The Sex Trade
A Three-Part Investigation

Part Two:
The Traffickers
The Great Sex Migration

Every year, approximately 700,000 women and girls are swept out of poor countries— from parts of South America and Asia and the former Soviet Union, and into wealthier nations and cities like Moscow and Tokyo, Dubai and Los Angeles—to work, often unwillingly, in the sex trade. In part two of our three-part series, Sean Flynn travels to a thriving center of the traffic and rides along with the cops who are trying to stop it. Failing to stop it, that is.

Photographs by Lisa Kereszi

Lured abroad to work as a prostitute, this young woman escaped and has now returned to her family in northern Moldova.
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Zina and Veronica are on a train traveling east, though the direction doesn’t matter, because north or south or west would take them just as surely away from home and toward somewhere else, which is the only place they want to go. They think they are dreaming. They think this, finally, is what it must feel like, dreaming, being cradled in the sway of a rickety, steel track sliding beneath them, something like a future waiting beyond the border, faint and indistinct but shining brighter than anything in their past.

They have never dreamed before. Ask them. Ask Zina and Veronica what they dreamed about when they were girls, after their father left them with their alcoholic mother and an alcoholic brother in three dank rooms along a mud rut of a road in a smudge of a country called Moldova, and they will look at you with wide, blank eyes, as if you’d asked where they stabled their unicorns. “We didn’t have a dream, because it was impossible,” Zina will tell you. “When you come home from school and there is no food, you can’t dream.”

When they finished their primary studies, Zina and Veronica wanted only to work, any kind of work, so they could earn money to buy food, but no one would hire them—they were only 15, and it wouldn’t have mattered even if they’d been older, because there weren’t any jobs anyway. So they planted vegetables in the patch of dirt inside the garden wall and collected apricots from three skinny trees, and they hoped winter would come late and stay mild, because the house would get so cold they would have to close off the largest room and hide together in the remaining rooms that, small as they were, the stove could barely heat. They lived like this until Zina was 27 and Veronica was 24, and they expected they always would.

Then, one December day when they were cold and hungry, a woman knocked on their door. Zina and Veronica recognized her from their childhood, only she was dressed better and looked well fed, as if she had some money in her pocket. She told the sisters that she had been to Russia, that there were jobs there, that Zina and Veronica should go at once. They could be vendors in a market in Krasnodar, one of the biggest cities in southern Russia. Or they could wash windows, as Russia has many wealthy people who insist on looking through sparkling-clean glass.

Zina and Veronica thought this was preposterous. True, thousands of people had left their village. Costesti, and some of them must be doing well, making money. See the new houses rising along the crumbling main road, grand and sturdy, two stories of block and timber with arches above the windows? That’s how you could tell who had a son on a construction crew in Lisbon or Moscow, a daughter mopping hotel floors in London or Dubai. But they could not go to Russia. They had no passports, no money, no place to stay.

The woman said she had friends, Gypsy friends, who would get them passports, lend them money for the train, and give them a place to live.

No, they could not go. Who would take care of Mama?

The woman told them they could send Mama money from Russia. How could they take care of Mama if they had no money?

Zina and Veronica said no again. The woman left, came back, had the same conversation, left again, came back again. She did this for two weeks, kept coming until Zina and Veronica decided she must be right, that they should go to Russia and earn money. It was agreed, then. The Gypsies helped them get their papers in order and booked their passage, and now, finally, they are on a train heading east.

Are they dreaming? Or are they only less desperate?

The train stops in Krasnodar. More Gypsies are waiting for them, as if they knew exactly whom to look for—Zina with her huge brown eyes and high cheekbones, Veronica with her short hair and pug nose—as if they know exactly which carriage the pair will climb down from. The Gypsies put the sisters in a sedan and drive them to a two-room apartment. Six other girls are already there. This is where Zina and Veronica will live.

The Gypsies tell them it will take two days, maybe three, to find them an open stall in the market and clear it with the police, with whom the Gypsies suggest they are extremely friendly.

Two days pass. Zina and Veronica do not leave the apartment.

On the third day, the Gypsies tell them there are no openings in the market. No one wants any windows washed. “But you still owe us money,” one of the Gypsies says. “So you will do other things. You will be prostitutes.”

Zina and Veronica panic. No, they say, we will not be prostitutes, we will not do such an awful thing. They say they are sorry for the trouble they have caused, for the money they have borrowed. They say they will go back to Moldova and find a job, any job, to pay back the Gypsies, pay back every cent.

The Gypsies beat them.

The Gypsies say, “We will cut your fucking hands off.”

The Gypsies say, “We will bury you alive.”

The Gypsies beat them some more, keep beating them until Zina and Veronica believe that they will, in fact, cut off their hands and bury them alive, beat them until there is no more foolish talk about going back to Moldova, beat them until, as Zina says, “we were destroyed.”

The next day, Zina and Veronica are sold to a strip club. Every night, they dance naked on a stage and have sex in the back rooms with strangers who do not care about their bruises. There are old men and young men, rich men and working men, and Zina and Veronica do not know many, because there are too many to count.

AND HOW MANY WOMEN? How many like Zina and Veronica, forced into prostitution not by circumstance or poverty but by deception, threats, and violence? How many are trafficked from villages to cities, from poor countries to wealthier ones, lured by false promises, bought and sold like chattels?

No one knows. Among the tens of millions of bodies swirling
through the global sex trade—the bar girls, the street whores and the escorts—they are surely a minority. Yet the victims, the Zinas and Veronicaes, can’t be counted because they are nearly always invisible, even in plain sight. Hire a prostitute in Amsterdam or Frankfurt or Los Angeles and you will not know if she has been trafficked. She will look like every other woman in that brothel or on that street corner, her situation no more apparent. A woman such as Zina will not tell the men who pay to have sex with her that a Gypsy has threatened to cut off her hands, because she believes he will. She will not confess her fear because she is afraid. She will not go to the police because she believes they are corrupt, and she will not run away because she has no money and no passport and she’s not sure exactly where she is anyway. And because she will not do any of those things, she eventually will confuse her fear with shame, her captivity with complicity, and her shame will make her silent, a slave mistaken for a whore.

The U.S. State Department estimates that between 800,000 and 900,000 people are trafficked—that is, transported by force or fraud—across international borders every year, 80 percent of whom are women and girls and most of whom are destined for the sex trade. UNICEF puts those numbers at between 700,000 and 2 million, also mostly women and also mostly in the sex trade, which it says is the third-most-lucrative black-market business on the planet, behind only weapons and drugs. The International Labour Organization calculates worldwide profits from sex trafficking at $27.8 billion a year, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation says the transnational trade (moving people from one country to another) is worth $9.5 billion.

The problem with those numbers isn’t that they’re wrong so much as they’re impossible to verify. “You have to remember, victims don’t stand in line and raise their hands to be counted,” says Ambassador John R. Miller of the U.S. State Department’s Office of Trafficking in Persons. “So any estimate, I would say—I would hope—is an intelligent guesstimate.” The body counts are mostly for the benefit of journalists and policymakers and grant dispensers, anyway, none of whom tolerate ambiguity particularly well. (The reports out of Miller’s office, even with their fuzzy figures, generate an annual flurry of MODERN SEX SLAVES headlines that would likely never be written if the number were to be reported as a more honest yet less enthralling “a lot.”)

There are only hints at the true magnitude, anecdotes and fragments of hard data. For example: In late June, federal agents and state police escorted more than a hundred Korean women out of massage parlors and spas in San Francisco, most if not all of whom were allegedly forced into prostitution to repay enormous debts to smugglers who got them into the country. In Turkey—a country so flush with prostitutes imported from the former Soviet states that they’ve been given a generic brand name, Natasha, as if they were an exotic subspecies—authorities reportedly identified more than 200 trafficked women last year alone. Two months ago in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, police pulled eighty-eight women out of a hotel massage parlor, including twenty-eight Vietnamese and four Chinese believed to have been trafficked into the country.

All these are just the faintest echoes of a much, much larger trade, tiny blips of radar pinging off a mountain shrouded in fog. But how big is the mountain?

Narrow the focus. Train the lens on one tiny country, Moldova, a ripple of vineyards and croplands barely the size of Maryland, a
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scant 3.4 million people wedged between Romania and the Ukraine. In the fourteen years since it became an independent nation with the breakup of the Soviet Union, Moldova has been decimated by sex trafficking; it is a place of desperately poor women made easy prey for a black market with a voracious demand for Eastern (read: white) Europeans. Yet even here, in a country so small that it has become a petri dish of sorts for the causes and effects of trafficking, there are still only clues. From the beginning of 2000 through May 2005, for instance, the International Organization for Migration provided counseling, health care, job training, and the like to 1,571 Moldovan women who’d been trafficked out of the country and then escaped or were rescued and returned home (another thirty-five were either trafficked internally—say, from a village to the capital, Chisinau—or were foreign-born brought into the country to work as prostitutes). “That’s only a fraction of the actual victims,” says Martin Wyss, who is in charge of IOM’s Chisinau office.

So narrow the focus even more. Crop out the big cities and all the small towns and villages and leave only Costesti. Shrink the whole globe to the cluster of mud roads and stone houses where Zina and Veronica once briefly dreamed of flashing Russian windows. There is a social-service agency here called Compassion, which means “compassion,” and it is run out of an old concrete community center by a sturdy middle-aged woman with short gray hair named Elena Merzeica. She was born in Costesti, and her parents were born in Costesti, and for many years she was the village librarian, so she knows almost everyone who lives there, and she will help anyone who asks: old people who need food and young people who need to learn how to use computers and kids who just need something to do and, especially, women like Zina and Veronica. She recognizes them as soon as they return, knows what has happened to them even before they tell her. “You didn’t even have to ask,” she says. “It was written on their faces.”

She recognizes those faces because she’s seen so many exactly like them in Costesti. Since 2000, Compassion has taken in fifty-three women and girls who’d been forced into prostitution. That’s the hard count from one village of about 10,000 people—the equivalent of every girl on the Hope, Arkansas, high school cheerleading squad, softball team, and soccer team, plus the basketball team’s starting five, being snatched away. And it is still only another ping through the fog. How many women never came home? How many came home and were too ashamed to ask for help, too ashamed to be labeled a prostitute in a place where it is not uncommon to raise a bloody sheet the morning after a wedding, the flag of the virgin bride? “Multiply by five,” a Western diplomat in Moldova says, “or ten. You won’t be wrong, because no one knows.”

THERE ARE DAYS, AND NOT ENOUGH OF THEM, when Ion Bejan drives north out of Chisinau to the village where he was born, where his parents’ house still stands, vacant now but immaculate, every wall and dish exactly where it should be, where it’s always been. A nearby family of Baptists keeps it that way for him, like a museum, like a sanctuary. Bejan goes there to settle into a chair and close his eyes and empty his mind for a little while, maybe walk the edges of the fields he rents out to tenant farmers and allow his past to wrap around him like an old, worn blanket. “It restores my soul,” he says. He stays only a few hours, because the drive back to Chisinau is long and his wife and kids are waiting and he has to be in an office—early the next morning—at which point his soul will begin to be depleted again.

Bejan is the cop in charge of countertrafficking in Moldova. He has twenty-seven officers working for him, but he ultimately is the one responsible for arresting the traffickers and chronicling their crimes. He is a block of a man with enormous, thick-fingered hands.
and coal black hair swept back on a big, square head, a physical specimen apparently designed to intimidate. Yet he is gregarious by nature and capable of being quite gentle, which his job often requires because the victims he interviews, the women he needs to testify against the bad guys, have been so horribly traumatized.

The woman imprisoned for four years in a cell of a room, nine feet square, with a toilet and a shower and a mattress, forced to have sex with fifteen to twenty men every day, never allowed beyond the door—how does a cop coax her to trust him? "She didn't see the sunlight for four years," Bejan says. "She did not think, did not feel. She did everything automatically." Or the woman sold to a Turkish pimp for $3,000 who got pregnant because men pay more to have sex without a condom, after which the Turk, enraged that she hadn't taken her birth-control pills, beat her unconscious and gouged the fetus from her belly and held up the bloody mess as a warning to the other girls he owned—can she be soothed enough to tell that story in a courtroom, to say it out loud and make it real again? Or the young girl who believes the handsome stranger with the fancy car and some money in his pocket when he says he loves her, who believes she's found a rich boyfriend even after he sells her to a brothel across the border—how can a cop convince her that she's wrong, that a trafficker isn't the same as a boyfriend?

And how many times can he hear such stories before his soul begins to wither and he has to drive north to his sanctuary, before he has to escape, if only briefly, into his past?

In his past, Bejan did not want to be a cop. In his past, he was a dutiful Soviet citizen who did three years in the navy on a sub hunter out of Odessa and then went on to the university in Chisinau to study economics. He worked as an accountant while he continued at the university, earning an engineering degree next, then starting over in law school. The Soviets were good like that, giving education to smart young men such as Bejan.

And then there weren't any more Soviets. It happened so fast, or seemed so, the sprawling empire collapsing, all the republics suddenly set free or cut loose, depending how one looked at it. Independence is a beautiful theory, but it can be ugly in practice, especially in the beginning, when the rules aren't clear and the old economy collapses before a new one takes root. It did not go well for Moldova. "Unfortunately," Bejan says, and in such grand understatement that he allows himself a grim smile, "there were some mistakes made during this transition." The nation he watched being born—prior to 1991, Moldova had never really been a sovereign nation—seemed less a democracy than a kleptocracy, "chaotic and barbaric," he says. State-owned factories and businesses were grabbed by the apparatchiks who ran them for the Soviets, stripped down, cashed out. Gangsters backed by a contingent of Russian soldiers would soon claim an industry-rich strip on the eastern border. Transnistria, as a separate, outlaw republic (which still exists, albeit unrecognized by anyone but the Russians), Unemployment soared. The villages—which is to say, most of the country—were devastated. In Costesti, about 6,000 people in what was then a village of 17,000 were promptly unemployed. The croplands were turned over to private owners, but so what? No one had a tractor or fuel or money to pay laborers. The new currency, the leu, was supposedly in such short supply that it was distributed to the outlying areas as photocopies, and no one worried much about counterfeiting because there weren't any copiers. Overnight, Moldova became the poorest country in Europe.

That's when Bejan decided to become a cop, to take his university degrees and get himself assigned to the Ministry of Interior investigating economic crimes. It was both practical—the man needed a job, after all—and patriotic, a small and possibly futile effort to help save his new nation from looters.

Legions of other Moldovans, on the other hand, decided to leave. Thousands of them every month, tens of thousands each year, as many as a million in a decade, so many fleeing so fast that there was no way to keep track of them all. Most found legitimate work abroad, but some were just as surely trafficked, tempted with the promise of a job and then beaten into submission. It's obvious now—or of course women eager to leave a poor, broken little country would be easy prey for gangster pimps—but no one noticed at the time. No one cared. Each victim was merely another drop in the flood spilling across the border.

Until they started coming back. "Not by the dozens," says Bejan. "but by the hundreds, and some of them in coffins." He remembers seeing a critical mass in 1997 and understanding then what had happened, what was still happening. But there was nothing he could do, nothing any cop could do. Trafficking wasn't a crime in Moldova, and it wouldn't be for another five years.

**From top, Ion Bejan, Moldova's chief countertrafficking cop; Lilia Prajac, 32, whom he arrested for recruiting women and sending them to be whores in Turkey.**

This is what: an international trafficker looks like: female, petite, hair cut pixie-short and rinsed with cheap cinnamon dye, wearing a black jacket with a hood that she can zip up around her face, pull her entire head in like a turtle. Her name is Lilia Prajac, and she is 32 years old. Also, she cries easily.

Bejan has produced her like a prop, brought her from a cell in his station in Chisinau so she can confess her crimes—alleged, technically—to a magazine writer. He has already sketched the basics, explained how Lilia recruited girls in the rural north for a woman in Chisinau who then shipped them to brothels in Turkey. Lilia was paid $100 to $300 a head, more for the pretty girls with big breasts, less for the ugly and the chubby and she says they all knew they would be prostitutes. Bejan is not convinced of (continued on page 439)
that—indentured whoring is an impossible hard career sell, after all—and in any case, she says a recruit would be beaten if she changed her mind en route. Nor does he know how many women Lilea and her colleagues went out of the country in the past eight months, though the day she was arrested in April, a 19-year-old and two 25-year-olds were booked on the five o'clock flight to Istanbul.

An officer escorts Lilea into Bejan's office. Bejan comes out from behind his desk and speaks to her softly, as if she were a frightened child. He tells her she is going to put handcuffs loosely around her wrists, not because she's dangerous but because he thinks she'll flinch against her black sleeves will make a better picture for the foreign photographer. Apparently, anyway. Everything is being said in Romanian, and by the time each word is translated, the cuffs are out and Lilea's lip is quivering and the photographer is saying. No, this really isn't necessary, but by then it's too late: Lilea's face disappears inside her zippered hood, which begins to puff like a nylon lung because she is sobbing.

On paper, in the black and white of official statistics, Bejan and his men have destroyed the trafficking syndicates operating out of Moldova. From 2002, when such crimes were finally made illegal, until April 2005, they arrested 839 people for trafficking in human beings, trafficking in children, or pimping. In that same period, 179 were convicted of one or another of those crimes (which, in a bit of self-congratulatory statistical computation, is exactly equal to the number of "trafficking networks liquidated!").

Off the page, in the gray shades of actual cases, they've grabbed a lot of people like Lilea. In the brief moments after she's been photographed and before she's crying too hard to speak, Lilea explains how she used to support her crippled son by driving to Moscow and buying $1,000 worth of goods to sell in her village, for which she would have to pay $500 to bring past the guards at the border. Talking girls into Turkish brothels simply paid better. A crime, sure, but legally and morally. But can she really be considered an international gangster? In league with arms dealers and drug smugglers? Or take the other women Bejan arrested at about the same time, Raisa Goraenscasa, 70 years old and the alleged ringleader of a trio-person crew who smuggled people out of the country with bogus documents identifying them as members of the National Federation of Artistic Gymnastics—a headline the next day read SLAVE TRADE NETWORK UNCOVERED IN MOLDOVA.

Really? Is she Moldova's Mo Barker? Or is she an old lady making a few bucks by, according to Bejan's dossier, "recruiting people...whose wish was to leave the country?"

Bejan and his men are earnest, but they are utterly ineffectual. No one disputes that international trafficking is controlled by seriously bad guys who by definition constitute some level of organized criminal networks—after all, it requires at least two people to get someone out of Moldova and into a foreign brothel. The problem in a place such as Moldova, though, is catching and convicting them, moving beyond the flummery and the lackeys like Lilea, who are arguably as pitiable as the girls they snare. This is not Bejan's fault. Even if he and his men are squeaky-clean (and aid workers and foreign legal advisers believe they are), the rest of the country isn't. The U.S. State Department, in its most recent summary of trafficking in Moldova, reports that it is "widely suspected"—diplomats speak for "We know it's true because it's so damned obvious"—that trafficking investigations have been limited, "due in some instances to pressure from local officials at higher levels in the government." In the same paragraph: "Despite confirmed allegations of trafficking-related corruption among some low-enforcement officials, the government took no action against these officials." There are corrupt cops, corrupt prosecutors, corrupt bureaucrats, even a village mayor who reportedly collected $50 for every pretty girl he put on a bus to Macedonia. Meanwhile, there are actual hard-core gangsters roaming Moldova.

Against all that, Bejan has only twenty-seven officers—the drug unit, by comparison, has a hundred—who are badly paid, barely trained, and ill-equipped; until the Americans gave him six Mitsubishi 4x4s and a couple of sedans, his squad traversed Moldova's deserted roads in one Soviet-era jalopy and public buses. "They can only go after the low-hanging fruit," one Western trafficking expert says. And if they try to go for the big, ripe fruit? "Best case, you're fired," the expert says. "Worst case, you're dead." Even the arrests the antitrafficking cops do make—all 839 of them since 2002—are in the end largely pointless. Moldovan law is officially brutal on traffickers, with sentences starting at seven years in prison and mixing out at life. In practice, no one does life. In fact, hardly anyone does time at all. Of ninety-five convictions last year, for "crimes related to trafficking in human beings," a mere sixteen were for trafficking in adults and seven for trafficking in children; only thirteen of those traffickers were sentenced to prison, and none for more than sixteen years. The rest, 75 percent, were for the far less serious charge of pimping, which seems odd considering Bejan's men arrest more than twice as many suspects for trafficking as pimping.

"The judiciary is one of the most corrupt entities in the country," says a diplomat who's worked in Moldova for years. That's an enormous institutional problem, yes. But break it down, reduce the appalling statistics to an inch of a name, to a single woman beaten and raped and sold overseas, rescued and come home, now finally brave enough to testify. Stand next to her when the judge reduces the charge to pimping. Then listen when she tells him, "I was a victim. And now you've made me a whore."

Now go tell other victims they should testify, too.

There's this kid in Chisinau, a boy maybe 10 years old, begging outside the Hotel Dedeman or in the park across Pushkin Street, in the plaza by the little cathedral. He hunches around, one hand out, and he grunts more than he speaks—"mister uh uh uh mister uh uh"—because he's stoned out of his skull on glue furnes. He's there every night and most mornings, too, like a tiny zombie, dirty and alone and only half-conscious. There's another kid just like him on Varlaam Street, down by the bus station, and a small flock of them haunting Stefan cel Mare park, and...hell, they're scattered all over Chisinau, all over the country, abandoned by parents who've left Moldova. Bejan guesses there are 25,000 such children in Moldova, a figure that is low and apparently nothing more than a rough estimate. Diplomats say a more reasonable estimate is over 125,000, who've been either orphaned or, more commonly, left behind by parents who've gone abroad, either for legitimate work or coerced by traffickers.

"The effects of trafficking" Bejan says, "will be felt for ten, fifteen years." He means those abandoned kids, but only partly. All this has happened with alarming speed: In only fourteen years, sex trafficking has wreaked—"is wreaking"—enormous damage not only on individual women but on the entire country. By one estimate, 80 percent of the trafficked women manage to return are neither too old or too reproducingly damaged to have children, and the physically healthy ones often suffer such severe mental and emotional traumas that they're incapable of proper parenting anyway. Combine that with the general exodus, officially between 300,000 and 1 million since independence, and Moldova is threatened with a long-term population crisis.

It is as if the country is collapsing in upon itself. The capital city is weakly rebounding, but the only major areas are a medieval shambles. The unemployment spike that followed independence never receded (officially, rates vary from 6.8 to 11.1 percent, but nobody in Moldova really believes that; aid workers and migration experts put the rate at closer to 50, 60, even 70 percent), and that, in turn, bred all the other textbook social ills—alcoholism and domestic violence and divorce—that thrive among the poor. Then the working-age population fled, which only exacerbated the problems: Moldova's sole natural resource is its land, but it's useless if there are no laborers to tend the fields. And while foreign workers send back almost half a billion dollars every year, hardly any of that money is invested in new businesses to nudge the economy along.

And so the cycle continues, a disaster feeding upon itself and, in turn, feeding the sex
The sex trade part II continued

Trade. Moldova is still the poorest country in Europe. People still want to leave, are still desperate to leave, so desperate they'll leave their children behind to do it. And some of them—again, no one knows exactly how many—will be snatched by the traffickers.

A decade ago, it was easy for the traffickers.

No one was paying attention. Sex slavery? Who'd even heard of such a thing? The newspaper ads for waitresses in Italy or dancers in Bonnau requested "pretty girls with no hang-ups" but what did that mean? Why would a boy of 15 years old in a village without running water or electricity have any hang-ups other than wanting to eat? Over the past five years, though, as it became clear the cops and the courts couldn't stop the trade, Moldova's been awash with prevention programs (paid for almost exclusively by the charity of nonprofits and foreign aid). The International Organization for Migration arranged a screening for nearly every schoolgirl of "Luga+", a Swedish film about a fictional Russian girl trafficked into prostitution. La Strada, another aid group that shares office space with IOM in Chişinău, set up a hotline for girls to call if they've been offered an overseas job that sounds too good to be true. Counselors tell them to ask basic questions: Will they be given a contract? Will they be allowed to call home?

More than 10,600 girls have dialed that number since September 2001. The staff at "La Strada" are certain some traffickers have changed, too—just look how the ads have changed. "Local contracts" they promise. "You will be able to call home!" (Context is everything, of course. Olesea*, who was sold to a brothel after being lured to Moscow for a construction job, was indeed allowed to call home. One month after she told her mother all was well, that she was having a great time, that she would send money home soon. Then the pimp pointed a gun at her head made her hang up the phone.)

The promises are so easy to believe because the girls are so eager to leave. Liubka* sold herself to a trafficker for $300. "I was young and I wanted to be free," she says. "And I didn't want to make this money..." So she took her mother to a restaurant. "I thought she was going to be happy for me. She was not..."

Revenko drove to the airport. The guy who chartered the plane had gotten spooked and disappeared, leaving the girls behind. They were all young, none more than 20, most of them bland, all quite pretty. And they were pissed. "Their first reaction to me was very negative," Revenko says. The girls told her they had real jobs waiting for them, and they waived their contracts at her to prove it. "Crappy pieces of papers," she says, not worth the ink that printed the words: The girls all believed they were going to work as cocktail waitresses in Kabul.

How do you tell them they're wrong, that they've been played for fools, that they're lucky—lucky—that their plane never left the ground? They won't believe it. They won't believe where they were going is worse than where they are.

Zina and Veronica are in the apartment in Krasnodar late on a winter afternoon. The Gypsies are telling them to go to work, go to the strip club and dance naked and have sex with strangers. They have done this every afternoon for more than a year. Sometimes the Gypsies say that if the girls behave, if they do what they're told and don't make trouble, they will be allowed to go home soon. They never say how soon, though, and soon never comes.

Zina feels different today. Worse. She doesn't know why, but her heart is pounding. She can't breathe, and she is sweating even though she is cold. She tells the Gypsies she's sick. She tells them she can't go to the club.

The Gypsies beat her. She knew they would, because they have beaten her and Veronica and all the other girls so many times before. Only it's worse now. She is beaten bloody, almost unconscious. One of the pimps drags her to the door, throws her into the street. "I can't do anything with you," he says. "Just go away."

Now she is alone. Zina has no money, no passport, nowhere to go.

So she goes to the police. This is a terrible risk. The Gypsies told her long ago that the police would not help her even if the police aren't corrupt, what will they see when they look at her? A face? A petty criminal who snuck into the country with no papers? Zina's been in that club for a year. Now she's a victim? How can she explain that? Can any woman anywhere explain such a thing? One of the reasons it is impossible to quantify the victims of international sex trafficking is the fact that it is international. Laws and mores shift from country to country, and the serious crime of sex slavery is always marked as either a petty nuisance or a perfectly legal business. In Germany, for instance, authorities last summer were building wooden huts to accommodate the 40,000 prostitutes expected to find refuge in the country for the 2009 World Cup, if only to keep them from scrounging in the streets. Common sense—as well as several studies that show that a correlation between legalization and trafficking—suggest at least some of those women were forced to show up. But


Page 63: Photograph of a group of people standing in a street.

Page 64: Illustration of a map showing the locations of various countries.

Page 65: Image of a street scene with people walking around.

Page 66: Photograph of a group of people standing in a street.

Page 67: Illustration of a map showing the locations of various countries.


The woman's name has been changed.

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CORRECTION

In the June issue, page 62 refers to white sex workers as "pimps." JAPIS is a registered trademark owned by Star Line Haven, Ltd.
It's never easy for a victim to come home. Some of them, usually the ones who've been rescued and repatriated, don't want to be home, insist they want to go back to their "boyfriends," their pimps. Change the context just a little and psychologists would call it battered woman syndrome, or maybe Stockholm syndrome. "It's not because she's afraid," says Ana Revenco, the president of La Strada's office in Moldova. "It's because she doesn't want to do with this freedom!"

Yet freedom is relative. Trafficked women go home to husbands who call them whores; children who no longer recognize them, to babies they can no longer cope with. They return to the same villages where their traffickers—the lackeys and thugs who sent them abroad—still live, where they are intimidated and shamed and stigmatized. They come back dejected and pregnant and racked by anxiety and nightmares. And even if psychologists can treat them, even if job counselors can train them, they're still stuck in Moldova. So sometimes they are leaving again, hoping it will be better," says Alina Budei, a social worker at La Strada. "How do you tell a young girl not to do it, not to go? Too many of them see it as their last, best hope."

Zina and Veronica want only to leave Costesti. They move to Chisinau, where they decide they want a profession because that is the first question anyone asks when they look for jobs: What is your profession? Except the man hiring dishwashers in a small restaurant. He doesn't care if they have a profession, and he pays them enough to cover the rent on the tiny room they share. Most weeks, they have enough left over to buy food.

They end the story there. But then there's more. Veronica should tell it, but she won't. Elena Mereacre, the woman who runs Compassion, whispers it later.

Veronica was in love. With a priest, Russian Orthodox, a man she met in Chisinau. They were going to be married. The priest could never understand, why, though, why Veronica wouldn't take him back to her village, introduce him to her mother. So one day he went by himself, and the villagers saw the stranger and asked who he was, and he told them, and they told him about the Gypsies who beat Veronica in her garden. Then the priest went to Veronica and asked her why she'd been beaten.

Veronica told him: Was she dreaming? Or was she just desperate for someone to understand?

The priest left her that night.

The next (and final) installment of "The Sex Trade" will explore the world of American sex tourists in Costa Rica, a country where prostitution thrives because it is legal.

SEAN FLYNN is a GQ correspondent. With additional reporting by AREN VER.

mother, Galyss, and moving into finance and dadhood. (Tom is the youngest of four children, the others all girls.)

Brady professes to be "intrigued" by the prospect of running for office and hedgingly avers that "if the opportunity comes, hopefully, I'll be ready to kindle delve into that."

Last year, unwittingly or not, he did kindle delve into that, sitting in Laura Bush's box during President Bush's State of the Union address, nestled between Joyce Rumson and Alma Powell in what many observers took to be a tacit endorsement of the incumbent presidential ticket. A Bush staff member mailed the Drudge Report to crow, "It was a touchdown from Kerry's own 40-yard-line!"

Brady insists his appearance was apolitical. "I was invited," he says. "I thought, 'What an honor. I'm an American. I'm getting to sit with the first lady of the United States at the State of the Union.' I thought it was one of the coolest things I've ever done." He also shoots down as "totally untrue" a D.C. rumor that he was set to publicly endorse Bush last year until Kraft, whose contributions to the Democratic Party far outweigh his contributions to the GOP, talked him out of it.

Although he says he has yet to sort out his party affiliation, Brady does keep making little sorties into the political arena.

While in Washington for the White House Correspondents' dinner in May, he taped a segment for ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos in which he said, "I enjoy the greater good, I think, of what this country has to offer... The things that I feel are fulfilling for me are beyond, you know, throwing a football. It's making influence in people's lives. And if that's politics, that's politics.

Unfortunately, that was about as eloquent as he got. With no Bellhicks-We-Can-Fix-It, no.Wilson-Drew weighting the expectations, Brady came off as woefully out of his element. "I didn't shine it a whole lot, to tell you the truth," he says of his performance on the program. "They weren't the normal round of questions that I usually get, and there were definitely some things in there where I thought, Oh man, I wish I had studied up a little bit more on that. They were asking me about Social Security reform and the Terri Schiavo case, a lot of questions I didn't have really confident answers to, and I'm trying to pretend I know exactly what's going on. You can make a pretty big ass of yourself."

So the baby kissing and the rubber-chicken circuit can wait. Starting with the season opener against the Raiders on September 8, Brady's got a title to defend and a narrative to subvert, the one that says it's someone else's turn—Manning's, Vick's, or Ben Roethlisberger's. "I was talking to my dad the other day," he recalls, "and I said, 'Dad, you know, the first Super Bowl we won, everybody was like, 'Holy cow! You guys beat the Rams, and they were unbelievable!' And the second Super Bowl, against Carolina, it was like, 'This is a great franchise to beat, great coach, what a great way to do it.' Then, when we won a third one, it's like, 'All right—we've seen enough of them! There's gotta be somebody else. This is getting old.'"

But then Brady resorts to a signature strategy: humility in the face of overwhelming success. "By no means have I ever thought I could just wake up and roll out of bed and just go play professional quarterback," he says. "I have to work really hard at it. I enjoy working, I enjoy the classroom. I enjoy the off-season program. I enjoy—"

I cut him off, unable to take any more of his Patriot-way goodness. "What don't you enjoy, Tom?" I say, a little too bitterly.

Brady laughs. "I know, I know, it's part of my personality," he says. "I just fit very well into the scheme of things."

GQ correspondent DAVID KAMP wrote about Paul Gigante in the June issue.

SEPTEMBER.05.GQ.435
Where They Love Americans... for a Living
There's an expat in a bar called the Blue Marlin, which is on the ground floor of a pink hotel in downtown San José, Costa Rica. He used to be a detective, did a bit of vice, enough to know how the world works, how people think. It's late, and he's drinking gin.

"These girls," he says, waving his glass at the chicas. The place is packed with chicas. "They average out at, what? An eight and a half? Nine?"

He's partial to Latin women. Make it seven.

"Okay, seven. But, c'mon, a lot of them are beautiful!"

Conceded, assuming your taste runs to python-tight clothing. And, you know, prostitutes.

"Now look at the guys." Another sweep with the glass. Almost every man in the place is a gringo. "Guys like them, to get a girl like one of these in the States, they've gotta have three things. They've gotta have a good job. They've gotta have a lot of money. And they've gotta be a nice guy."

The expat takes a drink, studies the gringos again. "All these guys," he says, "they've probably got one of those things. They might even have two of those things. But I guarantee you, none of them have all three."

When you're not drunk and the place is almost empty, this is what it looks like. There are tables just inside the door to the right, three rows of them between the windows fronting the street and the wooden rail that keeps people from tumbling off the raised platform that holds the main bar, which is huge, two peninsulas poking out in the shape of an upside-down U. There are TVs bolted to the walls and tuned to sports channels, because this is ostensibly a sports bar, and there are fish—stuffed fish, carved fish, and sculpted fish—mounted above the liquor shelves and dangling from the ceiling, because the "World Famous" Blue Marlin is also ostensibly a fisherman's bar, even though it's hours away from any place where you might actually catch a fish. Also, it's a gringo joint: There's a crinkled American flag, like the ones newspapers printed after September 11, taped to one wall, and dozens of shoulder patches, left behind by American cops and firemen, tacked up behind the bar—San Francisco, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Boynton Beach, Wayneboro, a hundred other little towns you've never heard of.

Eleven o'clock on a Monday morning during the Costa Rican rainy season and it's all white boys at the bar, eight of them, except for one wobbly local named Fernando that the security guys keep trying to pour out the door.

Seven girls sit on stools in the back corner, smoking cigarettes and looking bored. Six more are off the to the left, just beyond the casino, in the lobby of the Hotel Del Rey. They're working, but not very hard. Not much to choose from this early—not for them, not for the men.

Wait a little while—say, five o'clock—when the sun's still clawing through the rain clouds over San José and before the streets are lousy with beggars and peddlers. By cocktail hour, the place is jammed. There are a few ticos and the biggest Asian kid you've ever seen, but the rest of the men here are gringos. There are young guys in tank tops and old guys wearing socks in their sandals and a whole mess of graying middle-aged guys in Powder blue and floral-print shirts. They've got the bar surrounded three deep, and most of the tables are gone, too.

And they're not even half the crowd.

The chicas—Christ, there's a lot of them. Black girls and brown girls and beige girls and even a couple of white girls, brunt and blond and redheaded and skinny and chubby and tall and short and stocked and not-as-stacked, and every one of them single.

Are they looking at you? Hell yes. A hundred brown eyes turn on you the second you walk through the door, trying to catch your attention before you even get past the security guard with the metal detector, like you've Brad Pitt or something. When's the last time that happened at the Bennigan's in Parsippany? Never, that's when.

Which is exactly why all these men are here. "San José is the very best place in the world to get laid," said Leon, who calls himself La Muerte (literally, Death) wrote a few years back in one of the bajillion or so field reports that pop up when you search "Costa Rica sex" on the Internet. Even then, in 2001, the Blue Marlin was legendary among a certain sort of gringo tourist—the sort who likes a wide selection of pretty, inexpensive women in a safe place where the bartenders speak their language. But why stop at the Blue Marlin? That's just one joint in a city of 300,000. There's Key Largo and Atlantis and all the other bars, and the strip clubs that hang billboards—THE NEW NIGHT CLUB KUMAR: OH, TEN!—in English along the highway from the airport, and the street corners and parks paroled out by gender and age and fetish. Cheap blow jobs from old whores with drug problems? The Red Zone, a few dirty blocks around the Central Market. Teenagers? There's four by the pay phones at the edge of Parque Morazan. Transvestites, transsexuals, queens? They've all got their own turf close by, and the cubbies all know exactly where they are. "It's very easy to become like a kid in a candy store when you first go to San José," as Death says. "There's so much available talent down there, and it's all done in wide-open public spaces. That's a great feeling, but don't lose your good sense in the original bliss."

Yeah, don't lose your good sense. Get a seat—one of the high tops by the bar rail is open. Have a drink. Take your time. The girls aren't going anywhere. Sure, every few minutes one leaves with a guy, wiggles out the back toward the hotel lobby or out the front to a cab, but the selection never noticeably thins. The chicas, all
The Costa Rican government, of course, would prefer that its wedge of the Central American isthmus not be so well regarded among American men trolling for sex. The tourist board is much more enthusiastic about their beaches, rain forests, and volcanoes, and the country's official slogan—'No Artificial Ingredients'—would seem to have nothing at all to do with picking up prostitutes in bars. True, every horny American who comes down here is renting a hotel room, eating in restaurants, probably drinking, maybe gambling, and definitely paying the $26 departure tax on his way out; at least some of the money he's spending on sex goes back into the local economy. But what self-respecting country wants to fluff for those dollars? "You might be sure that this type of tourist is not wanted here," says one Costa Rican official. "We only want the people that want to spend a 'Pura Vida' time."

Yet the whoresmongs came in droves anyway. And by the early 1990s, they'd branded Costa Rica with a reputation as a sex haven—a reputation that stuck and then exploded near the end of the century. Why that happened isn't complicated. For one thing, prostitution is legal, or at least it isn't illegal. The business isn't taxed or regulated like, say, casinos or bars, but there is no law against an adult selling his or her body for cash. So you're not going to come down to San José and get busted by an undercover cop. Prostitution is also indignantly rampant and culturally, if quietly, acceptable—the majority of those who pay for sex are locals—so you don't feel all that awkward with your arm around a whore.

For another thing, Costa Rica is close, a four-hour flight out of Atlanta. The hard-core sex destinations—Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines—require major investments in airfare and flying time, twenty-two hours to Manila on a direct flight, twenty-three to Bangkok. Costa Rica, on the other hand, can be done in a long weekend. It's relatively safe, fairly well developed, and friendly toward Americans. Plus, with the notable exception of San José, it's a lush little emerald of a nation with plenty of other plausible reasons to visit. Tell your wife you're going fishing with some buddies, spend a night at the Holiday Inn, two more in Jacó or another one of the beach towns now overrun with prostitutes, then fly home and brag about all the big ones you caught. Who has to know?

Exactly how many tourists come here every year looking for sex is impossible to determine; "get laid" isn't one of the boxes that can be checked off under "purpose of trip" on the immigration form. But there are clues. Of the 500,000 or so Americans who visit the country each year, for instance, 25.8 percent are single men. There are also at least eleven companies that offer either complete package tours to San José, including airfare, or lodging, transportation, and women once you land. Solo Adventures bills itself as "a Full Service Travel Agency specializing in pre-designed adult companion packages to all regions of Costa Rica for the single (body or mind) Gent." Bendricks International Men's Club will fly you down, put you up in one of eight luxury resorts for three nights, and supply "companion escorts" for $1,995. "You can enjoy the private company of South American women who can satisfy even the most active imagination in one of the world's great adult travel vacation destinations for men," the Bendricks Web site says. (The company won't say how many men they take down each year. In fact, you have to pay the desk in the Miami office won't say anything at all—he just shakes his head at every question.)

But the commercial tours account for just a fraction of the gringos renting women in Costa Rica. (Only the truly inept and incompetent need to hire a middleman anyway.) Aside from the dedicated sex tourists, there are legions of part-timers, guys who come for some other reason and take a side trip, so to speak. The problem is, how to separate the dedicated 'mongers from the dabbler? The

Where It's Legal (and Where It's...Not)

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Sources: U.S. Department of State Global Prostitution Survey; Nevada State Legislative Council Bureau; Protection Project
for the women. But those are a minuscule proportion of the business, the vast majority of which is carried out in dirty hotels and strip clubs, in cars on and street corners, and almost entirely cash transactions between strangers who prefer anonymity—the very definition of unsafe and unregulated. In poor countries with thriving sex industries, enforcing any semblance of order would be impossible. Even if police corruption and criminal gangs magically vanished, places like Thailand or the Philippines have neither the manpower nor the financial incentive to monitor hundreds of thousands of prostitutes and johns. Even developed countries who attempt some form of regulation and encourage prostitutes to register have had dismal results. In the Netherlands, for instance, fewer than one in ten of an estimated 25,000 prostitutes have chosen to be officially licensed. Believing that will change, that it can change, is naive. Most prostitutes—the ones controlled by pimps or traffickers, the minors, the illegal immigrants—aren’t in any position to ask for government help, and the ones who are usually don’t want an official record of a profession they hope will be temporary. For all the blather about empowering sex workers, few women want prostitution on their résumés.

Moreover, legalizing it in any particular place—in other words, eliminating the risk of arrest and diminishing the immediate social stigma (at least for the men)—almost always increases demand, which in turn requires an increased supply. And since there are never enough local women clamoring to be prostitutes, especially in developed nations, they have to be imported. In the early 1990s, for example, an estimated 75 percent of Germany’s prostitutes had been shipped in from South America (a demographic that, since the fall of the Soviet Union, has been largely replaced by women from places like Russia, Romania, and the Ukraine). Common sense, as well as government statistics and a 2005 U.S. State Department report, suggests that at least some of those women were trafficked (that is, lured with the promise of legitimate jobs or simply forced) into the country by outlaw pimps—one of the problems legalization is theoretically meant to solve. What Paraguayan peasant—even if she truly wants to be a whore in Europe—has the money and the connections to get there and go into business for herself?

Or take the Czech Republic, where, for a decade, prostitution has been a misdeemeanor offense as widely enforced that it was de facto illegal (and a pre-legalization bill is currently awaiting a vote in parliament). In 2004 the Interior Ministry counted almost 900 brothels, 200 in Prague alone—dramatic growth for an industry that, one expert observes, was “almost nonexistent” in that country a decade ago. On weekends, the Czech border town of Cheb (population 32,000) is flooded with 10,000 German men who sample the prostitutes from Russia, the Ukraine, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Albania—all countries listed by the State Department as sources of trafficked women. And the profits, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, are collected by fifteen criminal gangs.

And then there’s Costa Rica. For such a beautiful little country that markets itself so aggressively to ecotourists and fishermen, it can’t seem to shake its reputation as a sex paradise. San José has long been the hub. Death called it “the very best place in the world to get laid” way back in 2001, after all, and apparently both the Chicago contingent and the Michigan Boys have been chartering down for more than ten years. Yet rather than being contained and controlled in the capital city, prostitution has expanded across the country, growing along with the crowds of tourists that have increased from 435,000 in 1999 to 1,450,000 last year. Prostitutes now shuttle to the ports on both coasts where cruise ships dock, and they’re part of the scenery in most of the beach towns.

Fifteen years ago, a tico named Jorge used to drive two hours over the mountains with his family to Jacob, a surf town on the Pacific coast and the closest beach to San José. Look at the place now. On a slow night in low season in the Butterfly Bar—an otherworldly joint that’s “World Famous,” which is apparently code for where a gringo can get a whore—twenty prostitutes are wasting their time on seven white guys and a couple of coeds who don’t stay long. When it closes, the girls move down the strip to Monkey Bar. Further down is Puncho Villa, where the kitchen in the downstairs club is open late, and the entrance to a strip club upstairs is around the corner. Two young guys, pale and preppy, come out with their arms around a couple of tall black women and grab a cab. Then there’s Città—16, tops—stumble up the street in slipper heels. (“You can always tell the prostitutes,” Jorge says. “They always look like they just got out of the shower. A really long shower.”)

There are no reliable estimates of how many are working in the country—since they’re not required to register, they can’t be counted, and the trade is highly seasonal—so the consensus among aid groups and Costa Rican NGOs is that there are more than enough, and more than before. The conservative guess is that half of those working the gringo crowd are foreigners, women imported from Nicaragua, Cuba, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and all the other Latin American countries with worse economies and fewer tourists. The U.S. State Department, meanwhile, lists Costa Rica as a source and destnation country for trafficked women, as well as a transit point for women trafficked from the Southern Hemisphere and Eastern Europe into the United States and other wealthy nations. And that’s in a place that would prefer the horny gringos stay home.

The barroom discussion about prostitution, on the other hand, isn’t a debate at all. It’s straightforward. It’s the expat cop sitting on a stool, waving his glass of gin at all the gringos, channeling their thoughts.

To get a girl like one of those in the States... it’s all about, you know, the cost, and the cost is all about who you are. That’s not true in Costa Rica. That’s not true in Costa Rica. Sex tourism is built on that very premise: These girls, the cheetas and the Eastern Europeans and the Southeast Asians, are different from American women, more willing, less judgmental, less observant to your Butt and your hairline, less about the fact that you’re the sort of guy who hires women to have sex with him. Norman Barry, a middle-aged American ex-patriot, gushed to the New York attorney general’s office, “I’m glad American men have the luxury of being able to pay for a woman to go to the beach and have sex with her.”

Cuba, where it’s illegal and the state runs it as a drug rehabilitation center, would be having the time of your life right here in mind-blowing, and everything else blowing, Angeles City.”

Change Filipina to Latin and the rest of it’s interchangeable. Endo Hehuan’s got its profile about “women who enjoy exciting an aura of sexual vibrancy.” Solo Adventures promises “stunning sensual women providing warm, friendly, and very personal intimate service.” The Web pages of freelancers extolling the purportedly genuine sensuality of Latin women run into the thousands.

Ken Fromblans, a consultant for Equality Now (the women’s rights organization that is currently just developing its treatment of Big Apple Shot Down), has been calling tour companies for almost a decade, posing as a potential client, listening to the pitches, even checking references with satisfied customers. It’s been a nine-year tape loop playing over the phone. “It’s talked about, I guess, like the guys in Ponce de León’s expedition talking about the Fountain of Youth.” He says, “You won’t believe it. Women treat themselves as you, as much sex as you want. You feel like Tom Cruise! They always say you’ll feel like Tom Cruise. Except for the guys who are really rich.”

They’ll tell you you’ll feel like Jordan Wayne.”

The level of self-deception is stupendous in April, for instance. (continued on page 201)
The government ministers would deny on camera that there was a problem, then the reporters would roll the tape, add some line about "trouble in paradise"—devastatingly effective television. "I know how the media works," Chavez says, and several times, because he has two brothers in journalism, which he also says several times.

He also knows that those foreign reporters were right and that his government was wrong—tactically and morally—to say otherwise. So now he's saying the opposite. Confessing it, really, so aggressively and often that he seems almost to be doing penance for the whole country. He's a small, blustery man of 36, quite proud of his accomplishments since he took over the Sexual Exploitation Unit two and a half years ago. His 120-man department also covers juvenile gangs, auto theft, and, oddly, copyright infringement. When he started, only six of his men worked the sex beat, he says, sharing one car and never leaving San José. Now he has more than forty officers on the job, covering the entire country. Why, just that day his officers rousted a woman who was pimping girls out of a beauty salon. "Pimps and pedophiles," he says. "Those are my two enemies."

But not prostitutes. He is sympathetic: "Some girls who are doing this are students selling their bodies part-time." He is philosophical: "I don't think it would be worth going after prostitutes. Nonsense. Anyone can sell her body to someone else." He is practical: "To try to police what women do with their bodies, or what men do with their bodies, we would be a police state."

Valid points, all. He wouldn't exult himself well in the academic debate. But what about the real-world debate? What about those 16- and 17-year-old prostitutes, the ones the TV crews caught on video and the ones who are still in the park by the Holiday Inn? Don't they come with the territory? Isn't that why those signs are cluttering up the airport, making all the legitimate tourists skittish?

"Sometimes," he says, "I have my doubts.
Thoughtful pause. "Any man can make a mistake."

So no, all those airport signs, apparently, they don't mean it.

Chaves bails a cab. It's a long ride to his home on the outskirts of San José. He talks the whole way. About his 120 officers. About how helpful the United States and Britain have been. About his hatred of pimps and pedophiles. About his government finally admitting it has a problem with both.

The cab stops at his house. The chief of the Sexual Exploitation Unit tells the driver, who doesn't speak English, to go on to the Holiday Inn, then says good night. He gets out and closes the door.

The cab driver frowns at the lights. He turns back with his right hand. There's a small pink card between his fingers for a place called Scarlett's Gentlemen's Club.

"Titty?"

He knows enough English to get by.

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AWOL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 289

NO SYMPATHY. That, to Josh, was the obvious point. A deserter would never get no sympathy from nobody. Hey, it was the military. And he was a soldier. In a war. It isn't supposed to be no cakewalk. Besides, he'd signed up for it. That's the point everybody would land on. You volunteered for it. So where do you get off acting like you were some kind of prisoner?

There was plenty more to that line of thinking, all the stuff that no one would ever come out and say but he figured was more real than the fine print of the deal: You idiot! That's what it boiled down to. You idiot! Why did you volunteer for it? Why did you sign the contract to join that war? Take a look at the people who signed up for it, all them other boys doing their time with you in Ramadi. Where were they the brainiacs of America? Were they the first boys with rich parents paying them to get laid in them dorm rooms with them blond girls in hip-hugger jeans? Were they the marlin-drinking leggy dukes Bermuda shorts with boats and leather golf clubs? No, they were not. They were not like he was: poor and nondescript and too stuck about understanding the ways they could be duped. They were the ones the rulers could persuade to volunteer, play on greed (here's a $5,000 signing bonus) desperation (you got nothing else going dude) or a starving need for some damn duty. Patriotism! God bless America! Shave them head! Go out on there and join the other boys fighting for freedom.

In idiot!

That's how he felt. Listen, night after night in Ramadi, that's how he felt when he hadd. He finally got so used to mortar

attacks he could sleep through them, he slept in burned-out buildings, and when he would wake up he would have ashes all over him from the ceiling falling on him, and he would shit in a can and pour gas in and light it and stir. He got used to it.

But when he was feeling bad, his eyes were wide open to all the evil acts that he himself performed. Raiding all them houses. The first time, he was scared shitless. None of them had trained for anything like this. Riding in that truck toward the center of Ramadi at 4 A.M., he felt nostalgic for the days of de-fusing land mines back at Fort Carson, a job that by comparison now seemed downright quaint. That first night, when they got out of the track and approached the house, they heard a click, like someone was about to discharge a weapon inside. You were supposed to shoot, just shoot without thinking if you thought threatened; even if someone just threw a rock at you, you were supposed to open up and shoot. None of them exactly wanted to shoot, especially at a house where they figured there were civilians inside, so one of them threw the flashbang grenade in the front of the kind that explodes into a bright light, blinding everyone for thirty seconds so you can run and aim position. The six of them ran in, screaming like crazy, howling fear and madness, and there's nobody inside, nobody but this kid, probably 12, with his mom and his sister, covering their eyes in pain from the light, screaming. That's it. The soldiers screaming with all the adrenaline pumping. And the kid and the mom and the sister screaming. They can't speak English and the soldiers can't speak Arabic, so it's just all bloodcurdling screams. Shit, we were just about to pump rounds into three innocent people because of a click.

They never did find out what the click was or, for that matter, what they were even supposed to be looking for in that house, just as he would never know in all them raids, something like one hundred houses he busted into. You weren't allowed to ask questions. You weren't allowed to say, "Hey, under what suspicion are we zip-cuffing this dude and hauling him off while his wife and kid sit here crying and splitting on us?" Just like you weren't allowed to say nothing about other soldiers ransacking the houses, stealing jewelry, just taking anything they wanted, stuffing it in their pockets. You weren't allowed to say nothing, feel nothing, and don't dare make eye contact with any of them Iraqi civilians watching all this, lest you explode into remorse, explode into rage, head back to base, and just shoot up your own command. That's how we felt sometimes. That was the level of fury he felt for a military that had duped him into doing its evil work.

No sympathy.

There would never be sympathy for a guy who snapped out of it. Snapped to attention and said, New war, a second here, what we're doing here is wrong. And the way you got me in there, it was wrong. I never said I would do this. I didn't sign up to be a combat soldier. I signed up to build bridges. I never said I would sit around and watch you rob innocent people of their belongings and take their fathers away. I never agreed to help you go in and occupy somebody else's country. You tricked me into this.

A soldier is not allowed to think like that.