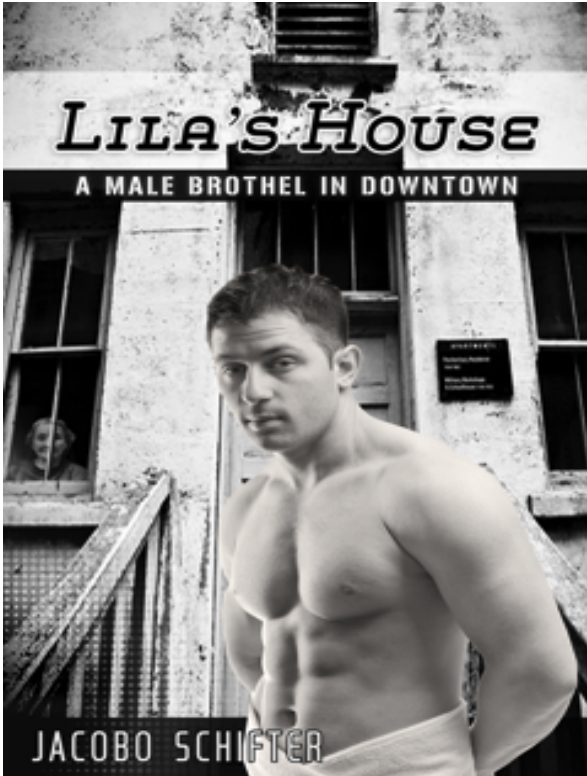


LILA'S HOUSE

A MALE BROTHEL IN DOWNTOWN SAN JOSÉ.



Translated by
Irene Artavia Fernández
Sharon Mulheren

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	3
I. The house and the money	4
The clients	19
“Cacheros”	39
The owner	42
Is Lila a sorcerer?	55
Profit and money laundering	59
II. The cachero is masculine	72
III. What can and cannot be done	102
Materialism	103
Language and forced-feminization	107
Focal vs. Multifarious	110
A day in the life	112
A clean slate	116
Indifference	121
“Pagadores”	127
Different sexual practices	131
Double standards	135
IV. Virility problems	139
Fantasy and Pleasure	139
Flirting	149
Money and drugs	153
Family and children	163
New demands	166
Romantic love	167
Empathy	171
V. Sodom and Gomorrah Revisited	177
Cacherismo	181
Health Prevention	186
Epilogue	192
Glossary	196

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Our team coordinated the data collection phase, made the initial contacts, obtained permission to enter Lila's house, and served as a consultant on the topic of “cacherismo” in Central America. I myself was able to be introduced to the brothel, meet and talk to Lila and interview the sex workers and some of their clients in the premises. My ethnographic observation lasted 9 months.

Lidia Montero, who helped transcribe the interviews, an extremely tedious job because of the enormous volume of material gathered.

Without Lila and the young men, this project would never have been possible. Despite the risks for everyone involved, their collaboration has left me deeply indebted to them.

The responsibility for what is written in this book is mine and mine alone.

The pictures are only for illustration.

To the readers, I ask you to read this book with an open mind and an open heart.

I. THE HOUSE AND THE MONEY

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. In the 1930's the neighborhood was filled with Polish Jewish families who were mostly peddlers and who managed to get away from Hitler's grasp. That is the reason you find a mezuzah at Lila's door and also an atmosphere of tolerance among her neighbors. The Jews might have left for greener pastures but their lessons of respect remain. People from all walks of life are seeing in the street. Some sell trinkets, other cell phones, and the majority, drugs and cigarettes. It is a cozy neighborhood where everyone knows your name.



The neighborhood

The house is in the middle of sleazy bars and small businesses. The bars are part of the landscape of this and many other neighbors of the capital city. You cannot longer afford to have a place that is not encaged by them, a sign of the spread of delinquency everywhere, including in the poor neighborhoods. San Jose is not what it used to be, I think, since during my childhood, in the 1950's, you could leave your front door open and roam freely everywhere. My own grandparents used to live a block away from Lila's and I can imagine they must have bumped into each other, without knowing the miseries lived behind each other's front doors.

There is a barber next door and a small cafeteria in the other side. Few customers are eating or getting their haircuts done. "Times are hard," says the barber as he winks at me when he sees me knocking at the door. I don't realize it now, but the man emphasizes the word "hard," which he associates with the activities at Lila's.

I recall that when I visited my grandparent's house 30 years ago, they would take me to get my school boots shined at this same barber shop. The man, when shoe-shining them, would fondle my legs and slightly pinch them as he stared at me. I was so shocked I did not dare to question his shoe-shining techniques. "Why is he doing this?" -I would think. There was a nice warm feeling though and I never uttered a word to my grandfather.

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." After 3 minutes, a young man only dressed with his briefs, take a look at me, asks me what I want and, after consulting to a person I cannot see, finally opened the door. 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-seat bench is positioned about six feet from the door. "This is my bed sometimes," the owner tells us. According to him, Easter is high season here and there are so many customers that Lila must let her room to be used for "crucifixions." Lila adds: "We are all Christian *putas* here." I don't dare to inquire what kind of crucifixions Lila has in mind.

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 a Lady Gaga poster 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..." I also think these sheets are home to a nice collection of fleas, ticks and *cucarachas*. Lila detects my disgust and horror and jokingly tells me that when some of the clients complain of itching and redness, she blames the sexual practices. "If you only did missionary fucking, with no biting and scratching, you will have no red spots. Read Saint Aquina's work, she adds, who prohibited all these acrobatics."

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."



The "landing strip" at Lila's

One of the customers tells us "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. Lila explains that we are wasting resources and if we continue to misuse water, a general draught will ensue in Costa Rica. "I am an avid reader of climate change literature (Al Gore is so hot!); I was born under a wonderful tree and I am conscious of the need to save water. Why wash the sheets everyday? She claims she is not being cheap, but rather being frugal.

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 flowerpots 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 *Sansevieria* (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 flowerpots. "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 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 as if the poor animal had smoked some crystal. 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 that 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.



Lila's kitchen



Amor, one of Lila's dogs

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 "one of the dogs haven't been out for four years. Once in a while he takes the other 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 50,000 colones a month on them." "The queen rather feed them than spending on cleaning their room. I think Lila is into so much shit that she has taken it literally," says she.

The cockroaches and the mice, however, are free to roam the house. "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 truly 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: "I've had up to five customers a day. I'll take anything, whatever it is." Lila tells me that "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

drank from it and 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: "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. "Lila usually celebrates their birthdays with a cheesecake."

Next to the washing basin 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. Some days, when many clients come, Lila uses this rag as a pillow case. 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.



The shower room

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 that 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 and it mixes with so many terrible odors that the guys feel like throwing up. 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."



Santa Barbara's Altar

On the other side of the living room there is a small and 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. Cerebrón jokes that sometimes Lila runs out of sheep sculptures and uses her dead rats in the scene. "The queen knows how to embalm them," he adds. Other times, Virgin Mary is a Barbie doll with a veil on it.

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, "costs me around twenty 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 8,500 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 who 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. Bedbugs are active mainly at night and

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