

The Vegan Bowl

Roman considered it a principle to hate “Events” irrespective of their nature and privacy settings. He hated receiving invitational notifications and the shameful spotlight casted over those courageous souls who openly declined them. He considered being a “Maybe” a display of weakness and insufferable propriety. Why not just send a group message and save the trouble of creating a title for your little party with fixed hours, the link to an online map, and a generic picture of a football? But there was something about this event that he found particularly disconcerting, even by his own lofty standards.

First there was the description: *Come join me and Laura at our new (not structurally speaking) apartment for a different take on this quintessentially chauvinistic tradition. I mean, the game will be on should anyone have a desire to watch it but we got a bunch of new records we plan on playing simultaneously, along with some awesomely nourishing snacks we're preparing. Yes, that's the two of us. You're more than welcome to chip in by bringing food but please don't take any offense if we abstain from eating it. As far as drinks are concerned, we're contemplating a BYOB policy. My number's below if you have any questions. Hope to see you all there!*

Then there was the guest list. Roman tabulated the total to be 43 people; which seemed like a lot for an old Battery Park apartment but small enough for him to browse through in its entirety. He knew practically no one, save for a couple internationals Terrance had previously acquainted him with and Siobhan Abrams, one of the last links he had to his ex-girlfriend Eva.

He hadn't seen Siobhan in a little over four months, just a week before Eva left a succinct letter in his dining room table announcing that she was leaving him to "rediscover herself in El Salvador where life was simpler according to one of her friends" and so forth...

Although they were friends, a fact which he had temporarily forgotten, Roman rarely clicked on Siobhan's profile and did so immediately. She really was quite attractive. It was just something he tried to overlook while he dated Eva, out of principle of course. There was something simple about Siobhan's beauty; probably a matter of contrasts between her fair complexion, black hair, and defiant countenance. She listed herself as single, used the strictest of privacy controls, and "liked" Tim Hecker out of all people. Now he started recalling past conversations and how she had proclaimed herself to be a millennial feminist and here he was, immediately transforming her into a Manic Pixie Dream Girl.

Finally, there was the moral obligation. Terrance had invited him and made the case that Laura would be disappointed if he didn't show up, which was probably an exaggeration. Terrance had also implied that the party was intended to be a sort of welcoming for him into their vegan community. Roman had quickly regretted casually mentioning to Terrance that he was giving veganism a try. More importantly, he'd also regretted telling Terrance why he was giving veganism a try. The guy had actually sent him just a few hours later a link to the Young Person's Guide to Veganism; as if he didn't know what veganism was and why people did it. Roman's self-consciousness however, told him that perhaps Terrance sent him the link so that he could find a more appropriate reason for his new lifestyle change. Finding blood in his stool would not do.

Having thoroughly evaluated these various elements, Roman decided it was in his best interest to physically attend the Vegan Bowl, while remaining virtually undecided in the list of invitees. The thing was on a Friday so he had three days to mentally prepare himself for social discourse, particularly his much anticipated reconnection with Siobhan. He begrudgingly took the time to read that silly guide but couldn't commit to the idea of a cow's dignity being placed higher than his love for medium rare steaks. He also didn't have nearly enough time or interest to browse through *Eating Animals*, another one of Terrance's contributions. Instead, he brushed off the dust on his brown tie-dye shirt from Oaxaca (a sure conversation starter), skipped his weekly shaving day, and decided to rely heavily on his ability to improvise.

The Vegan Bowl was scheduled to start at 7, an hour before the game. He arrived at 8, picking up a six-pack of PBR along the way. Laura opened the door, gave him a brief hug, took his coat, called Terrance over, and left her husband to give him a tour. It was a nice place, good furnishings, with a lot of Mediterranean oddities on the walls and sufficient living room space to host 43 people. The tour was cut short with the sound of the doorbell and more guests coming in. Terrance was forced to leave him to become acquainted with Manuel, a "bosom friend" of his who wore a shabby suit and sported an imposing beard. The two shook hands firmly and Roman asked him where he had met Terrance. Manuel proposed the following instead:

"Listen, I'm already a little bored and crave a quick smoke. Would you care to join me?"

Roman hesitated for a moment in which he took the opportunity to scan his surroundings in search of Siobhan. She wasn't around.

"Why not?"

Manuel nodded and made his way casually towards the bathroom with Roman trailing behind. When the two reached the door, the former knocked once, pulled on the door knob, and went inside. Roman followed and locked the door behind him. Manuel turned around and slid open a small window right above the sink. As he stretched upwards to do so, Roman saw part of the safety and grip of a silver pistol. Once the window was open, Manuel turned around, grabbed a cigarette pack from his pocket, and pulled out a small joint which he quickly lit and took a prolonged breath from. Both of them then sat down on the floor with their backs against the wall facing a claw tub and its blue polka dot shower curtain.

“To answer your earlier question, I’m his bookie and he’s got a lot of money riding on this game.” Manuel said as he passed the joint over.

“I see.”

Roman didn’t really see anything except that quick glimpse of that gun. It was the first time he heard about Terrance’s gambling, but it was also the first time in a really long time since he last smoked. All he could do for the moment was inhale and admire Laura’s taste in picking out that shower curtain.

“I’m guessing you came for all the free vegan food?”

“Somewhat, although I’d be lying if I said that was the only reason.”

“So then you must have come for someone.”

“Yeah, that’s probably closer to the truth.”

“I see.”

Manuel did see why anyone would go out of their way to attend a silly event just to meet with someone. But he was also thinking about the money he was likely to make today, how he also had the upcoming Merseyside derby to look forward to. Everything seemed to be falling into place for his move to Berlin. By this point the joint had made several rounds between them.

“I noticed right away your shirt from Oaxaca. Have you been there? It’s quite nice and internationally renowned for its weed and architecture. Oaxaca...”

“Yeah, I went once during a road trip to Mexico back in college. Its fame is well deserved.”

“Which of the two?”

“Both I guess. You’ve been there too?”

“Yes, I spent my childhood in San Salvador, moved around the isthmus, travelled up to Mexico and the border. Then I came to the States, did school here, and kind of stuck around after that.”

The joint was reaching its end and the two sat back smoking in silence, following the bounce of the blue polka dots as a slight draft made the curtain sway before them. Roman had a strangely satisfying urge to make a confession. Manuel did not, but was slightly perturbed as to why no one had knocked all this time.

“I think it’s done.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

Both of them stood up and Manuel flicked the small roach out the window. No one seemed to have minded their absence but it was noticeably more crowded outside. Manuel said he was going to check the score and have a talk with Terrance. They exchanged no more words and Roman felt a surge of relief upon finding Siobhan looking at some pictures just a few feet from where he stood. He wasn't sure of what to say, if his eyes were pink, how to make her turn around, and why on Earth he made the choice to get high on such a delicate moment. He gave himself a crisp slap across the face and approached her. The thought of an introductory compliment clouded his vision. He crept behind and tapped her left shoulder as subtly as possible.

“Siobhan! Long time no see!”

She turned around, apprehension flashing through her countenance, before recovering herself and recognizing the poor sucker who stood in front of her; at least that was how he perceived it.

“Oh, hi Roman, what a surprise. How are you?” Surprise, what was it exactly? The Oh, what was it supposed to mean? He pondered.

“I'm fine. It's been so long, you look stunning as usual. What have you been up to?”

“Thank you for the compliment. Well, I've been finishing up my thesis. It's taken a lot less time than I thought probably because of all the material I've had to work with.” Here was his opening.

“Really? That's great. What's it on?”

“It’s hard to describe. I like to think of it as a manifesto more than a thesis. Of course, my advisor is afraid that I’ll be presenting a sequel to the Vagina Monologues or something of the kind. I guess it’s an analysis of heterosexual relationships, specifying on the different types of pursuit of men by women, and how these stereotypes are perpetuated in our culture.

Now he was smiling. Maybe it was the pot, he thought, but I’m not afraid of playing the fool and seeing how far it can take me.

“Sounds fascinating. From my humble perspective I feel as though your manifesto could be quite special. Would it be too much to ask if you sent me a copy of it once you are finished? I’m good at giving an honest opinion and would love to read your work.” She gave a short and genuine laugh. Now he considered himself to be in a good position.

“Yeah sure, I can always use an outside opinion. Give me your number and I’ll text you my email address later. It’s quite long so I’ll probably send it to you in parts and you can take your time with it.”

Ok, he was ready to celebrate. It was just a step for him, but one which was definitely worth it. As they carried on their conversation Roman thought about the prospects of Eva finding out he was planning on dating her best friend and how it could all be a product of his resentments. Siobhan also thought of how strangely things have a way of unfolding themselves and all those nights she spent as a recluse, listening to music, and giving her roommate the excuse that she had to focus on her manifesto. Then, both of them simultaneously imagined Eva lying on a beautiful deserted beach with a great tan, and an attractive sun clad surfer doing tricks for her in the ocean; as they would confess to each later on. The only difference was that Roman’s surfer couldn’t be spotted inside the water but in a specific spot along the shore.

Sudden cheers snapped them out of their mutual reveries. So far, all they had heard were a couple of nameless records which had faded away from their little world seemingly carving itself out between them. Roman asked a guy who was standing next to him what had happened. The guy seemed slightly ticked off to be interrupted, but at the sight of Siobhan he replied that Manning was being Manning with two minutes on the clock and it looked as though the Broncos just might make a historical comeback to refurbish their fame as a winning franchise.

Roman thanked him and rethreaded his conversation when a humbling silence breached the entire apartment only a minute later; an interception. Siobhan could hear Roman's breaths. A door was then slammed. Muffled yells broke through from the master bedroom. Everyone stood their ground, struggling with the act of motion. Everyone except Manuel. Roman spotted him immediately. It was mainly his languid walk, like an abstract painter inside a museum gift shop. Siobhan also watched him as he brushed past the crowd which gathered sheepishly in front of the television and made his way towards the hallway. A single but commanding knock was heard, just like in the bathroom Roman thought, and the bedroom door's hinges creaked abruptly before the door was shut again.

"Listen, I know this might sound strange but do you trust me?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I think we better go outside for a moment."

"Really? Why?"

"I just have a bad feeling about all of this. I'll explain later."

"Let me get my coat."

The two met up at the front door and left the apartment, taking the elevator down to the ground floor without saying anything. Neither had looked back before leaving but it seemed as though they were only the first to execute an idea which many of the other guests were considering. It was frigid outside. Roman suggested that they wait a few minutes. Siobhan was even more confused than before.

“Why do you think we should wait?”

“I don’t know. I just want to make sure nothing bad happens.”

“Bad in what way?”

“Well, that guy you saw walking through the crowd just seemed suspicious.”

“I noticed that; but what does standing out here have anything to do with it?”

“Please, you said that you trusted me. Don’t worry, I’ll walk you home or to the subway; wherever.”

“Alright.”

They stood around for a few minutes, doing their best not to talk about the subject at hand when groups of people started emerging from the building. Roman managed to catch the attention of the same guy he’d asked about the game before. This time he was visibly upset and merely stated that Terrance had practically kicked everyone out of the apartment after having a fight with Laura.

“What a show,” the guy concluded. Siobhan was pleased with the news.

“See, it’s just a fight. We can leave now.”

“Please give it another minute. Let’s stand a little further away from the entrance. I just want to make sure of something.”

“Fine.” Siobhan said begrudgingly.

More people left the building. Everything seemed quiet once more when Roman caught sight of Manuel. He definitely had to be the last one to go. They both tensed up and got closer to each other as they watched him walking slowly down the steps with his hands anchored inside the pockets of a large black overcoat. He didn’t notice his onlookers and walked right past them, staring straight ahead, using the enveloping night as a mirror. Roman and Siobhan both gave a slightly embarrassing sigh of relief as they watched Manuel disappear in the direction they were heading. The former offered his arm to the latter and they made their way home, vaguely uncomfortable at the thought of following Manuel’s distant shadow.

They walked arm in arm for two blocks when they heard the hollow sound of a single gunshot coming from somewhere behind them. It took five seconds for their arms to come undone. It took another five for their feet to respond to the joint impulse which quickly ensued. Their hands floundered momentarily in the cold’s emptiness until they found the warmth of their touch to keep them safe. It was this embrace which pushed the two of them forward, unafraid of knowing whose path they were taking.