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Happy hookers: the other Belles de Jour

When Dr Brooke Magnanti confessed to being the mystery blogger, did she prove that 'happy hookers' exist outside male fantasy?



Helen Croydon

Annabel became an escort three years ago, in between working full time as a session musician. I meet her in the lobby bar of a plush hotel in Mayfair, Central London. Blonde, slim and pretty, she looks not unlike Dr Brooke Magnanti, the Bristol research scientist who recently outed herself as the call girl Belle de Jour.

Annabel, 25, worked as a call girl for a year, earning a similar hourly rate to the £300 charged by 34-year-old Magnanti. She stopped when her music career picked up and now helps to run an independent escort agency in London.

"I consider myself to be from a similar background to 'Belle'," she says. "I went to a private school and come from a wellbalanced family. I was curious about the industry so I started to look online. Then I met two lovely ladies from one site and the money sounded agreeable."

Annabel is elegant in a well-fitting, tailored dress. Everything about her appearance is neat and considered. "I certainly had student debts to clear but it wasn't destitution that led me there. I was fascinated by the industry," she says, her voice soft and educated. "I meet many potential recruits now with similar reasons for starting. If curiosity is their motivation, then of course they are going to look at the high end first. If you go into this work out of desperation, you will go straight in at the low end. You can't work up the ladder. I was curious about the story of Belle de Jour and I imagine there are many others like that."

Zara, 28, works for a London escort agency considered to be in the same price league as Magnanti's former employers. Zara left her job as a sales executive because she felt that it offered her limited opportunities. She tried escorting in between jobs and liked the work. "I had credit card debts and it seemed the quickest and easiest way to get rid of them. I tried the 'companion agencies' first but I soon learnt that the sort of work where everything is above board and non-physical didn't really exist, so I thought I'd try an escort agency where you get paid better. I've loved it. I'm treated well and I don't want to stop."

Annabel and Zara are working names. Despite their declaration of dedication to their second careers, neither is comfortable enough to reveal her identity. Zara refuses to tell me where she is from or even the full title of her "arts-based" degree. All she will reveal about her past is that she comes from a "comfortable family background" and went to university.

When Belle de Jour outed herself last weekend after more than four years of literary mystery — was she fact or fiction? Male or female? — she claimed to be far from alone in being a professional, middle-class woman with a secret double life. “I’m not the only person walking around who’s an ex-call-girl, believe me,” she said.

By revealing that Belle was real all along, Magnanti dealt a blow to the critics who claimed that her happy life of five-star hotels and luxury lingerie was surely fictitious. “I am really pleased Belle identified herself,” says Zara. “People who have never used an escort or don’t know what that world is about make an uninformed judgment. If someone like her comes out, it shows it in a different light and can only educate people. But the stigma and people’s judgments are so set, it would take more than one person to come forward and talk about it.”

On the one hand, Annabel and Zara are keen to portray their profession in a good light, citing their ability to fund a certain lifestyle and to work to a flexible schedule; yet on the other they are fastidious about protecting their secret from family, friends and colleagues. They may profess to feel empowered by their chosen profession but they still appear to feel the stigma of it deeply. Last month the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, attacked the television adaptation, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, starring Billie Piper, claiming that it misled people about the stark realities of the sex trade.

But some in the industry disagree. James runs one of the more expensive London escort agencies. He, too, wishes his full name to be withheld.

“I don’t think the scenes in Belle’s books and the TV series were inaccurate,” he says. “Lots of people who feel uncomfortable about the industry probably wanted to believe it was made up but there are lots of girls exactly like Belle — in fact, I think she is typical. We have had lots of PhD students on our books. We have had doctors, nurses, City bankers, a musician who played at the Royal Albert Hall, people who work in property.

“The TV series did glamorise it, though,” says James. “Whether that is good or bad I won’t say but I noticed that after it was shown, our younger girls — the ones aged 18 to 21 — started to think that what they did was cool. I call it the ‘Belle de Jour phenomenon’. They used to want to hide it but recently I hear they have come clean to friends — boyfriends, even. Not only has it become acceptable to them but some even aspire to it.”

While the cases of Belle, Annabel, Zara and the women on the books of James’s agency seem to imply that happy hookerdom does exist, others would reject this. “There is a problem with a story like Belle de Jour’s,” says Anna Bowden of the women’s support network Eaves, which runs the anti-prostitution pressure group The Poppy Project. “The only ones who are able to talk about their experiences of the sex industry are those who operate from a position of privilege and have the opportunity to speak out. We see many women who can’t put themselves forward to talk because they are too traumatised. We have to tell their story for them.

“The glamorising of prostitution is not the fault of people like Belle de Jour but of the media. It either portrays it as chick-lit or goes to the other end of the scale and exposes the dirty, gritty side where women are raped and beaten. The reality is somewhere in the middle.”

Writing about the sex industry frequently as a journalist, I have come across many so-called middle-class prostitutes: well-educated girls who see no moral boundaries. They approach prostitution not as a necessity but more as a lifestyle enhancer.

In the past 12 months I have gone undercover for two “interviews” at escort agencies, tested the demand for Craigslist adult services by advertising for sex online and, for this newspaper, experimented with negotiating a so-called sugar daddy relationship based on a monthly compensation package. From my experience I would definitely not consider it glamorous. One of my burly male “interviewers” greeted me in an upmarket Sloane Square bar with a purple, freshly swollen eye. A female “interviewer” smelt strongly of alcohol when she turned up, flustered and late, because she had “come straight from seeing a client”.

The unwelcome image that this frank remark conjured in my mind hammered one point home: those entering this sort of “work” must have specific non-emotive character traits to be able to handle the psychological strain. While there are many call girls prepared to give positive feedback on their

profession, for others it can be a hugely damaging experience.

Commentators have been keen to delve for clues to some trauma that may have propelled Magnanti into prostitution. Some have highlighted that she is estranged from her father. Yet it seems that the reason is far simpler. Belle/Brooke was not on the poverty line but she needed help to pay the rent.

“The sex industry is what women turn to when the chips are down — and in her case, to do something else: to fund her thesis. It is about survival and in a good many cases women enter it out of need to support their children,” says Cari Mitchell, a spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes, which campaigns for full legalisation of prostitution.

Whatever their motivation, soon prostitutes of every description will find it harder to work within the confines of the “Barbarella-style” agencies that Dr Magnanti used and which, she admits, helped to protect her from danger. Last week the House of Lords approved clause 14 of the Policing and Crime Bill, toughening the laws on prostitution. The changes will make it an offence for a man to have sex with a woman who is “controlled for gain”, even without his knowledge.

The new laws are aimed at clamping down on the trafficking of women for sex, not at the Belles and Zaras of the high-class escort world, but critics say that they will drive all forms of prostitution underground, rather than targeting only the vulnerable. The legal definition of “controlled for gain” means that a man can be prosecuted simply for paying for a woman who works with an accomplice. Legalisation campaigners say that this gives women an incentive to work alone and would encourage high-end escorts to ditch the apparent safety net of their agencies.

The truth is that, for all the light-hearted talk of clearing credit-card debt, the fear of danger is always present. Rape, coercion, mental anguish, social stigma and physical health risks exist in all areas of the sex industry, as many so-called happy hookers will attest. Perhaps those, such as Magnanti, who argue otherwise were just very good at their job.

In February this year a French student, Laura D, published a book entitled *Scandalous* about working as a prostitute to fund her studies. “It’s the male fantasy, isn’t it? That women adore being prostitutes,” she has said. “There are so many clichés. I’m sure many men saw me as a sort of Lolita. It’s the ultimate fantasy for some men — to find yourself a student prostitute.”

Laura D’s tale is a stark contrast to Belle de Jour’s: “I admit that at one point I was developing an addiction to money but never to prostitution,” said Laura. “Every time was horrible.”

However content Magnanti was with her call girl double life, and for all the evidence of other bankers, lawyers, doctors and students following suit, the middle-class hooker is still a shadowy figure in a seedy netherworld — and one who cherishes her anonymity.

“Even though Belle has come out into the open, the industry will never be free of social stigma because of the physical side of it and the fact that there is a health risk,” says Zara. “We all risk damaging our professional and social life.”

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