

Max & Julia

by Joe Sullivan

I heard the basketball hitting the pavement in the park across the street, right outside our window on Dean Street in Brooklyn. I heard it every day in an evenly spaced rhythm, as if it was keeping time, like a metronome on my life, on days spent in the house with the professor and the insane painter, Marco, whom my girlfriend Julia nicknamed “the sex offender” for his skeevy demeanor. He never left the house and it annoyed me.

It was late February and he was preparing for a show at one of the local galleries. For several weeks, I heard loud banging, wood crashing, early in the morning down in his room. I wondered what he was up to. Every night that we saw him, he was drunk and we couldn't get a straight answer out of him. His black hair was growing longer, and his blue eyes under his glasses squinted harder, while his mouth rose into a smirk when he'd find us eating dinner quietly in the decrepit kitchen, decades of neglect in the paint-chipped walls.

I wanted to run from those nights when he sat down slurring his words, pouring himself another glass of wine, waiting for us to entertain him. If we didn't, he'd start to mock us. His anger came out in sarcastic verbal abuse we ignored, at least for the time he was with us. He didn't handle his liquor well and it took him only two or three drinks to become obnoxious.

Julia was getting upset at our condition. She had begun to move restlessly about the house cleaning or rearranging things. Each week I would return home at night to find our bedroom rearranged, one or two items removed—stored, she said. To make the room “more wide open.” I agreed with this philosophy. The more wide open the room became, the less trapped I felt. I despised my days in that room, though. If it were night, it was a different story. But the days were unbearable—all the clanking and clattering come up from the bowels of the house, from the painter's studio or the

professor's room, which also billowed endless marijuana suffocation fumes that seemed to settle exactly where I sat, on the third floor.

This house was an American machine at its best, men moving materials, exhaust being expelled endlessly. I had been there much longer than Julia, who had basically just arrived. Before she decided to live with me, I had been vaguely planning on leaving. I had no idea why she, a refined woman, a true fine artist schooled as an actress, vocalist and dancer, would choose to settle in such a place. Though she would never admit it to me, I believed she was fleeing from her former home, a small three-bedroom in Murray Hill in Manhattan, where her two roommates couldn't stop themselves from over-involving themselves in her life. She had mentioned their inquisitions before, so I could infer it. That was exactly the sort of thing that, I knew, could drive her completely insane and cause an extreme move like coming to live in the old crumbling house with me.

I don't know why I had chosen to live in the house. I suppose it was because of my role as a freelance graphic designer and the inconsistent paychecks that made this place one of the few affordable to me in Brooklyn, still close to Manhattan. I can still remember that first day the painter showed it to me. I noticed the paint chipping, falling from the ceilings in both the bathroom and dining room. Somehow I thought: "This will be fine." And now Julia was here with me. But I knew it was only for me she was here and she found it all to be far from "fine."

Just a few weeks after she had moved in, Julia turned to me as we lay close about to sleep. She said, "I saw him again today, down in the kitchen."

"Marco?" I asked.

"Yes. He told me I looked nice and asked where I bought my dress. He said he liked the material. He reached out to touch it, but I pretended not to notice."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him it was from a thrift store up in Williamsburg. He smiled and repeated me. I hate it when he repeats me."

"Whaddyou mean?"

"I mean, the last thing I say, he repeats. Like if I say, 'I got this in a thrift store,' he says, 'Oh, a thrift store, you got it in a thrift store.' It's very annoying."

"Yeah, that would annoy me, too," I said.

"Plus, he's such a mess. He leaves pieces of food all over the counter. He's just a disaster."

"I know," I said. "What can we do about it, though? It's just how he is."

"I'm going to say something to him," Julia answered emphatically. "And I don't like how he spoke to me about my dress, either."

"Well neither do I. But you have to understand, he's a little awkward socially. I don't think his parents trained him or something."

"Or something. Whatever."

"Hey, we'll be out of here soon. When the spring comes, we'll get our own place."

"Well, I hope so," she said. "You didn't tell me Marco was like this."

"I didn't know he would be. Mostly I just avoided him before you arrived."

A while later, Julia had sunken into sleep and I was awake, left to ponder what I could do to make things more comfortable for her. The house itself was decaying, and having Marco bother her didn't make things any better. I couldn't come up with anything immediate that could fix the situation. But I figured I should talk to Marco. At least about his mess. Then about how he spoke to Julia. I would tell him she was a little shy and he should take it easy, make her feel comfortable. That's what I figured might be best.

The next morning, Julia was gone for work and I was left to fiddle around with a short book I'd been asked to design for a business publisher. Around two, I was hungry, and I ran into Marco in our kitchen. He had been especially quiet on this day and I hadn't been sure he was home. I watched him plunge into a salad with

walnuts and goat cheese. It amazed me how he managed to fit such large bundles of it onto his fork and then maneuver it all into his tiny, thin-lipped mouth. He seemed to be relishing it. After one or two mouthfuls had cleared his palate, he said, "How's it going, Dr. Wood?"

"It's fine. Fine. You don't have to call me Dr. Wood, though. You can call me Max, if you want."

Marco laughed. "I just like calling you doctor, for some reason. It seems to suit you."

"Well, whatever you want. Just know that I'm not a real doctor."

"I'll make a note of it," Marco said through another mouthful.

"Hey, listen," I said. "I don't know if you know this, but Julia's a real neat freak."

"No, I didn't know."

"Well, I guess all women sort of are," I continued. "She gets real antsy like if I leave clothes lying around. Or like if there's food left out on the counter. Or, you know, if stuff just isn't clean."

Marco was quietly munching and listening. I didn't say anything more and a moment passed. Finally he said, "Yeah, I suppose it's different living with a woman. They have different needs."

"Yeah," I said. "She's been on me about certain things. She just likes it all to be real clean around here."

"Well, I'll do my best," Marco said.

"Thanks. I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

"No problem," he said.

After winning that small victory, I didn't feel like bringing up how he'd spoken to Julia about her dress and even tried to touch it. I figured that could wait a while. I just said, "Well, thanks. I gotta go finish some work. I'll see you a little later." And that was that.

When Julia came home that night, I was on the couch in the front room watching TV. As soon as she came in the front door, I told her I'd spoken to Marco about his mess.

"Did you tell him you didn't like how he spoke to me about the dress?" she asked, unbuttoning her coat.

"No. I figured that'd be for another day. This is the only time it happened, right? He probably just wasn't thinking."

"You're not thinking," Julia said, voice lowered. "What if he acts this way towards me again? I'm already uncomfortable. Did you even think how this made me feel, Max? I'm afraid to be alone in the same room with him."

"Just because of that one incident?"

"Yes."

"I'll talk to him. But it seems to me he might've just made a mistake. He was really good about the cleaning stuff. I think you should give him another shot."

She wouldn't look at me after I said that. She draped her coat over her arm, then raised her head and looked out the front bay window, as if there was somewhere to be found on the streets of Brooklyn where she'd be escaping to. Finally she just shrugged and let out a sigh.

"It's going to be fine," I said.

She headed upstairs without saying a word to me, and we didn't speak for the remainder of the night. But when I saw her in the morning before she headed off to her temp job at the ad agency, she was back to her old self, singing as she got dressed and telling me she was glad the sun was out and that it was going to be a good day. She was in a good mood, and that put me in a good mood.

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I didn't see Marco for a few days, but finally, three days after I had promised Julia I'd talk to him, we ran into each other in the kitchen. Besides its decaying walls, the kitchen was extremely

narrow, which made it difficult for two people to be moving around at the same time. Marco didn't seem to mind it, though. He'd do whatever the hell he needed to do whether you were in the way or not. If I were washing dishes, he'd place his cup under the faucet. If I were making something, he'd decide to make something, too, and manage to make multiple trips around me, nearly into me, as he did it. This scattered, seemingly unaffected movement grated on me. It made me hate him, basically. He could never just wait. He had to be there, too.

On this morning, I took a new tack. I moved everything I needed out to the dining room and sat down to eat. Marco joined me without asking. And that was fine. I needed to talk to him. I sipped my tea and said, "Julia. She's very shy, you know?"

He raised his eyebrows and looked at me questioningly, while swallowing his cereal. "What do you mean?"

"I mean like, if you were to compliment her on what she was wearing. Like if you didn't know her too well. And you complimented her in a way that could be seen as excessive . . . well, she might not like that."

"Is this about the other night in the kitchen? I told her I liked her dress and she sort of made this face at me. There was nothing excessive. I was just trying to be nice."

"Well, that's fine," I said. "But just be careful when you see her. She can overreact sometimes."

"Mmm," he hummed.

"Sometimes she's just not in the mood."

"Not in the mood."

"To be complimented that way."

"Well what should I say?" Marco asked.

"Just ask her how she's doing . . . or no, don't even. Just say hello. Let her start the conversation. That would probably be much more comfortable for her."

"It really bothers her if I compliment her? Ask her how she's doing?"

"Sometimes," I said. "It all depends. She doesn't know you real well and she's shy. So just keep that in mind. It's no big deal. I'm not trying to tell you what to say . . ."

"You *are* telling me what to say."

"I'm telling you how to be. That's all. You two don't know each other and I'm just trying to smooth out any rough edges."

"Well I didn't know there were any," Marco said. "This is surprising to me. She's seemed perfectly pleasant when I've spoken to her."

"She is, she is. Just keep it in mind—her moods, her shyness. And don't under any circumstances touch her."

"Touch her?"

"Yes. She said you reached out to feel her dress."

"What? I didn't do that," Marco said.

"Well, she thought you did."

I could see him biting his tongue, wanting to say more but holding back. He said, "She can say what she wants, but that never happened. I'll be much more careful around her in the future. I'm sorry you think I would've done something like this, Max. I didn't."

"I believe you. I'm just telling you what she said. Maybe you're both just telling it how you saw it."

"Maybe. But I didn't do that."

"Well . . . good. It's not a big deal, anyway. I'm just telling you so you know, and so she'll be comfortable."

"I hope she is. I had no intention of making her uneasy."

"I've gotta get going," I said. "I'm meeting someone for a work interview. In the Village."

"Well, good luck," Marco said.

"Thanks," I said, as I moved to the kitchen to place my mug in the sink. I nodded to him and left while he'd gone back to eating his cereal. I didn't really have anyone to meet that day. I just wanted to get away from him and from the house.

I took a long walk several blocks to Prospect Park. I bummed a cigarette from an older man who was walking his dog and afterward I sat on a bench smoking. It gave me a headache. I

didn't believe Marco, really. I thought he *had* tried to touch Julia's dress after commenting on the fabric. It was in his character to do something like that. As for Julia though, I knew she could get overexcited. It wasn't a good match to have both of them in the same house. He, a ready instigator. She, easily excitable. Some sort of combustion experiment, it seemed.

I spent half of the day in the park people-watching and thinking about things. Then I got a sandwich from a nearby coffee shop and headed home. Marco was gone. There was rat shit all over the counter near where he'd spilled sugar for his coffee. I wiped it all up and washed my hands.

Julia came home that night into our bedroom. I was on the bed skimming a book about astrology and historical events—it was a book whose jacket I was designing. I told her I'd spoken to Marco.

"What did you tell him?" she asked, after placing herself on the edge of the bed next to me.

"I told him you were shy, and that he should try to make you comfortable. I also told him not to touch you."

"What did he say to that?"

"He denied trying to touch your dress."

"That bastard."

"I ended the conversation before he got too worked up. I think he took it fine."

"What else did he say?"

"Not much. I don't think he'll be bothering you again."

"Oh wonderful," Julia said. "I feel so much better. Let's go out to eat. Let's have a drink!"

After Julia changed clothes, we headed to an Italian place a few blocks away and got drunk on wine. For dinner I had veal and Julia didn't say anything. Usually she protested if I ate baby cows raised inhumanely. She had the much more vegetarian caprese salad and some kind of bruschetta with eggplant. She told me about her day at work and I sat listening attentively. I didn't have much to add to any of the goings-on at her office. It sounded like, being the office

temp, she got to hear everyone else's gossip, and they all trusted her with their secrets. We came home and there was a note on our bedroom door for Julia from Marco. It simply said, "Julia, let's talk."

"Well that's good," I said. "He probably wants to make sure there are no hard feelings."

"I don't want to talk to him," she said.

"I'm sure it'll be fine."

"I don't want to."

"Well do what you want," I said. She put her hand on my cheek after I said that, as if to say thank you. Then she moved it down to my chest, then my abdomen.

Minutes later, we were undressing. It was the wine. Without a word, we were on each other, in our vice grip, 'til it was over and she was snoring.

