

The Invitation

I have been called *Candy* for so long that I have forgotten if I ever had another name or, if I did, what it was. I seem to remember the name *Lucy*, but that might not be my real name. It's just that I'm Asian and some of my friends thought I looked a little like Lucy Liu, so that may have been why they called me *Lucy*.

Or maybe my name was *Amy*. I really can't remember.

Still, *Candy* is appropriate. *Candy* lures you in with a show of sweetness, gives you a quick high, drops you quickly and leaves you with nothing but a craving for more. That's me, and if you don't like it, then frankly I don't give a shit.

Of course, in my case, the sweetness is artificial sweetness. I hate those girls all the other girls call "sweet." Dotting their "i"s with little hearts and putting happy faces on all of their communications. *Ah! Isn't that sweet!* Smiling and giggling, playing with puppies and saying nice things about people even when the person isn't worth shit. *Ah! Isn't she sweet!* Makes me want to vomit.

Of course, the men I do business with like the name *Candy*. It sounds more like a treat than a real girl. No girl named *Candy* is going to challenge your masculinity. No girl named *Candy* is going to expect a commitment from you. No girl named *Candy* is going to expect anything more from you than that you pay for your candy.

It's not a bad life, though. I don't have to go out on the street a lot because I market myself on the Internet. When I do go out on the street, it's when it's not raining and I want to

flaunt what I've got before men too timid to go searching for it. I hang out around Pederson's store a lot. Men looking for girlie magazines down there get a jolt when an Asian hottie with real curves smiles at them. They're all like *Oh, my God! What do I do now?* I like to brush my boob up against them while I'm reaching for some stupid fan magazine, and when they notice, I give them my smile again. Pretty soon they're scrambling to get to their ATM, when all they thought they were doing was sneaking a quick peek at some porn and maybe buying a pack of cigarettes. I love it!

I'm different with the street people, though. I don't mean the other women of my profession, though some of them I am almost friends with because we put up with the same shit and all. I mean the people who live on the street because they have nowhere else to go. Sometimes I even give them money. I mean, that old Homeless Granny – who could refuse to give her money? Saddest face I've ever seen. Reminds me of my own grandmother, even though she's not Asian.

Most of the men on the street can't afford me, of course. Well, except for that guy who calls himself the Peacemaker. He came to me a couple of years ago, just after he had lost his job. He's avoided me ever since. Guilt, I guess.

People on the street are more real than the men who are my customers. My customers are all pretending, which is okay, because that is what I am doing too. I have gotten pretty good at pretending – pretending affection, pretending to show empathy for a guy in his empty little marriage, pretending orgasms. And they pretend they're really hot studs and it's not about the money.

People on the street know who they are. They know the dreams they had as children have all crumbled, and most of them know it's their own damn fault. They know their own

insignificance, that nothing in this world is about them, that maybe even God looks past them as they walk along. For me, they are the fallen angels of a sick and broken world.

Of course, some see *me* as a fallen angel in a sick and broken world. Okay, whatever.

So, as I said, I do market myself on the Internet, principally through this site that advertises to “men looking for women” called *hornycoeds.com*. Yeah, like I was ever a coed! Didn’t even graduate from high school! Anyway, I got this really weird message from a man who said right up front that he was a minister of a church, and that his church would very much like it if I would come to their church and share what my life was like as “a young call-girl/prostitute/woman of the night” – and *what did I like to be called?* He said that they were a progressive, *non-judgmental* Christian church and they would pay me for my time in accordance with my “normal fees”. Really.

Okay, first of all I was a little curious about how they found me out. Let’s see, *hornycoeds.com*. Surely that wouldn’t have clued them in. The picture was of me in a cheerleader’s outfit where as I jumped up it showed my crotchless panties and my halter top had a wardrobe malfunction. Nothing suspect in that. Instead of “long walks on the beach”, I listed as my turn-ons “frolicking naked on the beach and taking a pounding in the waves”. Now that I re-read that, maybe it wasn’t as subtle as I originally thought.

So I said, “What the hell?” and I called them. The first thing I did was to read to the minister the law about what constituted *entrapment*, you know, just in case. He said that wouldn’t be happening. Then I said, “Candy.” And he said, “Excuse me?” And I said, “You asked in the email what I liked to be called, and so I said “Candy.” He meant, what I would like my profession to be called.

“Yeah, you know,” he said, “I mean, housewives and house husbands like to be called ‘domestic engineers,’ and what we used to call ‘secretaries’ now like to be called ‘administrative assistants;’ stewardesses are now ‘flight attendants’ and, so...?”

“Queen of Fuck.”

“Yeah, you’re pulling my leg now, aren’t you?”

“No, but I suppose I would if you paid me.”

He was quiet.

“Okay,” I said, “Erotic Attendant? Is that taken?”

“Uh, no...I guess not.”

“It kinda goes with the others you were talking about, so, yeah.”

The whole thing was a little bit scary to me, so I think I was trying to turn him off to the idea, but he didn’t let go.

“So, do you have any questions?”

“Yeah – why?”

“Why what?”

The word “why?” pretty much summed it up for me, but I guess my profession had trained me to be cooperative with men. “Why are you asking me to do this? I mean, call me crazy, but I always thought church people wanted to avoid women in my profession...well, at least in public.”

“As I said, we are a progressive church. We see ourselves as an inclusive fellowship. We were talking about how Jesus went around with prostitutes, and we thought it would be good if we...well, we met one and found out a little about her.”

“You needed a token Jesus whore?”

“Well...we weren’t thinking—“

I just should have bailed at that moment. I mean, I certainly didn’t need church people looking at me and wondering what “went wrong” with my life. And I really didn’t need to stand in for all whoredom so someone could have their little devotional moment feeling close to Jesus. So, why didn’t I?

“Okay, I’ll do it.”

After I hung up I thought I should have asked if he wanted references from other ministers I have done business with, but it’s just as well – he might not have appreciated the humor.

It’s not like I had never been to a church. When I was little my mother used to take me to a Chinese Baptist Church down in San Francisco. I liked it. But as I grew up and got out on my own, what I experienced there just didn’t seem to fit the world. Oh, I did go back a time or two, in Portland after I had gotten into the business. One was a church that didn’t have any crosses, had Starbucks coffee in their lobby, and seemed to go out of their way to *not* talk about Jesus. I left there thinking *What the fuck kind of church is it that doesn’t talk about Jesus?* So I went to a different church with the name “Baptist” in it, because I figured that at least they would talk about Jesus, and they did. They talked about a Jesus who was coming back to judge all the people like me and throw them into hell, while taking all the good, righteous people like them into heaven. I noticed at least three of my customers, all trying to look the other way.

I also tried a Catholic church, because that was about as different from Baptist as I could think of. I liked some things. It all seemed so mysterious and holy. They talked about Jesus, and they also talked about Mary. I liked the Mary part. I could relate to Mary. A young girl, pregnant and no one understood. Been there, done that. What I couldn’t relate to were the confessionals.

No way I was going to talk about my life to a man I couldn't even see. I finally decided that church just wasn't for me.

So now I had volunteered to become a featured guest at a church, and all that kept running through my mind was *What were you thinking, Madame Shit-for-brains?* So the date was a week away and I decided to just throw myself into my work and try and forget about it.

My clients love it when I throw myself into my work.

After three days and nights of jumping, bumping and humping half the male population (and yes, some of the female population) of downtown Portland, I just had to pause and take a breather. In my profession, your body can take a lot of violation, but it's not so easy when you allow your comfort zone to be violated, as I had. I thought about just bagging it, but I have a real thing against going back on my word. Maybe people don't realize that about me. They think that if you're in my line of work, you don't have any principles at all. Not true.

So I was in a dilemma. When I find myself in a dilemma, I go to the people I know who have to solve dilemmas all the time as a consequence of their life situation – homeless street people.

I first looked for the Peacemaker because I know he gives good advice to people all the time, but as soon as he saw me smiling at him, he turned and hustled off the other way. Shit, he was in such a hurry he nearly ran in front of the MAX train.

Well, he's not the only person I know on the street. When I talked to the Snake he tried to shoot me with somebody's umbrella. Must have been off his meds. I talked to Cole and he just stared at me glassy-eyed, repeating "You want advice from ME? You want advice from ME? You want—" Oh, well, what the hell. You get the idea.

So I decided that talking to men about this problem, even men off the street, was kind of like talking to the family dog. They look like they're listening, but really, their drool just gets in the way.

I saw Crazy Jane, the bag lady, and I knew that she at least went in churches a lot, mostly to get free meals. I didn't expect too much, because most of the time she's too caught up in conversation with the demons inside her head to let herself get distracted by any other interactions. Still, what she said made me think.

"Beware!" she said, after I told her my situation. "Beware!" she repeated, with her eyes scanning first to the right and then to the left. By the time she said the third "Beware!" I was almost ready to run in front of a MAX train myself. Then she went on: "People who want to get to know you! That's who you should beware of! No good can come of that!" Then she grabbed the handle of her shopping cart and sped off down the sidewalk, as if she thought *I* was the one trying to get to know *her*.

I must have stood there twenty minutes, arguing with myself over whether or not she was right. Maybe that's why I have such a tough time remembering whether or not Candy is my real name.

I gave it another shot. Emily was a teenage girl I had met over by Pederson's. I found she had been through some tough stuff and had become pretty street smart, and yet I seemed to remember she had also had some church experience as well. I found her down at Pioneer Square, sitting on the concrete steps with her street family. They're mostly female, except for James who is gay, and that doesn't count, as far as that dumb drooling stuff I mentioned is concerned. I sat down next to Emily.

“Oh, good, Ms. Candy is here!” said James. “Now we can finally get some attention from the cops. I’ve really been missin’ havin’ them dudes kick around my little black ass!”

I tried to ignore his sarcasm and get to the purpose of my visit, but Marie, a Hispanic immigrant, was too quick to the trigger.

“I no need dos guys, dee’ cops! *Por favor*, you go away now, okay?”

“Come on you guys!” I said. “You know me, and you know the cops leave me alone. Unless, of course—“

“Yeah, girlfriend!” said Camille, a young black girl I had talked to on occasion, “It’s that damn ‘Unless, of course...’ I ‘no need’! Unless, of course they are after a little action that day themselves! Yeah, I ‘no need’ that shit. I no need your cute little Asian ass wigglin’ around in front of all the dudes! I get enough competition from pretty little Emi-Lou here.”

“Me!” injected Emily. “I don’t—“

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” I underlined the words with my most intimidating face, the one I used with guys who were trying to stiff me. “I just need a little advice, then I’m gone, okay?” I told them my story, and then looked to Emily, since she is the one I had come to primarily; but, of course, she wasn’t the one who responded first.

“Hey, Lucy Liu, what the hell you been smokin’?” said Camille. “Agreein’ to go to some uppity White church so they can feel sorry for ya’ and act all superior an’ all? I mean, if you feelin’ guilty, and need someone to whip yo little ass, then—“

“Do *I* have a little ass?” This question had come from the white teenager everyone called the Space Princess. She was twisted around inspecting her derriere. “I have little boobs, I know that. I heard they’re going to make a Barbie Doll with little boobs. But you know what doll I used to like? Raggedy Ann! I don’t remember if Raggedy Ann had a little ass, but she didn’t

have boobs. She had button eyes, though. What do you think it would be like to try to see through button eyes?”

“MY ADVICE, PLEASE!” I stood up and discovered I was yelling, so I toned it down a couple of notches. “I just want to know what Emily thinks, but if any of the rest of you have an opinion -- ON MY QUESTION, NOT BOOB AND ASS SIZE – then I would be glad to hear from you also, AFTER I hear from Emily. So, Emily—“

“Do it.”

“You think I should do it.”

“Yeah.”

“Even though it’s got me scared shitless?”

Emily shrugged. “I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t scared of something. If I didn’t do what I was scared of, I wouldn’t do anything at all.”

“Really?”

“When I go ahead and do something that scares me, It makes me that much freer. So, yeah.”

Finally, some sense.

I had forgotten how intimidating the outside of some church buildings can be. This one looked like a castle, built of huge impregnable stones, with turrets rising high above me, and a steeple rising even higher. The front entrance had a gate of iron bars, which I guessed had only recently been pulled open, with iron bars also across the lower windows.

The only thing missing was a moat with crocodiles.

I'm not sure why this church wanted to scare me off any more than it already did, but my thoughts kept going back to Emily's words. Why had I accepted them so easily as being true? Sometimes there is plenty of reason to be scared and back away. If I see a John with a wild look in his eyes, or who starts calling me vile, hateful names, or starts spouting judgmental scripture at me; I get out of there as fast as I can, and I do not even hesitate. I've had friends in the business who've been sliced and diced and on the five o'clock news for not being careful in those kinds of situations.

Still, something told me that this situation was different, and that Emily was probably right.

An elderly couple met me at the door. They were both very sweet. She took my hand and held it tightly as she looked into my eyes and smiled the most genuine smile I had seen in a long time. She told me that I didn't need to be nervous, because the people who were there were very good, caring people; and I told her I wasn't nervous, which by then was only a little lie because her presence had made me feel that much better. Her name was Gladys.

Gladys' husband was Eric, and he also gave me a great smile, although he seemed to struggle a little with keeping his eyes on mine. Emily and her street family had helped me pick out something to wear, and although it was more modest than what I normally wore, I was showing some cleavage, and I knew even a little of my cleavage was an eye magnet for men. He must have sensed his own struggle because he quickly apologized, saying he ought to know better how to behave around attractive young women, and would I forgive him? He then managed to keep his smiling eyes on mine for several seconds before I realized he really did want an answer. *Would I forgive him?*

"Oh...of course!" I said.

Gladys put her arm around my shoulder. “The man’s an animal, but I love him!” she said with a laugh. “Come this way.”

Eric stood on my other side and offered me his arm, as if he were escorting the two of us into a wedding. I smiled and took it.

There were about 40 people in the hall where everyone was gathering. Most of them were older men and women. The younger women were all in a little circle, looking my way and periodically bending their heads toward each other and whispering. I decided that was okay. I had been the new girl in school before.

There were two young men in the group. They also stood together, but the way their mouths hung open, it was obvious they were neither talking nor planning on talking. I looked their way and smiled, and they both blushed and turned away.

The older people were all moving in our direction. I was surprised that Gladys and Eric were not the only ones who seemed welcoming. I met Charles and Wilma, Eunice, Karl and Geraldine, Priscilla, and a Lesbian couple, Sarah and Charlotte. There were others too who were equally welcoming, but whose names I do not remember.

Gladys explained that we would eat first, and I remembered that from the church of my childhood in San Francisco: weekday programs always began with a potluck where there was lots of good food, after which the kids could play. I loved that part. I knew that in this case I would not be given time to play, but still the memory gently massaged my spirit.

I felt a hand touching my shoulder from behind. I turned and saw the face of one of the young women who had been talking together. She was obviously nervous and uptight, as she shuffled a little, and her eyes darted around the room.

“Hi, I’m Kayla,” she said. Then after a pause she finally looked me in the eyes. “I’m afraid I’m really not sure how to talk to you, but I just wanted you to know that I want to try.” She motioned toward the older people still standing nearby. “I mean, like, these are beautiful people, their love is genuine, their faith is awesome, and I really want to be like them, so I hope you will just give us all a chance to get to know you.” She held out her hand.

I looked into her eyes for a few seconds. They were beautiful green eyes, and they were tearing up a little, as if she had just made a move toward reuniting a broken friendship. I took her hand, but my mouth only trembled. We shook hands. Then she motioned toward one of the tables.

“My friends and I are all eating here, and we would love for you to hang with us during dinner...I mean, if you like—“

I looked back over at Gladys and Eric, thinking they would be a lot safer. “It’s your choice,” said Gladys, “and we would be happy whichever way you choose.”

I wondered if I had ever had any of the young women’s boyfriends as a customer. I even wondered if Kayla’s hospitality was a trap, like being invited to the popular girls’ table back in high school. I had that happen once. They told me that if I ever even talked to one of their boyfriends, they would tear my hair out by the roots. Then they dumped my lunch tray on the floor.

I remembered Emily’s words. *Doing what scares you makes you freer!* I remembered Crazy Jane’s words. *Beware the people who want to know you!*

Be free!

Beware!

Be free!

Beware!

Kayla touched me on the arm and I could see the question raised again in her eyes. My heart was racing. Still that heart was also telling me which side it wanted to win.

“Okay. I would like to sit with you,” I said.

“And, I’m sorry,” said Kayla, “but what was your name again?”

“My name?” My heart kicked into overdrive.

“Yes, please...unless that is too personal?”

I took a deep breath. I focused on slowing my heart. I tensed and then relaxed my shoulders. Then from my face I let escape the biggest smile I had smiled since childhood.

“Mary,” I said. “My name is Mary!”

And, I don’t know, maybe it was.