

4.

The Voice

It was over in less than ninety seconds.

A minute later, Robert was snoring beside her. Estelle pulled her dress out from amidst their entanglement and spread its warmth over her. She scooted herself over to the crooked, broken threshold of their little shack in the woods and stared up into the starry sky. Her body was still buzzing from all the...*whatever it was*. She wrapped her dress more tightly around her shoulders and breathed out a shuddering sigh.

I did it.

It's done.

He loves me, he loves me, he....does...

Estelle felt pummeled, not passionate; disoriented rather than fulfilled, lost within a gut-wrenching hollowness that left her unsure of what to think or do next.

“So...do you feel like a *real* woman?” she heard a soft, silken voice giggle.

She jumped, and whipped around fiercely to look at Robert, who was still sleeping. Her heart began thumping as her breath grew shallow; she felt suddenly dizzy, as if poised above an infinitely deep crevice.

“Well...do you?” the voice asked mockingly. “Did that *special* act create that *special* womanly feeling inside?”

Estelle spun back around. She peered outside the shack and saw nothing. She jumped into her dress and wrapped her shawl protectively around herself, then grabbed the flashlight and stumbled out of the shack over to the nearest tree, crouched, and beamed the light across the forest while she held her breath.

“Is there someone here?” she whispered, terrified.

“Of *course* there's someone here! Who do you think runs this joint?” the voice replied.

Estelle swung the flashlight in the opposite direction. “Joint?” she breathed.

“Yes, *joint*...not the one you smoke...” the voice giggled, “...the one that is even now expanding within you!”

“*Within* me?! What?!” her voice grew louder as she slashed the light through the woods again. “Who are you?! *Where* are you?!”

“Dear girl, I am not ‘out where’. I am *in here*. I am *within* you.”

Estelle felt her head begin to swim. “You...*whatever*...*please*...I – I...you cannot be *within* me...you're too *loud* and...and...” And too *obnoxious*, she thought crazily.

“Oh, I *do* like your chutzpah! How it so quickly rises to the occasion! Except...not so much with dear Robert, I see...”

“*Where* are you?!” Estelle demanded again, feeling herself grow hot and irritated.

Maybe I should wake up Robert.

She flashed her eyes back toward the shack; he slept, dead to the world.

“I told you, dear girl. I am *inside* of you.” The voice said reproachfully. “Oh, go ahead and look, if you must. Look for me everywhere. Look for me under a rock...or in Bobby's loud nose. Look for me inside the starlight, the moonlight, or in a lover's sight. I am no *where* to be found dear girl-who-wants-to-be-a-woman! Didn't you get the memo? The only place to *find* me is...*within*.”

“What on...how do you know what I...what I want? Who the hell do you think...who...*who are you?*” Estelle shook her head and bobbed her flashlight back around the quietly whispering trees. *I must be losing it. I have to pray.*

She crouched to her knees and cupped the flashlight between her trembling hands; its beam shot straight up into heaven.

“Dear Father God, please take this...this *voice* away from me!”

“Oh...good old *Father God*...He’s a dear pal...”

“What!” Estelle’s eyes burst open like popped corn.

“Oh yes...FG and I go way back. What if I told you...*He* sent me?”

Estelle stood up, her skin rippling with goose bumps, and turned off the flashlight. The trees fell silent. She searched the starry sky, as if to see her Dear Father God looking down upon her.

“Are you an angel?” she whispered, slowly and reverently.

“Well...you might call me that, but my friends call me, Puddy. You know, like *pudding*. But my nomen plenus is, Puddy Emufte´, at your service.”

Estelle drew a deep breath. “Am I in trouble?” she blurted, her mind racing back across those ninety seconds with Robert.

“HA HA HAAA HEEEE HEEE HOOO HOOOO...” Puddy laughed long and hard. “Oh my goodness, Dear One, the last thing you are is *in trouble*. No, no, you’re just, shall we say... a bit too *external*.”

“*External?* What does that mean?!” Estelle said, feeling a bit feistier now that she wasn’t *in trouble*. “Let me get this straight...you’re a...a quazi-angel...who can’t be seen-”

“I *said* I could be seen. On the inside!”

“On the INSIDE...how *in the world* can you see ANYTHING on the inside?!”

“Oh, trust me, dear girl-to-be-woman, a whole *universe* awaits your sight on the inside. I, Puddy, am simply your Galactic Guide for your mission.”

“My mission?”

“Oh yes, the grandest mission indeed...the one for which you’ve prayed for so long now...”

“But, I prayed to feel like a *real* woman!” she cried, a sudden sadness roiling up within her throat.

The conversation paused, as if in silent expectation. Estelle stood still, feeling her eyes became warm and wet and drippy. Until now, her entire night had seemed so...so *un-special*. She swiped her hand across her cheek, feeling tears etch her defeat across her face, knowing with a certainty sworn from the soul that she felt nothing like a *real* woman. She glanced at Robert’s dark form still snoring away inside the little shack, and swallowed back the mild revulsion constricting her throat. She looked away, then stretched her widening eyes toward the twinkling, beckoning sky. *Maybe Father God is answering my prayer...*

Estelle turned back toward the voice, directionless though it was, and wiped her mascara-smudged eyes again.

“Okay...” she sniffled, “...whatever this is...a mission...or what...I am ready for it.” She sighed heavily, then spoke up in a firmer voice: “I am ready to do whatever it takes to *feel* like a *real* woman.”