

Marion

by Nolan Turner

We took all our clothes off and headed to the pond. She jumped in and I followed. The water was cool and muddy and fireflies hummed around our heads and through the horsetail weeds. She came up and shook the water from her cropped, golden brown hair and ran her small hands down her face. The smell of slow cooked pig skin and warm horse piss drifted down from the farmhouse where she worked during the day. There wasn't much light left, but I could still make out her small breasts resting above the water line. The wind picked up just enough to make the thickets bend and whistle and send a small ripple across the pond. A dog barked off in the distance—the long, strained bark of a dog with a choke collar. All I could think about was touching her skin.

“Come here,” I said.

A tiny smirk came across her face. “No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because.”

I made small waves in the water with my hands, “So you'll let me see you naked but I can't touch you?”

“Oui.”

“What the hell kind of sense does that make?”

“I did not say it made any kind of sense. It does not have to make any sense.”

I got out of the pond and put my underwear back on. She dunked herself in the water and came back up holding her nose. “Listen,” she said, rubbing her eyes, “I do not feel like having sex tonight. And if I went over there and let you hold me we would have ended up having sex.”

I had been living with Isabelle for a week or two. She was holding down a job teaching rich kids to ride horses and living in the small guest house near the edge of the farm where she worked. It was just barely big enough for two, but I didn't mind because I wasn't paying rent. While Isabelle was at work, I would sleep or watch television or spend all day fixing dinner for the two of us. The arrangement worked out well for me because I was in between jobs.

We put our clothes back on and headed up towards the trail that led to the farm house. The sun was buried beneath the dogwood trees curved along the western edge of the farm. Isabelle wasn't wearing shoes and neither was I, and with each step the pulpy clapping of mud against flesh became dull. From the open door of the barn I could hear the rough, toothy buzz of a hand saw cutting through lumber. Isabelle reached into her shirt pocket and came out with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Only one left. She lit it and handed it over to me.

“When I was first learning English,” she said as she sat down in the cool grass and crossed her legs, “I would see these American films on television—”

I brushed a dragonfly from her shoulder and handed her the cigarette.

“But they were all...all...rerecorded into French. The voices. What do you call that?”

“Dubbed.”

“Yes, all of the voices were dubbed,” she sighed with a lungful of Marlboro smoke, “I have noticed that does not happen here. When a French movie is on television here, it is in French. But in France we dub your movies into French. I wonder why that is.”

The mud from the bottom of the pond was caked on our legs, sticking to my leg-hairs and sliding slowly down Isabelle’s smooth skin. I picked at the mud with my fingernails, “I don’t know—I’ve never been to France and you’re the only French person I’ve ever met,” I said.

“Anyway, watching these old movies, all I could think about was watching them in their original language. I did not want to hear John Wayne rerecorded by a Frenchman with a lisp—I wanted to hear his voice.”

I laughed, “And I bet that’s the way the Duke would’ve wanted you to hear him.”

“The Duke?”

“Never mind.”

“So I looked for these movies in English.” She rubbed the butt of the cigarette into the base of a small anthill. “It took me a very long time but I finally found them. I watched them over and over until the film inside the tape began to wear. It took me many months, but I began to understand the films even without subtitles. John Wayne made many bad movies, but he made me fall in love with his country.”

Hanging from a nail pounded into a wooden slat of the fence that ran along the edge of the property was a rusted bear trap with a sparrow nestled inside. I wondered how much use a bear trap could be in a place like this—I wondered whether or not Kentucky even had bears. The whole thing seemed precious; like a movie. I pictured John Wayne and the docile kind of frontier you can’t much find outside of True Grit or The Searchers. The kind of place where you don’t have much to worry about outside of snakebites and Indians and the kind of place where a tall man with a whiskey voice was always around to do the right thing.

An old Cadillac back fired on the dirt road and the sparrow shot up from the trap and vanished into the trees. I sat up and wandered over to a large tree stump with a faded copper hatchet embedded in its flattened top. The red flesh of the tree had turned to pulp around the blade of the hatchet. I tugged on the handle but blade was buried too deeply in the tree. I gave up and sat down and motioned for Isabelle to join me.

“It’s muggy as all hell,” I said, wiping the beaded sweat from my forehead.

She sat down and put her arm around me. Smoke from the bourbon distillery down the road came across the sky and tapered off in all directions, leaving a familiar taste on my lips. I put my hand down my shirt and wiped the sweat from my arm pit. “This heat is unbearable,” I said. “Aren’t you hot?”

“Been hotter,” she said.

“I bet France is nice this time of year.”

She shrugged.

“What was it like over there?” I asked.

She brushed a long strand of hair from her face, “Some days it rained, some days it did not. The nights were cold and it never got too hot.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know.” I kicked a small, smooth rock into a gopher hole. “It just must have been so much cooler growing up Europe.”

Isabelle got up from the stump and started stretching. The wind picked up and the hairs along my arm stood on end. With a quick movement, Isabelle turned around towards me, grabbing the handle of the rusty hatchet and pulled it out of the tree trunk. She held the blade in between us—it had been silver at one point, but after being buried in that stump it had been dotted an ugly copper. She lifted the hatchet high above her head and drove it back down into the stump with a loud whoosh.

“One day when I was eleven,” she started, fixing the strand of hair that kept falling into her eyes and keeping one hand on the hatchet, “I got bored during church and wandered off—started exploring. I did not like church.”

She back down next to me and played with the handle of the hatchet, “I was down in the basement—in a storage closet. I saw a loose piece of floor and pulled it up, and there was a bible sitting inside. Just a plain bible.”

I tried to put my arm around her but she shook me off.

“I opened the bible up, and the pages were hollowed out and there was a Mauser HSc with a swastika burned into the handle sitting inside it, where the pages should have been.”

“I did not know what to do, so I stuck it in my underwear and took off with it. The hammer was not working so I never shot anyone—but the thrill of the gun and the power made me...excited. I started off slow—I would stand out by the grade schools and flashed it in front of kids so they would give me whatever valuables they had. When I was sixteen I robbed my first market and never looked back. That is how I got out to America.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, “Bullshit.”

“What?” She looked up. “Do you not believe me?”

“Not for a second.”

“Maybe it is bullshit. But anything I tell you could be bullshit and you wouldn’t know the difference.”

Gunshots rang off in the distance, in the open field to the south guarded by scarecrows, and a couple of blackbirds shot out from the treetops. The sky had darkened and the

mosquitoes hummed around the trees and our bodies. The air became thick with moisture that left a paper thin coating of salt and sweat on my arms and legs like a fresh-spun spider web. A dog's bark—the same bark from before—exploded in the open field and trailed off into silence.

I thought about home for the first time in a while. I grew up in Belleville, Ontario, a small town along the bay of Quinte whose greatest product was Brett Hull, the hockey player. When I was fifteen, my father left. He headed across the border—getting arrested for fighting in small towns throughout Minnesota that no one has ever heard of and bouncing checks along every notch in the Bible belt. His last letter was from Waco, Texas, where he told us he was settling down with a Mexican bartender named Maria. My mother still gets his mail.

Another round of gunshots came in from the south and the dog barked. A man whistled loudly in the distance and yelled something. “Wonder what the hell is going on down there,” I asked, craning my neck.

Isabelle didn't look over. “It sounded like a Benelli Black Eagle. It is probably Billy off shooting turkeys.”

“Who's Billy?” I asked.

“He is an asshole that works on the farm,” she spat. “He is the only man I know who buys a new rifle just for shooting turkeys. Any old gun will kill a turkey. You do not need a Benelli Black Eagle II to kill a fucking turkey.”

“I hate it when you talk about guns,” I said.

“Yes?” She looked up at me. “And why is that?”

“It makes me feel like I'm sleeping with Ted Nugent.”

She looked away, “I do not know who that is.”

“Never mind.”

She got up from the stump and walked towards the barn, “You have never seen me shoot, have you?” She called.

With Isabelle wandering off towards the farm, I sat down on the ground, leaning my back against the cool wood of the tree stump, and faced the house. An old woman sat on the porch, perched in an ancient rocking chair, looking like she had been there since the Civil War. Factory-made buffalo rugs and Indian blankets hung from the wall and a peyote box sat forgotten on a stool. A soft smile came across the old woman's face as a light wind picked up and rushed through the patio, setting the cast-iron wind chimes and gas station dream catchers in motion. It was the kind of scene that made you want to grow old.

The door of the barn burst open and Isabelle came out riding the biggest horse I had ever seen. She galloped towards me with an old sawed-off shotgun slung over her back and a pair of revolvers fastened to her waist. As she came up on me, I noticed for the first time that Isabelle had a strong jaw line and that between her nostrils was the evidence of a broken nose. She pulled a single cigarette from her inside her sock and lit it.

“What’s all this?” I asked.

“Well,” She said, taking up the rifle and loading it, “You have not seen me shoot.”

“Going out to kill us some dinner?”

“No. I will just be shooting at those targets over there,” She motioned towards a long row of wooden cubes perched on sawdust stacks with bulls-eyes painted across them.

I laughed, “What’s with the horse?”

“Anyone can shoot a target standing still, pilgrim.”

Isabelle and the horse took off towards a gravel trail running in front of the sawdust targets. With a strong kick to the horse’s sides they took off, galloping down towards the end of the track. Isabelle released the reins and grabbed hold of the revolvers nestled close to her body, and without aiming fired two quick shots that splintered the red wood of the first bulls-eye. She twirled the guns through her fingers with the grace of a bullfighter and fired at the second target. The sound of cracked wood shot through the farm as Isabelle and the horse kept on down the line, firing at and hitting each target along the way until the barrels went click. Isabelle placed the revolvers back in their holsters and slung the old shotgun from behind her back as she came up on the last target. The shot echoed through the trees and the wood of the target shattered, opening a hole through which bits of straw and hayseed shot from. She pulled the horse back towards me.

“I don’t know if I should be turned on or afraid,” I said.

She took a long puff of the cigarette, “Maybe a little of both.”

“You ever think about cancer?” I asked.

A dog ran by us with a limp turkey dangling from his jaws. A man followed, wearing a short sleeve linen shirt and a bolo tie. “Aw hell, what have I told you about shootin’ up my targets, Isabelle?”

“I am sorry, Billy,” Isabelle said, hopping down from the horse, “I just wanted to shoot a little for my friend here.”

I stuck my hand out towards Billy but he wasn’t looking at me.

“Goddammit, you shot that last one to hell and back. It’s good as ruined.”

“I will replace it for you,” she said.

Billy pounded the butt of his rifle into the ground, “That ain’t the point—I told you to leave my targets alone and you need to learn a little bit of respect.”

Isabelle turned her back to Billy and led the horse towards the barn, “It will not happen again, Billy, Je m’excuse,” She called.

Billy moved forward, grabbing her shoulder and spinning her around.

“Leave me the fuck alone,” she yelled.

I moved in and pushed Billy away from Isabelle, “You better leave her the fuck alone,” I said.

“Isabelle,” Billy said, “You better tell your little boyfriend over here to back up, before I—”
“Before you what?” I asked.

With a quick movement Billy grabbed his rifle by the barrel and took one long, hard swing.

I woke up with a headache the size of Texas and a gash along my left cheek as long as the Mississippi. A small bowl next to Isabelle’s bed held two or three bloody teeth. Isabelle was seated on the edge of the bed, holding a warm cloth to my forehead and stroking my hair. Her hands still smelled like gunpowder.

“How long have I been out?”

“It is morning.”

I let out a sigh and closed my eyes, “He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Don’t worry about Billy,” she said.

I brushed the cloth and her hand away from me. Small drops of blood formed across my cheek and fell with a soft splat on the bed sheets. I felt Isabelle get up.

“There is this story—about the man who bought John Wayne’s yacht right before he died. The man who bought the Yacht, he was decorating. He went into this old nautical shop and bought these...oh, fuck, what is the English word? Lampe-Tempete. It is something with ouragan...”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said.

“Hurricane lantern! This man bought these old hurricane lanterns, and put them below the deck of the ship. But the man that kept the ship in working order, he told him that Wayne had lanterns just like that below the deck, but he had to get rid of them because he said he would hit his head on them. So, the next morning, this man wakes up, and all of his lanterns are on the ground,” she motioned with her hands, “Smashed. Into small pieces. He sold the Yacht that week. He was convinced it was haunted by the ghost of John Wayne.”

“And?”

“And so I went looking for this Yacht. It took me all the way out to California.” Isabelle lit a cigarette and leaned back in the rocking chair. “I stayed out there for three nights—on that yacht. I went out onto the dock very early in the morning looking for something—anything. But I never found anything.”

I tried to stand up, but the blood rushed to my head and I collapsed back onto the bed, “What’s your point?” I asked.

“My point is—I left. I gave up on John Wayne and his ghost and his yacht. It was not for me and maybe none of this is for you.”

Isabelle sat up and walked out of the room, returning a minute later with my suitcase packed up. I stepped outside and the wind whipped my face. The hills were dry and blue-green with sagebrush and a deer darted across the plane easy as sunlight through windy clouds. A gun

shot in the distance and the deer fell. I left Louisville and headed south—trying to forget about French women and cowboys.