

Photovoice – A Project of Frauentreff Olga

English translation of the exhibition texts.

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Lena

My experience has shown me that for the most part, the clichés of the broken home and a bad upbringing are not the reasons that young girls start with prostitution. On the contrary, it is more the case that you find women from all walks of life on the street. The reasons for this are very different. For some of them, it is curiosity, for others rebellion and provocation, and the list goes on and on. However, they all have one thing in common – quick and easy money. In the past, though, a lot was still much easier. There were more German women and fewer Southern Europeans. This comment is based on the fact that many of these women were brought to Germany by false promises and then had to earn money for their pimps. As a result, in the past few years prices have fallen so much that it is no longer feasible to earn money on the street. The other problem is drugs. The majority of the women are addicted. But most of the women who somewhere along the line started with streetwalking had nothing to do with drugs up to that point. At first, you earn money quickly and easily. Many of these girls/women then started numbing themselves with drugs, so they were better able to face the humiliations from their pimps. The result is that many women have never learned a trade, let alone had a proper job.

People should consider how these women, after their time as prostitutes, can be helped to come to terms with those previous years and how they can be given a chance to re-enter society and the workforce.

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Ivanka

Often I sleep in the park because I enjoy sleeping outdoors. I sleep there with a blanket. There is fresh air and I can see the sky and the stars when I lie on the grass. For me, Nature means life. Nature is what God has created and I love it a lot. Six years ago I fell in love with a German man, and he in me. He didn't want me to continue working and brought me to a small town near Stuttgart. There I met a German woman who gave me a Bulgarian-language Bible.

That changed me a great deal. I became religious. I read the whole Bible, but above all it was the first pages, the Creation, that made a big impression on me. It says there that God created Nature. Before, the world was just a desert. Sand. Before I touch a Bible, I have to be clean, to shower and pray, because I am dirty since I work on the street. That is my own rule. Unfortunately I lost the Bible in Berlin when I had to flee from a hotel, but I have kept my faith.

I will be religious for my entire life and when I die, I won't go to the devil, but to Jesus in heaven.

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Anna

I have been working here in the Kurfürstenstraße neighbourhood since 2008. Before I worked in other countries where prostitution was not allowed. I have remained in Germany because it is legal to work here. Everywhere else, I had to pay a lot of penalties and change my name several times. A legal name change doesn't cost a lot. I decided on the new name with my boyfriend. I had already been in prison for six months because of the penalties. Being in prison was like a little vacation. That is what I imagined so that I would not go crazy in prison. So I always told myself, this is like a vacation. In the beginning, I earned money for the family of my husband at the time. I wasn't allowed to keep any of the money for myself. I had to regularly work for two days at a stretch, and then at some point it was going so bad for me that I didn't earn enough money. Then I was handed over to another group because there was a man there who didn't have a wife. And he is now my husband. The situation is better now, because I know what is happening with the money. Now, for the first time since I started working, I have control over the money. I earn money just for me and my husband. He stays home and isn't here with me on the street, so the money doesn't immediately go down the drain. A lot of men and women pour their money right into slot machines or drugs and they drink a lot. I don't take drugs. I tried once, but it didn't have an effect or didn't help. Many women turn a trick and then go to the pub, drink, and throw their money into the slot machines. My husband doesn't drink or gamble. I don't let him. He's not allowed to do that. I don't want to work for drugs and alcohol. I would like to eat, sleep, smoke cigarettes, and drink Red Bull and coffee.

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Anna

After I recently aborted a child, I would like to earn money to get myself straightened out. Dye my hair, get my nails and feet done, makeup. Make myself pretty and get myself back in shape. I dyed my hair for €30. I also invested more time and money in myself and bought new cloths.

Before I used to wear high-heeled shoes, not any more now, since my feet hurt so much. Otherwise I would like to just sit down, because my feet hurt so much. When you have to wait on the street for a long time, it is very stressful, too stressful.

Once I had to sleep for two weeks in a pub. I had no strength, no money, nothing to even allow me to work, but somehow I always get my strength back.

God always keeps helping me so that I get better.

This assistance that is given at Olga or next door helps women a lot to keep going and pull through. Because you can get care and a few hours of sleep and can talk about anything. When I had the nights in the pub, I came here too and ate, showered, and slept.

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Nadine

A typical image: the pimp paraphernalia from the 1980s. Rolex, gold chain, car keys on a Mercedes keychain, a stack of bills with Cartier money clip, and now and again a gun. That was the 80s live. Yeah, I experienced shootings too. Because there was really a lot happening here. I did not stage this picture, and it is also not quite complete. When my husband comes home, he lays down his paraphernalia just like in the picture, even though he isn't a pimp. The gun is made of wax. There's a Panerei watch, a Versace chain, the wax gun. While there is no car key, there is a little money in the strongbox for one. Not exactly like in the 80s, but the image speaks for itself and brings back memories. At the time, life in the neighbourhood was really great. Lots of great co-workers. The symbiosis between police and women worked well. The pimps took good care of us. The income was good. The whole neighbourhood life was great and still had this nefarious, exciting, secretive existence. Where you were even a bit proud to be a whore. Unless you had a loony guy hanging around your neck, who didn't take care of anything, like I did. Then you ended up in a tent or somewhere else. He never could handle getting rent, electricity, and everything else paid, although he had my entire income. It's not like he never bought stuff for the two of us. I also had a studio here in Berlin as a dominatrix, or we went to Switzerland and I had my own studio there. Yes, he even spent money on me there too. Otherwise, his whole pimp concept wouldn't have worked out. Also, sometimes I lived in a boarding house. In 23 years, I definitely had seven or eight apartments. You ask yourself in all seriousness, why didn't I split up with him earlier, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.

It is no comparison to nowadays.

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Nadine

Nowadays I wouldn't like to be 21 again and starting to work in the neighbourhood. I would absolutely refuse to do that. For a long time now, the income has not been what it once was. The jobs are also no longer what they once were. The way of working that I learned then, I could hardly use that today. Nowadays a woman has to sell almost 100% of herself so she can even earn a little bit.

The learning process from an older to a younger where is not there anymore. Before, the old ones showed the young ones how to work. How to solicit prudently, how to make the john happy, but with a different programme than what he actually wanted. Nevertheless, he goes home with the feeling: that was the greatest night of my life.

Today, all of that doesn't exist anymore. If everybody pulled together, if everything was a tight-knit community and those who didn't hold to their commitments would have to answer for it, that would still work today. Even when you no longer earn the same amount ... it would nevertheless work. So that all women earn a fair amount. And if it is only €30 a day. It's also enough money. There's enough money to go around.

I see which customers are out and about on the street. The client thinks: Why should I pay €30–40, when I can get it for €10? That's how the customer thinks. If he couldn't get it, he would pay more, because he wouldn't have any other option. It's a fact that women will get in the car for €10. I've heard that from women and clients. Somewhere there are limits. In the past we didn't play around with our health that way.

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Piroska

I work here on the street and when I am exhausted and tired, then it is good for me to be at Olga, to shower here and rest. Then I sleep on this bed. I've already been in Germany a few years, seven or eight. I also have been sleeping at Olga sometimes during those years, but even so there is always something strange about it. I can rest here during the day so I can make it through the night, since I have to earn money then. That is why I work here. I don't have my own bed. When I do have one, it's only if I pay for it. I have never had my own apartment in Berlin and sleep at Olga, in the Internet Café, or somewhere else. When you have money, then it is not difficult. You can afford a boarding house and have everything, but as soon as the money runs out, it becomes very stressful. In Hungary I lived together with my whole family. With my mother, my children and sisters and my boyfriend.

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Piroska

It would be good to be legally registered, since I would like to have an apartment and have a proper job. I would like a very nice bed and curtains. An apartment with parquet floors, although a carpet would be okay too, and a small bathroom, but with a bathtub. We often look at the display windows of the furniture stores that are here, around the corner. All the women do that. Then we imagine that it was our own furniture in our own apartments. We imagine that often together. Nobody wearing shoes would be allowed to come into my apartment and walk on my beautiful carpet. But anyway I feel out of place here and don't want my own bed in Berlin, but one in Hungary. Then I go home, to my family, to my children and we sleep together in one bed.

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Laura

In the picture you see me with my boyfriend. I always look forward to seeing him when I come home. Him and my cat. Although he knows what I do, my boyfriend stands by me. We have been together now for 3 ½ years and I can talk about almost everything with him. About things that I can't talk about with my family.

My boyfriend doesn't talk a lot. When I told him that I am a streetwalker, he also didn't show any reaction at first, but he stayed with me. My mother probably knows it, with my father I am not so sure. Actually, my parents are not quite so conservative, and I have a very good relationship with both of them.

However, my parents do know that I take drugs. And although they know my boyfriend well and he doesn't take drugs, sometimes they think that he is a bad influence on me. Somehow I have the feeling that I am living a double life. I wouldn't be here if I didn't have to, but nevertheless it is a completely normal occupation. Even if it isn't so pleasant for me.

I am also like other people, I have a family, a boyfriend, a cat, and friends.

It would be nice if people would approach us without prejudices and were more open.

Because what would it be like, if that was your daughter?

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Daisy

At the age of 19 I realised for the first time – correctly – that I was in fact a woman, and then I also had sex with a man for the first time. At first I worked in Germany as a drag dancer for a year.

There I met a trans friend who suggested I street walk, because at the time you could make quite a lot of money that way. At the time I was 21, and since then I have remained working on the street.

Sometimes I hide my face from children. With very small children it is still okay, but bigger kids, especially boys, are difficult sometimes. They say stupid things to me like, “Whoa, what’s that? What a sight you are!?” Children shouldn’t think about me, they should play. At seven and older they understand everything. I have an eight-year-old sister. She has never seen me as a woman, with makeup and everything. While she understands me and knows that I am a pretty woman, she absolutely knows that, I wouldn’t like her to see me like that now, I can’t do it. She has to go to school and should be thinking about other things. I was in school through the 11th grade, and what have I done? I landed on the streets. I would like my sister to have better prospects.

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Daisy

In Berlin, in Germany, very different people live amongst each other. In Bulgaria it is completely different. For that reason, Germany is interesting to me.

In Bulgaria, all the minorities face a lot of discrimination and the people don't intermingle. I felt discriminated against in Bulgaria. I worked as a transvestite in a large city, and everybody was totally shocked. You can't live there as a trans woman, it is very dangerous.

Even when I was walking on the street as a boy, I felt discrimination, because I looked as if I were gay and then I was further discriminated against. I was born in Bulgaria, belong to a Turkish minority and speak Turkish.

That was not a problem, I wasn't discriminated against because of that, but because of my sexual orientation.

At 17 I came to Germany and now I am 30 and still live here. In Bulgaria I grew up with my grandmother and then followed my mother to Germany. What I like about Germany is that all people are equal and live together, no matter what sexual orientation they have.

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Daisy

For work, I put on makeup and everything, but only when I am wearing shoes am I really a woman. Only with really high shoes. And for me, a purse is something elegant, something intelligent. A woman without a purse wouldn't do. A purse without a woman, same thing. My purse was stolen once already. Since then, I always keep my money in my bra and it doesn't get stolen anymore. It was a customer of mine. First we had sex and then he pushed me and ripped the purse out of my hands. He was a German, not a foreigner.

In this job you have to have a strong character, a strong heart. My strength comes from me alone, I am just that way. I also have a family that is a great help to me. I am very proud of myself and that I am the way I am. Not everyone can do that.

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Sonya

What irritates me so much about this place is that there is so much garbage. It wasn't like that before. And I am also very angry about this place, because things are often stolen there. Wallets, mobile phones. Many customers are robbed there when they are drunk. There are people who hide in the darkness in the park and watch whether someone is drunk. Last year someone even sprayed me with pepper spray. I wanted to leave and a guy was standing there and sprayed me, then I ran.

I've been here since 2004. Back then there were fewer girls working here. Now there are more of us and everybody throws stuff away.

Some addicts take drugs and sleep there, and many women use it as a workplace, even though they also go to the bathroom there. Perhaps it would be cleaner if they placed two or three big dumpsters there.

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Sonya

I play this game very often with another woman at Olga. That is my method of recuperating. I play well and win often, but I don't do it to win. My friend only knows how to play this game, so we always play it. In Bulgaria I didn't have time to play. Then, I worked during the day and when I was done I visited my folks. But I haven't been in Bulgaria for six years. I miss my friends, the family, and my house there. I don't have any of that here. I am here for money and to support my family. When I am on the street, I am always tense. Especially lately, when there is very little work. When I again have no place to sleep or no money for a hotel, I come to Olga and sleep during opening hours. When I sleep here I feel much calmer. Usually I sleep with a friend together in a bed.

More beds would be good, since many women here are homeless and sleep in the internet café. The owner is used to that and doesn't make a fuss. There is a huge difference between Bulgaria and here. Here you can just work, in Bulgaria you're not allowed to stand on the street like that, then the police come and get on your case. Most of the time, the women stand on the freeway. They have to leave the city. At the beginning it was very difficult for me to get used to the situation in Berlin. Everybody can see us here, even children. That feels strange, but a person gets used to anything with time. I came to Berlin alone, but I knew a few women from before, and they then explained everything to me. They said that I do not need to be ashamed, because the people are used to seeing prostitutes here.

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Natascha

At that time, when I was lying in the hospital with a blood clot, it would have been easy for the judicial system to throw me in jail because I had realised that I had an appointment for a court session. Then this wonderful social worker came to me in the hospital and persuaded me to perhaps, finally, get back on opioid substitution therapy. She had arranged everything so that I wouldn't leave the hospital and right away walk the streets and fall into the same old rut. I already knew her from before from another drug counselling centre and then when she started working at Olga, at first I was torn as to which was more important to me: to be looked after by her, or to avoid the street walking scene and thus my old acquaintances. Finally, in retrospect, I am glad that I set my priorities that way.

Through the substitution therapy and her motivation in the psycho-social treatment (PsB) I was able to take part in a theatre project in which I had to keep regular appointments.

Then when she died, her death would have given me thousands of reasons for relapse, resignation, etc., but somehow, maybe also thanks to my new PsB, I was offered the opportunity to work on myself and the loss and not to come crashing down. Maybe it was luck, maybe it was meant to be. This allowed me to make use of the advances I had made up to that point and go through a training programme. Meanwhile, I am in the middle of an apprenticeship and in about a year I will have a professional qualification in the bag after all.

Certainly that has been a huge amount of work up to now, but at the end of the day she laid the foundation for me changing my thinking and sometimes I think for that reason I have to finish it on my own, to be able to show her, and in this way thank her.

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Tanja

I need my headphones and my fists at work. I can't listen to the blathering of the other women anymore: "I need drugs, do you have a euro? I haven't earned anything." And I used my fists, above all at the beginning, because of the other women. Because they always provoked me and thought the whole street was theirs. Some women can't change their spot, they have to go where their pimps put them.

Meanwhile, I can choose where I work and stand on the best corner, there my customers can see me, no matter where I walk.

I like to listen to Russian rap, Rammstein, and Mozart the most. I'm actually a romantic type, but here I listen to Rammstein to psyche myself up, and I can dance well to Russian rap. I love music and I love to dance. I actually wanted to be a dancer, but when I asked my mother if I could take dancing lessons, she said: "I won't pay for shit like that." She needed new clothes and didn't pay for my lessons ...

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Tanja

Underneath this ring is a tattoo. It represents love for a man. In five minutes he manages to totally tick me off and make me aggressive and only needs one minute to calm me down again. After I got the tattoo I said to him, “As long as the tattoo is there, I will love you.” He works in a kebab shop and that is also where we met. I went there every other day and ate kebab. We didn’t get together then, he thought I wasn’t his type and also it wasn’t the right time anyway, but despite that we were friends. When I saw him the last time, something had changed. We chatted and I said that I found it a shame that I don’t speak any language really well. Then he said: “But you sure are very good at French” [German slang for blowjob – *Ed.*]. It took a moment until I understood what he meant. He also wanted to caress me and cuddle with me, but I didn’t want to. In January I was raped here. That, the work here, and waiting for him have left me cold and empty.

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Stella

Every morning when I get up I pray to God. I pray that I will earn enough money to be able to send some to my family back home. I pray that I won't be beaten or raped, that I will get customers who want to wear a condom, and that I find the strength to get up again the next morning.

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Daniela

What started it all was that I got married very early, at 17. Then at 18 my first child, at 19 my second. I was bad with money, and my husband started gambling. He gambled away the money he earned. Then we had a lot of debts and two small children. I worked in a pizzeria across the street. Next door was a brothel, and the women came by once in a while to get something to eat. In talking with them I learned how much money you can make through prostitution. I said to my boss – as total bullshit – “I think I should become a prostitute too.” Then she said, “I do that as well, just come along with me.” When we got out of the taxi, it almost took my breath away, because it was the street where I had spent my childhood until I was 10 years old. Then we stood in front of the store where I would prostitute myself in the future, and I realised, that was the store where, as a small child, I had my bicycle repaired. My entire childhood flashed before my eyes, like a film. And I believe that in that moment, something happened within me. The first brick was laid for the wall that I have built around me, and my double life started. My entire extended family knew nothing about it. I always said that I was working as a waitress. I was 19 then. The debts were quickly paid off, since in those days you could sometimes earn 2000 marks in an evening. Then 1 ½ years later, it was May 15, when I came home, the apartment was empty. My children, my husband, all the furniture, just gone. The apartment swept clean. Of course, my world came crashing down around me, but because I always had problems trusting people, in that moment I didn't seek help.

And the second part of my double life began ...

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Daniela

... then I had a relationship with a man, who knew that I worked as a prostitute. My co-workers had taken speed so they could work and drink more. I wanted to try it once and really liked it, until my boyfriend found out about it, then I got beaten yet again. Despite that, I couldn't keep my hands off speed, even though I was afraid. Then my girlfriend gave me heroin to take care of my dilated pupils. Then I repressed things again, because I actually knew all the things that heroin would cause, but I took it anyway. Not long afterwards I was addicted, had to hide my addiction and live a double life again. Even later, when I only dealt with normal, middle-class people. They did me a world of good, but I couldn't give up prostitution because I was addicted to drugs. Then I continued to tell the old story that I worked cleaning homes. I had to hide my clothes. I went to work in sneakers and then changed clothes. In any case, my addiction was a full-time job.

That made me very lonely, I had built a framework of lies around myself that I also could no longer escape from. Because anyone who lies needs to have a good memory, and unfortunately I don't have one. I learned to act normal with my social environment, with problems, and with myself. For me, the mask represents a double life. To hide the truth, to cut yourself off. I have been leading my double life for almost 30 years. That really breaks you down. There was nobody who knew anything. Neither about the addiction nor the prostitution. While my boyfriend sat on the couch in the living room, I was in the bathroom shooting up heroin. In retrospect, I sometimes think that my friends in fact knew it, but didn't want to know it. Also, I had already had no contact with my parents and my children for years.

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Daniela

I had always been afraid of prison, until in 2011 I actually sat in jail for a few months for fare-dodging. During this period I managed to get clean and felt very good. Because in the correctional facility, I didn't need to lie or hide anything. But when I got out again, I realised that the same daily grind was starting all over again. I relapsed and started hooking again and was once again caught in a vicious circle. And then I somehow understood that I had locked myself up in a prison for 30 years because of my addiction.

It took me a few tries before I was able to really change my life. Then I sought professional help because I knew that I would not be able to do it on my own. I went to Olga and said: "I need help, I can't go on any longer."

Today, for the first time after almost 30 years of addiction, I am on opioid replacement therapy and have psychosocial counselling. I ended my double life, moved out, broke up with my boyfriend. With help and patience, I have slowly torn down the prison walls surrounding me. Now I have more time for myself and nice things. I am even in contact with one of my sons again. I feel liberated, I am no longer confined and no longer have to lie to myself and others. For other people, who like me get into difficult situations in their lives, I wish that they will not be scared, but that they will promptly get help for themselves and succeed in breaking out of their prisons.!

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Dzsenifer

I spend a lot of time at the job centre and the tax office and have many problems here. When I registered for the first time, I had to fill out a lot of paperwork. It was very stressful. I had to do a lot of running back and forth and a lot of waiting. Go back two or three times. In the meantime I am receiving benefits from the job centre, everything has improved.

I am no longer dependent on so many people and don't have to stand on the street any more. Before I had to ask my boyfriend when I wanted something. The job centre took its own sweet time with a lot of paperwork. It took more than two years until I got my claim through.

They always wanted documents that I could not get, like for example a residence permit, which as a citizen of the EU I absolutely no longer need. And yet the clerk insisted that I bring her this document.

I always had to deal with new clerks. Always those who were free at the time, and I had to tell my story again and once again bring along the documents and copy them.

There came a point at which I wanted to give up. I wanted to go back to Hungary, because my baby was due and for two years I wasn't able to get the money. During this time I was also working here in Germany. On the street, in laundries and hotels. The people in the job centre and the tax office wanted to know everything and really didn't want to help – and still don't. Until I said that I was going to see a lawyer. My boyfriend mentioned the lawyer and suddenly everything worked out. Now I am taking a German course, so that I can communicate better and can work here.

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Eva

The street Kurfürstenstraße. Like other women, I stand here and try my “luck”, but the easy money that you can earn here comes slower and slower. Especially on Fridays. One day of the week when you are either *totally* lucky or *totally* out of luck. Almost nothing in between. It is midday and it looks like a complete Friday washout. Even when I am lucky, it doesn't make much difference. Almost none of the cars that drive by stop, and those that do come want pleasure without protection. But the main thing is that the car is carpeted with family photos. Yay for the love of his own wife. And yay that I am so rarely here. Behind my butt I sense a movement. I hear a voice say, “Whaddaya say?” I turn around. A man with a dog and a young girl, at first glance rather pleasant. I am a bit shocked. “Whaddaya say?” my friends ask again. “Is that ... is that your daughter?” I ask and am completely perplexed. “Yes”, he answers quietly. “Then take your child and keep moving.” In my mind's eye I see my own boys. The notion that they know that I have something to do with this street is not particularly pleasant. A few minutes later comes someone who always walks around and waits until he is solicited. Today he is out of luck. Welcome to the club. “I have ten minutes, we could have a quickie here,” says Casanova to me. “We can't,” I answer. “Why not?” “Because I won't go into a dumping ground like that.” “You won't?” “No!” I go a few metres away from Mr. Swine. The other women often use the dumping ground in the middle of the city centre. Especially the Bulgarians, Hungarians, and most of the drug-addicted women.

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Eva

Some of them have to earn money because of the pimps, others need their drugs. As has often been the case throughout my whole strange life, I have been lucky under the circumstances and haven't had to deal with either of those things. "It's warm today. You should drink enough." Father, daughter, and dog are back. "I'm careful," I answer and display my water bottle. "Do you live in Berlin?" asks Papa. "No. I am only visiting for a few days." "Where do you come from?" "From the Czech Republic." "Aha. I once had a girlfriend from Děčín." How am I supposed to respond to that piece of info? "You have a beautiful daughter and a beautiful dog."

"Thanks," says the little one, who is really very pretty. "Do you enjoy your job?" asks the curious dad. "That's a secret," I answer. The whole situation is very embarrassing to me. Having the kid there is wearing me out. She figures it out and says: "Papa, we have to go now."

"Have a wonderful day and have fun working." No comment. My God, what have you given away your soul for? Friday. Shitday. A moment later, a car comes. A guy with a humungous hat. "You've been standing there a while, right?" "Yes," I say. "Come sit down inside." I get in. "What are all the things you do?" asks the Sombrero Man. 95% of the time, these kinds of questions mean perversities. "So what do you want to do?" "You say first." "Okay, that, that, that." "Hmm, I have very particular wishes. I'm 100% sure you won't do it. So, at most €20?"

"What for?" I am completely surprised. "For your time, and you also have to walk back 100 metres."

Is life crazy or what?

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Imprint

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A project of the Frauentreff OLGA with sex workers from Berlin's Kurfürstenstraße.

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