

GOLD COAST

by Amy X. Wang

That spring, none of us particularly wanted to be in the ugly snow-drenched town and nobody was going to do anything about it either. The options, laid out: Home to nagging parents; a last hurrah for friendships that were already over; shrouding oneself in blankets and quiet, waiting it out, one final season, one more holiday break, sit it through, come on, come on. Graduation would bring escape soon enough, all of us thought. But then Carly landed herself in the psych ward with those burns tearing all down her legs like volcanic streaks, bloody stretch marks, stripes on salmon.

FLORIDA, Jan yelled—too loud in the pastel hallway, his arms swept wide, looking comically sacrificial; the nurse who'd moments ago given us a strict list of words not to use (death, pain, harm, so on and so forth) glared like it was just as treacherous a thing to say. We had been summoned for a prayer of exacting phrases, no others, no fewer, no more. Let's take her to Florida, he chirped, pretending to not see. Vitamin D's exactly the right thing, you know? Getting out of the cold. Let's all go you guys c'mon, we haven't had an adventure in forever.

He was still saying it in the same unbearable way, the three syllables like a deranged Buddhist mantra, in the ice-daggered airport later, having beat off every single one of our objections, both Andy's and mine: the costs (I'll pay for it), the time (neither of you had plans), the sheer goddamn

awkwardness (what awkwardness?). He was saying it to Carly, who only looked at him and shrugged her shoulders and said, whatever gets me out of this nuthouse, right, while everybody tried to laugh in earnest and not stare at her skin slowly being baked back together by needles and ointment under a layer cake of medical wraps. He was saying it while booking the tickets through a last-minute travel package and filling us in via email, and then we had no choice but to get on the plane. I sat next to Carly because Jan and Andy said maybe she would have an easier time talking to me About It on account of being a girl, and I didn't have the heart to say: What? You think I can just sit down and ask what brand of razor she used? We were never close, is the truth of it. Not just me and Carly—all four of us, we were never close; we met too early as stupid freshmen and simply stopped liking each other as people, it happens, you know, we went to parties, we had drinks and lectures and I kissed Andy once or twice in a filthy co-op backyard and then breaking up the group by fucking him last autumn was like benediction because I saved us all from having to know each other anymore.

All she did on the plane was push a pair of headphones on and fall asleep, to everyone's relief.

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Then, we were in the heatwave of Fort Lauderdale, sitting in a hotel that looked over a sliver of the beach if you squinted and had a seafood buffet with a live band—I couldn't say if they were any good, but the volume was cause for immense gratitude. Until it stopped. And Jan, slipping a credit card smoothly into the tray, looking around at us with ridiculous optimism, said: What do we wanna do tonight?

Andy suggested taking a stroll, and the skyline was low and cool and littered with palm trees for a while until we hit a casino a few blocks down, all flashing lights and a mirage unto itself—an

explosion that sets up hairs on end, and we walked right into it, pretending none of us could feel its lure, until: Well, would you look at that. Want to go in? Sure. Why not. Whatever works.

(Whatever gets us through this weekend quicker, nobody said.) Once inside, Jan headed straight to the blackjack tables, waving us over, chattering excitedly—to himself, but Jan always had an incredible talent for carrying on a conversation alone, as if hordes of admirers were forever dangling just behind a curtain—saying delightfully in that very rich-boy happiness of his that he'd never gambled before in the States, saying let's give it a go, yeah? Andy latched onto it, painfully transparent, pushing Carly to play and saying, hey remember that movie we saw, remember when you— you're so good at—

She met my gaze for the merest of seconds, and I looked away before realizing what I'd done.

The slope-chinned man at the slot machines first fell into my peripheral vision when I was busy staring at Jan's left earlobe, later, pretending to be engaged in the game, fixing a curl onto the corners of my lip, pretending this wasn't excruciating. But once I noticed him, I couldn't not see him. Jan and Andy were valiantly trying to keep afloat a doomed chat about basketball championships, Carly occasionally biting out a laugh, fiddling with a thumb ring. The man at the slots was easy to keep track of because he moved only back and forth between two machines. His knotted hair thinned badly, and his tweed jacket was three inches too long in every direction but it looked once-expensive, the lining delicate and the fabric heavy, maybe beloved.

He kept going between them, one, two, trying one out for a minute, coming back; while the tourists and retirees around him pulled at knobs with mild interest in glossed-over eyes, his face stayed alert and seemed to absorb the blue-white light from the screens into itself. Every few seconds he'd pull out a notebook from inside the jacket and scribble something with a cheap Bic, eyes darting around the room before hastily shoving it back. That chin, slanting as if someone had pulled

the clay of it on accident before it'd fully set in the kiln where it was meant to be firmed into a handsome enough face, looked like one I'd seen before.

Andy, who it seemed had been quietly watching me, said, You gonna have a go, Mel? He nodded over at the machine. Said: maybe you'll get lucky! I mean my aunt won, like, three hundred dollars at a slot in Vegas last year.

The way the casino was built—the way all casinos are built, a gambling feature in a travel magazine told me once—made it hard for anyone to tell the direction they are walking, or how far, or where exactly any of the sounds around were coming from, voices fusing together into one immense pierce of sensation, and so Andy probably wouldn't have registered if I'd said what I really wanted to (All I've ever seen in you is a checked box in a to-do list, you pointless human incarnation of drywall) rather than what I did (okay, sure, why not). I walked over and saw down at a machine next to the man in the mess of tweed and his notebook and ink smeared all over his knuckles.

His head swiveled, slow, to look at me. Looked down at the pinwheel of colors and levers in front of me. Barked sudden and fast:

—Don't. That one's bad odds. Double down on the lines per bet and the pot's still not worth it.

I said, What does that—

—It means you'll lose.

I waited for more, because there was always more.

It'll be the codes, he said. Muttered. I wanted to glance back at the blackjack tables, see if Carly or Jan or Andy had even noticed where I was, but on the other hand I would've been fine to never look at any of them again. The man said: The codes. It's an algorithm, all of it, it's goddamn obvious isn't it. Like a pinball, he said, a hand coming up to scratch fiercely at his chin, at one uneven side of it. Like puzzles. You gotta keep every tick and piece in your head and every time

you've got the full thing you gotta use it or it'll slip away and you gotta use it to win big and get the jackpot, how stupid are people who don't know? How stupid are you?

He thumbed through his notebook, impatiently flicking it toward me. I moved to sit one machine closer so I could look at the writing, but it was futile because there was nothing to make sense of: letters, figures, some of them in neat little columns and others skittering right off the page, a line every once in a while so feverishly crossed out that the paper was poked and ripped right through. Stains in the crevices. He smelled strongly of boiled tuna.

He started to tell me exactly how many times he'd pulled each machine in the room— pointed to one in the corner with some sort of pirate theme: Rigged the highest, he said. Only cents at a time. But they're all rigged. Patience and you track the timing. Bet all your cash on the most lines right as it's gonna give you the jackpot. But tough. It's a toughie. I've got half the skip code and. There's a variable. There's one missing in the middle. Look over, look at that one— that purple there in the middle, biggest jackpot, but can't you see the camera? The little holes? Fail-safes. They keep eyes on a switch to keep the payoffs from coming if they catch you watching it. Don't look at it that close, he snapped. And then his gaze turned hard, no longer grey and crinkled, and he bent close and put a hand on my shoulder and shook it with more vigor than I expected, yelling why I was watching him, why I was spying—

Jan's hand on my other shoulder nearly made me jump. We're going now, he said, loud.

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The frost hit us on the walk back to the hotel, a wind from nowhere prodding hair into our faces; a couple of kids flew by on skateboards, a string of women in glittering heels smoking on a corner.

—Who was the creep?

Andy, out of nowhere. Twisting back to look at me from where he was walking, out in front.

No one, I said, automatic, and was irritated enough with myself for that to add: He was telling me how to beat the slots. Figuring out their patterns.

Jesus, Andy said, at the same time Jan said, Is that a thing?

Of course not, Andy said to Jan. I mean they're all set up like that to get people. No one plays the slots. But maybe he was trying to pay off a ton of debt or something—

He didn't look poor, I said.

You don't have to be poor to be crazy, Andy said.

I didn't realize Carly had stopped walking until Andy and Jan stopped and turned, first, from in front of me, twin confusion on their faces. She was standing a few steps behind us, her coat hanging off one shoulder.

You're a *cunt*, she said.

We stood there, facing off between her on the sidewalk and the three of us a few feet away on the same sidewalk and a chasm of earth opening, closing, opening once more between us, and she looked so ridiculous in her long dress and big black stockings—too hot for Florida but the burns were probably sensitive and the socks so thick they seemed an accusation—but unmoving. Her hair got all over her teeth but she didn't bother trying to peel it away.

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She said she wanted to go down by the water, when we resumed and finished a dead silent walk back to the hotel what felt like hours later. I went along, ignoring the doubt, the clear tormented hesitation scrawled out on Andy's face, the helplessness on Jan's, it was almost endearing,

you could practically see the *you sure that's a good idea* eking out of his eyes, but neither of them stopped us.

In the nighttime, the actual beach was sealed away from the hotel by a chain-link fence twenty feet off the shore and it would have taken too long to walk out to an area where things were open, so Carly sat down right next to the fence and pressed her head against it. I folded myself down next to her and we settled into the soft, lukewarm sand as waves rolled. Carly peeled at a widening hole in her stockings. She dug her toes in the sand.

—Cigarettes.

—Was it?

—And it didn't hurt.

I didn't say anything.

—Actually, that's a lie—it felt fucking horrible, fuck it still feels fucking horrible.

I watched the roil of the waves.

I know, I said.

There was nothing to say after that. In a few days we'd fly back up to campus. The two of us sat there against the fence, in the crawling dark, for I don't know how long.

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