



LITERATUR IN DEN SPRACHEN BERLINS 2024

Angel B.H. The Hustler's Curse (Excerpt)

Before it “mysteriously” burned down, Supersexe was Montreal’s most notorious strip club. A crown jewel in the collection of gaudy, lawless clubs that characterized the city. The great neon arc of its sign lit up Sainte-Catherine Street like a sleazy splash of paint, drowning out street-lamps and shining an ominous LED glow on the piss puddles and occasional panhandlers underneath it. Somersaulting across the arc were three enormous angels, their sensuous, bikini-clad bodies blinking in blue and red. An unholy triad, they invited idle eyes and invoked familiar trembles in the loins of many locals—a number of whom could be seen scuttling into the club on their way home from work.

Huddled outside Supersexe, in rotating groups, were the dancers: women in fur-lined parkas cropped tight at the waistline, thigh-high stockings, and towering, mud-spattered Pleasers. Intimidating and dazzling, they were the sirens of the strip—pinching cigarettes between

their lips and hastily chomping on Chicken McNuggets. Hovering watchfully was Tony, the fake Italian, who looked as though he was born to be a bouncer. The sight of them on Sainte-Catherine was as integral to the city as any cathedral or casino.

I was heartbroken, barely out of high school, when I first encountered Supersexe. Freshly moved to Montreal, I'd rented a room downtown, and was already struggling to pay for it. I spent most of my days at my stalemated job: cooking, cleaning, and waitressing at a Kosher restaurant that would inevitably go out of business. I'd glance up at the club on my way to and from work, offer the dancers my shy, small-town smile, and cover my ears as Tony bellowed FULL-NUDE, FULL-CONTACT dances! to all who deigned to look.

When the Kosher restaurant filed for bankruptcy, I finally gathered my courage and entered the club—or rather, I was drawn into it by an inexplicable force that I convinced myself was courage. Tony led me inside, gave me a quick once-over, and indulged me in a gruff tour. I wasn't surprised to find the interior in a state of shameful disrepair. While the club had certainly been lavish when it opened in the 70s, it was now a musty relic, reminiscent of a Persian rug one might find in a flea market: exquisite in a vintage sense, but worn and frayed around the edges, as though the life had been stomped out of it. The twelve-foot pole stood stark and clammy on the central stage, and upstairs the private booths were covered in threadbare crimson carpeting, low light barely obscuring a spattering of ancient stains.

It was early and the club was still empty, yet I could sense the omnipresence of women. Like transient ghosts, I pictured them up in the booths, straddling strangers in nothing but Pleasers, discreetly stuffing twenties into gluttonous clutches. Had they entered these doors already possessing some siren-like quality? Or had they started out meek and become increasingly shrewd and bewitching over time? Had they been desperate for money? Were there children, secret lovers, or others who depended upon them? And where did I fit in? Meek, yes, and certainly in need of cash, but also there on a bizarre and personal mission—to obliterate all traces of wholesomeness and vulnerability left in me, to become an anti-virgin.

Or perhaps, looking back, it was a form of possession in the guise of a mission. As a child, I had often been warned about this: demonic forces with the power to take someone hostage, supernatural creatures that consumed and tormented the weak, the defenseless. Perhaps some fallen angel or nefarious spirit had guided me into the club—down a path both enlightening and excruciating, one that would pluck me from the realm of respectability and eject me onto the other side of life's plexiglass.

Privately, I believed that one of the Supersexe sirens had something to do with it. I imagined some salacious stripper-witch, chain-smoking between shifts, catching sight of me scuttling down Sainte-Catherine Street and placing a Hustler's Curse upon me. A curse that inspired in me an obsession with money—along with a taste for drama and chaos, a propensity for self-sabotage. I blamed this witch, and the curse, for leading me into the club, for introducing me to all sorts of unsavoury characters, and, ultimately, for propelling me into a lifetime of trouble.

It's bullshit, of course. Strippers aren't witches, nor is hustling a curse. But there were times when it certainly felt like it.

In any case, with tight-lipped, trembling determination, I signed up for my first shift at Supersexe. And in doing so, I initiated a career move that would gobble up the rest of my twenties—one that would shape-shift and evolve, eventually taking me outside the club and across several continents. One that would cling to the rest of my life like the foul, elusive scent of damp laundry left too long in the machine.

When recounted with just the right emphasis, the parables of my own life are as vivid and far-fetched as any Biblical tale. And, just like the vanishing lore of Supersexe, they brim with turmoil and melodrama, sin and redemption, demons and angels alike.

Possessed by the spirit of capitalism, we create our own mythologies.