

# THE HYPOCRITICAL INCIDENT: A CONFESSION

## OR

### THE NIGHT I SAID "NO" TO A PROSTITUTE BUT DIDN'T REALLY MEAN IT

*Who would have thought it...that a non-sexual encounter with a Waikiki prostitute would have re-created me as a post modernist. (Of course, a non-sexual encounter with a prostitute is a bit like telling the chef, "I'll have the coq-au-vin, but hold the sauce!!"—but I digress)... The Cowardly Lion has nothing on me!*

BY GREGORY D. GROSS

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Beach came as a big surprise to this boy, then in his forties, who grew up with the Jersey Shore and the Delmarva strip. The Waikiki of 1990 lacked the smell of Idaho potato fries, lacked the lights of ferris wheels and tilt-a-whirls, lacked the rough, brown, stumbly surface of a boardwalk, lacked the cacophony of hawkers, stalkers, and nightmares.

Waikiki would have none of that. Instead Waikiki offered civilized commerce aimed at the sagging dollar and the climbing yen—each side of Kalakaua Avenue beckoning for one but not the other. The American side with its Woolworth and its Pearl Dip (every oyster guaranteed to contain a white pearl or your money back, \$4.95) sold stuff to take home and give away. Souvenirs. The Japanese side, with its trail of Dunhills, Hermes, and Cartier, sold for keeps—watches, handbags, and dreams that would find a home in Kyoto and the Grand Eastern Beyond.

Sanitized for your protection, there was no Jersey there. Very little Hawaii either. No shoyu chicken barbecue to scent the air, no shaved ice

syrup to trickle down tourist wrist and elbow, no slack-key guitar sounds to drown-out the unmistakable clatter of a MasterCard imprint. Those Hawaiian elements awaited the adventurer and the local alike just past the zoo, just beyond the Ala Wai Canal, just up Kapahula Avenue to the realm of ben to box, plate lunch, and ono ono shakes.

This boy—that is to say “this man,” that is to say “me”—walked Kalakaua Avenue alone just about every night after the kids went to bed in our condo, rented for the duration of one mother of a sabbatical on an island far far away from the East Coast and the emerging Gulf War to come.

“Would you like...”

First a word about prostitution. In 1962 we boys had heard about prostitution. Right there somewhere inside the beast that was Utica, New York, there existed a place of mythic proportions: Ma Davis'. Among ourselves we called Ma Davis' place a whorehouse. We never visited Ma Davis'; we never saw Ma Davis', even in a drive-by; we didn't even know



where it was. But we knew "it was!" Ma Davis existed.

In 1962 sex did not exist. It didn't live in our own lives, nor in our parents', nor in our movies. Sex only existed in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* under "Coitus" (which we read weekly), in Victorian novels like *The Pearl*, and in Elvis. Because sex did not exist, we could not imagine it as real. We could not imagine it as the *sine qua non* of Ma Davis'. No fantasy here, just amazement.

Amazed, Amazed, Amazed  
That you could buy That  
Buy That like a burger  
Buy That like a double feature  
Buy That like a Cherry Coke  
Buy That like a bus to the beach  
Buy That like "Mad"  
Like a feast  
Like redemption from a dashboard Jesus  
Buy That!  
Amazing Grace.

Beyond this amazement lay a promise, not a purchase; sex not bought but rented, not rented but promised, represented our only Hope. Sex didn't exist in 1962.

"Would you like some..."

Well, of course, sex did exist in marriage. Marriage had been built as the House of Sex, the way the Met is the House of Picasso. We would not reside in that former House for years to come so that hoping for sex seemed a bit like hoping for a Nobel Peace Prize—possible but for the few. We had only the House of Davis.

"Would you like some company..."

On Kalakaua Avenue (American side) she approached me from behind. She sidled up to my left and we walked together for one minute—maybe less. We walked together for a very long time—maybe until today. I had seen her before. She always wore white (really, this is no Melvillian metaphor here!). She wore white Corege boots to her knees. Above those a white leather skirt and above even that a white leather jacket with broad lapels whose open V pointed

south to a white belt. White leather in Waikiki! Who wouldn't notice that? The whitest of white faces—kabuki-like—crowned her garb with such radiance that her blond hair, itself almost white, seemed more a halo than a hairpiece.

"Would you like some company tonight?"

My answer came as no surprise. I gave the correct response. It was all wrong. I spoke the answer and heard the answer and saw the answer not right there on Kalakaua Avenue but above Kalakaua Avenue. Out of body, out of mind, I spoke and heard and saw in a way heretofore reserved for the dead. Hovering and suspended a dozen feet above, I spoke and heard and saw a lie, a right lie that was at

once all wrong. Heretofore reserved for the dead, I saw the lifeless nature of my own words:

"No, not tonight. But thank you for asking."

What could be more dead than that niceness? What could be more empty than this bottomless soul of a social worker without the passion of his own heart? From 12 feet above I spoke and heard and saw a "No" that meant:

Yes

I do want some company tonight.

Are you an angel on the tip of a pin?

Are you my angel?

To see one's folly from 12 feet up magnifies that folly. At 12 feet up a person's thoughts cannot be ignored. I am up here alone at 12 feet and that folly down below that was Waikiki, that was the world I had escaped from to come here, is now my folly.

One pitiful sentence without a grain of truth in it down there 12 feet





out-my-mouth  
like words dangling in a cartoon bubble, a "no"  
that meant everything in this world except "no,"  
a politeness that protected only myself (not her),  
a vacuous kindness with no object but this fool,  
icy breath, who slurped it  
out-his-mouth.

My own mouth, a fool who doesn't know his  
angel from a hole in the wall, 12 feet up here from  
the head of a pin and close enough to his own  
foolishness I can almost taste it, though it's so  
devoid of character it has no flavor, this poi, this  
paste splattered on Kalakaua Avenue 12 feet  
down! "No, not tonight but thank you for  
asking," barren phrases drooled across Oahu air:

Not tonight but thank you for asking.

Twelve feet up

Twel vfeet up

Twa - el - feet - up

Twal - effete - up

Twa - elf - eat - uh! - uh! - Uhp!

She moved on. Who could blame her?

And when she left, I descended.

Down like Newton's apple

Down like Rushdie's crashing pair

Down like a Hindu low-man

Reincarnated

one last time

'til he gets it right.

So this is what they mean by the Shock of Recognition.

### Aftermath

That bout of self-hatred didn't last long,  
thank goodness. Instead, a celebration of the self  
crept in. A confronted self, an accepted self is a  
real self, after all. Touching the ugly face of my  
own cowardice, once denied, now known, helps  
me understand my own frail attempts at heroism  
at the same time that it helps me understand my  
fellow cowards, heroes all.

Several weeks later I volunteered to work  
the AIDS Hotline, housed in the Waikiki Health  
Center on Ohua Street, only four blocks away  
from the place where what I now call "The  
Encounter" took place. The woman who trained  
me was a wonderful person named Ann Lei-  
aloha. I to this day still wonder if she had made  
that name up—the symbolic gesture perhaps of a  
Caucasian mainlander re-making herself in the

Paradise of her own choosing. Ann introduced  
me to a colleague whose name, I think, was Sally.

Sally referred to herself as the hooker-lady  
because she provided social and medical supports  
to the prostitutes working Waikiki Beach. Sally  
told of violent johns and even more violent

pimps, one of  
whom kept one  
of "his girls"  
locked and  
bloodied under a  
sink in his apart-  
ment to punish  
her for disap-  
pointing receipts.  
Sally spoke of  
abuse, disease,  
and death. Sally,  
if that is her  
name, goes out  
on Kalakaua  
nights to help



those women find some kind of celebration of  
their Selves. Angels galore!

If part of their celebration be a recognition  
of their connection to Everywoman or All-women  
(as it should be)—to all the sisters, daughters,  
lovers, and saints—then what of my own  
celebration? What of my connection to the Angel?  
Would a "yes" have contributed to her  
exploitation. Did my "no" contribute to her  
exploitation? At \$200.00/hour, is she more or less  
exploited than the man or the woman selling  
macadamia nuts and key chains for \$6.00/hour  
in the ABC Store?

Twelve feet up I learned I am at once john,  
hooker, and pimp, connected by some sub-  
terranean root system to all the other johns,  
hookers, and pimps—those who ever were and  
those yet to come. Every oyster guaranteed to  
contain a white pearl or your money back.

### Epilogue

That's when I decided to become a post  
modernist. ☐

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