



## Chapter 7: Consolata

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**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**CONSOLATA**

In the deepest part of the cellar Consolata woke to the exhausting disappointment of not having died the night before. Each morning, her hopes dashed, she lay on the cot repelled by her slug-like life which she managed to get through by sipping, sipping, sipping from velvet bottles with handsome names. Each night she sank into sleep determined it would be the final one.

Already in a space that looked like a coffin, already in love with the dark, long removed from appetites, craving only oblivion, she struggled to understand what was the delay. "What for?" she would ask and her voice was one among many that packed the cellar from rafter to stone floor. Several times a week she left the cellar but only at night or in the shadowy part of the day. Then she would stand outside in the garden, walk around a bit, look up at the sky to see the only light it had that she could bear. One of the women, Mavis



usually, would insist on joining her. Talking, talking, always talking. Or a couple others would come. Sipping from the velvet bottles made it possible to listen to them, even answer, sometimes. Other than Mavis, who had been there the longest, it was getting harder to distinguish among them. What she knew of them over the past years she had mostly forgotten and it seemed less and less important to remember any of it because the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and, <sup>what</sup> ~~as~~ Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift. The three d's that paved the road to perdition and the greatest of these was drift.

Over the years they had come. <sup>the</sup> the first during Mother's long illness; the second right after she died. Then two more. <sup>each</sup> each one asking permission to stay a few days but never leaving. They stayed on living like mice in a house no one, not even the tax collector, wanted with a woman in love with death. Consolata looked at them through the bronze or gray or blue of her various sunglasses and saw broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying. When she was sipping she could tolerate them, but more and more she wanted to break their necks. Anything to stop the bad food, the unintelligible music, the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims. But especially the

drift. The fact that they not only did nothing, except the obligatory, ~~but~~ they had no plans to do anything. Sister Roberta would have pulped their hands. Instead of plans they had wishes--foolish babygirl wishes. Mavis talked endlessly of crazy money-making ventures: beehives, something called "bed and breakfast"; a catering company; and an orphanage. One thought she had found a treasure chest of money or jewels or something and wanted help to cheat the others of its contents. Another was slicing her thighs, her arms, secretly. Making thin red slits in her skin with whatever came to hand: razor, safety pin, paring knife. Wishing to be the queen of scars. One other longed for cabaret life, a place where she could sing the pitiful little songs she wrote. Consolata encouraged these dreams, which seemed so silly to her, with padded, wine-soaked indulgence for they did not infuriate her as much as their whispers of love. One by one they would float down the stairs, carrying a kerosene lamp or a candle, like virgins entering a temple or a crypt, to sit on the floor and talk of love. As if they knew anything at all about it, she mused. They spoke of men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men waiting for them; of men who should have loved, would have loved, might have loved them except--except--except.



On her worst days, deep in the cellar as well as the maw of depression, she wanted to kill them all. Maybe that was what her own pointless slug life was being prolonged for. That and the cold serenity of God's wrath. To die without His forgiveness condemned her soul. But to die without Mother's dirtied it. She could have given it freely if Consolata had told her in time, confessed before the old woman's mind faded to singsong. On the last day of Mother's life Consolata had climbed into the bed behind her and, tossing pillows on the floor, raised up the feathery body and held it in her arms and between her legs. The small white head nestled between Consolata's breasts and the lady had entered death like a birthing, rocked and sung to by the woman she kidnapped as a child. Kidnapped three, actually; the easiest thing in the world in 1925. Sister Mary Magna, who was not a Superior then, refused to leave two children in the garbage they sat in on the street. She simply took them to the hospital, cleaned them in a sequence of baking soda, Glover's Mange, soap, alcohol, blue Ointment, soap, alcohol and carefully placed iodine. She dressed them and with the complicity of her sisters, took them with her to the dock. Who would question a nursing sister among five other nuns paying cut-rate passage for three urchins.<sup>?</sup> for

there were three now, Consolata being an afterthought because she was already <sup>9</sup>10 years old. It was called rescue for whatever <sup>f</sup>lie the exasperated, headstrong nun was dragging them to, it would be superior to what lay before them in the shit strewn paths of that city. When they arrived in Curacao Sister Mary Magna placed the small ones in an orphanage. But by then she had fallen in love with Consolata. The green eyes? the tea colored hair? maybe her docility? She took her along as a servant to the post to which the difficult nun was now assigned. An asylum/boarding school for Indian girls in some desolate part of the American west.

fx For 30 years Consolata worked to remain Mary Magna's pride, her singular accomplishment in a world of teaching, nurturing, tending in countries her countrymen and women could not pronounce. For 30 years Consolata slept in a panty, minded students her age and older, scrubbed tile, fed chickens, prayed, peeled, gardened and laundered. For 30 years she gave her heart, just as if she <sup>herself</sup> <sup>taken</sup> had ~~belong~~ to the Order, to God's son. He of the bleeding heart and bottomless love. He whose way was narrow but scented with the sweetness of thyme. Whose love was so great it dumbfounded wise men and the damned. God become human so we could know Him touch Him see Him in the



littlest ways. God become human so His suffering would mirror ours, that His death throes, His doubt, despair, His failure would speak for and absorb throughout earthtime what we were vulnerable to. Thirty years of devotion to the living God cracked like a robin's egg when she met the living man.

People were building houses and plowing land some fifteen miles south of Christ the King. In 1954 they had a feedstore, grocery store and, to Mary Magna's<sup>S</sup> delight, a pharmacy closer than the one in Demby. There she could purchase the bolts of antiseptic cotton for the girls' menstrual periods, the needles that kept them busy mending, embroidering, and the aluminum chloride with which she made deoderant.

On one of these trips, when Consolata accompanied Mary Magna in the school's banged up station wagon, instead of a dozen or so industrious people going quietly about the business of making a town, they saw horses galloping off into yards, down the road and people screaming with laughter. Small girls with red and purple flowers in their hair were jumping up and down. A boy holding on for dear life to a horse's neck was lifted off and declared winner. Young men and boys swung their hats, chased horses and wiped their laughing eyes.