

Prologue

The haze of dusk was a soft blanket over my green Honda Civic as I drove the familiar route to the Los Angeles Airport. How many times had I taken this freeway? This exit? On autopilot, I changed lanes smoothly and rounded the bend towards Century Boulevard. I was going in the same direction I had always gone, but I might as well have been in a parallel universe to the one I lived in six years before.

I glanced at the clock in my car: 5:45 pm... Always early.

My husband's plane wouldn't land for another 15 minutes. I decided to wait in the Taco Bell parking lot down the street.

I missed him. For the first year of our marriage I went on tour with him. We traveled from city to city in dusty rental cars, eating lunch at truck stops and fast-food chains. I sold his Pigeon John T-shirts and CDs at the product table, while he rocked the stage for a steadily growing fan base of nerds and ex-nerds, hip-hop heads and youth groups. I was happy to do so. It was a lifestyle that appealed to the bohemian Venice girl in me.

'I want your dreams to come true, too,' he said to me on the night of our honeymoon.

My dreams. What *were* my dreams? Driving through Nebraskan corn fields and the dim streets of Baltimore on our way to shows, I found myself pondering this question. One moment I was exploring the possibilities; the next I was filling out an application to join the program for the Master's in Social Welfare at the University of California at Los Angeles. My new

role as a full-time graduate-school student meant leaving behind the life on the road with my husband.

He had only been gone for a few days, but I couldn't wait to kiss his handsome, caramel face.

Driving down Century, I saw the sign in the distance. The words 'Live Live Nude Nudes' hung in muted, orange and red 1970s-style lettering. You'd think with all the razzle-dazzle strip clubs popping up everywhere, this one would wither and die and go back to being something more functional, as it was when it was a bowling alley. But it's still there. And so are the girls.

I wondered about my old co-workers. Had they moved on to other clubs, or other lives, or were they still there?

I remembered that life: the suffocating feeling of being trapped, with no end in sight; wanting the money, *needing* it, but wishing there were some other legal way to get it. The constant pressure to smile, and pretend you want nothing more than to fulfill every wish and fantasy of a stranger, when all you really want to do is lie around your apartment in sweat pants, watching mafia movies like *Goodfellas* and *Casino* – imagining you could live some other life.

I remembered, and all I could do was pray: that the women behind those very walls, feeling as I once did, would have a real and true encounter with the loving, gracious, God of freedom and wonder that I have come to know. That they would discover the beauty that lies within them that is more precious than the rarest gem. That they would realize that the dreams of their youth and the passions of their hearts are important, and within reach.

The driver in front of me gently pressed his brakes, snapping me out of the trance I was in. I glanced in my rear view mirror, and saw that I had passed the Taco Bell parking lot I was planning to pull in to. Instead, I parked in a lot directly across the

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street from the club, turned my car off, and sat staring. There are girls in there right now, I thought.

What are you going to do? A voice whispered to my heart. What *could* I do? I felt as though I was outside a prison that had once held me captive. I was free, while there were still women feeling trapped inside. There was a stand-off: I was still, waiting for something to happen. For the other guy, for some other person, to come up with something: a solution; an idea; anything.

What are you going to do? What can I do? It's not like I can waltz up there and tell the bouncer I want to talk to the girls. Even if he did let me in, what on earth would I say?

What do you want to say?

I glanced to my left and discovered a stack of postcards from a recent women's conference I had attended. The woman pictured was facing away from the camera, looking confidently ahead. Her back was draped with strands of pearls. Tattooed across the warm brown skin of her shoulder blades were the words, 'Her value... far above rubies and pearls.'

That is what I wanted to say. That is exactly what I wanted the women in that club to hear. Hands shaking, I grabbed the stack of postcards and began writing on the back of each one: 'I was just driving by and wanted to tell you that you are loved...'

What else? 'If you are ever interested in going to church, I know of a great one: www.oasisla.org. You are welcome there! Love, Harmony. PS: I used to work here too.'

When I first started dancing, even if I wanted to go to church, it would never have occurred to me that a church would have me. Still sitting in the car, my legs were heavy and stiff as I held the postcards in my hands. I wondered if I was doing the right thing. Would people think I was crazy for going back there?

I called my mother-in-law. If I am insane, she'll tell me so, I

thought. Her voice was deep and soothing like a mama bear; her words steady and careful, as she encouraged and prayed with me. It was settled; I wasn't crazy.

I approached the parking lot and there, scattered between orange cones, were the dancers' cars. 'My' spot was among them. Each night, when the security saw my car pulling into the lot, he removed the orange cone and motioned me into the space nearest the dancers' entrance. Someone else was parked there now.

As I approached the first car, a large man wearing a dark blue security jacket stepped out of the porn shop adjoining the club. Security: I hadn't thought of that. I wasn't sure he would let me go through with it.

The words *Go in confidence* radiated from within me. Before the security guard could even open his mouth, I briskly approached him and stuck out my hand.

'Hi. My name is Harmony. I used to work here. I just wanted to leave these little notes for the girls.' I whipped out the postcards and presented them to him. He looked at them and back at me. Tilting his head, he seemed caught off guard by the whole thing.

'All right; go ahead,' he said, as he waved me along and went back into the porn shop.

Quickly, before he changed his mind, I placed each postcard on the windshields of the dancers' cars. I wondered what they would think when they found the postcards at the end of the night. What would I have thought?

As I headed to the airport terminal to pick up my husband, I imagined myself walking to my car after a long night of work: feet aching, head throbbing from six hours of pounding music. How would I feel if I entered the buzzing silence of my car and saw that little postcard sitting beneath my windshield wiper?

'You are loved... You are welcome here.' Aren't those the

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words I had always longed to hear? That is all I ever wanted... to be loved and welcomed. Isn't that what we all want?

When I pulled up to the airport terminal, I saw my husband standing there, leaning on his luggage. Always dapper, his vintage-looking Kangol hat was tipped slightly to one side. I hopped out of the car and threw my arms around him, nuzzling my face into his warm neck.

'Missed you.'

'Missed you, too.'

We got in the car and headed home.

'John, you are never going to believe what I just did...'

I recounted the story, and he listened encouragingly.

'That's cool, babe. That's really cool,' he said, while affectionately squeezing my fingers one by one.

'Yeah. I mean the whole thing has me thinking... maybe I can do that every time I come to pick you up at the airport. Or every time I pass by a strip club. Do you think other girls would want to do this too? This could be the start of something,' I rattled on.

We had no idea that within a year a group of volunteers would be going to over 150 strip clubs annually. That we would be walking alongside women, encouraging them to live the healthy, flourishing lives they were created to live. That within two years we would be an official non-profit organization. That four years later we would be training other outreach groups throughout the nation.

The idea I had that night sitting in the parking lot has expanded and become more than I ever dreamed possible. No matter how much it has grown and changed, the message is still the same...

'You are loved. You are welcome here.' In our churches, in our lives.

Scars and Stilettoes

This very message was first breathed like oxygen into my heart during a time when I needed it most in my own life. My passion to share it was born out of my own broken past. This is my story.