

Roulette

Red on Black.

Red seeping through. Forming rivers; overly lipsticked smiling maws. Neon, aglow from some interior force, pushing against the nothingness of the black in an unwelcome way, somehow ominous, hell escaping through neglected cracks in the surface. Congealing into a face: almost smiling, but impassive, mocking. A stag's head. Staring in judgment. Heaven lingering behind it, growing farther away, adorned in the same evil neon. The stag was dead, wearing necrophilia makeup.

“Cheers.”

The voice reached from far away. Two cans attached by a string. But when I turned she was right there. Standing next to me. Holding up two shot glasses full of purple liquid.

“What's this?”

“Seriously?” Her voice was sweet and soothing in an abrasive way. Cherry pie and Tiger Balm. “Jäger, remember? You chose it, so don't blame me.”

My eyes swam back.

Red on Black.

A snap of focus. A stag's head. A cross behind it shooting lines of illumination. Jägermeister's logo staring out from the black machine which housed the liquor. An advertisement.

“Cheers,” I said.

The licorice-like anise flavor coated my tongue as the liquid deposited into the emptiness of my stomach. I felt no nausea, just a void where my insides were supposed to be.

“I don’t know how you do those regularly,” she said. Her hand, a leaf caught in a draft, flew from the bar, lightly brushed my shoulder, then retreated and landed on the stool next to us. I tracked the movement with my eyes and felt dizzy.

I was unmoored. The thread of the night was escaping through an alcohol induced fog. It wasn’t totally gone though. I could get it back. Regain my bearings.

The bar. I knew the bar. McCabe’s. East Village. St Mark’s. A dive, but that was the appeal. And I knew the bartender. Drank with him many times. Many Jameson shots. But now I was shooting Jäger, so I must be drunk. Too drunk. Trying to avoid a blackout. The extra sugar sometimes helped with that. When was the last time I had eaten anything? No clue. Alissa. I came here with Alissa, my coworker. Where was she? Search slowly, keep the room in its tenuous focus. Contacts feel like they’re vibrating on my eyes. There she is. Near the door. Talking to a bespectacled man with an uncouth beard. College professor hipster chic, complete with unnecessary blazer with elbow patches. Who was he again?

“You said you were a writer?”

Her voice reactivated her hand and suddenly her fingers were intertwined with mine. The move sent a wave through my empty stomach.

New question. Who was she? Why were her fingers probing, gently caressing the webs between my fingers? Her fingers were coarse and porous like a new sponge, which was sexy for reasons not totally apparent.

Remember. We were outside. Me and Alissa. Smoking cigarettes and this woman – Diane, Dana, Dhalia, did her name even start with D? – asked for a light. Cupped my hand as I lit her cigarette. Looked into my eyes, a smoky glaze reflecting in her own.

How long since she asked me about being a writer?

“Did I?” I answered her question with a question. Rude, but a passable delaying tactic.

Remember. “Thanks for the light,” she had said, her sponge fingers slowly falling from the back of my hand, giving me a shiver. “What brings you two out for the night?”

“Why not?” Alissa had answered for us.

“Fair enough. We’re in from New Jersey,” she had said, gesturing towards the bespectacled man. He was out there with us too. “Geoffrey, say hello. This is my husband Geoffrey.”

Out of the memory. My eyes dart back to Alissa and college professor Geoffrey – who I now remember actually did say he was a professor, his style being a bit on the nose. Geoffrey was occasionally glancing my way, but without any hostility, which probably meant he couldn’t see his wife’s thumb slowly inching its way up my wrist.

I looked at her. Her eyes were still smoky and swimming. Mostly focused on me but also dancing slow, sporadic pirouettes. Red neon glinting off the deep brown of her left iris, disappearing into the white of her sclera.

“You said you write,” her voice slightly slurred the s sound, snakelike, seductive. “I’d like to read what you write.”

“I’m not a writer. I wait tables.” That was an undeniably truer truth than what I had told her over cigarettes. Have I written second rate poems and rambling short stories? Sure. But I get paid to serve Spaghetti Calabrese and pair it with a bold Nebbiolo. That reality certainly sounded less romantic than being a struggling artist. Unromantic seemed the smart play, I thought, glancing back at Geoffrey, New Jersey professor, wife to Olive.

Shit, her name is Olive. Where the fuck did the D names come from? That wasn’t even close.

“Olive,” I started, unduly proud of the protracted progress of my limbic system.

“Geoffy and I are going to Veselka for some food, you should come,” she said, cutting off the sentence I had already forgotten my plan for. I cringed at the way she said “Geoffy.” I also cringed at the absurdity of the pet name being used in a proposition to someone else. And at the proposition being directed at me. And at me guiltily enjoying that she did such a brazen act, her husband only feet away. Still, I couldn’t. I tried to gently extricate my fingers from hers, but she grasped tighter and put my hand on her inner thigh, just below her skirt, the flesh of her thigh just underneath a thin pair of leggings. I glanced at Geoffy again. He wasn’t looking our way.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” my voice was a croak, unsupported by the energy which I was now expending trying to think clearly and keep my hand from instinctively moving any further up Olive’s thigh.

“Geoffrey’s fine with it,” her mouth was inches from my ear, her breath kissed the lobe, traced the edge. Somehow, in that breath I felt the dampness of her tongue, tasted the sweet and sour alcohol on her. “Your friend can come too,” she finished.

I froze. Lost time.

“Hey,” Alissa was saying. My hand was no longer on Olive’s thigh, her breath no longer permeating my senses. “Probably time for us to get going.” She put her arm around my shoulder, which was weird. Alissa and I didn’t really have an arm-around-the-shoulder type of friendship, but I went with it.

“Are you sure?” Geoffrey’s voice was an electric fan on the lowest setting. Calm, meditative, soothing. Fingers massaging your temples. I pictured the voice, a calm stream of encouragement as he and Olive together unbuttoned my pants and –

“Yeah, time to go,” I blurted, forcing my subconscious quiet.

Alissa’s arm dropped from my shoulders. She obviously realized that any implied intimacy between us would do nothing to deter Geoffrey and Olive. In fact, that sort of seemed the point. I’d never been propositioned by swingers before. It was oddly complimentary. I wondered if Alissa felt the same. When I looked to her, she was gesturing for our check.

The check led to confusion. Confusion may not be the right word. At least not for anyone else. I paid. Then, as goodbyes were being said, I found the Jägermeister Stag again. Stared into its dead, red eyes. But they weren’t ominous now. Weren’t scary. They were kind. Like an old friend bemusedly watching his silly, drunk buddy saying goodbye to his new swinger friends. I could almost see the stag wink at me.

Then I tried to pay again. One of those nights where a neon stag distracts you into looking foolish. We’ve all been there.

After a too long hug with Olive, and a too long hug with Geoffrey, and an awkwardly staged and totally unnecessary group hug, Alissa and I made our escape. Stumbled out to the street. Arm up. Into the cab. Sink into the leather seats. Look up.

Red on Black.

Neon red numbers, a succession of zeroes with a threatening decimal point. Poised to extract their fee. Changing, shifting, fluid reds disappearing and reshaping. Never still, except now, as zeroes, waiting.

“115th and 1st please,” Alissa said. We lived a few blocks from each other so we shared cabs often. Neither of us was on 115th, but it was a fair midpoint.

“Do you prefer First Avenue or the FDR?” The cabbie’s echoed voice exuded kindness through a lilting, Indian-sounding accent.

“Whatever you think will be fastest,” Alissa responded. I checked my watch. A little after 3:00 AM. It really wouldn’t matter which route we took. There’d be no traffic this time on a Wednesday night. “Weird, night huh? Remind me not to drink after work with you ever again.”

I laughed, Olive and Geoffrey seeming more absurd now that they weren’t in our direct vicinity. “What did Geoffy say to you?” I asked. “If he was as forward as Olive, I’m surprised it took you so long to break things off.”

“Geoffy? Christ. Hadn’t heard that nickname yet. And don’t think I didn’t notice your odd little hand sex with her, by the way.” I shrugged. What was there to say to that? “*Geoffrey* started out fine. A little boring, but he was talking about his favorite literary tropes or some shit. Normal professor stuff. Then, no shit, he complimented the line of my neck and how it led to my ‘perfectly divine clavicle.’”

Alissa imitated his voice on the last line but got it wrong. She went pompous with it, Northeastern aristocracy. Geoffrey's voice had been more salt of the earth, just with all the actual salt pulled out.

"I've never had my clavicle complimented before, so that threw me a bit." Alissa wasn't someone I viewed in a sexual way. She was attractive, I guess, but we were friends, nothing more. I would notice a new haircut or a nice outfit, but my assessment pretty much stopped there. Looking at her now I tried to see what Geoffrey saw. Alissa was somewhat lanky, tall and thin with wavy brown hair that was always a barely maintained nest. It was a look that worked for her, femininity through grunge tinted glasses. And she did have nice clavicles now that I noticed them. What a strange thing to notice, to be turned on by. The cord on the left side of her neck led seamlessly to her left clavicle. Which some people would find sexy? I could hear Geoffrey, in his actual monotone rather than Alissa's impersonation, trying to pick up women with strange compliments on mostly unremarkable body parts. *Beautiful right kneecap. Lovely left hip jut. Cock hardening right foot arch.* I laughed.

"What's so funny?" Alissa lightly backhanded my shoulder. "You don't think my clavicle is an irresistible turn on?"

She launched into an awkward, faux sexy, shoulder roll and joined me in laughter. The cab banked left onto the FDR and we both fell over. When we righted ourselves we were both red-faced from laughter.

"Ridiculous," Alissa let out through the last of her laughter. She was wiping tears from her eyes.

We calmed and sat in silence for a moment, thinking about what had happened. Thinking about nothing. Being happily drunk.

The cab fare was \$6.15.

The car slowed, then stopped.

Red on Black.

A sea of brake lights lighting up the darkness of the night. Forming upside down faces. Two red eyes. One red nose. A windshield where the mouth should be. Staring back, signaling a lack of movement. Stagnation. Forced patience.

“Fucking traffic,” Alissa bemoaned. “At this time of night?”

“Someone up front probably caught a glimpse of your clavicle in the rearview and was so distracted by its perfect divinity that they lost control of the car.”

“Don’t even joke about that. The last thing we need is for this to be some sort of accident.” Her voice was serious, but there was a slight smile behind her words.

The fare clicked over to \$6.25.

I looked forward at the brake lights and allowed my focus to soften until everything was a blurred sea of red. To my right, the east river, black and placid. Ahead, the red sea, solid and unmoving. I drifted.

“I have to pee.” Alissa’s voice was raspy from the alcohol, yet vulnerable. Sandpaper coated with aloe. It roused me from my state somewhere between sleeping and waking.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Same place we’ve been for the past year and a half, or at least that’s how it feels. And now I have to pee.”

The sea of brake lights remained just as I remembered it. A wall of red, many different lights blurring at the edges, congealing into one imposing stop sign.

Red numbers glared against their black background.

The cab fare was \$14.00.

My brain wasn’t as foggy as it had been but it was still working slowly. I tried to do the math in my head. \$7.75. How far had we moved in that \$7.75? Looking around everything was familiar. The east river hadn’t changed. The surrounding areas hadn’t changed. \$7.75 to go nowhere.

“Hey, man,” I said through the cab’s glass partition in my most reasonable voice. “I know it’s no one’s fault. But I’m watching this meter just tick up and up and we’re not even moving. Is there anything we could do about that?”

“My apologies, sir,” the kind voice replied back to me. It sounded almost like it was coming through a speaker, filtered as it was through the small hole in the partition. “I will shut off the meter. I am sorry for the traffic. I should have just taken First Avenue.”

That was certainly a *no shit* statement at this point, but no need to place blame now. After all he was stuck here with us. “You couldn’t have known. Thanks for taking care of the meter.”

I leaned back and watched as the red numbers disappeared and the touchscreen in front of me changed from an advertisement for some NBC morning show to a payment screen. I ignored it. There would be plenty of time to pay.

“That’s nice and all, but I wasn’t joking,” Alissa’s voice was strained. “I really have to pee.”

I looked at the wall of cars ahead of us. Some people were standing on the street now as well, having abandoned their cars in an effort to see what was causing the holdup. Ten feet away, the southbound lane was empty, sporadic cars zooming by, unaffected by our plight.

“Don’t know what to tell you,” I said. I sort of had to pee too, but we were stranded. “Nothing we can do about it right now.”

“Not sure that answer’s going to work for my bladder.”

“Try to think of something else.”

“Is that a bathroom over there?”

Alissa was pointing east. Thirty feet over was the silhouette of a building framed by the water of the East River beyond it. During the day it might serve as a bathroom, or an information booth, or just a strange gazebo-like spot. That didn’t really matter now though since it was obviously closed.

“I don’t know.”

“I think I could hop the fence.”

A wrought iron fence, about eight feet tall with no footholds, separated the park area with the closed, possible bathroom to our right from the FDR where we currently sat.

“You’re kidding, right? You’re not jumping the fence.”

“I can’t just sit here,” her voice was edgy, desperation seeping in. “Maybe I can run across.”

She had reversed her view and was now looking to the southbound lanes of the FDR. I followed her gaze as another car sped by at sixty miles per hour.

“That seems like a bad idea.”

“I have to do something, or I’m going to piss my pants in this cab.”

Running through the options, peeing herself was actually Alissa’s most sensible. Climbing the fence risked bodily injury and even if she succeeded she’d just be stuck next to the traffic instead of in the traffic. Running across an active highway was a live action version of Frogger with dire consequences if she lost. Of course, if she did piss herself, that would likely change the dynamic of our friendship in ways I couldn’t even imagine. It’s one thing to be invited to have group sex together, it’s entirely different to sit in a pool of your friend’s urine.

It would be a really good time for the traffic to break up.

“Ma’am, what music do you like?” It was the disconnected, robot-with-an-accent voice of our driver.

“What?”

“It take your mind off things. Listen to the music.”

“I don’t think —”

Alissa’s sentence was drowned out by the volume of the music abruptly turning up. It was a Rihanna song. *We Found Love*. I recognized it. One of those songs you hear all the time

even if you've never seeked it out. An earworm. Catchiness aside, its anti-diuretic properties were specious at best. I could feel Alissa's eyes roll without having to look over.

Then the chorus started.

We found love in a hopeless place

It was Rihanna's voice, but it was also the voice of our cab driver. Singing along, loudly, trying to soothe Alissa's bladder.

Yellow diamonds in the light / Now we're standing side by side / As your shadow crosses mine

Alissa and I met eyes and both started laughing. Our cabbie apparently thought karaokeing Rihanna would prevent Alissa from urinating on herself. It was an incredibly futile – and almost shockingly off-key – effort, but it was also endearing and heartwarming.

“Is this really happening right now?” Alissa asked through tears of laughter. “Oh god, laughing makes me have to pee even more.”

The song mercifully came to an end and our laughter abated. Then the next song started. Our driver didn't miss a beat.

You gotta go and get angry at all of my honesty.

He knew every word and sang along. It took me a minute before I could place the song as one plucked from Justin Bieber's oeuvre.

Is it too late now to say sorry?

The chorus broke Alissa. She was guffawing. Unable to listen to any more.

“I can’t,” she could barely get the words out. “I...gotta run across...can’t wait.”

She reached for the door of the cab. I stopped her.

“I’m not letting you run across the FDR by yourself. Let me just pay.”

I went through the payment screens while Alissa thanked our driver for trying, but explained that she couldn’t wait in the cab any longer. When I was through, we spilled out onto the street, stalled cars surrounding us on every side. We walked west, drawing glances from bored drivers. When we reached the median separating the northbound lanes from the southbound, we paused and looked north. A couple of cars were speeding down toward us. We waited, standing under an overpass which left us in darkness.

“Let’s head south a little,” I suggested, wanting to get to a spot where once we ran across we would reach relative safety rather than just another active street, which was what we faced under the overpass.

Alissa nodded and we headed south. The cars we saw heading toward us flew by, impossibly fast. I could feel a pit forming in my stomach.

We walked south a couple of blocks until we were in a better position. We looked back at the trapped cars. One lane over from us was a police car, stuck in the traffic like everyone else. I made eye contact with the officer driving the car. He looked at me, then Alissa, then the southbound lanes we were about to cross. He looked back to me and I could see his eyebrows raise slightly. I shrugged. He nodded and pursed his lips, the expression basically saying, “Fuck it. Do what you gotta do.” It was that kind of night.

“Ready. After this car.” Alissa was on the other side of the median, watching the traffic. I climbed over to join her. We waited, staring at the headlights flying toward us. Closer. Closer. Then we were in their light. A second in the spotlight. A gush of wind. Darkness.

In my mind I pictured a crash. Broken bones. Red blood pooling on the black concrete of the street.

“Now!”

We ran. I questioned, not for the first time, how much I had drank tonight, decided I didn’t care. Thought about what I would do if Alissa fell. Decided I didn’t care about that either. Ran faster. Looked north. Headlights. Still far away.

And I was across. Alissa was a second behind me. We were both panting. We were also laughing. Exhilarated.

“Okay, part one is a success. Now. Where the fuck can we find a bathroom?”

Alissa started heading further west, away from the FDR. Far enough away, we regrouped.

“What time is it?”

I looked at my watch.

“Fuck. 4:30.”

“You’re shitting me? We were in that cab for over an hour? Christ. What will even be open right now?”

I looked around and saw a street sign. Avenue D. Not many twenty-four hour spots around Avenue D. My eyes came to rest on a housing project across the street. Alissa saw where I was looking.

“No. Something has to be open. I’m not pissing on people’s apartments.”

“I’ll turn around,” I said, stupidly.

“Son of a bitch. I’ll be back.”

Alissa ran off around a corner of the building. I ambled for a second before remembering my own niggling bladder. I chose a spot on the side of the building, away from any windows. The urine steamed on the side of the brick and seeped down, pooling and creating small puddles divided by concrete islands. It was only as my bladder emptied and with it my adrenaline from crossing the FDR abated that I noticed the cold. It was the bone deep type of cold that only really occurs in the early am hours. I shivered as I finished and waited for Alissa.

She emerged moments later, her arms bunched in front of her as if she were carrying a bundle of fruit. She almost danced from foot to foot as she ran toward me, creating a sort of galloping effect.

“I’m not proud of that,” she said. “Let’s go.”

“You okay?” Something was off, I just wasn’t sure what it was yet.

“I’m not wearing any pants.”

She gestured down and it was true. I hadn’t noticed immediately because of her long winter coat which covered her thighs, but protruding from the bottom of her coat were her knees and calves, once covered by blue jeans, now bare.

“You took off your pants?”

“I didn’t want to pee on them.”

“So you took them off? Like completely off?”

“Jesus. Yes,” She barked. “And now that we’ve established that can we get a cab please? It’s fucking freezing out here.”

“Especially for those not wearing pants,” I quipped back, which elicited a death stare before Alissa turned and started walking.

At the next block, Avenue C, we came across a street sign which let us know we were walking down 13th street. In a sort of delusional optimism, I figured we must have at least made it up to the thirties, despite the fact that neither the East River Park – houser of closed bathroom gazebos – nor Avenue D actually extended that far north. Still it seemed unthinkable we had only made it to 13th Street. Over an hour in the karaoke cab had netted us a total of eight blocks. I considered pointing that fact out to Alissa, but seeing her spasmodically walking down the street to stave off the cold of her current, pantsless predicament made me reconsider.

We hailed another cab at the next block.

“You want First Avenue or the FDR?”

We didn’t leave the choice up to the driver.

Ten minutes later I nearly fell into bed, the first streaks of light starting to hit the sky outside my window. I felt a buzz in my pocket and fished out my phone. One new text. It was from Alissa. It was a picture of her, jutting out her false belly of bunched jeans shoved under her jacket. She was smiling and giving a thumbs up. The message underneath read:

“I can feel my legs again! Win!”

I smiled but didn't reply. I set an alarm for the next morning, really just a few hours away now, and shut my eyes.

Black.