

## Good Christian Girl

The mama-san's curiosity shop was not so much a favorite destination as an inevitable one. Adjacent to an outdoor flea market, the air conditioned building offered relief from Guam's tropical heat to souvenir seekers, relic collectors, and the unsuspecting who were about to discover something they could not live without. The mama-san was an intuitive truth teller, but not in truths about herself, only of others and if she could not anticipate someone's true desire, she created it.

Years of wheeling and dealing with off-islanders had made the local lady's life quite comfortable, but she never let on. She always dressed in a faded mumu, wore a sun bonnet, and drove a beat-up Mitsubishi van. It was all a part of an act that made her rich. Not that she was ever outright dishonest, no, just prescient, as only one can be when descended from a people who by surviving centuries of military conquest had become as fleet of mind as of foot. Even though she did not really need money there was no greater feeling than when it left other people's hands and came into hers. And so she began her day as any other, perched in her storefront waiting to see just whose money she was going to take.

The young woman had arrived earlier in a weather-beaten pickup truck with off-island tags. Along for the ride was a small entourage of buzz cuts wearing their off-duty military uniform—Hawaiian shirts and khaki shorts. The young woman, a leggy twenty-something, dressed against type. A long brown braid, heavy and thick, traced the length of her back, and she wore a tank top and cutoff jeans. But for all the woman's very feminine features, the mama-san could see she also was military. The controlled and erect manner in which she walked projected an air of silent authority. Command presence was evident in how she stood motionless after entering the store and slowly scanned the space around her before proceeding to consider what was being offered.

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Sidling alongside the young woman the mama-san casually asked, "What sort of *décor* are you and maybe husband looking for? I give you good price." She liked the word *décor*. She thought it gave her shop the illusion of class.

The brunette turned, propped her aviator sunglasses on her head, and quietly corrected, "I'm not married," and lifted the back of her hands, no rings, on any finger.

Then mama-san apologized, "So-sorry. So-sorry." She had said "maybe husband," but you never really know with women these days.

The mama-san attempted another approach. "I give you good price" in a sing-song island patois. "I give you good price for all furniture, local price, not haole price." The young woman nodded and quietly continued to consider the washed up whatnots from around the Pacific.

Not to be deterred the mama-san continued, "A beautiful girl like you has a man, yes?"

The woman stared blankly for a moment, then redirected the conversation, "How much for the Buddha?" She picked up a statue of a most un-solemn Buddha. He reclined on his side and his legs were hidden by robes carved from a curved cut of bamboo. His perfectly rounded prayer beads fell from one hand over his girth into the folds of his robe. The mama-san shot back a price. The woman countered with half. The mama-san liked the repartee, but counter-offered in a tone that said you must be joking. The young woman turned the statue over, examining him more closely. The Buddha was not worth the price, but he was so gloriously fat and full of laughter that she said, "I'll think about it," before placing him on a nearby stand.

In truth it was not the statue she wanted, at least not at first, but the teak table upon which the jolly Buddha had sat. On the mainland an exotic wood like teak came at an exotic price, and for good reasons. As a hard and versatile wood it is much sought after for its enduring qualities. When exposed to the elements and the passage of time teak silverizes, but does not weaken. If it never ventures out of doors the wood retains its youth and can be passed down through the generations, forever young.

She ran her hands up and down the honey-colored wood. It was

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smooth except for a few places where it had cracked while releasing its final breath. The rectangular table sat six and was held up by four cylindrical legs that were narrow at the bottom and gradually broadened before uniting with the top. Although no longer a living tree, it was alive, still changing and willing to change with the forces of nature and a life it had yet to encounter. Two elegant throne-like chairs graced the ends of the table and matching armless chairs were positioned not too far away, as if to display loyalty to the family.

“Ah, you have good eye,” encouraged the mama-san. Pausing for effect she cautiously continued, “You like, I include chairs.”

The young woman nodded in agreement. She was developing a good eye. For the past few weeks she had been in the market for new furniture, but not just any furniture. She wanted something unique to her experiences and traveled the island visiting merchants who capitalized on Guam’s proximity to the Orient. In her search she had seen rosewood so ornately carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl that it no longer looked like wood but more like porcelain, and seemed just as fragile. Bamboo, another popular wood, was fun, but too hollow. She was looking for beauty and solid craftsmanship and the teak table had both.

Just then there was a metallic crash at the front of the store. An arriving customer had knocked over a gong, and the mama-san ran to investigate, chastising the hapless soul in a burst of island-English. Then, chameleon-like, the mama-san turned herself back into the smooth hostess, guiding the offender away from the young woman and away from the table. The mama-san had already decided who was going to buy it and the young woman needed some space. What the mama-san did not know was that some space was exactly what the young woman already had in her life and it was space she needed to fill. Ever since that crazed day he had called to say he was marrying someone else.

Theirs was not an unfamiliar story. She loved him and he didn’t love her. In the days following that revelation her world bottomed out. In a rush of change she jettisoned worn out clothes, furniture, photographs, and memories. She was not even sure where it all went after dumping it into the back of a friend’s truck. Nor did she care.

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He had dropped the news shortly after she returned from deployment and she was still running on combat endorphins, immune to risk, and numb to the consequences.

Curious, she hopped up on the table. It seemed solid enough. Sliding off she examined each leg in turn and when satisfied by their integrity sat down at the head and stared at the other end. She thought about all the life that happens at a dining room table, the meals, the messes, the silences, and all the stuff that passes over, under, and around a simple piece of furniture. For a moment she saw that other life with a family filling seats, a husband, and children. What fun it would have been to have made those children on this very table.

Repressing a throaty laugh, she asked herself, "What would he have thought of it?"

What indeed.

He would not have liked it and in the end that may have been the problem. Earthy virgins were simply a mystery to men like him and looking back she could see that he may not have liked much about her at all, other than she was loyal to a fault. She had been there for him when he needed a woman but he never really wanted her. And as pathetic as it was, she held on hoping that he would.

Standing, she turned away, covering her eyes to fight back angry tears. It was always like this when she thought about his phone call. He was so cheerful, gushing about how he had found "a good Christian girl." He was so damn proud; he was going to make this one his wife.

A good Christian girl; she was not sure if either of them knew what he meant. She had turned the comment over and over in her mind trying to work out why she was not, at least to him, such a person. Maybe he thought she would agree with his choice and go along as a supportive friend. Maybe he was just insensitive. Or maybe she was looking for meaning in something that did not really have any.

Idly, she traced the edge of the table with her finger and took in a deep breath and then slowly let it out. She had wanted him in every possible way. Wanted sex, wanted children, wanted friendship, wanted the fights, wanted the forgiveness, and was willing to give her

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life in order to build one together. Family was in her blood to have, protect, and sustain. But in the end she was just someone who had hoped for him, prayed for him, and eventually was nothing to him.

In the background she could hear the mama-san trying to sell the GIs some overpriced war salvage. Each person feigned shrewdness as they maneuvered to get their hands on whatever they really wanted. Only the Buddha seemed to know all games. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that he was still smiling, as if he knew her secret, that she had a pocket full of cold cash, all earned while slugging it out in a combat zone.

On impulse, she grabbed one of the armless chairs and spun it around so she could straddle it, her bare legs looping behind and her lower torso flush with the curved back. She reached down and to the side, her hand closing on one of the table legs and stroked up and down its flawless length, no nicks, no rough edges. Nice.

She gave the smiling Buddha a glance and then turned her attention back to the table, its chaste minimalism inspiring her to be anything but. She could almost feel what it would be like on its smooth surface, her back arching and the rise and fall of bodies. Instinctively her hips began to move, matching the rhythm of her hand. She continued to stroke the wood, faster this time, her body poised for what she wanted and she wanted it...all of it, along with the table, the chairs, and yes, the knowing Buddha.

Suddenly the store was quiet. The air had stopped moving, as if everyone was holding their breath. Her mouth went dry. Had that sound come from her? She released the table leg, her hand now damp, and while still riding the chair slowly turned around.

Busted.

She didn't have to look to know, but she hoped that somehow no one had seen her and that maybe no one had heard her, either. If not for that, she may have remained invisible to them just as she had been to him, but no chance for that now. Everyone in the store had seen her and everyone heard it.

Flushed, she slid off the chair. The mama-san stared, calculating victory, while customers gaped in disbelief. One man grinned and nodded.

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Not wanting to lose the moment the mama-san interjected, “Yes, it would be good for that, too. You light girl. Just make sure he not too heavy. Or not, whatever makes you happy. It’s solid wood.”

About time something was.

The men started to laugh. Then the young woman did, too. Unable to stop she collapsed into a chair and covered her face with her hands. She would surely pay whatever the mama-san asked, but she was going to take it all to include the Buddha who was still smiling, now with approval.

Later, after the mama-san pocketed the cash and the chairs were being loaded into the truck, the young woman climbed back up on the table. It really was solid wood. With her lower limbs dangling from the edge she lazily stretched back and sighed.

A good Christian girl might not have bought a dining room table with that in mind, but an honest one did.