

Independence Day

by Bosely Gravel

Marisha likes to press the bruises one by one as she counts them, whispering the numbers in Russian. The pain of each bruise is something unique, like the complex flavor of good red wine. She likes to people watch through the big picture window as she counts. Marisha is nineteen years old, five-foot three and weighs a hundred pounds. Her face is too angular for traditional beauty, but there is a strength that seems to have focused in her dark brown eyes that makes up for it.

Outside there is no snow, there is rarely snows here, that was the first thing that made her realize just how far she was from home. When she gets to twenty-five she stops counting the bruises. An older couple walk by, they have a large chocolate colored Labrador on a leash. She pulls back so they won't see her, she doesn't like the Americans to look at her, it always makes her feel awkward, clumsy. Further still in the middle of the street two boys, not more than twelve years old, kneel close to the ground and light tiny firecrackers that dance as they spew intense greens and reds. She is frightened for the children, they seem so careless, so unafraid —

"Mari!" Owen yells from TV room. "I told you to stay away from that window."

He speaks in English and she doesn't understand the exact meaning of the words, but the tone of voice makes it perfectly clear. She pulls the curtain closed and goes to him. He has turned off the TV, and is staring at the dusty screen as he takes a swig of cheap vodka from a plastic jug.

"Why do those children light fireworks?" she asks in Russian taking

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care to speak simply and softly. He replies in broken sentences with long pauses as he draws the words from the depths of his vodka hazed mind.

"Fourth of July ... a war against the weak-chinned-inbred-crumpet-eaters," (he says this part in English and it means nothing to her), "We try to remember this country had a backbone once, not now, nothing but a bucket of stinking cunt, that's what we are ..." He goes on for some minutes. She sits down at his feet and looks up at him, feigning interest, understanding almost nothing of what he is saying. Between words he sucks on the bottle of vodka until he his tongue trips him up.

The vodka is a blessing and sorrow all in one, it splinters Owen into three distinct pieces, she thinks. She forces a smile and watches him drink the liquor down. Owen the First is kind and sociable. He likes to talk and tell her about America, often he will describe elaborate fantasies of what they will do with all the money when his latest project comes to fruition. They will be very rich, he says, live in a big house and have a garden. She can love Owen the First.

Owen the Second is the worst of the three, he is unpredictable, his fists hard as stone, his voice cuts her down to the bone. Owen the Second's sexual desires are cruel and unfathomably sadistic. Sometimes it takes her weeks to heal from Owen the Second's agonizing touch. Even when she was sold by her father to the Russian Mafia, at age thirteen, to make good on a gambling debt, she had not experienced such fear of what a man might do to her next. Sometimes Owen the Second can't perform to his own satisfaction; Marisha pays the price. She is his patron saint, and this suffering is worth it to free Owen of his demons, even if it is for only a few hours. Not long ago, Owen the Second showed her a skull. He kept it in a brown cardboard box in the top of the closet. "My first wife," he said, and sneered, his lip bunching up around a scar just under his nose.

Often Owen the Third sobs in a great heavy mass wrapped around his precious Mari. She is gold, she is silver, she is all that is precious in the world. She is all that he has. Sometimes she cries with him to make him feel strong, other times because she feels sad for him. She rarely cries for herself. When he falls a sleep wrapped around her, she lies still, even though Owen the First and Second have no awareness of Owen the Third. She holds him as he snores; often he covers them both with warm piss as his bladder gives out in his sleep.

When she is in his arms she dreams of Owen the First and how they might have a dog and walk it on the street. Or of friends that might come for hot tea and cake. Her favorite reverie puts her back in Russia, as a child, her mother still alive. Sometimes her mother would say, "Marisha, it will be okay." She can dream anything when she is in Owen's arms, protected by him like a shell. She pretends she knows English and is not afraid of being seen by the Americans. She dreams Owen's latest project would come through. But in short time the piss becomes as cold as reality.

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An exceptionally loud bang of fireworks startles her. She resists the urge to go watch out the window. She makes Owen a sandwich, he is in the bathroom shaving and slapping on a great palmful of stinking cologne. He is going out tonight, to drink with his friends at a bar. When they first got to America she had asked to go with him so she could see more of this new place. He had laughed and made a startlingly quick transformation from Owen the First to Owen the Second. He forced her to her knees and emptied himself in quick strokes into her mouth, his caustic semen burning down her throat into her stomach.

"You're a house wife, that's what your papers say, besides we have

plenty of dumb sluts at the bar, we don't need another one," he said and grinned, then cuffed her upside the head almost playfully.

Marisha serves him the sandwich on chipped plate, a handful of potato chips on the side. He continues to drink vodka while he eats. She hopes he is at the bar before Owen the Second makes his inevitable appearance. She smiles and nods when he tells her she needs to shower because he was going to fuck her when he gets home.

Fireworks go off again, this time a string of them. The sounds remind her of the automatic rifles she watched her Mafia captors use. They liked to practice on young rabbits since they were fast and small. She can still see a vivid picture of their shredded body and blood cooling on the snow. They would let her hold them sometimes before they'd release them. She would pet the soft fur with her knuckles and whisper sweetness into their ears, assuring them everything would be okay. She learned to harden her heart in those days. She wonders where that strength is now. Perhaps beaten out of her, not by fists, but by circumstance, or perhaps only dormant. The ideas of her confuse her sometimes, there is so little of her left to consider.

Owen leaves the house; his sandwich half eaten, the stink of vodka and cologne still hangs in the air. It will be Owen the Second that returns to night, she knows. A few more drinks and it is all but inevitable, but at least until then she can watch kids out the window, and the people sitting on their lawns drinking beer. She wonders how they got so strong that they are able to sit out there in the open in front of the world.

She nibbles the rest of Owen's sandwich as she watches the sparkles and fountains of color spray illuminate the gloaming. She can smell cooking meat. There is a strange mixture of happiness for them, and a pity for Owen stirring in her chest. She wonders why she

doesn't feel bad for herself, but can come up with no meaningful reason. She continues watching, refusing to introspect any more deeply than the beauty of the bright colors of the fireworks, and the simple pleasure of summer.

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Owen the Second returns much sooner than she expects. He is bleeding. There is a long slash through the leather on the back of his jacket. His nose is flat across his face, he spits blood on the floor, followed by curses.

"Motherfucker cut me," he says. "Motherfucker cut me good."

He sits down on a kitchen chair breathing heavily and motions for his vodka. She hands it to him and he absentmindedly exchanges a bloody knife for the bottle.

"I got his blade though," he says and takes a long gurgling drink.

The knife is warm and sticky in her hand, the blood will congeal soon, making it difficult to open. She sets it down on the kitchen table and helps him take his jacket off. The wound goes through his shirt into the flesh of his back. It should have stitches, she sees, and wonders if he wants her to sew it up. She is willing and able; she has done it before.

"Get some iodine or something," he says in his terrible Russian. She doesn't understand, so he back hands her and points to the bathroom. She wonders if he is angry because she hasn't showered, then realizes after he fumbles the Russian words again, he wants his wound treated. His eyes are angry thunder, a symphony gone bad, a star collapsing. She wonders if he thrives on his own pain the way he thrives on hers? She gets the bottle of iodine; he laughs when she dumps a cap full on the gaping wound.

"Mexicans," he says in English, "And their fucking knives. At least the niggers are men enough to use their fists. Motherfucking spics, good thing he didn't have a gun," he rambles on as she dabs around the slash. She tells him in Russian it should be treated by a doctor. He laughs again in a horrible forced bellow, and sucks down more vodka.

Through the curtains of the picture window she can see the flashes of light. She wants to go watch the kids again, she wants it more than she's wanted anything in a long time. When she finishes the wound on his back, he drops his pants and shows her a stab wound in his thigh. He spreads the hole open obscenely, and pours vodka down it, as he grits his teeth and sneers. The fireworks are growing louder now, great bangs and flashes of light. Between the bursts of noise she can hear dogs howling.

He gets up, cursing at the pain.

"I'm tired," he says and stumbles to the couch. She wonders how much blood he's lost before he got home. He leans gingerly against the couch, blood oozing from his wounds into the grime. He stays sitting instead of lying so that he can continue to drink.

"Mari," he motions for her the way he motioned for the vodka.

She looks to the curtains illuminated by the fireworks.

"No," she says in English.

"No?" he says, his eyes squinting. "You shouldn't ever tell me no."

She steps past a failed grasp, walks over to the curtain and peeks out. The children are lighting a dozen fireworks at once now. A handful of the younger children are waving sparklers in the air,

writing out their initials and smiley faces.

Owen tries to stand, but he is too weak.

"You stupid ugly bitch," he says and throws a stone coaster from the coffee table at her. It hits her in the back of the knee and stings brutally. She pretends the pain is not there.

"I said get the fuck over here." He throws another one, but she is prepared and ducks out of the way. It hits the window with a quiet cracking. The window spiderwebs, but does not shatter. She looks to him to see what fury this might have unleashed in him, but he seems unaware of the damage he has done. He is reaching for yet another coaster, the third in a set of four ... but as he leans to pick it up he slips and falls forward on to the coffee table and rolls onto the floor.

"Mari," he says after a full minute of her staring. He is Owen the Third now, there is no mistaking it. She can see fear and the self loathing floating on his face like rot on the top of a glass of bad milk. "Mari, help me. Don't be scared. Please don't be scared. I love you."

She looks at him, there is only one thing she knows that will help him. Only one thing she knows that will help put the broken Owens together again ... the knife on the kitchen table is cold in her hand, sticky, and indeed difficult to open. He watches her back as she opens up the blade and runs her finger along it. It's been crudely sharpened on a stone, she guesses, but the knife has held its edge.

"Please, I just want to hold you. I won't hurt you."

She comes to him, and lays down next to him, and drapes his huge arm over her like a blanket.

"Thank you," Owen the Third says, "Thank you," and he holds her tight. She looks up at his face, she hates that it is Owen the Third she sees, she wishes it was Owen the Second. But in life, she had realized quiet young, you don't always get what you want. His eyes are falling closed now, slowly, peacefully, despite the noise of the fireworks going off outside. She looks at his clean shaved throat and neck, and very humbly raises the knife and cuts from one side to the other in single smooth motion.

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Marisha is outside the house, she is wearing her best dress, and has her hair tied back in tight American style ponytail. She looks up at the sky as all the other people in the neighborhood do. At the nearby baseball field they are having a fireworks show, explosion after explosion paints the sky. Reds and blues, golds and greens. She has never seen anything like it before, not even on TV. It dawns on her that she has committed an incredible act of kindness and generosity, one that could never be offered to Owen again. She wonders which of them she has really set free.

She marvels at her own bravery standing in the street under this sky. She has earned this display, it is hers, she decides, as the sky explodes yet again in a galaxy of color.

THE END

