

PILVAX

Issue One February 2005

Chip Warren is still writing, now in Lost City, West Virginia. He hung up his porn spurs after climbing the ladder from set assistant to photographer/production manager, working in Budapest and Prague from the fall of 2002 until the summer of '03.

MILK: A Writer's Initiation into the World of Adult Entertainment

A Personal Essay by Chip Warren

The rendezvous was in Blaha Lujza Square, ten minutes from my flat by foot. I had time to walk but to ensure a prompt arrival I took the underground. Kole's stern instruction echoed: *Don't be late! I can be late, but you can't.* Tardiness on my part would reflect poorly on him, the recruiter. Distracted by first day jitters, I got off at the wrong station and surfaced five minutes further from the square. I popped open an umbrella and hurried through the morning throng on Rákóczi Ut, a nondescript boulevard that caters more to the local working class than to expats and tourists, especially at seven-thirty on a rainy Tuesday morning. I was seething with self-reproach . . . the clumsy drone-like pedestrians, the blaring car horns, the gloom . . . it recalled the walk from the Fulton Street subway station to my office in Lower Manhattan where on rainy autumn mornings stock brokers look surprisingly like their Hungarian counterparts. Budapest was my escape from the workaday life, my exodus to explore the discipline of writing, to avoid the doldrums of the rat race. I'd traded the real world, a six-figure income, and all of the privileges that come with it, for the simple chance to chase a dream. The day job was still in my rearview mirror, I was only a few months into a life measured in years—years of dedication, struggle, focus, solitude—a career as a writer. I was enthralled with the toil, addicted to the solitude, finding that all of the not-so-romantic rigors of the literary life suited me and anything else seemed like trading time for money. Daytime hours spent with anything but writing were mere distraction . . . and there, in the nascent stages of my new life, distraction was the enemy.

So why was I choosing something else? Moreover, why had I accepted a job working on a porn set? If for no other reason, curiosity. Deep curiosity. I cannot deny my own average and healthy relationship with porn. It started with the advent of the VCR, when my first two home viewings were *Escape from Alcatraz* (*hey Fresh Fish, you gonna eat your pasta?*) and *Deep Throat* (*do you mind if I smoke while you eat?*). In high school, parties at my house invariably ended with a viewing of *Talk Dirty to Me*. By my senior year I knew the script word for word for moan, start to finish . . . *Jesus Jack, you fucked her right there in the doctor's office? You gotta show me your stuff Jack, you just*

gotta . . . John Leslie, a classic. This was an opportunity to take a glimpse behind the curtain . . . I was going to meet the Wizard.

As I made my way through the rain I was frightened, but not sure what of. Bedside-table pornography is fairly innocuous but the business, the industry itself, is surrounded by a dark aura. Who are the people responsible for all those films and photos? Aren't they damaged souls and the people who prey on that vulnerability? I wasn't sure I was ready to take a place among such people. Suddenly my flat, my bedroom, my desk, seemed safe, warm and familiar. But a deal's a deal. I had accepted the offer, I had said yes, just eight hours earlier, emboldened by drink

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The bar is packed. A man ducks through the heavy curtain that hangs inside the front door. He is magnetically handsome . . . heavy lids over dark Sikh eyes that can hold a loaded stare like none I've ever seen. This is Kole: deliberately repellent . . . studded with piercings and streaked with tattoos. His mohawk flops to the side when it isn't frozen in liberty spikes. From the look of him tonight, he's either burning out a speed binge or wrecked from a rough day on the job. We all know what Kole does when Kole works. He works in porn.

Kole is not here for a drink. He approaches our table, stands without looking for a chair. He's too exhausted for pleasantries, citing a hellish day with a worthless set assistant; one more day like that will kill him. "Who can work tomorrow? It's going to be a long day . . . twelve hours. At least."

I shift in my seat. There dangles the offer. Set assistant is a high-turnover position and an easy one to get if you know the right people. Availability is the only qualification required to land the job. The first time I heard the offer my flatmate accepted and I was resigned to live with my curiosity. But I was also relieved that I had not committed to bear the weight that would accompany a day in porn. In that instance, the call to work never came so my flatmate dodged the job.

Kole's gaze circles the table and dredges up the lame excuses, "Sorry, I've got a meeting," "Uh, I'm driving to Prague tomorrow," "I would *but* . . ." Then me. I try to think of an excuse that would sound genuine, when suddenly it escapes, "Okay, I can work." Kole's gaze stops on me. His face does not brighten, there is no hug, no handshake, no *thanks man, you saved my ass*. Kole looks at me and says, "I'll call you in an hour with the meeting place." Then he turns and walks out.

I walk home feeling like I've crossed the irreversible threshold. *Gosh, I don't know* . . . My flatmate eggs me on, "it's perfect, you *gotta* do it. You're a *writer*." I sense his vicarious zeal. It's flattering persuasion; young writers need acknowledgement. That experiences like this are a natural extension of being a writer paints a lovely picture, but to seek fringe experiences because I am a writer is as ridiculous as buying a cowboy hat because you want to be in the rodeo. The only difference between me and a crass voyeur—a metaphysical rubbernecker on the highway of life—is that I take notes.

Home in bed, I stare up at the triptych of Saint Christopher that hangs overhead (Catholic landlords, furnished flat) half-hoping Kole won't call, half-preparing myself to follow through if he does. I'm lingering on the verge of slumber, thinking a deep drunken

sleep might just be the perfect escape . . . *gee, I didn't hear the call* . . . when the phone rings and I nearly jump out of my skin. It's Kole. I could still back out . . . couldn't I?

"Blaha Lujza, by the *cipő diszkont* (shoe store) a block south of the square. Eight o'clock. No, seven-fortyfive. Don't be late. I can be late, but you can't." He hangs up.

"Okay," I say to Saint Christopher, "I'll be there."

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I found the shoe store. Two bald and brawny Hungarian men stood nearby dressed in camouflage pants, black boots. These were type of thugs I had expected. Co-workers. The sick, mean bastards who operate the salvage yard for victims of hit-and-run. This was it. I was on the brink of forced associations with hedonists, pigs, thugs and junkies. I saw myself in a van wedged between them; I saw them ignoring me and speaking to each other . . . quietly, sparingly . . . without looking anywhere but forward. Later they would bark orders at me in Hungarian, orders they knew I couldn't understand. My imagination was getting the best of me. I ducked into a café.

I let my panic run its course, then washed down what was left with a double espresso. The first caffeine of the day brings optimism, fortitude; a rally cry up from the gullet to pull on your boots and get down to business. As I sipped my coffee I reflected on my pursuit of fringe experiences. There was a sound reason why I was suited to take a job like this, even if it did mean mixing it up with the Ugliers for a few hours. Something kept me from rejecting the offer out of hand, and, in fact, that something made me want it. This was not the first time I wandered from the beaten path, simply to have a look around . . . the evening I stood on an airport tarmac and watched my boss cutting a diagonal across the runway in his Town Car—a maneuver that screamed urgency—before he pulled up and said, "I need your help. My best friend's father just shot himself in the head and I need a cleaning crew." Without a thought, I accepted (the coroner only removes the pieces bigger than a walnut, I was told) . . . or the night I wound up stuck on an open-hull skiff after a mishap on the Bering Sea, clothed in clammy rain gear, the temperature lingering at the freezing mark. A five-degree drop in the unseasonably warm weather would have been curtains . . . or the evening I paid a San Francisco street whore twenty bucks plus a quarter of shitty yellow coke to tell me her story. These experiences share a common element: the choice to thereafter only wonder about some deeper issue—of mortality, sexuality, the dichotomy between courage and pride—or to know about it. I prefer to know.

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Back on the corner. It hit me that there may have been a cancellation; Kole had warned me that things frequently fall through—models, locations—causing last minute cancellations. Perhaps no one would show. The potential felt like waking up to a blanket of new snow, January 1975, and the radio announcement "Fauquier County schools: CLOSED." Relief. Perhaps after all the deliberation and self-scrutiny I could just go home and write about it.

"Hey man." Kole's voice, from behind. He extended a hand to welcome me and, by the twinkle of his half-smile, to show appreciation for my punctuality. Then silence.

Kole doesn't do much before coffee and his was still too hot to drink. I remember the thugs. Expecting introductions, I turned in time to see them climb into a work truck driven by a man who could have been their triplet. My expectations of doom pattered away in a grungy diesel, one small victory for the meek. A moment later, our van arrived.

The side door rolled open like a curtain, revealing my new colleagues. Kole lifted his punk-blaring headphones and made the introductions. One photographer was a Hungarian man named István, handsome, shaved head, birdlike with his hook nose hanging over a wide smile. The other was an Australian woman named Rhonda who, although only in her mid-twenties, comported a friendly seniority. The cosmetician, Frida, had a warm smile, she was pretty and very pregnant. Her reedy husband, Balázs, was our driver. He smiled and lifted a hand from the steering wheel when we were introduced. That made six; one seat was empty. "The talent," Kole pointed out. "Always the last to show." He replaced his headphones and sipped his coffee. The crew exchanged quips about the weather but were otherwise quiet. No one took much note of the new guy.

I watched a few trams pull through the square and Rhonda handed me a pastry with a mushy hotdog hiding inside. My fear dwindled as the veil between reality and my imaginations of the spooky world of porn slipped away. I was among peers, without a scumbag or heathen in sight. I felt invisible and to be invisible was somehow to fit in.

Five minutes passed and the model arrived. Stage name: Ginger. I detected an air of celebrity, like standing backstage when the star saunters to her dressing room, hiding her eyes behind shades of indifference. Here was the person whose talent—or in this case, willingness—was the reason we were all here. She was cute, mousy, but not what I expected from the Hungarian beauty pool. I had pictured one of the leggy six footers who stroll Andrásy as soon as the weather warms, crippling the patrons of sidewalk cafés with illusions of attainability. I pictured a woman seething powerful sex who gave no doubt about her purpose in life . . . but this gal had no ostensible libido at all. She was wrapped in a quilted nylon parka; her nose was reddened from recent blowing. She gave a smile through the introductions. Her upper teeth poked forward, more dainty than buck, perhaps displaced by chronic thumb-sucking . . . teeth designed for making bird calls or nibbling finger sandwiches. Ginger took a seat behind me. She smelled soapy and clean.

The rain stopped but the cityscape was still gray and cold. We crossed the Erzsébet Bridge. In Buda the Castle loomed over the Duna opposite the spiny Parliament on the Pest side. The sprawling architecture stirred the feeling that I was engaged in something lurid, something illicit, just under the nose of culture, tradition and respectable human endeavor. Then came the abrupt transition as we headed west onto the Austria-bound M1 expressway, a corridor of fast food restaurants, warehouses, and superstores. The hush continued until Rhonda announced that we needed to stop for videotapes. "Better pick up lunch stuff while we're at it," she added. Balázs stopped and Rhonda disappeared into a gargantuan variety store. Kole capitalized on the last idle minutes of the day to begin his tutelage.

"Do you learn better hands-on or by instructions?" he asked.

"A little of both, I suppose."

"Okay," he said after a quick breath, "your job first and foremost is going to be lighting the sets. We use studio strobes, can lights, and have four kinds of shades: a big soft box, an octagon, a small soft box, and a strip light. There are three umbrellas and a few reflectors. The photographers tell you where they want the lights, you set them up.

Then take meter readings throughout the set to make sure the light is even. I'll show you how to do that. After the metering, we do test shots to get the best exposure for the skin tones we're dealing with. You know about f-stops and aperture and all that shit?"

"More or less."

"After the lighting, the sets have to be dressed. We've got bags full of linens, towels, sheets, tubes of posters and artwork. Make the room colorful, get rid of any open voids, blank walls, shit like that. Sometimes furniture has to be moved, a houseplant put here or a lamp there. When we're in someone's house watch out for family photos, always hide those. If you need any props, drinks or food, just go find it. If you can't find anything, ask."

I nodded.

"Okay, the set's lit, dressed and the test shots are done. Next get the cameras ready. We shoot digital. Make sure both cameras have a memory card and that the card is formatted and ready to go. Always check the batteries and put the back-ups in the charger. Put the camera on set and give the green-light to the photographer. Last thing, check the schedule and see if you need any props or dildos. We've got a bag of them; let the model choose. Put the dildo and the lube and baby wipes somewhere out of sight, under a pillow or in a bedside table."

"So," I interjected. Kole kept going. His coffee was in full rush.

"Once we're shooting, the photographers might call for your help to hold reflectors or the pussy light. Make sure you keep your ears peeled. If you've got nothing to do, ask. If you're standing still, you're not doing your job. The less photographers have to do other than shoot, the happier they are. The happier they are, the smoother the day goes. Got it?"

Pussy light, I thought. *I'm pretty sure he said 'pussy light.'*

Kole's rapid-fire instructions left me with only a blurry sketch of the technical details, but he did impress upon me the pace of the work. Our employer specialized in internet content, about 80 percent of which was still photography and 20 percent video. The video was plot-free, dialogue-free scenes, streamed in fifteen-minute clips. A typical work day: two models, ten sets each, about 120 shots per set, so by the time the gear was packed up at the end of the day, the studio would amass roughly 2500 photographs. Each set was then edited, touched up, backed up, and uploaded to the client. The position reminded me of the commercial fishing jobs I'd held in Alaska, where to fall out of rhythm with the operation brought the machine to a swift halt. A distant frame of reference, but a frame of reference nonetheless.

We stopped in front of a large house circled by a seven-foot adobe wall. I followed Kole to the back of the van. He pinched his cigarette between taut lips and, squinting at the smoke, flung open the double doors. Without a square foot to spare, the cargo area was packed with duffel bags, briefcases, hard-shell cases, tripods, packing tubes and toolboxes.

"Fourteen bags now, fourteen when you load up at the end of the day."

Kole slung as many bags over his shoulders as would fit. I grabbed an armload, Rhonda and István picked up what was left. We filed through the gate, across a thin flagstone walk, and entered the house without knocking.

Our host was a short middle-aged man with a receding blond mop. One look around the place and I learn that the midlife crisis is not solely an American condition:

the man was barefoot, dressed in blue jeans with a silk shirt only twice buttoned. A shag rug rendition da Vinci's *The Last Supper* hung in the dining room. Across the foyer, a crucifix-shaped window with smoky glass was recessed into the wall; behind the glass a red light bulb with a flickering filament simulated a flame. A forty-gallon fish tank was home to a lonely school of goldfish, and copious plants gave the sunken living room a lush feel but a closer look revealed plastic trunks and nylon leaves. The man smiled and nodded as we passed and then aired his only rule: no shoes in the master bedroom.

Kole situated the production gear in the foyer, emptying the bags and cases and pointing out items he had mentioned earlier. Strip light, octagon, super clamps, hot lamps for video, peach-flavored lube. Kole filled many roles on set. Aside from managing new assistants, he was the videographer, handling set production, lighting, scripting (when required) and the live filming. When he was between video sets Kole helped with the still photography. Working two sets often required concurrent light readings, test shots, reflector work, set up and break down. Kole also filled in as still photographer or model when duty called.

"Pay attention," Kole said, "because you'll be doing this tomorrow."

Tomorrow? I picked up work for one day. The idea never occurred that this might become a regular commitment. The thought gave me a shudder that I had no time to contemplate as Rhonda called out the first two sets.

*The complete story can read in its entirety in the JANUARY 2005 issue of PILVAX.
Locally available in Budapest.*