

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

*JR Ingrisano*  
**The Prostitute**

Alicia leaned on the railing of the small, island-hopper cargo ship and watched the sun set beyond the Western Caribbean. She thought of Manny, but just briefly. She felt no regret, no guilt, no remorse. She knew she had to focus on today, not the past, and everything that had happened before this afternoon was the past.

Her arms were folded, her fingers resting gently on the brownish bandage on her left arm. It was almost invisible on her dark skin. Intended to look like an unattractive wound cover, it contained her only possession. Under a flap was an almost flat, plastic-handled pocket knife. The blade was only three inches long, but razor sharp, with a tip that could draw blood with the slightest touch. The best place to hide it, Alicia had explained, was in plain sight, under the bandage on her arm. Men did not want to know about wounds or blood. They would avoid it.

The crew soon would be coming for her again. That really did not bother her. This was the unspoken price she knew she would be expected to pay on top of the huge sum the ship's captain had demanded to take her from Colombia.

Her only priority now was to make sure she did not get tossed overboard before the ship made port in the morning.

She was not afraid. She was done with being afraid. She had given up letting fear rule her life years ago. She was twenty-four. That was old by some standards. Fear was a luxury, she'd learned early on, that got girls like her killed. Show eagerness and enthusiasm, no matter how sick the thing they demanded. But never show fear. Show obedience, even while turning your back and spitting in their drink before gaily prancing over and cutely setting it before them. But never show fear. Show sweetness, no matter how much you wanted to take a knife and cut off what they called their manhood after they rolled off and fell into a drunken sleep beside you on the stained, sheetless mattress. But never show fear. Or just show no emotion at all, become invisible in plain sight, especially when they robbed, beat up, shot, stabbed, or bludgeoned each other to death in front of you. But never, never show fear.

She looked out over the Caribbean and listened. The chugging hum of the old ship's engines was soothing. She decided it would be the sound of a laundry room washing machine churning in a three-bedroom home. There would even be well-fed, healthy childr, two of them — no maybe three — in clean clothes played in the living room. She'd seen this scene on the television. It would work for her tonight.

She put it in that place they could never, ever get to, that place they could not reach, unless she let them. And that would never happen; she would never let them ... If she did, she knew, she would be everything they said she was and everything they did to her and everything they made her do to them.

She had had control of very little all her life, living at the whim and mercy of others, men whose whims and mercies could not be trusted, men

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who seemed to enjoy inflicting pain, who loved the idea of watching others squirm as they held power over them, men who never made love, but who attacked and assaulted, who used sex to feel like men, and to make women feel like ... to feel like nothing, like less than the dogs to which they flipped table scraps.

However — and if Alicia was still alive, Chica would have to thank her for this someday, because Alicia had taught her this, too — she did have that one place that no one could penetrate, rape, slap, cigarette burn, curse at, beat out, or take away. That was why she could smile and wink at a fat, disgusting, unshaved, unwashed man and even say the dirty words he needed to get an erection. Perhaps it was not much of a skill, but it was a skill that had kept her alive. So, no, she was not afraid.

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There were seven members of the crew. She'd counted them as soon as she'd stepped out from under the blanket after they'd smuggled her aboard earlier. The fat-jowled captain had been first. No words. No expression. All business. He'd just pulled her into his cabin, ordered her to take off her pants, pulled down his own, and pushed her back onto his bunk. It was over in thirty seconds. He opened the cabin door and pointed. She pulled on her pants and left.

The others had stood in a circle close to the captain's cabin and waited. They'd probably thrown dice or cut cards to decide who was to have her next. Or perhaps they'd decided by rank, with the first mate after the captain. The tall, lean one stepped forward. She noticed that he had shaved. He was what the girls back at Joanie's Joint called a Lothario. He fancied himself a lady's man, the kind who were charming and chatty, even while taking her. He would expect her to smile, to like it. He had looked at the bandage on her arm and showed concern.

"What happened?" he'd asked.

"A small cut that got infected," she'd said with a smile. "It's nothing."

He led her to the stern and, also smiling, tenderly invited her to lie down on a blanket placed atop the blue plastic tarp that covered the on-deck cargo. She watched him carefully. These were the ones who often were the most dangerous, the ones who liked to pretend she was an eager, charmed lover, a virgin. These men took a lot of work on her part. She was exhausted after the stress of escaping the brothel and eluding Manny's men as she made her way to the harbor.

Still, she smiled back. This one, like most men, needed reassurance. She had learned to search their eyes for doubt and fear. Some were anxious and concerned. They came at her desperately, as if she were a challenge. It was as if their entire identity were in their ability to perform, to get the job done. For others, it was about performing magnificently. Some would even laugh afterwards, straddling her, and howl like a wolf standing over his kill. Others sometimes were angry, angry at her. They came at her with a vengeance, often pinning her by the wrists and taking her hard, violently, sometimes cursing at her. No matter; she always said, "That was wonderful. Thank you."

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The ones who started out and flagged, who could not maintain an erection, they were the most unpredictable. Some sighed and sadly walked away. Others, however, cursed and blamed her, saying that she was not sexy enough and demanding that she do things to arouse them. Sometimes they hit her, blamed her, and called her a stupid whore. That seemed to solve the problem. "That was wonderful. Thank you."

Sometimes they demanded their money back. When that happened, Manny would get angry. "You have one job, one thing to do," he'd say, grabbing her roughly and putting the tip of his nose right up against hers. "You are a stupid whore. Your job is to make men feel like men. That's your job."

So, she would actually try harder, try to be the best whore in Manny's stable.

No more. Not any more. Not after tonight. Tonight, her job was to survive.

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It was a beautiful, still evening over the Caribbean. Chica watched the sea, listened to the thumping of the engines, and waited. She heard the men coming, and she was not afraid. If she made it alive to port tomorrow, she would find Yvonne's Place. Alicia had told her that she would find good people there, although Chica did not know exactly what that meant. Even if the ship's crew threw her overboard tonight, she would die a free woman, not as someone's property, not as a stupid whore.

She smiled as the engineer approached her and put his arm around her.