

Roulette

I am twenty-three. It happens in the summer of 1984.

I live in New Orleans that year, renting a Quarter apartment, with a balcony facing Bourbon Street, down on the quiet end, away from all the noise and craziness. It fits me for now, a one bedroom, high tin ceilings, original hardwood floors, even a log burning fireplace. The city is my hurricane. I am mess, a good mess, a wonderfully good glorious fantastic mess. My life has become a crescent existence.

I sit out on the balcony, trying to steady myself after a liquid lunch, contemplating a long nap or at least a couple of hours in front of the television, my choices limited by my inability to want to do anything. Drinking at lunch always seems like such a good idea at the time. After a couple of rounds you say, God, what a great life, but if you don't keep it going the slug will come on and the rest of the day will slow down like there won't ever be another tomorrow. I eat a slice of yesterday's pizza from the refrigerator. I take a nap. I dream of avocados.

Flat Cat is a local dive where we all go, a dark, dank place with the air conditioning so cold you think about wearing a jacket. Tom and Carl are there, drinking their way through the day, playing gin rummy at a corner table. Mary Grimes and her new boyfriend have a side booth and you can see she is in love again. Mary must have her romance, a courtship junky, and next week it will

probably be some other guy. You have the other regulars scattered about, silently nursing their drinks, staying out of the heat. Barb is behind the bar and she gives me a sullen nod. Another day in the neighborhood. I order a Dixie.

One stool over Richard sits with his beer and his notebook, always writing something down, a dedicated man, spending every afternoon here and giving a go at his long novel. He doesn't talk much and we pretty much leave him alone. To my right is an old man and a young woman, strangers in this purgatory.

Flat Cat has been around forever, maybe more than a century, and it certainly smells like it. Many a life has been wasted here. If these walls could talk, they would mumble and slur and leave their sentences unfinished, drifting off into nothing.

Barb the bartender says, This fucking place.

She means Flat Cat, New Orleans, America, the world, maybe even the universe. Poor Barb hates just about everything, except her husband, cocaine, and Johnny Walker Black on the rocks, though not necessarily in that order. She and I talk a bit and then she turns away. We only have so much in common.

The old man by me is tall and wiry and his skin is like parchment. He wears a dark fedora and a black rockabilly suit and a bolo tie with a giant turquoise stone on the slide. He has long anvil-shaped gray sideburns. He uses a black bone cigarette holder, letting the ash burn down until it almost drops. He reminds me of a dissolute Hunter S Thompson, if such a thing is possible.

He has a scent to him. He smells like coconut. The girl is too far away for me to smell. Not that I am a particularly olfactory kind of person, only part of the puzzle, but I do like a good aroma every now and then. It livens up the day and especially the night.

You do have to appreciate a word like olfactory.

The girl, short blond hair moussed flat to her small skull, wears a blinding white outfit, the skirt short enough that I can see the lace at the top of her stockings, and when she crosses her legs even more. She listens to him whisper to her while she reads from a heavy textbook she has on the bar, sometimes taking a pen to underline key phrases and write comments in the margins.

She is definitely not his granddaughter, not the way his hand touches her thigh every so often. New Orleans collects the odd and misbegotten, drawing them in like a black hole, and seeing this pairing isn't that unusual. You find just about everything in this city, some of it really wonderful and some pretty terrible and sometimes it takes a while to know which is which.

Carl comes up for another round for him and Tom. Alex Wilson, he says, as he breathes.

I had been with Tom and Carl for lunch. We never got around to ordering food.

Still going?

Still going, and going 'til we're gone.

Join us, Carl says.

But I've had enough of Tom and Carl over our liquor lunch. They're in a bitchy mood today and it's like a cat fight between them, everything mean and nasty, and that sort of thing gets old fast. They're regular biting humor is nowhere to be found and for now they're just bitter and cranky and there is enough of that going around without having to wallow in it.

Fine, Carl says, turning away. I am now something else they can whine about.

I am alone with my beer and I ask for the Times-Picayune sports section. Barb sighs as she hands it from behind the bar. New Orleans is a sad sports town, Tulane terrible, the Saints even worse, and I spend my time on the baseball standings and box scores. Even here I still follow the Yankees, and they're pretty bad this year too.

Alex Wilson? The old man turns to me, his blue eyes flashing. Your father Don Wilson?

Yeah? I say.

Marlene your mother?

Yeah? I say, not liking this. Strangers in this city are rarely a good thing, especially strangers who know something about me. It means they have done their homework. It means they have an agenda.

I start talking to Barb as if we are still in a conversation so the old man will leave me alone. I say the Yankees lost another one. Barb looks at me like I

am wasting her time. She shrugs and returns to doing the Times-Picayune crossword puzzle.

The old man offers a bony hand. I am Vaughn Wright. I knew your parents.

Vaughn is my middle name. I've heard of Vaughn Wright all my life, but I'd always figured he was another one of my mother's exaggerated stories. And here he is all sepia-toned, as much a con artist as advertised in our family's myths.

We go through the pleasantries. Vaughn Wright is in town on business, staying a couple of nights at most, here from Los Angeles, and he and Kate, the girl, have a suite at the de Ville. They were walking the Quarter and found this place. He doesn't like New Orleans much. He finds it too provincial.

He has a placid face, a simple jaw, and blue eyes forever darting, scanning the bar, avid and hungry, marking the faces and backs of the drinkers, taking them in and spitting them out, their existence of no concern to him, none of them potential threats or conquests.

He introduces me to Kate, his wife. She gives me a slight nod and returns to her textbook. He says she is pre-med at USC, brushing up for her sophomore year. So my mother at least has this right. Vaughn Wright likes them young.

He remembers the night before I was born. They were having a pool party, they were always having parties, and everybody was having a good time. My father manned the grill, flipping chicken and burgers, getting it all done. My

mother resembled an Olive Oyl with a pea in the pod. She drank a little too much and around midnight she got out of her clothes and went swimming in the pool. Some joined her, Alexander and my father and others, and soon the water was full of naked young people. It is, for him, a cherished memory.

The next morning, he says, you came into this world.

Hurray, I say.

I tell him my father died last year, health problems, leaving out that he was drunk and hit his head on a coffee table and nobody found him for a week, or that my mother and I flew from separate parts of the country to the funeral and spent two days drinking wine and smoking cigarettes in a hotel room and not once really talking about my father.

I always liked Don, he says. A good man. He certainly loved your mother.

He seems an opaque man, which is dangerous, because obvious ambiguity often obscures what really is a blatant intention. His hands move around while he talks, performing circles and curly-cues in the air, punctuating his sentences, motioning close during pauses, offering a palm now and then. His ringed fingers are like talons or the vampire in the silent Dracula movie. Nothing about him speaks of anything gentle.

The whole time he's ordering round after round, telling Barb to put it on his tab, and I'm not sure what she thinks of him. Barb normally doesn't care for anyone, we are hardly worth the tips we leave, but she seems to keep an ear

cocked, an eye alert, and I see her smooth her scraggly hair more than once. He calls her Dear and she almost smiles at that.

His wife Kate smokes cigarette after cigarette, drinks her gin and tonics, and reads her book. She has probably heard his stories enough by now. Every guy in the place keeps looking over to give her a once over and a once over again. Even Tom and Carl take a few peeks off and on and they're not exactly interested in women. The Quarter may have the strangest collection of people on the planet but it is rare to find such a creature in our midst. The erotic and the exotic are commonplace around here, a given, but anything resembling true quality is a rare commodity, especially in this bar. There is always a hint of the bayou, of the swamp, of warm bodies in the humid night. New Orleans has a moldiness to it, and this woman is clean and frostbitten. She has this something about her that can only be called a distilled crystal. Vaughn Wright must know his stuff to carry on with such obvious talent.

He asks Barb if they have a phone he can use and she points to the booth off in the corner. He excuses himself, telling his wife to keep me company.

This Kate gives me a side glance, trying to decide if I am worth the trouble. She closes her textbook and turns to me. She has a lot of Edie Sedgwick going on. What do you say to someone like her and not sound like an idiot? She is younger than me and I am the one tongue-tied. She tilts forward for me to light her cigarette, closing and then opening her eyes, an expert move straight out of the old film noirs.

When she speaks I hear that kind of English accent which makes you understand how Britain came to rule the world. People want to obey when they hear a cadence like that. She says she was born in London, her parents in the business, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood family friends, and when she was fourteen her father got clean and they moved to LA so he could produce movies, if that can be called getting clean. She knows Exene and Lydon and John Doe, but she's not part of the deal anymore.

She looks at me as if there is no way I can understand what she is talking about, but I actually do get the references. I lived in New York when punk came around and then flamed out, America not exactly fertile ground for class-hatred pop music, though there remain pockets here and there. I am more of an Elvis Costello kind of guy.

I ask about her being in pre-med. She shrugs. It means money. She says Vaughn Wright gave her a choice, medicine or law, and she chose the medical field simply because she liked the human body, or liked it better than a lifetime stuck in an office and studying rules and regulations.

She crosses her legs and I hear her stockings brush and shiver. And she watches me and she knows full well what that sound does to a man.

She says she met Vaughn Wright on one of her father's film sets. She can't remember the name, one of those never released, built more as a tax dodge and laundering deal than anything else. Vaughn Wright was the money man. She'd just turned sixteen and fresh off the Kennedys tour and he was

married to wife number five and he said he wanted her for number six. It was almost like a business transaction, even going so far as him paying her father something like a finder's fee.

She says I really should get out of here. I ask why. She shakes her head and says, Run away as fast you can. I ask why again.

Fuck, she says, do what you want.

When Vaughn Wright comes back she returns to her book as if we never spoke at all.

In the middle of another long story about my parents he stops, lowers his voice, and touches my shoulder.

Do you want to help me out with a favor?

I say I have no idea.

Nothing much, he says. Come with us to Arnaud's and then we'll go someplace else. I promise you won't be bored.

Boredom, of course, is personal, impossible to explain.

It is a lot like loneliness. And I know loneliness.

I ask him what he wants me to do. I actually have some scruples left over. There are things even I won't do, at least not yet. Plus New Orleans is the sort of town where when things start going wrong they can turn into an irrevocable nightmare. I have seen it happen too many times.

He asks if I have a decent jacket and tie. He says all I have to do is just ride along and act like I work for him. I don't have to say anything. In fact it is even better if I don't say anything at all.

Give me a glare, he says. I give him a glare. That will work, he smiles.

His smile looks like it hurts him to give it out.

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Arnaud's is the kind of restaurant you bring your mother to, the sort of place where you feel like you are playing at being an adult, and if this is adulthood you're not sure if you want to live that long. The food belongs to different age, preferably one with wide hips and blue hair. There are the three of us in a private room, drinking pre-dinner Sazeracs, with Vaughn Wright talking about meeting Fidel Castro the first time. It was right after the Cuban casinos were closed and he and Meyer Lansky and a guy named Joe Stassi met with Castro and tried to convince him to reopen the hotels and bars. That didn't work at all, but he and Castro got along just fine. He thinks Fidel is one of the greatest men in the world. Castro smokes a mean cigar and knows his way around the ladies. Plus he owns a whole country. If that doesn't qualify you for greatness, what does?

Kate listens. I think she's maybe said three words the whole time. She has changed into a short black dress and she has on a diamond necklace and the big fob nestles in her cleavage. And I realize her breasts must be fake, too round and

too perfect and a touch too big for her body. Not that I care. Vanity has its place in the world. I, like everyone else, enjoy a good narcissist every now and then.

Vaughn Wright holds off from ordering dinner. He shakes his gray head when I ask him why I am here. He tells me to enjoy my adventure. He won't spoil it by letting me in on the secret. Mystery, he says, is the spice of life.

Oh, Vaughn, Kate sighs, please, no clichés. Not tonight.

Sharks are in the water, he says, and the water is deep.

I'll leave. She sounds like she means it.

I finish my Sazerac. It has never been my favorite drink, too sweet and too tart. When the waiter returns I order a scotch.

Kate looks straight at me. I know what I am. Vaughn won't allow any illusions. I wish he would. A girl needs her fantasies.

She talks as if he isn't in the room, her voice plain and matter of fact. He watches her, his expression blank and patient.

There is a mural on the wall behind Kate of happy blacks picking cotton in a field. You can almost feel the blazing heat. You can almost hear Swing Low Sweet Chariot.

I'm wife number six, okay? There will be a wife number seven and a wife number eight. I have three more years. It's all understood.

You don't need to explain yourself to him.

I don't want to him to get the wrong idea. I am not an idiot.

He never said you were an idiot.

He doesn't have to. Because of these. She lifts her breasts in her hands. I hate them. I really do.

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In the 70's, before my time, Fat City became something of a go-to place during the disco era, dozens of clubs full of leisure suits and big hair and fuck me pumps, but with the death of the fad all the places began closing and now it is apparently something like a ghost town. I wouldn't know. It's Metairie, for God's sake. They still have Klan rallies there.

But you have to love the name. Fat City. I picture Jackie Gleason and Sydney Greenstreet carousing on the sidewalk, Dom DeLuise and Mama Cass off in the shadows, Falstaff and John Candy standing under a corner light.

On the ride over I ask Vaughn Wright about what is going on with everything, and he gives me his cryptic smile and says, Aw, kid, that's really none of your business.

There are a few bars open, the kind that give drinking a bad name, but as we turn down some shabby side street all of a sudden there are valets outside a building and tons of expensive cars in a large parking lot and the driver pulls up and it is as if Jesus has shown up. The valets are all over us and the big bouncer opens the car door and says, Good Evening, Mr. Wright.

There's no neon sign, no awning, nothing to say anything is here. A line of evening dressed people wait to get in. They give us stares and whispers. When

we go inside there are more stares and whispers. We must be somebody special, to get right in.

It's a casino, an illegal casino. I've heard of them, word gets around. It's New Orleans, so there must be a gambling joint somewhere, but the thought of actually looking for one doesn't interest me in the least. Betting, for me, feels corrosive, a subhuman activity, greed based luck.

Staffers push and shove the densely packed crowd, driving a wedge, creating a lane for us to pass through. Around me I find the best Metairie and the suburbs have to offer and it isn't much. They're all overweight and dressed for church, the men in cheap jackets and the women in heavy bows and shoulder pads. I see men standing stricken and women raising their arms up in heavenly joy. Some guzzle down drinks, some dance around, some hold their palms together in prayer. All the tables are full and people push up and wait their turn. More than anything it feels like a church casino night, an air of stupidity, with the metal chairs and the worn felt on the tables and the Astroturf on the floor.

I say all this but I know full well that these suburbanites are probably far and away sicker and stranger than anybody wandering the Quarter on its worst night. I know better than to take these cretins at face value.

We are led through this unholy mass towards the back and down a dark hall. Kate turns to Vaughn Wright and says she never wants to do that again. She feels like she needs a shower. The thug knocks on a door, talks, and we are brought into a second, smaller casino.

Here it appears relaxed, civilized, well-dressed men and women calmly playing at their gambling games, low conversations punctuated by light laughter, standing on red carpet and under chandeliers, a steady atmosphere, speaking of wealth and privilege, but it still feels a bit dirty, and I wonder if the reason I feel so cranky is because all my drinking is beginning to affect me, alter my landscape, and I think I might be drunk now, though that doesn't stop me from ordering a double scotch from the waitress at our service.

The waitress is topless except for the pasties on her nipples, gold pasties with silver tassels that swing when she walks. At least she wears a sparkly skirt and not a g-string. The other waitresses have the same outfit and it is amazing how well they carry it off, as if they were born to parade practically nude around the rich and powerful.

I see men in moustaches, close cropped moustaches like dark worms crawling across their upper lips. They give short smiles, little quips, and small shrugs. They seem to be channeling Burt Reynolds.

And the women. Is that Bette Davis or Tallulah Bankhead? Is this the fifties or eighties? If you are New Orleans and in the suburbs, you never know what decade it is. Sometimes it makes you want to praise the lord that you have at least a modicum of intelligence.

Kate whispers, One last chance, big boy. Go home.

Vaughn Wright tells a guy to bring chips, a thousand, no, two thousand, and when they arrive he hands the basket over to Kate. Give us some time, he

says, you know how to get more. I'll find you, he says, when your part is up. She turns without a word and heads to the crap table and I watch her walk and I find I really like the way she moves when she walks.

Vaughn Wright steers me to a corner booth where two couples sit and stare. The men ask the women to leave and we take our seats by each other. The two guys could be twins, heavy, slump-shouldered, thick dark hair drawn back in mullets. They remind me of oil spills and backwater swamps. Vaughn Wright doesn't bother to introduce me to them.

They seem unhappy with him for some reason and he sits still and smokes his cigarettes in his holder and he has his drink and he patiently listens until they finally finish and then he says, You're right, you're absolutely right, and I agree with you, so let's say that is taken care of, where we begin from here—

They lean towards each other and I am out of the picture. Vaughn Wright was wrong about one thing. I am bored, and when I am bored and I have been drinking I can only drink more. A double scotch, another double scotch, and here is where the bottom drops out. My vision sort of doubles and there seems to be a drone in the background. I hear Vaughn Wright talk and it might as well be Swahili and I just nod whenever he says something to me. Once or twice he gives me a funny look.

The gamblers at their tables change from surface sophistication to ugly animals in expensive costumes, their clucks and brays echoing around my brain, like Orwell and the pigs at the farm. I expect to hear an oink-oink here and a

moo-moo there. The waitress allows me to diddle the tassel on her pasty, using my finger to swing it back and forth. She says, Okay, that's enough for now.

I say, They're watching us.

Kate says, They think I am the new whore in town.

I stand by her at the craps table. How did I get here?

She says, Pass, Don't Pass.

I guess she is explaining the game to me. I hope she is explaining the game to me. I hope it wasn't her tassels I was playing with. But she doesn't wear any tassels.

It's called the Pig-in-the-Poke, Kate says, that's what he's doing.

She says, You're drunk.

She says, You don't want to know.

It's too late now, she says. You can't leave now.

It's a big Pig-in-the-Poke, she says. First class.

She says she'll be back.

When you throw the dice too hard they bounce off the table and people have to go searching for them.

She says she is sorry it took so long.

She says, You're my good luck charm.

She says, Don't touch me there.

Vaughn Wright says, He looks better.

She says, He'll do fine.

She says, I told you not to. I warned you.

She is talking to me.

She says, I love him, that's why.

I know she's not talking about me.

Vaughn Wright positions me by the office door. He sets my shoulders against the wall. Just stand here. Can you do that?

He wraps a towel around his hand. He disappears. I talk to someone.

Someone says, No speaka de English? When he returns after forever I ask if that is blood on the towel. He tells me to shut up.

Kate kisses me. I say, But—

Up with you now. Time to go.

I have to wait.

No more waiting.

I have to wait for them.

They've been long gone. Come on, up. We got a cab ready. Come on, in here. A light goes on and it's like a million needles. Get yourself clean.

In the bathroom mirror I have a bruise on my cheek. My lower lip sticks out. Where is my tie? My jacket has two gold buttons missing. The bruise on my cheek looks like it will eventually turn the color of an overripe avocado.

I ask him who he is and he says he is the manager of the casino as he guides me out the back, unlocking a door, the night coming in.

Mr. Wright wanted me to relay something. He says, Good job. Your momma would have been proud.

I ask the manager what I did.

He nods to the cab waiting in the alley. There's your ride, he says.

(A week later two plainclothes detectives knock on my door and come in without asking. We sit in my living room and drink beer. The tall one smokes a cigar and he questions me about the casino and Vaughn Wright and that night. And I say I don't remember anything, which is mostly true. That makes the two detectives laugh. They think it is very funny. Yeah, they heard. They heard about me. They tell me to get them another beer. We talk about the Saints and their lousy pre-season. We talk about Tulane. They say, Hey, we're the good guys here. We're just imparting information. Everybody thinks you did a fine job. They hand me their cards, four from each of them. You get visitors. You get stopped on the street. You give them our cards. You do that, you'll make it through. I ask what happened. They really laugh now. You don't know, we ain't gonna tell you. That's a good thing you don't know. You keep that story going, you're gonna be all right. You might just be all right.)

The air outside is no better than the air inside and when I get in the cab the air is even worse and I roll down the window and the cabbie tells me to roll it back up, the air conditioning is on. He asks if I am going to throw up in his cab. Nobody throws up in his cab. I tell him to drop me off at the corner of Bourbon and Toulouse.

(Years later, '91, '92, I hire a private investigator to find Vaughn Wright, my curiosity finally too much. A month goes by and we meet at his office down in the Bowery and he says he's found maybe fifty Vaughn Wrights living in the United States of America. Can I imagine that? Who knew it was such a popular name? I tell him to continue. He used my parameters, age late seventies to mid-eighties, and he's found nine, so he goes to the marriage licenses, California, Vegas, early 1980s, with a Kate or Katherine, and there's nothing, so he figures all the states, and there is one, in Missouri, but it ain't Katherine and he ain't our guy, so he finds the apartment complex my parents lived in and he gets a guy, he's on my itemized bill, and somehow they got records from back in '61, my parents there, but no Vaughn Wright. Now he's stumped. He's got a friend in the FBI. He figures the FBI keep good records, and they do, and no Vaughn Wright. He does a whole bunch of other stuff. It's on the itemized bill. He says he's sorry he's got nothing. He says, These guys, you know, they sometimes don't use their real name. They kinda find it better to change it around. Sometimes, he says, they don't even exist at all.)

