

The Chain's Embrace

“I miss him already,” Mariya said. She twisted her curly brunette hair into a bundle and draped it over her bare shoulder. The ends grazed her pink tube top. She pressed the soft skin beneath her eyes with her fingertips. Dry. Why always dry now? She turned back into the front entrance of the dim, tobacco-stained lobby of the hotel. She stared at Iryna and the man with her.

“Maybe he comes back. See you again,” Iryna said in English. Iryna clung to the man, her tight green party dress slightly crooked on her hips. One of the dress's shoulder straps had torn and a patch of sequins at the base of strap was missing. She nudged the man with her elbow.

The man's eyes widened. He cleared his throat, tried to wet his tongue. “Yeah. He might come back, you know. The company sends us here now and then.” He cleared his throat harder and squeezed his saliva glands with his neck muscles. Cheap rum. Cheap Korean cigarettes. He couldn't shake the taste. When the two girls spoke in Ukrainian, he wondered if they were talking about him. He looked at Iryna and took a deep breath through his nose. Sweet powder and perfume. Liquor. Sweat. Sex. He fiddled with his wedding ring in his pants pocket. His fingers smeared sweat and oils on the gold.

The girls talked. Iryna removed her arms from the man and stood close to Mariya. She placed her hand on the girl's cheek and stroked it. A peach. Why such a beautiful peach? Mariya brushed Iryna's hand from her face. She turned and stared through the revolving door at the dawn and the growing mass of commuters. Ragged slacks and long skirts. Dry hands. Cheap suits. Worn leather soled shoes. Red faces. Black hair. Homogenous. Dry and cold.

The man checked his watch. Suitcase packed. Showered last night with Iryna. Didn't count for hygiene. Tickets in jacket pocket. Tip or not? She seems nice. Poor girl. Some unspent

Won in wallet. Might be twenty American. Maybe a little less. Enough? Sure. Checklist complete. “Hey,” he said. He cleared his throat, grunting. He reached for Iryna’s arm “I have to get going.” He blushed, stared at the floor, the door, the glass chandelier. He glanced at her face. Then at Mariya’s. “I have to catch my flight. Here. It’s all I have left.”

“Oh...sure...ok.” Iryna examined him, jaw slack as he handed her a wad of Won. She grasped the soft, soiled bills. She sneered at the wad before tucking it into her bra. “Please tell your friend that she will call and email him.”

“Oh, sure,” the man said. “You, uh, have his number and stuff?”

The girls chatted in Ukrainian. “Yes. Yes. She has his card,” Iryna said.

“I’ll tell him when I see him next.” The man put his hands in his pockets and glanced at Iryna from under his brow. He moved toward her, drawing his face to hers, and kissed her. She patted his back with one hand.

The girls watched him walk across the lobby to the elevator. When the doors opened he stepped inside. He kept his head down and pressed the button labeled “F” between the five and three.

“You kiss him?”

“Yes.” Iryna shrugged and curled her upper lip.

“You kiss everyone?”

“Most. Makes no difference.” Iryna shrugged again. “Business.”

“I never kiss.” Mariya looked away. Sore neck. Sore feet. Stilettos. Stilettos. Sore legs. Sore inside. “But I kissed him last night.” She fingered her curls and sighed. “Should we go?”

Iryna nodded. “Yes. Before he calls Agi.”

She nodded in the direction of the hotel's owner—a fat, balding Korean man. The man had started taking a share of girls' earnings. Get it while it's there, eh. Rumor has it the base is closing. Slow times to come. Oh. Bad times, eh. Bad times. Take what I can, eh. When girls made too little to pay cash, he'd escort them into a vacant room, grinning. He grinned now as he stood behind the counter. A gold canine glinted in the fluorescent light; it had been a dark rotten hole two months earlier.

“Your stay's up, eh.” He grunted at them in Korean and then in broken Russian. “You must pay an overstay fee.” He flipped open his cell phone.

“Please, old man,” Iryna said in rough Korean. “We're at the door. We're leaving now.”

“No. You overstayed. You in the green, you overstayed last week. I gave you a break then, eh. This time I'm calling Agi.”

“Come,” Iryna said. She grabbed Mariya's thin wrist and led her into the revolving door. They shuffled between the glass panels, their black stilettos clacking in step until they exited with a burst of air. “We should eat before we go to the house.”

“What about Agi?” Mariya asked. “It's almost eight.”

“Agi's not going to feed us if that old rapist really calls,” Iryna said.

“I suppose. But...” Mariya's bottom lip quivered. She held Iryna's hand. “Ok. Eat first, and then hurry to the house.”

“The house! The house!” Iryna squeezed Mariya's hand and tugged her arm. “Why do you want to rush there? Enough about the house. How about some soup?”

Mariya nodded.

They turned down an alleyway lined with the dim facades of noodle houses and soup shops. Slick pavement. Trash cans. Feral cats. No tails. Rusted metal roofs. Soot. Steam and the

residue from greasy smoke filled the windows. When the girls entered one of the shops, the old woman behind the counter glared at them. Flat lips. Eyes like coal. Hard cheeks. Jaw clenched. The girls ordered two large beef soups. The woman slid them two small bowls, half-filled, and charged them for larges.

Iryna's stomach tightened. Her throat. The pressure of a scream built and hissed up her esophagus. But her mouth released the scream as a sigh. Her head drooped. Dirty asbestos tiles. Open-toed stilettos. Vinyl scuffed on all sides. Dry toes. So hard to keep them nice. Chipped toenail. Bruised shin. Pale. Rug burn. So hard to keep them nice.

Mariya took the soups. The old woman crossed her arms and watched Mariya lead Iryna to the short wooden stools at the window counter. Iryna hung her head over her soup. Her insides heaved. She squeezed her eyelids together until purple spots appeared. Nothing. Not even the meniscus of a tear. She thought about the church at home. Gold domes. Idols. Incense. Somber old women. Candles flickering. Heavy wood door creaking. Rays of light beaming in through the doorway, illuminating the idols in the far corner. Her silhouette. Her daughter's silhouette. Whispers. Whispers.

Mariya prayed. She placed her hand on Iryna's thigh.

Agi was waiting at the door of the house—a second-floor apartment where the fifteen girls who worked at the Zone Bar downstairs lived. It had four rooms, a kitchen nook built into a closet, one bathroom, and one small hot water radiator. Each room had four cot-like beds, metal frames bolted into rutted floor planks. One door. Four locks. All locked from the outside. Agi sat at a small table near the door, twirling her shiny black hair with the fingers of her left hand. She drummed the bright pink nails of her right hand on the table. A man with slicked, graying hair sat

beside her. He had his hands in the pockets of his leather coat, rubbing his fingers together. He sat thinking about Agi. Her thin legs. Her wet mouth. Skilled hands. Her gold necklace and cross hanging low, directing his eyes to her breasts. Tiny breasts. But worth the paperwork. Worth the time. Better than tracking petty thieves or following-up on complaints. Much better than sitting at the station. Predecessor was right. Oh, the perks. Oh, the perks!

Iryna and Mariya climbed the dusty wooden stairs stilettos in hand. Each step a shared heartbeat. A hard thump through their bodies. The heartbeat stopped when they crested the flight and saw Agi and the man at the table in the hall.

“You’re late,” Agi said in Russian. She raised her hand as Iryna opened her mouth. “No! Mr. Lee from the Sunset Hotel called. You overstayed and didn’t pay. Now Detective Yoo is here and he wants to arrest you if no one compensates Lee. Now I have to fix this for the sake of our family.”

Yoo nodded and examined the two girls. His eyes fell on Iryna’s bare shoulder, the broken strap hanging over her breast. Neither girl had seen this detective before. Screams filled Mariya’s head as Yoo’s gaze removed her clothes. Iryna’s face dulled. Again, she thought. Another detective. Another man. Another set of rules. Puffy cheeks and chin. Too much soju. Might not feel him. Or, at least, not for long.

“Do you know how much the fine is?” Yoo asked. “Agi, translate.” He lit a cigarette, pulled hard, and smiled in his smoke.

The girls shook their heads.

“One...hundred...thousand...Won,” Yoo said. Agi caught her jaw. Yoo chuckled. It loosened something in his chest and he coughed. He smiled. “The rate has gone up. I guess my

predecessor didn't tell you." Agi stared. "Agi, why aren't you translating?" His smile fell and his face hardened.

"One hundred fifty thousand Won," Agi said. She sighed.

Mariya's knees wobbled.

"He didn't say that," Iryna said in their local dialect. "He said one hundred thousand."

"What does it matter?" Mariya said. "It's still too much."

"Your boss, Agi, has agreed to settle this with me on your behalf. And I will take care of Mr. Lee. But if you overstay again and I hear about it..." He paused for Agi to translate. "If I have to go out of my way and waste my time... I will not be so forgiving. You will deal with me directly at the station. And who knows maybe we need to check your visa status."

"But Agi took our paperwork!" Mariya shouted in Ukrainian. Iryna grabbed her arm.

"What did she say, Agi?" Yoo asked. His face was still hard. Sweat beaded on his brow.

"Something about her papers." She looked at Yoo. Sweaty forehead. Sausage fingers. Double chin. Bloodshot pig eyes. She grasped her thighs and cringed.

"Well, Agi, I think we can address that issue too," Yoo said. A tight smile stretched over his top teeth. He placed one of his hands on Agi's, enveloping it. His fingertips probed Agi's thigh. Soft skin. Older than expected. Used. Still soft. Still quite warm. Oh, the perks! "Tell them to go, Agi. I have a busy schedule." He lifted his hand.

Agi stood. She unlocked the four locks. "You two better rest now, so you can make double tonight."

The girls walked toward the door. Agi grabbed Iryna's arm, letting Mariya enter.

"I blame you," Agi said. "You know better. You ruined this dress. And look at those toenails. I'll have the nail lady here at noon. Pick a new dress off the racks. You'd better have a

big night tonight.” She looked at Iryna’s teeth. Her hips. Her legs. The bruise on her left shin. Red knees. The red line of raised skin where the shoulder strap had been. She lifted Iryna’s arms by her wrists and looked under them. She shook her head. “I had high hopes for you.”

“Time is money, Agi,” Yoo said, standing now. He adjusted his slacks.

“Go!” Agi said. She ushered Iryna across the threshold, closed the door, and locked the four locks. She turned to Yoo. Pig eyes. Sausage fingers. Bump in his pants. “Follow me to my office.”

Yoo followed. His hard face cracked. A schoolboy grin emerged. He watched Agi’s slender hips shift in her white cocktail dress as she led him down the hall.

Mariya woke. The man beside her slept. His face lay in a ring of drool. A film of sweat covered his back. A trashcan sat near the head of the bed. Used condoms. OB cans. Cigarette packs. A half-digested cheeseburger soaked in tonic water and gin. The smell had penetrated Mariya’s dreams. The village landfill. An incinerator. Dumpsters. Streets slick with market waste. Her sister jumping across the slimy gutters. Her mother buying cabbage. Her father drinking. His heavy hands. Bruises on her sister’s face. On her thighs. Faces of men. Feet. Arms and legs tangled. Slick skin. A line of cots. A wooden doll. Long hair burned. Arm missing. Iryna.

She sat up and pulled her green tube top over her breasts. She slipped out of bed, straightened her panties, retrieved her skirt from the other bed, and stepped into it. She tapped the man’s shoulder. Nothing. She found her purse and sat on the other bed beside the nightstand. She removed a business card from her purse. Her hands trembled and sweat. She looked at the man.

“Hey!” She called.

Snoring.

Mariya lifted the phone. She dialed the number on the business card, charging the call to the room. Ringing. Ringing. Sweat soaked her palms. Her chest fluttered. Her stomach twisted. Voicemail. Air surged from her lungs. Three languages jumbled in her head. Which one? Oh... Hello this is so and so, blah, blah, blah. Leave a message. Blah, blah. Oh... Which one? English. English. Beep.

“Uh, hello? This is Mariya. Do you remember me? We met two days before. Please call... uh.” What number? What number? The house? No. Hotel? How? Oh. “Uh... Please email the one on the paper I give you. I...can call again...tomorrow morning” The man in bed stirred. Mariya’s lips trembled. “Ok. I have to go.” She snapped the phone down. Her stomach loosened and gurgled. She pressed the soft skin beneath her eyes. Dry. Why always dry now? The man rolled and looked at her.

“You ok?” the man asked.

“I have to go now,” Mariya said.

“Now? I don’t have to work today. What if I buy you breakfast?”

“No. Thank you. I have to go back to my house by eight.”