

LILA'S HOUSE.
A MALE BROTHEL IN DOWNTOWN SAN JOSÉ.

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Translated by

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I feel the pain again
here, now, in this place.
I take the path of the mirror,
I stop at the threshold,
I look at it and I see the reflection;

Your reflection

I cannot identify
what I feel,
or what I see,
or what you are trying to tell me.

You speak a language that is difficult
to understand.

(Antonio Bustamante)

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Jacobo Schifter

I. THE HOUSE AND THE MONEY

THE HOUSE

Lila's house was built in the 1920s as part of a working-class housing project. It is located in a marginal neighborhood in the southern part of San Jose, Costa Rica. It is surrounded by bars and small businesses. The front of the building is dominated by a peeling and dented door. The small metal gate has been closed for years. The number plate above the door reads "13-28". As you enter, you see a long, narrow hallway, about four feet wide and nearly forty feet long, with a high ceiling. "This is Sin Alley" says the boy who answers the door.

The designs on the floor tiles contrast with the sawdust, excrement, and dogs' urine that is everywhere. A wooden three-seater bench is positioned about six feet from the door. "This is my bed sometimes," the owner tells us. The first room is about twelve feet from the entrance, on the left hand side. It is a medium-sized room about fourteen feet long and almost as wide. A naked light bulb hangs from the ceiling and the walls are decorated with tourism posters and a full-length mirror. A dimmer switch controls the light. "It's better not to have too much light," says Mike, a prostitute. "You get some really scary-looking old dudes in here."

The double bed in this first room is placed against the wall and is covered with a torn, stained sheet, made from the same material as the curtain that covers the closed-up window. The owner and his companion sleep in this bed, which is also used by the owner and his clientele as a "landing strip," a bed on which sexual relations take place. One of the five large dogs that live in the house occasionally sleeps there as well. "The bed of sin, take a good look," says Lila. "Here, the sheets are witnesses to lust, licentiousness, the weakness of the flesh..."

Near the bed there is a table, approximately five feet long and eighteen inches wide, painted black, with several cigarette burns and what appear to be oil stains. A three-piece moon-shaped mirror set hangs above the table, as well as a roll of toilet paper, some moisturizing cream, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, some condoms, and a fan. There is a penetrating organic odor: sweat, semen, "Sanipine" (a disinfectant), and used toilet paper on the floor. Behind the headboard hangs an old green velvet theater curtain. "This was a gift from the deceased 'Macha'," says Lila, "so the neighbors can't make peep holes. It's a very powerful curtain. 'Macha' was a witch."

One of the customers tells us that "here they do three to six hits (sexual encounters) a day, depending what day it is." Jesus, a sex worker, explains that the sheet is changed "every week or two." According to him, "a clean bedspread is used for special clients." This means that the sheet is normally used for around fifty sexual encounters before being washed. According to Lila, use of the room is irregular but frequent. "There are nights when customers knock on the door in the middle of the night and I have to get out of bed to go sleep on the bench in the hall; it's been tough lately, I have no choice." On a busy night, the owner, his companion, and the dog have to leave the room several times to sleep on the bench.

Farther down the hall, which widens slightly, is a small interior garden with flower pots and plastic buckets containing ornamental plants, some hanging from the roof, others from the wall. There is also a white porcelain toilet tank. According to Lila, "the *mother-in-law's tongues* that I planted in here are to bring in money." Parts of the wall and roof have deteriorated, leaving some areas exposed to the elements. This has benefited the plants, judging by their vigorous growth. "The collapsed wall and the holes in the roof help to get rid of the smells in the house", Lila remarks. "That's wishful thinking -- you'd need a whole forest to counteract the smell of dog shit," says Aguilucho.

There are some huge river boulders surrounded by flower pots. "This rock," explains Lila, "I stole it in the middle of the night, with the help of a couple guys. I'd been seeing it in the same place for years. I liked it so I took it." Mike cannot see the point in stealing a rock "as if it were a diamond." Every plant, stone, or decorative object has its own story, and Lila is willing to tell them all in intricate detail. Some are his own hallucinogenic fantasies. However, we preferred not to ask, as he tends to talk endlessly and the house is filled with old trinkets.

The kitchen serves as the focal point and meeting place of the house. It measures about twelve feet by ten feet, and is separated from the garden by a wooden folding screen made from woven strips of a beautiful wood that is no longer available in the country. There is a long, narrow table with three plastic chairs, a gas hotplate with four burners, and several cupboards containing a variety of items which are scattered around: empty bottles, figurines, porcelain and glass vases, some ornamental plants, old newspapers, and a pink hamster cage. This pet, one of Lila's newest acquisitions, runs neurotically on its treadmill. On top of the new white refrigerator sits a German radio from the 1940s, which nearly always plays 'salsa' music. The floor is made of cement and is painted red. Pedro, a customer, disdainfully remarks that, "something's always cooking here. Lila spends everything on feeding the dogs and the punks who hang out here day and night. Everything goes to feed those lazy bums."

The kitchen leads to two rooms. One is the dogs' room, where two large black dogs have lived for the past four years. Sometimes, if they hear a noise, they try to get out, pushing on the door and barking menacingly. The customers and the prostitutes generally become alarmed, whereupon Lila screams at the top of his lungs, "Shut up you sons of bitches. That's enough!", while he pounds on the door with a heavy chain. This routine is repeated four or five times a night.

The dogs are a forbidden topic. Any reference to the foul odors, filth, parasites, or to alleged abuse of the dogs, Lila takes as a personal insult. His reactions to such comments are explosive and aggressive. Don Pedro, a customer, agrees: "I've seen Lila yell and threaten more than one of these guys when they criticize the dogs." According to Lila, the smells and the excrement protect him from possible police raids. "No cop is going to climb over so much shit," he assures us. He certainly has a point: to enter the house, you need to be good at playing hopscotch. One false step could be deadly.

The dogs eat, urinate, and defecate in this twelve-foot square room. They have no choice but to spend their lives sitting down. Salomon, one of the boys, tells us that "the dogs haven't been out for four years. Once in a while he takes them for a walk at night." Mike, another one of the boys, thinks that "it's not the police who will raid us, but the health department." Other animals, including rats, mice, cockroaches, and other insects are found throughout the house. The dogs' room is also where the owner keeps his clothing and valuables. Salomon tells us that only Lila can go in this room. "One day I went into the room, and one of the dogs bit me -- I still have the scar. I felt betrayed. I hate that dog ! "La Rubia" (The Blond One), a customer, agrees with Mike: "Those dogs have been the ruin of this house. This fool spends over 20,000 colones a month on them." The cockroaches and the mice, however, are more mobile. "I was bent down having oral sex with a guy," recalls a North American client, "when I saw a parade of mice and cockroaches. First, one cockroach went by, and then another, and another. Then the mice came out. Three of them in line, one behind the other. The last one stayed for a few seconds to see what I was doing, so I asked him, 'Could I have a little privacy, please?'"

Lila defends himself from his critics. "If I have to bury myself alive in this house with the dogs, then I'll do it. I'm not going to get rid of them just because some of son-of-a-bitch queen criticizes me. I've spent millions on them over these last seven years. What these queens want is to see me ruined, in jail. They're all jealous because I was beautiful and because I like luxury and nice things. They can all go to hell! These dogs love me, they're the only ones who love me... These animals protect me, they're my destiny." Lila continues, "Twenty or twenty-five years ago the deceased "Flores" predicted it: I see you surrounded by eight black dogs that will protect you."

The other room leading off from the kitchen is fourteen feet long and about ten feet wide. A single bed takes up most of the space. An old closet with beveled mirrors allows just enough room to pass by. A new electric stove covered with a white sheet fills the rest of the space. According to Lila, "this stove was given to me by a gringo who fell in love with Mike." For years, this room has been rented or reserved for "emergencies." Now it is occupied by Hector, also known as "Rambo", a masculine, muscular, good-looking 22 year-old sex worker. According to Lila, Hector is the one who is most sought-after by the clients: he will do anything, and almost does it for love. However, Lila bemoans the fact that "he's so strange, he doesn't talk. I think he's sick. He treats me very badly, he insults me, he doesn't respect me, I keep him here because I feel sorry for him. He goes to bed at five in the morning after whoring all night. He gets up at six in the evening. He doesn't help me with anything; he doesn't even want to wash the dogs. Too bad he's so weird. With a body and a dick like that, he should be a millionaire, but no, he just wants to whore and sleep. He's very strange." "Rambo" himself confirms that "I've had up to five customers a day. I'll take anything, whatever it is."

According to Lila, "La Montaña" and his lover, Quique, used to live in Rambo's room. "La Montaña got it when he was fifteen. Mike also used to live there, with his squeeze, 'til the stupid slut got pregnant and I threw them both out. I loved him dearly, and I still do, but he was destroying me little by little. You can't live with a hardened player."

Separated by a wooden screen, the kitchen sink is located in a space two and a half meters by two meters. It is a damp, dirty-looking place. The lower part of the wall has caved in and is exposed to the elements. You can see the patio of the house next door (which has been closed off for the past year). Sewage flows freely underneath the sink. The water is so foul that seven puppies from the last litter who drank some died of poisoning. During the rainy season, water pours onto the floor through the holes in the roof. Next to the sink there are some unpainted wooden shelves, worn by water and time. Various kitchen utensils sit on the shelves. Occasionally, small rats scamper across them. You can hear the sound of the rodents' offspring. Lila explains that "I don't kill rats because they, too, are parents and have the right to live. They'll go away someday..." This doesn't seem very likely in the near future: "The rats are happy at Lila's. They feel welcomed and appreciated," says Pedro. "They don't even hide," he says.

Next to the washroom is the bathroom. A piece of cloth held in place with tacks serves as a door. The bathroom is small, four feet wide and about seven feet long. Neither the sink nor the toilet works properly. A North American client visiting the house for the first time comments: "Jesus Christ! After doing my thing with the guy, I went to the sink to use some mouthwash. I gargled, spat into the sink, and -- ah, it was so gross -- the mouthwash spilled directly onto my new sneakers! There was no pipe -- I could see right down through the sink to my shoes!"

The shower has no curtain. The prostitutes bathe here, as do some of the clients. Lila also uses the shower to wash out the rag he constantly uses to mop up the dogs' urine. Small shelves display empty flowerpots, bottles of medicine and liquor, some of which are broken or have not been touched for years. There are also tubes of toothpaste and disposable razors. A vine that dried up years ago is still planted and stuck to the wall. There is an empty fishbowl. The dogs drink from the toilet bowl.

Next to the bathroom is a tiny 5 feet square patio, a kind of utility room with no door. Nearby, there is a large new white washing machine. According to Lila, it was given to him by a client "who wanted to win me over."

The largest space is the living room, which is around fourteen feet wide by eighteen feet long. An altar to Saint Barbara, decorated by a client and friend, occupies the position of honor -- a six-foot long, eighteen inch wide platform which stands about three feet high. The platform is draped with red velvet. An enclosure of pink and magenta feathers covers the nine inch high statuette of the saint. The owner says the statuette was given to him by "La Duquesa" (The Duchess), a guy who came from France and who "had powers." "I admire St. Barbara," says Lila, "because she was a princess who chose to die rather than be humiliated. They say her own father cut off her tits." The statue is surrounded with magical accessories: a pack of Spanish cards that Lila uses in his reading sessions, a bronze goblet, an oil lamp that burns 24 hours a day, fruits and red ornaments. There is a picture of the Afro-Caribbean deity, "Changó". "It was given to me by a Cuban friend who painted it himself. A white card with the Hebrew character "Aleph" printed in red is used for offerings, and there is also a bell made of bronze and wood. Another dog sleeps under the altar. Occasionally, incense is burned. When times are hard, the owner prays and meditates in front of the altar. Sometimes, he cries. According to Mike, "the day after a Cuban sorcerer 'cleaned' the place up, I saw him cry like a baby, he was kneeling and the Cuban put his arms around him."

On the other side of the living room there is a small unused bar upon which the Christmas Nativity scene is built. The owner admits that the scene "is famous throughout the neighborhood." The Nativity scene is displayed in December, to coincide with St Barbara's feast day. It is taken down in April, after Easter Week and after a rosary has been said. Parts of the floor have come loose where the ground has sunk and the tiles have not been put back in place.

Two large fishbowls shed a faint, greenish light. A bubbling sound can be heard, though there are no oxygen pumps. One day we saw Lila transferring a fish from one tank to the other: "Come here, baby. Keep still! Come to Mama. Don't jump, you son-of-a-bitch. I'm the boss here!," he said to one of the large golden carp. The fish died a few days later. It floated for hours before anyone bothered to take it out. "This fish here," says Lila, "cost me around seven thousand colones. I've spent a fortune on them. They're more grateful than the bastards who live here, who don't give a shit. I feed them Japanese food that costs me 1,500 colones a day."

In one corner of the living room there is a narrow door secured by a thin chain. This is the last room in the house, known as the "landing strip". It was originally a kitchen, but for years this room has been rented or used by itinerant young men, many of whom do "extra" work in the house. The room is ten feet long and eight feet wide. It has a single bed, and the old wash sink has been turned into a table and closet. The current occupant, Cesar, hangs his clothes on a metal rod. He has decorated the room with photographs and posters of girls in swim suits. A well-known picture of Marilyn Monroe hangs on the grey discolored door. "If this room could talk...", Salomon remarks. Quique adds, "a very drunk, drugged-up client tried to strangle me here one day. Lila saved me when he heard my screams." Raul, a client, recalls that one day in this room "two kids pulled a gun on me and threatened to kill me. In the end I talked them into selling me the gun. Then I beat them both up." Lila has his own story about this room. "One day, during a fight, someone tried to rob me and they locked me in here, and I broke my hand trying to get out through the ceiling. I almost killed myself, but I landed like a feather." Lola, a friend, says that in this room, "I scratched the son-of-a-bitch who lived here in the face, and I left marks -- nobody makes a fool of me." Aguilucho, one of the young men who has worked longest at the house, lights a joint and comments, "the only room in this house that's kept neat is this one." In recent months, the room has been used as an office to conduct interviews and a bedroom for Cesar, a twenty-one-year-old sex worker. He recently moved here because of family problems. His girlfriend visits him often and they lock themselves in the room. Cesar charges at least 3,000 colones for sex without penetration. "No son-of-a-bitch is going to touch my ass. If the client wants penetration, he's got to give me a "toucan" (5,000 colon bill)." He says his girlfriend does not know "that this is a whorehouse or that I work here."

THE CLIENTS

They creep into the house stealthily and leave even more quickly. They choose the guy they like and go into a room. It seems that they do not exist because you hardly see them. "It's not that people are scared at Lila's. It's just that it's swarming with ghosts," says Mike. If you listen carefully, you can just make out sighs, barely suppressed exclamations of pleasure, a little groan of pain... "They've nailed (penetrated, in jargon) the Venezuelan!" he says softly. "When you have experience as a madam," Lila continues, "you get to know what goes on behind closed doors." As we paid more attention, it seemed that he was right: the Venezuelan was moaning with pleasure. "However," he added, "one day I was wrong. They were strangling a queen and I just thought he was coming. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between orgasm and strangulation." A few minutes later, the Venezuelan came out. He did not greet us, or look at us, or say anything: he simply went out onto the street and disappeared into the night. "That queen's a journalist," said Lila, "and look how she moves her ass."

Who are the clients? What kind of men come to a place like this? They are not generally willing to be seen or interviewed. "No, no!" exclaimed Lila. "Are you crazy, wanting to interview my clients? I'll be run out of business." Neither the owner nor the prostitutes wanted the clients to be interviewed. "If we let you talk to them, tomorrow you'll be bringing Dr. Phil with his TV cameras?". Then, you guys will be on 'Ophra's while I'm rotting in jail for pimping," said the owner. "The only way to get a closer look at them is to ask the prostitutes," he suggested as a compromise. "Next they're going to ask me if they can film a fuck!" said Lila to Mike, in a tone of exasperation and uneasiness.

There are many types of "regular" clients at this place. Most of them are interested in young men aged 15 to 20. Others, a minority, prefer boys aged 10 to 14 years. Yet another group has no age preference: they come here because men are available and they can even choose 35 year olds. Gerardo, a soccer referee, works from time to time at the house. "I've got more energy and experience than any shithead around here. Look at this body," he tells us. "Isn't it sexy?" However, his type is not the "specialty of the house." Lila's brothel is best known as a place for pederasts and pimps. "Our clients like youth. There are other houses for old 'cacheros'," says Mike.

Unlike the prostitutes, the clients' sexual orientation is bisexual. Most of them are married men with children, who are completely "in the closet," as Lila says. In other words, these men lead a heterosexual life in public, with occasional visits to the brothel. Nevertheless, there are also some homosexuals among the clients. However, as we will see below, the prostitutes do not like homosexual clients. "They're never satisfied. They always want more and more sex, they want you to kiss them on the mouth and say things to them. They're a pain in the ass. I'd rather not go with them, so I concentrate on the 'viejos' (mature men)," says Cerebrón. For 'cacheros', homosexuals are

generally effeminate men who move within the gay community, live with other men, and have not married or had children. The "*viejos*" are those who hide their homosexuality well, who are masculine, and whom one would never suspect of being homosexual.

Although bisexual clients appear to be masculine, there are significant differences -- besides age -- between themselves and the sex workers. One of them is desire. Paying clients express feelings of sexual attraction for other men, enjoy sexual relations, and began their secret homosexual lives years ago. "Clients like what's done to them -- if not, they wouldn't pay," says Hugo. "You can tell they like gay sex," says Mono. According to Lila, many of his clients have been coming for more than 20 years and started young. One of the few clients that we were able to interview, "El Flaco" (The Thin Man), confesses that he started paying men for sex when he was 17 years old. Now, aged 39, he admits he enjoys it just as much: "I'm married and have children. I do this once a month when my hormones flare up."

Bisexual clients also differ from homosexual clients. Bisexuals are more attracted by the prostitutes' youth, while homosexuals are attracted by their masculinity. Mono explains why:

The homosexuals who come here are looking for a man. What attracts them is not youth, but masculinity. In gay bars, there are masculine homosexuals but they are a minority. The younger "fairies" who want to feel like women come to be penetrated. When you're with them, they act and talk so much like women that you feel like you're in a hen house. Some guys like them because it's like being with a woman. Others hate them for being effeminate. The masculine clients, on the other hand, are respectable family men, some are even grandfathers.

In terms of sexual practice, there is also great variety. Cerebrón prefers older customers because "they treat you more like a son" and "they help you more, they don't beat around the bush, and if you need something they give it to you because they know they're old. They're not so interested in sodomy." Hugo agrees that clients who are married and have relations with women "are different from homosexuals. They're not so demanding." However, he believes they are interested in penetration. Erick does not think there is a general pattern for any single client. "Each guy has a different relationship with a client. With some, the client may be active, and with others, passive. With me, 'El Flaco' is extremely passive even though he's married and 'macho'. With others he may be active, I don't know." There are also some very effeminate homosexuals who are active. "La Preciada is active despite being a complete woman," says Mono. "Life's full of surprises," replies Lila, and adds, "You can't kid yourself and keep on believing that a married, masculine man is necessarily active. I've seen thousands of 'macho men' who, instead of attacking and dominating you, get down on all fours. If I see that a man is not going to dominate me, then I dominate him and fuck him. I'm a queer, but I'm not a coward."

Many of the prostitutes believe that clients have trouble picking up sex partners because of their age, looks, or weight. Cerebrón comments that, "if they had pretty faces, they wouldn't be here." He says many of them are so fat that "you can't even see their dick because of their stomach." The man with the glasses has "such a big belly that he looks like he's eight months pregnant," adds Luis. But others say that it's not only ugly men that frequent the place. "No way!" says Mono. "We get good-looking guys who could have any man or woman they wanted, but they don't because they don't want to get a reputation, so they come here because it's quick and discreet." The owner agrees: "We get everything. I've got clients who ask about other clients...they want to take them into a room, because they're so good."

The clients' social status is equally varied. Although Lila's house leaves much to be desired, and the dirt has driven away many customers, he still receives middle-class and wealthy clients. This is what Hugo has to say:

What we get is working middle-class people -- some are professors, others are bar owners. There are others who are real upper crust -- there are two really rich guys here. One is very arrogant and thinks he owns the world. The other one isn't like that, he treats people well.

One of the rich men who frequents the brothel is the famous and mysterious "El Conde" (The Count). He pays for the rent of the house in exchange for complete discretion and absolute confidentiality. "The Count," says Mike, "is someone hardly anyone knows except us. The owner throws everyone out of the house when he's expected. He's a very rich and

important man. His turn-on is watching erotic scenes involving several guys. When he comes here, Lila chooses the best guys to treat him 'like a king.' He's a fat man with glasses. I've seen him, and people would die if they knew who he was." "Can we find out who 'The Count' is?" we asked Lila. "Sure, I'd be happy to tell you," he replied, "if you give me your credit card number and a blank check. Can't you see that if I open my mouth, I'll end up with my tongue in the fish tank -- and maybe yours, too?"

Although there are rich clients, most are from modest backgrounds. Lila's house is cheaper than many other brothels. The price of a "hit" is less than ten thousand colones, including room and prostitute. In saunas where prostitution is practiced, the cost of the masseur and the room is double. "People are throwing their money away when they go to those saunas. I'm telling you, Lila's is cheaper and you pay half as much: 'Listen, you fools,' I say, 'don't you see that here you can save ten thousand colones for the same thing?'" Despite Cerebrón's sales pitch, the saunas are cleaner, and many middle-class men prefer them.

Although, as we shall see later, emotional relationships develop between clients and prostitutes, the transaction can also be crude and commercial. Adults regard these young men as sexual objects, and there is minimal conversation:

1st Interviewer: What is it that attracts clients here?
Hugo: What most clients are looking for is a big dick.

Cerebrón agrees:

1st Interviewer: Do clients propose marriage to you?
Cerebrón: Yeah, lots.
1st Interviewer: Why do you think that happens?
Cerebrón: I don't know -- must be because of my dick. I have a bunch of clients who are in love with it.
1st Interviewer: And that doesn't bother you?
Cerebrón: No, actually I feel proud.
1st Interviewer: But wouldn't you rather that they fell in love with you for your mind?
Cerebrón: Of course! But most of them are queers, and since they're so interested in dicks...

Hugo tells us that clients are interested in a big penis, "like a horse." When we asked him if some of the guys have been rejected for being less well-endowed, he said, "no, not very often. However, clients discuss all our characteristics among themselves. Maybe the first time they'll go with someone small, but the next time they'll look for the biggest one."

Other requests from clients, such as sadomasochism, are often turned down. Luis says he "hates it" when they ask him to use vibrators or alcohol. "Some of them ask me to use alcohol. Do you have any idea how much that hurts?" Others like pain or scratching and biting, "things that really bother me." Hugo has had violent scenes with clients: "One day I was with a guy from Puriscal and we went to his house. I was joking and asked him if he liked to give his ass. He had a record in his hand, and he threw it down, slapped me, threatened me, and treated me like a dog."

Some prostitutes take revenge on their clients by robbing them. If someone picks them up in a public place (not at Lila's or in a sauna) and is loaded with money, as Cerebrón says, he's setting himself up to be robbed. According to Cerebrón, clients who go to bars and come out drunk run the risk that "the guys will leave them naked in the street." He explains how and why he robs some of his clients:

2nd Interviewer: OK, so can we conclude that besides the money that clients pay you for sex, you also have the opportunity to rob them?
Cerebrón: Yeah, but let's say you and I go to a hotel, or where nobody knows we are, we do it, and then after it's over you tell me that you don't have much money, you take out your wallet and I see lots of "toucans" (5,000 colon bills), but you only give me 3,000. That's when I'd rob you.
2nd Interviewer: How do you do it?
Cerebrón: You say, 'give me your money,' and you take out the knife, and if he doesn't cooperate, you grab him and shove him up against the wall. You don't need a knife to scare people.
2nd Interviewer: Just by looking mean?
Cerebrón: Yeah, just by looking mean, pure acting.

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