

Velvet Slippers
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It was unbearably hot in the crowded seminar room. Couldn't someone just open the window? The rank smell of perspiring bodies offended Kara's nose, as she made her way back to her seat. It made her feel queasy, too. They'd been told in advance that the use of perfume or deodorant was strictly forbidden, but now she had to put up with this nauseating stench. Fortunately not everyone in the audience had played by the rules.

Kara could make out pockets of scent around the room and even recognise her favourite DKNY fragrance among them.

“Can you please take your seats now?”

With the audience settling down, Kara was in two minds whether to stay or to leave. Today was the last day of a weekend workshop on soul development, but right now her soul couldn't take any more. Not only was she disillusioned with the rigid set-up, but she was rebelling against the organisers who clearly knew how to maximise their profits. Unsure of what to do, she looked at the audience with mounting disgust. Their sheep-like acceptance of half-baked theories on past lives and channelling made her cringe. But what did that say about her? After all she'd signed up too. It was a leaflet she'd picked up in passing that prompted her to go. A strange feeling of compulsion had taken hold of her when she read it. An irresistible urge to find out more. Though she wasn't a complete novice to esoteric beliefs, she was sceptical by nature and at this moment she could hear her bullshit detector ringing loudly and clearly inside her head.

By now, Simon, the workshop leader, had returned to the stage. Kara felt her shoulders tense up, nearly forgetting that she was here to see Helen who would be part of the programme for the first time this afternoon.

She watched Simon as he moved around the room with the confidence of a very large man. He gave the impression that he could easily bulldoze his way through life. On the first day he had been quite civil, almost jovial. Only once had he shown the arrogance she could sense underneath his blubber, when a stressed-looking woman made a small mistake with her payment. He'd ripped the cheque out of her hand and torn it into little pieces, in front of everyone. After this public dressing down, the poor woman had scuttled back to her seat, looking more despondent than ever.

During the break Kara heard him talk with great authority about nutrition, claiming that 90% of the population were unable to digest brown bread and should bloody well stop eating it. Kara had almost choked on her wholemeal sandwich. What would a fat slob like him know about healthy eating? Everyone could see that he had the appetite of a glutton.

But the audience hung onto Simon's every word, supposedly because he was a well-known authority on soul development and had written a book or two. He claimed to receive his knowledge directly from source and seemed to get away with it. Surely she wasn't the only one who could see through his bluster?

A hush fell over the room. All eyes were on Simon now. He could hardly suppress his irritation, when a few late-comers scrambled back to their seats. Something menacing was in the air. Kara felt her stomach tighten.

“Let’s get on with part two of our programme now. Before I introduce our medium, I will give you some vital instructions. You need to follow them to the letter as long as Helen is present in the room:

Number one: Do not make any loud noises, that includes talking or moving chairs around.

Number two: Make sure your mobile phone is switched off. If a mobile goes off this afternoon, I will personally escort you out of the building.

Number three: Do not ask any questions unless I give you permission.”

He paused and drew himself to his full height.

“Helen will see you one by one. You will be given ten minutes each. The rest of you just have to wait. Do not leave the room. Try to meditate, while you are waiting, I don’t care what you do, but keep quiet. We are on a tight schedule and if you miss your slot, tough. I will be recording the channelled message for you and you are allowed one question at the end.”

As he was talking, Kara’s vision started to become blurry, the way it always did when she was about to perceive something from the distant past. With her head reeling, she felt as if somebody was rewinding a tape in her head. She was entering a different time zone. At least that’s what she’d been told by a psychic who experienced similar things. As she kept staring at Simon, a change came over him and his face underwent a complete transformation. His features kept shifting, then rearranging themselves, until he appeared solid again.

Once his face was set, Simon’s clothes started to change. Instead of his casual grey trousers and corduroy jacket, he was now dressed in a scarlet cassock; a white cape placed over his shoulders and he was holding up a heavy, silver cross. It was the ring, however, that utterly horrified her. An oversized amethyst embedded between the fat fingers of his left hand. Yes, she remembered. The image of the ring made her lean forward in pain.

A feeling of nausea swept over her and forced her back into present time. She had to get out and hurriedly made her way to the exit. By the time she reached the ladies’, she was violently sick. Clinging to the smooth, cold porcelain for support, Kara felt utterly vulnerable, utterly helpless.

Images were flooding in now, creating a hellish sequence of violence. A vast, medieval palace. A fat bishop squeezed into an ornate throne. A bloodied woman at his velvet-covered feet. A searing pain in her stomach. Glistening tools of torture. Metal toes ripping her face. His Excellency gazing at his ring, merely sitting and gazing. An oversized amethyst, gleaming on his fat finger. A symbol of power and persecution. Soldiers dragging her away.

She was left to bleed out, on a cold stone floor, destined to die. Much later she remembered the light. An old man leaning over her, offering some water from a broken cup. She hadn’t realised till then that she had a fellow prisoner in her cell.

Kara, or whatever she was called back then, felt his hands supporting her back, as he helped her to sit up. Dizzy and disorientated, with tears welling up in her eyes, she accepted a few sips of water. With every drop, she willed herself to live.

One night they came to take the old man away. He was too weak to put up any resistance, but he quickly passed her his last remaining piece of bread, hidden in his sleeve. As they dragged him away, she saw the distinct shape of a star-shaped tattoo on the back of his head.

Kara took a deep breath and pulled herself up from toilet floor. Her mouth tasted of vomit and she reeked of sick. Now she understood what had brought her to the workshop. Why Simon had filled her with such loathing right from the beginning. She wondered whether Simon was aware of their connection, but she doubted it. Kara forced herself to walk over to the sink and wash out her mouth.

By the time she got back to the seminar room, Helen had started her channelling sessions. She managed to slip into the room unnoticed, while Simon was busy telling off another participant.

“Stop fidgeting”, she heard his cross voice. “Helen is hypersensitive when she’s channelling. Can’t you keep still?”

A queue had formed and Kara took her seat at the end.

“Do you have to make so much noise?”

Simon looked at her with cold eyes, barely able to conceal his dislike. She ignored him which infuriated him even more. The queue moved quickly and before long she sat facing Helen. For an instant Kara was taken aback by Helen’s dowdy appearance. Had they met in a bar or restaurant, Helen would have passed as a plump, middle-aged secretary. Dressed in expensive, but unfashionable clothes, she looked like the type of woman who was secretly in love with her employer and dedicated her whole life to looking after him.

The medium glanced at her briefly, a faint smile playing on her lips, before she turned her gaze inwards. Kara followed her on her path into another realm. A swirling mass of consciousness expanded and contracted in never ending cycles. She could see patterns forming around Helen’s body. Wisps of thin, bluish smoke appearing from nowhere, then fading away.

“You have come to resolve a situation from the past. Deep feelings of pain and injustice are waiting to be released. Disturbing past life images have left an imprint on your mind and still influence you today. “

Kara waited, as Helen paused for a little while, in an effort to relay the message correctly.

“Take this opportunity to let go of past suffering. Forgive past perpetrators and move on. My guide is telling me that he understands the connection between you and Simon, but is urging you to let go. It’s for your own sake.”

Kara dug her fingernails hard into the back of her hand. It stopped her from crying out and the pain made her feel alive.

Helen carried on channelling for a little longer, but Kara had stopped listening. The images of torture were still vivid in her mind and it felt beyond her power to erase them here and now.

“Your time is up,” Simon announced and shoved a tape into her hand. She got up and walked out of the room, into the blinding sunshine.