

SUB-TOPICS OF A HANGOVER

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I like strippers.

I like the dingy feel of the underground club that houses them, with the flashing colored lights and the old feel of the makeshift furniture. I like the secrecy and the thrill of dark corners and smoky air. I like the drone of bass in song after song, hour after hour, that soundtrack, the night from dusk till dawn. I don't really like the expensive booze they sell, but it comes with the territory as a necessary evil.

I love the way their cheap-looking and brightly colored lingerie clings to their bodies by flimsy bits of string. I love their standard cheap perfume, liberally coating collarbones and thighs. I love their gyrating asses, of all shapes and sizes, wrapped around a pole or thrust in my face. I groan when a stripper goes through the motions in frustration. I love it when the stripper strips like she is stripping for stripping's sake.

I dread college.

I dread lectures and lecture venues. I cringe at 2000-word essays with a 2-week deadline that needs 14 Harvard references sourced from 5 journals. Tutorials are processes to endure, to shirk when called upon and hurriedly dash from when the tutor is 12 minutes late. The final year dissertation is an apocalyptic saddle around my neck, hovering and intimidating in all its academic gory. It takes glee from the souls of students who failed.

American pie was a lie! The brotherhood bond of sororities and frat houses is an ever elusive myth. There is no magical and all-encompassing social bond that university bestows on its student body. It's a fragmented, eclectic collection of characters that each collaborate to fray my edges and expose my insecurities.

What is a friend?

I talk to people, don't get me wrong. A little wit and a large bank of stock conversations means I can quip, shade and laugh with the rest of them. You can talk about series and the best places to download the latest episode. You can spend

hours considering the merits of the new season of Game of Thrones. Monday is for reviewing the successes and failures of Thursday's weekend plans. It's doable. I can talk to people. But, what is a friend?

I know I can't tell them about my three years of solitude nursing of my anxiety. Certainly I can't ask the girl in the front row about her rumored fling with the lecturer so that she can get higher marks. Her friend told me that gossip in confidence. She wanted to feel better about her confession of having an older guy buy her that handbag. She didn't say he was a 'blesser'. That is a dirty word. I wouldn't use that word. She wouldn't use that word. He was her friend.

We speak, but never really talk.

You have got to be polite. And cool. And ambitious. And strong. And smooth. And smart. And hardworking. And focused. And liberal. And funny. And aware. And 'woke'. So, I'm all these things.

It's surprisingly easy to choose a personality, stick to it and act out its stereotypes to a T. There is the social animal that always has the stories of the weekend event and whether the DJ was 'killing' it or not. The class representative doesn't even have a name. Or maybe she does. All I know is I go to her to ask about deadlines and submission guidelines. There is a girl by the door who sells muffins. It's a quaint business. She always has change. I like that. I ask her for change sometimes.

But, I prefer talking to strippers.

Well, I do have to negotiate for that lap dance. Hagglng for an appropriate price point is a must. We do have to agree on cash, swipe or mobile transfer, even if it's not the sexiest thing to talk about. I also need to ask questions about the restroom, the special birthday events happening next week and the best seat and time for the model's solo run on the pole. It has to be done.

I talk to them a little more though, more than other patrons do. I pry for real names and not stripper names. I never get them, but it's worth a try. I asked one, why she dances, and I always ask her about her 7-year-old son when I bump into her. We exchange numbers and Facebook profiles; it's so much easier to keep up with new technology. I spend extended periods of time between sets scrolling left and right in one's gallery showing 17 different ways to pout. Some even

complain to me about the cheap patrons who come in and don't pay. Well, when the big shots come, she has to say goodbye and get that money. She is courteous though, and leaves with a polite smile and a promise to see me later.

The bouncer lets me in for a reduced fee.

This place is expensive and the management is completely insensitive to the plight of the regular customer. I mean, why are there no monthly passes? Or weekly ones? Or even a discount for buying entrance fees three days in a row? This place is expensive. Luckily, I talked to T, three weeks ago. He was a little more understanding than his boss. It's corrupt and it's slimy, but we all gotta survive right? Nothing is free, so the bouncer lets me in for a reduced fee.

I commiserate with the waitress about the low volume of alcohol sales and the slippery slope that led her to the dead end job of evading lecherous hands and drunken patrons. I bond with the cleaning lady over the dilapidated state of our shared neighborhood, the difficulty of health insurance and the collective responsibility we have for community safety. The bouncer always has a story about roughing up some newbie who thinks he is king. I am a regular in this place now. I know these people and these people know me. That's why, the bouncer lets me in for a reduced fee.

I don't like the fact that I like strippers.

I'm broke. Well, I am on a student budget so that comes with the territory but, f*#?, I'm broke. I'm really broke. If you add up the transport money, the money I leave with the bouncer, 2 rounds of drinks and 4 sets of tipping, you have a large bill. Or, a large hole in my wallet. Or, an empty cupboard. Or, raggedy clothes. Or, an unpurchased dream of a 20 megapixel camera. This thing is expensive. I'm broke.

I'm a christian too. This 'shit' is wrong as f*#?! Damn. I just swore. It's the language that 'bitch' used when she was talking to that 'dick' of a client. She has a foul mouth and that's contagious. I never used to speak like this. I don't want to speak like this. I'm not this person and I know it in my heart. But I seem to be, when I am in this place. F*#?#!

I want joy in my heart.

I look around my classmates with envy. That girl with the new bag holds it high

and proud and she is beaming from all the jealous looks of her peers. That guy and girl in the back of the class are clearly ecstatic about their new relationship. The matching t-shirts gives it away. That soccer fanatic had a great hand at the soccer bet and he clearly bet the odds by trusting an impotent Milan attack. My roommate went out last night and got drunk. He went out the weekend before that and got drunk again. I can see his bottle of gin and the grin on his face tonight. He's happy.

I don't have joy in my heart. I have fear, fear of life and my own inadequacy to tackle it. I have guilt, guilt at my deviant sexual vices and affinity for strippers. I have doubt. Doubt about the test I wrote last week and the impending exam next. I have shame. Shame at my lack of self-control and indulgent experiences. I have anxiety. Anxiety about the albatross around my neck whose weight I do not know if I can carry. I have exasperation. Exasperation at my empty cupboard, growling stomach and a traumatic cycle of mid-month hunger. I have apathy. Apathy to my surroundings, unkempt bed and chaotic wardrobe. No woman is ever gonna visit me anyway. I have depression. Depression at myself and my abysmal sense of self-worth.

I need help.

I've tried to deal with these f*#?ing emotions and they can't seem to give me a break. Peace eludes me. There is no joy in my heart. I probably can't get those warm feelings in the morning or that quiet in the dead of night when my conscience screams and rages at me. This is probably not the way college should feel. This is not the way I should feel.

I don't want to drown my sorrows in drink. I don't want to numb my mind by the shaking of strippers' asses. I don't want the escapism of the strip club. I don't want the indulgence of sexual vice as a coping clutch. I don't want to be broke. I don't want to be what I am anymore. I don't want to fulfil my uncle's prophecy of being a "failure in life".

Who will help?

I obviously can't talk to these strippers. They can't relate to college struggles and they already have the school fees payments to worry about. I can't talk to my classmates; such a confession would reduce me to a staple of the grapevine. A stock joke of a sick jock. I can't talk to my parents. They are so far away. Plus, I

told them school was “stressful but fine.” I can’t talk to my roommate. He is not even here tonight. I’m here alone tonight.

The school has a campus student affairs division. They are probably not the right place. The student representative council is probably best avoided too. I could have gone to the clinic, but they treat flu and headaches. Dr. Olsen helped me last time but I was released from therapy, so I’m ok. Plus, it’s so far from school anyway. What’s the name of that place again? Snap. I forgot. Above the clinic, there is the students counseling division. It sounds decent. It looks clean. She just said come in. Who is she?

“My name is Valentine Makoni, I need your help.”

There are two desks in the office and a neat seating area. She asks me to take a seat. There is a poster on the wall, showing that this lady is a qualified academic counselor from a reputable Southern African University. She just told me her name. I was distracted. I couldn’t really focus on listening as I scanned the window for anyone passing in the corridor who might know me. Ok, she is waiting on me now.

Before we can get to that though, I have to fill in a form. My personal details, contact details and year of enrolment. She assures me that these are in confidence and that no one will see. She also asks about me. How many children are in my family? How many boys or girls are there? Am I the first born? She asks about my programme, which year and whether I am a student. She writes intently. I feel at ease. She is done with the paperwork, I think. It’s my turn now.

“I can’t study.”

It is a campus clinic, after all, so they have to help me study. They have to help me pass. She has a qualification in academic counseling. It makes sense to talk about school. About my overdue project and my missed assignment deadlines. About my falling grades and incompatibility with group work. About my 7 years in college doing a 4 year program. About my upcoming examination and the just released examination schedule. It is time.

“I can’t study.”

“Why can’t you study?”

“I think I am depressed.”

“Depressed?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you say so?”

“Because I feel low and I feel scared. And I can’t study and I don’t know how to. Dr. Olsen told me I have a disposition for depressive behavior and I think I can see the signs of it now. I can’t sleep. I’m scared. I’m not happy.”

She told me that depression is not real.

She said that it was all in the mind. If I told myself I was depressed, then I would be depressed. It was how my mind worked and I needed to channel some positive energy into my thoughts. I could pass school if I worked hard enough. I needed a study timetable. She would help me study. She would schedule a meeting for me next week, so that she helps me study.

She was not going to write a letter to the administration excusing me from any exams. She made that clear. She was not going to refer me to a psychologist or psychiatrist. She implied that quite strongly. I did not need it. She was going to help me study and she was going to start checking my work and progress from now on. She wrote on her papers and gave me one last pep talk. I just had to be positive and everything would be fine. I mean, at the end of the day, she told me that depression is not real.