

108 Worldly Desires

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Fey changed the A in her name to E when she turned forty-seven, because that was exactly how she felt. Crazy, yes, the word *fey's* most common definition. But also suddenly undoubtedly fated to die, the lesser known definition. Fey wanted to strap on a leather bra and garter and howl at the moon. She wanted to dance on tabletops to an admiring mixed-gender audience and she wanted to spoon in dark corners with a man whose name she wouldn't ever know. She wanted to travel to places she couldn't pronounce, and she wanted to sit on the edge of her bed, the same bed she'd slept in for the last fifteen years, in the same house she'd lived in for the last thirteen, where she wanted to drop her face into her hands and cry with the abandon of a five-year old for all the things she hadn't done, hadn't known, hadn't heard about. She wanted to cry because she was going to die, and it was closer now than it was ten years ago. Her life was probably half over; living past ninety-four seemed unlikely, despite all the centenarians who appeared on the good morning news shows.

Watching one of those shows on a snowy morning as she put off going to work until the last possible minute, Fey learned that there are 108 Worldly Desires. During a report on how different cultures celebrate the New Year, the newscaster said that Japan had a tradition of ringing bells on New Year's Eve to drive the 108 Worldly Desires out of the country. But he didn't speculate on what they were.

Fey thought of this as she drove to work. She knew of the Seven Mortal Sins, of course...anyone raised in the Catholic faith did, having to memorize them in catechism class between cookie and milk time and dipping one's head in prayer. They were Lust, Gluttony, Avarice, Sloth, Wrath, Envy and Pride. But that left 101 of the 108 and Fey began to wonder again what it was she'd missed. If she added in the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, another vivid vision from her childhood, that would still leave 97. The Four Horsemen were War, Famine, Pestilence and Death. Fey could see how War and Pestilence could maybe be seen as a Worldly Desire, but Famine and Death? So that brought her back up to 99. She could, of course, toss in the Ten Commandments, but there was so much of a crossover there to the Seven Mortal Sins. Even if she counted all Ten Commandments as unique individuals, she still had 89 Unknown Desires. How could she live to be 47 and not know 108 Worldly Desires? It was bad enough she didn't know them intimately...she didn't know them intellectually as well.

When Fey got to work, she dropped without ceremony into her chair, a brown tweed that had seen many better days. Life as a travel agent was nowhere close to what it used to be before Travelocity and Expedia and Priceline and William Shatner started encouraging everyone to be their own travel professional. Most days were filled now with trying desperately to drum up new business, and keeping happy the few diehards who felt that Fey served them better than the web. Fey saw The End coming, and she was studying for her real estate license.

On this day, after her computer booted up, Fey googled 108 Worldly Desires. Websites came up from all over, but none of them provided a list. Most just gave general descriptions, including how the number 108 came to be, which was through math so complicated, Fey just couldn't follow it.

She spent her morning alternately looking at the Worldly Desire sites, studying real estate, and talking with new clients...a sweet couple who were so damn young, they were kind of scared of the internet. They sat before her desk and the boy (Fey just couldn't call him a man...he had to be only 22 or so) talked in a hushed voice about identity theft and important reservations lost in the ether, and next to him, the girl (not a woman) nodded and clutched his elbow. He explained they were getting married, which made the girl smile, and they wanted to book a cruise for their honeymoon. "Alaska," he said, and finally the girl spoke for herself. "Because I think it's romantic, and I want to see the polar bears. They're so cute!"

They were going on their honeymoon, and from the freckles and blushed cheeks in front of Fey, these were virgins. After their Grand Discovery on their wedding night, they'd spend most of the time in their suite on the cruise ship, polar bears be damned, and when they came back, Fey just might have to call them Man and Woman.

After sending them on their way with a receipt and an itinerary, Fey decided to celebrate her rare sale by going out to lunch, spurning her usual cup of yogurt and chips. As she sat in the food court of the mall, she watched all the people over the lid of her Rocky Rococo box. She looked for 108 Worldly Desires.

But she didn't see anything new. There were teens who made her think of shoplifting, and teens who made her think of raw unprotected sex. There was the fat man who sat a few rows down, at the handicapped table so he could have a loose chair that could be pushed back to accommodate his belly. There was a Winter-Spring couple who held hands and pressed their foreheads together in a corner by a potted fake fern. Fey noticed the glint of a ring on Winter's finger, and the pale empty skin of Spring's. And there were the dowdy-coated mothers who walked by, dragging screaming, wailing, rubber-legged children. The mothers' lips were drawn in a line so taut, Fey couldn't help but wonder what would happen when they got to their cars. To the children. And to the mothers, when they got home.

But those were just the usual sins and crimes. Nothing new. Nothing that came even remotely close to adding up to 108.

When Fey returned to work, she picked up a message from a regular client looking for a trip to Hawaii over New Year's, four weeks away. Fey started to look, using the internet that the client could look at too, but paid Fey instead, and then she popped back over to Google and the list. She read again about Japan, and ringing a bell on New Year's Eve to cleanse the country of the 108 Worldly Desires. Japan.

And that solved it. The agency would be closed from right before Christmas to just after New Year's. Fey had vacation coming. She received discounts because of being a travel agent. And for all her desire to howl at the moon, she had no plans for the holidays. She would go to Japan. On New Year's Eve, she would cruise the bars and find a native, someone older than forty, and she would ask for clarification. For a listing, a recitation, one after the other, of the 108. What would number 1 be? Would it be worse than number 108? Were they ranked in order of badness from 1 to 108, or 108 counting backwards to 1?

Going on a search for 108 Worldly Desires wasn't dancing on the table to a mixed-gender audience, but it was something. It would have to do.

Fey chose Sapporo because she didn't know how to pronounce it and she arrived there two days after Christmas. She stayed in a lovely room, large and lush, king-sized bed,

chaise lounge, huge claw-footed tub, and a balcony that she could stand and shiver on. Sapporo was a beautiful town, not too big, not too small, loaded in arts and culture. It had an incredible underground shopping mall. And there were many bars for ringing in the New Year, ringing out the 108. If she'd chosen to come in February, she would have been treated to the Snow Festival, when the entire town became a snow museum, filled with ice and snow sculptures of pieces of Japanese history. Fey was sorry she was going to miss that, but she reminded herself of her search for the 108, and so she set to wandering around, checking out the bars for atmosphere and age ranges, and selecting a game plan for New Year's Eve.

She took in the culture too, of course. At 47, Fey felt that she couldn't afford to miss anything. It was now or never. She went to the art museums, and corkscrewed her head and thought hmmm and ahhh and what the hell is that? She even bought a couple pieces to ship home. Going to the underground shopping mall, she marveled at the manners of the place. No pushing and shoving, but bows and nods if she were accidentally jostled, doors were held open, and she was given smiles and appreciative thank-yous. Japanese men of all ages glanced her way and she felt suddenly younger and valuable again. She maxed out a credit card or two. But what the hell, she thought. She'd discovered you really do only live once, and so you might as well die poor and surrounded by wonderful things, and happy. You can't take it with you, but at least you can have it while you're here.

On the 29th, two days before New Year's Eve, she met a man, another American tourist, who ate at the next table at dinner. He raised his wine glass to her, she raised hers to him, they went out for drinks after, and tumbled into her king bed at just after two in the morning. The sex was good and Fey reveled in what must surely be one of the 108. When he brushed his lips against her cheek and said goodbye at daybreak, she smiled and snuggled further under the covers, the sweet smell of sex-soaked sheets lulling her to a lusty sleep. He was flying back that morning, he lived somewhere on the west coast, she didn't have a name or a number or an email, and she didn't care. He'd admired, she'd accepted, it wasn't love, it was desire, a Worldly Desire, and she experienced it and was happy.

On New Year's Eve, she dressed carefully and with American flair. A tiny dress made entirely of silver sequins that weighed more than it looked. Deep v-neck, deep v-back, she applied bits of poster tape to the tops of her shoulders to ensure the straps would stay up. The dress stopped a scant inch or two below her buttocks and she relished the way her legs could move so freely. For 47, she decided, she looked pretty damn good. Surely a good-looking Japanese male, hopefully a male who knew the secrets of the 108, would fall for a tall all-American woman in full shimmer.

She worked her way through the planned map of bars and she danced and she drank. In dark corners and dark booths and dark back doorways, she nuzzled men and let men nuzzle her as she asked them her set of questions:

- 1) How long have you lived in Japan? (She looked for the answer, "All my life.")
- 2) How old are you? (She wanted forty and above, but when one zealous twenty-something pushed aside her strap, popping her poster tape, and placed his mouth on her breast, she allowed it for a bit until a picture of the 22-year old freckled groom popped into her head and planted itself suckling on her nipple, and she smacked the boy away and moved on, without her poster tape).

- 3) Are you well-versed in Japanese traditions? (Of course, she wanted yes.)
- 4) What are the 108 Worldly Desires? (She had a pad of post-its in her evening bag for writing them down. She also had a supply of condoms.)

Nuzzle and grope, kiss and fondle, left her wet and loopy, but none the wiser. In one dark alley, she lost her second poster tape as her straps were pulled aside and down and her breasts lifted and licked in rapture, and she raised her face and howled at the New Year's silver moon. It stunned the man she was with, and he paused for a moment, but then returned to his work, sliding his hands up her thighs. In a bar in the middle of the map, she climbed on a table and danced, her straps shimmying and her hem slithering. When she fell with abandon into the admiring crowd, she was caught and kissed again and again, by men and women alike. But her question, what are the 108 Worldly Desires, only brought a few of the already familiar items, and no more.

At a few minutes before midnight, she stumbled with the others out into the street. There was no glittering ball drop here, no Times Square, but all waited for the ringing of the bells. The temperatures were cold and Fey clasped herself at the elbows to keep from shivering, which failed. Then a man dropped his jacket over her shoulders.

"You looked cold," he said, and stood next to her, his arm tucked around her waist.

She smiled her thanks and looked him over. He was Japanese, check. He looked over forty, check. He didn't appear to be drunk, he seemed very self-assured, so he could be a knowledgeable man, half-check.

And then the bells began to ring. The crowd stood in silence, rained on by the sound and the sanction, bells from everywhere, clanging in uneven rhythm, a wild sound, an angry clamorous sound, and Fey pictured the 108 Worldly Desires raising up and running out of Japan, like snakes following St. Patrick and his pipe. The man next to her tightened his grip, and when Fey looked over, he had his head bowed, as if in prayer.

When the bells stopped, everyone stood for a moment more, and then, in an exhausted hush and whisper, they turned back to the bars. Fey turned too, but then she looked up at the man. "Is there a place around here with good coffee?"

"Sure," he said, and he led her to a Starbucks.

Fey sighed in the familiar, the green and the black and the chrome, even though the baristas were mostly short and dark-haired and had faces as sharp as triangles. The man seated her in a red suede chair, then went up to place her order. A grande cinnamon dolce latte. Whipped cream. Extra hot. When he returned with their drinks, he scooted out the table next to her, pushed another suede chair in its place, then sat directly beside her, as if they were on a comfy loveseat in front of the fireplace. They held their mugs in their outer hands; on their shared armrest, they entwined fingers.

"I'm Joe," he said.

Of course he was. "I'm Fey," she said. The coffee was thick and sweet, and as the heat of the fire and the heat of the drink and the warmth of his hand draped her, Fey found herself suddenly wanting to cry.

Joe nodded toward his jacket, still clutching Fey's shoulders. "You shouldn't be out in this weather without a coat," he said. "You must be from America."

"I am," she said. "But I had a coat. I lost it somewhere." She knew where, actually; it fell off her shoulders in a heap when the overeager boy latched himself to her

nipple, and in her hurry to get away, she'd left the coat behind. "Why must I be from America?"

"You all seem to think that vacation spots are always warm and tropical."

They sat and sipped and stared at the fire. "So why are you here?" Joe asked. "Ringing in the New Year by yourself?"

Fey nodded. "It's silly, actually, and I suppose now you'll think all Americans are silly too."

He smiled. Maybe he already did. But his hand was warm.

"A month or so ago," Fey said, "I heard about the 108 Worldly Desires. The ones that were just all rung away. And I want to know what they are. I couldn't find any answers on the internet, so here I am. I thought maybe I could find someone who knew." She turned toward him, slipping sideways in her chair, and his hand fell from the armrest to her thigh. "Do you know? You seemed to be thinking, praying maybe, when the bells were going off."

His fingers began making slow circles. "I don't think anyone knows what they are, specifically. It's just a number. It all comes down to one thing, really."

"Just a number?"

He explained, like the internet, the complicated math. She still didn't understand it. "It was just a way to give a number to something, to make it feel more real. The way it feels more real to say, *She looked gorgeous in her silver sequined dress*, than it does to say *She was gorgeous*."

Fey shifted a little and his hand slid smoothly down the inside of her thigh. He tucked himself up to the knuckles between her leg and the chair cushion, and it was comfortable. "So it comes down to one thing?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "Evil. Each year, the bells ring out the evil in our country. And we start over, until it needs to be rung out again."

"And it has to be rung out every year," she said. "Because evil always comes back. Doesn't seem like a very good system." She thought again of St. Patrick. He only had to rid Ireland of the snakes once, didn't he?

"Oh, but see, that's the beauty of it. The beauty of evil, and of living side by side with it, side by side with evil and grace, really, sandwiched by them. Turning toward one, turning toward the other." He pulled his coat more tightly around her and it was like she was being embraced. "I think of evil as a hot bath. It's something you dip into every now and then, relish and enjoy, and then it cools and you step away clean and let it run down the drain. But you know there will always be another bath. You enjoy and are cleansed, you enjoy and are cleansed. Just like the bells every year. And as you get in and out of the tub, as you rotate between evil and grace, you get to experience everything."

When he kissed her, she let him, and when his hands slid under his own jacket, she allowed that too. Back in her room, they came together and melted, came together and roasted, came together and whispered laughs and obscenities and hints and abstractions. In the morning, Joe was gone, but his jacket was draped over her, on top of the sheets, the blankets, the coverlet, and his taste was in her mouth and his scent on her fingers and she was as warm and limp as any twenty-year old with all of her life in front of her.

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Back at home, Fey hung Joe's jacket in her bedroom closet, and from time to time, she wore it like a beloved bathrobe. She got her real estate license and began to sell houses, she got a new coat and a cat and a convertible (not red) and she ate chocolate. She hung wind chimes outside her bedroom window. She returned the A to her name, and then, feeling sorry for the abandoned E, she tacked it to the end. With maybe half of her life left (she didn't know anymore and she no longer wanted to measure and estimate), Faye slipped into Evil like a hot bath, soaked and drank wine and deep hot coffee, and then listened to the bells as she rocked into sleep and woke into the day.