

SWEET PAINTED LADY

Written by

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The year is 1919

The winter following the end of World War One

OVER BLACK.

Silence. The kind that only exists in one place.

INT. ATTIC - NIGHT

A match ignites with a SNAP. The flame drifts through the darkness and lands on a candle. The wick catches.

The candle starts to glow, illuminating the face of a LITTLE GIRL (11).

She shakes out the match and leans with her back against the wall. After a beat, she closes her eyes and bows her head. The girl whispers a desperate prayer. Her eyes pop open.

The little girl digs around on the ground. In one quick motion, she rises. She is holding a SHOTGUN.

Suddenly, a gust of air extinguishes the candle.

EXT. CATHOLIC CHURCH - DAY

Snowflakes trickle down from an overcast sky. Covered in snow, the church belfry stands watch above a sleepy town.

INT. BORDELLO - NIGHT

CLOSE ON

A woman's finger, her wedding ring.

CATHERINE (21) sits at a desk below a mirror, playing softly with her simple wedding ring. With a sigh, she twists it from her finger.

She unlatches a small chest on her desk and sets the ring inside, unable to look at it any longer.

Catherine pulls a stack of banknotes from the chest and hurriedly counts through. Satisfied, she drops the stack back in the chest and closes the lid...

SMASH CUT TO:

TITLE: SWEET PAINTED LADY

SERIES OF SHOTS

Quick DETAIL SHOTS of Catherine getting ready for the night.

- She applies rouge to her lips and rubs them together.
- Colors her pale cheeks with liquid blush.
- Smooths her thigh with a nude cotton stocking.
- Pins up her curly hair in a way that accentuates her neck.
- And slips into a negligee dress.

INT. BORDELLO - NIGHT

In the mirror, Catherine puts the finishing touches on her appearance and straightens in her chair. She takes a deep breath and smiles. Or at least tries to.

Catherine's smile fades. She tries again with earnest, holding the forced expression until her face twitches.

Suddenly, a KNOCK at the door.

Catherine jolts. She quickly adjusts her cleavage, pops her lips, and stands.

CATHERINE

Coming!

INT. BORDELLO - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Catherine slides the bolt and opens the door.

WALTER (33) meets her gaze. He stands in the hallway, wearing a black overcoat and derby. His foot taps impatiently on the floor.

CATHERINE

(smiles)

Evening.

WALTER

Good evening.

Catherine steps from the doorway and gestures for him to enter.

CATHERINE

Please, come in.

Walter removes his hat, knocks the snow from his shoes, and enters. Catherine shuts the door behind him.

INT. BORDELLO - NIGHT

Walter strides over to the window and places his hat on the table.

Catherine steps forward and extends her hand.

CATHERINE
I'm Catherine.

WALTER
Walter.

They shake...

CATHERINE
Can I get you something to drink?
It might not be a pleasure we have
much longer.

WALTER
No. Thank you.

Catherine pauses. She studies Walter's features, trying to place him.

CATHERINE
Have you come to me before?

WALTER
(snorts)
No.

CATHERINE
Perhaps I saw you with one of the
other girls?

WALTER
No. I'm sure.

Catherine smiles. She sidles up to Walter.

CATHERINE
Funny. You must just have one of
those faces. A lovely one at that.

Catherine softly caresses Walter's cheek, then kisses him.

The kiss becomes deeper... She begins to unbutton his coat, but he stops her.

WALTER
I would prefer...

Catherine looks up at Walter. He motions to his clothes. She removes her hands.

CATHERINE

Oh.

She backs away.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Of course. I can just... I can change over there.

She points to a folding room divider.

WALTER

Thank you.

Catherine hesitates, thrown by his request. Then she smiles, walks over to the divider, and steps behind it.

INT. BORDELLO - BEHIND DIVIDER - CONTINUOUS

Amused, Catherine snickers. *She really has heard it all.* She slips her dress from her shoulders.

WALTER (O.S.)

I trust your evening has been agreeable.

CATHERINE

Yes. Quite.

Catherine wiggles out of her undergarments, revealing bruises up and down her legs.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

And you?

WALTER (O.S.)

It's been fine.

INT. BORDELLO - CONTINUOUS

Catherine steps out from behind the divider, naked.

Walter stands in the middle of the room in nothing but his underwear. He swallows.

She smiles.

MOMENTS LATER

Catherine lies on top of the sheets, listening as Walter prepares.

He slips out of his underwear, climbs onto the bed, and carefully mounts her...

Catherine gets comfortable and smiles.

A long beat. Walter struggles...

WALTER

Sorry. I can't seem to--

CATHERINE

Here.

Catherine rises and guides Walter into position.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

You just have to get a bit lower...

There.

WALTER

Oh.

She settles back on the mattress.

SERIES OF SHOTS

CLOSE-UPS, not of the act itself but of their reactions to it.

-- Catherine focuses on the cracks in the ceiling.

-- The muscles in Walter's back contract.

-- Catherine wraps her fingers in the sheets. She notices the cross on Walter's necklace swinging back and forth...

Then, a whimper, full of anguish.

Catherine looks up at Walter, and the duo lock eyes...

He's crying.

INT. BORDELLO - CONTINUOUS

Walter dismounts Catherine before he can finish.

WALTER

I'm sorry.

Embarrassed, he covers himself and backs away.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I can't. I'm sorry.

Walter stumbles from the bed and begins to gather his clothes, distressed.

Catherine is speechless. *How can she get him to stay? More importantly, how can she get paid?*

CATHERINE

I could be on top?

Walter pulls up his underwear and begins to dress.

WALTER

No.

CATHERINE

We can try something else if you want.

WALTER

No. I can't do this.

Catherine sits up and pleads with him.

CATHERINE

Please. You don't understand.

WALTER

No. You don't understand.

Walter turns... He's buttoning a Catholic cassock and white clerical collar.

Catherine stares... She keeps any reaction below the surface. Showing her true feelings would only complicate things.

Walter shakes his head and snatches his shoes from the floor.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I should leave.

He marches to the door and grabs the knob...

CATHERINE

Stop! Please.

Walter slows...

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

(beat)

My mother used to take me to church every Sunday when I was a little girl. Not that she was particularly religious.

Catherine chuckles.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

My mother never found joy in the service or homilies. Our attendance was simply a chore to punch our tickets. But I always loved it there. There was something about that stuffy sanctuary.

Walter's hand slips from the knob. He turns to Catherine. She's sitting on the bed with her arms wrapped around her knees.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

It was almost like I could feel a leak from a world just beyond my reach. This heavenly overflow that ran through the aisles and under the pews. I imagine you had a similar experience. A factor in your decision to dedicate your life to the church.

Walter bites the inside of his cheek and shrugs.

WALTER

Maybe. In the beginning.

CATHERINE

What happened to that feeling?

WALTER

(sighs)

I suppose... my leak was plugged.

Catherine begins to sympathize with him. She collects herself.

CATHERINE

Do you smoke?

Walter looks up at her.

Catherine slips out from under the sheets and walks to her desk. She drags open a drawer and begins to dig around inside.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
So, the question is, does it ever
come back?

WALTER
Does what comes back?

Catherine retrieves a smoking pipe and a bag of tobacco.

CATHERINE
That feeling...

Walter makes a face.

WALTER
Why do I get the sense you are
trying to remedy me?

Catherine shrugs.

CATHERINE
You paid for a half hour, did you
not?

She SLAMS the drawer and takes a seat at the desk.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
The truth is that feeling only
exists in certain places at certain
times, and even then, only for
brief moments.

Then, she grabs a matchbook.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
The rest of the time, you just have
to have faith that it's working
from a distance.

SNAP!

Catherine lights the pipe and blows into the embers.

WALTER
(scoffs)
Oh. Is that what you do?

Catherine inhales. She exhales from the side of her mouth and
smiles playfully.

Walter is serious. He drops his clothes, walks to the
mattress, and sits facing Catherine.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Well, have you considered that maybe it's just a feeling?

CATHERINE

With no substance?

Catherine takes a drag from the pipe...

WALTER

Yes. I've come to believe that just because a feeling is comfortable doesn't mean it's always right or infallible.

A beat... Catherine offers Walter the pipe. He accepts and puts it to his lips.

CATHERINE

Is that why you're here?
(off his look)
For comfort?

Walter exhales smoke through his nose. He shakes his head and returns the pipe.

WALTER

No. I came here to get it over with.

CATHERINE

(chuckles)
Sex?

WALTER

You make it sound so simple. I've lost my faith. Why uphold its standards any longer? Why keep myself from something my body so desperately wants? It felt like time to confirm that decision with action.

CATHERINE

But you didn't finish?

Walter quiets... Catherine dumps the pipe in an ashtray on her desk, suddenly serious.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

I think you put too much weight on what tonight might do for you.

WALTER

What is that supposed to mean?

Catherine rubs out the smoldering tobacco.

CATHERINE

I think you expected the sex to validate your decision.

WALTER

(bristles)

No.

CATHERINE

You seek to replace the feeling you got in church with a new experience. One that would convince you that you were right to believe there's more.

WALTER

Oh, you're one to talk.

Catherine's brows furrow. She points a finger at her own chest.

CATHERINE

Me?

Walter leans forward.

WALTER

Do you really think you're invisible under all that makeup? If I came here for validation, you came here for acceptance.

They are face-to-face, uncomfortably close.

WALTER (CONT'D)

I would bet you never found it outside these walls. You probably believe the men in here really need you, and you can be everybody's fantasy because they never look in the cracks.

Catherine stands up, challenging him to continue...

Walter gulps. One look in her eyes and he's regretting his words.

WALTER (CONT'D)

Wait...

Catherine storms across the room and disappears behind the privacy divider.

INT. BORDELLO - BEHIND DIVIDER - CONTINUOUS

Fuming, Catherine begins to dress.

WALTER (O.S.)

Catherine, please. I thought we were being honest with each other.

She rolls her eyes.

CATHERINE

You can leave now.

WALTER (O.S.)

I wasn't trying to offend you. Though I realize...

(sighs)

I'm just... I'm having trouble reconciling you. You're not what I was expecting.

Catherine wipes herself and slips into her undergarments.

CATHERINE

And what was that? Some hungry whore? Is that how you see me?

WALTER (O.S.)

No...

CATHERINE

Okay. Then what?

WALTER (O.S.)

Sweet.

INT. BORDELLO - CONTINUOUS

Catherine steps out from behind the divider. She has a funny look on her face.

CATHERINE

Good.

Walter chuckles.

WALTER

"Good"?

CATHERINE

That means I did my job.

Catherine stalks over to the desk and grabs a silk robe from the side of the mirror.

WALTER

I saw you.

She throws the robe around her shoulders and knots it angrily.

CATHERINE

You saw the me I wanted you to see.

WALTER

No. There was a moment when I truly saw you.

CATHERINE

(scoffs)

Sure...

WALTER

I saw you doing your laundry.

(a long beat)

I saw you chewing your fingernails. Your feet in wet grass. I saw the desperation that sits right below the surface.

Catherine's expression grows darker and darker...

WALTER (CONT'D)

See, your job is not only to create a fantasy but also to maintain it. The moment you become you, I become me, and the entire illusion is broken.

(whispers)

What are you doing here?

Catherine keeps the shake from her voice.

CATHERINE

I don't have to justify my actions, much less to you.

WALTER

It's a simple question.

She snaps.

CATHERINE
So you want the simple answer?

WALTER
Yes.

CATHERINE
Fine then.

Catherine drags her chest out from the desk and digs through it. She pulls out the stack of banknotes and throws it down furiously.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
There.

Walter looks from the money up to Catherine. She points at the stack.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)
That's more than most women make in their entire lives.
(laughs)
And I can make it in a night. All I have to do is lie there with a smile on my face and act like I'm enjoying myself.

WALTER
You make a compromise...

Frustrated, Catherine stomps her foot on the ground.

CATHERINE
I make a choice.

WALTER
So?

CATHERINE
You only say that because I'm a woman. Men are allowed to come and go as they please. You take for granted your position in this world.

WALTER
Are you saying men have it easy?

She boldens.

CATHERINE
I'm saying men don't have to jump through the same hoops.
(MORE)

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

They don't understand the importance of choice.

Catherine snatches the cash off the desk and throws it back inside the chest.

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Women are taught to choose from a surprisingly young age. If we want to go to school, we have to leave our dolls at home. If we want to start a family, we have to leave our homes.

She SLAMS the lid and turns...

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

Now, I could perform like a man if I really wanted to. I could stretch myself in a million different directions just to fail all but the one I deem most necessary. But I know the truth: to choose is to pour everything you are into that choice.

Catherine sets her jaw...

CATHERINE (CONT'D)

So, in answer to your gross assumption, the only acceptance I've found here is in the fact that being sweet might just allow me to survive being a woman.

For once, Walter doesn't know what to say. A long beat...

WALTER

I'm sorry.

CATHERINE

Why?

WALTER

Because that's a choice you shouldn't have been made to make.

Catherine chuckles.

CATHERINE

The only reason you should feel sorry for me is for the choices I didn't get to make.