

ONE LAST SECRET

ADELE PARKS



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

For all my readers.

Without you there really would be no point at all.

We are the very definition of a co-dependent
relationship – but a great one!

Special shout out to readers Nia Oldall and Sophie Howard.

Dora

No little girl grows up dreaming of becoming an escort. A sex worker. A whore.

Keep that in mind.

It's a job, right. A lot of people do difficult work, and many don't like their jobs. That's a fact about being an adult. We suck it up for a myriad of reasons. Maybe because we can't think of anything else to do. Or we don't believe there is anything else we *could* do, as we don't have qualifications, or opportunities, or simply the energy to draft a new CV. We do however have rent or mortgages to pay, electricity, gas, and the lure of the local pub that sells a really average Chardonnay. So, we need to make money. From time to time, miners, couriers, sous chefs, debt collectors, refuge collectors, HGV drivers, labourers on building sites, care workers (list not finite) must all complain about the way they earn money. And they are entitled to. All those roles incorporate high-pressure deadlines and have low income-growth potential. I'm just saying, none of us lives in Disneyland.

OK, PR girls, the ones in marketing and events management,

you might very well be all wide-eyed and incredulous at this moment; you might be insisting, 'But I love my job.' Good for you. You will also be thinking it is not paid well enough; you will be planning on marrying someone rich if money matters to you, or living in rented accommodation all your life if it doesn't. If you are thinking of marrying someone rich to supplement your lifestyle, to allow you to continue to pursue your dream job, then you need to pause on that thought before judging me. Look, don't take offence. I'm not saying you are like me exactly. I'm just saying maybe we're not a million miles apart. Telling it as it is, is a core skill of mine. If I ever had to write a CV, I'd include it.

Being rich doesn't really matter to me. That might surprise you.

Being valued does, and that might surprise you more, because people assume women who are prepared to accept money for sex have self-esteem issues.

Side note: being rich – obscenely so – matters to many, many of the people I am surrounded by, so I know money is power and I play the game. I know what money can and does buy. Anything. Everything. When we get to know one another a little more, I will elaborate on all of that. Let you in. Maybe even tell you how I started out. But not yet. I don't think the best relationships begin with retrospection. It's indulgent. I'm all about the moment we're in; I nod to a future when I dare. Looking back isn't my thing.

I think most sex workers would agree with me.

And that issue I mentioned, that no little girl grows up wanting to be an escort, well that's true, but they – we – had dreams. Plans. I know I did.

Today is perfect. The sun is shining just enough. The job I've just finished was perfectly fine.

Fine. He didn't want to insult me, humiliate me, urinate on me. He didn't smell. I have a good nose. Well, I say good; in fact it's a mixed blessing in my line of work. I probably should retrain as a perfumer or something. You can imagine the drawbacks of having that heightened sense in my job. The smell of a good cologne is usually guaranteed, thankfully. Men who can afford me can afford decent aftershave. But other smells come into it. His balls, neck, feet, crack. There are a lot of ways a man can become unappealing. I've learnt to breathe through my mouth. I just have to deal with it. If they do smell very badly, sometimes I suggest we shower together, take a bath. It is what it is. But today I wasn't presented with any of those issues. I actually quite like him. Or I could if I met him somewhere else. If I was someone else.

Both things are impossible. I mean, where else might we meet? It's not like I'd ever turn up at his local Neighbourhood Watch, or the monthly executive board meeting at his enormous blue-chip company, or any of the annual charitable trust meetings that he patrons, chairs or fundraises for. Cancer, modern slavery, national ballet are his causes. These are the places he hangs out when he's not with me. Being respectable. Being brilliant and philanthropic. With me, he's filthier.

I've been looking after him for about five months, and we get together every couple of weeks in a small boutique hotel in Richmond. I assume he must live or work nearby. He hasn't said, and I never probe; clients find it unnerving. I prefer hotels over private homes. My regulars are always easier jobs. I guess I enjoy them the most; or more accurately, I fear and dislike

them the least. I know what I'm walking into. I can gauge their moods, their needs. It doesn't absolutely remove the risk, because people are unpredictable, but it certainly reduces it. Today we had sex in an efficient, satisfactory way. The way a couple who have been together a decent period of time and know their way around one another's bodies might. After the sex, he still had thirty-eight minutes on the clock. He'd paid up front for two forty-five-minute sessions. As he's a regular, I might have allowed him to carry over the second session, but he didn't want to. He wanted to talk.

Some of them are talkers. They think they want sex, but in fact they want company, so they pay for sex hoping that when it's all over, they can have a chat. With those clients, I see my role as something similar to that of a therapist. Therapists will hate that analogy; they will be rushing to post outraged (although carefully phrased passive-aggressive) tweets refuting any parallel. They'll be frustrated to discover I don't have any social media accounts, so they can't cancel me. I'm not trying to offend therapists. I apologise if I have. I do appreciate that very few people like their profession being put on a par with mine. I'm simply saying that if I look hard enough, I can find the similarities, and I have looked. But it's just my opinion; you don't have to get worked up. Both my clients and the clients who lie on a therapist's couch undergo a stripping-back; they are laid bare, either physically or mentally. Is it so different? Frankly, I think it's easier to take your clothes off than allow access to your deepest and darkest thoughts. Take my deepest and darkest orifices over that any time. Sorry. I crack jokes when I'm nervous. I realise that I can come across as inappropriate. I guess I am the epitome of inappropriate; it's

a professional hazard. I did briefly consider being a therapist, but I figured it would be exhausting. All those feelings.

All that feeling.

Obviously, I don't really do a lot of feeling in my line of work. It's a golden rule of survival.

Anyway, all he wanted to do was talk. My client – Daniel – is almost forty. He is unmarried; he tells me most of his friends assume he's gay. I don't get that vibe. Paying for heterosexual sex must be pretty low down on a gay man's list of prioritisations, even if he were still in the closet. It's quite obvious that he is in love with his best friend's wife. He talks about her all the time. When I mooted the idea, he looked horrified. Maybe horrified that I'd found him so transparent, maybe horrified because it was the first time the thought had occurred to him. I don't know. However, in the moment the thought did occur to him, he must have known his love was doomed. Sisi (the object of his adoration and idolisation) doesn't know he is in love with her, because he's a shy, nice guy who has never dared make his feelings known, not in the time before she married his bestie and certainly not since. He has placed her firmly on a high up, out-of-reach pedestal, and no other real woman can come close.

The majority of his relationships have not stumbled past the three months anniversary. He tells me that the women he's dated are too ambitious, not ambitious enough, self-centred, overly clingy, boring, exhausting ... and so on and so on. It's a shame. Daniel, I admit, is no looker. He has a face only a mother could love, but he is decent, clever and very wealthy. I think he could be the answer to many women's needs, if not dreams. He has told me that he's stopped investing emotionally

in relationships now. He's happy paying me twice a month (to have the sort of sex a girlfriend might tire of) and then to chat about Sisi (something I think even the most understanding girlfriend would find irritating). He is one of my favourite clients. I feel so comfortable with him that I shower before I leave. I dress in the bathroom, so he doesn't see that I've shoved my lacy knickers in my handbag and have put on a pair of sensible cotton briefs. I wear my heels until I'm outside, back on the street, and then swap into trainers. I have to maintain standards, no matter how easy-going the client is.

It's a warm late-May day; I sniff the air and can almost smell summer. I love spring, not in its own right, but because it's the predecessor to summer, my actual favourite season. I have learnt that anticipation is genuinely a gift. Hot days slow my blood and heal my bones. They take me back to being young. Younger. I'm thirty-one, so some people, like the wives, would think I am young now. But others – the daughters – would think I am old. My clients don't know I'm thirty-one. I am whatever they want me to be within a range of eighteen to twenty-six. My manager, Elspeth, and I never speak of the age issue. I earn enough to indulge in all the high-end beauty treatments I want. I use filler and Botox to build up collagen and tighten jowls; lasers to vanquish spots and redness; fat-dissolving acids to lose the extra bit under my chin and radio frequency treatment for my neck. This, combined with a strict diet and lots of sleep, means I look like the angel I most certainly am not.

I am young, old, ageless; it depends on your viewpoint. I am all things. Sometimes it feels like I'm nothing at all.

And yes, I have a manager. You might think of her as

my madam or my pimp, if you are the sort of person who thinks of your PA as a secretary. I text her to let her know I've exited the job safely. Even though he is a regular client, we always follow procedure. She texts me back instructing me to drink lots of water and reiterating the importance of keeping hydrated for beautiful skin. After most jobs, she gifts me a little beauty tip. I think it's her way of showing she cares. Texts swapped, we can both let out a sigh of relief, although we never acknowledge that we exist in a state of perpetual anxiety.

Elsbeth is well worth her thirty per cent. Some girls balk at paying the commission; they try to get clients to call them directly. A route that always leads to trouble. I think it is money well spent, because everyone knows you can't put a price on your health. Health and safety has a totally different meaning in my job. Nothing to do with donning a high-vis jacket or being given an orthopaedic chair to counter the strain of long hours at a desk. Avoiding a beating or a STD is so much more immediate, don't you think? Besides, she introduced me to an accountant who was prepared to manage my VAT and tax returns. Officially I'm registered as a self-employed clairvoyant; an extremely popular one. Without him, I'd never have got a mortgage.

Our system, if you are interested – and I find most people *are* curious – is that Elsbeth's telephone number is on my business cards and the agency's website, as are those of about twenty other sex workers. She is the filter. The barrier. She vets all my potential clients. She establishes that they have funds and ideally no criminal record. She does allow some white-collar convicts, but never a perpetrator of a violent

crime. My game, like every game in a capitalist society, is a matter of supply and demand. Elspeth maintains that with the sort of girls she supplies, we can afford to be choosy about our clients. She finds out what they are looking for and tells them which of her girls can accommodate their tastes. She does call us 'my girls', which annoys people who are devoted to politically correct nomenclature. We are in fact women, all above the legal age. However, all sex workers have been called much worse than 'girls'; few of us lose sleep over this matter. Elspeth sets up the rendezvous. She alerts and bribes hotel staff so they can also be invested in our well-being. There have been two occasions during my career when hotel staff have reported a 'funny feeling' about the client and the assignment has been cancelled. On another occasion, hotel staff called the ambulance.

When I arrive at an assignment, I text Elspeth to say so. She contacts the client, he transfers the funds, I receive a text from Elspeth to say she has the fee. I can then proceed. If I don't get her text confirming the deposit of the money, I leave. This administration is done in front of me, but I never discuss it with the client; I remain silent throughout the transaction. It helps create the illusion that I'd be there irrespective of the money that is changing hands. Elspeth also sets up checks at sexual health clinics, and gives advice on a range of subjects from underwear to clients with halitosis or unusual sexual proclivities (and they really do have to be unusual if they can't be catered for by one of the girls in Elspeth's portfolio). She has done her time as a sex worker and so is vigilant, practical and unsentimental. I appreciate all three things about her. She is just eight years older than I am. I suppose she embodies

some sort of career path trajectory. I too might work up to the dizzy heights of managing my own girls one day. I don't have an older sister, but if I had, I imagine our relationship would be something like the one I have with Elspeth. She makes me feel a little less alone.

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