

MYRA TRUDEA OKUMU

Saintly Modest

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To the Einsteins who have spent their lives washing dishes and the Mozarts bent over stoves because you had the misfortune of being born a woman.

Chapter 1

“Daughters of Eve,” the preacher’s voice thundered across the sanctuary, “the Lord has commanded you to cover your shame!” The foundations of the church shuddered with each word.

He jabbed a finger at the women in the pews. “For it is written: A woman must dress with decency and propriety, adorning herself not with braided hair or gold or pearls, but with good deeds, as is proper for women who profess to worship God.”

His Bible slammed shut with a crack. Dust rose and reflected in the sunlight that poured from the tinted windows. He was an odd man, and his face was not evenly sculpted. His face was as disappointing to the eyes as he was unappealing to the mind.

The men hummed their agreement. Their stomachs were round with Sunday lunches, and the buttons on their jackets held onto dear life.

“Do not tempt your brothers,” the preacher went on with beads of sweat at his temples. “For did not our father Job make a covenant with his eyes? He turned from the lust of women, as you must turn from being lustful women!”

Spit erupted from his mouth with every hiss. He glared at the women in the crowd and wiped his brow with a white handkerchief. The white deeply contrasted against the rich melanin of his skin. He was the new preacher hurriedly sent

by the church after the scandal that had almost torn the church apart.

People still whispered about it but the Lord hated gossip and so they kept their heated opinions to themselves. Something about the choir master's daughter and the preacher.

The new preacher promised order where there had been shame, and holiness where there had been weakness.

"Cover your legs, lest they draw men into sin. Hide your hair. Its shine can ensnare the weak," he continued. "Lower your very voices for a woman's laughter is a snare to the holy heart. Remember, sisters, when you dress, you carry the weight of our salvation. If a man falls, you are to blame."

Never a man. Like Adam blamed Eve. His actions were the result of the temptations of a woman. Adam had been defenseless to the woes of a woman. If Bathsheba had not bathed naked, King David would never have been tempted. Her body, not his desire, bore the blame. Men were creatures helpless before a glimpse of skin. They were stumbling saints undone by the wickedness of female existence.

A murmur rippled through the pews. Women shifted uncomfortably. They tugged at their shawls, their skirts, and their scarves, trying so hard and failing dismally at hiding the small patches of skin that were in view. Some lowered their heads. Others clenched their jaws.

The preacher softened his tone and offered a smile oily with condescension.

"You see, my beloved daughters, the Lord made you to be vessels of virtue. Your beauty is dangerous like a wildfire."

A few coughs were heard in the congregation. The church was silent and all eyes rested on the pulpit. The preacher noisily gulped down a bottle of water, and waited for his words to sink

into their hearts. God had sent him to deliver this message. Through hell or high water, he would see it done.

Women nowadays were not like their grandmothers. They questioned and spoke out. They wanted equality like their place was not in the kitchen, bent over stoves. How dare they? This was a man's world and they had to be reminded of their place in it. That place was beneath men, in labour rooms and on their knees scrubbing floors.

After a moment of quiet had passed, he continued his sermon. "Do not ask why men are weak; ask instead how you may shield them. For the good woman is silent, modest, invisible. And the Lord is pleased when His daughters disappear."

* * *

The following Sunday, the first woman arrived in a potato sack.

Not a figurative one.

A literal, coarse, and itchy sack. The white was still faintly dusted with soil and the remains of last year's harvest. She had cinched it at the waist with a fraying rope that left angry marks on her skin. She shuffled down the aisle with the solemnity of a penitent. Her bare arms were blotched and scratched by burlap. She ignored the looks of horror on the men's faces and sat quietly in her chair.

The woman that followed was waddled head to toe in thick black cloth with two jagged eyeholes hacked out with kitchen scissors.

Her steps were slow, and she stumbled. Her modesty demanded not only invisibility but blindness. One would have laughed if the situation had not been so serious. Murmurs arose

among the men; the insanity of women and their desperate need for attention.

The pews filled with women muffled and swaddled in whatever could hide them best: quilts stitched into hoods, shower curtains tied with twine, and burlap sacks dragged over shoulders. One had sewn her bedsheets into a shapeless gown. Another had pitched herself into a tent, and the fabric sagged over her head. When the choir began to sing, the voices were nearly drowned out by the crackle of tarps, the squeak of rubber boots, and the wheeze of duct tape. The women's side looked like a jumble sale of fabrics.

Surely, the Lord would be pleased.

The preacher cleared his throat. His lips curled into a smile that was anything but kind. "Sisters," he said, "I see you have... taken my words to heart." His eyes skimmed over their bowed, faceless forms like a farmer inspecting livestock. "But I must caution you: modesty is more than fabric. It is an attitude. It is demeanor. A man may still be tempted by the way you walk, the way you move..." He leaned forward, lowering his voice to a hiss. "...the way you breathe."

The congregation of wrapped women, a collection of lumpy and suffocated furniture, stared back at him through potato holes, curtain folds, and cardboard flaps. Their silence was louder than any hymn.

* * *

The next Sunday, they escalated.

One woman hobbled in on crutches. She was determined not to walk in a way that might sway her hips. Another held

her breath for half the sermon until she collapsed into the arms of her daughter. A third appeared entirely encased in plastics. She shuffled noisily like an overgrown child's toy, but she was determined that no curve of her body could possibly be discerned beneath layers of plastic.

The preacher slammed his Bible shut so hard the choir jumped and the church mice scurried in their hiding place. "Sisters! God sees your mockery. Temptation still lingers. A man may lust after your ankles, your fingertips, and the very sound of your laughter!"

The women covered their hands with whatever they could find. They bound their feet in boots two sizes too large. They sealed their mouths with strips of cloth like the pandemic had once again taken the world by storm.

* * *

By the third week, the preacher was unraveling. His eyes looked tired and weighed down. His once-booming voice cracked with fury. His sermon was interrupted again and again: by the squeak of plastic tarps, the hollow clatter of cardboard against the wooden pews, and the suffocating hiss of duct tape as another woman sealed her chest flat against the "temptation of breathing."

Consumed by anger and trembling, he lost all composure.

"Don't you see?!" he bellowed, spit flying and landing on the gathered congregation. "You will never be modest enough! Even now as you stink of sweat and potato sacks, you tempt us still! With your presence! With your voices! With your... EXISTENCE!"

SAINTLY MODEST

His words rattled the stained-glass windows.
What were the women to do? Die?