

How to Sell Your Body (and Survive It)

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Leave home as soon as you graduate high school. Underestimate how much money you'll need to live in the city while attending college. Meet an older man who tells you you're too pretty to be a waitress or dishwasher. ~~Don't trust him.~~ Follow him.

This is how you become a 7th Avenue Girl. Your name is not your own.

Work the graveyard shift— 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. Schedule your classes for the afternoon. Lie when classmates ask what you do for work. Learn that you can function on four hours of sleep with the help of coffee ~~and cocaine~~. Be nice and listen to the veterans' advice. These women will not only be your friends— your *family*— but also your mentors. They'll be the ones that offer you a cigarette (*It'll help you calm down and get it over with*). They'll be the ones you go to when you don't know how much to charge. They'll be the ones who teach you to scream "Fire!" not "Help!" if someone tries to take advantage of you. Run whenever you hear another girl shouting that. ~~It will always be too late.~~

After your first time, puke in an alleyway and sob. One of the older veterans— a woman called Lola with fake Chanel perfume and fiery, bright red hair— will hold your hair from your face and tell you it gets easier. She's lying. Hold onto its falsity for comfort. It will take months before you start to become numb to the nerves and nausea. The speech you recite as you walk up to a car, the positions and sounds, shoving crumpled bills into a black pouch— make it all blur into a robotic routine. By the end of your first year, have regulars.

Do your makeup to look even younger. Pigtails are a hit on Sundays. Equate your worth to your body and how many men want a slice of it. Dress enough to keep you warm in the midnight wind but not enough that it repels customers. Buy fishnets in packs of five from the corner store. Always carry a taser. A knife. Pepper spray. An alarm. A pack of condoms. Birth control. Buy thick hangers from the corner store, too, while you're at it. Lola will instruct you over the phone how to use them. ~~They will hurt.~~ They will work. Don't talk to cops. A rookie made that mistake. Find her body discarded behind a dumpster with her panties torn and a bullet in her throat. There will be no funeral, but you and some of the other girls will hold a moment of silence for her. Pretend to not see one of the girls hop into the car of your professor's husband. Act surprised when she stops wearing her wedding ring to lectures. Turn down the guy sitting next to you in biology. Turn down your classmates' offer to hang out after class. Don't turn down the cigarettes and needles. They will ~~destroy you~~ keep you going.

Accept the number Lola gives you (*My cousin is a therapist. Promise me you'll see her*). Go every Thursday to the cozy little office with the yellow, plush couch. Open your mouth— but not as a service. Let the words flow out— even if

just a few. Cut your working hours. Create a resume. Apply to four different unpaid internships. Get rejected by the first three. Get accepted by the fourth. Break down and throw a stiletto at your mirror. Realize that nothing will ever get rid of the years of invisible handprints and marks of repulsive lust.

Wash. Scrub. Scratch. Tear. *Scream.*

Repeat to yourself that virginity and body count are just concepts meant to belittle women's sexuality. Repeat to yourself that you are more than just your body. Repeat to yourself that you are a *person*— not an object to be traded and bought and sold. Whisper this over and over and over again until you finally start to believe it.

Set your last day of work on 7th Avenue. You won't walk those midnight streets again. It will have been five years. Lola will hold you tight and with tears in her eyes tell you how proud she is of you. Promise to visit her even when she tells you to move far, far away. Use your internship to get a better job. Use your better job to earn more money than you ever did on the street. Use that money to buy clean needles, toiletries, and other basic care items for the remaining 7th Avenue Girls. Do not leave *this* family behind.

When you introduce yourself at your first AA meeting (*It's not just for alcoholics*), take a deep breath and use your real name.