



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, ^{what} ~~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. the first during Mother's long illness; the second right after she died. Then two more. ^{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 ^{Seducing} ~~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. ^{She made} 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 ^{silly} 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 ^{would} 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 ^{Levee} 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 ^{Rev.} 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, alchohol, blue Ointment, soap, alcoh^ol 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. [?] for

there were three now, Consolata being an afterthought because she was already ⁹10 years old. It was called rescue for whatever ^flie 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.

For 30 years Consolata worked to remain Mary Magna's pride, her singular accomplishment in a world of teaching, nurturing, tending, fx ~~in countries her countrymen and women could not pronounce.~~ For 30 years Consolata slept in a ^hpanty, 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 ^{herself} ^{taken} had ~~belong~~ to the Order^s, to God's son. He of the bleeding heart and bottomless love. He whose way was narrow but scented with the sweetness of thyme. Sweet 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^S 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.

As Consolata watched their sunlit ^{joy} ~~glee~~ a dim memory of her birthplace yawned. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. A memory of just such skin and just such men, dancing with women in the streets, dancing to music she had forgotten, music beating like a panicked heart, torsos still, hips making small circles above legs moving so rapidly it was fruitless to decipher how such movement was possible. These men were not dancing; they were laughing, running, calling to each other and to women doubled over in glee. But Consolata knew she knew them.

It was a while before Mary Magna could get the pharmacist's attention. Finally he walked them back to his house, where part of the front porch served as the pharmacy section, and let Mary Magna in. Consolata waited on the steps and saw him for the first time. He was leading a horse down the street toward the feed lot. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. His khaki shirt was soaked with sweat and at some point he removed his big hat to wipe perspiration from his forehead. Sha sha sha. Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile and the buried panic, undead, fluttered in her chest. She did not see him again for two terrified months. Months of fervent prayer and extra care taken with chores. Months of tension also because the school had been enjoined to close. The good, sweet Indian girls were long gone.

Snatched away by their mothers and brothers or graduated into a pious life . Now they had wards of the state: girls who clearly thought the sisters were crazy most of the time, sinister guards the rest of the time. Two had already run away; only four remained. Unless they could persuade the state to send them more wayward Indian girls, the orders were to prepare for closure, reassignment. The property, a benefactor's gift, untaxable and, so far, without any discoverable natural resources, was impossible to unburden. The state had wayward girls all right, since wayward could mean anything from truancy to stuttering in class, but preferred to place them in protestant schools where they could at least understand the ritual if not the clothes of the teachers. Catholic churches and schools in Oklahoma were as rare as hen's teeth. So with everybody distracted, Consolata's fumbling, dropping things, sudden rushes into the chapel to pray were nuisances but not signs of alarm distinguishable from the rest. She managed enough excuses so she would not have to return to Ruby. It didn't help. He came to her.

She was bent over weeding the vegetable garden with two restless students on a clear summer day when a male voice said,

"Excuse me, Miss."

All he wanted was some black peppers.

He was 29. She was 39. And she lost her mind. Completely.

Consolata was not a virgin. One of the reasons she so gratefully accepted Mary Magna's hand, stretching over the litter like a dove's ~~white~~ wing, was the dirty pokings her ^{NINTH} ~~tenth~~ year subjected her to. But never, after the white hand had enclosed her filthy paw, had she known any male or wanted to which must have been why being love-struck after 29 years of adult life took on an edible quality.

What did he say? Come with me? What they call you? How much for a half peck? Or did he just show up the next day for more of the hot black peppers. Did she walk toward him to get a better look? Or did he move toward her? In any case, with something like amazement, he'd said "Your eyes are like mint leaves." Had she answered "And yours are like the beginning of the world" aloud or were these words confined to her head. Did she really drop to her knees and encircle his leg or was that merely what she was wanting to do?

"I'll return your basket. But it may be late when I do. Is it all right if I disturb you?"

She didn't remember saying anything to that, but her face surely

told him what he needed to know because he was there and she was there and he took her hand in his. Not a peck basket in sight.

Once in his Chevrolet truck, easing down the two lane track, the narrow dirt road and then gaining speed on a wider one, they did not speak. He drove, it seemed, for the pleasure of the machine. The roar contained, hooded in steel. The sly way it simultaneously parted the near darkness and vaulted into darkness afar--beyond what could be anticipated. They drove for what Consolata believed were hours no words passing between them. The danger and its necessity ^forcrossed them, made them calm. She did not know or care where headed or what might happen when they arrived. Speeding ahead into the unforeseeable, sitting next to him who was darker than the darkness they split, Consolata felt as though she had just now been born, just now unstuck from the walls of a stone cold womb. Out here where wind was not a help or threat to sunflowers, nor the moon a signal for time, weather, for sowing or harvesting. But only for the two of them.

Finally he slowed and turned into a barely passable track where x grass scraped the ^efenders. In the middle of it he braked and would have taken her in his arms except she was already there.

One the way back they were speechless again. What had been uttered during their lovemaking leaned toward language, gestured its affiliation, but in fact was un-memorable, controllable or translatable. Before dawn they pulled away from each other as though, having been arrested, they were each facing prison sentences without parole. As she opened the passenger door and stepped down, he said, "Friday. Noon." Consolata stood there while he backed down the track. She had not seen him clearly not even once during the whole night. But Friday. Noon. They would do it do it do it in daylight. She hugged herself, sank to her knees and doubled over, her forehead acutally touching the ground. Rocking in the harness of pleasure that bound her.

She slipped into the kitchen and pretended to Sister Roberta that she had been in the hen house.

"Well, then? Where are the eggs?"

"Oh. I forgot the basket."

"Don't go soft headed on me please."

"No, sister."

"Everything is in such disarray."

"Yes, Sister."

"Well, move then."

"Yes, Sister. Excuse me Sister."

"Is something funny?"

"No, Sister. Not at all. But...."

"But?"

"I was wondering what day is today?"

"The twenty-second day after Trinity. Why?"

"I mean what day of the week."

"Tuesday, why?"

"Nothing, Sister."

"We need your wits, dear. Not your confusion."

"Yes, Sister."

Consolata snatched a basket and ran out the kitchen door.

Friday. Noon. The sun has hammered everybody back behind stone walls for relief. Everybody but Consolata and, she hopes, the living man. She has no choice but to bear the heat with only a straw hat to protect her from the anvil the sun takes her for. She is standing at the slight turn in the driveway, but in full view of the house. If Sister Roberta or Mary Magna call to her or ask for an explanation she will invent something--or nothing. This land is flat as

an iron, open as a ^{longue} tk. There is nowhere to hide outrageousness. She sees his truck before she hears it and when it arrives it passes her by. He does not turn his head ~~but~~, he signals. His finger lifts from the steering wheel and points further ahead. Consolata turns right and follows the sound of his tires and then their silence as they touch tarmac. He waits for her on the shoulder of the road.

Inside the truck they look at one another for a long time, seriously, carefully, and then they smile.

He drove to a burned out farmhouse that sat on a rise of fallow land. Negotiating blue stem and wolf grass, he parked behind the black teeth of a collapsing chimney. Hand in hand they fought shrub and bramble until they reached a shallow gully. Consolata spotted at once what he wanted her to see: two fig trees growing into each other. When they were able to speak full sentences he gazed at her and said,

"Don't ask me to explain. I can't."

"Nothing to explain."

"I'm trying to get on in my life. A lot of people depend on me."

"I know you married."

"I aim to stay so."

"I know."

"What else you know?"

"That I'm way older than you."

"Nobody's older than me."

Consolata laughed.

"Certainly not you," he said. "When's the last time?"

"Before you were born."

"Then you all mine."

"Oh yes."

"I've traveled. All over. I've never seen anything like you. How could anything be put together like you? Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?"

"I'm looking now."

No figs ever appeared on those trees during all the time they met there but they were grateful for the shade of those dusty leaves and the protection of the agonized trunks. The blankets he brought they lay on as much as possible. Later each saw the nicks and bruises the dry creek caused.

Consolata was questioned. She refused to answer; diverted the inquiries into a plaintive "what's going to happen to me when all this

is closed? Nobody has said what's going to happen to me."

"Don't be ridiculous. You know we'll take care of you. Always."

Consolata pouted, pretending to be wild with worry and therefore unreliable. The more assurance she got the more she insisted upon wandering off, to "be by myself," she said. An urge which struck her mostly on Fridays. Around noon.

When Mary Magna left on business in September only Sister Roberta, Sister Mary Elisabeth and three, now, feckless students had to pack, clean and maintain prayer. Two of the students, Clarissa and Penny, began to smile when they saw Consolata. They were fourteen, small boned girls with knowing eyes that could go suddenly blank. They lived to get out of that place, and were in fairly good spirits now that the end was coming. Now they regarded Consolata as a confederate rather than one of the enemy out to ruin their lives. They covered for her; did the egg gathering that was Consolata's responsibility. The weeding and washing up too. Sometimes they watched from the school room windows, heads touching, eyes aglow, as the woman old enough to be their mother stood in all weather waiting for the Chevrolet.

"Does anyone know?" Consolata ran her thumbnail around the

living man's nipple.

"Sure," he said.

"Your wife?"

"No."

"You told somebody?"

"No."

"Someone saw us?"

"No."

"Then how could anybody know?"

"He's my twin."

Consolata sat up. "There are two of you?"

"No. There's just one of me."