

The (Minimum) Wages of Sin

Text and photos by Kevin Lambert

Port-of-Spain, Trinidad: It's a Thursday night in The Uptown Bar. There are only three customers and the nine girls who are hustling them haven't been having much luck. Every male entering the bar is propositioned by smiling, pretty young women, who practically stand in line for the chance.

Michelle Christopher, 31, is feeling lucky. One of the men—an African gentleman—had been hit on by two other girls without expressing much interest. Now he was sitting alone and Michelle moved in to take her turn.

Caribbean hookers don't worry about cops, pimps, or other natural predators. Just their next meal.

"We talked, he bought me a drink, and we exchanged ideas," is how Michelle put it. One of the ideas was how much it would take to get her into one of the rooms upstairs. She was trying for TT 100 (about \$17.00) but would have settled for less. It turned out, though, that, for all his charm and foreign sophistication, this African guy barely had enough to pay for her soda pop. But they made a date to meet the following night—which he didn't keep—and Michelle left. On the street several men—all broke—propositioned her. One of them, in the manner of Wimpy cadging hamburgers, said he would gladly go to the bank tomorrow if he could have her tonight. She got home, alone and completely broke, at 3 a.m.

It was her best night of the week.



Ever since the Europeans settled the Caribbean, they have been misbehaving there. It was the New World's first home for their misfits and ne'er do wells, who evolved into pirates & cutthroats. Grog shops and taverns, stocked with whores, gamblers and cheap rum, sprung up. It became part of the legendary Spanish Main, one of the planet's earliest party-time neighborhoods.

Things have changed, and things have stayed the same. Trinidad today is perfectly respectable. The cash crop has gone from plunder to oil and sugarcane. There are international investors and bankers and high-rise buildings to house them. The streets are safe, and the national sport is cricket. But you can still get into an open air crap game on Independence Square, there are still pirates coming across from Venezuela, and the low-down bars are still full of eager young girls. That's where I met Michelle.

The Paradise Palms is a tough, friendly, downscale bar in a neighborhood called "The Ghetto." It's a rowdy place, redolent with rum, gambling, cigars and smuggling stories. As soon as I walked in, Michelle came over, smiling prettily. She had been sitting with some other guy, but then saw me and smelled things like hard currency and American passport and kicked him downstairs.

"Hi!", she smiled. "I'm Michelle. I can finish up with the guy I'm with and get back to you in ten minutes. Okay?"

"Non," I replied, which I think makes me sound like a suave international adventurer...even though they don't speak French in Trinidad.

She took rejection well. In fact, she apologized for coming on so strong, and hoped that I wasn't offended by her behavior.

I wasn't offended. I was impressed. Most hookers, in my experience, don't apologize when they're turned down. American hookers sneer and ask if you didn't want one of their overpriced blow jobs, why the hell did you come around in the first place? Mexican hookers simply stick their hands deeper into your pockets. I've had German hookers call the bouncer, and Spanish whores curse my ancestors. But Michelle, in Trinidad, felt genuinely bad about breaking decorum. To apologize, she did everything but curtsy.

I guess we like to see good manners in the classes of people who aren't popularly supposed to have them. And in the next couple of evenings I was to see that a lot more. Friendly greetings, polite behavior, sweet tones of voice, a civilized come-on, and a philosophical

smile and shrug when I said *non*. Except for one girl who asked me why the hell I was trying to speak French in Trinidad.

None of these girls, however, had that combination of exotic sluttiness and Catholic school politeness that Michelle showed me. And later, when I looked into their lives, I was to realize just how truly nice they were being. For rejection, in their world, can mean something very close to starvation.

Michelle and I got to be friends. I never used her professional skills, but she did show me a good time.

Michelle Churchill [Not her real last name] was born in 1965 in Baretaria, a village south of Port-of-Spain. Racially, she is a Caribbean mutt; fairly equal parts African, East Indian and Portuguese. Nail-thin, with deliriously high cheekbones, quick to smile, she has the husky voice and cynical laugh of the young Ida Lupino. She finished her 5th form (roughly high school) and went for two years to a secretarial training school. She didn't finish, and indeed, seeing her today in a short, skintight, lizard green bar dress, it's hard to imagine that she ever went at all. But dropping out of school led to a break with her parents, and at 20 she ran off into the protective covering of Port-of-Spain. Alone, broke, young and vulnerable, she was a classic hooker in the making.

After a time on the street she hooked up with one of the main players in the West Indian underworld, a 350 pound Portuguese called Charles "Elephant Walk." Elephant Walk wasn't the brightest of thugs, but he was tough and implacable and he wasn't afraid to bust heads. That, coupled with some savage grasp of underworld mathematics, had made him wealthy enough to house his bulk in comfort. At the time she met him he owned several bars and a house in the suburbs.

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different rule book than an American pimp like Iceberg Slim. Trinidadian prostitution is not a rough scene and the girls don't need rough players. The police let them alone, and if the cops let you alone, everybody lets you alone. Even the customers are pretty easygoing and the trick violence is almost non-existent.

So a pimp in the Caribbean is more of a middleman or an agent. He finds girls, turns them into the life, and stocks his clubs and hotel rooms with them. The money they pull out of men for drinks and hotel fees are his. The money they make for their performance they keep. In other words, the girls are subcontractors. The pimps have been reduced from lord, protector and thrill god to innkeepers.

Elephant Walk set Michelle up with her first date. She took on three different men and walked out with TT 2,000. After the austerities of home and the shock of the hungry streets, she was impressed. And she had enjoyed herself. She likes sex, it turned out. She has since taken on as many as 12 men a night and enjoyed the hell out of it. She decided, like a lot of people before her, that the happiest of us are those who love our work.

After two years of faithful employment, she got bored with Elephant Walk and struck out on her own.

Charles didn't beat her when she left. That sort of bloody parachute is not an element in Trinidad. He wished her well and replaced her the same evening.

These were the high flying years, both for Michelle and Trinidad, and she jumped right into the stream of it. The oil boom was on, and a lot of cash was being tossed at pretty young bar girls. She made good money, but she said, "I squandered it. I fell in love, bought him too many expensive gifts."

When the economic bust came—oil is a fickle horse to back your country on—the money dried up. Michelle's prices fell in an uncanny parallel to Trinidad's NASDAQ rating. Since then, Trinidad has risen, but Michelle is still living on the edge and it's hard to say whether she'll be able to come up again. Now she'll take 100 TT for an all-nighter. And as low as 60 TT for two hours in a hotel room.

Compare that to Sherry Rawlins, who got \$500 US an hour for toe-sucking with Dick Morris.

I wanted to write about Michelle, which I figured would be far safer than sleeping with her. I told her that since I would be taking up her professional time, I would pay her for it. How much would that be?

"I charge according to my mood," she said, regally, "and of course what I think I can get." She thought about it, then she announced that she would charge me the same rates she gets for a hand-job.

Kind of tells you something about journalism.

We went to the upstairs lounge of the Top Hat Bar in Port-of-Spain. Other girls came in and out, none with customers, all with friendly smiles in case I ditched Michelle. I bought her a soda and a pack of cigarettes, and from then on her meter was running. She would find things that I could buy for her almost hourly; everything from candy bars to a new key to her flat. But this is unthinking hooker behavior and I didn't fault her for it. She isn't greedy, or even particularly

materialistic. She just has some ingrained professional habits.

"I have three bars I go to, where I work the men. This is one of them. The other ones are old fashioned places, and they show sex films. I never work off the streets, I don't want to be like the street prostitutes. I know they do the same thing I do, but it's a different way. I don't like the way they stand on the street with their legs open." She drew herself up. "It's not becoming."

Everything Michelle says is delivered with a soft, West Indian lilt that makes even the stories about faking anal penetration and penile imperfections sound somehow innocent.

"Here on the street, it's a dog-eat-dog thing. People treat you with as much respect as you carry with yourself. I carry myself good, you know? I don't have enemies."

"Do the police harass you? Do they take free favors?" She shook her head, clearly shocked. She has never been bothered by a policeman. "I have no relationship with the cops. They go their way, I go my way."

Michelle performs the actual sex in designated hotels or cars. With poorer customers she'll go into an alley or a parking lot. "I don't like going to my home, and I don't like going to their homes because I'm afraid they might

kill me." However, in her ten years on the job, she's never heard of a girl getting killed by a trick.

"What's the worst aspect of free-lancing, and prostitution in general?" I was expecting horrible stories of ax murders and murderous pimps. But she just shrugged.

"Drunks. I hate drunks."

"Me too. They're so tedious in conversation, and aesthetically..."

"I have to spend so much time to give them erections," she muttered, naming an aspect of drunkenness I hadn't given much thought to. "I will have to give them oral sex over and over before they get hard. And then if it goes back down I have to go back and do it again."

She sighed, just like a mailman talking about dogs. The more we talk the more I realize something. This isn't lust, or wild, abandoned rapture we're talking about. This is a day job.

"What do you do when you don't have any money?"



"I don't know. I'll do what I do when I don't have any money, any customers. I'll pray. I'll bawl. I take a shower. I scream at the top of my voice. Then I put on my best dress. Then I go out and give 'em hell."

Special Feature

When you have no food, when it seems like no hope?"

"I get crazy. I ask my friends for food. I pray."

"What saint do you beseech to send you a trick?"

"Mary Magdalene." (She's kidding.) "But I have people I can ask for food sometimes. And you know, I help my friends eat, too."

This was true. She had scored the night before and she had the man buy her a meal first. Telling him to wait, she took the meal home, gave half to a hungry friend, and told him that she had to go back and earn it. Which she did. What I liked about this was the fact that the customer waited in good faith, and she returned in the same spirit.

"Do you ever go into a restaurant and offer services for food?"

She burst out laughing. "No! My God! He'd kick my ass." She drew herself up, back in Catholic school mode. "That would be very bad behavior."

Sometimes her naiveté—as charming as it is in a professional prostitute—is frightening.

"Men don't like to use condoms. And sometimes I have to do it with them that way. So I'll squeeze the penis. I'll wash it, look at it, make sure it's clean, then I'll squeeze it to make sure there's no inflammation." (Kids, don't try this at home!)

"My God," I said, horrified. "That may be effective for the clap or maybe, you know, acne. Not AIDS."

"I know", she shrugged. "But that's what I do. And I passed my AIDS test just May." She said this as though it were recent. "And, when I need to eat I need to eat."

I looked at this gentle creature, who has begun to see some of the horrors and monsters on the path she's taken. And no way off of it.

Right now, there is a strangler working the streets of Port-of-Spain. This is the only whore-hating wacko in living memory. He takes girls to parking lots and strangles them halfway to death before he rapes them. Michelle, poor lass, has had him twice. He uses voodoo, she says.

"It was last year. I thought there wasn't something right. I sensed strong vibes, dangerous vibes. But I was desperate for the money. So this guy says, 'Let's go do a thing.' 'Okay,' I said. He said he could not afford the hotel, he could give me my price but that was all. So we went to a quiet place, a car park. As soon as I turned my back from him I felt his hands around my neck. Strangling me real hard with

his hands. But I catch my breath. I said, 'Don't kill me, I have kids to live for.' He stopped strangling me but he held his hands over my mouth so I couldn't scream. He pulled up my skirt and he—uh—relieved himself. Then he goes away."

"The second time, I was alone on the street and he followed me. This time he almost killed me. I saw him on the street but I didn't recognize him. He makes some voodoo, where people cannot remember his face. I made a report to the police—they were nice to me—but I could never picture that man's face. This second time he strangled me for a long period. When I woke up my eyes were bloodshot red."

Michelle, right now, is a real life lonely hooker with a heart of gold—*Leaving Las Vegas* come to life. Her life is at the mercy of the island's economics, and things aren't going so well. She's also at the mercy of the lawmakers and the self-righteous, and a slight shift in legislation could turn her into a lawbreaker. Then things would get really rough.

She's a peaceful person and she'd be chewed up by the cops and the pimps and all the other cruelties that a life of crime—as distinct from a life of sin—can bring. I told her that compared to her sisters in North America, I said, she's lucky. (I didn't mention Sherry Rawlins.)

"I don't feel lucky," she said. "I feel like, the next time you come to Trinidad, maybe I'm dead."

We finished the last session. In the ten days I had known her we had gotten close, and it was getting harder and harder to keep cool in her presence. It was time to go. In all that time she had

scored one customer. A hand job, yet. We had a hug. "Think you'll score tonight?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'll do what I do when I don't have any money, any customers. I'll pray. I'll bawl. I take a shower. I scream at the top of my voice. Then I put on my best dress. Then I go out and give 'em hell." ■



Michelle has had the whore-hating wacko twice.