

mine to define

survivors

& sexworkers

SPEAK OUT!







Introduction

Dear reader,

You hold in your hand a rare resource put together by a few people working in the sex industry and who identify as survivors.


We decided to create this small zine to give a little space for survivors sex workers like ourselves to share their stories, analysis, and testimonies... Our lives are complex and often hard to put in to words due to the stigma, shame and guilt associated to both sex work and (sexual) abuse. And what sometimes makes it even harder are these un-nuanced discourses and debates on sex work and prostitution: Happy hooker or victim. Empowered or abused. Always one or the other. Never both, never neither.

Nothing is that simple. We are the ones that abolitionists use as statistics to win debates for more criminalisation. We are the few from the unproven mantra that the "large majority of prostituted women suffered sexual abuse in their childhood".

Our experiences are transformed into arguments to manipulate and lie and push for criminalisation. And those flawed and tired arguments force us to keep silent, to keep quiet, to keep those stories in our heads and not look for answers.

"You grew up in an abusive family and turned to prostitution?"
- You just become a useful cliché for abolitionists wanting to use your experience to further their agenda, reducing your life and agency to a story of victimhood and confusion.
"You were raped at work by someone posing as a client?"
- Another proof that the sex industry is the root of all patriarchal evil and should be abolished.

"You want to speak out about abuse and work from a



sex workers' rights perspective?" " Shhh... be quiet, you don't want to give more arguments to abolitionists do you?"

But we will not keep quiet. Nothing should stay secret. We learned this truth the hard way.

Our lives and experiences are a journey between different states from victimhood to resistance, resilience to healing. Few words, few submissions in a zine from a sex worker collective will not be enough to explore the complexities and uniqueness of our lives. But maybe it will be a start to dismantle this oppressive narrative that survivors working in the sex industry need rescuing and are unable to speak for themselves.

Sex workers survivors today speak out.

Can you listen to us?

Signed

Thomas and Princess

This zine contains people's personal experiences around abuse. Some of this is explicit in detail.



Not Afraid to Jump by wearenotvictims

It was just a second, when I realized how my mother could react to these things that my sista just said. That drove me crazy. How, how could she betray me in that horrible way? She said: Ieah, she took the money from the wallet of this guy, who was married. Actually, I couldn't remember that night very well, I really don't remember if I took it or I just picked it up from the floor. I was too drunk for these trivialities. But I remember something very well from the days after my mother knew what happened with that guy.

That girls don't take the money.

*

When I was a child, my father used to throw ping-pong balls to my face. It was supposed to make me more aware, to improve my reflex's. That was more or less the way that they educated me: be ready, you never know when you'll need to run. Be the best. Be the one. The best marks. The best intellect. Don't be like your mother, don't be a slave. Don't be straight, don't be a hole.

*

I was twelve, 'but she seemed sixteen' he exclaimed, finally.

My relation with my father was always difficult, full of love and rage. But at those times I could find the ways to relate to him: be his daughter. And everything that goes with that.

So then there was the wedding. In a little town, where my mother in law grew up, very countryside.

I spent the whole day with the other feminized bodies, getting 'ready'=feminizing our bodies, together. I was happy, with all this community: at that time I was still respecting the rules of this community, the community of good girls. They put me in a fancy bra, a beautiful red dress and lot of make up. I always liked to dress up, with everything.

So finally I was there, ready. Ready for what? For who?

[...]

I was supposed to sit with the young ones. There was this guy, big blue eyes.
He wasn't at our table.
'Do you take cocaine?'

[...]

I was in the car.
I don't remember what happened.
I remember taking cocaine in a car, with this guy. Then I was absolutely disseminated, at peace. I had his dick inside of me, but that was the least important part.
It was so pleasant.

Then the next thing that I remember was the gaze of the others: the men, the girls, my father. I remember everyone being ashamed of me, of my behavior, of myself, of what I represented.

I crossed the border.

And when you cross you just have two options in this mother-fucking binary world: victim or executioner.
What If I was both? I wanted it. I wanted risk, drugs. Probably I didn't want the dick, but what if it's worth it?
Then, everything. My family, the police, my whole family again. I didn't say anything, I just wanted to listen to music, and forget. I was fine, in my self, but not in the middle of this squad of blame. My father was so ashamed, he just tried to convince himself that I had something in my body, 'too much testosterone. That's why you look for risk and violence' The guy was ashamed as well, 'but she looks sixteen'.

*

No, I don't want to go sleep.
I know.
I know how to lick my wounds.

*

When I start to work as a sex worker the summer had almost ended. I remember being with my best friend on our bikes, with our mini skirts and full faces of make up under our helmets. It was so amazing to start together, us, punk-queer-femmes crying and laughing together, sharing information, clients, experiences. Accompanying each other to our first clients, waiting, and then talking about how it was over a double chocolate ice-cream. It



was awesome how we had the same questions, the same surprises about what this work looks like.

First we started work in a Club, soooo ugly and bad paid. Thank goodness my friend was more active at this point and looked for agencies. So we start there, again.

I remember, in the beginning I was a little insecure about my own body. Thinking things like... my bf was just the most beautiful girl ever, and myself... well, I'm only ok. After some time, I realized that my body is awesome like every body and that this idea of sex work as being only for super models is absolutely wrong.

I'm pretty sure that sex work helped me to see my body as beautiful as it is.

*

My grandma always told me that I just like to escape places. When I was a baby, they couldn't stop me when I jumped from the cradle. Same when they took me in their arms: every time I would burst out laughing when I was wriggling down. After a while, when I was a teenager, my only wish was to jump away from home. Actually, I did it when I was six and tried again when I was twelve years old. Finally I succeeded when I was sixteen and my mother and I agreed about it.

*

The first time that I earned real money having sex with someone was when I was fifteen. I was walking towards my home-bar where every punk person from my city ends up at some point. It was like my house.

A guy stopped me. He asked me where he can get a drink. I invited him to our bar.

I was drinking my big jar of beer when he finally arrived. He asked me if I take cocaine. I said yes. So we went to the bathroom, like always.

We took it and then he started to touch me, like always.

Then he wanted me to give him a blowjob. I said no, I don't like that, but you can put it in here.

Like always.

When we left the bathroom, I had the cocaine inside my blood, just as I wanted it in this moment. We where chatting for a while and then he snuck fifty euro into my pocket. I was absolutely surprised. Wow, such an amazing guy. He gave me cocaine AND money. In my mind at the time, I was just used to changing sex for drugs -like always. Now that I'm a sex worker I realize how much money I could have earned if I had had the tools and the feminism that I now have [and how much precariousness I could have avoided]



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For a long time I thought that being a feminist meant not being affected by anything. Being strong.

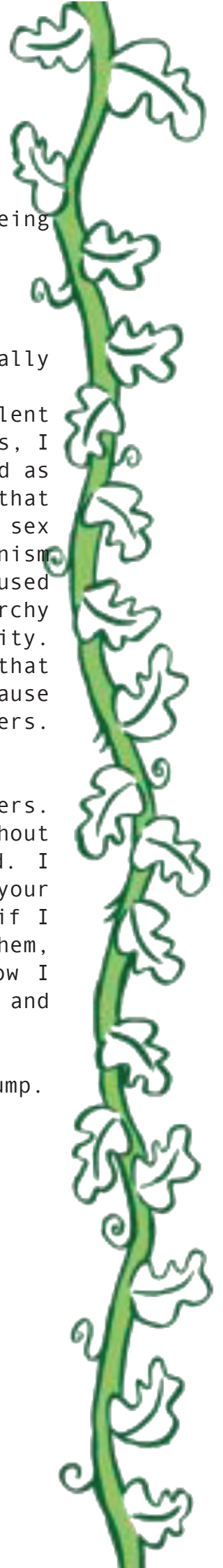
So I did.

Now I've learnt that feminism and anti-capitalism is actually about being affected and affecting others...consciously.

So I started to talk about these things, like abuse, or violent situations in the micro levels. Then, over all of these years, I realized that almost 99% of the people who have been educated as a woman have rape and abuse stories. Every feminized body that I know has had this kind of experience. So probably, every sex worker has as well, but not because of this false determinism that some people would love us to believe, where every abused poor woman 'ends up' doing sex work, but because of patriarchy and male domination in the world which punishes our femininity. Like myself in this wedding: they dress you up as the girl that they want you to be, and then, because you are not -or because you don't want to be, they punish you for crossing their borders.

One of the things I've learnt from this job is about borders. Maybe it's too naive to think that we can live in a world without borders, or this shit that borders are just in your mind. I think there are some borders that are invisible because of your education. For example, I thought when I was younger that if I take drugs, in the street at night, and I can't pay for them, that I'm supposed to be touched or fucked or whatever. Now I understand that the point is to know where the borders are and how you can approach the how, what and when.

I know where the borders are, and still I have no fear to jump.





Dear Amnesty International by SWOU Members

Dear Amnesty International,

We, the undersigned, would like to express our opinion about Amnesty International's policy on sex work. We are sex workers, prostitutes, escorts. We exchange sex for money. We sometimes do or did for other things like a roof or a sandwich or a mini-bottle of vodka.

These are our testimonies. It will not be backed up by evidence and links and research. We are pretty sure that you will already have been pointed 130 times to UNAIDS or The Lancet.

This letter has been written by people of all genders who have sold sex in different settings and for different reasons. We are also survivors of sexual abuse and sexual violence, sometimes in the context of sex work, sometimes in other contexts.


We sold sex because we didn't want to work at McDonalds or didn't want to keep working at McDonald's; we sold sex because we needed money to buy enough alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of having been raped and abused by family members; we sold sex because we were too fragile emotionally to work under an abusive boss; we sold sex because there was little alternative; we sold sex because we were promiscuous and had no problem charging for it; we sold sex because working 40 hours a week stacking shelves did not leave us time to care for our children.

We sold sex to live.

We decided to write this letter because we object to the instrumentalisation of survivors' voices.

We read the letters, the outrage, the columns: "Survivors speak out against Amnesty's policy to protect the human rights of pimps and punters."

We respect these survivors' voices as we respect everyone's right to define their own experience. But, no. NO. This mysteriously funded



network of survivors travelling the world and holding press conferences (from the European Parliament last year to London Premiere Inn Hotel today) and having apparently unlimited access to media does not speak for us and only represent themselves.

We were raped. Beaten up. Abused. We do not often tell our stories anymore because we are sick of telling them. For many of us, it took years to get over the trauma of that violence. Years of addiction, years of self harm, years of therapy, years of activism with other survivors – feminists, anti-rape campaigners, sex worker sisters and brothers.... The healing was sometimes as painful as the violence itself. But we survived.

This is where the word “survivor” comes from. People (of all genders) who had been subjected to childhood sexual abuse or other forms of child abuse or domestic violence did not want to identify as victims anymore. Yes, we had been victims, but we would not remain victims. We had a strength inside us, a will, a power that kept us fighting, healing, surviving.... And we had love. Sometimes from our community, our friends, maybe a family member, or ourselves. Sometimes sex work was a form of self harm, sometimes it was a form of healing, often it was just work. Some of us have left sex work, others continued, as we made our peace with ourselves and our past.


We write to you today to say that whatever our experience in sex work, good, bad, “empowering” or traumatic, we support Amnesty International’s policy on the decriminalisation of sex work.

We are for decriminalisation because there isn’t one reason that people sell sex and any form of criminalisation makes us, sex workers, more vulnerable and less able to make our livelihood.

We know why we sold sex but we will not speak for others. That some survivors – those who should know exactly why respecting someone’s voice, history and self-determination is so important – claim to speak for all of us is incomprehensible to us.

Many of us, when we were raped and abused, tried to speak out, tell our sisters maybe, our best friend or the nice lady from the school. Anyone. (Very few of us tried to tell the cops though. Those same racist, sexist and rapist cops that abolitionists are so eager to see given more powers to raid our workplaces and arrest our clients...) Most of the time we weren’t heard. Sometimes we were ignored. Often we were told we deserved it. We said “No”. Our whole childhood was a flashing fucking “NO” but they did it anyway. And those people we tried to get help and support from were telling us: you said “yes” or if you didn’t say it, you meant it. “No means Yes”.

And now we hear the same stories but from those who should be on our side. Other survivors telling us, telling the world, that every act of selling



sex is rape. That when we consent to a sexual act for money, it is rape. That when we say "Yes", we mean "No". "Yes means No".

There is no difference – not one bit – between a rape denialist saying that a woman is lying about sexual violence and an abolitionist saying that a sex worker is suffering from false consciousness and doesn't know when she is being raped. Both are ignoring our lives, our realities, our truths. Both are part of the same patriarchal system that denies a woman's agency to define her own life and experiences.

We need survivors to stop pushing for the criminalisation of prostitution. There is no secret agenda or big pimp lobby behind the sex workers' rights movement. The sex workers demanding decriminalisation of sex work are just this: sex workers. And a large number of us are survivors from abuse at home, or in care, or on the streets and parks where we lived when escaping our homes.

Some of you have already changed your minds. And many of you will continue to change too. We understand the anger and the rage at the violence you survived. But this anger, this rage is itself turning into a violence that, like the violence we ourselves survived, is endangering us.

Listen to sex workers.

Listen to survivors.

Decriminalise sex work.

Signed

Sex worker members of SWOU of all genders



by Stephin

Back in January I had a bad experience with a client. He wilfully misunderstood much of what I'd negotiated with him and disregarded moments when I wanted to stop. This showed up in several ways throughout our session - for example, when he deep-throated me. I had previously agreed to this but when I'd had enough and needed to stop and tried to move my head away, he pushed it down and continued what he was doing until I threw up. There was other stuff, but the defining feature of our meeting was that he anally fisted me for almost an hour after I'd clearly stated I would not receive anal sex. Presumably he didn't think it counted as sex if there was no penis being inserted. He did not stop and held me back when I tried to pull away. When I verbally asked him to stop he said he would, but then carried on until he eventually came from masturbating with his other hand.

The session in total lasted two hours. Immediately afterwards I was in physical pain and felt stunned. This wasn't the first time I'd experienced something like this -the other times were not in work- but it was quite possibly the worst. I didn't -and still don't- know how to define what happened, I just knew it was bad. As we were putting on our clothes, he gave his evaluation of my gender, appearance and body and how they were a cause of disgust for him - I looked 'dirty' in my photos, I was diseased for doing some of the same things with gay men as I'd done with him, I had too much body hair but not enough hair on my head, I dressed like a man but didn't look enough like one to actually be one. I did not pass the bar of acceptability for either a man or a woman. I'm a trans guy and I advertise as one, but as I don't take hormones and haven't had surgery a lot of clients (and people in general) have trouble fully understanding this. Usually it doesn't bother me in the least what clients think I am as long as they pay, but this guy saw fit to actively ridicule my gender and express his contempt for my body after what he'd just done. I was shell-shocked from what had happened so by the time he gave his spiel about how disgusting I was I felt mentally disarmed and didn't know how to respond or defend myself. Later I thought of all the things I should have said.

After the session I got the bus home a teary mess. I rang another sex worker and talked about what happened and later that evening I met up with a close friend in the pub. I drank a lot. We went to the cinema and watched American Hustle. I just stared at the screen without taking in the plot, but it was good to have a distraction. I went to work the next night and happened to get the best client I'd ever had. He was curious

about my gender but let me define it, he told me that he believed, 'To live with ambiguity is a sign of real strength,' which felt like a good thing to hear at the time.

Despite the repulsion I had apparently inspired in the abusive guy, he tried to contact me several times after our meeting. I never picked up the phone.

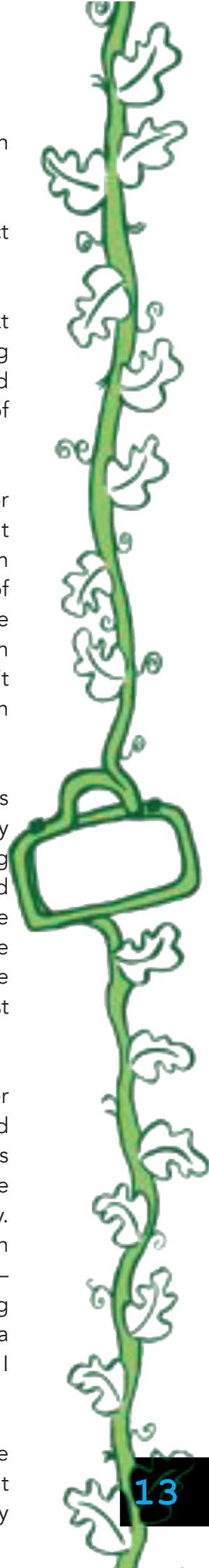
I made the mistake of going away to an intense two day political meeting the next week. It was actually around sex workers' rights activism. There was nothing wrong with the meeting itself but I shouldn't have gone in my frame of mind. I think I'd expected there to be a chance to debrief about work stuff but it wasn't that type of meeting and I came home feeling even more of a mess.

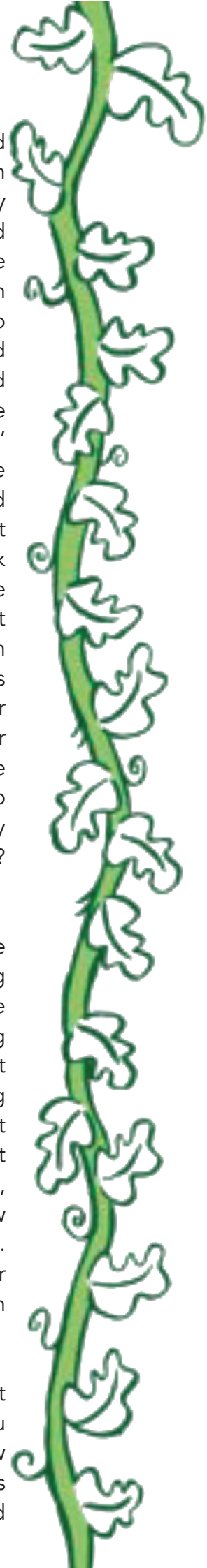
In the weeks following I had moments of wondering whether sex work was for me or not. If I had decided it wasn't then that would of course have been totally valid, but ultimately I didn't see why one asshole should change the way I lived my life when I didn't want to change it and the events involving said asshole weren't reflective of the rest of my experience of sex work. The problem was that because so many people are down on prostitution anyway, I felt like as I talked about what had happened with certain people, I had to at the same time justify my choice to be a worker. I couldn't just fall to pieces like a normal person, I had to defend sex work and be spokesperson for a movement whilst not really feeling up to it.

I did feel some pressure from being involved in sex worker rights' activism -as I was starting to be- not to talk about experiences such as this one. No one ever actually said this to me, and I don't think it was on anyone's agenda, but we are always fighting against those narratives of whore as victim and I felt like my experience contributed to that narrative. Then again if people could respect our work in the first place, there would be no pressure to not talk about negative experiences. The biggest pressure not to do that for me came not from other workers or campaigners, but from those who would see me as an inherent victim in the first place - someone who was just getting what came to me.

I was seeing a counsellor around the time. I mentioned being a sex worker to her once and she flipped out and made a point every session to tell me how concerned she was for me and tried to get me to think through other career options. Safety was her prime concern apparently, but I have to wonder if she'd of had the same response had I wanted to do something far more dangerous and destructive like join the army. I couldn't tell her about the client, I felt like if I did her entire focus would have been trying to rescue me as oppose to actually helping me to recover from the experience – it wouldn't have been abuse, it would have been proof. That's what you get for being a hooker. Maybe I'm judging her too harshly, but as she immediately employed a paternalistic attitude to my job rather than asking me how I felt about it, I didn't feel I could risk expressing to her that things weren't always 100% dandy.

I was doing an MA in Creative Writing and a few weeks after I'd seen the client I wrote a story about him which was read by the class. Writing it helped me to process what happened and I think it was a pretty good story. I deliberately made it extremely





graphic as I still wasn't sure there was a word for what I'd experienced, so I wanted to make everyone who read it understand how it had felt at the time, as much as I could anyway. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised when some of my classmates tried to counsel me against prostitution after reading it or at least told other people -so I heard- that they didn't think I should be doing it. Someone asked me if I ever took heroin to blank out the traumatic experience of being with clients. I kind of knew describing the event would elicit this response so I tried to add some background to the story, the things I like about being a sex worker and hated about my other jobs, which often felt like death sentences as they drained so much from me with no pay off, and the explanation that this happens to people who aren't prostitutes as well. But still, I felt like I'd sold out the sex workers' rights movement and turned half my class into abolitionists. There were some people who responded with a much more open-minded attitude though. And anyway, I don't like writing happy stories, they don't interest me, why shouldn't I be able to write about shit things that happen to me just because I don't work in a bank or for an NGO or something? I could have written a story about the nice guy the next evening instead if I'd wanted to. The following week a different classmate submitted a story about a middle-aged woman with low self-esteem who was going on lots of internet dates. During one of them the guy she was dating pushed her over and fucked her violently from behind, disregarding her request for a condom, instead putting a hand over her mouth and pushing her head down. No one in the class discussion suggested this woman's experience was down to the tragedy of heterosexual relationships or that she should stop dating men. Why then does a sex worker's bad experience point to the tragedy of the entire profession? Because we're not in love with or married to the client? Because there's money involved?

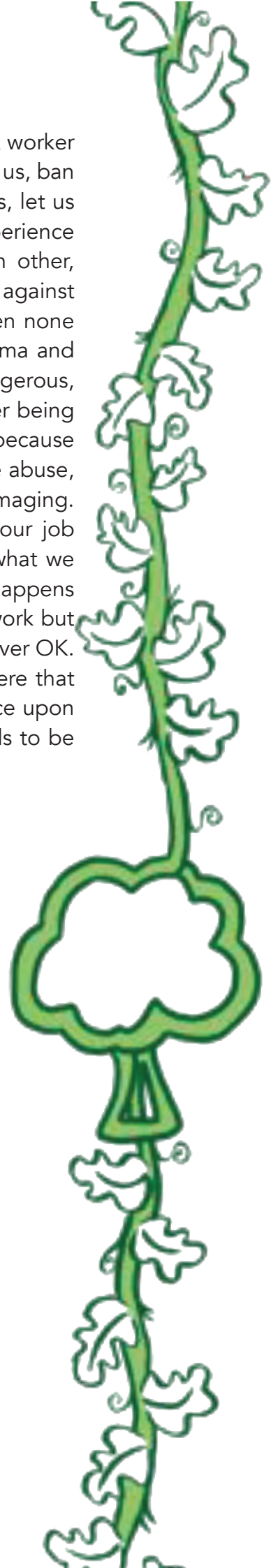
It was inconceivable to some of the people I talked to that I could possibly choose recovering from a bad experience and staying in a job I usually like over working full time in a job I hated and feeling constantly drained, because it might be physically safer. Being a sex worker has its annoying sides (and I'm not talking sexual abuse – that's not in the job description) but overall it's honestly the best job I've ever had. I have issues with the false consciousness thing and getting the message time and again from the anti-sex worker lobby that my mind is not my own. A lot of the experiences I've had growing up, working in other jobs, at school, even in communities that are meant to be like-minded and supportive, have had a far greater and more damaging effect on me –at times after a slow corrosive build up- than this or any other bad sexual experience I've ever had. I'm not saying that they didn't affect me badly, but I find it strange how our experiences are automatically ranked and de-contextualized without our say in them.

From my own personal perspective I learnt some stuff from what happened about the way I handled clients. Maybe it will be useful to other workers, maybe you all know this stuff. I don't know. I'd only been working a few months when I saw this guy. He asked me to be a pro-sub for him and that isn't really my area. This doesn't mean that what happened to me wouldn't have been fucked up if it had

happened to an experienced pro-sub or that 'that's what you get' for doing that kind of work, but personally I didn't feel confident asserting my boundaries in that area and therefore it probably wasn't the best kind of session for me to be offering. I think whatever area(s) of sex work you're doing it's important to try and get a definite sense of your limits and what you feel comfortable with (or not) if possible. I wouldn't have thrown myself into a two day political meeting straight after but would have tried to seek out other workers specifically to talk things through. If I could have -and it isn't always an option- I'd have tried to see a counsellor who was sex work-positive (luckily I now have one, well, sort of). Also, this particular guy had glowing comments from eight sex workers whom he'd booked online describing him as 'the perfect gentleman'. He had no negative reviews which made me think he'd be OK. But he didn't book me online and therefore on this particular website (adultwork) it wouldn't have been possible for me to give feedback on our meeting. All the people who'd reviewed him were cis women who would be considered 'conventionally attractive' (to a cis straight male gaze). I found out at our meeting that he sometimes saw trans women (whom he made derogatory comments about) but there were no reviews from any of them – he hadn't booked them online so there was no chance for them to leave feedback. I guess I would know to still be cautious in future even if someone had good reviews if there were none from other trans people or those who were in some way 'unconventional'.


But I will also say this - had I been in a more desperate situation I probably would have seen the abusive guy again. I know this is the moment when all the abolitionists go ah-ha! I knew it! But that statement doesn't mean that sex work is inherently evil – it means capitalism is. The thing which creates the inequalities causing those situations. For everyone, sex worker or not, the lower down on the economic/migration status food chain you are, the fewer options you have when in situations of extreme difficulty. Just because in a desperate moment a person may return to an abusive client because it is a better choice for them than being rendered destitute/homeless/deported doesn't mean that the choice to be a sex worker should be taken away from them. In campaigning to criminalise clients –if that is even effective, the jury's out- the anti-sex worker lobby may provide us with less choice of who to see by deterring some of our customers on legal grounds and forcing those of us who are most hard up to go with clients we are less comfortable with. The more legal complications and stigma there is to sex work, the harder it becomes for workers and the less options we have. Those with the least resources, privilege and money or with the most precarious immigration status are the worst hit. The anti-sex worker lobby (including those who purport to be acting on feminist principles) contribute to dangerous settings under which abusive clients thrive by actively campaigning against sex work instead of supporting workers to gain better and safer conditions. If these people seriously want to ensure we never end up with dodgy clients they should campaign against issues which might put us in restrictive situations such as austerity measures, immigration raids, border controls and laws which target sex workers. The case of Mariana Popa clearly illustrates this. Popa was a Romanian worker murdered last year in Redbridge, she was believed to be working late to pay off a fine for soliciting on the night she was killed and was working alone most likely as a result of a Met campaign to target street-based workers, making them disperse to avoid detection.

I feel I may be preaching to the converted on this one - but if you're not a sex worker and you care about sex workers who have experienced abuse, don't patronise us, ban us, tell us we don't know our own minds (another form of abuse). Listen to us, let us define our own experiences and our own lives. When most other workers experience shitty conditions or have bad experiences they get together, support each other, organise. No one who cared about them would try to get their jobs abolished against their will. I mean, apart from the eventual death of capitalism of course, when none of us will have to have jobs, but in the meantime... For many of us, the stigma and legal complications to being a sex worker make our lives harder and more dangerous, particularly when dealing with violence or abuse. I've heard of one sex worker being told by staff at a sexual health clinic after she'd been raped that it wasn't rape because she was a sex worker. The view that we can't be raped or our job is to receive abuse, which well-meaning people who want to save us spread, is incredibly damaging. Don't unwittingly conspire with those who would hurt us by implying that our job legitimises rape and sexual abuse, or make us feel powerless by telling us what we should and shouldn't do and how we should and shouldn't respond to what happens to us. Understand that, yes, some of us have experienced rape or abuse at work but so much of this happens to people who are not sex workers as well and it is never OK. All the patriarchal, transphobic, racist, homophobic and other bullshit out there that legitimises the dehumanisation of others and the entitlement to inflict violence upon them isn't going to go away if sex work does. And that is the stuff that needs to be fought, not our right to continue working.



by Bat Rose

TRAUMA	BEFORE BECOMING A DOMINATRIX	AFTER TWO YEARS OF DOMMING
My mother had beaten me up regularly	I was suffering from my fantasies about beating up someone	No more fantasies. I enjoy beating up clients
	I was very masochistic	I hate receiving pain but I enjoy giving pain
My mother did not give me medication during an asthma attack but slapped me	I was scared of seeing strangulation in a movie	I am mostly not scared of it in a movie I love giving suffocation and strangulation
When I was a young child, an adult family member had a wank in front of me	I was scared of cock	I am neutral towards cock, sometimes bored
	I was angry at cock	I sometimes enjoy torturing cock
	I threw up when seeing sperm	I find it disgusting to neutral
	I would have liked to have a cock (but I am not trans)	I like to use men with my strap-on
	I panicked when being pestered by men in public space	I fight back or distance myself
		I sometimes panic when clients pester me by phone
My mother said I am ugly and I will never find a man	I someone mad a compliment I did not believe it	I am thankful for compliments and I believe they are true



TRAUMA	BEFORE BECOMING A DOMINATRIX	AFTER TWO YEARS OF DOMMING
	I put a lot of work into looking less attractive	I do a lot to look more attractive
My mother was blaming me for everything	I was too nice towards everyone	I don't take any shit any more (except relationships). I learned a lot about boundaries. I sometimes get a bit too bossy.
	I got drunk every 1-2 weeks	I get drunk twice a year (and I don't take any other drugs)
	I felt like a victim when spending time with my family	I feel like a loser when spending time with them
	I spent hundreds of hours blaming the aggressors	I enjoy giving to clients, in a controlled and consensual way, what my aggressors did to me. After doing that, I am done and can be myself the rest of the week. I stopped blaming my aggressors but I do not forgive.
	My traumas were a burden, a stigma. I was constantly patronized.	My traumas are lucrative, bring a lot of joy and can even heal others.



Confusion by Princess

That's what my experience of abuse has been.

Confusion.

Things not being clear cut. Not easily nameable, identifiable. Not really knowing what things meant.

The abusive parts of my incest experience were mostly emotional; the fact that there were sexual elements to a relationship that should not have involved sexuality is just the container for it, not the painful part.

It's more about how the sexuality was lorded over me. The fact that what was happening between us was denied when we were in public. And how I was treated outside of the sexual interactions.

I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I'm also queer, a femme, pakeha (white person from Aotearoa/New Zealand), middle class, non-monogamous, a sub/switch/power bottom/mummy/girl, cis-gendered, a woman, able bodied, skinny/curvy, an anarcho-feminist, an anti-capitalist, I'm engaged in social justice work around decolonisation, immigration and anti-racism and I'm also a sex worker.

I've had 10 years of therapy, I've done group therapy, I've read over 50 zines on survivor politics, I've read books on sexual healing, on dissociation, on panic attacks, I've broken plates in the street, I've screamed at the top of my lungs at protests against sexual violence, I've done training courses and delivered curriculum credits to high school students about sexual abuse, I've been involved in organising actions and sit ins around funding cuts to sexual abuse counselling, I've been a phone counsellor on this topic, I've written pieces for zines and I've spoken publicly and on TV about just how nuanced and fucked both the macro and micro levels of this epidemic are. With all of this, one of the most affirming, powerful, yet painful things for me has been hearing parts of other peoples stories that made me realise I wasn't alone.

I hadn't and still haven't heard many stories from people that have more than just a few characteristics in common with how I experienced my abuse.

My abuser was my cousin and he was close in age to me (3.5 years older).

The abuse began when I was around 7 years old and continued until I was around 22.

My story:

For as long as I can remember I have been sexual with my cousin.

My earliest memories include this.

I think it started when I was about 7. Which is when we were living in close enough proximity that we would spend all school holidays, plus some weekends I think, and birthdays etc with all of my mum's extended family. So her two brothers and their wives and kids and her sister and husband and kids and my mums parents.

I remember doing things like playing hide and seek and always hiding with this cousin. We'd kiss or he'd feel me up in the wardrobe or spaces we were hiding.

I remember really enjoying it, loving getting the attention from him and that it felt really physically nice.

I don't remember what it was like when we weren't doing that. What it was like when we were around other people.

I knew it was something I shouldn't be telling anyone about, or making obvious to anyone. I don't know how I knew this. I don't remember him verbally saying anything to me about that.

After this happening for quite a while, I got quite dependent on receiving this attention from him.

I wanted to tell people about it so much, I wanted to tell my friends at primary school who were all talking about 'boyfriends', how I had a 'boyfriend' and that I'd given him blowjobs and stuff. But people wouldn't believe me because they could never see him, and they didn't think I'd be able to be dating someone in high school. My cousin was 3.5 years older than me so when I was standard 3 (9 years old), he was form 3 at high school (13 years old).

So I made up a name for him.

I knew I couldn't tell them it was my cousin, not because I thought at the time that it was wrong, but because I thought they would find it gross.

I think part of me must have known something about it was wrong though, because I did think that if I told some people they might tell my parents or tell on me somehow and then I'd get in trouble, or worse, they'd make it stop happening.

I wanted it to keep happening. I felt like I was in love with him. He was the first person I was sexual with, and I was dependent on him for that.

My sexuality had started, miles before anyone else's, so there was nowhere else to go to get these sensations I was receiving from him (part of how grooming works hey).

I became more and more obsessed with him.

And it turned into me trying to initiate things all the time.

I would try and make myself constantly available to him. I would stay up late so that if he wanted to do anything, he could stay up too and I'd be there. I'd try and make it so that sleeping arrangements on trips and things would mean that I would have to sleep in the same place as him.

I felt completely powerless. If he wanted to do stuff then it would happen. If he didn't, it wouldn't. What I wanted to do didn't matter.

I tried talking to him about it and he wouldn't. I wrote him letters, begging him to write



back, telling him that I felt like a guinea pig, and he never replied. I didn't know how to stop being sexual with him.

I didn't want to keep doing it, it felt like he didn't care about me, the older I got, the less special it felt and the more disempowered I felt by the whole situation. I couldn't help but feel physiologically drawn to him, but I felt like he was being so mean to me. He wasn't acknowledging me as anyone special when we weren't being sexual. We never spoke of what it was we were doing while we did it. And he never told me how he felt about me. I asked him in notes all the time. I told him I loved him. He never told me how he felt about me. It would have been hard to hear that he didn't feel the same, but at least I could have known and that might have helped me to not be sexual with him again.

All of my self-confidence got caught up with whether or not he wanted me. If we weren't sexual on a holiday, or he didn't take up the opportunity that I bent over backwards to make available for him, I'd feel worthless, like nobody would ever want me, or find me attractive. It felt like I had nothing in the world.

I didn't want to be sexual with him, but if I didn't get to be sexual with him, I didn't feel good about myself.

At least he touched me nicely when we were being sexual, so I could make up in my mind that that meant he did actually like me, and maybe he was only mean to me around others so no one would find out and we could keep doing it.

I started living in my head a lot. I had no one to talk to about it.

Even when I started dating people, I still couldn't stop myself from being with him.

I think once people around me, at school and things, started dating I realized what it was supposed to be like when you date someone, and it became far more apparent that how he was treating me wasn't the normal way to be treated by someone you were being sexual with.

I oscillated between being angry at him and wanting him.

Once I got my first girlfriend, and fell in love, he seemed to be more interested in doing things again. I think because I stopped initiating, he lost some power over me, and therefore wanted me again.

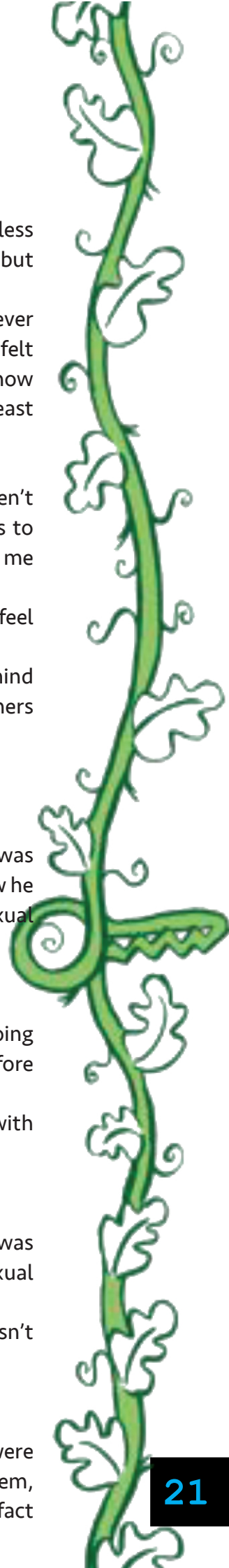
I couldn't resist. And it made me feel horrible that I'd cheated on someone I loved with someone who didn't even care about me.

I only started really talking about it, for what it was, when I was 23.

A friend was working for rape prevention education, and talking to me about what she was learning, or maybe she told me her story, and I realized that maybe my story was sexual abuse too.

I asked her if what had happened to me counted as sexual abuse. She told me that wasn't up to her to decide but gave me some numbers of some ACC sexual abuse counselors. The counseling has helped me to defog my life.

Along the way, from other places, I've found out that if you were abused when you were young, you can have a physiological response to your abuser, your body responds to them, I mean this may not be true for everyone, but it really helped me to not feel bad for the fact



that my body responds differently to my brain around this stuff.

I didn't want to keep being sexual with him. It didn't feel like he was being nice to me, he made me feel like I was worthless and unlovable, so much so that I wanted anything I could get. Him touching me made me feel like he cared about me, even if he ignored me in public. I got really mixed messages, and that made me start to mistrust myself. It messed with my sense of intuition for a long time. My head was saying no, but my body was saying yes. So hearing that bodies could be 'hardwired' by such early abuse to 1. really like the touch, and 2. have this kind of uncontrollable consistent connection to that person, made me feel less confused by the whole thing and that it hadn't been my fault.

Our ages were close. Which in my head made the lines of definition blurry.

It took me 2 years of weekly therapy to even get to the point of calling what happened sexual abuse or incest.

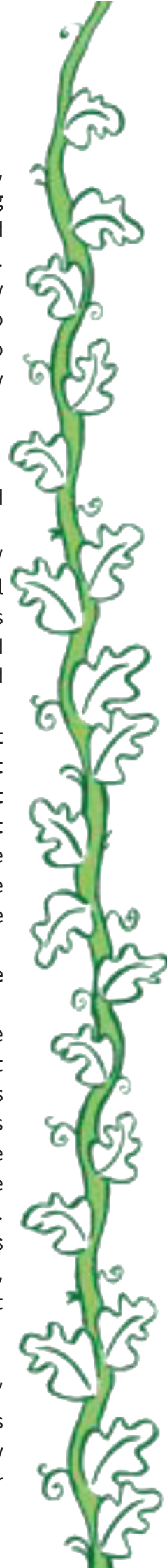
For a long time I worked on putting together a chronological timeline of what physical/sexual activities happened at what particular ages. I'm a diligent diary and journal keeper (still to this day) so I was able to go back through about 16 diaries, yearly planners where I had written what I did each day, and about 8 journals of my feelings, and find the times we had spent family holidays or family weekends together and what we had done sexually.

I did this as a part of trying to prove to myself that what had happened was abuse, that no, a 9 year old shouldn't be giving blowjobs to their cousin. But it didn't work. It wasn't the physicality that was going to get me there. I could argue with myself all day about why it didn't count as abuse. He wasn't that much older than me. I wanted it. I liked it. It felt nice. I started initiating. Etc etc. What got me there in the end was letting go of the idea that it had to fit particular requirements to count. I had to keep this a secret while it was going on, for 15 years. I was a little girl and thought he was my boyfriend. And the emotional abuse and neglect (even within a non incest situation) was damaging.

These reasons were enough for me. Naming the emotional abuse. And that's what made me able to define it in the end.

It was around this time that I started a new relationship. I fell in love. The kind where the world changes, irrevocably. But my abuse was so present. Now that I had seen it for what it was, it was there with me, every day, just about all day, right on top. I was needing constant reassurance, I was often falling apart after sex, and needing to process for hours, and I was needing to process for hours even outside of sex. My needs were so heightened and I was so hyper-vigilant. I was feeling it and thinking about it all the time. I can't imagine what this period of time would have been like without this person. I'm sure I would have gotten through it, it would have found its way. But the places they went with me, the generosity, the support, it helped bring something back to me, something that had been lost for a long time. And sometimes, I feel like the size of that gift is still too big for me to understand.

At the time, I was living in a house that we'd decided to call 'The Mooncup Mansion' with a couple of best friends, also fierce radical queer femmes. This period of my life, this internal chaos, also put strain on my relationships with them. Our lives were beautifully intertwined, we were up in each other's business like fierce friends are, giving each other radical love and support daily, but I was all over the place.



The effects were happening everywhere. Outside of my chosen family, I realised it was also affecting my relationship with my biological family. No one in my family knew, and this made me feel like I was living a double life.

The lies were getting too much.

My mother would ask how I'd been -

"Oh I've been having a tough time mum, I'm having panic attacks in the bathroom once or twice a day when I have flashbacks to the feelings I had in the past, or when I get overwhelmed by the idea that I'll never be able to function properly in a relationship"

But she didn't know, so all I could say was "Oh yea, great mum, the weather's been really great up here."

It was a risk, but I came up with a plan with my therapist to tell my immediate family as well as the extended family about what had happened. And in doing so, have a safety net so I wouldn't have to be at the same events as this cousin ever again. Unless my feelings on seeing him changed in the future.

Over the course of the next 2 years I told a lot of people. Telling my brother and sister in law meant I was able to go to their wedding because they had believed me and taken seriously the fact that I couldn't be around him so had told him he couldn't come. Then I told my Mother. My brother had been the first family member I'd told, but in some way it felt like I had a lot more riding on telling my mum. I really wanted her to believe me. I needed it almost.

And although my brother had been supportive in a lot of ways, he told me not to tell anyone else, and I didn't want my mum to feel that. I wanted her to back me 100%. I had a lot of wants. I was scared.

I told her on the beach, and she heard me. She really heard me. She was upset, but together we decided to tell my step dad. They were really upset together. They felt a lot of guilt, which the 3 of us talked about, my brother had also had these feelings. I told them that I wanted to have a joint counselling session with me, the two of them and my cousin's two parents (my auntie and uncle), to tell them about what had happened with my cousin and I. I told them that I also wanted the other two families to know. They weren't so sure about this plan.

A real shift happened.

We were on the way to one of my auntie's houses for a family event. My cousin was going to be there, and we had not made prior arrangements so we wouldn't be there at the same time.

The anxiety was building in the car, heading towards panic, until I lost complete control of myself. I started screaming at the top of my lungs, I was banging the car door as hard as I could. I was out of control, and could see myself doing it but couldn't seem to stop it.

Them seeing me in that state changed the way they understood me, the way they saw me, allowed them to see a part of me they hadn't known before. I felt like my relationship with them was awoken, a part of the relationship that had previously been asleep my whole life. We pulled over and talked about it, and from then on they understood how this was for me. That it was having serious effects on my day to day life. They hadn't been able to see that, I hadn't shown them that, they understood that something needed to change.



We ended up having the joint counselling session. We told his parents. They denied it. They said I was lying. We tried another session all together. This time they'd spoken with my cousin about it. They said maybe something had happened but we were both to blame. They didn't want me telling anyone else. And they just wanted me to get on with it now. The whole process deeply affected my mum's relationship with her sister. And for this I felt wholly to blame. My mum and I spoke at length about this and have worked through it. We told the other two families, one of which responded outstandingly, with my auntie apologising that I hadn't felt like I could say anything earlier. The other saying, "oh is that it" and going to turn the TV on.

I now have a plan in place where at family events my parents organise with his siblings when he'll be there and when I'll be there. And so far it's worked. I've lost/tarnished relationships within my extended family due to this process. I've also made many relationships more honest. And, to my unforeseen gratitude, it has completely transformed my relationship with my mother. My mum is now one of my best friends.

It's not like it doesn't affect me anymore, or like I'm fully healed or that everything is perfect now. I'm not sure it ever will be, and that's not my goal. But I have survived the crisis period of it. The reaction that my spirit had when I first was able to see it for what it was has simmered now. I don't think about suicide daily/weekly, I don't have multiple panic attacks a day. And I don't need to process for at least a few hours each day.

Some effects have passed, some are still here.

I used to worry that people were just with me for sex. This used to be really painful for my partners. Partners who were in love with me, and me them, and who loved me so well. I don't have this anymore.

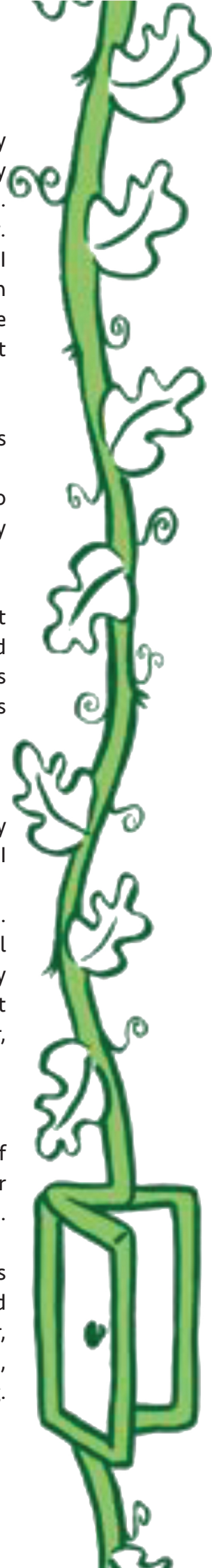
I do still worry that I'm going to be 'too much' in relationships. That I might need too much. Too much reassurance, too much talking, too much figuring out of the ways this stuff still affects me, too much from them to feel secure about what I have with them. And my hyper-vigilance is still there. But things are a work in progress, and my goal is not to have it not affect me at all, in any ways, ever again. But to understand myself and my needs better, and to accept myself.

I've had a fear around writing this piece, about putting this information out there. A fear of my friends and people I know reading it. A fear that people will be shocked when they hear what has happened in my life. That that's all they'll be able to see when they look at me. That they'll feel pity for me.

I don't want that. I don't want people to be shocked by this, because although the ways we've all experienced trauma are different, it's not uncommon, it's all too common. And that's what's shocking. But we all already know that. And that's what makes the queer, politicised and sex work communities that I'm part of, and families of friends I've created, so amazing. People know this shit, we talk about it, we don't deny it, and we keep on living.

Now, this is the experience I've had.

But how does this connect to sex work?



Well, yes, there may be some connections for me between these things, and there also might not be.

And that's the point.

Whether I got in to this work, or working at a Rape Crisis NGO for some kind of healing or working through of my feelings. Or whether I ended up in this job because it was the best choice out of a limited number of options, or no other options available. Or whether I had many shining options for ways to make money but this is the one I ended up doing.

It doesn't matter.

And it doesn't matter for two reasons.

1-Rights

Saying that there are abuse survivors within an industry, so therefore that industry should be shut down, jobs taken away from people who need them, and the most basic human rights and safety taken away from the workers themselves, is a completely flawed, overly simplistic, naïve, patronising and privileged way to approach things that they see as a problem. It lacks any nuance of understanding of what the connections between sex work and personal histories of sexual abuse might be, if any. It lacks the possibility for those nuanced connections to be self-defined by the people actually living it, and not by feminists who have a theory on what other women's lives are like when they have no lived experience of it. And finally, it eclipses the possibility that survivors might actually have agency, and be able to make the best decisions for themselves based on what they know of themselves and their conditions.

And 2 - Silence

Whatever links there are between the parts of my lived experience as a survivor of incest and the parts of my lived experience as a sex worker are for me to know, they're my knowledge. But no amount of links, or absence of links is enough for me to be re-silenced, to have to keep quiet around a part of my life where silence nearly killed me.

I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. And I'm a sex worker.

Get over it.

Don't conflate my identities.

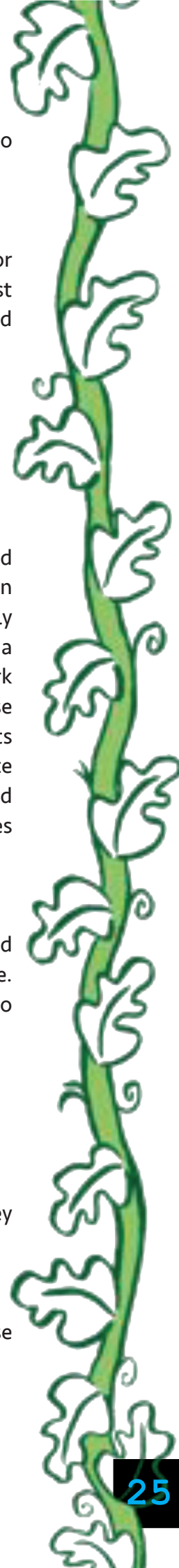
Don't assume you know anything about either of those parts of who I am and how they interact or if they interact unless you know me and we've had chats about it.

My feminism has no room for whorephobia

But ya know what it also has no room for, silencing me about my abuse history just because of my current job.

I've fought with everything I have to get where I am.

And I'm not about to start keeping quiet about it now.







2015

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