

BISON GRASS

by Jessica Taylor

Smoking isn't allowed in bars any longer in Los Angeles. So when I go to the Russian House, a kitschy Soviet themed bar in West Hollywood, to reminisce, it isn't exactly the same as my memories. Still, I get to read the elegant Cyrillic alphabet with longing and hear patches of Russian spoken if I am lucky. I can close my eyes, and I'm almost back in Moscow, sipping vodka with my friends before we wander arm in arm through Red Square.

The smoky air in those bars stung my throat. I liked it though because it felt romantic and meaningful. Sitting across from Elena and Kristina, it was like looking through a grey veil at them. I think they liked to parade me from bar to bar across the city because my hair is naturally red. In Moscow, most red hair comes out of a bottle. I was their American trophy, their foreign novelty. We mutually appreciated each other.

Before I drag open the heavy doors to the Russian House, I walk through a cloud of smoke from hipsters loitering out front.

I enter and then air is clean and clear. The light is low; the chairs are upholstered in thready red velvet; and the outline of the former Soviet Union is painted on the ceiling. "CCCR" is stamped in Cyrillic gold letters across it.

Behind the bar, a flat-screen TV plays Russian music videos. The women in the videos have long, slender legs; the men are always wearing sunglasses; and the singers are frequently holding snakes. They don't show any snow. And I never once saw a snake when I lived in Russia as an ex-pat.

Like in Russia, the bartender ignores me for ten minutes before asking my order. I drum my fingers on the wood bar. When he finally turns to face me, I try not to react. He's my kind of good looking: half classy and half messy. His blonde hair is scruffy but his white t-shirt is pressed and tucked into low hung grey slacks. He's got thick eyelashes but groomed eyebrows. He's not too tall, and his pants are rolled over his leather shoes. I can see the tattoos on his torso through his shirt.

"What can I get the lady?" Clean American English.

"*Pivo, pazhaluysta*," I test him. It's basic: beer please. He shakes his head at me, and his gold lip ring vibrates slightly. A few goose bumps begin on my neck and the air is suddenly icy on my skin.

"Again." He looks down his slim nose at me, a gold stud symmetrically placed on each of his nostrils.

"May I have a vodka?" I'm a bit disappointed we won't be speaking Russian, but it doesn't make him any less attractive.

One of the other reasons I come to this particular bar is their surfeit of house infused vodka. The list is lengthy and includes herbs I have never even heard of. Since returning to California to live in the guest cottage behind my mother's home, my new obsession is herbs. I grow them where I can: in the soft ground, in white pickle buckets lining the sidewalk, in hanging pots near my blue front door. Each herb I label in Cyrillic, using their Russian name. I sing them lullabies when I deliver them into the soil.

The bartender raises his clean eyebrows at me.

"A vodka?" He flirts, with a smile. He steps back, passes a hand beneath rows of shelves to either side. He is like a male Vanna White, showcasing the goods.

"Hmmm..." My eyes roam the glassed infusions. I look back at him and my mouth begins to water, despite his failure to speak Russian.

Whoever runs this place must have been a mad apothecary in a former life. The shelves are packed with various shapes and sizes of vodka casks infusing herbs, fruits, and even vegetables. They cover the entire bar around the TV and half of another wall. Some of them remind me of ships-in-bottles. I don't know how they got those entire fat lemons through the skinny bottlenecks. There's even three entire coconuts sunk into one heavy keg that sits low to the ground—they take earthquake precautions seriously here.

"Might I make a few suggestions?" He puts a hand on one hip. The other he outstretches on a wooden shelf. His muscles are small but defined, and a bundle of purple beets are tattooed on

his inner bicep. I notice the groove running down it, and I imagine setting my tongue there. *Salt, it will taste like salt.* My mouth waters more, because I am a salt addict.

"Please." I nod with a straight face, a flat tone. I don't want to broadcast my enthusiasm just yet.

The velvet chair pressing into my thighs is soft but scratchy. It reminds me of whiskers, like the five-day overgrowth this man has going. I sit even heavier, grinding down into the fabric as I wait for his selection. My vision goes a little hazy as I watch his back muscles flex under his shirt when he reaches for each heavy bottle after a moment of contemplation.

When he turns around, I become fully aware of the seriousness of this situation. I sit straight up and my heart speeds. He has a smooth wooden board that reminds me of a paddle. The skin across my rear begins to prickle with enthusiasm. But this paddle has test tubes drilled into it. Three are filled but the last is empty. There are three glass droppers as well. Their black rubber ends look like hard nipples, and I lick my lips.

He sets the tasting board in front of me.

"What's your name?" He leans forward onto the bar, resting on an elbow. The metal wrapped around his lower lip nudges his tongue as he hangs over his selection for me. My eyes go wide with excitement.

"Katherine." I whisper. My copper hair feels like soft ropes as I twirl it around my finger.

"Okay, Katya. I'm Nik. *Priyatno poznakomitsya.*"

"It's nice to meet you too." I was wrong about him. His Russian, like his English, has no accent. But now I'm too flustered to speak Russian. Katya is the nickname a lover would call me.

"Choose the first one to try." Nik picks up an olive from a tray of garnishes. He pops it into his mouth and drags his finger across his teeth, sucking the juice off. My own finger starts to tingle.

I point to the third vial on the paddle. It's a woody green, like absinthe. Nik picks a glass dropper up and sucks up a small amount.

"Hold out your tongue."

I do as I am told, because there are some situations in which I find myself excited to be bossed. I am half embarrassed to be following a stranger's instructions in the middle of a bar at 4:30 in the afternoon in West Hollywood. But my curiosities are encouraged by his confidence.

I close my eyes. Two small drops of liquor alight on my tongue. They taste like green sunshine. When the delicate scent reaches my nose, I think of Italy.

I open my eyes and pronounce, "Basil." It's the first herb I ever grew. And Russians consider it an aphrodisiac. My thoughts start to quicken, like my pulse. What's he trying to do? Is it possible he finds me as attractive as I find him?

"Very good. Next?" He pulls a fresh glass dropper out. His purism impresses me.

I point to the first vial. I close my eyes and move closer, my tongue extended again for him.

"No, Katya, open your eyes."

I want to keep them closed, as if doing so will hide the part of me that feels self-conscious in this situation. But if I don't do as I'm told, I might not get what I want.

I dare myself: *look into his eyes*. When I do, I see their lovely brown shade, like amber stones from the Baltic Sea. There are smile creases next to them. I appreciate that type of wrinkle because then I know a person has been happy. As I stare at him, I slide my tongue out again. Two drops rain down.

The liquor makes my tongue hot. It is mildly sweet but also bitter. In my mind, I hear the crackle of a fire. My skin feels the soft abrasion of dry leaves. I smell a creamy, cooling pie.

"Nutmeg." I inhale deeply, and the lace of my bra moves against the inside of my thin undershirt. There is a nutmeg tree growing at my mother's home. The best sex I ever had was under that tree, a few years ago. Since then, whenever I smell the woodiness of its spice, my insides go warm and I immediately want to make love.

"Good call. You know your infusions."

I am nervous, so I lose censorship over myself: "I love herbs and spices." The basicness of my blurted statement shocks me, and I feel so simple.

"I can tell," he laughs at me. "You've got one left." He crosses his arms, nods at the paddleboard.

I pause, because I don't want this to end. If I try the last one, he will certainly have to attend to the other guests.

"I'll tell you what. If you can guess the last one, I've got something special for you."

He picks up the third glass dropper. He holds the black rubber nipple between his thumb and forefinger delicately, as if he wants to demonstrate something to me. He dips it into the murky vodka, applies pressure, and then releases, sucking up liquid from the last vial. My breathing picks up and my eyebrows elevate as if I have been whispered a secret.

"Hold out your tongue."

My hesitations have melted. I firmly hold out my tongue to him and stare straight into his eyes. He immediately rewards me. This one is a bitter leaf taste, and it's hard for me to place. I close my eyes to search my mind. I am giddy knowing that he is watching me take my time to get it right. I remember in middle school if you liked someone you would hold a yellow flower under their chin. If their neck reflected the yellow, it meant they loved you.

"Dandelion." I answer and my grin grows slowly, knowing with certainty that I am right. His smile answers mine. I can see his teeth, crooked like the LA skyline. Uneven teeth have always signified originality to me.

"You won," Nik says. He slowly pulls up a clear bottle from beneath the bar, revealing it inch by inch.

Suddenly, I am sweltering and I pull off my sweater. The white v-neck t-shirt I have on beneath matches his. I slip off my

sneakers and stand on the brass foot rail beneath the bar. My red toenails curl around the cool metal. I lean closer in to him and his frozen bottle. There isn't much of the wooden bar separating us now.

"Bison grass," I announce. I notice that his eyes drift down to the space between my breasts. So I lean forward more.

I reach out to touch the glass with my fingertips, but he pulls it back from my reach. Bison grass come from the Belovezhskaya Forest, the former royal hunting ground of the Russian tsars. I have day-dreamed of walking hand-in-hand through its green meadows, then laying in its tall protection to sip vodka as the sun descends and the night takes over. Next to me, someone special would whisper to me and tug at my earlobe with their lips. They would kiss that spot behind my ear that I love.

Nik slides the cork from the bottle. Inside is the long spear of green grass. He extracts it slowly, letting the blade slide against the rim of the glass. My head falls backward. He licks his lip, his tongue pushing against his metal ring. I want to tug it with my teeth to hear if he will moan. When he has the grass completely exposed, he sets the bottle down with a thud. The blade falls onto his tongue, and he bites a piece off. There is a drop of vodka left on his chin. I dare myself to touch it. He holds the bison grass out, his other hand cupped beneath it to catch the dripping vodka.

"Open your mouth, Katya."

He lays the blade down on my lip and it slides to my tongue. My whole body becomes soft and relaxed. He just bit it and I



swear I can taste his mouth. A small moan escapes from my throat, but I don't care. I want him to know that this is the best bison grass I've ever tasted. His fingertips brush against the bottom of my chin, and I moan again with a visible exhale leaning evening closer to him. My chest is only inches from his now, and my long hair grazes his arm. The red looks beautiful floating over his tan skin.

Nik pulls the bottle of vodka back to him. I chew the herb, allowing its freshness to infuse my throat. My hands are trembling. But so are his, I notice, as he sinks the herb back into its vodka bath. I don't know how it happened, but the bar has cleared out. It's just him and me.

"You want to see where the infusions are kept." It isn't a question. He's beside me now, pushing a piece of my hair behind my ear.

"I want to see where you keep the bottles," I whisper to him. I am looking up at him, my chin cocked, and after a moment of silence my smile erupts. And then his does too. He threads a finger through the loop of my cutoff shorts and pulls. I pad barefoot behind him, forgetting my shoes despite the filthy floor. I lean into the scent trailing behind him. His mint smell has an undertone of black pepper. Now I want to touch him even more. I want to feel his soft lips on mine and taste the gold metal circling it.

How I make it down the red hallway painted with nesting Russian dolls without touching him, I don't know. We stop at a wooden door.

"This is it." He lays a hand on the dented knob. I place mine over his, staring at the blonde whiskers of his face, aching for them to rub across my neck.

We turn the knob together. My body feels like someone replaced my blood with vodka. In the small room, dusty infusions are racked up from ceiling to floor. We move into the center of it and a bundle of dried bison grass hangs over us like mistletoe.

Eventually, the glass bottoms of the infusions press into my back like a deep massage. They decorate my skin with their ringed impressions even hours later, when I look at my back in the mirror of his bedroom.