

1 THE RED REALM

I

“Hello, my friend,” Mykonos said when I opened the door, answering his knock.

He stood outside my cabin, grinning a horse’s smile, wearing shorts and a tank top.

“Hi,” I said, welcoming Mykonos into my small home. “Come on in.”

The one-room beach cabin had no furniture. Mykonos stepped inside, looked around the room for a moment, and sat on the wood floor.

“I didn’t expect to see you, Mykonos.”

“Well, I just thought I’d stop in. Is that OK?”

“Of course. I’m just surprised that you’re here.”

I had met Mykonos twice before. The first time was a few years earlier, after Mykonos had been ousted by his spiritual teacher and shunned by his fellow students who he had, supposedly, threatened to beat with a baseball bat.

Then, a week before his appearance at my cabin door, I ran into Mykonos on the beach. We sat together and talked about God,

who Mykonos called the “Great One.” We watched women walk by, and Mykonos expounded on the spiritual capacity of women’s genitals, which stunned me.

When I joked that he seemed obsessed with women, he said, “What would you rather consider besides sex and death?” Not much, I admitted, and Mykonos nodded slightly, looking deep into my eyes. For a moment, everything stopped—no sounds, no motion, even my breath stopped—and then Mykonos got up to go. From the beach, I pointed out my cabin to Mykonos, but I never expected him to actually show up.

“Do you have any cold ones?” Mykonos asked, looking toward my refrigerator.

I figured he wanted a beer. But I didn’t have any beer. I didn’t drink. My life was very strict. I did three to five hours of spiritual practices in my little cabin every day, and I was a die-hard vegetarian.

“I don’t have any beer,” I told him.

For a few minutes, Mykonos made some small talk and then got up and left. I regretted that I didn’t have any beer to offer him. I knew that Mykonos had a lot to offer me.

Mykonos was a man as ugly as he was tough. I had heard that he grew up on the streets, playing hockey, boxing, and getting into more than his share of trouble. He was also a decorated Vietnam veteran. After recovering from nearly fatal battle wounds, Mykonos, still a very young man, turned from the world and wholly devoted himself to spiritual growth. He spent twenty years

studying at the feet of his spiritual teacher before being kicked out, ending up in the same coastal town where I lived.

I knew that he spoke from an enormous wealth of spiritual knowledge—what I didn’t know is that he walked his talk with a vengeance, and that he was about to walk into my life and change it forever.

The next time Mykonos showed up at my cabin door, I was prepared. A six-pack waited in the refrigerator.

Mykonos came in and sat on the floor. He seemed particularly animated.

“Do you have any cold ones, my friend?” he asked.

I went to the refrigerator, secretly smiling, and grabbed two cans. One for me, one for him. I handed Mykonos a beer and sat down in front of him. He popped the top and raised the beer high.

“To the Great One,” he toasted.

“To the Great One,” I replied.

We both took a sip. I couldn’t believe it. I was drinking beer. In my spiritual efforts to live a healthy life, I viewed alcohol as poison. But I had to trust Mykonos. If he wanted to drink beer with me, then there must be a reason. I was willing to go along with him and find out.

He took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. I swallowed. Cigarettes? I had been pure for so long. I hadn’t eaten meat, or even drank tea, for more than fifteen years. I didn’t want to throw away years of devout purity for a few hours of chatting with a guy who looked like a cross between an ax murderer

and a car wash attendant. Mykonos was not a big man, though you wouldn't want to mess with him. Between his knees and his shorts, scars from shrapnel wounds crisscrossed the flesh of his thighs. He had a certain look in his eyes, as if he knew death—from both sides.

As soon as he lit up his cigarette, I was sure Mykonos felt my fear and resistance. He placed the pack within my reach and nodded toward it, indicating that I could help myself. I didn't.

Mykonos took a long drag on his cigarette, and then exhaled very slowly. Smoke filled the room of my clean cabin. He took another sip from his can of beer.

"Ah yesss," Mykonos sighed. "The lady is all around us." He made a sweeping gesture with his hand as if to indicate the beach, or maybe the entire world, outside my cabin. "She is beautiful, is she not? And she'd just as soon kill you. Eat you alive. What a bitch. What a beautiful bitch. Do you have any idea what I am talking about?"

Startled by his vulgar language, I nodded, hoping he would tell me more.

We both continued drinking beer in silence. I waited. Then Mykonos spoke of seemingly random things: books, sports, schemes to make money. I felt he was testing me. Seeing if I would bite. Finding out if I was ready to receive what he had to give, or whether I would be satisfied with small talk and common chat.

Meanwhile, I was starting to feel the effects of the alcohol. By then we had each drunk almost three beers. Having been a long-time

teetotaler, I was beginning to spin a little bit. I was losing the thread of the conversation.

“Breathe it down, my friend. Suck her down your front. Breathe her down to here,” Mykonos said, firmly grabbing his crotch, which frightened me. “Why separate yourself from her? Hmmm? Why not take it to her? She wants you. She’s gonna get you one way or another. She’s gonna chew you up when you die. And after you die? On the other side? She’s waiting for you there, too. You can’t escape her, my friend.”

Mykonos took another drag off his cigarette. I was wordless. Reeling.

“No amount of your so-called spiritual practice can save you from her,” Mykonos continued. “You can’t get away. You can only love. You can live in fear, or you can dance with her. And when you love her without holding back, when you see her as she really is, through and through, she dies in bliss. You know? Only bliss. But if you can’t get her to spread her legs, if you won’t even drink a beer, if you are too uptight to breathe her down to here, then she’s just gonna laugh at you. We are talking about a *big lady*. A *very* big lady. Your agenda doesn’t mean shit to her.”

As he spoke, I felt dizzy, and my gut tensed. His words were crude, but he was right. I had equated spiritual practice with squelching my desires, denying them, suppressing them. I could sit in a clean room by myself and meditate for hours, but I wouldn’t dance with what Mykonos called “the lady.” I was afraid of life. I was afraid of death. I was afraid even to drink a beer and lose my purity.

I wanted refuge, not chaos. I wanted peace, not passion. I was trapped in my little room of sanctity, in my meditative stillness and solitude. This wasn't true freedom. Nor was it love. As Mykonos pointed out, I wasn't penetrating the world with my love and opening "her" into bliss. Rather, I was pulling back. I was obsessed with myself.

Maybe the beer was loosening me up, or maybe it was just the right time, but as Mykonos spoke, my entire life strategy began to unravel. I had believed that by keeping my body balanced and my mind clear, then everything would work out. But meanwhile, I was dying anyway. The "lady" was eating me. The whole world was a massive, chaotic woman who terrified me, so I tried to seek safety and refuge in my spiritual inwardness and purity.

"What is a vagina, anyway?" Mykonos suddenly queried. "A lotus of delight or an ugly cut of mucous? Why do you want to poke it so bad? You like to see it in bed, all prettied up, but do you want it as bad when it's on the toilet, shit coming out of the ass? Hmmm? The body is what it is. Usually you like to hide it behind your underwear. You keep the bathroom door closed. Genitals!" Mykonos laughed. "They can be beautiful or disgusting. It's no big deal either way. Love has nothing to do with all that. And, believe me, the big lady doesn't give a damn about your genitals one way or another. If you are going to love the big lady, it's going to take a lot more than your pecker. And the same goes for loving your woman."

I thought of Gia, who was going to college, and wouldn't be able to join me at the beach for several months.

Mykonos smiled and lit another cigarette. Then he offered the pack to me. This time I took a cigarette, put it between my lips, flicked the lighter, and inhaled. The sharpness of the smoke caught me off guard, but I managed to quell my cough. I took a sip of beer, a drag off my cigarette, and tried to relax into the situation.

When we finished the last beer we walked down to the local store to get some more. Then we went to the beach. We sat on the sand, drinking and talking.

Mykonos tilted his head toward a gorgeous blonde tourist walking by in a bikini. I saw smooth tanned skin, narrow waist, and full hips. I saw upright breasts and nipples showing through the fabric of her bikini top. I saw legs to die for. I felt Mykonos regarding me.

“You know what she is?” Mykonos asked with a smile. “Years of arguments, snotty-nosed children, mortgages, and bad smell. You look at that thing every day, day after day, and you just want to run. You know what I mean?”

I did know what he meant, but I didn’t say anything. I thought he was talking a little too loudly.

At that moment, we saw another woman walking on the beach. She was about 35 years old, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. She was a friend that Mykonos and I both happened to know. She was a good person—though, to my taste, she wasn’t particularly attractive. I certainly wouldn’t call her sexy. She walked up to us and said hi.

“Hello, ma!” Mykonos responded fervently. I assumed that Mykonos developed this habit of speech from spending time in India, where, as a matter of love and respect, women are sometimes referred to as “ma,” living facets of the Great Mother, the Goddess of the Universe.

“You are looking very happy today, ma!” Mykonos said.

“I’m doing OK,” said the woman, with a shrug.

“You are looking very beautiful. Very radiant. Would you like to have a beer and share the shine of your heart with us, ma?” Mykonos asked her.

“Sure,” she said, already visibly happier. And definitely more attractive.

I realized that Mykonos’s manner, as outrageous as it seemed, was revealing the limits I put on love. When a woman entranced me, his words disillusioned me. When I was indifferent to a woman, his words unveiled her beauty. Either way, I was trapped by the caprice of my desire, and Mykonos’s words, as crass as they were, showed the possibility to open in a way I had never allowed—to offer love without holding back in fear.

“Have either of you ever really been fucked? I mean, *really* fucked,” Mykonos asked us.

Before we could respond, he answered his own question. Looking at us, drawing back his lips to expose his front teeth, he shook his head and said, “I don’t think so.”

He sat in silence, gazing at the ocean. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. I felt I had to say something.

“Mykonos, what does it mean to be really fucked?” I asked.

He sat for several more minutes without answering, smoking his cigarette, looking out over the water, as if remembering another time and place. Eventually he looked at our friend and smiled.

“Ma knows what fuck is all about. Don’t you, ma? Hmmm?”

She grinned, a little shy, a little hesitant to admit it, but definitely like she knew exactly what Mykonos was talking about. He continued.

“You know what it’s like to take the Great One so far into you there’s nothing left to do but give it all up to the Lord, don’t you? Maybe you’ve never done it. But you know what it would be like. You can feel it. You know you want it. You want to be fucked into God, don’t you? Do you know what I mean, ma?”

Now she was smiling, beaming, nodding her head. Mykonos went on.

“Sure you do, ma. You know what it’s like because you *are* love. Your heart is love. Your mind is love. Your pussy is love.” As he spoke Mykonos looked at her heart, her head, and between her legs. The expression on his face was one of blatant veneration, but without the slightest hint of pretense. I couldn’t believe that Mykonos was looking at her crotch this way, without guile and full of virtue and love. Meanwhile, she seemed to be drinking in his praise, basking in his adoration of her form.

“Our poor friend here,” Mykonos said, nodding toward me, “He is afraid to fuck. He is afraid to dance with the lady, ma. He wants to stand back and watch, like a scientist. He’s afraid to leave his room, to lose his purity and peace that he has worked so hard to attain.

He's afraid to lose his precious stillness. He's afraid of the wildness of woman. Everything has to be all tidy for him. He wants the pussy, but he doesn't want the slop. He wants the tit, but not the tooth. Oh, he is a good man, alright. Look at the light in his eyes."

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Mykonos put his arm around her shoulders and sat back so both of them could look at me.

"The light has guided his entire life. This boy might just make it. But not until he learns to embrace the lady, ma."

Then, the air around us shifted. A dense rapture grew down upon us, descending into our bodies as thick love, permeating us, impregnating us and the space between us with a blissful pressure. Mykonos continued to speak, his craggy face glowing in beatitude. He began addressing our friend as if she *were* the big lady. He began speaking to her as the Goddess.

"Our boy here won't know love absolute, he won't know what real freedom is, until he can fuck you, and be fucked by you, so that only the Great One shines in his place. And I'm not talking about him wiggling his pecker in your pussy, you know? I'm talking about the heart." Mykonos stroked his heart and the pressure of love seemed to grow. He continued speaking, so tenderly.

"Can you feel it now, ma? Can you breathe love into your pussy? Can you open yourself to the Great One now? Can you feel the Great One everywhere, between your legs, filling your body, breaking your heart wide open?"

Mykonos was looking into her eyes as she began to weep and tremble. Her legs opened and closed as she breathed deeply and

gasped, “Yes.” Then, more loudly, as her body brightened, she began laughing, without care, full of power, full of sex, full of love. “Yes!” she yelled, ecstatically, fearlessly. She seemed bigger than life, touching herself, opening herself, laughing, radiating fierce energy. Mykonos was right. I was afraid.

“And you, my friend,” Mykonos turned to me. “You’re going to die anyway. She’s going to eat you, sooner or later. Stop struggling. Give it all up now. Give all your love. I mean *all* your love. Why not? What do you think you can gain by holding back? Do you love this woman right now? Can you feel her? Is she not the Goddess? Is she not alive as love unbound?”

II

She was. Radiant. Open. Alive. Laughing and weeping. Displaying her womanhood without inhibition or pride. Free in her glory. Legs open. Tongue thrust out. Her eyes were wild, full, sexy, unafraid, knowing. She was everything I ever wanted in a woman. Even though I was still afraid, my heart went toward her. My whole body filled with force. The force of desire.

“That’s it,” Mykonos said to me. “Don’t hold back. Don’t be an asshole. Love this woman. Give her everything. Feel it all and be free in love. Be open as love. There is only love. Only this Great One, always love, always making love. The Great One is Fuck! There, have I said it? Have I gone too far? There is only the Great One, even in all our seeming twoness.”

As outrageous as his words were, Mykonos was right. We were sitting on the beach, fully clothed, not even touching each other, opening as man and woman, alive as love, opening as love, giving

love. It was as fuck as fuck gets. And it was clear that every moment was as deeply loving and spontaneously alive as this moment, if we would only consent to give and receive love without holding back or closing down.

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“There is only love,” Mykonos continued. “There is only this Great One, always churning as love, always making love. Ours isn’t a world of angel wings and white spires. Maybe when you die and go to the other side, you’ll flit around as golden light. But that’s not how love shines in this human realm. Here, in this place of hot blood and rosy flesh, the Great One makes love through bodies of desire. This is the red realm. And the only way beyond it is to feel through it—by loving *as* it.”