

The man was smoking too much. For many years he had his addiction under relative control, but the last two months he felt like he was doing double of what he used to smoke. He started feeling less powerful, slower in a way. In short he felt like a smoked ham most of the time.

He didn't know how he got there, but when he started noticing his increase, he wasn't happy. He felt a bit scared. Is this how life was going to be? How was he going to overcome this? He saw no way out.

He prayed to the Lord to help him, but nothing happened, it seemed. It became a burden to him. But, as addictions go, he didn't seem to find the strength inside to cut down, or stop completely. He was afraid to tell the people around him, because of their naturally judgmental nature. He was at a loss.

Then, one day, he was waiting at a traffic light. The cars were zooming by, and he was, as always, holding a cigarette in his hand. As he was taking the occasional puff, something drew his attention to the left of where he was standing.

Unnoticed, a man had taken position besides him. He appeared to be also waiting to cross. He wore simple jeans clothes, had a brown beard and long brown hair. A medium size, lean man he was.

The man observed how his unexpected companion took a cigarette, lighted it, and started smoking. Now he seemed to notice the man also, and gave him a big, friendly smile. The smile was both surprising and confusing, it felt really sincere. Pure in a way.

At that very moment the man noticed that the light had changed to the "walk" sign, and automatically he started walking, crossing the road. When he felt a sudden inclination to look back, the lean bearded man was nowhere to be seen anymore.

And then he noticed... the change. He felt strong. Young. Vibrant and alive. He didn't feel the need to smoke anymore. The man felt happy, and went about his pressing business with a renewed vigor. He could smile again, and his worries had left him.

It was not that he had stopped smoking, he noticed later. But his consumption of tobacco had returned to the normal, lighter level that it had been at all these years. He felt as new, and lived life with a spring in his step again.

Only after a few days he started thinking. What had happened to him? What had that man to do with his change? How did the improvement happen? Could it be that that man... was...?

He would never forget that moment, ever again in his life.

She felt cold. Even when the flames were leaking around her, hungrily eating away at all they touched, she didn't feel a thing. Only the cold.

She wondered if she was going to become a star in the sky, amongst the many twinkles she saw, when she raised her head. Oh, she had raised her head so many times to the heavens, to worship, and to draw strength from the moon, that wonderful tide changer, source of power.

She lived a happy life. Deep in the woods, alone with the little furry creatures and the bugs, that liked to come and look, when she was chanting her incantations in the dark, before the mighty oak. And that came to beg, when she was brewing a fat stew in her pot, and the fumes were spreading in the surroundings.

The snake had been right. He had told her, when he appeared to her in a vision, that she wouldn't exist in this form for long anymore. That she would undergo a drastic, painful change. But, the serpent had also explained that the change was necessary for her to ascend into the next realm of existence, as a spiritual being. And now, the change was here.

She had been afraid when the soldiers caught her. She was just collecting mushrooms, when they came and rudely snatched her away from her beloved forest. They had their way with her, more than once. With her vivid imagination running wild, she even enjoyed it at times, picturing wild, beautiful stallion unicorns mounting her, to produce magical offspring.

She didn't even remember all the things the man in the long dress had spoken to her. All she recalled now, was his heavily wrinkled face with the scruffy beard protruding from it. And his voice. That high-pitched, shrieking voice. It sounded like he found himself a very important person, but he was only ugly to her. Very ugly.

She wondered why she didn't feel pain. It was all like a dream. Even her hands, tied tightly to the pole behind her, seemed to be free of any discomfort, and she didn't perceive the bondage anymore.

In her mind's eye, all kinds of half-beasts and mythical creatures started dancing around her in a circle, on the rumble of an intrinsic, rhythmical pounding of some sort of wooden drums. Faster and faster they went, as the drums speeded up. Ecstasy began to take a hold on her, as if she was being driven towards a chaotic and all-consuming climax.

And then, cool and embracing, there it was...

The Dark.

Her eyebrows were sweating. Luckily the sweat got caught in her bandana, sporting the West Street Locos gang colors. As she felt the wet spot on her forehead, she recalled how she received this rag when she became a member for the first time. She was so sore that day! She had been beaten good.

The gang didn't consider if you were weak or strong, man or woman. You gotta hold your own, no matter what. Or you'd better just die that same day. There was no place for weaklings in the gang, since you were going to represent the colors and the name. By the name we stand, or we die. Colors for life!

What the hell is taking that José so long? He has been in there for more than fifteen minutes. If he was not coming out soon, she had to go in after him, guns blazing. The Glock felt cold in her hand. It reassured her. This is power. I kill for fun! She remembered all the gangster movies she watched with her brothers when she grew up. It seemed easy back then.

It was not that easy when she popped her first cap. She had been puking for about an hour. Not that she gave a shit about that nigga. That fool deserved it! It earned her her teardrop. They put it on the next day, while they were all high on that chronic, celebrating her losing her virginity.

José was in there, making a deal to buy two kilos of smack from that nigga Get Go. Bad ass mofo. He had to be, or the Locos would put him out of business. They could use some free dope. Who couldn't? But, there ain't no messing with Get Go. He would get medieval on a perpetrators ass. Didn't have a problem with that. Not at all!

She took a small bottle of tequila out of one of her wide pockets, and took a sip. The warmth penetrated all through her upper body, as the fluid entered her abdomen. Good shit! She burped, and then again. The car was cooling down, with the engine off for so long. Luckily the nights in LA were never cold.

And then, suddenly, there were shots, searing through the silence. What the hell? She could hear shots from different kinds of guns, even an AK was fired. And then there was silence. Damn! She took out her Glock, and her .22 in her other hand, and carefully made her way to the entrance of the building. She went inside. Damn! What she saw there...

~~~~~

The bellboy was holding the door open, as the beautiful lady approached the doorway. It was a cold evening in the Big Apple. "Good evening, madam." As always the lady didn't say a word. Always dressed in the finest apparel, she was immaculate to him, except for that little scar under her eye. He imagined how that lady must have been brought up. She had to come from the finest of homes, raised in a private school, graduated from Harvard or Yale, accustomed to vast amounts of money at her disposal. This is how he always fantasized about the guests. Usually he

was quite accurate in his descriptions. But this time... He didn't know how far he was from the truth. Luckily for him.