

The Point

It was a Friday night like any other, this time in a bar called The Drop Zone. Katarina sat at a table in the center of the room, alone. There was a man and a woman sitting with their chairs pushed together at a table nearby. A trio of men in baseball caps silently lapped the pool table in the back. The bartender rubbed a yellow rag against a mug while he gazed at the flickering bulb in a beer sign with the expression of a man pondering something profound. A lone man sat at the bar. He had his back to Katarina but she thought that he had noticed her when she had sat down a half hour earlier; there was something about the tilt of his head and the way he turned his face slightly toward her as he lifted his beer to his lips. He could be the type who would need extra encouragement to approach her. She sat up and flipped her hair back, straightened her shoulders, and arranged her shellacked, scarlet lips into a pout. The band, three shaggy men who sounded like they were playing together for the first time, announced that they were taking a fifteen-minute break.

Katarina directed a penetrating stare into the back of the man's head. After a moment, he turned and looked at her. Their eyes met for an instant. He gave his head an

awkward flick to clear a swath of brown hair from his face then swiveled back around to the bar. It was clear to Katarina, in retrospect, that she could have given him more than just eye contact, that if she stood up with her drink, and slipped onto the empty stool next to him, maybe even put a hand on his arm, (“You mean blatantly come on to him,” Richard, her husband said), that she might have had more time with him.

“That isn’t the point,” Richard said. They were lying in bed. Katarina stopped her story and waited patiently, staring at the ceiling.

Richard was always explaining the point to Katarina. There were a lot of things she needed explained. Richard was hard to understand. There was the language problem and the age difference problem and what Katarina told her mother on the phone, was the “American” problem or perhaps more specifically, the “Richard” problem. Katarina wasn’t sure if these were all separate problems or maybe one big problem jumbled all together.

The point, Richard always said, was to let them come to her. The point was that it was their idea, not hers.

“I know. I love you,” Katarina said. She felt confident saying I love you, more than any other words in English. She said it a lot. It was the least she could do. Her husband had given her this new life, brought her to America, paid for pedicures and shiny cocktail dresses, let her order anything she wanted at restaurants. Katarina stroked the patch of curly gray hair on Richard’s chest. “Like old poodle,” she had remarked the first time she saw it and Richard had made the very displeased face—the one where he flattened his lips into a straight line and wouldn’t look directly at her. Richard didn’t often think she was funny.

Katarina continued watching the man at the bar. After a few minutes, he turned to look at her again. This time Katarina was the first to look away, as if caught doing something she shouldn't. She took a tiny sip of beer. There were strict rules for these evenings, one of them being not to drink too much. Keeping her eyes downcast, she crossed her legs and hooked a finger under the strap of her dress to adjust her bra. When she glanced up again, the man was still looking at her. This time neither of them looked away.

“He really liked you,” Richard said, stroking the valley between her breasts, “I could tell.”

The man stood and walked over to Katarina. Up close, she could see that he was young, probably close to her own age. He had the kind of eyes she liked, warm and brown and heavy-lidded, as if he were trying hard not to fall asleep. She had been disappointed in Richard's eyes the first time she saw them. His were a cold metallic blue and as alert as a squirrel's.

“What was the first thing he said to you?” Richard asked.

“Hi.”

Katarina tilted her head up. The young man was tall and lanky. A beanpole but not unattractive. Not at all. His hand clutched a sweating beer bottle, a somewhat anxious expression on his face. She thought perhaps he was not in the habit of approaching women. She liked him immediately.

“Hi,” Katarina said.

He turned and studied the stage the band had vacated. Katarina waited. Without looking, he put a hand on the back of an empty chair at the table and took a sip from his

bottle.

“And then he asked do I come here often,” Katarina told Richard.

“He didn’t,” Richard hooted. “You’re kidding.” Richard found other men’s corny pickup lines uproariously funny. The first thing Richard had said when he met her was, “Well, at least you look a little like your picture.”

In reality what the man said was, “I don’t want to alarm you but there’s a really creepy guy over there who’s watching you.” He jerked his chin towards the back of the bar.

Katarina glanced over to where Richard sat under the EXIT sign. The light turned the top of Richard’s silver hair a Martian green but his face was lost in the shadows.

Another rule--never look over at Richard. Katarina glanced back down at her hands wrapped around her glass. This was the first time since Richard had started needing this that someone noticed him. Usually the men saw only her. A few had mistaken her for a prostitute and she knew she must look like one, in her short, shiny dresses, offered up, glistening, silky, and fresh—like something good to eat. Dessert. She might as well have a price tag on the top of her head and a spotlight shining down.

This bar was a horrible place, dark and musty smelling. She was, as usual in America, way overdressed. But Richard said he couldn’t take her to nice places all the time. He wouldn’t even take her to the same place twice. He didn’t want her to look like a regular or some kind of barfly, whatever that was. He didn’t want to take a chance that some guy might recognize her and approach her a second time. That wasn’t the point, he said. Katarina imagined that someday they would run out of places to go on Friday nights, that there couldn’t be that many clubs in Albuquerque and the surrounding area,

and they would have to move to another city, to someplace new. Maybe they would end up in a motor home, like some of Richard's old friends from the Navy, chasing the sun and good fishing, though in Katarina and Richard's case they'd be chasing singles' bars

"I'm sure you're used to men staring at you," the young man said then quickly continued, "I don't mean that in a weird way. Geez, I'm sounding like an idiot."

"No, no," Katarina said. "Is okay."

"Did you think he was attractive?" Richard asked.

"Oh," she said, "he was just kid, you know?" That part was true. He was a kid compared to Richard.

"Not even a little attractive?" Richard burrowed his head into the hollow of her neck. "Come on," he mumbled into her skin, "You thought he was hot."

"My name's Seth," the young man said, offering Katarina a hand that felt damp and cold from the beer bottle. "I would ask you to dance, but my dancing...well, that's not the first impression I like to make on a girl. But I can dance if you want to, I mean, if you don't mind dancing with a dork." He smiled. "Or slow, I can dance slow." He gestured to the stage. "I mean, when the band comes back. Then. We could dance. Or something."

Richard would like it if they danced. Once, Katarina had danced with a tall, muscular black man wearing a white t-shirt that stretched tight around his chest. They hadn't danced so much as simply swayed on the dance floor, never lifting their feet, the top of her head nestled under his chin. For that moment, they became one melded being, fitting as if they belonged together. Then Richard had appeared to claim her, like a child who wanted his toy back. That night he had fucked her in the back of the Bronco right in

there in the parking lot of the club. Katarina could still smell the black man's aftershave in her hair as she and Richard drove home.

Now she felt Richard watching her from across the room, waiting to see what she'd do next. She gave the young man her dazzling smile, the one that she perfected in the mirror, the one in the first picture Richard had ever seen of her. "I'm Katarina," she said. "For now, we can talk?"

"All right," Seth said, pulling out the chair. "Where are you from? I like your accent." He put his elbows on the table, leaned forward and let the beer bottle dangle from his fingers like a bell. He was more than attractive; he was beautiful. She could see that now. His long hair made him look almost feminine.

"Like Beatle," Katarina said to Richard, "very pretty."

"Not your type at all, right, baby?" Richard said. "Poor sap, he never stood a chance."

"Yes," Katarina said, "no chance."

"Tell me, Katarina," Seth said, taking a sip of beer, "tell me something about yourself. What do you do for fun?"

Katarina thought for a moment. There was nothing to tell about her life back home. There she was the same as everyone else, with the same flat future as her mother and father and her aunts, uncles, and cousins. She didn't miss much about it. She had written on her profile that she wanted to be an actress, the kind who made audiences laugh because she was clumsy and always messed everything up. Like *I Love Lucy*. Funny and loud. She had hoped a movie director from Hollywood would discover her but instead it was Richard from New Mexico. He had picked her out from a hundred

beautiful faces on a website, they met, she married him. She was so lucky. She hadn't had anything to offer but herself, her youth, her pretty smile. And he didn't ask for any more in return than any husband would ask. Except for these Fridays nights.

Richard was retired. Weekday evenings they sat in matching recliners and watched *Judge Judy* after dinner. They went shopping together for groceries and clothes for Katarina. A woman came twice a week to vacuum and scrub the toilets. There was little for Katarina to do. She never went anywhere or did anything without Richard.

"I like shopping," Katarina said.

"Who doesn't?" Seth said. "What else do you like?"

"I like dishwasher," she said.

Seth laughed. He had a hearty guffaw, throaty and appreciative. When he laughed, he seemed kind, like someone she could become friends with, maybe fall in love with. Such straight white teeth. Such clear and flawless skin.

"Tell me something surprising," he said. "Tell me something you've never told anyone else."

"Okay," Katarina said. She wanted to tell him something that would make him laugh again. Maybe she would tell him about the first time she had gone to an American supermarket, how she had been overwhelmed by the entire wall of cereal. Boxes and boxes nearly six feet high, flakes and loops and squares, charms and nuggets in every color. She had stood staring, frozen in the aisle for so long that Richard had to tug at her to get her to keep walking. This was America. This was how Americans lived. Richard should have been practiced at choosing one from so many.

"Okay," Katarina said again. She wasn't that smart; Richard had to explain

everything over and over. She was pretty, but Richard said she was ordinary pretty. He said her hips were big, she crossed her arms over her breasts, she slumped her shoulders when she walked, and she was too loud. He thought sometimes he might have done better. She knew Richard was afraid he'd made a mistake.

"The creepy man is husband," she said, surprising herself.

"What?" Seth said. He didn't laugh. He paused with his beer halfway up to his mouth. "He's a husband? Whose husband?"

"Me. Mine husband." Seth turned in his chair. "No, you must not look."

Seth put his beer down carefully on the table. He frowned. "So what's...is this...is this a joke or something?"

"Is okay," Katarina said, though she was pretty sure it wasn't okay. Richard hadn't precisely told her not to tell anyone about him. It was more implied by his actions, his lurking in the shadows.

"Ah, no, it's not okay," Seth said. "Is he, like, stalking you? Are you separated or something?"

"Yes," Katarina said, "separated. I am here, he is there."

Seth contemplated this for a few moments. "Look," he said, "I don't know what's going on here but I don't want any trouble." He put both hands on the table and started to stand.

She reached over and grabbed at his fingers. "No trouble," Katarina said. "Please. Just talk?"

Richard said, "You seemed to be having a pretty intense conversation."

"I told him I was gypsy. I told him I would read palm."

“Oh my god, that’s perfect,” Richard said, delighted.

Seth sat back down and took a sip of beer. “I’m going to regret this. I know I am.”

“No, no, nothing bad.” She turned his hand over and uncurled his fingers one by one. The pillows on the palm of his hand were soft. Richard’s hands were scaly and covered with hardened calluses. They caught on her skin when he touched her. “Is perfectly normal. You stay and we talk and we dance and Richard take me home.”

“Who’s...wait, he watches you with other men?” Seth said, his voice rising.

“That’s just crazy. You’re joking, right?” The bartender glanced over at them.

She thought of the night when Richard interrupted her dancing with the handsome black man, how Richard had tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Okay, buddy, that’s enough.” The man stepped back as Richard slipped his arm around Katarina’s waist, pulling her to his side. His arm was a steel shackle, his bony hip pushed into her side. The black man could tell immediately that she and Richard were all wrong together.

“She’s my wife,” Richard had said.

“Shit,” the man said, “you with her?” He laughed like it was a practical joke she and Richard were playing on him. When Katarina laughed too, Richard took a step towards the man, pushing Katarina behind him.

“Is this old dude really your husband?” the man said, looking past Richard to Katarina. “Really?”

She realized afterward that she might have said anything at that moment and changed her life. She wondered if she would ever get an opening like that again.

“No joke,” she said to Seth.

One of the band members stepped back onto the little platform in the corner of the

club. He riffled through a pile of papers on top of the piano then turned and scanned the room. When he saw Seth, he gave him a quick nod.

Seth nodded back. "My brother," he told Katarina. "I guess we both have family members here." He paused as he thought about it. "Only I'm watching him, not vice versa."

Katarina tipped her head back and laughed up at the ceiling. She let go of Seth's hand and it escaped back to his beer bottle. He stood. "I just came to watch my brother play. I don't want to get in the middle of anything between you and your husband over there."

"You were laughing," Richard said. "What were you talking about?"

"I don't remember," Katarina said. She put her arms around Richard's neck and pulled his face to hers. "It's not important. He's not important."

"But didn't he want to dance with you or anything?" Richard asked. "I mean, why did he come over to talk to you in the first place? What was the point?"

Katarina felt the tendons in Richard's neck stiffen. The air between them, which had been as thick as syrup, seemed to thin. Richard peered into her face, judging, evaluating, searching for those flaws that hadn't been apparent in her photos on the internet, looking to see what everybody, anybody, else saw.

Katarina thought of other nights--the time a young man talked to her for over an hour about God and the sorry state of her soul, the guy who tried to sign her up to sell Amway, the middle-aged man who cried quietly when he mentioned his dead wife. She had listened and waited for whatever came next.

"This one wanted to go to back room," she said, "the bathroom, where we could

fuck. He wanted to leave and I go home with him right now. Run away. Go, go.”

Richard’s head dropped down next to hers on the pillow, his arms tightened around her, his body against hers tense and urgent. “He wanted me so bad. But I laugh at him and say no. No. Only talk. Only dance.”

“Everybody wants my baby,” Richard said without lifting his head, his mouth flush against her ear.

And like every other Friday night, Katarina closed her eyes and opened her legs beneath him. It was funny. He wasn’t a big man but the weight of him nearly crushed the life out of her.

END

