



The Esthetic Apostle

The Illusionist

by Marisa Russello

My first childhood dream was to become a world-renowned magician. Instead, I became an elementary school teacher (by day). And a high-end escort (by night).

One of my earliest memories has somehow managed to shape what I've chosen to do with my life. This memory is from kindergarten in 1991 during the time I fell in love with my best friend, William James. Will was truly my first love. Even though I was only a five-year-old, I would regularly profess my love to him on the playground and dictate love notes for my mother to write him on my favorite stationery. One day during reading time in Mrs. Morgan's kindergarten class, Will and I were sitting beside each other. The story our teacher was reading aloud must have reached a romantic part because I vividly recall the sudden urge to firmly plant my lips right in the middle of Will's, and then I did just that. To my dismay, aside from shock, Will also felt somewhat mortified by my actions—I could tell by the cherry-red color his complexion took on—and Mrs. Morgan wasn't too thrilled by what I'd done either. After sternly criticizing me in front of the rest of the class, she decided to have me sit "in the corner" for an entire half hour, alone, while I cried.

When people ask me why I became a teacher, I always share one of my stock answers like how I love to inspire others to learn new concepts and to be curious about the world or how I love seeing the little "ah-ha" moments and "light bulbs" turn on for my tiny scholars. "I've always seen myself as a teacher," I say. "Children are so precious. They're our future!" But secretly, I think I chose to teach elementary school so that I could achieve some sort of vengeance by torturing all those little children in the same way that Mrs. Morgan was so cruel and unforgiving to me as a young girl.

Similarly, Will's rejection of me that day in kindergarten has stuck with me ever since, which is perhaps one of the many reasons why I so much enjoy taunting different men each weekend with what they can't keep: me. It was shortly after graduating college when I first got into escorting. I was angry about being so far in debt and still aching from a

recent breakup with a boyfriend I'd thought was "the one." I had never attached my sense of self-worth to any silly ideas like virginity or monogamy, but on the other hand, I'd also never pictured myself as a prostitute. My "first date" as a call girl was with a man named Jared. I remember being most anxious about having to "entertain" this guy for the whole three hours that he had booked with me. As I soon learned, though, most of that time takes place after sex being filled with cuddling, back scratches, and pillow talk.

Although I am forced to hide certain aspects of my work from my family and friends, I would never change what I do for a living. Being a teacher, as well as being an escort, has provided me with many opportunities that I may not have otherwise had in my life. And now that I think about it, perhaps, in some way, I did achieve my childhood dream of becoming an illusionist.

Marisa Russello graduated with a bachelor's in Spanish language and literature from Haverford College and a master's in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University. She lives in New York with her loving husband and their two rescued Chihuahuas and writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Marisa is currently at work on a memoir concerning her struggle with bipolar disorder. Her passion for mental health advocacy inspires her to speak openly about mental illness, which she believes will weaken its terrible stigma. You can find her on Instagram @marisarussellowrites or on Twitter @russellowrites.

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