

love me

by Leslie What

My wife, who is from Russia, and I are about to celebrate our tenth anniversary. Maybe *celebrate* is too strong a word for what we are doing. *Observe* might be a better choice, given the circumstances. I sit alone in her apartment, a bottle of California champagne on ice. Yelena will be home late; I hear she goes out dancing on Friday nights. I can wait, after all, I waited until I was forty to get married. I am good at waiting. Plus, she has cable. It's weird how I can change the channels from my head using my brain implant. The implant doesn't work how it's supposed to, but it does change the channels. I think it's defective. That would explain a lot.

Yesterday, I get a letter from a lawyer, explaining that the former Yelena Chekhov wants a divorce. I would sure like to hear that coming from Yelena, then I would believe it. The problem, the same one that we have had all along, is our language barrier. Yelena never learned English and I never learned Russian. We communicated by Charades until the implants that were supposed to change everything.

I'm not saying I've been the perfect husband, but Yelena is not an easy woman to please. In that way she's like a lot of American women, not that I would ever have considered marrying one of them. They expect so much a man can never measure up. Yelena, on the other hand, expected nothing. That sure changed. She was so innocent when she arrived. She walks outside, showing off her new gold chains. Gets herself mugged her first full day in our country. Yelena goes ballistic, refuses to leave the house again until I buy her a little gun. I send her to a self-defense class taught by lesbians. I help her mom, sisters, aunts and uncles come over so she will have her family. Takes a while, but her confidence slowly returns.

Then we learn she's barren. She's heartbroken. We can't adopt — I'm too old for any agency. We can't afford private. I let her take a job as a social worker for Russian immigrants, and that keeps her happy and busy for a time. You never saw so many impoverished babushkas. They're at the house continuously, eating my food, drinking up the Stoli. When they leave I find a clock radio missing, or my new bowling shoes gone and in their place a pair of mismatched slippers.

"Yelena," says I. "These people eat me out of house and home." She doesn't understand a word. My savings account drops to zero. We take in a boarder named Mike to help pay the mortgage. He recommends a Russian marriage counselor, Dr. Nystroya, a quack who couldn't help Mike sort out problems with his Russian wife. I should have known.

Nystroya's office is above a Russian deli where Yelena likes the borscht. Our first appointment, we walk upstairs to ring the bell. A dark, disheveled man with a eighties shag-rug hair unlocks the door, says something Russian, makes us wait in the hall until he changes into a yellowed lab coat and hustles us inside.

I cannot understand a single word Nystroya says and I doubt he understands me. He has us sign papers for the transplant, which I assume is routine. Yelena smiles. For one moment, I hope things will work out.

Next thing I know, Nystroya is shooting me full of drugs; a nurse with facial hair is shaving my head. Everything goes dark. I wake up. I'm given an instruction manual, written in Russian. "But I don't speak

Russian," I say, and the nurse tries to tell me something in Charades. I figure out the pamphlet is the FAQ for the universal translator Nystroya has implanted in my brain. The device is supposed to translate my thoughts into Russian, translate Yelena's Russian thoughts into English ones. We should be able to communicate with the blink of an eye. If there's a disclaimer, I can't read it; the Russian manual is Greek to me.

Yelena points to the FAQ list. She blinks, three times hard and fast, and I stare into her eyes and try to interpret her thoughts. "A union waits, frozen in hellish Siberia."

I suspect there's something missing.

I blink three times, just like she did, ask, "What's for dinner?" Her answer is to roll the FAQ into a tube and swat me on the side of the head.

I try again, "Honey," I say. "Let's go home. I'm hungry." Then I get wise to what she's saying. "If you'd rather not cook, we can grab a bowl of borscht downstairs."

Her words come so fast and furious that no machine can decipher them. I've said something wrong. Or maybe the device has made a mess of the translation. I'll never know for sure. Yelena heads for Nystroya's front door. I follow her out. In the morning, I wake up, knock on her bedroom door. "Did you make breakfast?" I ask, not because I want her to, but just so's I won't duplicate her efforts.

"You bacon!" she says.

"We have bacon?" I ask. She doesn't do the shopping anymore, she doesn't do anything. She's turned out really different from the woman I fell in love with from the mail-order brides in the brochure.

"Stuff the turkey," she says.

I figure she's confused, because Thanksgiving isn't for another few weeks. We keep trying, at least I do, another few months. Things get worse. I can't tell if Yelena understands me, but I sure as heck don't understand her. The translator doesn't help. For the first time I start to doubt she loves me. Maybe she's a lesbian. That would explain things. Finally, she packs her bags, leaves. She won't return my calls. The bank repossess my car. I have to let go of cable. And now the letter from her lawyer. I'm sick over the whole thing. I can't eat. I can't sleep. My hair falls out in patches. My boss fires me. It's this device: it doesn't work. I have to explain to her, tell her I still love her, that we should start all over.

So I wait. And wait. Until I can't wait anymore. I polish off the champagne and fall asleep. Boy, do I ever conk out. I must not hear Yelena come in, must not hear her gasp to see me sitting on her couch. Maybe she doesn't recognize me. I've lost twenty pounds and haven't shaved in a week. "You've come home," I say, lifting the bottle while I try to think up a toast.

Something's wrong. She's screaming. All this trouble I've gone through on her account and she still doesn't understand me. I wave the bottle around, trying to get her to calm down and find myself staring down the nostrils of a pearl-handled pistol. It looks like a toy. I start to laugh because I bought her that gun. "You wanna play?" I ask, thinking this is another game, like Charades, only with bullets instead of words.

She's so serious, aiming right at my head. I sober up quick. I blink, five times, hard. "Don't shoot," I say. I can't tell if my message gets through, or if she understands me loud and clear and plans to pull the trigger anyway.