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ONE EVENING IN WINTERTIME IN NORTH OF UKRAINE BY CARLOS BEZ

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The American walked to the table nearest the bar and sat on a stool with his back to the wall. It was his table, his for the past month, ever since he started coming to this bar. The table was always open; it was too close to the bar for intimate conversation. The American was always alone.

The older barmaid watched the American walk in, as he had done every evening at this time, and poured 150 ml of peppered vodka into a small glass and filled a ceramic beer mug with draft beer. Ceramic mugs were used for regulars and VIPs. The American was now a regular. He was a good customer; he never got too drunk, and he always left money on the table. She put both drinks onto a tray and motioned for the younger barmaid to take them over to the American.

The American nodded and made an indiscernible grunt-like "spa-see-ba" when the younger barmaid brought him his drinks, and he lit a cigarette and took a sip of vodka and then a drink of beer. The younger barmaid returned to her position behind the bar with the older barmaid. They each lit a cigarette, hunched close together on stools (the bar was drafty), and waited for the other one to say something. But neither did. The CD skipped, where it always skips, so the younger barmaid replaced it with a different CD, the same kind of Russian folk rock, but still indistinguishable and of only mild interest to the American.

"Neil Young," the American said aloud to himself. "Yeah, old Neil Young or CSN." He shook his head and grinned, but only slightly. He was getting bored with his own complaining. The older barmaid only saw his lips move and knew he was speaking to someone else, someone not there; it was a common thing for foreigners to do, when they were alone, and she accepted it as normal.

"The American is lonely. You should go over and acquaint yourself with him," said the older barmaid to the younger one.

"He is old and fat. You should. He is more your age."

"I am old. Americans like beautiful, young women to pay them notice. I am like a wool blanket. I could only keep him warm at night."

The younger barmaid laughed.

The older barmaid remembered when she was beautiful. That was in Soviet-times. Everyone had jobs. Men had pride. Sasha didn't drink too much.

"I am not interested in an old, fat American. I have Andrey. I love Andrey," said the

younger barmaid, after thinking about it for a moment.

"The American can give you everything you want."

"I only want Andrey."

"You are thinking like a girl. You will have nothing, not even Andrey. You will be old and you will be fat."

The younger barmaid knew she would never get old and fat.

The outside door opened and two young men entered through a bank of condensation. They were well kept like most Ukrainian men, unlike the American who always looked like he needed a shave. Candles on the tables flickered; the American leaned back against the wall and lit a cigarette. The younger barmaid walked over to the two young men and took their order. She knew them.

The older barmaid thought about a photo in a magazine of hot air balloons, hundreds of them it seemed, in Albuquerque. She had cut out the photo and had put it between the pages of a book. The balloons were so beautiful, so many different colors. That is what I would do if I ever went to America. I would ride in a hot air balloon, far above the ground, thought the older barmaid. She couldn't remember what had become of the photo, what had become of the book. The younger barmaid returned with the two young men's order.

"The American is a teacher," said the older barmaid, "at the pedagogical college."

"Teachers are poor."

"Not in America. They have their own flats, their own autos. You could have your own auto. You could drive to the top of a hill. You could see all the beautiful lights in the city below." The older barmaid remembered that scene from an American film she watched on television.

"I could kill the old, fat American and take all his money right now. I think that would be much better for me."

Both of them laughed. The older barmaid glanced over at the American. He sat almost motionless, staring at his nearly empty pack of cigarettes on the table, only his lips moving.

"Americans don't curse their wives," mumbled the older barmaid, and she lit a cigarette. The younger barmaid sang quietly to the song on the CD and ignored her.

The American crushed his cigarette butt in an ashtray and lifted his ceramic mug to order another beer. The older barmaid nudged the younger one as if to say "here's your chance," but the younger barmaid only inspected her own recently polished fingernails for chips. The older barmaid stood up and sighed deeply, like it was an ordeal just to stand up.

In five months the school year would end and the American would leave Ukraine. He could terminate his assignment before then, but five months, that's not too long, he thought. But he knew it was, especially in that town. He lit a cigarette and took a sip of vodka and muttered something to himself. The older barmaid looked over at him and smiled. The younger barmaid brushed the hair away from her eyes and waited for Andrey to call.

Three militia officers walked into the bar. The two young men quietly left, followed shortly afterwards by the only other customer besides the American. The American stared at his cigarette. Both barmaids looked nervously at one another.

A tall, skinny officer walked up to the older barmaid and said something to her. She nodded over in the American's direction, and then he and the two other officers walked over to the American's table.

"Your documents," the tall, skinny officer said. His English was painful.

The American reached into his left breast pocket and took out his Peace Corps passport and pink card. He showed them to the officer. But he refused to surrender them, as he was cautioned, and the officer stooped to inspect the documents.

"Now yours," said the American, arrogantly testing him. The officer shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, "I don't understand you."

The tall, skinny officer scanned the emptied bar, searching for the correct verb tense in English to use. "You must come with us," he finally said.

The American stood up and followed the officers outside. The barmaids acted busy, taking down bottles from shelves and wiping them clean. The tall, skinny officer said good-bye to them. The barmaids acted uninterested in the happenings.

The American was never seen in town again.

Author's Note: *A conservative estimate of five-percent of the nearly 8,000 Peace Corps volunteers worldwide are actively involved in intelligence gathering activities, in the media, in Christian church and missionary groups, and in human rights organizations, among other such NGOs. Rarely does Peace Corps or foreign officials ever discover them.*

Carlos Bez has worked for the Peace Corps and has lived in the Ukraine. This is his first published piece of fiction.

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