

## CHRIST DWELLS RICHLY Liz Lydic

It was five minutes into intermission when Pamela Coffman almost ruined my business. I'd been so certain that my Christian intentions had been straight back in October when I met her. She was down on her luck, I told the other women in my Donna Joy group. But behind the concession stand all these months later, while incidental music from 'Peter Pan' played from the sticky clubhouse auditorium, Pamela Coffman reminded me of her true, sinning self.

Had I not been at the play to watch my son perform, I would not have seen Pamela come out from backstage—where she was 'assisting' her lowlife friend Carla Broadstone with costuming—three sheets to the wind and nearly stumble into the card table where packaged snacks were laid. She knew the rules of Donna Joy darn well, and there were no exceptions to number three: maintain public images that support and represent the brand. After all I'd been through with Pamela to get her down to 123 pounds to align with my cluster's weight standards; all the work I personally put into coaching her on posture and wardrobe and small talk; the \$20 I'd given her to get that hairstyle down at Love Me 'Do salon; she'd come to the play and struck it all down.

"Well, look at that!" I said to Brenda Sloane, the drama booster club president with whom I was elbow to elbow. Just a moment prior, I'd been telling Brenda about the Donna Joy energy supplement line. "Pamela has a little costume stage fright, don't you, hun?" I was already next to Pamela, my body between hers and Brenda's to block the sagging face of a chronic and relapsed drunk. I squeezed Pamela's upper arms and shook her a bit. "My goodness. Let's get you some air." I felt like an actress in a play myself with that line but Brenda's sympathetic wave and frown showed me I'd done well. "I'll be right back," I mouthed to her, not wanting to lose her interest in the supplement conversation.

"You have got to be kidding me," I hissed at Pamela once we were out in the courtyard. It was a warm night, and we'd gotten far enough away from the clubhouse door that the sound of crickets overpowered the buzz of parents making smalltalk about what excellent jobs their children were doing. My own husband, Rick, was likely saying something to another father about our son Christopher's stoic performance as a Lost Boy, failing to notice how badly he had enunciated in Act 1.

"Roxanne! Hey, my arm!" Pamela's hand went to where mine was clutching her bicep. There was a softness I immediately wanted to discuss with her, and I allowed my mouth to run parallel to my mind's thoughts about placing her on a weight-based probation.

"You are a Donna Joy woman, Pamela." I was talking through clenched teeth, and blocking her body partly from cast member siblings who had come out here to play an impromptu game of tag. "What is the matter with you? Do you not know better than this? How many times did we go through my cluster's credence?" She looked at me with tired, drooping eyes and I glanced around. My hand dug into her arm. "How could you do this to me?"

Pamela let out a low laugh. "You're a snob, Roxi." Her head bobbed down like a rag doll and I was unsure if she was nodding about her own statement. I pushed my upper body against hers to prop her up, the smell of must from her ratty jean jacket made me gag. We started walking, with me mainly guiding her a few feet down a path in the park laden with humid, wet droppings from the overgrown trees.

"You will never call me that again, do you hear me? Not 'Roxi' or a snob. A snob would not have chosen you. A snob would have looked the other direction at your trailer trash life and let you figure out your own misdoings. But did I? I did not. I knocked on your door, Pamela. God and I knocked on your door and asked you in. Do you hear me? We let you in. I made my own career out of nothing, and I gave you the chance to do the same. To create your own career, do you understand that?"

We stopped in front of a set of stairs that led to the parking lot. I pushed her in front of me, steadying her arms. My eyes glanced down at my front to ensure my pussycat bow blouse was not ruffled. I met Pamela's eyes. She glared.

"You're a bullshitter, Roxanne," she said, and my mouth opened in shock. Rule twelve of Donna Joy was that no cluster member would publicly engage in language that could tarnish the wholesome image of the company's reputation.

"No!" I said loudly. "You are a violator of Donna Joy!" I lowered my voice. "You are an unappreciative non-independent business lady." My voice caught and stinging behind my eyes meant I was about to cry. "You betray the gifts that God and Donna Joy and myself have given you. That is your flaw, Pamela. Do you hear me?" I had placed my left pointer finger dangerously close to her clavicle and I saw her eyes graze down to my wedding ring and French manicured nail. One tear fell under my right eye, but otherwise, I'd ceased crying.

"That's how you're a bullshitter, Rox. My ass, independent business ladies. Con artist. Scheme...scan. Scam," she said, grasping for basic English language under her intoxicated and mortifying circumstance. "Scam!" She yelled the word as if I were a male predator and she was calling for immediate relief. I took a deep breath.

"Dear Heavenly Father, in the name of you I pray. I am grateful for the opportunity to spend this time with Pamela Coffman, and for granting me the grace and wisdom to share with her the infinite glory of Donna Joy skin care products. Lord, please, I ask of you now the faith to help her gain focus, Father. I pray to you from within and for all eternity. Amen." My hand was on Pamela's shoulder and my eyes had been closed. When I opened them, Pamela was smirking and then began slowly clapping.

"You're talking to God, Roxanna Banana. I love it. I loved it." She looked to the sky and I saw her neck skin stretch vertically. "God, are you listening? Thank you for making me part of this crap and for letting me see the light-" here Pamela began a horrific pantomime of prayer and hand raising that made my face tighten until I remembered what Dr. Rosenberg had recently said about laugh lines—"Oh happy day!" she sang. "Oh happy day! I quit! I quit Donna Joy, Donna Jo, Donna Ho, Donna Blow me." She put both her thumbs in a down position and blew out a raspberry that smelled like beer and caused several pieces of spittle to land near my kiwi colored capris. I grabbed her hands and shushed her.

"Oh, no you don't, Pamela." A chime sounded from the clubhouse, which meant there were only five more minutes of intermission. "You do not quit my cluster, do you understand me? I have prayed for you. I rely on you." My eyes were glued to hers and did not blink.

Her lips were sealed but peeled back into a smile, and her eyes were soft. For a moment, this calm state of her face, along with her sideswept bangs and the tiniest glint of her hoop earrings through her brown hair made Pamela look less like a woman who drove a run down Yugo and almost like a particular popular rock star whose lyrics endorsed stolen kisses from bad boys in tight pants. "That's right, Rocky. You do rely on me. And all my white trash friends you made me take advant...advantage of, the ones you made me steal from."

"No, no! It is not stealing, it never was. You empowered them, Pamela. Through the work of the good Lord, you blessed them with their own independent businesses. They were in your tier and you gave them the gift of financial independence. You, Pamela, you did that."

"Hey Foxy Roxy, you know they haven't sold any of their products yet. If I quit, you'll have to forfeit...forfeit them in your...cloister...cluster" She started to laugh suddenly, doubling over, then stood up with huge eyes and sang "You'll have to pay them back! Oh, ho, ho, ho. All of the...Oh, thank you lord, that's...." Inexplicably, she sat on the ground, legs in front of her, the flare of her blue jeans leafing out to the sides.

"Get up, get up, Pamela!" I knew it was almost time to get back into the auditorium. Rick would be looking for me, and I hadn't yet thought of a way to make an excuse about Pamela, about whom he had warned me when I told him I'd onboarded her.

"Don't. She's trash," he'd said, and then I'd just tsked and told him that was typical husband talk, rooted in jealousy for my new business lady independence.

"The play," I said. "Let's get you a Tab and you can sit by me in the back row. Come on." But Pamela wouldn't get up, and when I tried to pull her up by the hands, she was dead weight that I didn't believe I could handle. "Pamela!" I let go of her hands and she folded backwards, laying flat on the concrete path, a scarecrow of fading denim and bad choices. The lights in the clubhouse flashed and I saw Brenda dragging the rubber doorstep in by her heeled foot to close the door.

Pamela was taking in staggered, wet breaths on the ground. A park employee made rounds on the hour, and would find her in about ten minutes, according to my lilac Casio. I wiped my hands on my thighs, thinking of what kind of things I might have caught by having touched Pamela and her clothing. I walked the 100 or so feet to the clubhouse door, past the sandwich sign listing the show's dates and times. There were three more performances of 'Peter Pan'. Quickly, I counted the names of five women who had been in Pamela's tier. Five times five hundred dollars I'd have to refund personally if Pamela formally quit. As the lights dimmed for the start of Act 2, I silently asked God for his guiding hand in connecting with drama booster club mothers who were ready to accept his—our—generous offer of financial freedom so they could become independent business ladies. I prayed for Pamela Coffman to reconsider her relationship with the bottle. And last I prayed the hardest for Christopher to please speak more clearly in Act Two.