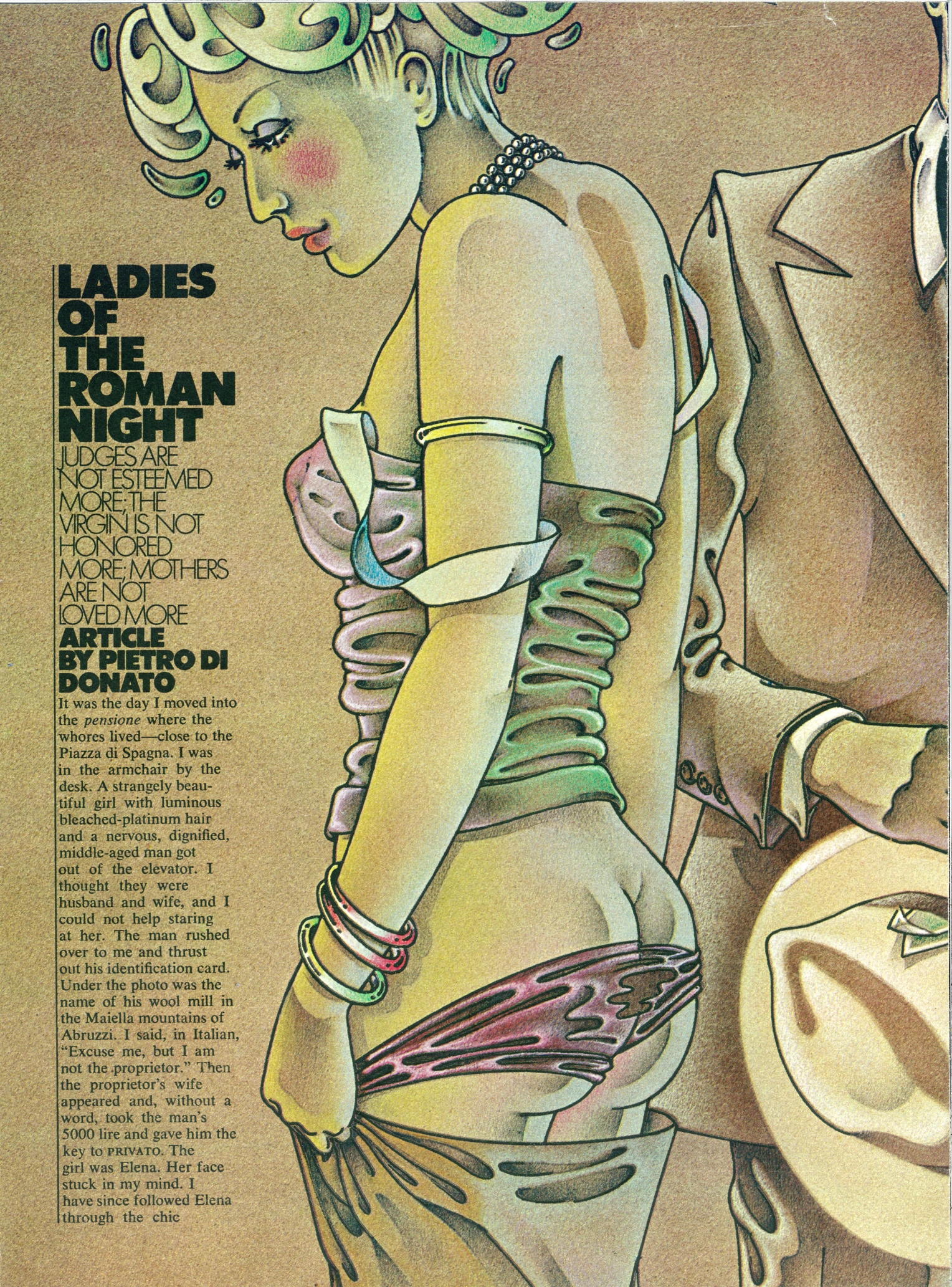

LADIES OF THE ROMAN NIGHT

JUDGES ARE NOT ESTEEMED MORE; THE VIRGIN IS NOT HONORED MORE; MOTHERS ARE NOT LOVED MORE

ARTICLE BY PIETRO DI DONATO

It was the day I moved into the *pensione* where the whores lived—close to the Piazza di Spagna. I was in the armchair by the desk. A strangely beautiful girl with luminous bleached-platinum hair and a nervous, dignified, middle-aged man got out of the elevator. I thought they were husband and wife, and I could not help staring at her. The man rushed over to me and thrust out his identification card. Under the photo was the name of his wool mill in the Maiella mountains of Abruzzi. I said, in Italian, "Excuse me, but I am not the proprietor." Then the proprietor's wife appeared and, without a word, took the man's 5000 lire and gave him the key to PRIVATO. The girl was Elena. Her face stuck in my mind. I have since followed Elena through the chic

LADIES OF THE ROMAN NIGHT *A timid Swiss businessman followed the girls and stared, and when they beckoned, he first froze, then scurried away, then returned. He did this over and over.*

promenading evening crowds that window-shop at the elite stores in our Piazza di Spagna neighborhood. It thrilled me to watch her go into the hairdresser's and to see the fairies flit about her, or to trail her to a fashionable shop and to behold her, through the plate glass, moseying about, lighting up and sighing over fine things. Her lovely face, with the high cheekbones and perfect lips, had a limpid expression. Men turned from their wives and peered, but she paid no mind, not even to those who were rich and handsome. You'd think she were alone in a chapel. In the dreams of night, I followed her, saying, "Elena, you are a good girl."

Elena's parasite pimp (who hardly bothered to bring her men) was haughty Umberto. He was a greasy Bogart with baggy eyes, a jaundiced complexion, and a winningly dissolute air. I used to see Elena, Umberto and the baby, Giulietta, in a proletarian *trattoria.* The bar was up five steps in the front—with bread, *lupine* beans, cheese, salami and prosciutto for the seedy drunkards. Wine from the taps of giant casks was five cents a tumbler. In the rear was a farmhouse-style dining room with a pregnant peasant waitress and a long unfinished table. In the center of the room, with nicotine-stained fingers and gaudy jewelry on his wrists, Umberto held court, judging pugilists and soccer champions and treating friends to food and drink. Elena hardly spoke. But back at the *pensione,* Anna, the crippled maid, spoke breathlessly and reverently of her as the lady of room four. Anna cared for Elena's room each afternoon; she put fresh flowers in the vase and took care of the marvelous baby, Giulietta. Elena gave Anna more in tips and costly gifts than Anna received from the *pensione* proprietor.

The proprietor and his wife treated Elena like a goddess. At noon, the wife would knock lightly on Elena's door, which was next to mine, and whisper, "El-e-na. Elena dearest. El-e-na treasure, are you ready for the tub and collation? Elena, if you are resting, do not disturb yourself. Let us know what you desire—at your pleasure."

After Elena left the bathroom in the corridor, I would go in to smell her ambrosial shampoo and bubble bath and kiss her towels and suck in the damp ghost of her mysterious female being. Often her door would be partly open and she would be wearing a Chinese dressing gown and rhinestone-heeled silk slippers, her hair up in curlers and a Marlboro in her mouth. She'd put the breakfast tray on the hallway floor by the head of the stairs. After breakfast, Elena would spend hours at her make-up table going through the ritual of embellishment that she didn't need.

Elena leaving the *pensione* at night and heading for the Piazza di Spagna was something else. Her platinum hair was soft and radiant; her handbag, containing such occupational equipment as condoms, petroleum jelly, douche and antiseptics, among other things, was slung efficiently over her shoulder. Her clothing was somewhat loud: She favored a whorish flower-decorated white imitation-leather jacket, and I guess she wore slacks because her cunning legs were thin. She was a Saint Joan of Arc of cunt, going fearlessly, relentlessly into combat.

On the lintel of the room next to mine was an enameled gaslight-era plaque that said PRIVATO. After ten P.M., the tall thick door to the street was locked; the outside bell had to be rung, and the proprietor's wife—on night duty—did not ask "Who is it?" as she did in the daytime, but simply pushed the buzzer. And far into the Roman night, the buzzer sounded, as regular as clockwork, for the darling *mignotte* leading in their *clienti.* The wall between my room and PRIVATO was an improvised partition, and by putting my ear to the wall, I heard most of what went on. There was the guy's comical oohing and ahing, and when his breathing slowed, I could tell he had shot his load.

Elena processed men rapidly. In order to get a look at her, I'd pretend to have to go to the toilet, but she was not fooled. She'd come out appearing brand new and look through me as though I were invisible. And there would be the pale john rinsing the corpse of his prick or battling the stuck zipper of his fly. Every other week, the middle-aged wool manufacturer came from Abruzzi. He was lost, mad, gone for Elena: "Elena, angel mine, oh, how I love thee! What good I feel for thee!"

Besides Elena, six whores thought of the *pensione* as home. Black Angelica worked the Via Veneto from Air France to the American Embassy; plump Ursula, who carried a miniature poodle in her bag, the Trevi Fountain; leggy Gay, from the Via del Corso to the Piazza San Silvestro. Bespectacled Dorothea, called the teacher, worked by Valentino's shop in the Hotel Inghilterra and Via Condotti; and Cinzia with the child's face and streaked hair, Lisetta the Sardinian redhead (her pussy was the dark religious hue of tomato paste—how salutatory are a flaming bush and speckled thighs for a change!) and unforgettable Elena walked the Piazza di Spagna. They could each have graced a centerfold, which is what it is all about.

One rainy night, they were by the desk with the proprietor's wife. Their perfumes came up the elevator shaft in aphrodisiac bouquet. Neapolitan Anna, the lame domestic, brought in Elena's splendid one-year-old Giulietta for the girls to coo over. I didn't know if Giulietta was Umberto's child or if she had been fathered by one of Elena's clients. If I recall correctly, the proprietor once told me that Elena had found the baby when it was abandoned by an Irish-English hippie couple. Giulietta gleefully echoed what she had been taught: *"Mamma Elena bella! Mamma Elena bella!"* The childless proprietor and his wife fawned on the baby. The proprietor's tubby white-haired mother appeared; I caught her quick shrewd glance at Elena, the baby and her son. The pimp Umberto came up the marble stairs with a boxer on a chain, took a wad of lire from Elena to bet on the horses and left. The rain stopped. The girls combed their hair, took out cosmetics, touched up and sallied forth into the streets.

In the Piazza di Spagna, they went singly to the middle of the block, and when men in cars approached, they communicated the availability of flesh and of every manner of orgasm—oral, anal, vaginal, manual, fetishistic. They employed the *gesticolaria,* a system of furtive signs from ancient Roman times. They put the middle finger to the mouth inviting fellatio and to the ear inviting sodomy. Motorists slowed down and the whores approached them jauntily. *"Carissimo!* Dearest! Enjoy life. Let us make love!" On the night in question, I heard one man ask how much, although he already knew the price to be 20,000 or 30,000 lire; he felt he owed it to his family to economize. The girl said, "Everything is high today. Inflation caused by the Arabs' oil is frigging all of us. Darling, obey your prick. It has to live, too. Make yourself courageous. Come. Where? To a family-style hotel nearby. It's safer than your own home. If not, to a hotel of your choosing."

A timid Swiss businessman followed the girls and stared, and when they beckoned, he first froze, then scurried away, then returned. He did this over and over. Finally a girl took pity, grabbed him and pulled him along to the *pensione.* A couple of married wise guys from Milan gave the girls a hard time to demonstrate the superiority of Northern Italians over Central Italians; but when the girls got tough and told them, *(Continued on page 158)*

LADIES OF THE ROMAN NIGHT *The husband returning home from the whore's loins was the cat who had stolen the cream and whose guilty conscience made him sweet and fit to live with.*

(Continued from page 88) *"Stronzi vaffa n'culo!"* (Turds, go get fucked in the ass!), they became lambs.

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Rome's first whore was Acca Larentia, the wife of Faustulus, the shepherd of King Numitor's flocks who found Romulus and Remus abandoned on the banks of the Tiber and brought them up; because of her wantonness, Acca Larentia was called *lupa*, prostitute—whence the fable that Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf. Then there was Flora the whore, who left a tremendous fortune for the amusement of the Roman people—whereupon followed the festival of the whores, the Floralian Games. The Games' motto: "If I can conquer with my cunt, why should I bear arms?" At the Games, the rich whores of Rome paraded from their houses with slaves, dwarfs, priests and fools, assembled in the arena of the circus and did a slow striptease. The Romans applauded their lascivious postures. Then, to the blare of trumpets, nude men with astonishing erections burst into the arena, and there was a frightful orgy.

Ovid, Horace, Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, Vergil, Petronius, all the Roman poets sang of their luscious whores. Horace screwed the prostitute Gratidia, then went for her daughter Tyndaris, saying to the kid, *"'O matre pulchra filia pulchrior.'"* (O you, the more beautiful daughter of a beautiful mother.) And Petronius said, "Booze and whores destroy the health of the body, and yet the true happiness of life lies in booze and whores."

The prostitute was and still is called by a variety of epithets. *Bliteae* were the lowest of the low old whores; *bustuariae*, whores who work cemeteries; *forariae*, country whores; *delicatae*, high-class whores; *famosae*, patrician whores; *noctilucae*, nightwalkers; *quasillariae*, servant whores; *nanae*, dwarf whores; *paedicones*, pederasts; *unguentarii*, young male whores; *peripateticae*, traveling whores; *gallinae*, whores who are also thieves; *fellatrices*, female cocksuckers; *fellatores*, male cocksuckers; *pergulae*, balcony whores; *carogni*, old whores; *intactae*, virgins. Eunuchs are *spadones* and *castrati*; homosexuals are *effeminati*; and bisexuals are *orecchioni*. Pimps are *lenocinatores*, *papponi* and *ruffiani*. Lesbians are *introversae*. Whores with large vaginas are *Pasiphaës*, after the wife of King Minos who couldn't get a human cock big enough, so shut herself in the belly of the temple's bronze cow in order to be fucked by a bull.

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At dinner at the home of an Italian political leader, I said, "I wonder how a woman can give herself to men, simply for a fee."

The politician's very proper wife surprised me with her reply. "My husband, you, all men, have promiscuous sex left and right with no more thought than that given to dogs in the street. Is there a woman in Rome who is not a potential whore, when it is simply a matter of the amount?" she said.

"And how's his arthritis?"

I questioned many other Italian women about their feelings toward whores. The sum of what they said was that they preferred the whore's ass to be sodomized, sore and bleeding rather than their own; let the whore take into her mouth the repulsive object that invariably spoiled one's taste for coffee in the morning. Also, the husband returning home from the whore's loins with his beastly satyriasis appeased was the cat who had stolen the cream and whose guilty conscience made him sweet and fit to live with—a better father and husband.

The Church, with its casuistical labyrinth of weights and counterweights, is circumspect about the oldest profession. Countless rich whores on their deathbeds have bequeathed their all to the Church for absolution.

A prelate of St. Peter's told me, "We bear in mind Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, who by faith did not perish; Mary Magdalene; and the woman of Samaria at the well with our Lord. You will look in vain in the *Osservatore Romano* for the Vatican's attitude toward prostitution; we are concerned not with the imperfect, polluted, ephemeral body but with the soul, with fidelity to the Holy Roman Catholic Church, with sincere confession and with contrition. Many prostitutes have forgone the world and joined the religious orders. Their Holinesses Innocent III and Gregory IX pronounced it a praiseworthy act to marry a fallen woman and uplift her. Remember, a whore was first at the Cross and first at the tomb!"

The Church views divorce with horror and alarm; it views the prostitute as a spillway for the animal needs of the father-husband. When I did research on the life of little Saint Maria Goretti, a cardinal in the Vatican told me that it would have been better all around if the sex-crazed young peasant, Allesandro Serenelli, had gone to a prostitute instead of trying to rape Maria. Also, it would have been better if the Goretti child had given in to Serenelli, so that she could have started a family. She would have lived, and the youth would not have spent his life in prison.

Prostitution is against the law. When the *carabinieri* and the police brass are driven about on inspection tours, the girls know beforehand and scatter in mock terror. The police know that, unlike American whores with their drugs, alcohol and criminality, Roman whores have character. It is insanity to think that officialdom will ever enforce the antiprostitution edicts and stop the girls from milking tourists of the many millions of dollars they in turn put into

the sick economy of Rome and Italy.

One night Cinzia was on the lookout for trade in a chiaroscuro of lamplight by the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide—stamping her feet and swinging her arms to keep warm. I watched her from in front of the heavily guarded Spanish Embassy and talked to an old cop.

"Look at that dear angel of a child," he said. "She probably has an invalid hero father who lost his legs in the war to protect the rich, or a widowed mother and a regiment of hungry mouths to feed at home. I don't understand the things God permits. I for one rebel against His cruel ways. If she were the daughter of Carlo Ponti and Sophia Loren or of the Fiat billionaires, she wouldn't be out here chancing influenza and suffering for the family bread. Capitalism is a sin. There is no equality in this country. Brother, why don't you do a noble thing? Patronize her. It will give you nature's delight and help her situation."

I pretended that I didn't know Cinzia and was afraid of disease.

"Our *mignotte* are wise; they go to doctors and use the bidet and douche. They take a sharp look at your sausage and squeeze the head hard to test that all's well. As for cleanliness, you could eat spaghetti off their pussies!" he said.

I kept Cinzia company; I asked her what she would do when her youth was gone and she was no longer marketable. She tossed her head: "There's time yet!"

I asked what had decided her to become a prostitute.

"What was your father?" she asked.

"My father was a bricklayer like his father."

"And what work did you do for most of your life?"

I told her I had been a bricklayer also. She said that both her mother and grandmother had been whores and that they had ultimately married workingmen and settled down to normal family life; that, perhaps, would be her destiny, too. According to her, it is rare that an Italian whore ends badly.

Romans, whores included, are highly civilized, moderate and practical. And as for the ideal in women: Fellini, Rosi, Bertolucci, in fact all the top Italian directors have told me that actresses fight one another like wildcats to get to play the role of a whore.

With the Romans, there is no neurotic intellectual shit about sex; they put fucking on the level of breathing, but that doesn't mean fucker and fuckee will always commingle heart and soul. Love and spirit together are the exclusive prerogative of the king of the home, the husband. Among the 11,000 prostitutes of Rome are many housewives, veritable saints, who hawk the trinity of their orifices with the encouragement of their

grateful mates so that the family can meet car, appliance and mortgage payments, send the kids to better schools and provide dowries.

Ursula with the white powder-puff poodle told me that, for her, prostitution was a filler, and pricks were really the last things in the world she wanted. "My true calling is the cinema. I have been in Doctor Fellini's films. As you know, he glorifies the overweight woman. I just want to star in a few movies and then retire to the seaside and live like a nun, tranquil and serene."

I took her to Franco Rosi's party; most of Italy's top directors were there. Fellini was glad to see Ursula and made her feel like a queen.

I asked him why his films were so crowded with enormous whores. He said that when he was 11 years old, he had caught the family's huge maid, a former prostitute, using his mother's bathtub and her imported soap. "If Mother had known, she would have fired the maid. The maid asked me to dry her back with Mother's Turkish towel, then her legs and so on. I had never seen a naked woman before and I got a painful hard-on. She weighed more than 300 pounds. Her breasts were bigger than watermelons. Her nipples were as big as your fist and smelled like potato peels. She made me swear on holy pictures that I wouldn't tell Mother, and she gave me a grand jerking off.

"I spun a love fantasy about her and made her promise to marry me when I grew up and became the world's greatest movie director. She taught me all the tricks. Each time she jerked me off, she would look at the Virgin on the wall and say, 'Mary is watching, and this causes her heartfelt displeasure. See her sad look? We must not make the Madonna unhappy. Here, I have the solution.' So she would grab my ears and jam my head into her big hairy bush, saying, 'Ah, Federico, the Lord's mother cannot see you down there. Eat it, my child. It will make you a genius. It will make you live forever.' "

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Hundreds of cathouses are advertised in the newspapers under the guise of massage establishments. They feature aesthetic, satisfying, relaxing, health-creating manicures, spinal manipulations, foot treatments, muscle kneading, soothing exercises and also out-call services in your domicile no matter the place, the day or the night—during strikes, demonstrations, religious festivals and in all weathers and seasons.

One evening I was with Colonel T, an ugly sex-mad Greek who had taken

a room at the *pensione*, and his French friend, Jean-Pierre, who was an international art dealer. Jean-Pierre warned me that T had supported the dictatorship. We walked along the Tiber by Castel Sant' Angelo and passed a clutch of stunning whores by the bridge. We made the mistake of seeming interested. The gorgeous cunts were men, more female than Eve, exotically gotten up with platform shoes, white silk stockings up to their tucked-in balls, earrings and clanking jewelry. As we left them, we turned, out of curiosity. That did it! They came after us, salivating like dragons in heat and making blatant sucking and anal-lingual gestures. The he-she bastards followed us for blocks, and we didn't shake them until the nutty Greek decided to hire one of the transvestites; the Frenchman and I escaped.

Another evening, I looked over the dolls on the Via Veneto. Whether because of the full moon or the bankruptcy of the nation, pussy was legion, and so were the madams and pimps. On such a night, the show is the best in the world—Fellini, Bertolucci, Visconti and Zeffirelli notwithstanding. Two old horned-toad Texas cowboys in boots, Stetsons and shoestring ties were kissing transvestites on their lipsticked mouths and fondling their asses. Lesbians were boldly accosting girls and even women tourists accompanied by husbands. One pregnant woman said maliciously to her confounded mate, "How she looks at me! It gives me a funny feeling. Honey, what could she possibly want?"

I spotted Jean-Pierre and Colonel T. The cocky midget pimp who roosts at the corner of the Café de Paris by the newspaper kiosk said to Jean-Pierre, Colonel T and me, "Gentlemen, I have a deluxe cunt for you!" Jackie, the *mignotta* he called over, certainly was special; she was 19 and spoke smatterings of French, Greek and English.

"Only thirty thousand lire apiece," she said. "Don't hesitate. Make love now. Be brave!"

Fifty dollars apiece in a country with its back against the wall? I gagged and feigned reluctance, hoping that the price would go down. Jean-Pierre shrugged; he was neutral. But the swarthy bald Greek, Colonel T, was rank and ready.

She said, "Friends, I have my own apartment and machine and driver; you will luxuriate in fine drinks and food, music and smokes. I will give you a full happy hour each. Or I will take you all at the same time, if you wish. You'll see. Come, you are getting older by the second and you never know when you may die. Let us make this a special occasion. Look then: twenty-five thousand lire apiece!"

Jean-Pierre said, nodding toward me, "It's up to the maestro."

I said to Jean-Pierre on the side, "Let's bargain her down to twenty—maybe fifteen."

She heard and held her ground. People swirled about us. It was obvious to onlookers what was being transacted. Wives of milk-toast Americans gawked at Jackie in wonder and admiration as she pumped her pussy against me and, with my hands in hers, made me feel her hips, breasts and box.

The midget pimp drove us in a new Alfa Romeo; the young prostitute's apartment was lush, and the drinks and snacks she served were the finest.

I had my fun first. Then tall bearded Jean-Pierre mounted her. The Greek said he had to have privacy, but we opened the door of the bedroom and peeked: He was having seconds and thirds and whispering, "You are a thousand times more beautiful than Jackie Onassis. Promise you'll be true to me. Promise you won't fuck Jean-Pierre and Pietro!" Then he dove down on her—slobbering, slurping and growling like a famished dog. And that was the Greek hygiene fanatic who, in Jean-Pierre's kitchen, insisted upon washing the vegetables with soap and hot water!

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Weeks before Christmas, a number of streets were barricaded to traffic and decorated with red carpets, poinsettia plants, pine and palm trees, cushioned wicker lounges and antique oil-burning lamps. On the first spacious landing of the Spanish Steps, a village with a wondrous manger was built. On cold nights, there was a precious family feeling, with Elena and the other regular girls plus new stray lovelies, a policeman, a couple of *carabinieri*, a night watchman or two and the beloved drunk of the Steps, Barabbas—whose real name is Aldo. He tells everybody that the evil mob freed him in order to have Jesus Christ crucified. Barabbas would make a bonfire and we'd broil sausages and roast chestnuts, and the generous *mignotte*, with hearts bigger than their sweet asses, sent for vintage Bardolino and plates of spaghetti—between fast fucks for clients.

An oddball mother and daughter prostitute team came while the girls were warming at the fire and passed out handbills for a National Prostitutes' Civil Rights Union. The girls shook their heads; they were not about to be suckered into Orwellian identity cards, photos, monitoring, overhead and taxes. The failed mother and daughter whores were sexually undesirable, a disgrace to the profession; eventually they were reduced to working as postal clerks.

At the *pensione*, the girls exchanged gifts, including holy pictures and amulets—they are devoutly religious. The proprietor's mother had baked the traditional pastries for them. As Elena prepared to leave to spend the natal feast with Umberto's folks, the proprietor took baby Giulietta from Anna the maid. He held the child tightly and said with tearful eyes, "Treasure of treasures!"

The week Elena and the girls were gone the *pensione* was a nicely illuminated tomb.

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On a spring day by the Piazza del Popolo, I met Elena pushing Giulietta in her gocart. We walked without talking up to the gardens of the Pincio. Giulietta played on the grass with other toddlers. Elena and I rented the big telescope and inspected every part of Rome. Opposite the Villa Medici, Giulietta saw a woman feeding a cat.

I told the woman that my calico cat in the U.S.A., Miss Minnie Mascara, drove me out of my wits with her moody tastes. The refined woman said, "Your American young lady lacks the best appetizer: hunger." We introduced ourselves. We knew each other through our books. She was Elsa Morante, the great European author and—something I didn't know—the wife of Alberto Moravia.

I visited Elsa Morante at her duplex. "This was Moravia's apartment," she said. "We are good friends because we have always lived separate lives. Moravia comes here now only to tell me of the problems his mistresses give him." I said shamefacedly that I was doing a magazine piece on Roman prostitution.

Elsa said, "If there's anything you want to know, ask me. I was a professional whore for years. I was one of the dependable prostitutes at the railroad station."

"Because of economic distress?"

"Yes."

"Goddamn the dirty fucking capitalistic society!" I said.

"Oh, don't say that," she said. "I found being a prostitute wonderful! I was from the Jewish ghetto; I had a terrible sense of vaginal inferiority; I felt unattractive and unwanted. To me, whoring was the spice of life. New lovers night and day. No lies or bourgeois garbage. Every woman has a fascinating whore in her. She should use it. It is the supreme school for living, marriage and writing.

"Before a woman leaves this world

she should be fucked by Proteus, who changes himself into a different man every hour. What a grand and beautiful gesture against destiny and death!

"But when it came to money, I was the most stupid whore. Business transactions frightened me. I never charged enough. And now I'm the same way with agents and publishers. Oh, no, I was not a good commercial whore."

I said, "I was a bricklayer, and I still lay bricks. One's craft is never lost. If you don't mind—let's not be stuffy—I'll hire your services tonight and give you much more than you would ask. You see, I've never fucked a writer."

"Thank you," she said, "I appreciate your meaning. But I am no longer a woman on this planet. Elsa Morante is dead. Her soul and brain live in the idealism of paper and the typewriter."

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There was a call for long-legged Gay. The proprietor of the *pensione* rang her room, put his hand over the mouthpiece and gave me the phone, saying, "You have to hear this!" It was Gay's pimp cursing her for not having made the payment on his Ferrari.

When Gay came down, she was upset. The proprietor led me to the room behind the desk where there was a window overlooking the street. A white Ferrari convertible, driven by Gay's flashy pimp, arrived. He pulled her hair, slapped her.

The proprietor said, "*Disgraziato!* Ingrate!"

The following week, I saw Gay's pimp arrested. When the *carabinieri* silently closed in on him, he threw a plastic bag over the wall. A young *carabiniere* fetched it from among the orange trees and bushes. In front of the pimp, he opened the bag, revealing packets of dope and hypodermic needles. They put chains on the pimp and hustled him down the Spanish Steps to the Alfa Romeo police car.

Gay left the *pensione* to live with the pimp's mother and sisters. The proprietor bewailed his loss. He said he leased the *pensione* from Vatican Realty, and were it not for the whores, he'd starve to death. He took me into the dining room where he played piano ragtime and had me drink a quart of brandy and sing with him. And I learned the details of his fucking the *mignotte* of the *pensione*—without cost.

"But Elena! For Elena, I would throw away my wife, the *pensione*, my soul!" And making that Roman sign of top quality, the forefinger screwed into the cheek: "If Jesus Christ made more ineffable cunt than Elena, the son of a bitch has kept it for himself!" He wept and said, "What I could tell you about me and Elena and my treasure Giulietta would make you the best book!"

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The *pensione* was definitely not a whorehouse; in it, the girls were untouchable—you don't shit on your own doorstep. Pacts had to be struck outside. Then it was permissible to come back to the *pensione* and go through the routine of paying a day's rent for a few minutes' use of PRIVATO. They knew I was writing about them, and it was baby-face Cinzia who put me on the spot: "Look here, Doctor, your rich American magazine pays you but not me and you're taking up my time. If you don't care to fuck or can't get it stiff, be a big Yankee sport and give me the 30,000 lire for chatting with you."

When I was walkin' one day with my Roman niece, who w made up like a stage star with pain, powder, heavy lipstick, blond wig and false eyelashes, Cinzia took her for a brazen competing whore, came over, grimaced and blew cigarette smoke in her face. My niece was flattered.

I had had the girls of the *pensione* one by one with the exception of Elena, who had avoided me. A motion-picture camera should have recorded how I spied on Elena's movements from about 200 feet away. It was weird. I can't imagine what she thought of my behavior. Also, I believe that my respect and civil kindness—thin masks for my infatuation—terrorized Elena, were a foreign body in her social stream, an invasion of her lifestyle.

One night I decided: There's a time for all things. I took Elena by the arm. She did not resist. In Rome, it is not what you do, but how you do it. In front of Bulgari's window, which was scintillating with diamonds, rubies and sapphires, I put three new 10,000 lire notes in her hand. What an indescribable blessing it is that an aging Faustus can buy an edible Margaret, a pearl, and take her to bed for a paradisiacal spell. An hour with the divine whore is as 1000 years—without society and religion's lousy bullshit!

In PRIVATO, the graceful way Elena undressed was entrancing. A girl denuding is the artist born. Without effort, Elena invoked all that is love. It seemed she was serving herself to me on an altar. After a quick appraisal of the thing and a cursory squeeze of the knob, she got a condom from her purse, tenderly unrolled it onto me, lay back on the bed like earth receiving the rain, spread and worked me in. Elena did something transfiguring for a man. It made him say and mean with all his being, "Elena, I love you!"

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I had to go to Sicily for two months. When I returned, the proprietor told me that Elena was gone. Elena had found out from a doctor that she had the first symptoms of tuberculosis. The wool man had taken her and the baby to the Abruzzian mountains. He had set them up in the small village hotel and, for appearance' sake, he had given her a job in the mill as a weaver. His son, who was about Elena's age, fell madly in love with the girl; and Umberto, the abandoned pimp, tracked her down, assaulted the old wool manufacturer and was arrested and sent to prison.

"I miss that girl the way a man suddenly blinded misses his vision," the proprietor said. "I see Elena's face in the *Pietà*—and many duplicates of her face and profile can be seen on the reliefs in Augustus' tomb. Ah, who wouldn't love Elena, though she's been fucked by thousands? A whore makes the very best wife. Elena will come back. There is something about her career!"

After he got over his reverie, he said, "Do not be offended—you know how women are: My wife wants me to tell you that your typewriter bothers our tired constructionworker guests at night and, by day, interrupts the sleep of the girls. We must think first about the comfort of our permanent guests."

One morning in the Piazza di Spagna, I thought I was imagining things—but it was not a mirage. Giulietta, having learned to walk since I had last seen her, was clambering up the steps ahead of Elena. The baby was rushing happily toward the great banks of azaleas. And Elena pointed out the various colors.

The next day, a messenger brought her an impressive gift box from the florist. Before the proprietor sent it up, he opened the package and showed me the expensive long-stemmed American Beauty roses and the card. He said they were from the wool man's son. Later we saw the tall, rich, magnificent young man call for her. The proprietor brought out the customary quart of brandy.

"Some of us dream," he said. "In this uncertain life, who knows what may happen? Suppose God in His mysterious ways and wisdom called my dear wife to heaven. Elena could take her place at this desk. You see—you have got to know—Elena's Giulietta is my child, my angel, my blood."

We drank on that.

"I guess we all dream," he said. "But, remember, even a dream is better than nothing." ▣