

and Tracy Quan, New York call-girl turned writer, tell their personal stories

I rebelled against my strict mother

I GOT INTO prostitution for practical reasons — to earn my living — but my decision was fueled by immature fantasies. Unwilling to renounce either my past or my fantasy life, I used my experience as a call girl to build a new career as a novelist.

When *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* was published, people asked if it was a memoir. It's not, but the sequel, *Diary of a Married Call Girl*, still brings e-mail asking if I've actually "tied the knot."

Now that *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl* is out, people wonder if I had a favourite customer involved with the Enron scandal! If I did, would I really want to write something "that" close to home?

Like other fiction-writers, I cavil when readers confuse my novels with my life. But perhaps I protest too much.

There are some similarities I can divulge. Like Nancy Chan, the pragmatic narrator of these tales, I ran away from home as a teen. I saw just enough of the dangerous side of the sex trade to resolve that I would conquer its caste system and work in the "high end." Nancy's best friend Allison - a privileged blond who started at the top - sees the injustice inherent in this hierarchy, and she wants to change, not just the sex trade, but the world. There is a little of both types in my nature, a romantic idealist clashing with the unapologetic realist. And maybe neither type alone could have created a novel.

In New York, where I established myself as both writer and call girl, the sexual caste system is flexible for some women, brutal for others. Perhaps a dim sense of my part-Indian ancestry made me want to write about this modern aspect of caste. One of my great-grandmothers died in childbirth, on a boat that sailed from India - we don't know where in India - to Trinidad. The widower (whose name remains a mystery) had to work off his debt in the cane fields when he arrived. His child, Lucinda, grew up in a Trinidad orphanage.

I always wondered about my ancestors' caste origins - not for reasons of status, but in order to understand better the multi-cultural place where my family is now rooted. Although we were encouraged to think of ourselves as Chinese-Trinidadian, I always felt a greater kinship with India and Indians - a curiosity I never felt toward China.

Some of this conflict found its way into my novels. Like Nancy, I have an opinionated relative who rails against VS Naipaul, another who attended high school with Naipaul's sister - and a problem adjusting to the climate whenever I return to Trinidad.

Another theme I can't disown is the central character's difficult relationship with the concept of home. Nancy wonders how it is that a long distance conversation about commercial sex conducted in a foreign villa makes her feel like she's "home." The household she's building with her husband "should" feel

By Tracy Quan

like home, yet she cannot fit in fully with that safe, socially acceptable way of life - despite being able to pass for a banker's respectable wife.

Some have accused me of writing stories that make prostitution seem easy, but my point is different: for a prostitute, normal life isn't as easy as it looks. When you have worked so hard to build a business as a successful courtesan, the choices are harder than you'd think.

Telling this story with a quiet smile doesn't mean the job is easy.

Behind the call girl's glamour, there's plenty of anxiety and alienation, but the contrast lends itself to social comedy rather than tragedy. This is something the moralists won't accept, addicted as they are to unhappy endings.

There have always been stories about prostitutes, and I wanted to bring my female experience to the genre. Ironically, the books that inspired me were written by "dead white males." Reading Daniel Defoe's 18th-century novel, *Moll Flanders*, was my Aha Moment, for I began to feel less alienated. Despite the archaic language of Defoe's prostitute, many of her tricks and traits are amusingly familiar. Later I discovered *The World of Suzie Wong*, in which bohemian 1950s London echoes the New York art scene where sex workers are a trendy minority.

I have wanted to write a novel since the age of 13, but my transition from seasoned prostitute to first-time novelist was terrifying. Writers who dabble in prostitution just to pay a few bills may find it easier to let go of sex work, but I was fiercely attached to my call-girl lifestyle and afraid to leave.

DURING a BBC interview, I was asked: "Is your family scandalized? And how can you dedicate *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl* to ... your mother!" My mother, who taught me to read, was the stricter parent, the one I rebelled against. I know she was relieved when I put sex work in the past so I could write about it.

When my first novel came out, there was a bookstore reading in my hometown - where my parents no longer reside. In the front row of the audience was my mother's best friend who has known me since I was a baby. Sitting next to this aunty-figure was a man with a strange obsession.

"Are you a nymphomaniac?" he asked. I took a deep breath, and gave an answer my mother would approve of, pointing out that 20th century ideas about emotional pathology are being swept aside by drier economic theories in the 21st. Remembering my mother's etiquette lectures, I assured him that his question was valuable for shedding light on this cultural sea-change.

When I returned to New York, I met a sex worker who had just published a well-received memoir - but her own mother



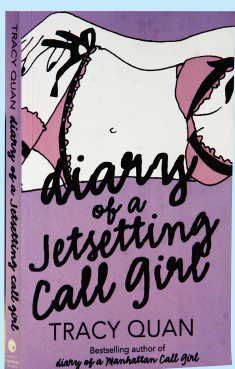
Quan: Streets to stardom

was too embarrassed to tell her friends. I had not, until then, realized how much I appreciate my mother's unambiguous support for my Call Girl novels.

(Tracy Quan wrote this exclusively for MAIL TODAY. Quan's latest novel, *Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl*, is out now (Harper

Perennial. In 2006, *Quan's Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl*, was published in Malayalam by Current Books, Kerala. A television series based on *Diary* is being developed for HBO by Darren Star, creator of "Sex and the City." Visit www.tracyquan.net)

EXCERPT



You aren't a professional unless you have a self-imposed quota. You feel like a failure if you can't make your quota, and the heightened security in hotels has made it harder to keep up. I was starting to feel like a shadow, of my single call-girl self, until I lowered my weekly quota to a level I can actually meet.

Though Matt isn't aware of my job, he totally benefits when business is good.

And suffers when business is slow. Perhaps not financially, but in other ways.

Will this do something weird to Milt's lower back? Once in my teens, I had sex on the floor on my back - what agony the next morning! Maybe it is different for guys? In any case, I didn't want to break the spell. I bit my lip and said nothing. Now I was back in control, ready to get my customer off and my mind had slipped away from

Duncan. My nipples were tingling. But I was focusing on Milt. As I rode harder though, I realized that I wasn't. I could not stop thinking of Duncan. I closed my eyes and imagined his hands were doing what my hands were doing - touching my breast. I managed to unhook my bra and remove it, without missing a beat. Milt was getting closer, and so was I.

- Excerpted from *The Diary of a Jetsetting Call Girl* (Harper Perennial)