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“I can count on my fingers the number of times I had sex because I wanted to.” Tears that refused to fall saturated Lynda’s tawny eyes. She spoke about her pains sometimes as if they belonged to someone else.

Apollo sat on the rustic porch swing across from her. A tin bucket spotted with rust sat between them. Her pale fingers unshelled lima beans and dropped them in the bucket.

“All my life, since I was ten years old; I gave myself to men – daddy, brother, cousin.” She paused. “The reverend.”

Apollo took notes. He hesitated, not knowing if he wanted to include an ordained reverend's sins in his story. Then he questioned himself. *Would it be wrong to exclude the reverend part?* If this is what she said happened, it is the public’s right to know her story – right? She would not have said anything about a reverend if she did not want the public to know. He scratched out a word and then wrote *reverend*.

“What did this do to you? How did it affect your outlook on life?”

“I didn’t have much respect for myself.” Lynda dug her fingers into the hulls. Apollo imagined how pretty her hands were before life on a farm. “I didn’t expect others to respect me either. I had no human significance. I felt that way until I joined the order.”

“What changed?”

“I learned about an occultist named Dion Forte. She was powerful and not at all shy about her sexuality. I wanted to become her student – not in real life, but in an academic sense. I read everything she ever wrote. I learned to appreciate my sexuality. You see a woman should never be ashamed of her beauty. It should empower her.”

“How?” Apollo asked. He needed details.

Lynda sat straight and let her hands drop between her knees dangling over the bucket. “I’ve always had difficulty expressing it.” She sighed. “Here is the best I can do. In our Christian societies, a woman who exudes in sexuality – even unknowingly – is a bitch or a slut. At least that's the way she's understood. What happens when a thin waisted woman walks in public with a short skirt, heels, and nice cleavage? What if she goes to church like that? How much disrespect will come her way?” She paused.

Apollo wrote her example in his pad. When he turned his eyes to her, he thought to answer the question, but he didn't know what to say.

"Even by other women," she laughed and waved her hand. Apollo detected the disappointment and buried anger in her voice. "The fat women and those with no shapes, they're worse than the men. Oh, how they'll scream at the workplace about dress codes and professionalism. You ever hear a man complain about the dress code?"

Apollo hadn't worked many jobs. The Constitution was the first job he had that didn't involve salting fries. "Now that you mention it, no."

"Then you see my point." Lynda went back to the beans. "In the Order, we learn the true spirit of these protests - you know? We learn the nature of a dress code is rooted in disdain for God-given sexuality and power."

Apollo wrote. Lynda gave him an idea for another story. He relished the idea to follow her story with something about dress codes. *I can do something about how corporate America oppresses human expression with dress codes.* “That’s interesting,” he said more to his thoughts than to her.

"I thought so," she agreed. "Then we learn of the Holy Whore symbolism and the liberating power of it."

He looked up from the pad of paper. Something in his Christian heart trembled. *Holy Whore?* He did not want to write the words. *Was this a satanic reference to the Virgin?* He abbreviated.

Lynda read his expression and as if hearing his thoughts, she decided to explain. "*The Holy Whore* concept is not derogatory at all." A warm smile appeared briefly. Then it went away as if she remembered that she disliked everything about the order. "You are misled and psychologically damaged." She said to him. Her voice was firm with conviction. "When I say those words, your conformity to Christian ideology kicks in. Are you insulted?"

Apollo took a moment before answering. He didn't know what to make of her. She wasn't fully detached from the teachings although she pretended otherwise. The Order's influence on her was stronger than she knew.

"One of the first things I learned was the meaning of the word *zonah*." She waited for him to write it. "It is a Hebrew word meaning prostitute and prophetess. The link between prostitute and prophetess was important in the original rituals.

"The ancient ones understood that a woman comes to know and accept her sexuality through psychological and spiritual development. She expresses through rituals her connection of the body, mind, and soul. They used sex as a means to God and enlightenment."

"That's very profound," Apollo sighed.

"It made me understand that there was nothing wrong with me. My beauty, my tits, and ass were heavenly gifts – powerful tools given to me. I should use my whole self to expand universal consciousness. And that's when I stopped being ashamed. I stopped feeling guilty."

"It sounds liberating," Apollo watched her fingers go to work again. "It sounds like you converted to a religion. How did that change you socially?"

The spark in Lynda's eyes dulled. She struggled with something. In her hesitation, Apollo sensed her discomfort. She shrugged. "That's hard to answer. The truth is that I changed in many ways. Some ways I thought were good, but they weren't. In other ways, I became cynical and distrusting. Socially, I was isolated. I could only stand to be around members of the Order."

"Why distrust if you all believe the same?"

"In my chapter, the men outnumbered women three to one. When someone on a higher-level shows interest in you, it's flattering."

She reached for the glass of lemonade at her foot. "I made a bond with a man in the order. He was deeply into the occult." She hesitated and stared at him for a while as if she was uncertain to speak the next words. "Congressman Edwards was his roommate." She sipped from the glass.

"The last time I told this story, the reporter's eyes lit up. She said the public should know about him, but the article was never published."

"You don't have to worry about that," Apollo promised and began to write. "I don't have regulators."

"Regulation?" She jeered. "No one is without regulation."

"What role did Congressman Edwards play in this?"

“He was my boyfriend’s roommate; if boyfriend is even an appropriate word to use.” She sat down the glass. “He was deeper into the magik aspect than Roger.”

“Roger, your boyfriend?”

“Yes.” Lynda waited, watching Apollo write. “I didn’t call him Congressman, then. He was just Donald. He was into making potions.” Her head tilted back pulling memories from the air above her. “There was something he taught us to make. He mixed with cum and saliva. It was an ointment rubbed into the anus and on the male perineum. Then it was put on the outside of the body in the external correspondences of the chakras.”

Apollo wrote quickly. He resisted the urge to allow his skin to crawl over his back and shoulders. *This is some gross shit.* His stomach turned and he wanted to spit.

“I was not willing to take part, but I did.”

“Why?”

“I heard this little voice. Yes, I knew he wanted to fuck me. I knew they both wanted to, but I felt desirable. I felt that I affected them as much as they did me but in different ways. It was a power I had over them, but I did not know how to use it.”

Lynda sat back and embraced herself. Her hands moved over her naked arms to the shoulder and back again to the elbow. She did these three times, each time faster than before. “This is why I despise them.” Her voice became deeper and more aggressive. “That experience had a different meaning to me than the spiritual empowerment I expected. I was obligated.”

"So why did this anger you? it was consensual?"

She shook her head. "Are you listening? It was not consensual. It was obligatory. A true magician should respond to the various cues a person signals. He should know the difference between enthused and reluctant participation.”

Apollo saw the fear and agony in her eyes transform into disdain.

She leaned forward. “Donald had the responsibility to see my soul’s vulnerability and, in that ritual, he should have strengthened me. Instead, he cast his spell on us and they fucked me no different than any other man.”

Apollo stopped writing and simply stared at the letters in his pad. It was clear to him why the article was not published.

Congressman Edwards was a prestigious man – he was the whip. Some thought he would be the next president of the United States. Apollo took a deep breath. He tried to consider the repercussions of posting her testimony. This was, no doubt, a juicy story. There would certainly be a reaction to his readers and his follower count would increase. But what else? What bad things may happen? When he realized it, he noticed that she had not stopped speaking.

“I didn’t want to see it then, but one of the ex-members told me that I was a victim. I did not accept her assessment.” The tears returned but did not fall. She looked to the sky and recalled more horrors.

"A similar experience happened to me, even with different men. Sometimes there were as many as four men. With alcohol, sex potions, and deep mediations, they did things to me I can't even remember. I was victimized." She yelled.

Apollo nodded. “I’m sorry to make you relive that.”

Lynda shook her head. “I relive it often. The trouble with victims is that we seldom understand that our refusal to accept the fact that we are victims is, in itself, the effect of being one.” She leaned back and exhaled. “I had to accept that fact. When I did, I left the group.”

“Did you ever speak to someone? I mean is what you describe normal? In the Order, I mean.”

She nodded. “I spoke to the leaders, they spurned me. They told me that my grief is my punishment from the holy mother – the whore.

If I accept the teachings and allow myself to break away from the patriarchal colonization of my mind, I would successfully express my power to those men. The fact that they did not worship me like a goddess was evidence of my flaws not theirs. They said that the group represents the microcosm of the world. When I rise above the men in the group, I would do the same for the men in the world.”

Apollo was aghast. “That sounds like a major con job.” Compassionately he stared at her. “What would you say to a woman considering this group?”

She licked her lips and dropped her hands between her legs. The anger melted away and left a sullen, defeated shell.

“Would you recommend this group?” Apollo rephrased his question.

She waited for a while. Then she took the glass again, sipped and answered. “Maybe.”

Apollo thought that his mouth reached his chest. He tried to hold his composure. He wanted to yell at her; to call her an idiot, but he held his breath.

“Even with my bad experiences, I found benefit in the organization. There are some good things in it for women who go through male induced trauma, rape, and abuse. I do believe I was successful in moving past them and understanding why.”

Apollo couldn't believe his ears. He expected her to say *run from this group. Stay away.* But she spoke tenderly with sentiment. He couldn't understand. He doubted anyone would believe her story. He sat back and dropped his shoulders. He hoped his eyes reflected his empathy for her, but there was one more question. "Was your boyfriend Roger Cunningham?"