

Marlene

Her life expectancy was null. On the border, she would rise and hold a flag above her head, for her, the symbol of integrity. What is a flag but a sheet of colors?, what is death but a stairway of darkness? When was it she thought of fairy roses and sunny beaches? How long ago was she smiling through her tears? When did she lose hope?

It was a rainy day in Austin, sheets smothering her beauty shop perfect hair, phone dangling between her thighs like a lover. Her lover had gone, and she was left with the vows of marriage. Who could ask for finer prison time? At her wedding, people had estimated two years, and one more on parole. She said it would last forever, this blissful sentence. It'd been five years. A now loveless marriage. An insult to whoever gave a fuck. But no one seemed to do so. The mascara goo had reached her cheeks. Too much make-up or too much crying?, she didn't know anymore. Her insides seemed to be suffering from-

Crap, someone's come into the room. She tried to look asleep as the minute hand of her four-year-old lifts up the sheets. Mommy can't get up, sweetheart. Her legs felt like two paralyzed cruise-ships, fresh out of fuel. She can't move. I'm tired of being nothing. Being laughed at like a child whenever she intends to do something other than clean and cook. I like to write! The words of her wife come back to taunt her: Oh, my wife's got such a lovely little hobby. That's what she would say to people, and the wife would smile pleasantly, feeling her chest burn and her head expand to the point of about to explode. Who is this woman by my side? I have seen her before, of course, so many years, but who is she? My eternal bully, my vow of looking down. The floor had become her permanent view.

Now there's been poking, and she felt her skin mold like clay, every which way, until she was nothing but a lumpy mass, his best piece of art so far. Christ, he's grown so fast. She could remember him still feeding off her, his young gums pressed against her nipple, his warm eyes looking into hers, so tainted and disgusting. She felt his gaze redeem her. This act of bonding. How many toxins was she passing on to him? His tender body rotting from the inside out by way of her milk. And still, so warm his stare, so forgiving. His screams of Mommy, mommy almost made her open her eyes, but the screams inside her are much more powerful. So, she doesn't move, and the kid goes away.

Enter the wife in a raging state. She pulled our lady out of bed by the shoulders, and flanged her towards the wall with the same effort it requires to toss an eggshell. I'm sick and tired of your sleeping in. You have a son to raise. And a wife to feed. She now kicked her ribs, and she is being molded with a chisel. How she preferred his pokes, the lesser of two evils.

Suffice it to say she could have anybody. Suffice it to say she had minstrel's hair, princess cheeks, dazzling blue eyes, and a nose any rhinoplastic surgeon would envy. Suffice it to say she was valedictorian, twice. And here she was, getting the crap beaten out of her, useless as a chipped tooth. Her scorn was her reward.

All regret can do is stump you. So, one must learn from the past, not regret it. Her father's constant violence had taught her how to mend herself. That is what she had learned. Not to not repeat the same pattern as her mother, not to stand up for herself, fight back. Just repair the house after the storm's blown it to pieces. And yet she had not lost hope. That came two minutes after.

The sleeping giant that was her stomach erupted. That kick at her stomach had made her thrust blood on the antique persian carpet, and she was now scrubbing it off. Something in the middle of the biggest concentric circle caught her attention. She had immaculate talents for detailed observation. She gasped in horror as she studied the tiny white tooth she now held in her hand. When did Jimmy start losing his baby teeth? She'd heard that wouldn't begin until he was six or seven. And then she saw the clump of brown hair, torn from the root. and she knew: her young, delightful, though sometimes handful, son had taken a beating. And the world crumbled.

Marlene woke up on the persian rug, still clutching her son's hair and his tiny tooth. As she looked at them, tears rolled down her cheeks silently. Thoughts of what to do circled her head. My wife is powerful, my wife has contacts, my mother

loves my wife. Where was she to go? To some musty old motel room, a bacteria infested cave for them both? No, they would be found within the hour. And she couldn't ask for a divorce. The first time she'd laid the papers in front of her wife, she'd taken a beating that left her ten days immobile. Was it then that she'd hurt their son? When she couldn't do the only job she had: take care of her boy? No, that was long ago, he wasn't even two years old then. How she feared her. But now, her little boy was involved. And fear gave way to that trait of survival that for some springs not when they are hurt, but when that hurt extends to include the hurt of another. She felt maggots spewing out her chest, fiery maggots, fierce lions chewing like rodents inside her. Her mouth tasted different, dry and bitter. Her muscles had begun to tighten and contract and were now painful rocks.

How could a simple, deteriorated housewife avenge this ghastly coming of events? How, with her torn ribs and herniations, with her tendonitis, and glossitis, and tonsillitis, and many more itis (if she had an exoskeleton it would have been broken now) could she achieve a rightful victory? Well, rightful. I do misbehave, she thinks.

It had to stop! Would you go to jail for bludgeoning your newly made nemesis? Could you get the death chair for the annihilation of what stands between you and yours? Not with a good lawyer, which, of course, she had none. No, how could she go through such efforts? In her thoughts, it wasn't so much that she wouldn't, it was more that she literally could not.

Now, don't be quick to judge. More likely, savor this moment. For she was now in a state of rage, her protective instincts taking over, a state which would never again happen.

She had to get out of the house, had to take her little boy with her, and if Am got in her way, and tried to stop her... well Marlene would do more than lose her temper.

Her head felt drowsy. Those pills the doc prescribed have kept her mind in a steamy oven for months now. She went over to the window, limping quietly. The driveway's empty, she noticed as she opened the curtains, just a bit, enough to see and not be seen. A car approached, but she paid no heed. Her head was in the suitcase she would take with her. She had to flee. They had to flee. Where's Jimmy? Preschool. Go get him. Elope with your little lover. No one will love her like he does, cheerful little slugger. No, do not cause a scandal. The school will call Am, that's what she'd instructed them to do a few months ago. They would be found, Am could make it look like a kidnapping, well you are snatching your kid away from all he knows, without consent, with much regret. Dammit!

What the fuck was she thinking? Rebel's thoughts. I am the commander, her wife had said, see I don't need to explain why I do things. That was the nice way. Marlene had learned early on not to ask questions; one time, after Am had thrown her towards the wall, she made the stupid mistake of asking why this was happening. How dare you question me? What happened next was so extreme Marlene did not dare speak for a whole two weeks. She was the drum and America the drummer.

Marlene had no control over anything, she'd handed it to Am so gradually, she hadn't even noticed she was doing so. Yet, as her head went on and on, she was unconsciously packing her suitcase. Of course the suitcase wasn't hers, nothing in that house was hers. Not even her life. Except Jimmy. He was conceived inside her. She remembered the strange and wonderful feeling of sensing someone living inside her, and then the little kicks that would make her giggle; she could picture him perfectly, and would croon to him when she was alone, and recite sonnets. She'd loved him since he was just a zygote.

Oh, she was wretched. Puny and weak and angry. She would act upon one of these three, and depending which she'd use, the outcome would ultimately vary. But not yet, she still battered herself with her thoughts, self-aggressing, a seedy flow of poison dripping into her brain, twisting words; self-pity and self-loathing. See, that's the dangerous part with bullies: they end up inside your head without your knowing, until they're no longer needed: you become your own -and worst- bully. And, again unconsciously, she slipped back into bed.

She awoke to little Jimmy holding out a card for her. She looked at him playfully and took it from his tiny hands. As she read it, Jimmy climbed up on the bed and sat very close to her. Happy Mother's day, it said in perfect penmanship, his teacher's most likely, but the coloring and decoration was his alright. Stars and rocket ships. And on the inside, now in his own squiggly writing: Mommy you are beautiful. I love you. She looked at her boy, overwhelmed, and he lunged himself into her arms.

Do you like it mommy?- Jimmy asked cheerfully.

And inside her a forceful voice, one she had not heard in a long time, said: Marlene, fight! Get up now!

-It is lovely- she said as she kissed him on the nose. -Lets fetch you a PB&J.-

Marlene hastened to Jimmy's room while the boy ate his snack, yet packed his suitcase slowly, for her head was filling with thoughts of how to pursue and succeed at what she wanted. What could she do? No one is going near her boy again. That she knew. Suddenly Sun Tzu came to mind. *Know your enemy and know yourself and you can fight a hundred battles without disaster.* And so she started to think of America, her wife, her torment.

Well, she doesn't believe in knocking, that's for sure. Marlene remembered the first time they just barged in on someone's home. She felt ashamed for being so disrespectful, but Am was so authoritative, so unlike her. That was one of the traits that made her fall in love with her.

She believes she had a right over everyone else, above all, Marlene; she was her new conquest. She made Marlene watch the movies she liked. That also went for any type of art form. And her way of speaking. And her views on the world, on life. What was worse, she made Marlene think that's what she really liked. It was Marlene herself who disposed of all the things that made her her. Only now could Marlene see the manipulation, the subtler form of invasion.

The whole world would be against her, she knew that, but she had to break free. Am controlled her whole world. And she could turn the whole world against her. She was a control freak, but only because she's so insecure. It mattered not how many times Marlene told her she loved her, Am would always have these thoughts that she would walk out on her, or that she actually hated her, that her whole world would crumble. Marlene knew her world would in fact crumble if she did what she was longing for right now. She felt a bit sad for her. But she enforced her views with violence... Violence that comes from... Fear! Am feared Marlene even more than Marlene feared Am. Her head began to hurt as neurons opened up new pathways inside her brain's circuitry, but her chest felt warm inside, and she could finally breathe. The fear was gone.

When she returned to Jimmy, he was playing with the bread crumbs and the spilled jelly on his plate. As she saw him, the urgency for independence squeezed her chest tight. She would not watch her little boy get the shit beaten out of him as he grew up. She could take the beatings, but only she.

Marlene picked the boy up from his chair and changed his stained shirt.

- We have to go honey bunny. -

- Ok Mommy, can Buzz come? -

She smiled at him, turned towards the suitcase, grabbed the toy from on top of it and offered it to the child. Jimmy beamed at the sight of his beloved Buzz, grasped for it, and pretended to fly the toy.

-Let's fly him to the bus!- Marlene said affectionately. The boy grinned and nodded.

She grabbed both suitcases and headed towards the door. She was fetching her keys when she heard another set open

the door from outside. Marlene stood erect, calm, ready for the final battle.

Am entered the house. Upon taking in what was going on, she went into a fit of rage. She was about to strike Marlene, but cowered, for Marlene did not. Her eyes were unflinching, staring at Am, outwardly relaxed, inwardly sad. Am yelled and began to throw anything she could find, then, seeing her wife move steadily towards the door, child in hand, she rushed towards them and stood in the doorway, blocking the exit. She threatened to call the police. Marlene told her to do so. Am was taken aback, confused and angry and scared.

- Please, move. - said Marlene, gently but firm.

Am tried to stare her down, but it would be of no use this time. Marlene had never stood so tall. She saw Am's stare turn from menacing, to indignant, to shocked, down to all around horrified. Then the unbelievable happened. Am stepped aside in complete silence, hatred spewing from her whole. She had no more weapons, no more power. Marlene had unintentionally left her absolutely naked, helpless and exposed. With great solemnity, Marlene and her son walked out the door and jaunted towards the bus stop, with no destination other than each other.