

The small, fat man exhaled, his wide stomach straining against the stained white shirt he was wearing. His hand trailed slowly across his scalp, fingers smoothing the wisp of wiry hair which stretched lazily across his head. He raised the crystal glass to his fleshy, dry, cracked lips. They smacked contentedly as the amber liquid slid down his throat. He sighed. A happy sigh. An ice cube rolled around his mouth and the water dribbled down the fleshy lips and onto his pock-marked chin. It wobbled as he wiped it dry with the sleeve of his jacket.

Placing the glass on the table he focused his gaze on the corner of the room. He shook his head in dismay, his eyes widening as they fell upon the lifeless body of the young woman, as if he was seeing her for the first time, which he was not. How had it come to this? He mumbled to himself, the softness of the words echoing in the room, sounding to him like someone shouting in a cave. He wanted to scream. He wanted to laugh. He wanted to make love to her again. He did not understand why he wanted to do any of those things and knew it should trouble him, but the fact was it did not.

It had all begun so innocently. He had felt gay and carefree, the excitement of the long night stretching in front of him where anything was possible. A night at Coco's, the nightclub where he spent most of his evenings. A pulsating vibrant venue in downtown Nantes where the music was always loud and the young women beautiful and available. Despite the fact he was barely a quarter of a century old, he already felt like an old man. His nights at Coco's made him feel young and alive. Coco's was a place where no self-respecting citizen went, or rather, he thought with a grotesque smile, a place where a citizen who did not want to be self-respecting for the night would go.

Coco's, despite its reputation, was, for him at least, a place where he could be himself. His true self. Where his worth was calculated by what he had in his wallet, not his appearance, nor his position in life. For a man such as him, it had been a revelation. He grew up with nothing and had only recently come to bask in the glory of greatness, but he always felt he was simply play acting and that he could lose it all as quickly as he had gained it. It was always there, the doubtful, nagging voice, the devil perched on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, telling him he was a fake, a phoney. A fat, blubbering failure. He also knew if it was not his own devil informing him of his shortcomings it would be someone else. There was always somebody ready to drag him down and make sure he understood what he had could be taken away at any moment.

Something changed when he discovered Coco's. It felt to him like a door being thrown open, illuminating his true soul, blinding the darkness which lived within him with a light stifled for too long. He was not sure what happened exactly, other than with Coco's help he had received a glimpse of the secret self which had been lurking, hiding, waiting. It should have troubled him. It did not. On the contrary, it intoxicated him. Being at Coco's ignited a fire which until then was only a flicker. He could feel the fire burning inside him, trying to push its way out. It was getting bigger by the day and he could feel its warmth spreading through his entire body. Some days it felt like ivy wrapping itself around a tree, others it filled him with an intoxication he did not know what to do with. But all the time the devil on his shoulder got louder, more confident. If the man worried about anything it was that he felt his own inner voice was becoming quieter and quieter, as if subdued by its dominant twin.

He glanced again at the young woman. Her hair had fallen across her face, fanning across her cheeks in an almost seductive fashion. Some of her hair had matted around the congealed blood on her left eye. The truth was he did not fully comprehend how it had even happened, other than he had allowed the fire within him to escape. He thought he had it under control, believing he was in charge of it and could use it to let the flames appear when he needed to boost his confidence, to inflate his ego. To impress a girl. Normally it worked. That night it had not.

He was reminded again of how it all began so innocently. It was, in fact, just a normal night, like a hundred he had spent before. He had arrived at the club at around ten o'clock as was his normal routine, the time when darkness finally won over the warm summer evening, descending on it like a heavy curtain.

While at work he found himself spending more and more of his day staring out the window, desperate for the darkness to appear so he could leave his desk, push aside the pile of messy papers and the inane chattering in his ear from the plebeians who always wanted something from him. He found it harder each day to feign acceptance and compliance, though he knew he had to find a way to do it if he wanted to continue living his life the way he was. He had tasted the forbidden fruit, though, and knew he could not go back to being the man he had been before. He did not want to.

In a way, part of him knew the ease with which he found himself able to compartmentalise his life should cause him alarm. The light and the dark. The day and the night. It was only at Coco's he knew he could let the darkness envelop him and fill him with the euphoria which seemed to be coursing through his veins like lifeblood. He closed his eyes and sucked the air through his nose. He could still smell her. The scent of her skin, washed and clean, not masked with the perfume it had been when he first took her off the dance-floor. He was still not sure why he chose her, this young woman in particular.

The truth was it was not as if she was even his type. She was much older than the girls he preferred, and she had been much brasher, bristling with a confidence he found distasteful. He liked his girls demure and grateful, subservient. They had to show gratitude and be in awe of him. That was more important than anything else, and he craved it. It was the best part of the game, even more than the actual physical act. Had he taken her just because she was new to Coco's and he wanted her before she could be soiled by someone else? Or was it because the knowledge of what he would do to her would help him through the difficult, tiresome times when he had to deal with her father? The thought amused him. He would smile knowingly while dealing with her father, a difficult man he disliked immensely, all the time his inner devil screaming out, "If only you knew what I've done to your daughter!"

Their time together had begun so well, filled with soft, sweet kisses, her hair still damp from the shower he instructed her to take. Her body naked apart from her underwear and the gold cross which hung around her neck, nestling between her small, pert breasts. No doubt she had been instructed by Sergio Milatanzi, Coco's owner, as to what she was required to do with the men who approached her at the club. There was, after all, a strict set of guidelines. A code of conduct indicating what could and could not be done with customers. They all understood the rules. They were there to ensure they could continue to enjoy their time without fear, without interference. Without the police getting involved. The men paid handsomely for it and the women were compensated. For men like him, it was a perfect situation.

That was why it had come as such a surprise to him when she recoiled the first time he struck her. He liked his girls to struggle a little, but her reaction had puzzled him. It was almost as if she felt it was beneath her. Had Sergio not explained her role to her sufficiently? It confused him, sure he had not even hit her very hard. He had been much more forceful with the other girls. He slapped her face just enough to see the splash of red against her pale skin. It had excited him, so he did it again, this time on her inner thigh. She had lifted her head sharply, the sparkle of the game leaving her eyes, replaced with a simple warning. "I'm not the sort of girl you can do that sort of thing to." She reminded him of her father and he had to admit that her defiance, whilst irritating, only further fed the fire spreading down to his groin. Perhaps this was part of the game after all? She must have taken Sergio's instructions and added to them in an attempt to prolong and intensify his experience, his enjoyment. He was, after all, paying a great deal for the pleasure of her. Therefore, they would do it his way, not hers, despite what she thought.

It all happened so quickly he had no chance to process it, probably due in some part to the fine Scotch he had consumed. All he meant to do was pull her head back sharply by her hair so he would be able to kiss and bite her neck, but she resisted. Something changed in him then and he had grown weary of her resistance, his ardour passing as if he had fallen into an ice cold lake. He meant just to slap her face lightly a second time, but had done so with more strength than he intended, causing her to spin around and fall backwards, her head smashing against the side of the marble table, her blood spurting across the white sheepskin rug.

A confused cry escaped her throat as the glass from the table shattered around her head. She came to a stop on the floor with a thud, her body twitching for the ten seconds or so it took for her brain and her heart to stop their interaction.

He had stood watching, transfixed as if watching a movie. He told himself he should do something to help but he was stuck, his feet like dead weights against the rug. It was all he could do to lift them to step away from the seeping blood. When she finally stopped moving he knew there was only one thing he could do, that he was not capable of dealing with it alone. He knew he would have to ask for help. To ask for help from the same people he always asked for help from, even though when he did, a little piece of his pride died each time.

He could see their faces already, a mixture of pity and anger. But he would ask them, the only people who could possibly understand the situation and know it was in all of their best interests for the woman to go away quietly. He may not be as powerful or as rich as them, but he knew them, their secrets, their neuroses, their own hidden darkness. He knew the reason they helped him was more to do with that and he did not care. Between friends, shared knowledge and secrets were more important than anything else. His friends would help because they had to.

His eyes trailed lazily down the young woman's body. She was still wearing the plain, simple white bra and panties he had instructed her to wear. He had wanted her to look young, not trashy. He stopped suddenly, taking in a sharp intake of breath. He could not believe what he was seeing. It was almost like a snail's journey, a trail of blood which had spread down her abdomen, onto the white panties and down onto her smooth left thigh.

He gasped, unsure why the blood suddenly began pounding in his ears, like a drum. He felt drunk. High. An insane amount of emotions crashed against his brain all at the same time. He could not understand what it was about the blood which ignited a fire in him. He studied her intently. It was all he could do to stop himself from rushing toward her, to lick the blood off her. Something told him he would savour each drop like a precious nectar. He glanced around the room, a smile appearing on his fleshy face. He was, after all, alone. Who would know? He licked his lips, rose to his feet and waddled slowly towards the young woman, her eyes already clouding like milk.

'She looks like a child,' he purred to himself. 'Like a sweet, innocent child.' His tongue darted out of his mouth and the fire ignited in his eyes. He did not know why or how, but it felt as if a door had opened in a new part of his brain, one he had not seen before. He closed his eyes and stepped forward into the room in his head and was filled with a joy he had never known before. Something told him he would never leave it again. The lock had been turned and the key lost and the fact was, he had no interest in looking for it.

