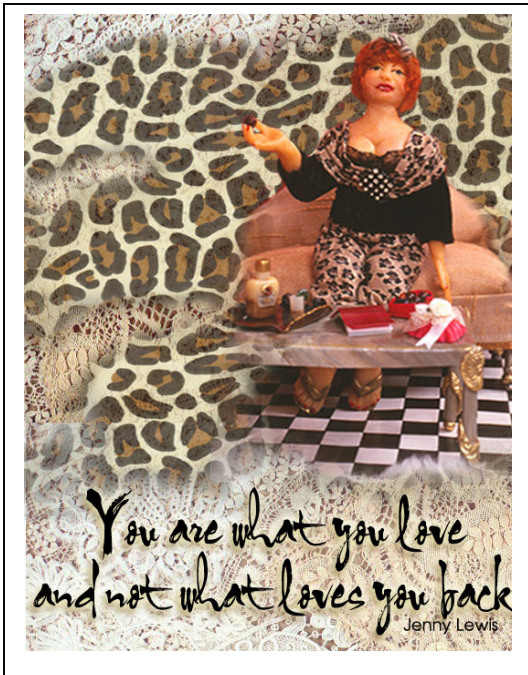


## Chez Madames



This place used to be kind of a dump. Dilapidated, old, huge and outdated, sprawling without purpose, unkempt and largely uncared for—and that’s kind of how I felt myself, when I first got here. I’ve been at Madame Bette’s Boarding House For Ladies almost five years now, and that’s longer than some, but not all. I was one of the first, and I’ve stayed put. Any other house though, that’s unheard of! Staying in one place that long is not the way of the restless, the wandering, or the professional performer, and I’m not just talking about Vaudeville, now. You have to keep moving, keep what the audience sees fresh and interesting. That, or you have to supply something they can’t get anywhere else. I think that’s a good bit of the secret of what Madame has going here; we supply something special.

If that song that Mandy keeps listening to off of the Jenny Lewis and the Watson Twins CD “Rabbit Fur Coat” is true (and I surely think it is, those girls are telling it straight up) then “You are what you love, and not what loves you back.” Bobbi said that means that Madame B.’s heart really IS made of gold, and we all laughed, including Madame B. but it was a comfy laugh we shared, not a mean one. Sure, she loves gold, but every one of knows she loves her Ladies too, and we love her right back or get the hell out of town. New girls come and go all the time at other houses, but one big difference is that once you are one of the her Shady Ladies, Madame B. lets you know you are welcome back no matter where or in what circumstances you may find yourself--as long as you are willing to live by the House Rules, that is.

The #1 Rule is that you don’t lie to Madame B., no matter what you might be telling others or yourself, for that matter. Its not about what name you are calling yourself this week, or what color your hair might be today, or what you might be planning for Someday since those things can change on a whim. It’s about the more practical issues. She says that in your own best interests you ought not lie to your spiritual counselor, doctor, lawyer or accountant, even if you don’t always come up with every last juicy detail to share. And since she fills most of those functions all rolled up into “House Mother”, she requires the naked skinny, not a work of fiction. Around here it’s likely to be partially clad and not all that thin, but still truthful. Those that can’t part with the truth end up not staying long at all, and that’s just fine with the rest of us. Although, it does take a bit of getting used to; knowing you can take what you get from Madame straight to the bank. She says that its up to us to soften the edges of harsh physical reality for the

customers and in return they pad the fiscal edges for us with money and more, but we have to remember what's real when the shift is done for the evening or we end up paying for it in more than just dollars. She's a smart cookie, and if you stay here, she makes sure you get smarter too.

Her sister Miss Bertie, (aka BonBon Bertie, because of a certain predilection for reading novels on the couch while having at the chocs in the box) has now finished up her degree in accounting and keeps the books—not the novels, the money books. On the first Sunday afternoon of every month we all sit down around the big wooden table in the kitchen with a magnum of champagne and fresh squeezed orange juice (I love a good Mimosa!) and go over the numbers so that we all know where the money is flowing. That's another part of Rule# 1; Madame B. gives it right back with no bullshit (which I can say here, but not in front of the Gentlemen Callers. That's part of Rule #3, but I'm getting ahead of myself.) Miss Bertie runs the books tight, and every penny is accounted for, coming and going. First up is income, and whatever money comes in, she takes 75% right off the top to run things here. Until the meetings, most of us had no idea how expensive it is to run a home or a House. Most places take 50% of a girl's earnings and then charge room and board on top of that, charge for laundry, charge for the doctor and the lawyer and everything else, including charges for phone calls and cable tv if you want that and by the time its all added up, you can find yourself owing the House even after a good week. That's not how it is here. It may sound like we pay more, saying "bye-bye" to \$75 out of every hundred the minute it comes in, but there are no extra charges. We actually get to keep that \$25, every single time. You stay here, you get an account all in your own name at the local bank, and half your earnings go straight there at the end of every month and are turned into Certificates of Deposit each time you get to \$5000, the other half is cash on the barrel head and you can spend it however you want. Mandy was shocked when she found out "CD" meant more than just music! Madame Bette and Miss Bertie don't force the issue, but if you want you can buy in on the retirement investment fund too, and they will match the amount you put in. That's something you aren't going to find in most Houses, and unlike the Teamsters and lots of other big Corporations and businesses, nobody here is going to take that fund and run. We see the Bank Statements growing every month, and we're in it for the long haul—that's a trucker joke, but funnier to us than the Teamsters, I bet. We take care of ourselves, and each other, and nobody gets screwed unless they want to—and then they get paid.

We all know who's working hard, and who's hardly working, but nobody gets kicked out as long as they want to stay and continue to contribute. Even if you are sick like JuneyRae was for two months with pneumonia, or too pregnant for physical labor like LaWanda, you can do the phones or write scripts for the phones or SOMETHING! That's how JuneyRae started her first novel, writing scripts for the phone work. She's working on the second one now and only sees customers when she's bored or stuck on a scenario. There's a prize if you are Top Earner of the month and she won without even trying when her first royalties came through; she got a \$200 gift certificate to Victoria's Secret. That's the kind of practical item everybody here can enjoy, working or not. If you are at the bottom of the list, you have to help do the dishes for the next month, and nobody enjoys

that. We all tend to work a little harder the next month just to avoid the rubber glove detail.

Another thing that's different here, we don't have a TV. We've got Internet access though, and we all take classes online and here at the house too. I thought I hated math, but Miss Bertie showed me how its different when you're talking about your own money instead of trains that are rushing towards each other at 50 miles an hour. Now I'm taking a class in accounting as well as working on a degree in psychology. We keep busy enough there's no time for television—lap dances yes, lap tops yes, but no big boxed boob tube in the parlor. (Erin says “not since LaWanda left” and she's right too, though I was referring to television. Those tube tops were really stretched thin, much like our tempers around LaWanda, and she's not really missed that much now that she and Junior have gone elsewhere). On Tuesdays (a slow afternoon, usually) the sisters give classes in Class—deportment, manners, and anger management usually top the list, and those two hours are a required item on each of our “To-Do” list. That's part of Rule #2—Self Improvement. Chloe gives dance and yoga lessons, Marta gave us a cooking class one snowy week, and we're all enrolled as students in the local college, studying whatever we want. Teaching and learning go together, and we all have something to contribute. I gave a workshop in gardening last summer and everybody helped plant all sorts of flowers out front and in the back garden. Bobbi called it “whoreticulture” and I laughed too because I got the joke. I've learned LOTS of words since I came here. Instead of a weed filled rocky patch, we now have a gorgeous flagstone patio with Adirondack chairs and roses, jasmine and honeysuckle. It smells as nice as it looks, and in good weather we sometimes have dances there. No more rusty car parts and thistles for us!

As you can probably tell, Madame B.'s got different ideas on how to run things than most in this business. She owns the house outright; an old Victorian with good bones and a great coat of paint (much like her, she's been known to quip). After her late husband died, she was rattling around all by herself in a run down old house in a run down old neighborhood, and lonely for a little more excitement. Plus, she was wondering how to afford property taxes, a new roof, plumbing repairs (hers and the house's) and what to do about it all the debts her husband hadn't seen fit to take with him. First thing she did was to get her sisters Bertie and BonnieBelle to join her here, and create a partnership. This place is huge and was in need of a lot of tarding up as well as structural repairs, so after much talk and planning on their part, the Busy B's went to work. They pooled their resources, and their labor and with several months of spackling, painting, wallpapering, and getting down on their knees to lay the black and white marble tile floor in the parlor, things were looking very different.

That's when they started to take in boarders, and I was one of the first. I helped lay the floors, but had no intention of laying anything else at that time. That was before I found out all the particulars as to income potential, of course. I was here even before they split the attic up into three very nice bedrooms (one of which is mine for as long as I want it, and it looks out on the garden. I love it!) Now there are eight bedrooms here in the main house for us Ladies, and the B's all live in the converted carriage house. That's what we call the garage now that it's also been re-done, and it doesn't look anything like it used

to, either. I guess I don't look much like I used to, now that I've lost 30 pounds, gotten a great haircut, discovered my Inner Blonde and brought her out, and lost the hangdog look that came of having nothing and no one that mattered. We've all managed to pick up a good bit of skill at renovation, both on the grounds here and on ourselves.

BonnieBelle has a degree in marketing and creative writing; she put together the brochure and runs the website. She also runs the phone lines, and when one of us can't work the floor, we can still work the phones. "Talk is cheap, but also \$2.00 a minute" is BonnieBelle's motto. Madame Bette says it's the cheapest thing in the house, because WE are not cheap, not in price or value. She calls us her Shady Ladies, on account of the big old oak trees that line the street out front, and the pines surrounding the porch that goes all around the front of the house. She calls it "The Veranda", and I think that's a much prettier word than porch. We like to sit out there of a hot afternoon, always tastefully arrayed in something nice with makeup on and hair fixed up though; no curlers or grubby outfits out front, and no underwear without outerwear on top. That's Rule #3—Look and act like a lady, not a tramp. A lady can do what she likes in her own private room, but has to look cared for in the public view, and especially in the semi-private view! A lady doesn't call somebody an "asshole" just because they are one—she knows how to say it using words of higher quality. Madame Bette can get that point across with just one eyebrow and no words at all! Now, that's quality. Just as it is with the house itself, a good paint job and drapes of a good cut and beautiful fabrication can hide all sorts of things and make it all look better right away. And when feeling good and looking good go together, amazing things can happen. That's something I've learned and taken to heart here at Madame Bette's Boarding House, and something I'll keep with me always.