



# OUT of the DUST

WRITTEN BY BROOK FLAGG / PHOTOGRAPHED BY BOOTSY  
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It's 11:00 a.m. on a Thursday, and Harmony Dust is performing the age-old balancing act of mommy multitasking. "I hope you don't mind," she says of her baby daughter's discontented babbles as we speak on the phone. Her husband, underground rapper Pigeon John, steps in to help out. "That's better—she's got her Cheerios now," she laughs.

For Harmony—a hippie daughter whose own upbringing was far less structured, giving way to a string of regrettable decisions—this mundane morning routine is nothing short of serenity. Like the majority of women who enter sex professions (66 to 90 percent, according to her own research), Harmony was a childhood victim of sexual abuse. As a college student with mounting bills and a deadbeat boyfriend, she asked a trusted professor his thoughts on stripping to supplement income. His dubious advice ("It's not like you'd have to put it on your résumé") turned out to be a classic case of famous last words: Today, Harmony's full-time operation is the non-profit group Treasures, which aims to support women who desire to leave the sex industry.

As perceptions of stripping, pornography, and prostitution continue to be sanitized, "We've developed a tolerance to

objectifying women. The media glamorizes it, but people don't have the full picture," Harmony says. Maintaining a semblance of dignity at the club was important to her, but it proved to be a difficult feat. "It was so stressful when guys from my school would come in—and so embarrassing when they recognized me." Juggling her dancing with UCLA classes and a part-time job at a preschool, "I really lived a double life. It got to the point where I lost sight of who I was, because I was consumed by an alter ego."

Harmony only embraced the stripper persona, "Monique," when opportunities to project her anger arose. When a customer violated house rules by touching her, punching him in the face "gave me a chance to let out all the rage I had." Pretty soon, "I wished that people would touch me just so I could lash out."

One day, a new friend with a cheerful disposition and a non-judgmental attitude invited Harmony to church, where she met a young, creative congregation she identified with. "After awhile, I started getting my shifts changed so I could keep going. Pretty soon, I was like, 'I don't want to go to the club. I'm calling in sick.' I started learning about God and his love for me, and I started changing my behavior."

*"I love seeing women get that passion to help other women. It gives all of our pain a purpose."*

After leaving stripping for good, Harmony met her husband, entered graduate school, and began a career in social work. But six years later, the girls inside the club were still very much on her mind. Then one night in 2003, she had an idea: Form an outreach group of volunteers with similar backgrounds, establish professional relationships with club managers, and ask for permission to pass out gift bags. She hoped women would read the enclosed pamphlet that offered contact information and the declaration "You are loved." Despite the simple premise, their first visit (at a well-known Hollywood hot spot) almost ended as soon as it began. "I still don't understand what happened," Harmony says, "but as soon as we walked in, the music shut off and everyone looked directly at us. We looked at each other and said, um, what are we supposed to do now? It was definitely a grand entrance! From that moment on, we knew we were on the scene."

In addition to emotional support, financial guidance and professional development are available. "That's their number-one challenge, especially in this economy," she says. "A lot of times they don't have anything to put on their résumé, so we help them brainstorm and give them a template that's very creative." Many participants are offered temporary positions to help them gain experience, and they enter fields such as real estate, cosmetology, office administration, and education. Some have become advocates outside of Treasures, moving back to their hometowns to reach the women there—and that's just fine with Harmony. "I love seeing women get that passion to help other women. It gives all of our pain a purpose."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, INCLUDING HOW TO SEEK HELP OR GIVE HELP, VISIT [IAMATREASURE.COM](http://IAMATREASURE.COM).**

# OPPOSITES ATTRACT

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WRITTEN BY LAURA WARNER / PHOTOGRAPH BY KELTY LUBER  
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No offense, Paula Abdul, but until recently I just didn't believe that opposites attract. Or rather, I recognized they might attract each other, but that they most certainly should not marry each other if they were interested in 'til death or beyond.

When I met my Mister, I was smitten by our commonalities: shared love for Radiohead, dual detest for tomatoes. We liked dry wit and independent films. We weren't embarrassed to profess our love for Taco Bell bean burritos. (I know, I know, it's not real Mexican food, people!)

So we added up all the pluses, worked through a few minuses, and got married under the impression that our couple congruence negated any gender differences. "Girls are thin-skinned; boys are brutes"—these were old stereotypes that didn't reflect our modern mentalities and passionate commitment, right?

Then, we went to the grocery store one Saturday. I brought a tedious list, derived from my menu for next week's dinners, and meandered up and down each aisle. With our cart marginally full, my newlywed panicked. He asked if we had enough food to make it through the weekend, which we did. Then, he begged me to leave with him, and I obliged. I thought it was a spontaneous gesture suggesting he wanted to spend time with me in a more romantic setting.

Wrong.

Here's a news flash: Most men don't like grocery stores. They also don't like to talk about their feelings for hours. They will not think to do most things without prompting, including buying you

flowers for Valentine's Day. (Especially if you tell him you think the holiday is cheesy, but you secretly want him to follow tradition.) They will often be thinking of nothing, which makes it very hard to read your mind. If you complain about something, they will try to fix it. Unfortunately, you don't really want a solution; you just want a sounding board, but they won't remember that unless you remind them. If your husband is nice like mine, he'll switch to listening mode, unless a sporting event is on TV. Then, he'll just pretend to listen.

While it's tempting to generalize men as primal, it's their simplicity that teaches me many complex lessons. For example, my husband does not walk into a room and take note of what the other men are wearing, or whether or not he's the fattest person in the vicinity. He does not stress about the food or serving ware for a social gathering. He will do anything for me (if I ask) and expects no recognition.

As a stereotypical woman who works hard to appear the opposite, I'm very grateful for his mellow example. I'm hyper-sensitive to criticism. I'm prone to over-analyzing. I'm my worst critic. But since marrying my "twin," I've learned to think a little less and live a little more. I've learned to settle a disagreement in under an hour (without crying). And I've come to expect less and ask for more, which is more realistic and less disappointing for both of us.

Despite our chromosomal differences, we are pretty darn compatible. We love to spend time together. We tend to like the same movies—though I prefer mine with a little less action and a few more corsets. We can talk for hours and usually concur. In the geography of our love, our differences are only a few coordinates apart. And that's a good thing. (I think he'd agree.)

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