

The Star Spangled Banner

by Lauren Chaves



Artist: Melissa Jeralds

Max tugged on one of his three shirts and cleaned his spotted glasses with the least dirty corner of his shirt. Then, he pulled up his jeans that sat next to his bed and pulled the belt tight against his skinny skeleton – all the while looking at his Kurt Cobain poster, and wondering if the rebellious fuck ever found his freedom. He thought American History teachers must be the most disillusioned children in the world because they were always chanting, “And on the field of Gettysburg they fought for the freedom of slaves.” Well, Max learned that freedom is an illusion. He only felt free for a few hours after fifteen beers and a blunt. Someone was always trying to control him, but one day it would end.

With a shrug, he shook away his deep thoughts and looked around his messy room, thinking if he forgot anything. He looked at the desk and saw the crystal he had traded his weed for Natasha. The majesty of this crystal was found in its beauty. He would tell Natasha it came with special healing powers, and hopefully, she would eat up his lie. He carefully placed the crystal in his pocket, waddled through the dirty laundry on the floor in his room to find his hat. On the way to the door, he avoided his reflection in the mirror, taped on the wall; he only felt confident when he wore a hat.

Max lived in a middle class Massachusetts two-story house with a basement. The basement was converted into a spare bedroom with no parents allowed. Then, Max walked upstairs to the kitchen. He saw his mother and father sitting at the breakfast table. His French mother politely asked, “Maxine, would you like a croissant?” Still holding strong to her French roots, they had only just moved to Massachusetts six years ago. His father’s head hung almost as if by a thread over a bowl of cereal, burping up last night’s whiskey and coke. He was very much Irish. His mother sat poised with the *New York Times* and a plate of fruit. The morning light painted her

in a hue of heavenly gold, which is only reserved for those who can match that same beauty internally.

Max looked straight into her blue eyes, “Merci Ma, but I’ll figure something out later.”

“Okay Maxine, tell Jack I say hello.”

“Yes, I love you.” All his father had to add to the conversation was the most egregious burp. He saw spews of oil and gases circulate in the air. Max didn’t think much of his father who was just a stand in fuck up. Max dubbed him, “Father Fate,” because he could throw a wrench at you or throw a wrench in your plans.

He turned to the door where he left his skateboard and grabbed it. On the street, he threw his skateboard ahead of him and ran to meet it, a collision of force. He wanted to be far from the cul-de-sac of cracked driveways and rusted fences. Mr. Wallace was watering his grass into what would soon be a mud puddle. Wallace waved, but Max wasn’t feeling it, not after last night, so he flipped him the middle finger. His dick swelled with pride.

Max wanted to return to college, staying at home for the summer seemed juvenile, and he hadn’t found his equal back at home as he had in college. Max missed late nights with Natasha, drunken brawls, pranks, and snowball fights; he was ready for the summer to be over. Everyone at home was still knocking the same Nike’s they had since high school because they would rather spend their money on a stamp of heroin. It was their choice, it’s not like he hadn’t done it, but at least, he was going to school. Although he was getting drunk, he was getting by with okay grades. He skated past a Dunkin Donuts towards Jack’s house. There was always something going on there, so why not participate. He saw the run down shotgun house surrounded by a metal fence that was leaning to the left. He wondered what Natasha was up to.

The pinks and greens of neon lighting hid the grease and blood stains from last night’s fight. This was Las Vegas, so never trust the headlines because it is never as safe as they report it to be. Natasha was participating as she always did in the frivolity in her hometown, never enjoying pure freedom, because who could be truly free around people who cared too much about what they looked like or behaved. Natasha was a fan of act now and think about it later, but her friends in Las Vegas thought she was a tad insane. Many times, she thought if only Max was here, they would understand her. Perhaps, then she would convert them over to what true pleasure was.

She sat on a prickly bench in the back of a bar watching her high school friends huddle around each other. She traversed and sunk her hands tight into her leather jacket, not wanting to touch any of these duplicitous people. A few more whiskey doubles, and she’d have the whole crowd beat.

A boy-man with pubic stubble approached her at the bar, “Hey would you like to play a game with me?” She looked him up and down. His hands were empty. He didn’t have a can of spray paint, crow bar, nor a Nerf gun. The finishing touch was that the light behind his iris’s seemed dull; she already knew he had nothing to offer. “And what game would that be?”

“Hide and seek.”

She rolled her eyes and decided she had to let him down easy, “Well, see now I can already tell by your tight jeans and vest that you shop at Urban Outfitters, and you isn’t a crip, but really what I’m looking for tonight is to put a dildo up a crip’s corn hole, and honey, you ain’t it.”

She felt so asexual recently, that all she had were bitter comebacks for any suitors at a bar. The boy-man still had his confidence and moved on to his next victim.

She walked her drink back to the huddle where this new girl asked her if she’d like to go to Arizona. Her name was Randy from Washington. Randy tried to play the pseudo hippy card even though she used to be a former meth head. “Alright, anything to get out of this dump, so count me in. What are we doing?”

Randy jostled her weight of scarves and jewelry around and yelled over the music, “To see Mimosa and to try this new drug out called DOC.” The music bumped louder and her short dirty dreads moved to the beat.

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Max felt the grips of the skateboard as he took it up off the ground and knocked on Jack's door. Max was patted on the back and guided to a chair at the dining room table, where he saw lines of Ketamine cut out on a mirror. He took the straw and did what was expected. He drifted off into a warm psychedelic trip. Max didn't even notice the new girl in the bunch. Her name was Lizzie, and she was currently engaged to Jack. Everyone sat watching as Max rolled his head around. Max came fifteen minutes later. He focused on Lizzie's round Asian face, "Who are you?"

Lizzie assertively said as if it had always been, "Jack's fiancé." Max passed the mirror and Ketamine to his friend Mike, sitting to his right.

Max trying to cope with the sudden news, remembered his manners excitedly, and exclaimed while grabbing her hand, "Well, congratulations, Jack is a lucky man, and I can't wait to get to know you. Where do you come from?"

"Massachusetts first, but I just came back from living in China for four years." She let her facade slip, and she scratched her arm. "Well Max, would you like a beer," Lizzie asked, "I hear you're leaving soon for school?" Lizzie looked bored and sick, she began to pick at the tablecloth, but she concealed her addiction like a pro. The key to hiding addiction is to dress conservative, and society will still think you're a goddamn virgin.

Max looked down at the dirty tablecloth with some hardened noodles that clung to it, "I still have a week left, but we can always celebrate something, Merry Christmas?"

Mike was sitting next to him, and he went to Saint Michael's college, too, but he wasn't Natasha. He secretly wanted Max alone and drunk. Mike could not scare Max away; he was still a good friend. They were roommates once, but they fought too much. They fought over the stereo, drugs, booze, everything, but it could all boil down to the sexual tension Mike tried so hard to create. Max never returned the heat. It angered Max that Mike's father would not allow Mike to come out of the closet. Out of courtesy for Mike's homophobic father, who knew he was gay, he kept his posters of half naked girls taped on his bedroom walls. Max liked to think of Mike's father as "A Hard boiled Mass-hole."

Mike chipped in, "You should meet my new guy." Max's older brother was gay; therefore, he knew what it was like for someone to explore his sexual options for the first time. It was always trouble.

Mike continued, "He is thirty-five years old, and he buys me all the booze I want."

"Ugh older guys? You can do so much better. He is really just trying to take advantage of someone new to the game." Mike looked semi-ashamed because it was new for him to even breach the subject of male partners.

"He gets me booze though," he whined. Max looked Jack in the eye, wondering if this news disturbed him as much as it did him, but apparently not.

Jack grabbed Lizzie's hand and announced, "Well, we are off to the methadone clinic. We will be back soon, beer and vodka in the fridge." The door slammed behind them. It was the only noise they made.

Max looked towards Mike, "I miss the old Jack"

"You mean pre-heroin? When he was cheated on by his girlfriend of three years at Saint Mike's? Considering my predicament Max, I'd say it's better to not live a lie."

“He used to brush his hair and smile, Mike. You’re a hypocrite. You’ll go back in the closet once we go back to school. I still can’t believe his girlfriend gave him acid to tell him that she also gave him herpes.” Max walked to the fridge and opened it. Staring at the frosty Pabst Blue Ribbons made him miss Natasha even more.

The neon lights were called upon again to hide the bloodstains as a fight broke out at the bar.

Natasha’s new acquaintance said, “Hey punk, we are leaving tomorrow. Let’s leave this joint before the police come.” Natasha got in her car and followed Randy to her house a few streets from the bar. In the kitchen, she met Randy’s mother. Randy’s mother had pockmarks all over her face, and Natasha wondered if meth had been a family activity. Randy’s mother’s tits seemed to bulge everywhere. Randy was bulky, but Natasha had never seen a woman comfortable with stowing away her own tits in her armpits. Upon seeing Randy trying to shuffle off to her room, she said, “GIIIIIRLLL, I finally gots a job we can get your teef capped. You’s gunna be on my insurance.”

Randy looked enthused, “Well, heck yes, Ma, I knew you could do it! This is my new friend Natasha.”

“Awww Natasha, you call me Ma. You’s skinny; you’s needs food. How come you only like to wear the color black? What’s wrong with this one Randy?”

Natasha became dizzy with the incoherent babble, and she started to wonder what she had gotten herself into.

She had presumed that Randy had good drugs. This was why she was here, but this was not blissful ignorance. This was torture. “Well, thanks Ma, but no thanks.”

“Where’s your lady’s room?” Natasha always found it the best way to avoid parents.

“That be in Randy’s room, down the hall to the left.” As Natasha turned for the bathroom, she could hear an audible fart noise emanate from the sound of the compression of flesh sloshing in sweat coming from Ma’s armpit. She made it to a green bathroom where she saw makeup scattered over the counters and period stained underwear on the green linoleum floor. *Not much better, but at least I don’t have to converse with that monster of a woman thought Natasha.* She took the time to call her parents and leave a sugar coated voicemail, “Hey, I’m going to Arizona for a few days. I’ll be back in time for school, so don’t worry. I love you.” Natasha wished fat Randy could magically turn into Max, but that wasn’t the case.

Max let himself into his house where his dad still sat at the kitchen table, but he replaced the cereal bowl with a bottle of whiskey and a wine chaser. “So Max, are you going to tell me where the fuck your laptop has been all summer? Don’t think I haven’t noticed that it’s missing. Did you fucking pawn it for drugs?”

Max began to heave with anger. “No, I fucking told you at the beginning of the summer. Some kid stole it at school!”

“How the fuck am I supposed to believe that someone would steal a laptop from a kid at one of the richest east coast schools in the country?”

“Fine, don’t fucking believe me. I don’t give two fucks. I’m out of your life in a week, piss off.”

Max shook with anger, caught his father’s beady eyes in the dark, and reached for his father’s golfing shoes by the front door. He clutched the shoe all the while not losing his father’s gaze and threw the golfing shoe toward the bay window. Shards of glass landed all over the sofa and carpet of the living room. Max dropped the shoe, and succinctly turned towards the basement. *At least those golfing shoes have been used for something in the past ten years.*

In his basement, he opened his sock drawer for his bottle of Xanax and ate two to relax. Kurt Cobain was lifeless in the dark, but he probably would have agreed with Max. Max grabbed his phone and rang Natasha because her voice always put him at ease.

"TASHA, I HATE FATHER FATE."

"Hey Max, what's up?"

"Father Fate is fucking up my happiness again. What are you doing?"

"I'm currently sitting in a green bathroom, but what happened with your asshole dad?"

"He noticed that my computer was missing."

"Fuck Max, we are fucking taking a baseball bat to that kid's knees. I swear on Jimmy Hendrix's grave! I still can't believe he took your computer because you owed him forty dollars. Like hello, he is the richest fucking kid in the school. It's like no one realizes that life isn't a fucking videogame. It's like let's pretend I'm a drug cartel today and fuck with the poor kids."

"Yeah man, it sucks. I just don't want my mom to find out, and that fucking asshole probably lost my laptop by now. He doesn't even answer my calls anymore."

"Well Max, he is going to answer to me. Don't you worry! You are getting a laptop."

"You always know that violence soothes me to sleep. Goodnight Tasha."

"Goodnight Max."

Max quickly drifted to sleep and wrestled in a nightmare. He was stuck in the maze from *The Shining*, trying to find Natasha, but he couldn't

The next morning with the sun and sand pouring in on them, Randy ended up packing her car up with three whole suitcases. Randy turned, saying, "Natasha, are you sure you don't want to go home to grab some clothes?"

"Not really, we are only going to be gone a few days. I'm not worried; you seem to have enough clothes to clothe an entire acting troupe."

Randy snorted a laugh, "I die. Your sarcasm is to dieeee for."

Natasha asked one question, "So what's DOC?"

Randy's answer had been so long winded and patronizing that she ended her answer two hours into the road trip, "Yeah, so that's DOC, so you excited?"

"I can handle it, I think." If Max can handle his predicament, she can handle a little psychedelic.

Max awoke to his mom prodding him, "So you broke the window in a hell-bent fury Maxine. You must not let your anger get a hold of you, or you will just turn out like your father, whom I think you despise. Although he is your father, I believe somehow maybe you love each other." Max contorted his face, so his mom would not see the tears in his eyes because he believed that his mother deserved a perfect family.

"Your right mother, I apologize for the window. I will have it fixed at once." It was as if life had shoved a walnut down his throat. He felt terrible over upsetting his mother. He decided that he would cry in the shower, and perhaps the walnut would shrink in size.



Later, at Jack's, they decided to drive into Boston to see their friend Tony for the night. Jack had seen the anger on Max's face when he slammed the door to his house that afternoon. "J Fucking P Morgan laid me off because they're capitalist motherfuckers, and now I have to dip into my very limited school fund to pay to fix my parent's living room window."

"Whoa man, calm down! Let's have a guy's night and go and see Tony and get drunk." Jack had left his fiancé a stamp of heroin. Max watched her as she curled up on the couch and ignored them as they left for Tony's.

Tony always made everything better probably because the kid had foresight to ask for a trampoline for his rooftop for Christmas one year. He had lived in the same apartment building in Southie Boston his whole life. "Max, my man, you looking good for the lady's tonight, and first things first, I got some incoming freshmen from Northeastern, don't ask me how I talked them into coming to Southie, but you must meet'em."

"Thank God for dumb Midwesterners," sighed Max.

Tony handed Max a beer while seamlessly chatting him up and moving him next to a perky blonde named Stacie. "Hey, I'm Max."

"Stacie."

"Where are you from Stacie?"

"Well, we all say YA'All ALLOTT, so take a guess Max."

"This one is truly tough Stacie. Wow, you're just a natural quiz show giant," sardonically sassed Max.

"I'm actually studying to be a doctor."

"Okay, I'm gonna guess Texas."

"OH My God, you're so cultured Max," shrieked Stacie. "The freshmen boys are sooooo dumb." *Max wondered is Texas part of the West or the Midwest? Either way this girl was so dumb she just had to be easy. He would ask Natasha later.*

Dust hit the car from all sides. Natasha truly loved the desert for its lonesome quality, but Randy was ruining every atom of it. Randy was very controlling; therefore, she was both the driver and the navigator. Resulting in an eight-hour long drive in what should have been a quick four-hour long drive. Natasha had met the nemesis of her free-wheeling lifestyle, and it was Randy. "See if I just stick my GPS out the window, I know we will get a satellite connection, man." At this point, Natasha and Randy were actually in Tempe. It was just a matter of finding her friend's apartment.

Suddenly, Randy dropped the GPS in the middle of the road, "Fuck, I'm stopping to get that. I don't care if I die doing it."

"Well, I don't want to die trapped in this junk car in the middle of a busy intersection because you're a fucking fool," yelled Natasha. They didn't talk until they knocked on the door of her friend's apartment because Natasha needed a beer.

The vacation was revived because Randy's friends seemed to be infinitely more relaxed than Randy. The DJ, Mimosa, was playing in an hour; therefore, Natasha had to drink and relax fast. The apartment was small with an obtrusive mural of some basketball team on the wall. *My god at least put up a poster of your favorite band*, she thought as she looked upon it in disgust.

"So you don't like the mural? It's okay my fucking dad put it up and surprised me with it when I was moving in. Hi, I'm Alicia. I think it's fair game if we all admit that we have daddy issues."

"My god, a sense of humor, I was this close to doing the most depraved things for laughter during that stressful drive."

"I would have endorsed it."

Randy came over with sour patch candies that had the DOC dripped on it. Natasha held out her hand and popped it in her mouth, chewed, and swallowed it with a beer. Alicia asked, "Would you like a line of coke," while leading her to the bathroom.

"I like how you already know that I was going to say yes. If I had said no, would you have made me do it against my will?"

"Yes, I would have held you at gunpoint with a water gun."

"I like you Alicia because you're a good hostess."

Alicia looked beautiful in the mirror's reflection while cutting out the lines with a precision usually allocated to the military. She had dark uncombed hair; she could have been mistaken for an early Pat Benatar. Natasha looked at her reflection. She wore a slight smile when she sometimes found people who reminded her of Max, but still not the real deal.

Max asked Tony in a whisper, "Yo, have you ever been interrupted by one of your neighbors when fucking on the trampoline on top of your roof top?"

"Nah, it's completely fuckable after one in the morning."



"Thanks, I believe Stacie has had enough watermelon vodka in her."

"Seriously, she is beyond retrieval, but it's not like there was much there beforehand."

"Hey Tony, do you happen to have a rubber?"

"I ran out last night and never made it to the drug store today, my bad Max."

Max headed out of the apartment towards the roof top access, and Stacie dutifully followed. Her breasts were worth the hour and half long conversation and what a rush to be fucking on a trampoline. He needed to please his flesh, and Stacie was it for the moment as he came all over her perfect breasts. Then, the worry set in, when he thought, *I didn't wear a fucking condom!*

Max looked at Stacie, who was still astonished that she had cum on her, "You're clean, right?"

"Well, that's an absurd question; of course, I am."

"When was the last time you were checked for STD's?"

"Well, I don't know Max. I don't sleep around. You have to believe me." Max worried and thought of his poor brother six years into his HIV treatment. He was smarter than this, fucking Midwesterners!

The city of Tempe reminded Natasha of Randy a fake hippy town with something sinister to hide. Randy insisted on driving and parking because she didn't want to spend the extra five bucks on a taxi. Randy chose to park outside Yellow Mellow Mushroom Pizza, "Hehe, we're high, and that's mushroom pizza."

"True, love the connection, but what if we get towed? I'm broke."

"It's too late for them to tow."

"You are always right Randy." Alicia and the others were waiting outside the club for them.

Alicia's eyes smiled and enveloped her into a kaleidoscope of colors.

Natasha nudged Alicia, "By god, I love girls with green eyes."

“Well, then just stick with me, babe.”

Natasha followed Alicia by the hand. Every light streamed by her in slow mo as they entered the club. Once inside, Natasha noticed the ceiling had magically grown ten stories. *Shit I was Merry Prankstered by the evil Randy she realized.* Her goal became to find the sphinx with the green eyes. Alicia was waiting patiently for her to notice her on the dance floor. Natasha’s apprehension had dissipated like beads of mercury shattering on the dance floor. Natasha and Alicia danced leaving traces with their fingertips. Alicia grabbed Natasha and brought her to the bar. There was a mirror behind the bar, and immediately as Natasha set her eyes on it, it shattered into a million pieces and moved into a new design as it felt like it. “Cool huh,” said Alicia. “Oh so I’m not alone on this drug escapade?”

“No, but as always, it’s too strong, and she gives us no warning.”

“We just like her drugs, not really her, but this time she took it too far.”

“I came for the drugs and music. I really just met her last night.”

Randy sat on a bar stool with her hood up a shadow stricken across her face. She was watching them come to the realization that we were her guinea pigs. Only she had the remote control for this demented show, and she reveled in her power.

After the show, Natasha and Randy walked to where the car was parked, but it wasn’t there. Natasha thought it’s almost as if Randy had planned the worst night ever just to torment her. Natasha checked for a sign and found one immediately that said, “Tow Zone, Call 1-800-666-6666 for retrieval \$150 fine for out of state vehicles.”

“Financially fucking speaking Randy, I can’t even afford half of that, and I told you it was a tow zone.”

Natasha saw a taxi zooming past them and shoved her dress over her head to flag it down

“What the fuck are you trying to do? Get arrested for public nudity?”

“No, I’m getting us out of this fucking dump now, so get in the fucking taxi.”

Once in the taxi, “So Natasha, you have no funds to contribute to bailing the car out?”

“No, I have to save for college in a week. You know a \$42,000 loaned out education.”

“Well, you’re helping me out with the fine, or you’re going to miss your first week of school.”

Natasha turned and glared at Randy’s pug face, “Fuck you, I will figure something out, you cowardly fat ass.”

The taxi driver chimed in, “Where would you gals like to go.”

“I’d rather be in Somalia right now.”

“The Q Building on Empire Street,” Randy screamed as she dialed the tow company.

**FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS TO NATASHA, RANDY,
& MAX IN THE SECOND INSTALLMENT
OF *THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER*
ON SEPTEMBER 10, 2012...**