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Lauren Rigor
Dominican University of California

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Apples Decay

by Lauren Rigor

[The following article was taken from the last issue of The Summerland Courier, a major newspaper published in Summerland, a city located twenty miles outside Avalon across the Lake. It was found at the bottom of the newspaper's regional section.]

"Through the Mists: An Update on Avalon's Sex-Worker Homicides"

Avalon—January 1. 1:09 A.M. New Year's Day rings in with a series of gunshots as a woman's bloody body lies face down along the frozen, misty banks near Nimue's, the famous (and infamous) brothel/clinic reputedly run by Madame Le Fay, the only known female pimp in Avalon and one of the last remaining Avalonians with a high school diploma. The woman, seen dressed in red, satin lingerie and matching stilettos, was simply known as "Art." Art was a Student in Transition (ST) and a former prostitute who worked at the Ex, a rival brothel not too far from Nimue's. Witnesses report seeing a group of large men dressed in black chase Art down Pier 8 towards Nimue's. One of the men pulls out an 8 mm out of his coat pocket and shoots Art six times in the back. Her death marks the latest attack on prostitutes switching over to Nimue's.

Avalon, the once prosperous city of 1.2 million and formerly known as the country's "apple capital," is now one of the nation's top crime-ridden cities with a dwindling population of 900,000. It is also the only city that legalized prostitution. Analysts say that about fifty to sixty homicides occur in Avalon each year, more than half of them Nimue's-related.

Vivian Rivers, a clinician working at Nimue's and one of the last remaining people in Avalon to attend college, states that sadly Art's story is not unique. She sits against her gray, metal office desk with her arms crossed over neat stacks of files and says, "Few report this, but many women sacrifice their lives just to reach Nimue's front steps." She looks out the tinted, barred windows thoughtfully. "And the vast majority of these women are STs." STs, one recalls, is the term used to describe the men and women who were unable to afford a continued education in the wake of Avalon's school-closures due to budget cuts. "All the STs know that Nimue's is the cleanest and safest brothel in Avalon," Rivers says, "In fact, it's the only brothel in the city that actually has a clinic. So it's no surprise why prostitutes everywhere want to work here."

However, renowned political activist Elaine Loch points out that Nimue's is not exactly Avalon's safe haven. She stands outside her ornate Victorian home—sixty miles outside Avalon city limits—with her Toy Poodle and says, "All the pimps want Nimue's closed and Le Fay dead. Of course. She's stealing their workers. So drive-by shootings in that

area are common. These women risk a lot reaching Nimue's. The only thing that keeps Nimue's above water (no pun intended) are the local gangs Le Fay made connections with over the years."

Police are currently investigating Art's murder and hope to put her assailants behind bars. But Loch is skeptical. She picks up her Toy Poodle and remarks indignantly, "The police aren't going to do crap. Why do you think none of pimps or their associates have ever been arrested? Who do you think funds the police department? Not the city. It's broke. So you have all these conflicts coming in on all sides, cops and gangsters, pimps and Le Fay. And people like Art end up suffering the most.

"Besides, even if the police did find Art's assailants, nothing's going to change. In a couple of nights, hell maybe even as early as tomorrow night, you can bet that there will be another prostitute killed near Nimue's by some other pimp's cronies." She goes on to say grimly, "The prostitution killings won't stop until conditions in Avalon change."

Social worker Lawrence Merle indicates that Art's death is only part of a larger problem. In his bare office, except for a few post-it notes here and there, Merle sits on a broken swivel chair and shakes his head gloomily. "As horrible as these crimes are, I don't believe they are the most shocking. These STs like Art know what they've gotten themselves into and are fully aware of the dangers of leaving their former pimps for Le Fay. The ones that I pity the most are the non-STs, the ones growing up after the school-closures. Those are the ones most susceptible to recruitment and keep this awful business alive. I can't tell you how many runaways have left their homes and gone into prostitution."

Responses to Art's death are mixed.

"A dead hooker?" one resident said. "Ha! What else is new? You kill one and ten more spring up."

"I can't believe Art's dead," another resident wails, her face red and wet with tears. "I went to school with her. She was so nice."

Ironically, many of the women at the Ex, Art's former co-workers and predominantly non-STs, are among the most ambivalent.

"Stupid b— shouldn't uh left daddy," one worker says. "Serves that dumb b— right."

"She try an' be like Le Fay and bust outta here," another worker laughs. "The f— was that b— thinkin'? She ain't Le Fay. I mean, she not only left, that b— left at night. Everybody knows yaw don't go out at night. There be gangs an' sh— everywhere. If daddy's crew wasn't gonna pop her sorry a—, then the gangs out there sho would've." She pauses. "Oh well. Looks like there be an opening for bottom b—." She smiles and winks.

Yet one woman at the Ex admires Art's actions. Lana, a close friend and co-worker (an ST) of Art's says simply, "That girl was ballsy." She stands outside the abandoned Avalon Senior High, located a few blocks away from the Ex, to avoid her pimp and his cronies, both of which she says could beat or kill her if they saw her being interviewed. She turns and for a moment and stares at her former high school, which is now covered in graffiti, broken windows, and cracked off-white paint. She turns back and looks down on the ground with tears running down her face. "Sorry," Lana whispers, "This place just brings back memories." She cleared her throat. "Anyways, Art asked me to join her. But I said no because I knew she'd have a better chance of getting to Nimue's by herself. And also because I was afraid of getting killed. Mostly I was afraid of getting killed."

She looks up and pulls out a tiny, leather notebook from her maroon, laced garter. She laughs lightly. "At first I thought she kept a record of her clients in here. Kinda like her 'little black book.' I used to always see her write in it and just assumed she was keeping track of her clients." She pauses. "Ya know, you might talk to a lotta people around here about Art's death an' all. But, trust me; she's just another statistic in their eyes. They ain't gonna tell you that her real name is Martina Pluma. And that she wanted to one day be a writer"—she holds up the notebook—"She says so in the book. When Art died, daddy said anything left that belonged to her we could keep. This was the only thing I got."

Lana flips through some of the pages. "I read through some of her stuff and was like, 'Damn, she wrote about everything. Life before the school-closing, the pimp wars, everything.' I mean listen to this, 'Avalon had the most beautiful and delicious apples in the world. Countless shades of reds, greens, and yellows could be found on one Avalonian apple. When you bit into one, your mouth would be filled with such ecstasy it was like tasting the kiss of God. But when everyone who could afford it left, the apples turned brown and festered from neglect. The only things eating those now are the worms and the opossums.' Now that's deep.

"It's a shame," Lana goes on to say, "I really thought she'd survive this."

To many, Art was merely another statistic in Avalon's increasing crime-rate. But to people like Lana, Art was a tragic case of a good woman caught in a bad situation. Her death, among many others, reflects Avalon's decline from a city flourished with apples to a city flourished with criminals. An excerpt from Art's notebook says it all, "Once, Avalon's mists came from the Lake. Now, the mists come from loaded guns." –T. Mallory

[Upon the printing of this article, The Summerland Courier shut down due to lack of funds and readers.]