

Howling Neon Flats: or away from home

The slot machines shouted, this much couldn't help but be apparent, blatant, glaring. Always more, the closer eyes and ears got to the machines. They glowed, and they wouldn't yell their faults and secrets, just victory as an invitation.

They didn't care to whom.

They just wanted someone to touch their knob. All they were made for is a little pull.

Arabella rubbed her face with both hands, but the layer of smoke instead of sleep persisted. It lay down like she should be.

A film of nicotine was all she could taste. It was impossible not to notice on her teeth, even if she tried to keep her tongue as still as she could. It felt like it was cracking and breaking, her tongue, though it continued to rise up and meet the filter of each cigarette like it had no choice in the matter, anymore than whether or not it would smooth along her teeth. She would practice stilling it in her mouth as it hurt, and the yellow layer of nicotine was still there making everything slippery and stagnant.

She looked around habitually, it got worse when she was tired, and she was tired. Her eyes would try to hide her from herself when she found the odd slivers of ill lit reflective surfaces. They didn't make sense here. It wasn't exactly someplace she wanted to see herself; the odds said the face in the mirror was losing. The mirrors didn't exactly make the room look bigger. She supposed that without them maybe all of it would close on in.

The reflective surfaces created space for the sights, the same as the halls for the sound, as everything couldn't help but try to close in. Lights flashed and Arabella didn't squeeze her head even though it felt like hell, because it didn't do well to look mad in Hell and the noises went on, and on, aware of her only as a demographic. Not even a specific one, just as someone who would be in the presence of the whispering machines at all, and they screamed, and hollered, and howled, and hated.

Touch my knob.

Push my buttons.

Put it in, the money.

TOUCH MY KNOB.

It wasn't the shouts that brought a person back though. It was the whispers. "You can win." "There's a way." "Stick around and I'll tell you a system." On the wind they weren't quite spoken in binary.

It was the whispered promises of the machines that let you neglect their flat faces, without any worry for whether or not they would come true. They promised that the gaudy, exaggerated beckoning theme that called wasn't as offensive as it seemed. Whether it was Arabian, western or jungle it would tell you to see its shine and share its greed. It doesn't tell you it will just deflate yours; that is how it shares.

It whispers of systems.

It makes sure to make you believe.

It crests in its simple ways always down the row.

She was here with Howell. Anywhere she was it was with Howell. They were all Howell's haunts, that's how it had always been. He shared like the machines, deflating as he grew. His terms rode a cruel wind, wilder the surer he was that he wanted you off, or in Arabella's case the more he was sure she was twisting in his for life.

She scratched the top of her knee high boots. They were just the sort of thing she wouldn't own if she didn't know how to get it for free. They didn't rhyme with anything.

Perfect.

She patted her hair that wasn't coifed so much as dealt with. She rubbed her eyes and her firm lashes reminded her that she was wearing makeup, but she knew she had probably ruined it already. It was probably spreading like it was trying to run from something. All the way or halfway down her face, the embarrassing part was that she knew exactly how she'd gotten here.

Howell said he didn't like makeup. It was made of burnt animal bones, but that had nothing to do with it. That was just a fact, one that if he'd known it could have meant anything, depending on his mood and whether or not he felt like cutting the messenger down.

He was a hunter.

He was a killer.

He was a felon and there was something in his eyes when he looked at her and didn't miss prey. Hunters always miss prey when they look at that which isn't and he'd stand and smile without being happy, but he wouldn't miss prey. He would see right through her and she'd feel awfully vulnerable for being invisible.

He hadn't put her in her place in a while. Why would he if he didn't have to?

But they both knew she was slipping out of it, they both knew she might not fit anymore. It wasn't just that either, it was the sort of slip a girl didn't return from, and months or days it'd be hard not to lose her.

She got up to stay awake. She wasn't free of the whispers. She wandered captivated enough by the idea, the possibility, the illusion, that it could be her touch that made the machine scream.

She walked to stay awake.

She wanted to go slow so she didn't have to pick another machine, but she wouldn't get hassled for not picking a machine.

She wanted to go fast to pump her blood.

She was trapped here until it was time. It didn't matter what she wanted, so long as she was with Howell her voice was an invisible whisper.

It had been harder to ignore recently, even though it had always been true. In all her lonely hours waiting home alone, feeling as though life were passing her by, she had never thought she would miss his propensity for leaving her in solitude to go and live in his own form.

Back when his attention was flattering, it was easier to overlook its unsettling nature. If actions spoke louder than words he hated her, but she just drank his poison with a smile on her face. After a while she'd lost sight of what else to do.

It wouldn't be long until he called her a bitch again, it was like a nickname anymore.

She passed Vanna and Pat, she passed science fiction swirls. She passed mechanical poker. She passed sheriff's stars. They all wanted her to see stars.

It didn't matter how fast she walked. She managed to be invisible under constant surveillance. Even if she wanted to be seen she wouldn't even know where to begin regarding stealing or winning, which is all they really looked at anyway. Winners and thieves were all they really saw.

She found herself in a corner. There wasn't anywhere else lately. She would have wanted to disappear into it, but the prospect was so possible that the desire just seemed superfluous and she couldn't help but sigh at the thought.

She sat down at a machine with an Indian theme, Far East, hot and humid Indian. The design was racist like all of these glowing billboards advertising how to waste time, an utter affront to humanity and goodness.

She ignored that Howell could soak in the affront like it was home. He couldn't soak home in this way. He blamed her aloud, but she wondered anymore.

He had taken her here for her birthday eighteen months ago, six they'd stayed home. Then he'd found the machines, she'd waited like loyal, there hadn't been the time or money for her to play, she'd stayed with the kids. She hadn't known how yet anyway, to play, so that had been fine. It was always fine or a fight and Arabella wasn't fond of a fight she couldn't win.

Arabella put the dollar near the bindi. The money was eaten without spiritual or any other concept of the consequences of desire.

It was eaten like poverty. She couldn't get money when Howell wasn't around.

The night circled deeper and she wanted to win so she could eat the next day, but the night just circled deeper and she and the machines each knew how it went. The stool felt like it was moving under her but it wasn't. She watched the squares that meant slots blur and then steady the stops they came to halted.

The knob was just there for looks anymore. She missed when it had needed to be pulled, even though she had never known such times.

The turnout of the squares was this: Garish bindi, stylized bronze Om, Om, racist yogi in a lotus position, all other rows locked, minus five cents.

Pull. (Press really).

Blur of the tutu of a sideways ballerina. Faster, faster, dizzy fast ballerina machine.

Stop.

The turnout: belly dancer that's really just sex, smoky eyes, Om, bindi, minus five cents.

Head pulse, jaw tighten, desperate lock, wrist stretch, button push, spin. Eyes dance, eyes swim. Eyes keep up with nothing, all is lost. Eyes keep up, with nothing all is lost. The physiology of losing hope hurts but looks like nothing as it spins.

Stop.

Turnout: Minus five cents. Bindi, eyes, Om, yogi, loss.

She sat with predictable shock. Disappointment and awe, all the way down. Something settles in the crotch. Lean with bile in the fast game.

Whisper. Whisper, tell me what I'm doing wrong.

Howl. Cry, whisper, howl or holy something.

Push the button, pretend to feel the same easy false resistance as the pull of the knob.

Turnout: Om, Om, no peace, Om, elephant.

The machine says 'Namaste' and gives five dollars but it doesn't know what it means and Arabella's staring, only sort of seeing. The temporary break from loss doesn't mean much. Taking five to the counter feels like more loss anyway.

There it is under the eyes of the machine, to the right of the sacred chant. The elephant.

The elephant carries a couple. They smile like they haven't known each other for long and Arabella wishes that gay people would just understand, it wasn't that she was against gay marriage, it was that she was against all marriage. She had thought 'to each their own', but she didn't anymore.

They enjoyed each other, and the beauty of the image made her wonder if she was hallucinating. She really wanted a cheeseburger, and beauty on a slot machine was a sign of being tamed and unwell.

She stared, she knew it wasn't right. She couldn't look away.

The couple on the elephant, in the machine, glowed and silently talked there in the shine and the clouds were lit just enough she wasn't sure that the sky wasn't on fire. She stared and thought she might go to the library the next day. Her gaze didn't need to shift for her to grab a smoke.

She could slip one from the pack without taking them out of her pocket. She didn't have to look at all. It was between her fingers without a thought. The lighter slid right into her palm. There was no smoking indoors where she came from. There were no such smoky places home.

She lit up without moving her eyes from the couple at all or thinking about it. If she weren't lighting a cigarette it would look strange that she was just sitting there. She wasn't pushing buttons, pulling knobs, playing like boss with the machine.

The silence and stillness were odd but not the same as how she was staring in a way not everyone could, deep into the bored lights. That was what could have gotten attention, if it

seemed a dangerous distance she went when still, but instead she was invisible in the utterly watched room.

Harmless.

She sucked the smoke in, the cherry glowed and it turned the color of the clouds in the sky on fire. She blew smoke right at the trio, giving them texture, taking their color away. The couple didn't wave it away from their mechanical stance. The elephant didn't adjust his trunk.

Arabella stared deeper and imagined a wedding. The procession would have demanded the clearing of the streets.

She shook the wedding off and imagined running away. They were both running away from another marriage. A marriage with others or marriage at all, they ran on the beast and the fringed palanquin he'd found himself saddled with. There still weren't people in the path, not that it would have mattered under an elephant's foot.

She went in deeper just for a second and she could have sworn they all had wings.

It was in her head. Detail as she imagined wasn't possible on the scale of the actual picture. The only place they really existed.

A hand thudded between her shoulder blades. It didn't land hard but like it didn't know gentle. When it hurt it was because it did.

She blinked at the impact and suddenly she was back and Howell was at her back.

Not only was he not interested in Arabella recently, but while Kevlynn wasn't on his arm it could have looked like she was from certain angles. Arabella tried not to pay attention. Arabella did a lot of looking away. She sat in a lot of silence.

Nothing she said meant anything anyway. Howell had always belonged to the night. He lied because he could. He lied because she would pretend to believe him until it was true.

Howell had the wind to cover him and Arabella could just stare into it and see nothing. She couldn't hear over the whipping air in the wind as he mourned of fault and neglect.

Some people were always being punched, even when it had been a while.

"Do you want to get out of here?"