



My husband was gainfully employed, had been since he was sixteen, as well as for most of our marriage, which had lasted seven years at the place my story begins. In fact, the only time Frank hadn't had a job to go to was when the plant shut down due to the strike a year ago last winter. I'll admit it was hard on him. Being accustomed to going to work everyday, Frank almost went crazy during those three months of not having 'a purpose in life,' those being his words, not mine, though, come to think of it, I came pretty damn close myself just from having to listen to him carry on about how crazy he was going.

Anyway, my point is, Frank, he'd always worked and I hadn't, mainly because he thought a woman's place was in the home, not somewhere else, even if she would get paid to be in that other place and all she got for staying home was depressed and bored since their only child had started preschool and she didn't have a thing to look forward to except *General Hospital* and *Oprah*. Well, that is, unless you counted an occasional cup of coffee with Blanche Picard, who lived next door and was more than a little strange, given she treated her two cats like they were kids, even going so far as to dress the things up in little matching outfits and hats, which, believe you me, those cats didn't much like wearing at all.

But back to Frank. Like I was saying, he was old-fashioned in his attitude toward women, especially his wife, and not one to change. So you can imagine his reaction when I told him I wanted to get myself a job because I was fed up with being 'a nobody.'

'But you ain't a nobody,' Frank insisted, though I knew he was only saying it to humor me, given I'd seen the looks on folks' faces when they asked me what I did and I had to say, 'Oh, I'm just a housewife.' But Frank, even at thirty-one, had never paid much attention to other folks' expressions, if you know what I mean.

'Frank,' I came back at him, 'I'm twenty-six-years old, and just what've I got to show for my life?'

'A daughter,' he said, even though I knew damn well I had a daughter and didn't need no reminding. The problem was my having a kid to show for what, in three months, would be twenty-seven years of breathing wasn't exactly my idea of accomplishment, even if Suzy was a pretty good kid, as kids go, and was doing real good in pre-school according to her teacher, a bubbly young woman the kids just called Miss Flora.

Since he was sitting at the kitchen table at the moment we were having this discussion, and I was standing and pouring him another cup of coffee, I looked down at the bald spot on the top of Frank's head. He tried to cover it up by combing his hair all to one side because he thought he was 'too damn young' to be losing his hair, all the while forgetting those pictures of his own daddy who'd been bald as an egg by the time he was thirty-five. 'Look,' I said, 'the extra money

would be nice.' I thought this approach might influence him since he was hoping to work enough overtime to buy Jimmy Wade's old bass boat when Jimmy got himself a new one the next summer.

'Lorene, I make damn good money at the plant,' Frank snapped, probably because he'd always been kind of sensitive about anything that might be construed as an affront to his *manhood*.

'I know you do,' I said. And he did make fairly good wages, even if it was never enough to allow for any of the so-called finer things in life. 'But with a little more coming in each month, we could put some aside to take that real vacation you been talking about for years.'

The truth was he had mentioned going to Disney World in Florida off and on since we'd been married, but something always seemed to come up, like us needing a new appliance or the clutch going out in his truck, you know, little things that meant we always had to forget about that vacation and, instead, settle for going to see his sister, Darla, who lives in Mississippi and has one of those above-ground pools out behind her doublewide. But Frank's response was just to grunt into his coffee cup like he'd experienced a sudden change of heart and no longer cared one way or the other whether we ever got to Disney World or not.

Never being one to give up easily, I said, 'The fact is, I'd like to have something to help pass the time.'

'Why?' Frank asked. 'Looks to me like you got plenty to do around here, and besides, ain't you always complaining about being tired?'

He had a point, but what he couldn't understand was how there was 'tired' and there was '*Tired*,' and my kind was more of the spirit than the body.

'I do have lots to do, that's a fact,' I said as I sat down with my own coffee, lit a cigarette, and looked at him across the table. 'But the thing is, I been doing the same old thing so long, it's gone and got kind of boring.'

He snorted. 'Hell, try working at the plant if you want boring.' Frank was always complaining about his job but never did a thing about trying to find himself another line of work.

'I don't want boring,' I said. 'That's the problem. I want interesting, and I wanna get out, meet people, and—'

'Why you wanna meet people? Ain't you got friends?' Frank raised his right eyebrow and looked at me instead of the sports section of the newspaper, which he'd been glancing at to see who his favorite teams, the Saints and the Cowboys, were drafting for the new season.

I nodded. 'Sure, I got friends. And I don't need no more friends. I just need to talk to other folks sometime, you know, in a professional setting.'

'Professional?' He snorted again and looked back at the paper. 'And just what're you gonna do that's professional?'

This was the opening I'd been waiting for, so I smiled and announced, 'I'm gonna be a sales rep for House of Venus.'

Frank put a finger on the page to mark his place before cutting his eyes toward me. 'And just what the hell's a house of Venus?'

'It ain't *a* house. It's just House of Venus, and it's like Mary Kay or Avon, except better.'

'You gonna sell makeup? To who?'

'No, I ain't just gonna sell makeup. They got all kinds of products, top of the line perfumes and colognes, beauty creams, bubble bath, even jewelry and doodads for the house.'

Frank rolled his eyes.

'And I'm gonna sell 'em to women who wanna buy 'em, that's who.' I took a puff on my Virginia Slims then spit out the smoke. 'Hell, the good thing about House of Venus is their products sell themselves 'cause women like 'em.'

'How do you know women like 'em?' Frank asked, skeptical as always.

'Cause I'm a woman, and I like 'em.'

A third snort, and he looked back at the newspaper.

'Frank,' I said, having had all I could take of his rotten attitude, 'it don't matter one way or the other what you think. I'm gonna be a rep for House of Venus.' With that, I left the room. Hell, if the man wanted another cup of coffee, let him pour it his own damn self.

Two days later I met with Sally Jean Nichols, the division manager, and listened to her rave about how good House of Venus had been to her—two trips to Hawaii in her first three years and the use of a brand new Caddy the fourth. Anxious to start winning my own prizes, I made a small up-front investment for a demonstration kit and, never being one to waste time, after leaving Sally Jean, I began going door to door in our neighborhood, Holiday Gardens, a subdivision near Broussard, Louisiana, where we lived at the time. The way I saw things, I'd begin where I knew folks, just to get my spiel down, so to speak, then branch out. And that's just what I did. In no time at all, I was going into other neighborhoods, some of them real ritzy, and before Frank could snort again, I had me a pretty good business going. In fact, given that I always did like meeting folks and Sally Jean told me I was a natural born salesperson—a compliment that made me feel good about myself for a change—I was real good at selling Venus products. Why, within the first six months, I'd become an area manager and had my own team of girls working for me. Plus, I'd even set up a

little office in the spare bedroom, though Frank didn't much like it and kept harping about how I was just going to have to give it up when we had another baby, as if that was going to happen anytime soon, at least if I had any say in the matter.

Anyway, it took me a while to get a real good sales crew together, seeing how some girls who said they wanted to make a go of it seemed to find it hard to convince folks that Venus products were any better than what they could get at Wal-Mart or Kmart for a third of the cost. At least that was their excuse. Me, I figured there were two things preventing them making sales. One, in order to sell Venus products, you had to believe in their superior quality, and these girls didn't. Two, though I didn't come right out and say it, the girls who couldn't cut it just didn't have the right look to be Venus reps, you know what I mean? Hell, take Crystal Dade for example; she didn't even wear no makeup herself, so how'd she expect to get other women to buy it?

But after a few more months, maybe four, I finally had me a top-notch sales crew. We called ourselves the *A-team*, meaning we were number one, which we really were, seeing how we sold more Venus products than any other team in Division Seven, which was our division and covered all of Lafayette Parish. In fact, one month, we even came close to equaling the sales of a team in Division Eight down in New Orleans, and that was saying a lot. So, as you can see, we were going strong and feeling pretty damn good about ourselves. Plus, more important as far as I was concerned, I sure wasn't bored or depressed anymore. I was anything but.

My A-team consisted of Trisha, Janis, Renee, Donna, and our newest member, Cody, which I thought was a weird name for a girl, but she sure could sell Venus products, and that was the only thing that mattered. Though the rest of us were married, Cody wasn't, and I figured this had something to do with her success, since she seemed to know a lot of single girls through some women's group she never talked too much about.

As for Frank, by this time, though he never said anything, he had to realize House of Venus made some pretty good stuff, seeing how much my girls and I were selling and all the extra money I was bringing into the house, not that I told him exactly how much that was. Let's just say by the time Christmas rolled around, I'd made several times what it'd take to buy that bass boat from Jimmy Wade, though by then I wasn't much inclined to surprise Frank by tying a big ribbon around the damn thing and parking it in the driveway on Christmas morning.

You see, Frank had become a real jerk, always complaining about me being gone and never being there to keep his house the way he wanted it, which wasn't true because I always did the housework, even his damn ironing, before I went out on my route or met my girls for lunch, which was really a business meeting because we talked a lot about sales' strategies and planned promotions, stuff like that.

Personally, between you and me, I think Frank's real problem was jealousy. Hell, there I was, making good money and having fun in the process, while he was stuck at the plant and not having any fun at all. Not that it was my damn fault the man wouldn't find himself another line of work, now was it? And this being the case, I just ignored his bellyaching and went on running my business. Besides, I was feeling good about myself for the first time in a long while, and though I wasn't about to say as much to Frank, I'd also come to realize how nice it was not to be dependent on some man for every penny I wanted to spend. Why, by then, if I wanted to buy something for myself or Suzy, I always had the money in my purse and never had to say, 'Please, Frank, can I have this much or that much.' And I have to admit the situation made me do some serious thinking about the role Frank played in my life.

Oh, and it wasn't just my success that bothered him. Frank was also jealous of the girls, especially Cody, seeing how the two of us had become such good friends. But then, we'd really hit it off from day one. Me, I'm short and dark, but shapely, with green eyes; and Cody, she's a tall blue-eyed blonde, with long legs and small but perky boobs. We sometimes laughed about how 'opposites attract.'

Now there's something you have to understand about Cody. She's kind of like this magnet where men are concerned. Seems they just take one look at her and they're caught in some spell or something. Reminds me of a program I once saw on TV about these snake charmers in India, or maybe it was Africa, that play flutes to hypnotize cobras, except Cody is the charmer and men are the snakes. Why, Cody could have any man she wanted just by wiggling her little finger, given she's not only a real looker, but has this sexy voice, kind of like Marlene Dietrich—you know, that famous star of old movies—and when she opens her mouth, men seem to hear Cody saying something she isn't saying at all. But then, that's the way men are, and they just can't seem to understand that for some women, Cody included, being sexy is just as natural as breathing and hasn't the least little thing to do with them.

But, like I was saying, business was good, so about three weeks before Christmas, we girls were having our sales meeting and decided we ought to throw a party to get into the holiday spirit, plus reward ourselves for remaining our division's number one team for three months in a row. We set things up for the following Saturday night and planned our menu, deciding everyone would bring a special dish and her favorite beverage over to my house. Frank always played poker on Saturday nights with Harvey Blanchard and the Benoit brothers, Tom and Willis, so this meant the House of Venus girls could be alone and just have fun.

When the big night arrived, things got off to a really good start. We were all decked out in new outfits bought for the occasion, and, damn, we looked hot, every last one of us, but especially Cody, who was wearing a green velvet

micro-mini skirt and snug-fitting red sweater. We were playing CDs, drinking, and cutting up with one another, you know, just acting silly the way girls do when there aren't any men around to make them feel all self-conscious. And talk about goodies, believe you me, we had plenty, everything from Trisha's sausage gumbo to Renee's jambalaya and Donna's famous chocolate-almond cheesecake.

I guess it was around nine, maybe a little later, when the front door opened and Frank came waltzing in. His excuse was 'Harvey was on a winning streak and bled us all dry,' which I didn't much believe, given Harvey had never even won a hand since the four of them had started playing three years back.

I'll tell you this much, no sooner had Frank walked in that door than everyone of us got uncomfortable. I knew I did, and I could tell the other girls shared my sentiments by the way they started acting. Take Trisha. She usually won't hush for nothing, and she'd been chattering on and on like she does, but she suddenly got real quiet; and Renee, who was sitting with her legs curled under her on the sofa, tugged at the hem of her new dress like she'd just noticed her thighs were showing. Not that Frank seemed to notice. Hell, how could he when his eyeballs were glued to Cody?

I could feel my blood pressure going up a notch since I didn't much appreciate him either breaking up our party or ogling my best friend, and I was just getting ready to give him a piece of my mind when Frank wandered off to the kitchen.

Believe you me, as soon as he left, the atmosphere in that room got lighter, *poof*, just like that, and all I could do was hope Frank stayed put in the kitchen or at least found something else to do besides pester us. After all, we were the House of Venus girls, and we sure didn't want some man ruining our evening.

Janis looked at me, shrugged, and got up to put on another CD. It was Credence, and she fast-forwarded to 'Bad Moon Rising,' pulled Renee to her feet, and the two of them started wiggling to the beat. Then, since nobody can sit still with Credence going full blast, the rest of us got up and started strutting our stuff, though no sooner had we gotten wound up than I glimpsed Frank out of the corner of my eye.

Budweiser in hand, he was propped in the doorway and watching us like he really enjoyed seeing a much of women dancing around, boobs jiggling, in the middle of his living room floor. I also noticed he seemed to be looking a lot more at Cody than he was at anyone else, even his wife. But when the tune ended, Frank had disappeared, and I figured he'd gotten tired of watching us and thought of something better to do, like amusing himself with those videotapes he kept hidden in the closet and thought I didn't know about.

A little while later, I found out I was wrong.

Cody had gone to the kitchen to dish up the French vanilla ice cream I'd bought to accompany my homemade fudge brownies, and she'd only been gone a few minutes when Donna asked me if I'd get her some more ice for her Scotch. Always a good hostess, I took her glass and headed for the kitchen; and let's just say, I really wasn't too surprised when I got there to see old Frank leaning against the cabinet and eyeballing Cody's legs.

Not that Cody was paying him any mind. She was just scooping the ice cream into the cut-glass bowls I'd gotten that week at J.C. Penney especially for the party.

'Umm, umm' Frank said, 'I gotta admit that sure does look good. Real good.' His voice was all low and husky, you know, like maybe he'd had one too many cigarettes, and as he was talking, he let his eyes sweep up the long length of Cody's body before they came to rest on her tits.

I'd already about had it with Frank by then, and believe you me, the last thing I needed was him standing there getting ready to put the moves on my friend, something I knew for a fact, having once been on the receiving end of those moves and knowing his method of operation. So, I just looked him in the eyes and said, 'What the hell's going on here in my kitchen?' I didn't direct the question at Cody because I knew she didn't much care for my husband or any other man for that matter, since she'd told me a lot about herself by then.

Taking a sip of the Budweiser, Frank smirked in that aggravating way of his. 'Lorene,' he said, 'you've had too much to drink.' Then he laughed like he thought he was funny.

I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face. 'Like hell I have,' I said and pointed at his private parts. 'I'm sober enough to recognize a damn hard-on when I see it.'

I have to hand it to Frank, he did blush before he snorted and stomped out to the carport, slamming the door behind him.

Cody looked at me with those big blue eyes and said, 'Sorry 'bout that, Lorene.'

'Ain't your fault,' I said, knowing it for a fact.

'Men are such assholes' was her next comment.

I agreed.

'What do you see in him?' she asked.

I told her I wondered about that myself.

Cody glanced out the window over the sink, though it was dark outside and, even if it hadn't been, there wasn't much to see in the backyard.

Opening the fridge, I started digging around in the ice compartment and clanking cubes into Donna's glass.

Cody said, 'You're too good for him.'

As I closed the fridge, I thought how there was a lot of truth in Cody's observation. 'Well,' I said, putting the glass on the counter and lighting a cigarette, 'I guess we all make mistakes.'

'That we do.' She turned away from the window to fasten her gorgeous eyes on my face. 'But we don't have to go on living them.'

I could see myself mirrored there, this tiny woman in a sea of blue.

She smiled her slow sexy smile.

Crushing out the cigarette, I took a deep breath, and when Cody leaned forward to put her lips on mine, I heard myself sigh in relief. But then, I couldn't help it. I was a House of Venus girl, and it just felt so damn good to finally correct my mistake.