

Inside Temple

Mack let Maribel and Sara into the reception hall as the groom's parents were giving their speech, together. The father was saying that the strength of their religion springs from the wife. Maribel stood behind the hors d'oeuvres table, crossing her arms to protect her inner thoughts, and replayed the night before when she'd somewhat clumsily inserted her fingers into her lover's asshole. She thought, *The pliancy of it, of everything helplessly attached to it, under the smallness of my middle fingers*, knowing it was the thought of a novice. But that was the best explanation she could come up with. She'd also liked the smell, which opened slowly like all damp things. At first, it had been dark like mushrooms earthworms. Then, as she worked more space open, it became lighter and deeply sweet like maple syrup and mowed grass. Being somewhat prudish and averse to the scatological, her references for the olfactory of anal were limited. Her friend Karin, who is a nose, once explained that jasmine has fecal notes. Maribel thought about that a lot because jasmine is the only scent that makes her wet.

Her thoughts drifted as the bride's sister took the mic, and Maribel wondered if she'd ever rim a man, using the night before and the two times men had rimmed her as studies. She remembered apologizing to the first man who'd eaten her ass for not being ready, meaning she could have been cleaner.

"Maybe next time you could warn me," she'd suggested.

"Yeah," he said, "Well, you should *always* be ready."

Her mind slid to the phrase "The Rhetorics of Rimming" (an essay or a college course by Avital Ronell?) as she scanned the reception room inside the giant Hebrew Tabernacle, picking out the Orthodox from the Hasidim from the Reformed from the secular from the gentile based on their attire. At Grand Central Station, where they'd stopped to buy a dress suitable for the wedding for her friend Sara, whom she'd invited in order to friend zone Mack, she'd texted her friend Ellen: *I'm realizing it's very important for me to anally penetrate a man.*

Maribel didn't know the bride. She'd met the groom once upstate with Mack, who at that time called him his best friend (though he didn't seem to like him anymore, despite being a clearly treasured wedding guest). She was wearing the sundress, floral and bluntly attention-seeking, that she'd brought for just-in-case. You see, Mack has a habit of suggesting high-end hotels and formal occasions at the last-minute, and their relationship is based on nonsense and spontaneity.

Maribel decided that she probably wouldn't enjoy rimming a man because she'd never be able to forget what her friend Brandy, a "high-end" sex worker, had said about male assholes one time when they were on a flight to Vegas for an overnight doubles gig. She'd said, "They all smell like enchiladas, 'and told Maribel about a client who'd unexpectedly thrown his legs over his head and ordered her to lick his asshole, saying "Clean me." Something about the way she described

gingerly lapping around it until he was tricked into believing she'd wiped him pure made Maribel forever associate the act with work, not pleasure.

The speeches ended and a band of young horn players struck up covers of wedding songs. She moved to the bar table on the other side of the hall, hoping she'd be less conspicuous there.

As she sipped her tart wine, it occurred to her that she'd been inversely tricked by one of her clients, "Dirty Pussy Lou", into letting him service her asshole. She understood now that he used 69 as an excuse to stick his nose in her ass even though she'd always been explicit about no anal play. Rather than risking an infection from not showering, on the day she was to meet him, she would go for a run and wash everything but her nether area, leaving herself open to the dirty remnant desires of his former live-in sub lifestyle.

Her friend Sara loaded up her plate, complaining about the inadequacy of the food while she did so. Above the plastic rim of her glass of wine, Maribel caught the bare glance of a man. It was a bedroom look that flew in the face of the glum afternoon light glowering through the dirty windows. This gaze was obvious about its intentions. And without permission, her body responded like a nose pinched with sachets of jasmine. How was it that he looked at her with her own eyes? She knew he was coming for her the way scoundrels always come for other scoundrels, sniffing out the starved, indulgent company of the morally dispossessed. But there was something else, too. Something coy and sincere that made her worry they'd met before. She pushed his gaze out and took a mental picture of his green irises, artful and shy-but-bad. Like hers. She teased the hummus and crackers on her paper plate and waited for him to walk over, assuming it would be soon, condensed as wedding interactions usually are. As she waited, watching him get pulled into groups by the photographer, she thought about her desire to be inside a man, to compare the ridges and retentions and receptive reflexes to a vagina. To her own, she guessed. Maybe she wanted to strap on a dildo after all.

Finally, he walked over as if he'd rehearsed it. Which was fine. She had also rehearsed it. "I saw you come in during the speeches," he said. His eyes were her eyes.

She admitted everything: she'd come with a friend and brought her own friend; she'd had a dress because she always had a dress; she didn't know anyone; and she had no business being there.

She learned the bride was his oldest and best friend. As they were talking, she was vaguely aware of her lover-friend tugging at her elbow asking for a dance. Her relationship with Mack was based in the droll, and according to that script, they should have been charming imposters, dancing together at the wedding of this friend who he didn't like anymore. They'd once broken into a business conference in Krakow, stolen the name tags of their hosts, and sat at a set table drinking as much wine as they could —well, she drank like a dry plant, like a drunk, at least— as a slideshow about business opportunities in Israel played.

When the wedding was over, she'd given the guy with her eyes her number. He'd went to collect his luggage from his parents' apartment on the Upper East Side, then to Lagaardia to catch a flight to Los Angeles. Maribel didn't see him leave, but she could feel when he was gone. She said goodbye to Mack, who was off to Europe to lecture about concentration camp porn, a genre on which he is the only expert.

Feeling what she could only describe to Sara as, "a little crazy," Maribel was convinced to go into the temple to "pray." As she looked up at iconography, so stripped compared to the overabundance of blood, bodies, and thorns she was used to as a Catholic, she began to feel like a big, begging hole that debris had fallen into. Like an old well. Like a caved in tornado shelter being scampered over by raccoons. She started to cry.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I think I'm having a conversion experience."

"You're not."

"I feel like God is squeezing my heart in his fist."

Sara grabbed the unopened bottle of wine they'd taken from the caterers and led her out of the Tabernacle. In the park, some kids were setting up a hookah. Maribel and Sara sat down to drink an entire bottle of wine.

"Will you do me a favor? Will you take my rope with you?"

"Yes," she nodded robotically, "I will take your rope."

Maribel handed her a tangled, cherry red bondage rope across the table.