**TRUTH, DARE, COMMAND**

“Truth!” the children shout.

Reuben shakes his head or perhaps he shudders. He grins at his feet.

“Dare!” call the children. This time Reuben nods.

“We dare you to run into the girls’ toilets and bang on every door.”

At their shout Reuben runs. Doors bang, girls scream, but Reuben is out and hiding before one of the older girls can catch him. Another child chooses to play the next game. Wise children pick ‘Truth’ or ‘Dare’ rather than the masochistic risk that ‘Command’ brings.

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The barista has put a powdered chocolate heart on my coffee. I stir it into my cappuccino while remembering my schooldays. That game wasn’t about ‘Truth’. It was about exposure and shameful secrets. In another few minutes I’ll be facing the humiliation of confessing my secret shame to my therapist. Will I tell the truth? I don’t know. Aren’t all relationships multi-faceted mirrored versions of secrets and lies? If I didn’t know the truth about James when I was married to him, how can I know it now?

“I’m unravelling,” I tell Lynne when I’m seated opposite her, “but why did it take me so long to fall apart? I’ve been divorced for years.”

“Perhaps James’s death has made the difference?” Lynne suggests.

I nod slowly at my curled fists in my lap. I want to hold onto a truth that will help me survive.

“I’m ashamed to be an abused wife. It’s a secret I kept from everyone – my children – my friends. Even from myself. Now he’s dead the secret is mine alone to bear. Shame is eating me up. I want to die.”

“You’re not alone,” Lynne says. I glance up at her stern face. “It’s one of the ways abuse works. Everything that happens in an abusive relationship is made to seem as if it’s all the victim’s fault. You become the only guilty party and you deserve your humiliation.”

“I thought I couldn’t be abused because he didn’t beat me,” I say, twisting in my chair. “I thought we were okay as long as – “

I can’t finish the sentence, but Lynne won’t let me stop.

“As long as what, Angela? How did you measure the success of your marriage?”

“As long as I took care, we were fine,” I say flatly, struck by the mundanity of what I’ve said. I was so careful. So organised. Such a good housekeeper and manager of the children. I managed my mood. I smiled. I soothed. We were the perfect couple and the envy of our ‘crowd’ of friends.

I stop writhing in my chair. Instead my insides curdle and I cry sour tears. Lynne pushes the box of tissues over. During the next hour I empty it.

“I loved him! I love him though he’s dead! He hasn’t gone out of my life! I hate myself. I’m ashamed. Why didn’t I run away?”

Lynne says, “There’s a difference between loving an abusive man and loving abuse. James controlled you.”

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I dare to join a private online chat room. We open doors onto our pain for each other. We bang doors shut on our shame. We talk about the latest marital violence drama on the telly and say how sick it makes us feel. We are a group of older women who stayed long years married to our abusers.

“Why did you stay?”

“When did you realise you were abused?”

“How did you escape?”

We ask each other the questions and listen fascinated to the answers we didn’t know we would one day be able to say out loud and without fear.

“I don’t understand myself,” I say. “I’m not stupid. Why did I go on pretending that my marriage was a safe place for me and my children?”

My virtual friends click.

“Like!”

“Like!”

“Like!”

We don’t joke or laugh online as we might around a shared bottle of wine. Online conversations aren’t nuanced and it’s too easy to misunderstand each other. We want to be crystal-clear and sharp as cut glass when we perform the surgery that will free us from the controlling violence that still shackles us to dead and divorced husbands.

“There’re so many women like us,” Noreen says.

“Like!”

“Like!”

“Like!”

We all agree. It remains a mystery to us all that we didn’t feel the heat when we were in our beds or next to our stoves.

Penelope shares a paper from a psychiatric journal about abusive men.

It discusses psychopathic tendencies and an inability to be empathetic. It cites traumatised childhoods.

I sigh in recognition, but my virtual friends don’t hear me.

“He needed me,” Noreen says.

“I knew he had problems,” says Penelope.

“I loved him and the sex was good,” Mary says.

“He was a man of importance and high status. Nobody would have believed me,” I say. “I organised his social diary.”

Penelope shares a paper from a social studies journal about power and patriarchy. Mary finds a quote that says that power is always violent.

None of us likes it.

Noreen is angry

Mary is sad.

“Wow!” I click.

“What happened to you? When did you realise you were abused?’ Mary taps.

“He stopped me working and wouldn’t let me have my own bank account,” taps Penelope.

“I realised the violence wasn’t normal when he dragged me down the street by my hair,” taps Noreen.

“I was always afraid of upsetting him,” Mary taps. “He was so cold and cruel.”

“I didn’t realise I’d been abused until after my divorce,” I tap. “Then I wanted to die because I felt so worthless. He’d forced me take an overdose of sleeping pills. He calculated the time I could be unconscious before he had to make me vomit. He experimented on me. I was an object, not a person.”

“I never wanted to be a martyr,” Mary says.

“I’ve always been a feminist,” Noreen says.

“What are you going to do now?” asks Penelope.

“Did your children know what was happening to you?” I ask.

I see my therapist Lynne regularly, but outside the group and her therapy session I don’t tell the truth to anyone.

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I’ve answered the ‘Truth’ challenge and admitted my shame and my humiliation. I’ve carried out the ‘Dare’ by finding other survivors of domestic abuse and sharing my experiences with them. I’m learning how to survive. Perhaps now is the time to speak to the child who witnessed the shipwreck of my marriage and ask if she kept afloat?

Lila is our only child, named when James was briefly into Zen and motorcycles. I waited for Lila to leave school before I left James. I knew she would find our separation hard. We were used to the high end life-style of top executives. It’s one of the reasons it took me so long to escape my marriage. I was a ‘perk’ paid for by his firm and locked in by the social network that glued us together. I hadn’t only married a man, I’d married his work, his health insurance, his friends and his golf club. Of course, I had enjoyed all of that but leaving my husband meant I lost my social ranking and Lila was furious with me. That was really hurtful, but as she was young so I thought we’d be all right in the end.

After our divorce, Lila replaced me as her father’s social secretary during her gap year. Then the inevitable happened. Divorced top executives are in demand as husbands, while second wives are reluctant to share their homes with step-daughters of the same age. Lila had to go. True to form, my husband’s lack of empathy made Lila very unhappy and for a while she didn’t see much of her father or speak of him either. Instead she started her own small but successful business and I thought we had begun to understand each other better.

Something changed after James’s death but I’m not sure exactly what. Lila and I eat at a small French restaurant. It’s pleasant at first.

“Lila,” I say. “I’ve been seeing a therapist – sorting myself out and getting my divorce into perspective.”

“That’s good, Mum,” she replies. “Keep it up – it’s important to be happy and put the past behind you.”

“What about you, Lila? Are you over the way Dad and his wife treated you?”

Lila’s eyes flicker.

“Of course, Mum- what else?”

She adds, “Dad and I had a special relationship.”

Does she refuse to admit that James was ever unkind to her? Are victims of abuse to be despised? Shame’s brand burns my heart but I go on.

“If you need to ask me anything about Dad and me and our marriage –“

“Mum! Don’t dare!” Lila says in a voice of steel. “If you want to see me again, never, ever, mention your marriage or Dad to me! Do you understand!”

“That’s a command, is it?” I ask.

“Yes!” Lila snaps. “It is!”