

INTRODUCTION: ELENA AND JÜRGEN

Elena, a twenty-two-year-old Dominican sex worker in Sosúa, the Dominican Republic, was released from jail after being held for two days.¹ She had paid the police 500 pesos (U.S.\$42)—the standard bribe sex workers must pay for their release.² While she was in jail, her younger sisters, ages fourteen and sixteen, took care of her five-year-old daughter, Mari. In their care, Mari announced to her aunts that she too was going to go out in the *calle* (street) “so the police will arrest me and I can be with Mom.”

Elena had been arrested in the middle of the day while out running errands with her friend Andrea, another sex worker. The police plucked her from the streets and brought her, along with nineteen other Dominican women, to a jail thirty miles away in Puerto Plata (the largest city on the north coast). She was not yet dressed for cruising the tourist bars, but the police knew she was in the sex trade since, like most sex workers in Sosúa, Elena had been arrested before. During this roundup, however, the police also had arrested women who were not in the sex trade—six of the nineteen, according to Elena’s and Andrea’s count—thus rendering real Elena’s young daughter’s fears of being arrested just for walking in the street. The police did not arrest Andrea, however, as her boyfriend was on the police force. Besides, she had not worked the tourist bars as a sex worker for months: she had met a German client who paid her rent and other expenses and promised to marry her and to bring her to Germany to live with him as his wife. It was a stroke of luck that Elena was with Andrea, who notified Elena’s family and paid the bribe Elena needed to get out of jail. Because of Andrea’s relationship with this German client, who sent her international money wires, she had enough money on hand to help out her friend.

Building Transnational Ties

Elena went to the beach the afternoon of her release. She came back ecstatic to her one-room wooden house. She had run into a German client of hers, Jürgen, who had just returned to Sosúa to see her. They had been sending faxes to one another since he left after his last vacation, and he had mentioned in one of his faxes that he would be returning. He did not know where she lived but figured he would find her that evening at the Anchor, Sosúa's largest tourist bar, where foreign male sex tourists went to drink and dance and where foreign men went to pick up Dominican and Haitian women working in Sosúa's sex trade.³ Jürgen brought her all kinds of presents from Germany, including perfume and a matching gold necklace and bracelet. Elena was thrilled, and, as she showed off her gifts, talked about Jürgen as a smitten school girl might: "He is adorable. You know he is older, like my father.⁴ He is very sweet. I am going to spend the entire time with him while he is here. We will go to the beach, and he will take me to nightclubs and restaurants." She began preparing for a night out on the town. Her sisters would look after her daughter while Elena stayed with Jürgen in his tourist hotel for the duration of his vacation. She rushed off to the hair salon, where the stylist straightened her shoulder-length black curly hair and shaped it into a sophisticated French twist. She looked elegant. She chose the evening's outfit carefully, with plenty of help from her sisters, daughter, and friend, a young sex worker who also lived with them without paying any rent because she had very little money.

Elena took care of these four girls with her earnings from sex work. They all rotated between sharing the double bed and sleeping on the floor. Spending time with a tourist on his vacation meant Elena would receive more gifts, maybe even some for her family, as well as earn a steady stream of money. These girls helped primp Elena, selecting billowy rayon pants that moved as Elena did, and a black stretch shirt with long sheer sleeves that was cropped to reveal her slim stomach. She was meeting Jürgen at the Anchor, where I saw her that evening and where she stood out in the bar crowded with sex workers vying to catch the attention of visiting male tourists.

Later in the week I ran into Elena and Jürgen at a restaurant on the beach. Jürgen invited my husband and me to join them for a drink. Elena's daughter, Mari, was eating a fish dinner, and Elena's two younger sisters were snacking on sodas and french fries. At one

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point, Jürgen reached over to wipe Mari's runny nose, and Elena cleaned something from Jürgen's forehead. They touched each other affectionately and looked much like a family on a beach outing. Not far away on the beach were Elena's three older sisters (two of whom used to be sex workers but now were married to Dominican men) and their children playing in the sand. Everyone was in a bathing suit, except for Jürgen, who wore jeans and a long-sleeve denim shirt that he had unbuttoned, revealing his large stomach. He was sweating profusely but refused to swim; even Elena's teasing could not induce him to take a dip. Jürgen spoke in English to my husband and me, and then I translated for Elena, who did not understand English or German. Jürgen could not speak Spanish. He explained to us that he was interested in buying some land and building a house. He wanted to live part of the year in Sosúa and part in Germany. He asked me, "Have you seen Elena's place? It's horrible." After I told Elena what he had said, she hinted, "Well if he wants to buy me a larger house, he can." When the check came, Jürgen insisted on treating us to drinks, and Elena also waved our money away.

A week later, as I was walking along the beach, Jürgen called out to me from the same bar where I had seen him earlier in the week. His vacation was coming to a close, and he was flying back to Germany the next day. He planned to return to Sosúa in a couple of months. Elena was at a bar next door getting ice, and when I saw her and asked how she was, her face dropped; she began crying. I had not known how much this relationship meant to her. Maybe Jürgen represented more than just money, nice meals, and gifts. I had heard sex workers often distinguish between relationships for love (*por amor*) or for green cards (*por residencia*), but Elena's tears broke down that distinction.

Despite Jürgen's most ardent promises, there was no telling what he would do once he left Sosúa. Elena knew all too well that she might not ever see him again. Whether or not clients stay in touch with sex workers is out of these women's control. One thing was certain, though: once Jürgen departed, Elena's vacation would be over. She would move from the comfort of the "First World" tourist hotel back to her one-room shack with no running water and would resume all of her normal daily activities—taking care of her daughter and cooking and washing for an extended family of five. With Jürgen, she also had a break, however brief, from the constant worry of finding enough clients to meet her many financial obligations. It

was difficult making ends meet day after day, especially since she also sent 1,000 pesos (U.S.\$83) every month to her parents in the countryside to pay their bill at the local *colmado* (small grocer). Besides, with Jürgen gone, who else was going to treat her so well? For a couple of weeks Jürgen showered Elena with gifts and attention, a far cry from her getting dressed up every night, dodging the police, and trying to land clients at the Anchor. Jürgen paid Elena money for her sexual services, but he also treated her—and Elena’s family—unlike any other client had before. As Elena described it: “He does not deny me anything. We go to the disco, we play games in the casino, we go to restaurants.” He even paid a pawn-shop broker to retrieve a bracelet Elena had placed in hock when money was tight. And he promised to send money via Western Union once he was in Germany. Is this a relationship *por amor* or *por residencia*? I asked Elena. “It is a little of both of course,” she replied. She feared that Jürgen might lose interest in her once he returned to Germany. “It’s hard to meet good men like this.”

Jürgen kept his word; he wired Elena money and kept in touch through faxes. With the money wires, Elena was able to move into a larger cement house located around the corner from the one-room wooden shanty the five girls shared. The new house had a bathroom and a kitchen sink (though it was without a spigot and water lines), which worked well for holding the water they hauled from communal tap stands. The rent increase was considerable, double what she paid previously: an increase from 450 pesos (U.S.\$37) to 1,000 pesos (U.S.\$83) a month. She could not afford such a surge in rent without Jürgen’s support. Elena wasted no time putting her windfall to good use: the same day Jürgen wired money for her to move, she paid the rent and bought a dining room table and four chairs.

Even more surprising than his money wires and faithful fax communications was Jürgen’s return to Sosúa only two months after his previous visit. Wishing to avoid paying what he called “outrageously high” taxes in Germany, he moved his business address to the Dominican Republic and planned to travel periodically to Germany for work.⁵ He explained that with the money he would save in taxes, and the low cost of living in the Dominican Republic, he would not have to work as much as in the past. Within days of his return to Sosúa, he rented a two-bedroom apartment along the main paved road in Los Charamicos (the Dominican side of Sosúa) that cost 3,500 pesos (U.S.\$292) a month. The apartment had running water

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and an electrical generator (for use during daily blackouts). He bought beds, living-room furniture, and a large color tv. Elena, her daughter, and younger sisters moved in immediately and set about furiously cleaning their new home.⁶ Her three older sisters came by to help and to fuss in their sister's new home, which had items they could only dream about for their own homes: sinks, a shower, a toilet, an electric stove, and a large refrigerator.

Everyone was very excited, especially Elena. She was living out the fantasy of many sex workers in Sosúa, sharing a household with a European man who supported her and her dependents. Jürgen moved her from a wooden shack at the end of a dirt street that barely had enough room to accommodate a bed, to a modest middle-class, two-bedroom apartment with electricity and running water. He paid for food that Elena and her sisters prepared and had cable tv installed. He also paid for Elena's daughter to attend a private school, and he came home one day with school supplies for her. Occasionally, he took them out to eat at one of the tourist restaurants lining the beach. After observing how much time Elena spent washing clothes by hand, he rented a washing machine. Elena had moved up in the world: eating in tourist restaurants, sending a daughter to private school, and living in a middle-class apartment were clear symbols of her increased social and economic mobility.

A single mother who had been taking care of her daughter and younger sisters with her earnings from sex work for three years, Elena quit sex work soon after Jürgen started wiring her money. Her situation mirrored that of her friend, Andrea, who also had left sex work and moved into a bigger house (with plumbing) thanks to her transnational relationship with a foreign tourist. Once Elena moved in with Jürgen, her new role was unusual in Los Charamicos: She was no ordinary Los Charamicos "housewife." Having a German "husband" and living in one of the few painted concrete apartment buildings that contained an electrical generator set her apart from other Dominican women in Los Charamicos.⁷ Sex work, and the transnational relationship it had fostered, transformed Elena's life, as well as the lives of those who depended on her. But for how long?

Breaking Transnational Ties

It was not long before Elena discovered that Jürgen was not her or her family's salvation as she first had hoped. Soon after Jürgen

moved to town, Elena found out she was pregnant. Both she and Jürgen were very happy about having a baby. He had a teenage son living with his ex-wife in Germany and relished the idea of having another child. At first, he was helpful around the house and doted on Elena. But the novelty soon wore off, and he returned to his routine of spending most days in the German-owned bar beneath their apartment. He also went out drinking at night with German friends, hopping from one tourist bar to the next. He was drunk, or on his way there, day and night. Elena saw him less and less frequently, and they fought often, usually over money. Eventually he started staying out all night. On one occasion, a friend of Elena's (a sex worker) saw Jürgen at the Anchor talking and later leaving the bar with a Haitian sex worker. Elena knew he was cheating on her, but she did not want to bring it up with Jürgen. Reasoning that men "do these things," she instead focused her anger on the fact that he was not giving her enough money to take care of the household. "I'm fed up. I'm in the house all day, and he's out. He goes to El Batey (the tourist side of town) to drink in the tourist bars, or he is below drinking in the bar. I wanted to go out dancing Saturday night. He did not want to go, and he would not give me the money to go either. And if he does not give me the money, I don't have it." Their vacation days of going to the beach and dancing at clubs had truly come to a close. Elena now had less disposable income than she did before she lived with Jürgen. Back then, she would go out dancing and drinking with her friends—not looking for clients—but just to have fun. Now, without an income of her own, she was dependent on Jürgen not only for household expenses but for her own personal expenses as well.

Eventually, their fights got so bad that he kicked her out of their bedroom, and she started sleeping on the couch. They stopped speaking. She joked about her predicament and her inability to understand Jürgen and his ways: "Here in the Dominican Republic when couples fight, it is the man who ends up sleeping in the street. And with the Germans, it's the man who is in the bed and the woman who is in the street." On more than one occasion I served as interpreter between the two during their attempts at "peace negotiations," after they had not spoken to one another for days. Since Elena does not speak any German or English, she asked me to help her understand why Jürgen was mad at her as well as to communicate her viewpoint to him. In preparation for one of these "negotia-

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tions,” she briefed me on what she wanted me to explain to him, “I want to know why he is not talking to me? And why he is not giving me any money? He is my esposo and is supposed to give me money. I need to know if he is with me or with someone else. He pays for this house and paid for everything here. I need to know what is going on. You know I was fine living alone before; I’m able to do that. I took care of everything before—this is not a problem. But I need to know what is going to happen.” As they were living together, and Jürgen was paying the bills, Elena considered them to be married. To Elena and her friends, Jürgen, as an esposo, was financially responsible for the household, a role she perceived he was not fulfilling.

But Jürgen saw things differently. He felt Elena thought he was “made of money” and was always asking him for more. He asked me to translate and tell her, “I’m not a millionaire. I told Elena last week that I don’t like her always asking for money. She did not listen. She asks me for money all day long. I don’t want to be taken advantage of.” Elena and her sister shopped like most poor women in town by buying food items as they needed them to cook the family’s meals, sometimes going to the markets three or more times a day. Therefore, it is not surprising that Jürgen felt Elena was constantly asking him for money—she was.⁸ Although they worked through this rough time, and Elena moved back into their bedroom, they fought explosively on many more occasions. Making up resulted in Jürgen’s loosening his purse strings. Elena described how they settled one of their many fights: “Everything is fine now. He bought me pizza and gave me money to rent a washing machine. And he gave me money to go shopping. Tonight we are going out.” Eventually, however, they fought so often that Elena started sleeping on the couch permanently. When I questioned what she would do if Jürgen left her, she replied, “I worked before in a restaurant back in my home town when Mari’s father left me. And I was a domestic for a family. It went fine there. I could do that again. My older sisters could look after Mari and the new baby, and I’ll get them a smaller house.”

One day, without warning, Jürgen packed his bags and left for Germany for business. Elena knew this day would come; she knew that Jürgen had to go to Germany to work. But she did not expect their relationship would be in such disarray and that he would depart without leaving her money (although he did pay a couple of

month's rent and left some food money with her younger sisters, who turned it over to Elena). In Jürgen's absence, Elena took her daughter out of private school, since the tuition soon became overdue, and she started working part time at a small Dominican-owned restaurant. Once Jürgen returned to Sosúa from Germany a couple of months later, they split up for good. Elena moved out of their apartment and back to the labyrinth of shantylife structures on dirt paths off the main road. Her economic and social mobility was short lived. She had not accumulated any savings or items she could pawn during her time with Jürgen. He had never given her enough money at any one time so that she could set some aside for savings. And all the things he bought for the apartment were *his* things, not hers. When they vacated the apartment, he took all of the furniture and the tv with him.

Today Elena is still living in the same conditions she had before she met Jürgen. Upon his return to the Dominican Republic, Jürgen lived for a while longer in Sosúa with another Dominican woman, also a sex worker. Elena had her baby, a boy, and Jürgen initially gave her money from time to time to help care for him. Once Jürgen moved out of Sosúa for good, he stopped all financial support. After a couple of years went by, Jürgen visited Sosúa to see his son. During this visit, he denied paternity of the boy, insisting "There is no way I could have a son this black." Elena never returned to cruising Sosúa's sex tourist bars for clients, and she has made significantly less money in a series of tourist-related jobs such as restaurant and domestic work. Her older sisters helped her take care of their younger sisters, and Elena still sends what money she can to help out her parents⁹—though she sends less than she did in her sex work days.

A Fantasy Falls Short: Holding Foreign Men To Different Standards

Elena's relationship with Jürgen dramatically changed her life: they had a child together. But her social and economic location remained as marginal as ever. In many ways Elena was better off financially before she met Jürgen. Even though she appeared to have all the material trappings that accompany "marrying" a foreign tourist, Elena ended up returning to the same conditions of poverty. Ironically, when she and Jürgen fought, and he withheld money from her, she was less economically independent than she was as a sex

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worker, when she could earn on average 500 pesos (U.S.\$42.00) per client. Despite other sex workers' aspirations to achieve what Elena had, Elena's relationship with a foreign man was clearly far from ideal. Jürgen turned out to be an undependable father and a volatile alcoholic who slept with other women, thus putting Elena, and possibly her baby, at risk for acquiring AIDS.¹⁰

Yet Elena and her friends were quick to overlook Jürgen's faults, his alcoholism and infidelity, and they continued to describe him as an *hombre serio* (good man). Dominican sex workers often dismiss foreign men's imperfections and instead describe them in idealized terms—versions of the type of men they always wanted to marry. This romanticized construct contrasts with the women's described perceptions and failings of Dominican men, particularly their drinking and womanizing. It was only toward the end of Elena's and Jürgen's relationship, when his drinking was so obviously out of control, that Elena's friends finally admitted that, like the Dominican men they constantly criticized, Jürgen was trouble.