her obsession. That and champagne. She took very good care of herself --- a woman of the time.

Jane would visit our flat on 2nd Avenue often to hang out carrying her thrifty bottle of entry level Lejon and never without a plastic champagne flute in her leather saddlebag purse. She made no bones about whose champagne it was and who was going to consume every last drop and then only to vanish in a timely manner to our bathroom for her earring ritual which was never offered as an option to anyone present. This really was OK with all involved. Everyone drank beer having not yet cultivated the taste for champagne, let alone cheap champagne that should have been labeled "Headache in a Bottle". Hard liquor was appreciated but for those of us on a budget it was out of reach, but we often did more than the reach. There was enough beer, wine and weed readily accessible if you put your feelers out and had even the minutest degree of patience. Some people would come over to the house empty handed knowing full well that it would all come to them. We were receptors as well as providers and had jobs and never looked back when it came to sharing. Stingy was not in the Operator's Manual but we did welcome with jubilant fanfare communal supplies. You could count on beer stocked in the fridge and a huge margarine tub filled with Columbian ready to roll. That's just the way it was. 2nd Avenue provided the much-needed role of a Recreation Center, read wreck center, on weeknights, especially Wednesday, Thursday and Fridays where parties would erupt in the ferocity of a tsunami without a Conelrad Alert Warning. It was surprising how quiet Saturday nights were for reasons figured, but those weekdays, damn, you could never tell who would walk through the door.

With all that flowed through the house you would have thought we would have been busted but we knew most of the cops in the area and they knew we were students and not god forbid into "drugs". I had, from an early age, learned to walk on stilts and had two sets at the flat. One afternoon after ingesting LSD I launched myself up onto the stilts, which was quite an achievement. I walked up proud to a police car in the parking lot next to us and asked the officer if I could check his tires. He said they were fine while laughing but I gave them a kick with my stilt leg anyway. I figured if he saw me walking on stilts that I must be in full possession of my faculties. The OPD would eat at the hamburger place next door to us, Caps it was called. Our second floor living room looked down on the parking lot. The owners of Caps liked us well enough and we made sure that all the people visiting us did not park in their lot while still appreciating the relentless flow of hungry burger customers unleashed from our house especially on those weeknights.

One night, a warm Wednesday in late May, Jane had just finished off her bottle of champagne. She made sure it was empty, up righting it over her open mouth like a starving baby bird and then the look of give me another bottle but resignation set in and she became comfortable and resolute in her inebriation and inhalation. She retired out to the bathroom for less than a minute to complete her personal satori.

"It's always so boring over here." She said coming back in and sitting down in her preordained chair.

I'd just come in from my bedroom after changing the record wired to the living room. *Delta Lady* by Leon Russell belted out. Music is an accessory to particular and individual nuances. I tried to run the zigzag of taste and satisfaction suiting the immediacy but not always nailing it.

"Then why do you keep coming over?" I asked half smiling.

"Because you guys are the cheapest entertainment around. I bring my own. Such a clean machine for me."

She lived a few blocks away on the same side of Lake Merritt. She could have walked but always drove.

"Besides every now and then something exciting happens."

The doorbell rang. Living in the upstairs flat, there was a buzzer button that unlatched the door lock at the bottom of the stairs. Once depressed you never knew who might walk through the door. Most of our regular visitors used the back stairs door and just walked in. It was Wednesday night.

"Here we go!" I said pressing the buzzer anticipating only who knows what.

The door burst open with three girls, the first one almost crashing against the entrance wall knocking into Kemit's stored beer that had been stabilizing for the past two weeks. He kept it there because it was the coolest part of the flat.

The girls were Cherkee, Simone and Joy, 3 call girls that Kemit had become connected to for various reasons. They weren't prostitutes, they made that clear on many occasions but for all intents and purposes they really were but just not out on the street flagging down their clientele. Cherkee was light skinned which she told us was due to a Father way back when in Louisiana her bloodline was Cajun. Simone was a young Diana Ross but blacker and unlike her with the most abrasive attitude ever. Joy, as well, was black with just the happiest disposition ever. They had Natalie their so-called Madame that made all the arrangements and of course took her cut. They were expensive, 2 and often 3 hundred bucks and it could rise if it wasn't a straight fuck. Sometimes they would escort a person to an event with a fuck thrown in after the fact for that additional bonus. These women were great looking in too much make up and cleavage that derailed your eyes with the body movements and confidence of very classy, sensuous femme fatale. They were eye catchers and seemed to find our Second Avenue flat as a port in their storm.

"Hey Stacey man what's happening?" Cherkee sputtered out while climbing the stairs.

"It's Tracy Cherkee --- how are you doing?" Simone corrected.

"Hey I'm sorry Tracy, Yeh that's right Trace, now I remember. I must have knocked some brain cells loose with my last client. Gawd that guy was big ---- I mean not that way I mean big, huge, tall, well shit, he was a basketball player, someone who he thought I should know. Doin' fine otherwise, thanks."

"Don't tell him that." Simone inserted. "He doesn't need to know that shit."

"Oh he's cool. And he's too stoned to care." Cherkee said smiling, winking and giving me a hug as she reached the top of the stairs. She smelled of smoke and perfume or maybe deodorant. I found this endearing in her unintended condescending way. They piled in upstairs into the living room with Laslow, the dog, sniffing them as they entered.

"Hope this dog don't bite?" Joy asked apprehensively in her approach although she had been here before.

"If he didn't bite he couldn't eat" Jane laughed. They weren't laughing but I was and then Jane introduced herself.

"Hey, I'm Jane" she said without moving, firmly planted in the big easy champagne chair draped with a maroon patterned tapestry from Cost Plus to masquerade the wear and tear from 20 years gone. Same for the couch. Still had the firmness but with worn out upholstery having endured half a dozen owners.

"I'm Joy."

"Simone"

"My name is Cherkee --- that's chair and key. Don't know what my mama was thinkin' but that's it."

I joined in. "I'm Trace and that there is Kemit" as he emerged from the kitchen.

"Hey there he is" Cherkee said with a dulled enthusiasm. She had shown interest in Kemit in the past.

"Well --- Hello nurse" Kemit said drawing out the hello.

"Why does he always say that? He knows we're not nurses." Joy asked off to the side as if he wasn't there.

"He likes us," Cherkee said. "Awright?"

"Of course we do" Jane said sarcastically. "I've been anticipating you coming all night."

"Gawd that sounds just like some of my hardy tardy businessmen" Cherkee said.

"Most guys could give a shit if I come or not" Simone added.

Joy, not much of talker, nodded and laughed.

"Isn't that the case for all men?" Jane chimed in looking over at me. The three call girls "ooohed" in unison.

"What are you looking at me for?" I said. "We've never slept together."

"If he's sleepin' he ain't gettin' it" Simone half whispered to Joy.

"Just thought you might want to try sometime, but not the sleeping part." She said still staring at me and blushing a bit. Her attitude was becoming a bit daring in light of these new arrivals.

"Wow! That's sounds like an open invitation stoner boy," Cherkee blurted. My face felt hot and I couldn't think of anything to say.

"He's not queer is he?" Joy asked Simone in another aside whisper everyone could hear. Jane now full of herself and champagne as well laughed hysterically.

"You know that's why I like coming over here. You guys are awright. It's not like everyone is trying to get down my pants" Cherkee said.

"Whoa Nellie!" Kemit was quick to insert. "I just don't know where in Sam Hill you got that little idea in your head. I can arrange accommodations. And Jane --- if Trace doesn't take you up on your offer I'll be gladly waiting in the on deck circle."

"Batter up!!!" Cherkee yelled

"I wasn't asking for volunteers. I was posing the question to Trace" Jane offered up.

"Jesus woman!" Cherkee came back. "You shouldn't just give it away. Make some money off that body of yours.

"I could never do that." Jane responded

"What?"

"Sell my body for money."

"Don't fool yourself honey. We're all selling ourselves in some way. Joy yeh, and me we were Oakland Raiderettes for one year 'till they kicked our asses right out of the end zone. It was a set up. It was get this. The upstairs management had two guys offer us 500 bucks to go down on

them and we said yes which was against somebodies rules but was dam-good money. It wasn't a big decision for me. Fucking blew my whole trip, Joy's too but it did plant that seed and here we are making as fucking much money as we want."

"Fucking money --- that's good, I like that." I said.

"Huh?" Cherkee said.

"No I get that we're all selling ourselves in some way" Jane said, "but I don't think I could get used to having some strange guy stick it to me. And a different guy each night or a couple in a night --- if I felt nothing it might work but I think it might feel to me like rape."

"Yeah some days you feel that way and some days are rougher than others," Simone said.

"In more ways than one" Cherkee added.

"No really!" Simone said. "There are times when some fat sweaty guy with a two inch dick that keeps slipping out because his hairy gut won't let him get close enough to me or he goes limp wimpy and the rubber slides off into me spilling his fat retarded sperm --- those are the times I wonder what in the fuck am I doing?"

Everyone was laughing and now it became show and tell.

"Or how 'bout the twisted ones?" Joy the quieter one blurted.

"What do you mean when you say twisted?" Jane asked now very curious.

"You know --- Mr. Suit and Tie wants to pay more to ass fuck you or he doesn't even want to fuck at all but wants you to tie him up naked, jerk him off and then stand over him and pee on him."

"No way!" almost all of us said.

"Yeah it seems more and more that nobody wants a straight fuck." Cherkee added. "I had one guy, a big guy, who had a duffle bag of women's clothes. He had to have to have bought them himself, this guy, another basketball player, I watched as he put the bra and panties on wondering what was next and then he handed me a strap on and some lube and wanted me butt fuck him. I said, "Honey you really got this all twisted up ass backwards. You need a dude!" At first he was pissed and I got a little scared, I didn't know what hornets nest I might of stirred up but then he got real embarrassed and gave me money just to keep my mouth shut which I do anyway."

"Yeah we can see that." Jane laughed. "But see that's why I could never do what you guys do."

"Well the money's good and it is the oldest job in the world and would be so much easier if it was legalized; or at least decriminalized." Simone said.

"That could be tough" Jane began, "Decriminalization only lets the cops off and the judicial systems off the hook to a certain degree approaching negligence. It's not going to protect women from abuse any more than before. They'd only be citing people and policing fines. Legalization would require regulation, somewhat like they have in Nevada with the brothels."

"But were just selling sexual services that most men expect for free. I don't think it is a less degrading environment than sweatshops with women at sewing machines, people pushing filet o' fish sandwiches at MacDonald's or men manning the hose of the honey sucker cleaning port-a-potty shithouses. It is a goddamn service," Simone said.

"But if it was organized and regulated it would start to be less degrading and promote self worth" I said trying to grasp it. "I know it's a morally charged conflict."

"Hey no offense here Trace" Simone reacted, "but I don't have a conflict. I have my dignity and can retain that dignity everyday and improve on a man's outlook on women by giving him love that you fuckin' hippies only seem to talk about. I'm out there doin' it baby, I ain't doin any degrading."

"Easy girl" Cherkee chimed in. Trace here ain't breakin' your bones. Peace, right Trace?"

"No offense at all. Just trying to get the picture." I offered up.

Cherkee started rummaging through her purse looking for something she was clearly looking for. The conversation had run it's course with her and she was off to the next. Finally she pulled out a pretty good-sized pill container.

"Awright!" she said, "Here we go" opening it and showing us 5 or six black pills much bigger than aspirin size almost like coffee beans.

"What are those?" Jane asked. I knew what they were. The girls had brought them over before. "Black Beauties" I said.

"LA Turnarounds" Cherkee revealed correcting me.

"LA Turnarounds?" Jane inquired.

"Yeah --- you get so buzzed on these mother fuckers you can drive to LA turn around and drive back home again. No problem."

"Well that certainly sounds like fun" Jane remarked.

"Oh! You can go to sleep if you drink enough. That's why I brought this" Cherkee said producing a quart of Gin out of her deep saddle back purse.

"And this" Simone said pulling out the same of Vodka.

"And this" Joy said in perfect synchronicity pulling out a smaller pint of Cognac.

Jane with a knee jerk reaction said, "Oh this should be entertaining" and started to pack up her stuff. "Well it's Wednesday, I'll check up on you on Friday, you guys will probably still be sitting here."

Kemit came up to Jane and motioned her to sit down, his hands pressing down and down again in mid air to keep her seated. "Jane, Jane, Jane --- where are you going? Where do you have to go? What do you have to lose? This is exactly where you want to be --- it is chance, it is now, it is now . . . now."

I was stopped in the cogs of the elevated sexual and highly sensual clockwork that was ticking off into a new time warp. Cherkee was feeling relaxed and unbuttoned her top fully exposing at least one breast with another peeking out. We were all use to braless punctuations beneath shirts but blatant flagrant tit exposure, certainly welcomed, was new to our new found hipness. It was as if she was breastfeeding and we were the babies with mouths agape in polite mode, except Jane.

"It is hot in here but my shirt is only comin' off if the lights are really dim." This was a surprise from Jane but I went and dimmed the lights on the gothic spray painted gold chandelier.

Kemit, back from the kitchen with a fresh beer in the dim light proclaimed in dramatic theater fashion, "Release the Angels, free the doves of love and bring on the vestal virgins!" He then cupped his elbow with his hand and slowly brought his fisted hand to an upright position simulating an erection. "Blue Steel Baby --- Blue Steel"

"Whoo hoo baby, I ain't no vessel virgin but I know I want you" Cherkee shouted and in some automatic response pulled down her skirt revealing the skimpiest of underwear I had ever seen. She placed the palm of her hand over her crotch and laughed. "I want you Mister Steel --- I want you now Blue Steel Baby!"

And that was all that was said --- no more fanfare. He grabbed her hand and they went off into the never never land of his bedroom and I turned up the music a couple of notches.

"So much for you shouldn't just be giving it away!" Jane had to observe.

Jane might have been playing me but I never really thought that she wanted to ever ever be with me. It would be a surprise. I felt as though anything I said at this point could be misconstrued or jumped upon for my embarrassment so I tried to wait my stay.

"Hey Tracy --- you kind of quiet over there." Simone declared while downing a healthy swig of Royal Gate Vodka. "You got the sleepy pee pee?"

Joy, Jane and Simone thought this was hilarious and I only hoped this would not escalate.

"Yeah I love it when they wanna fuck you so bad and then end up apologizing for their limp dick" Simone said.

"This is the first time this has ever happened" Joy added in a fake man's voice.

"And then they think cuz they didn't get off they don't have to pay you --- or at least get a discount." Simone said.

"I tell them that when you go to the bowling alley if you never get a strike do you still pay lane fees?"

"And they still get to wear the bowling shirt and shoes" I added because I was moving into her lane and frame of mind.

"See! No offense Tracy baby but you ain't got no ball to bowl, you got no game!" Simone barked out. She was getting kind of nasty.

"Oh don't get mean Simone!" Joy said.

"Really now --- you keep riding him that way and it will be ground hog day before his weenie sees its shadow" Jane quipped in much to my surprise. She was feeling bold or empowered by the unfiltered brazenness of the call girls. The four of them laughed, as my discomfort became apparent.

"Oooohhh!" Joy and Simone ooohed.

"Come on honey child --- we didn't mean to hurt you, we were just havin' fun, at your expense no doubt." And everyone broke up again.

"Yeh --- sorry about your weenie and the groundhog." Jane mocked nicely.

The doorbell rang again and I started thinking that it was getting pretty weird. Parallel universes were colliding and yet I thought that could never happen. I was reminded by a short and difficult relationship when I was in 10th grade and Eileen was in ninth. She was long blonde, skinny and somewhat of a wiz when it came to math. She not only got it, she loved it. When she broke it off, us, she said I was wrong, said we're parallel, parallel, do you get it? I didn't get it. She yelled --- Parallel lines never meet!!!

I pushed the buzzer and the door opened with caution. It was Diane and Janelle that I worked with as fellow telephone operators and both were in their last year of undergraduate studies at Mills College. Janelle was in awe of Diane but was more than a shadow. They both new Jane from work but never connected.

"Hey there!" I yelled, "Come on up" and was wondering how this whole thing might suddenly migrate or more possibly implode. Could get messy. Could become a biology class with putrid petri dishes because it's fun to say like Peter picked. It could become interesting or even get nasty or even worse we could accidentally create a new drug.

"Hey there Trace" Diane spoke for both of them from the bottom of the stairs. "Is it OK up there -- are we safe?"

"You are safe and I think it's worth your time to climb these stairs."

"Good enough!"

I did my best, as always, to usher new people into the dining room serving as our main room, which was still a good, sized room. There was so much loud commotion and crazy talk jabber among the din of music that no introductions were needed. I did however turn down the music to give it a chance. And then the album ended with a complete and abrupt silence as if the room had inhaled. Cherkee and Kemit walked into the other end of the room looking disheveled and happy. I was introduced once again to the word "uncomfortable".

Sometimes, especially times like this, it's best to shut the fuck up and let things run their course. Kemit came to the rescue addressing the vacuum.

"I'm glad all of you could come together here at these festivities. You are Welcome!"

I thought this guy was from Walnut Creek, California and he's charming the room with a Southern congeniality. It shattered in one swipe --- the suspicions, anxiety and prejudices. It might not have been an easy transition but now everyone looked so much more at ease.

Janelle was laughing at Cherkee trying to adjust her clothes but more like trying to re-adjust her underwear.

"Girl --- you can't be laughing at me baby?" Cherkee said advancing her clothes distribution to another level by grabbing her crotch ever so quickly and smiling ---- "That boy is the devil!" nodding to Kemit.

Janelle first took offense then saw that there didn't seem to be any malice in their differences. Diane was beginning to relax. It was going better than I could have scripted. I saw my chance to put on music to maybe soothe any nerves. Sly and the Family Stone became the next selection and by chance I had turned down the volume from what was playing before. I couldn't hear the volume level from my room --- I had no technology. This left *Dance to the Music* playing in low volumes in the room with all these un-parallel psyches cross-dressing.

As I walked into the room Cherkee asked "Hey Stoner Boy --- you play this just cuz we're black." Because the music was so low all of a sudden the whole focus of the room was on me. Not such a big deal but I had no preparation.

"Cherkee --- it's music! It's SLY!" I said

Janelle said trying to rescue me "No no no, man I know, I know, you know I dig Miles."

I wanted to hold my head in my hands but faced the storm.

"Man O Man smart girl! Do you even get it? Stoner Boy plays Sly and then you dig Miles. Have you ever felt prejudice, segregation, racism? Condescendence?"

It looked like Janelle was going to have a nauseous evacuation and I was torn on whether to run back and turn up the volume or do disaster relief.

Kemit was sizing up the entire condition weighing this for that before doing politics.

"Whoa Nellie everyone! Can I get somebody a sedative of some sort? We're all gracious guests of these people and must show our appreciation."

"What you sayin' cutie, this is your place?" Cherkee felt she had to state.

"Well that's an interesting thing" Kemit started. "You know about place and what is yours and what isn't. No one owns any piece of this planet, we, or the landlords, or the banks, or documents. We just occupy these plots that blueprint our circumscribed existence, the space we're standing in. We, at best, can become stewards, to maintain some continuance without destroying the entire summer camp. No one wants poison oak. Trying to change anything --- Jeez-us Christ --- that would be monumental ---- a simultaneous disaster on so many levels."

Somewhere along the way Simone became the ambassador to the in-between.

"You know everybody --- in this crap world that I was dealt, I didn't get a lot of choices. I got a bunch of yoo-dos and yoo-don'ts and I never got --- Would you like to do this? Or that? Simone, do you have any requests or desires?"

Diane positioned herself and then began.

"I was born to wealthy parents, disgustingly rich and pretty much into their selves. I mean they were remarkable providers and I have traveled probably worldwide more than most. So I have witnessed privilege but have little to compare it to. But as I aged I realized shallowness in myself that I hadn't been aware of. I was catapulted from a world of wealth and am trying to make it work and you were born out of what I can't say but are really trying to do the same thing that I am."

There was another album ending pause at that precise moment and everyone probably thought the lights should have been a bit dimmer.

"Hey now --- you're no threat to me rich girl. I catch your love and it's dim baby --- no light at all. But baby, I never thought we were going to be best friends. You go your way --- I go mine. We're all looking for the same thing, aren't we? Just a little love baby, just a little love."

Diane looked at me for some kind of reassurance. As if this was a normal congregation. As if I had staged an Avant-garde performance in absurdity.

It was the strangest thing that there was another pause, a huge pause, where everyone was looking at each other expecting the next to speak.

Kemit, some how, found the need to once again interject.

"Don't get me wrong --- some of my best friends are white but that's not where the bull exits the rodeo. It runs the chute until it's free... We have to struggle until we finally surrender to the reality and are comfortable with each and everyone and then and only then can we party in the discomfort we just went through."

"All that sounds good but you spend a lot of time confusing things instead of diffusing." Simone answered getting pronunciation correct in her inebriation.

"There are no rules for getting along but why shouldn't we? You know it --- we are all from different backgrounds but we're in the same room breathing the same air, burping and farting as all humans do. We have that in common and so much more. We are sisters and brothers."

Kemit might not have nailed it but did a good job of everyone looking at each other in the eye and giving in to a degree of acceptance, of each other, of our differences but most of all that we were here, now, occupying the same space.

Diane's political immersion had her wanting to shake us all into the awareness she lived.

"But don't all of you know that our government is corrupt and undermining the ethics of human nature, that if let run free will make us automatons that will lead to sublimation, surrender and finality?"

"I don't pay any attention to that shit." Simone quipped. "I live here and I live now and you can't tell me that no Nixon is going to buy my life or tell me how to live it."

"Nixon is only the head of the dick of this patriarchy. There is so much work to do to dismantle this mindset and status quo of a male dominated autocracy. This is our opportunity," Diane offered up.

"Are you on another planet rich girl? Your white world of opportunity only enforces racial oppression. You're already climbing a ladder I can't even get close to, to get a chance to climb. I have to make my own opportunities to get ahead in your world, trying forever to make it my world. Why try to change what you can't and do what you can do? Live here now and get off on that!"
The man is on everyone's back but you don't have to carry him." Simone came back.

Jane thought she would try to mediate, "Man, don't come down on her for trying to make change in the world. Someone needs to step up."

"And just what is she --- what are you doing to make change. Now the Panthers, they are changing the way people think, scaring the shit out of you white people."

"Do you have any connections to the Panthers?" Jane asked.

"My connection is I'm black. What is your connection?" Simone asked looking at Diane.

Diane paused and thought before she said almost reluctantly, "I write most of their communiqués."

"Bullshit!" Simone yelled and Diane let it go, we all let it go. I knew Diane and it was completely within the scope of who she was and what she could do. She had mentioned Bernadette to me before and other clues that she was somehow involved in clandestine activities. The Black Panthers and The Weathermen were not outside of her realm.

Janelle who had been quite reserved up to this point blurted out " You don't know how much she has done to try to change this world."

"Girl, you think you can change the world because you wish upon a star? Get real."

"But you have to start and you can't do it alone, we need to unite together to make change."
Diane added.

Simone seemed to have had enough of this discussion and retired to a crevice in the couch with her bottle of Gin. Joy was now coming alive and had some opinions.

"You know, I don't know, but it seems to me, that, I don't know, but shouldn't we be able to get beyond all this, our differences, how we are not alike but how we are all alike, how we all want to hold someone, to feel love, I don't know but I want to be loved and I think that's really what we all want."

The room went silent except for the music so low now you couldn't make out what it was.

"Love is not my objective," Diane broke the silence. "Changing the inherent oppressive presence of the military industrial complex and disgusting male chauvinistic autocracy is more of a concern to me."

There was no supernatural triage of opposite views to prioritize and Kemit, once again, came to the rescue.

"I must call an immediate safety meeting here to remedy all that ails us in our confusion. We are here enjoying each others company, for the most part, but now let's celebrate our indifferences and raise our glasses, our hands, our cans, our bottles to each other with love tonight."

And as if by magic, in unison, everyone, every person, raised their hand, saluting each other and the compromising night.