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Ellen sat alone at the dimly lit pub, her eyes tracing the intricate patterns etched into the wooden tabletop. The smell of stale beer and a hint of tobacco lingered in the air, a familiar scent that brought a sense of comfort to the quiet solitude she cherished. The murmur of conversations around her created a soothing backdrop, allowing her thoughts to wander freely. Her attention was drawn to the rusty cuckoo clock above the bar, its tick-tock a metronome to the evening's rhythm. The clock chimed eight, and she glanced down at her empty mug, contemplating another pint.

Her thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the rowdy group of men at the next table. Their laughter grew louder, more obnoxious, as they placed bets on who could bed the shy artist, Anika. They spoke in crude terms, their voices a stark contrast to the gentle ambiance of the pub. One of them, a burly man with a thick beard and a leather jacket, suggested using a bicycle pump to "make her more... cooperative." The others roared with laughter, slapping the table and spilling their drinks.

Ellen's cheeks flushed with anger. She knew Anika, a gentle soul with a fiery passion for her art. The thought of these brutes treating her with such disrespect made her blood boil. Yet, she remained still, her eyes narrowing as she listened intently to their conversation. It was clear they had no intention of letting the topic drop. The tension grew thick in the air, each crude remark a knife twisting in her gut.

The artist in question, Anika, was a frequent visitor to the pub. She often sat in the corner, her nose buried in a book or sketching on a napkin. Her delicate features and soft-spoken nature made her an easy target for these boorish men. But what they didn't know was that she had a fierce spirit, one that had pushed her to overcome countless rejections in the art world. She had a quiet strength that they would never comprehend.

Ellen's hand clenched around her mug, the heat from the ceramic seeping into her skin. She contemplated confronting them, but the risk of escalation held her back. Instead, she decided to inform Anika of their lewd conversation, hoping she could handle it with the grace she had seen her exude in the past.

As the men grew more intoxicated, their voices grew louder, their bets more outrageous. The bartender, a stoic man named Larry, shot them a warning glare but said nothing. He knew better than to interfere with the regulars when they were in this mood. The silence from the rest of the pub patrons spoke volumes about the discomfort the scene was causing.

Ellen decided to go home and to visit Anika tomorrow.

The night grew colder as she stepped out of the pub, the chilly air a stark contrast to the warmth she had felt inside. The cobblestone streets were slick with rain, reflecting the glow of the street lamps. She walked briskly, her thoughts racing. How could she tell Anika without causing her more pain? Would she believe her, or think it was just a twisted rumor?

The next day, the rain had cleared, leaving a freshness to the air that seemed to mock the stale anger still lingering from the night before. The sun had barely crested the horizon when she found herself outside Anika's studio, a small, cozy space above a bookstore. She took a deep breath and climbed the creaky stairs, her heart pounding in her chest.

The door was ajar, allowing the faint smell of turpentine and oil paints to drift into the hallway. She pushed it open gently, the bell above jingling to announce her presence. Anika looked up from her easel, her brush poised in midair, a look of surprise flitting across her face. She was dressed in her usual attire, a loose smock smeared with a rainbow of colors, her hair pulled back into a messy bun.

"Ellen," she said, setting her brush down, "What brings you here so early?"

Ellen stepped into the room, her eyes scanning the various artworks scattered around. The walls were a canvas of emotions, each stroke telling a story of passion and perseverance. She took a deep breath, trying to find the right words. "I heard something last night, Anika," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. "Something that I think you should know about."

Anika's smile faltered, her eyes searching hers for an explanation. "What is it?"

Ellen paused, gathering her thoughts. "Some men at the pub last night, they were making bets... about you." She took a deep breath, bracing herself for Anika's reaction. "They were saying things, disgusting things, about how much they'd pay to... to take advantage of you."

Anika's eyes widened, and the color drained from her cheeks. She looked down at her hands, which had tightened into fists at her sides. The room grew quiet, save for the distant hum of the bookstore below. "Which men?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Ellen described the group, her heart heavy with the weight of her words. She watched as Anika's expression shifted from shock to anger, the muscles in her jaw tightening. "They want to offer you a sum of money to pump you up using a bicycle pump."

Anika's eyes shot up, a fire igniting in their depths. "They want what?"

Ellen nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry. I had to tell you."

For a moment, Anika said nothing, her eyes glazed over as if lost in a tumultuous sea of thoughts. Then, she spoke, her voice firm and unwavering. "Thank you for telling me, Ellen. It's better I know."

Her words hung in the air, and the silence grew heavier as they both grappled with the gravity of the situation. Anika turned back to her easel, her brush moving in deliberate strokes across the canvas. The tension in her shoulders spoke volumes of the anger and humiliation she felt, yet she painted as if the canvas was her shield, her sanctuary.

Ellen fidgeted with the hem of her sweater, unsure of what to say next. The weight of her revelation was palpable, and she feared she had shattered the peaceful bubble Anika had built around herself. "Anika," she ventured, "I don't know what to say. I just couldn't let that go unsaid."

Anika paused her painting, her brush hovering in the air. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling with the effort to compose herself. "You did the right thing, Ellen," she murmured. "But what do we do now?"

Ellen considered the question. "We could ignore them," she suggested tentatively. "They're just a bunch of drunken fools."

Anika's eyes never left her painting. "Ignoring them won't change their minds," she said, her voice tight with restrained anger. "They'll just find someone else to harass."

Ellen nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "We could confront them," she offered, her own anger simmering. "Make them realize the kind of person they're dealing with."

Anika's brush stopped mid-stroke, and she turned to face her friend. "Confrontation might not be the answer," she said, her eyes reflecting a determination that hadn't been there a moment ago. "But exposure could be."

Ellen raised an eyebrow. "Exposure?"

Anika nodded. "Yes. I could make a painting of this situation, paint corps balls, talking nonsense."

Ellen felt a spark of hope in the darkness of the revelation. "Your art has always had a way of speaking the truth," she said, encouraged by Anika's resolve. "But be careful. These are not good men."

Anika's smile was cold, her eyes sharp. "They don't deserve kindness," she said. "But I'll be smart about it. I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing me upset."

The two women stood in the quiet studio, the early morning light filtering through the dusty windows and casting a soft glow over the unfinished canvases. The air was thick with the scent of paint and turpentine, a stark reminder of the creativity that was now marred by the ugliness of the men's words.

"I'll start on it today," Anika said, her voice steely. "A piece that shows them for what they truly are. Let's see if their arrogance can handle being the subject of public ridicule."

Ellen felt a flicker of admiration for her friend. "You're braver than I ever could be," she said softly.

Anika's eyes met hers, a fierce determination shining through. "Art is my weapon, and I won't let them use it against me."

The two of them stood in silence for a moment, the gravity of their situation weighing heavily. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, Anika's expression softened. "But for now, let's have some tea," she said, moving towards a small table cluttered with mugs and a steaming kettle.

Ellen followed her, feeling the tension ease slightly as Anika busied herself with tea preparations. She knew that the artist was using the mundane task to regain her composure, to channel her anger into something more productive.

As they sat sipping their tea, the warmth spreading through their hands and into their chests, Anika spoke again. "You know, I've faced worse in the art world," she said, her voice carrying a hint of bitterness. "Men who underestimate me, who think my success is because of my looks rather than my talent."

Ellen nodded, recalling the subtle, yet persistent, sexism Anika had mentioned in their previous conversations. "But this is different," she said. "This is personal."

Anika set her mug down with a clink. "Maybe it's time to make it personal for them," she said, a glint in her eye. "I'll show them that their words are just as empty as their wallets."

The two friends sat in contemplative silence, the only sound the occasional clatter of a book from the store below. Anika's mind raced with ideas, her fingers itching to

hold a brush again. This time, she wouldn't be creating beauty; she'd be crafting a scathing rebuke.

"Let's not let this define us," Anika finally said, her voice calm and resolute. "We'll use it as inspiration, but we won't let it consume us."

Ellen nodded, feeling a sense of solidarity with her friend. "You're right. We'll tackle this together."

The following days saw Anika throw herself into her work, her brushes moving with a newfound vigor. The painting grew, layer by layer, each stroke a silent rebellion against the vulgarity of the men's conversation. The figures of the men took shape, grotesque caricatures of their true forms, their lewd expressions captured in vivid detail. The bicycle pump, once a tool of their twisted amusement, became a symbol of their impotence and ignorance and was painted heavenly blue.

Ellen visited her each day, bringing news of the pub and the men's reactions. The talk had spread, and whispers of Anika's impending artwork reached their ears. The men had grown quieter, their eyes flickering with unease whenever she was mentioned. Yet, they remained oblivious to the storm brewing in the studio above the bookstore.

As the painting neared completion, Anika called upon her network of friends and fellow artists. They gathered in the small space, their eyes widening at the sight of the powerful piece. The room buzzed with a mix of anger and admiration for Anika's bravery. They discussed the best way to unveil it, to ensure the men understood the message without causing a scene that could harm her reputation.

One of the artists suggested a local exhibition that was known for showcasing controversial works. It was the perfect stage for Anika's statement. The opening night was in a week's time, and the excitement grew as they worked tirelessly to prepare for the event. Anika named the painting "Deflated Ego," a title that brought smirks to everyone's faces.

The night of the exhibition arrived, and the air was electric with anticipation. The gallery was packed with a mix of curious townsfolk and the art community, all eager to see what the whispers had been about. The walls were adorned with various pieces, each telling a story of their own, but all eyes were drawn to the corner where Anika's painting hung.

"Deflated Ego" was starkly lit, the men's leers and the bicycle pump glaring in their absurdity. Anika had painted herself in the center, a stoic figure, her eyes piercing through the canvas as if daring the men to look away. The contrast between the vivid

colors of the men and the muted tones of the rest of the scene was deliberate, a silent commentary on their lack of substance.

So was Ellen, when she visited the exhibition she realized that she was the one who had told Anika about the drunk guys and the bicycle pump. Her decision had made a way of difference.