



Amie Leeking

Variable Rewards

by Chelsey Johnson

My Hunger

I was so hungry. I had been in Portland a few weeks and already almost all my money was gone: the plane ticket, the bus pass, a ten-dollar slab of foam for a mattress, my first month's rent paid in a paltry heap of traveler's checks, cash, and change. I was nineteen and had decided to leave my tiny Minnesota hometown to spend the summer in Portland, and my parents said fine but you're on your own. I was subsisting on pasta, Safeway deli samples, and the neighbor's blackberry bush.

The June afternoon in question was at some point after I'd started selling my plasma for 25 bucks a pop but before I'd secured the downtown Baskin Robbins job (\$4.75 an hour.) You could only sell your plasma once a week, though if you donated four times in a month, you were entered in a drawing for a free TV. The last time I'd done it I'd passed out on my way to the counter to collect my money, collapsing into a swift doctor's arms.

I had never lived in a town with a population over four digits so I hadn't been prepared for what it means to be a girl walking down the street in the summertime. Never mind if, like me, you cut your own hair, poorly, and your flat chest is draped in funny-print polyester shirts whose sleeves and hems you've raggedly scissored off, and your vintage men's shoes are a size too big so you clop like a pony down the sidewalk and you haven't shaved for two years: wear a beat-up old skirt and endless men whistle and holler, as if you're a stray pup just looking for a master.

I got a lot of it, and it was all I got. What I wanted was Jael, the girl with whom I shared a bedroom, and what Jael wanted was Ed, my ex-boyfriend (my last, it would turn out), and I was elated and miserable by the way things were going so far (our new, intimate friendship, their escalating relationship). With nothing but time to write, I settled one afternoon onto a bench on the south park blocks with my small green spiral notebook. Head bent over my journal, a sharp, distinct wolf whistle soared my way: wheet-wheeeoooo.

Enough. I jerked my head up, eyes blazing, ready to lash back.

The perpetrator was a boy in a worn white T-shirt and baggy jeans and short hair sauntering by with a couple of girls.

I opened my mouth to deliver my stinging reply when I caught a glimpse of purple sports bra through the ripped shoulder of the boy's T-shirt.

My brain turned upside-down.

How I Ended Up Here.

I'm not a born-this-way gay. My parents were shocked when I came out. I didn't read as gay, ever, and I had ample boyfriends in high school, never mind that I'd been making out with my girl friends in roleplaying scenarios all through elementary school. I envied the people who knew from birth, who were already sneaking kisses and more by high school, which I know romanticizes the excruciating existence of being queer and young, but I envied their certainty. I felt nothing like certainty until Jael.

She played cello in the Oberlin conservatory and bass in an art-punk band called Polyestrogen. She had the tall lanky body of an adolescent boy, bleached her short hair yellow-white, and read at a lightspeed. She slept with Ed and I tried to get over it and we tried to all be friends and then we all moved to Portland, a gang of seven.

I arrived a week after everyone else but Jael and our other two housemates-to-be had yet to score a place to live, despite daily appointments with landlords. The thing was that they refused to "kiss ass." "Kissing ass" included making pleasant small talk, washing your hair, and wearing clothes that could be construed as bourgeois. Apparently if the landlord didn't want our real selves—broke, dirty, unemployed, three of the four of us full-time smokers and two of us still teenagers—then fuck them. We would not sell out. Meanwhile, our ass-kissing friends scored a whole house at the corner of NE Ninth and Failing Street. The rent was \$675 and you could watch crack deals out the window. The plasma center on MLK was in walking distance.

This was the path to Melrose Place: we needed housing, fast, and if the place had three bedrooms for the four of us, so be it. And the building we ended up in really

did look like Melrose Place, blush stucco and a garden courtyard, if no pool. Leaving Damion and Mike A smoking Pall Malls on the Failing Street porch, and dressed to kiss ass, Jael and I managed to coax the frizzy-haired landlady into handing over the keys to a duplex. Her T-shirt showed smiling multicolored stick figures holding hands above the word ERACISM.

Was it Jael's idea or mine to share that third bedroom? I think both. We were oddly eager to shack up, mutually fascinated with each other as we navigated the common territory of Ed, I his past, she his future. We laid our thin foam sleeping pads on either side of the door and unrolled our sleeping bags atop them, and built a shelf of scrap wood and cinder blocks and milk crates under the window. I could tell you a lot about the agony and enormity of the two-year crush that was born in that bedroom, but all you need to know right now is that what I felt for Jael knocked me off my feet, unsteadied my step, in a way I hadn't experienced in all the frantic boy pursuits of my youth. I went from questioning to knowing.

My friends here, all of them straight, knew me from before and had no idea. But to anyone else in Portland, I was whomever I wanted to be, or whomever I told them I was—including myself. I was in new territory, literally and existentially.

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That Whistle

My retort vanished. I sat and stared. The whistler was a girl. A girl with short copper hair and blue eyes and sort of bad skin and a sweetly cocky swagger to her walk. The girl caught my frozen frown and said, "Sorry," as she passed.

"It's okay," I managed to say.

"You're very attractive, that's all," she called back over her shoulder, and smiled. And she and her two friends sauntered down the steps in the direction Pioneer Square.

I said, "Thanks."

I felt like I was going to fall over, like I had at the plasma center when they'd sucked out my blood and pumped it back in, mine but different. A strange heat rose in my whole body, a thrill so strong it felt like embarrassment or terror. A girl had whistled at me. It was the single most momentous harassment of my life.

I immediately, desperately wished she would come back my way. But then what would I do? It didn't matter. She was already gone.

Variable Rewards

That whistle hummed in me all summer. My only proof. I had platonic, pleasant, slightly awkward meetups with a couple of girls I knew from a riot gril listserve. I got far too drunk and boldly leveled a meaningful stare at a straight girl at a party; she politely ignored me, and then I went outside and threw up on a tree. I went to matinées of *Sister, My Sister* and *The Incredible True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*—twice. I showed up at the feminist bookstore on Hawthorne to uselessly volunteer—all they had for me to do was alphabetize, so I did, face to the shelves, rearranging chronicles of other lives lived, while women came and went behind me. And every night I went home to Jael. It was like this.

1. “Take off your shirt,” Jael says, locking the bathroom door, and I unbutton and shed, braless. She mixes red hair dye in her plastic-gloved palm and massages it into the back of my hair. I have never dyed my hair before and I watch her in the mirror above the sink, her eyes concentrating on the nape of my neck as I turn into a different person. I watch her twist her white-blond cowlick around her fingers as she tells me stories of her wayward youth, sharing her cigarette with me on our front step. But I also have to watch her with Ed, draping a long leg over his, beating him at video games, making his eyes go soft.

2. Walking drunkenly down the sidewalk one night, she puts her arm around my waist and I do the same.

Jael: Now we’re going to get beat up cause people think we’re lesbians.

Me: Ha ha.

3. I come back from brushing my teeth and find Jael lying on my foam sleeping mat. I lie down next to her and she turns her back and spoons into me. The natural thing to do seems to be to put my arm on her waist, and she takes my hand and pulls it there into place. She falls asleep, content. I lie awake, conscious of how the tip of my smallest finger hooks around the rim of her navel, the touch so light I can barely feel the skin of her belly under my fingers. Through the streetlight leaking in the window I can see her empty bed six feet away. I can barely sleep. I marvel, I fret at this singular event.

I do not yet know that this will not be the last night Jael gets into my bed.

In dog training, there’s this concept of variable rewards. It means that when you say “come,” for example, you don’t give the dog a treat every time he comes. So instead of

the dog hearing “Come” and thinking, “yeah, whatever, a treat,” he thinks, “hey, I might get a treat”—which is a much more powerful incentive to come and find out. It’s like the slot machine. You don’t get something every time. That’s why you keep going back. You can’t resist dropping in just one more coin, convinced that maybe this time you’ll hit the jackpot.

Jael was a master at this. I was never sure when she’d crawl into my sleeping bag, or when she’d hang up the phone at midnight with a smile on her face and pull on her sneakers to walk to Ed’s house. She said—an exact quote recorded in my journal—“Sex doesn’t matter. It’s just having someone there in my bed that’s good.” All summer, and for the next two years back at Oberlin, I would keep coming back, keep dropping in every coin I had, and the most I ever got was a drunken party makeout up against my fridge and two tipsy solicitations of sex that had evaporated by the time we made it back to her house. And eventually the day when my mother finally asked outright What is going on between you and this Jael? The answer was still, sadly, we’re just friends, but then there was the rest of the answer, and that’s where my coming-out story starts.

But that was the unknown future. In Portland, in 1995, anything still seemed possible. That girl who whistled at me? All summer I looked for her, or for someone like her. If it had happened once, it could happen again, right? But I was too scared to venture alone into the queer world that surrounded me, a fish afraid of water. Every night I rode the bus alone from Baskin-Robbins to the bedroom I shared with Jael, never sure if she’d be there, never brave enough to send a clear signal.

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Three-Card Monte

My last night in Portland before I headed back to Ohio, I stayed out after work with my skater-dude coworker Roadie. We ended up by the waterfront, where a guy hunpered on the sidewalk invited me to play a game of Three-Card Monte. It looked pretty straightforward. I did something I never, ever do: I gambled. I handed over the last five dollars in my pocket.

Of course I lost it. I was incredulous. I didn’t yet know that some games are just rigged.

Since that had been my bus fare, Ed’s housemate Joel came and picked me up and drove me back to the house where Jael and everyone else were drinking Olympia beer and hanging out. I told him I had lost five dollars but had been this close to winning ten.

“You played Three-Card Monte?” He burst into laughter. “That’s a total con game.”



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"No, I was really close," I said. "I almost chose the right one. And then at the last second I changed my mind. I would have played again but I didn't have any more money."

He kept on laughing. "No one wins at Three-Card Monte."

I couldn't believe it. "But I almost did."

"Yep. That's how they get you."

We drove over the Hawthorne Bridge and turned onto MLK. I had never noticed timed traffic lights before, and as we drove home down the wide quiet boulevard I watched with wonder as each one lit up in our favor as we approached. I had been fooled, but Portland was giving me a steady string of green lights all the way home.

Yes, You

It took me eight years to make my way back to Portland, this time for another charismatic musician, gifted and volatile, who was not only an expert in variable rewards but in fact a pro dog trainer. The romance didn't last, of course. But the place did. Here were more queers than I'd ever imagined, and now I was one of them. Fish, meet water.

And here I went to my first-ever Pride weekend: corny, commercial, rainbow-strewn as a Lucky Charms battlefield. Pride is a reminder that queers can be as unoriginal and exasperating as anyone else. We fight for our humanity to be recognized, and indeed, there it is, bad shorts and all.

In Portland a zone is cordoned off with chain-link fencing by the waterfront, a gay cage in which we are punished with embarrassing bands and marketed to by white tents hawking TV networks, nonprofits, insurance, and mortifying fashion choices.

I get to be cynical about it because I take for granted that I am safe and in good company in my everyday life. I get to be cynical about it because I'm old enough and savvy enough to recognize the corporate pride apparatus, the mainstreaming forces that seek to normalize us in the dullest, least radical ways possible.

But I also notice these kids wandering through—not the sauntering posers with their patches and piercings, the GSA-blazers who have already banded together and found power in numbers, but the ones and twos who walk slowly over the trampled grass, looking around with wide eyes. And I recognize in them the nineteen-year-old me, home-cut hair faded to an uncertain hue between my born blonde and chosen red, a girl who didn't know quite where to go, wandering from booth to booth, seeking what no vendor sells. A kid for whom one sharp sweet whistle could pierce through the clutter and land square on her heart, saying *You. Yes, you. You are wanted here.*