

She was shifty. She changed her name and appearance every time we met and reminded me of the new name with an unspoken frustration at my confusion. One time, it was Valerie. She was Valerie with a platinum blond bobbed wig and fuchsia colored lipstick. Valerie was part intellectual, part flirt, with a Russian accent, tight purple skirt and gold bracelets that jingled when she sipped wine. She left fuchsia lip prints on the glasses and on the cigarette butts she smashed into overflowing ashtrays.

The only consistent features her bitten down, ravaged, finger nails. And her eyes. Those eyes, even when she laughed or smiled, remained lifeless.

She was fantasy. She created the form; I created the purpose. She became what I didn't know I wanted until she showed up in a new mode to satisfy me.

The first time, she was Makela with long black hair pulled tight into a swaying ponytail, long taffeta skirt and sweater cut in a tantalizingly low V. The first time my stomach twitched with anxiety and my mind feared the consequences. She met my distress and upped the ante with a well placed phrase and an intently naughty movement.

"I'm lonely," I muttered as she brushed her lips against my cheek. I was disgusted by my confession and repulsed by my own desperation.

"All of you are," she whispered. I expected cruelty and judgment but got none. I later found out those cost extra.

I didn't have to tell her what I wanted. The first time my trembling fingers dialed that number to ask for company, I revealed everything that I desired. *I'm lonely...was it necessary to even say it?*

At first, I assumed that I was in control. I presumed that my money gave me some sort of authority to wield over her. But, from the beginning, she established, through insensitive action and tightly controlled indifference, her power over me. She wrote the rules; I was merely allowed to follow them...for a price.

I squeezed in time for her-between business meetings, late at night or early in the morning. Our "dates" were fevered, lustful moments that seemed to address and, at the same time, frustrate my primal urges and basic needs. She cajoled the fiend out of me, with graceful and experienced fingers and carefully rehearsed sensuality. She coaxed the beast to come out and play.

After awhile, I craved to undress not just her body, but her heart. I wanted to make her more than moan; I wanted her to sing my name with uncontrollable affection. I wanted her to lose self control as a result of my effect, my presence, my touch. We were destined to be unsatisfied together. I needed to possess her; she required an independence I could never give.

I held her one night with an intimacy she didn't need or request. I whispered possibilities into her reluctant ear: a receptionist opening at my accounting firm, a sign I'd seen for a waitress position at a local restaurant.

"Why do you assume I want to be saved?" she asked, untangling herself from my arms and pacing around the room, naked, searching for her cigarettes.

I looked with disdain at our surroundings, another anonymous hotel room, piles of disregarded clothing, and empty bottles of wine littering the orange shag

carpet. I felt my lungs polluted by second-hand smoke and smelt my breath tainted from too many violent kisses.

*Why did I want to save her when I couldn't even save myself?*

She found the cigarettes but threw them back on the floor. I remained motionless in the bed, feeling like a child who had broken the rules. I knew she didn't wish to be recognized; her entire existence was based on an image. She needed to dictate my perception. It was the only freedom she really had.

"Take this," she growled, returning to the bed and climbing on top of me. She began to move. I let go of my hope, but held on to lust.

As part of my fool's mission, I took her to see Madame Butterfly. She was reluctant: it was the only time that she seemed insecure. She asked me what to wear and advice on how to make herself presentable. She spent so much time standing out; she no longer knew how to blend in. She met me at the opera house, her hands nervously clasped around a beaded clutch purse, looking heavenly in a classy black dress. She didn't look at all tawdry or cheap, but I admit that I saw only what I wanted to.

She sat quietly during the entire performance, eyes rapt and wide, not even getting up to walk or have a smoke during the intermission. Her back was straight, her soul paying attention. I drove back to the hotel that night when the opera was over, the car filling with an unaccustomed silence.

"Take me home," she muttered, covering her mouth with her tortured fingertips.

"I don't know where your home is," I admitted. I wanted to feel excited by this change in her: this momentary glimpse of her humanity and the shattering of the wall she put up to protect herself. Instead, I felt only pity. Her face, in the dim light of the dashboard, looked vulnerable and I caught a glimpse of the innocent girl she had once been.

"Just drop me at Lillian's place then," she said. *Lillian's*. Yes, the exuberant madam, the grand mama to all her "girls". I wanted to despise that overly presumptuous and exploiting woman, but how could I? Lillian brought me Valerie, Makala and a million other guises.

Ten minutes later, I pulled up in front of Lillian's brownstone in the Nob Hill district of San Francisco. "I'm sorry about tonight. I'll make it up to you another time," she said, sounding like an appeasing child.

I wanted to grab her hand and ask her to trust me. I wanted to drive her home and hold her all night, listening while she explained why she always looked so sad. I wanted her to call me, "darling" and quit the next day.

Yes, I wanted to demand that she quit.

Instead, I did nothing. She slipped out of the car and ran inside the building, her heels clicking on the damp pavement. I imagine she cried that night, glided into someone's arms that she felt safe in and confessed her woes. I liked to think that she had someone, even if it wasn't me.

The images began to drive me crazy: the wandering johns with their disposable cash and insensitive attitudes. I imagined quick fists, bizarre fetishes, and her eyes, sad and lifeless, burned in my mind, suspended over one body

after another. She was used and spent every time I slept with her. I was afraid of catching diseases, but my biggest fear was of catching her apathy.

I didn't tell her about my fears, but I began to demand more of her when I got her. I could be cruel and demeaning; flashing my money and ordering her to do ridiculous things that I later regarded with a shameful regret. It was my revenge for the times I could not have her, the times she spent with other men and even women, ravaging them, enticing them, possessing them. I took her off the pedestal to save my own soul and deposited her on the ground.

Our ending was not one written in fairy tales told with a great tragic tone or a fable with a clever moral. I simply got caught. There were too many unexplainable cash withdrawals and mysterious credit card purchases. I was an accountant, yet I hid the emotional trail better than the monetary one. Maybe I wanted to be caught, knowing that I was settling into my own destruction, knowing that she would bring me nothing but ruin and heartache.

There's something in my wife's eyes now, after the hours of confessing and pleading. A reluctant dimness that was not there before; one that shows a new lack of trust and a deep betrayal. I explained that it was only sex, that is was only lust, that I only did it because I missed her touch so much.

*But, it was all lies and my wife knew it.*

In purpose and facade, we remained married but a cloud of disenchanting dust hung over us. The only thing I remained true in was my pledge to never be with Valerie or Makela or any of them again.

I never held her in my arms again, but I did see her once. Months after my wife found out, I was strolling down the street, peering into the store windows. I was lost in thought about spreadsheets and profit margins. I walked by a second-hand clothes store and spied her through the dirty glass, leaning up against the counter. I stopped, like a stone in the middle of the river, as the crowd impatiently flowed around me.

She wore thigh high boots, a lacy top and tacky garters peeked out from under a leather miniskirt. Her hair was frizzy and her makeup was smeared and overdone. She looked cheap. For the first time, she looked like a whore.

I watched as she slipped her arm around a guy with a baseball cap and toothpick sticking out of his mouth. He grabbed her butt and squeezed. She giggled and glanced out toward the street. Our eyes met. No flicker of recognition came over them, but I swear, for a brief moment, she seemed to be silently pleading with me.

*Can you save me now?, she asked.*

*No, I seemed to say back.*

I walked away, ashamed by my own foolishness and delusional need to paint a queen out of a slut.