

They Play It for Money

A puddle of blood, large and wet and dark as tar, its liquid tendrils spreading out like the tentacles of a jellyfish, stained the shoulder of the road. All the signs of a crash were evident: the slow-moving traffic; an overturned truck and a ruined car, side by side; clusters of people, rescue workers and bystanders and the police; shattered glass like rough ice crystals glittering in the noonday sun.

A young woman in a black t-shirt sobbed and clutched something to her chest. Joy craned her neck and saw the woman held a single child's sneaker. It was pink and had red flashing lights on it, lights that matched those of the ambulance idling in the middle of the road. A sobbing young boy sat down on the ground next to the ambulance, his knees up, his head cradled in his hands. Some men loaded a stretcher onto the ambulance, the small figure atop it barely visible underneath a blanket. Joy's car passed close to the ambulance, drove past right its open doors.

“A shame,” Juan, the driver, said from the front seat.

“Is she?” Joy began. “Is the little girl...” She assumed it was a little girl, must be, the small figure under the blanket. That it was the girl’s mother who held the sneaker. The girl must be dead, and that’s why the woman cried and cried. But how could Juan know the answer to this question? For a moment, Joy wanted to ask anyway, to have him lie to her, to tell her everything would be fine. She had this thought and then couldn’t bring herself to finish her sentence, and by then they had already passed the accident. Steve played with his phone and Joy looked out the window at some unusual trees with monkeys in them and Juan just kept driving. After a few miles it was almost as though the whole thing had never happened.

Juan maneuvered the car onto a highway. He was driving Steve and Joy to a hotel Joy had booked for them online. They planned to stay only one night and then leave the following morning for the beach resort. The highway was aligned with billboards touting familiar chain restaurants and various things for sale. Familiar, only the words were all in Spanish. Joy noted the signs advertising Burger King and motor oil, how similar they were to ones in the States, and a vague disappointment sprouted in her chest. She thought the signs were tacky, that they interfered with the otherwise charming and distinctly Latin American vista: ice cream-colored stucco buildings, children playing soccer, tree-enrobed mountains in the distance. She resented that she was on holiday and forced to read ads she might as well be looking at back home. Though it was difficult to admit it to herself, she also resented the accident, how it had cast a pall over her day. She shifted in her seat and opened her window wider to allow for more ventilation.

“Just a bit further now,” Juan called from the front seat.

On the highway, traffic once again slowed to a near stop. There seemed to be many motorcycles and buses and dogs and groups of people walking on the side of the road. Men carried sticks with clear plastic bags fastened to them and weaved in and out of the slowly moving lines of cars. The clear bags contained many different things: plantain chips, slices of mango, nuts.

“Steve, can we try some mango?” Joy touched her boyfriend lightly on his arm and he looked up from his phone, a tightness flashing across his face before it relaxed again.

“Sure, babe.” Steve frowned. “Unless it’s going to make you sick. Are you supposed to eat the fruit here? Hey, Juan?” he leaned forward.

“The fruit, drinking water, it is all fine. Safe for you.” Juan nodded vigorously.

“Um, okay then.” Steve leaned forward and removed some bills from his wallet. “Can you take care of it, then? Get her a bag of mango?” He knocked Juan’s shoulder with the hand that held the money.

“Of course.” Juan rolled down the window and made the transaction, speaking to the other man, who had a mustache and was wearing a shirt and pants that looked pressed and crisp, in rapid Spanish that Joy could barely understand. When Juan handed the bag to Steve, he spoke to him over his shoulder. “The traffic, it is not normally this bad.”

“Hey, no worries, man,” Steve said, hunching back over his phone. Joy looked to see what he was doing. He was posting pictures on Instagram, answering e-mails from work. She knew he had purchased the international plan before leaving home, and that for \$10 a day his phone would have the same functionality that it did in the States. Even so, she couldn’t fathom how he had internet access out here on the road, but she was happy that he did, that he was

content and not complaining to Juan about the length of the drive. The mango was juicy and delicious. She offered some to Steve, but he shook his head.

After about a half hour, Juan pulled up in front of their hotel. Joy felt a surge of satisfaction as she surveyed the building and the grounds surrounding it. The hotel possessed all the charm and character promised on its website: a white stucco structure with a soaring roof, large windows, and bright sprays of a flowing purple flower, maybe jacaranda, spilling over the sides of the building. Rolling hills and lush trees surrounded the hotel. In the far distance, the sliver of turquoise ocean contrasted nicely with the greens of the foliage. It was all very pleasing to the eye. She cast a sideways look at Steve to gauge his reaction. He was still looking at his phone.

After checking in, they climbed three flights of stairs to their room. It was decorated in soothing creams and browns and had a balcony that had a view of ocean, an opaque glittery blue some distance away. There was a circular drink dispenser in the corner with upside-down bottles of rum, whiskey, and vodka. They had perfunctory sex, showered, then changed their clothes. Joy chose a white sundress, brushed her hair, smoothed lotion on her suntanned legs, and attached a silver bracelet to her wrist. She watched Steve while he put on a fresh golf shirt, then they went down to the bar to have a drink.

The bar was open air and adjoined a casino with its own gaming tables, a roulette wheel, and slot machines, but Steve disapproved of gambling, so they sat at a table near the door. Joy ordered a Mai Thai and Steve got an old-fashioned from the bartender, who introduced himself as soon as they walked in. As they sipped their drinks, Joy looked around. The area behind the hotel sloped down. Two white stone staircases, one curving on each side, guided guests to an

area with ping pong tables and a swimming pool with a volley ball net. It was all very pretty, but Joy had been expecting something more traditional, maybe in more of a Spanish style, judging from the way the outside of the hotel looked. A few waiters buzzed around in dark pants and white shirts and beamed at Joy and Steve. Joy pushed away her feelings of disappointment and struggled to think of something to talk about with Steve.

“Hey, what was your name again?” Steve spoke to the bartender.

“It’s Pascal, sir.”

“Hey, listen, Pascal. We want to eat lunch out tomorrow, on our way to the beach, but we want it to be somewhere authentic. We only like the local places, for food. Can you help us out with that? What do you recommend?”

In fact, Steve did not like eating at the local places. He always said he did, but whenever they found one, no matter where they traveled, he would invariably find fault with the food, the decor, the lack of service, the dirtiness of the bathrooms. Once, Steve had berated the owner of a small boutique hotel in Central America over a single strand of black hair he discovered in his freshly squeezed orange juice. Joy tactfully averted her eyes as Steve complained to the owner for several minutes in a loud voice in front of the other guests. When he was done with his tirade, the owner told Steve in a quavering voice that both of their breakfasts would be on the house, and he would give them one of their nights for free as well. Steve regarded this as a personal victory. “You just have to speak up to get what you want,” he instructed Joy later. “You have to let them know. Otherwise they take advantage.”

Back home, they always dined at the comfortable and the familiar: an expensive steakhouse called T-Bone's was Steve's favorite, or maybe they would go to the neighborhood sushi place to break up the monotony.

"There is a place that is very nice, a cafe, that specializes in seafood," Pascal said. "I will write down the name."

"Thanks, man." Steve winked at Joy and slid some bills over to Pascal when he came back with the slip of paper. He had written the name of the restaurant on it in pencil. "We'll let you know how it is." He took Joy's hand in his and squeezed, and Joy realized that although Steve would relish bragging to their friends later about all the local culture they had absorbed on their vacation, he also attempted to find these local places for her, to please her. This was not nothing, she thought. "All good?" he asked. She smiled and nodded.

Joy noticed several well-dressed men and women walking through a narrow door in the corner of the room on the opposite side of the bar. They were all in their sixties, rowdy and jolly, carrying drinks and talking loudly. There was a sign next to the door. "Bingo," the sign said. "From five o'clock to midnight. Pozo acumulado desde \$5000."

"Bingo?" Joy murmured to Steve, motioning to the sign.

Steve squinted and turned his head in the direction Joy was motioning. "That seems pretty random. Why would they be playing bingo here?" He directed the question at Pascal, who was drying some beer glasses nearby.

"Ah yes, bingo," the bartender said. "There is a small bingo hall here. It has become very popular. The older people like to come. Only once a month, on Sundays." He tilted his head

toward the door. “The jackpot starts at \$5000. That is very good. It will go up, throughout the night, as long as no one wins it.”

A different line of people now filed into the bar. This group, comprised of five men and two women, walked in a line through the wood paneled doors. They were not well-dressed like the other patrons of the bar. Nor were they elderly. They did not seem festive, and none of them carried drinks. As they walked into the bingo room, their faces somber, they reminded Joy of workers heading into a factory. Joy noticed one of the women who looked to be around her age, 27. The woman’s hair was thick, her lips soft looking and the color of plush burgundy, carefully painted with lipstick. She didn’t meet Joy’s eye as she passed. Her dress was made of a cheap polyester patterned with white and black flowers. She looked familiar, but Joy could not think why. She was young, very attractive. Was she a prostitute? Joy had the thought, it came quickly, unbidden, and then she felt deeply ashamed of herself.

“Who are they?” she murmured, not realizing she had spoken out loud.

“That group?” Pascal had overheard her. “They are our neighbors. They come in on a bus, from a little town, to play bingo. They are paid to play it.”

“Paid to play? Like a job?”

“When the jackpot begins at 5000 dollars, give or take, they are paid by wealthy men, gamblers, to play all night. If they win, the players also get a little bit of the money.”

Joy considered the door, catching a final glimpse of the woman’s white and black shirt. “Can we play?” she asked Steve.

“I don’t know.” Steve looked down at the floor, and then at Joy. “It seems kind of like gambling.”

“Please?” Joy asked.

“How much does it cost?” Steve asked Pascal.

“It’s not so much. You buy the boards before each game. You can buy up to twenty, I think. It’s about \$1 US for a board.”

Ten boards would be the price of another drink, or maybe a nice sandwich. Joy squeezed Steve’s arm. “Oh, let’s do it.”

Steve hesitated, but only briefly. “Why not?”

They sat in the bar for another moment, finished their drinks, ordered fresh ones. Then Steve took Joy’s hand and led her to the rear of the room towards the small wooden door in the corner.

Joy was not sure what she was expecting, maybe something elegant, or charming, or colonial, but she did not find it in this room. Bright florescent lights lined the ceiling and the windows were small and narrow. The players sat at rows of tables. The older, smartly dressed women and men were still in high spirits, loud, calling out numbers, chanting. On the other side of the room sat the other group. They were not having cocktails or glasses of wine but talked animatedly to each other. Only the woman Joy had noticed earlier seemed quiet. She stared straight ahead as she sipped from a bottle of water, then checked her phone. When she glanced up, her eyes seemed frantic when they met Joy’s. Joy was the first to look away, but not before seeing the gentle swelling under the woman’s shirt. She was pregnant.

A bingo game was already underway. A woman in the center of the room stood behind a table covered with a white table cloth. She wore a short black skirt and a glittery purple top. In front of her, sitting on the table, sat a container made of wire with a handle on the end. It contained hundreds of smooth tiles with the bingo numbers printed on them in black. The young woman spun the contents of the container first, then plucked out a tile and read the number.

They bought cards from a man circulating with a basket of them. "All of the cards, are different," he explained to them. "So there can be only big winner per night." He handed them little pencils to mark their cards with.

"Interesting," Steve said, eyeing his card. "Only one winner? Is that possible?"

"Yes," the waiter said. "Only one can win the entire jackpot."

"And how much money do you win? If you get bingo?"

The man inhaled, exhaled, and he opened his eyes wide. "If you get a line, *una linea* in a row, you win 10 dollars. If you get the whole card, you get 500."

"How do you win it all? The whole jackpot?"

"Get the entire card, all the numbers, in 40 calls."

"That's impossible," Steve said.

"Difficult, yes," the waiter said. "But not impossible."

"Does that happen every night? How late do you play?" Joy asked.

The man gazed at Joy patiently. "No, not every night. If no one wins, the money will roll over into next month's game."

They played one game, then two. Neither Joy nor Steve got a line, even though the players at the other tables seemed to be having more luck. "This game is rigged," Steve

announced. They had more drinks, and left for awhile to get dinner in the hotel's restaurant: bread and steak and tilapia. Joy was surprised when Steve insisted on returning to the hall to buy more bingo cards.

Steve, the anti-gambler, began playing with an intensity that seemed unusual to Joy. Then she remembered how competitive he was with his neighborhood tennis league, playing once until he injured himself and then getting into an argument with Johnny Auten over the close match. This resulted in a bloody nose (Johnny's) and bruised knuckles (Steve's) that caused them both to be suspended from the country club for a year. She also recalled how he had gone to his supervisor when he discovered that a rival colleague had borrowed a credit card from the desk of the supervisor's assistant, resulting in the firing of the rival. Joy did not like Steve very much when he got like this. His eyes had become small and somehow blacker than before, piggy, and two bright red spots appeared on each cheek.

"Steve." She put her hand on his arm. He pushed it off. "I'm tired. Let's call it a night."

"Why don't you go back to the room?" Steve didn't look at her. "You drank too much. You can sleep it off."

Joy's head throbbed, and she put a hand to her lips. "I'll stay." She sipped some water.

Steve shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The next number called was on Steve's card. "Yes!" he shouted. When he marked the number, he pressed down so hard the pencil snapped in two.

Joy excused herself to go to the bathroom. When she pushed open the door, the woman was there, leaning against the row of sinks. She was on her phone and did not look up when Joy walked in. Her lipstick was smeared and her face looked sweaty. Joy let herself into one of the

stalls and sat down. She tried not to listen to the woman's conversation, which was in Spanish, and which she only understood marginally, but in the end she couldn't stop herself.

Anita. The woman's name was Anita. Her baby was due in three months. The baby was a little girl, and had a congenital heart defect that would require surgery shortly after the girl's birth. The surgery was something that could be covered by the government's healthcare, but there was no one to do the surgery in the entire country and she could not afford the airfare that would be required to travel to a country with a qualified surgeon. Without the operation, the baby would certainly die. Anita couldn't find the girl's father. She was worried and didn't know what to do, felt she would die, or kill herself, if she couldn't help her baby. But! If she could win bingo, the jackpot, she would have enough to pay for the surgery. She had been trying all weekend.

Joy listened until Anita stopped talking. The story was horrifying, harrowing. Her eyes grew hot as she thought of the tiny baby with the broken heart. She tried to decide what to do. When she emerged from the stall, the woman was gone.

Joy left the bathroom and took her seat next to Steve. He was still playing feverishly and did not notice her as she sat down. When the next round started, she got another card.

"3," came the call to begin the game. Joy looked down at her cards, then Steve's. They both had that one.

"47."

The game went on and on. Steve seemed to be doing well, getting almost every number. Joy noticed that Anita, who had retaken her seat with her coworkers, was also doing well. A

group crowded around her, congratulating her. “*Vamos, Anita!*” “You will win it all, Anita!” The table of well-dressed men and women were shouting different numbers: “67!” or “25!”

“81.”

Joy looked down at her card, then at Steve’s. He had filled in the entire card. Bingo. She nudged him.

“Bingo!” he shouted ebulliently. “Bingo! Bingo! Bingo!”

The woman calling out the numbers came over to look at Steve’s card and nodded. Then they heard, from the other side of the room, a softer voice. “Bingo!” It was Anita.

“How can that be?” Steve asked. “There can only be one bingo winner. That’s impossible!”

“It’s okay, sir.” One of the waiters had appeared at Steve’s side. “It happens sometimes. It’s all right. You can split the winnings. They are quite large. You both filled the card before 40 calls.”

“I don’t want to share! You said all the cards were different, that there couldn’t be more than one winner!” The red marks on Steve’s cheeks grew more prominent and saliva flew out of his mouth as he spat out the words.

“We checked her card.” The waiter, his white shirt damp, spoke calmly, apologetically.

“This is rigged!”

Joy touched Steve’s arm. “Let it go,” she murmured.

“I won’t! I won’t be taken advantage of!”

“Please listen to me,” she said. “I’ll explain later.”

Steve shrugged her arm off, flinging his card off the table, spilling his drink on her dress. The stain of the liquid spread, yellow, cold, looking like urine, on her skirt. She tried to blot it with napkins as Steve continued to yell at the waiter, demanding to see the manager of the gambling hall.

“Steve, please,” she said. She explained in a low voice about the woman in the bathroom, how her baby was ill and needed surgery. “We don’t need it.”

Steve looked at her in disgust. “You are so gullible, Joy,” he said. “She was just scamming you.”

“She didn’t even know I could understand what she said! And how did she know you would win?”

Steve’s eyes were flat black discs. “I can’t believe you, how incredibly stupid you are right now.”

The manager came out then, a man with a bald spot and a large gut that strained the buttons of his tight shirt. First, he walked up to Steve and apologized. He checked Steve’s card quickly and shook his hand, patted his back. Anita then held out her card to him, her hand shaking, her forehead damp. The manager looked at her card, at the tiles that had been called out, and checked everything. The room went quiet.

“You’re an asshole,” someone yelled.

The manager looked up intently at the young man who had spoken, as though memorizing his features. No one else said anything. The room grew so still that when someone coughed and cleared their throat it sounded like thunder. Joy began sweating in her white dress. Steve looked smug and assured.

Finally, the manager turned toward Anita and shook his head slowly, back and forth, a rabid dog getting ready to attack. He walked towards her, slowly at first, and then faster and faster. He held the card over his head like he would slap her with it, brush her away as though she were an animal. He yelled things Joy could not understand but that sounded ugly, guttural. The well-dressed men and women yelled protests. “She is pregnant, you ass!” The manager ignored them. The group Anita had arrived with only looked down at their hands, but one of the women was crying. Anita herself clutched her stomach, stumbling, running outside, flying into the darkness.

“She is a thief!” the manager announced. “A common thief! She tried to steal money from this casino! You! Never come back! I will call the police.” The room erupted in shouts and screams.

Joy followed Anita outside, running after her into the still-warm night that smelled of jasmine and salt water, though the ocean was at least 100 miles away. It was completely dark now and she could see flickers of moon through the trees.

Anita stood under a tree, no longer crying, breathing heavily, staring at her. Considering her. Could Steve be right? Was she gullible? Was this a scam? Underneath Joy’s actions, always giving the homeless man on the corner a \$5, working at the soup kitchen, she was aware always of her hypocrisy, her feelings of superiority, that she tried to quell by being nice, by behaving charitably. Joy greatly disliked this discomfort, the different parts of her at war: wondering if she was being stupid now, having to speak to this stranger, defying Steve.

But. No matter if the woman was scamming her, or if there was really a sick baby or not. She was sure Anita needed the money regardless. Joy clutched a wad of bills in her left hand. It was around \$800 in cash, all she had on her, money she had been afraid to leave in the hotel room. She had no idea if it would be enough. “Here.” She tried to shove the money at Anita. “Take this. Take care of your daughter.” Joy thought Anita would take the money joyfully, hug her, shower her with praise, commend her.

Instead, Anita regarded Joy for a moment, her eyes defiant. She didn’t move. Then, Joy realized why she looked familiar: she was the very picture of the woman who she had seen earlier on the side of the road, the woman clutching the sneaker, the one who had been next to the accident.

Anita’s hand, small, childlike, came up slowly, like a claw. Joy wondered at first if she might slap her. Gently, Anita took the money. She nodded once and then left Joy standing by herself among the trees and the moonlight.