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The Glass Screen

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In dire need of money, I took the job stripping behind the glass screen. My boyfriend Karl was very much against it. He thought that I was lowering myself by taking up that sort of work. I was an extra-mural student, studying psychology at Massey University, living in London, struggling to get by. I needed the money. I was an illegal immigrant, so there were only a small number of jobs I could take, as I had to be paid under the table. I had flown into Paris from Auckland, made my way to the coast of France and taken a boat across to Blighty, coming ashore in the dead of night.

The stripping job had been advertised in the local paper:

*WANTED: WOMEN TO DANCE IN PEEP SHOW. ALL HAIR COLOURS
CONSIDERED – BRUNETTE, BLONDE, REDHEAD. CALL BARRY ON 027 520 7394.*

I called up Barry. He asked if I had any dancing experience.
“Just boogeying with my girlfriends at the weekend”, I truthfully replied.
“Well, come on down to the parlour at noon tomorrow and we’ll see if we can hook you up,” he said.
He gave me the address and hung up.

At midday the following day I made my way down to the parlour. The front door was unlocked. I pushed open the door and entered the building. I approached the receptionist and asked for Barry.

“Barry, Barry”, she hollered. “There’s a lady here to see you.”
A man dressed in paint-splattered jeans and a red T-shirt came sauntering out to meet me. He extended his hand in greeting.
“Hi, I’m Barry”, he said.
“I’m Katy”, I replied.
“Let me show you the dancing booths and then we can have a wee chat”, he said.

I followed him through the reception area to the booths which were glass on one side to enable the gentlemen to peep through at the ladies dancing within.

“You’ll be dancing in one of these booths,” he said. “I pay a flat hourly rate and then you’ll get ten percent of whatever tips the men leave. Some of the men can be quite generous. You’d be surprised.”

“What’s the hourly rate?”

“Ten pounds fifty cash in hand. Under the table.”

“Okay I’ll take the job. When can I start?”

“Tomorrow. There’s two shifts, a lunchtime and an evening one. Which would you prefer to work?”

“Can I work both?”

“If you like.”

“I’ll do that then.”

I had been working at the peep show for about a month, when I noticed that one of the customers kept returning on an all too regular basis. Did I have a stalker? The thought freaked me out a bit; but at the same time I was a little flattered that somebody thought me attractive enough to stalk.

The stalker had been haunting me for several weeks when, leaving the parlour one night, I heard grunts and yells coming from an alley to the right of the parlour. I moved to investigate and, heading into the alley, saw my stalker lying on the ground being beaten to a pulp by two beefcakes in dark blue jeans and black leather jackets. As they turned towards me I caught a glimpse of their faces. I wanted to help but my legs were frozen solid. I stayed where I was and watched helplessly as the two men pummeled the stalker to death and then ran out past me and jumped into a car that was parked in the street adjoining the alley. Who could I turn to, who could I tell about what I had seen? As an illegal immigrant, I couldn't run to the cops. I trudged home and telephoned Karl. He picked up on the third ring.

"Hello, Karl speaking."

"Jesus Christ, you'll never guess what I just saw."

"What?"

"You know how I've taken a job in the peep show."

"Yeah."

"Well, there's this guy who keeps coming back. Bit of a stalker. Anyway, I was heading home from work when I saw him getting beaten to death in an alley."

"No way. Man I *told* you not to take that job. There's been nothing but trouble since you started."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. This is the first incident."

"You know I don't want you stripping."

"That's not the point. The point is that I just saw a man being killed."

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"You could call the cops and tell them. Say it was you who saw it."

"I'm not going to lie to the cops. I could get in big trouble."

"Well somebody has to tell the police. There's a dead body lying in an alley by the strip club and nobody's been alerted."

"Oh someone will stumble across it at some stage. Just leave it there."

"Fat lot of good you are."

"Why is it up to you to draw attention to a dead stalker?"

"I dunno. I guess I just feel responsible somehow. Almost as if I knew him personally."

"Listen. I really think you need to get some rest. Why don't you put down the phone, have a hot bath and get a decent night's sleep. It'll all look clearer in the morning."

I hung up with a sigh. I did as I was told; drew the bath, climbed in between clean sheets and did my best to head off to the land of nod. But the image of the dead man was sharp in my mind – I couldn't rid myself of it.

I woke up in the morning with dead man images still in my mind. I walked into the kitchen, made myself a coffee, put a tab of Equal into it – (I had gone off sugar to lose

weight) and sat down at the table. Somebody would have found the body by now, I reasoned, but thought I had better go back to the alley to check.

I dressed casually in dark blue jeans and a black turtleneck sweater, my glasses pressed firmly onto my face. I made my way back to the alley. The body was gone. I turned on my heels and was heading back to the street when somebody grabbed me from behind. I squirmed and tried to get away but they held me fast. I was dragged into a car; my feet and hands were bound with rope and a gag was placed over my mouth. There was nothing I could do. I closed my eyes and did not open them again until we reached our destination.

It was a spacious house in the country surrounded by fragrant pines. The rope that bound my legs was untied and I was led into the house. The gag was removed from my mouth. "Let me go you bloody bastards", I yelled, but they didn't.

They sat me down in a kitchen chair. I heard the front door being locked.

"Tell us what you saw last night in the alley," they demanded, but I refused to answer.

They gestured that I should rise to my feet, so I did. They led me down the hallway past a series of doors, each with a window in it. Each window had a female face pushed up to the pane; prisoners trapped within. They opened up a door and pushed me inside. They smeared red lipstick on my mouth. Applied kohl to my eyes.

"Come on bitch, dance", said one of them. "You wanted to be a stripper, so strip."

They moved round to the other side of the door and watched me through the glass pane. I obeyed their instructions. I swayed from side to side, slowly removing each item of clothing until I danced naked. I heard the men on the other side of the glass slowly applauding. In one corner of the floor rested a single mattress. I dressed myself and lay down.

I had just begun to drift off to sleep when I heard a tapping from the other side of the wall. I climbed out of bed and walked across to the wall. There was a hole in the wood. I put my eye up to the hole. A wide violet eye looked back at me.

"Hey you," I hissed. "What's your name?"

"June. And you?"

"Katy. How long have you been in here?"

"About three months, I think, but I'm losing track of the days."

"And how did you end up in here? Did they kidnap you too?"

"Yea, I was walking home from my job in a strip joint, when they grabbed me. I think you'll find it's the same for all the women in here."

"And what about the men that perv in at us? What's the story there?"

"Well, the boss of this place is Henry. He's the big fat guy with the man boobs. He runs this place along with a couple of his mates. It's an underground operation. Local men pay top dollar for the privilege of coming here and watching us strip."

"Creepy."

"Yea, but is it really any worse than the lives we led before?"

"Yes, it's way worse. Before we were free. Now we're prisoners."

"Yea, but at least we're fed regularly. I was struggling to scrape together enough money

for groceries when I was on the outside. And there's regular exercise in the exercise yard. They like us girls to stay fit and healthy."

"Well, it would only take one of us to escape, to liberate all of us."

"How do you mean?"

"If one girl got out she could alert the cops and they could bust this joint."

"Yes, but we're locked in."

"What about the exercise yard? Any way we could go over the wall?"

"No, they watch us like hawks."

"Well, what about befriending one of the guards? Or one of the clients?"

"There is what us girls refer to as Mingling Time, when we go out into the common room in our underwear and meet with the clients. I guess there might be an opportunity for bonding then."

"Exactly. You need to sidle up to one of the clients, make friends. With time he could invite you back to his house. You can alert the local cops and they can come and set the rest of us free."

"Hmm, let me think on it okay. I'll see you in the exercise yard. Not that we're allowed to talk to one another while we're doing our exercises or anything."

"Okay, see you then."

I lay back down on my mattress, watching a Daddy Long Legs crawl slowly across the ceiling.

At six pm, a plate of food was passed through a flap in the door. Dinner was none too inspiring; an overcooked chicken breast, some watery beans and a dob of mashed potato. I didn't feel like eating, but I ate anyway, I would have to keep my strength up in this place. I wouldn't let the bastards grind me down. After dinner, I pushed the plate back out through the slot, then lay back on the mattress again. Christ, there was nothing to do in this place. The Daddy Long Legs was providing all the excitement. I fell asleep eventually, but it seemed to take forever to head off to the Land of Nod.

At ten the following morning a bell rang and we were ushered out into the exercise yard. A guard stood at the front of the yard, demonstrating the exercises that we were to perform. All of us inmates imitated the guard, left leg forward, left leg back, right leg forward, right leg back. And hush no talking girls, and single file back to your cells.

It was about a month later that June befriended Timothy. They met, as per my suggestion, at Mingling Time. Timothy was standing by himself at the snacks table. June sidled up and started chatting. The following week Timothy started paying extra to be allowed into the room with June as she danced. The week after that, he started paying even more to be June's only customer. He visited her every day for two or three hours. A month or so later he asked our owner if he could be allowed to take June home with him and our owner agreed.

June had been going home with Timothy for about two months when she finally managed to alert the cops. Tim was out doing the gardening; June snuck to the phone and informed the police that we women were being held prisoner. They came for us in their cars, arrested Henry and his co-workers.

I was booted out of Blighty for being an illegal immigrant. I flew back home to New Zealand, completed my degree, took a job as a psychologist at a local clinic. Images of the underground strip parlour haunted my dreams; at night I was back there, trapped in that room, the walls closing in around me, no possibility of escape.