

Little Games
by Eric Cecil

It's the year after next, and still she's playing these little games.

She starts by betting on trivial matters: a gamble while running late for work. If she makes it to the train on time, she'll have a lucky day. But if she misses her usual ride, it's a week or more of unease. She arrives at the station just as the train does, slots herself between its closing doors, then waits for her luck to follow.

It never does. And never does she seem to win or lose anything, no matter the wager. Soon she decides to advance her odds onto others. At work she watches a man elbow the side of a machine in the breakroom. This time she banks on defeat: his. He won't, she thinks, get what he's after. If he does, the day is shot. If he doesn't, it's hers. In her kindness she explains to the man that he must unplug the machine and power it on again. To reset it, she offers. Her coworker nods, unplugs, then reconnects and restarts the appliance. It does not register his payment, does not vend his purchase. Does not, he says, work at all, glowering at the blinking display. She slinks from the room in silence, claiming a new kind of victory.

But the gains are still petty, no bearing on her life. The good days remain elusive. She grows desperate in evenings spent alone, seeking greater returns. Coming home from the office one night, she spots a mother and child on the train, looks on as the boy drags his hand through a torn book missing its cover. He balances the dogeared text upon one skinned knee: a sure sign of clumsiness. He'll drop the book, she bets, and if he does, then everything will change: a promotion, a new man, another life. If the child holds the book until his stop or hers, then maybe none of these, and never.

Never has she been so attentive to a stranger. Far more watchful than the mother herself, who stares out the window, looking onto the tunnels that chute the train from one end of town to the next. She regards mother and son with anxiety and contempt as the train approaches her stop. Neither seem to notice. The child flags and wings the pages as if fighting off stiff headwinds, but the text remains perched upon his lap. In desperation she stands, lunges, knees the book from his leg and onto the dirty floor. His hoarse cries draw the attention of all on board, but by then, it's too late: she's off the train and onto the promise of the next day.

The days grow longer and shorter and longer again, expanding and contracting with cold and heat. There are rains that roil and clatter for weeks and then narrow to nothing, half the city's crowds thinning and blowing away with them. In the absence of both are the pale light and torpor of summer. At every curb bake the tidewashings of surrendered belongings: piles of thin

clothing, soiled bedding, old toys. On cooler evenings she circles the debris, walking the blocks now given to litter, looking for a new angle. She finds it in an abandoned pair of heels at the split lip of a three-way intersection. They'll be gone, she assumes, by the time she returns. If they aren't, she must wear them. She huffs a sharp laugh later that evening, spying them again at the curb, waiting there for their rightful owner. She removes her own worn flats and steps into the perch of each heel and finds that they fit all too well.

Her gait sharpens as she wanders among the foothills of junk and clutter, which soon afford her a new skirt, a sheer black blouse, thin bracelets that chime at her wrists. Now she's dressed for a greater occasion of chance. She clips and jangles past a mattress that sags along a bent fence, prowling into a wilderness of orphaned furniture, and finds tables and desks that lie flat on their backs, legs stiff in the air like felled horses. Beyond these, she happens upon an outpost of large boxes. Most are empty. Some, however, keep and coffin the living: more players, she thinks, for better games.

The longest of these boxes sits below the overhang of a damp building. Its cardboard walls wilt and fold against an unused doorway. They dimple upon a swaddled mass of blankets that darkens its interior. The terms present themselves almost before she can grasp the details: if there's someone inside the bundle, she will lose, but if it's empty, there's another win. With resolve she approaches, then raises her right leg and spikes the found heel, both hammer and nail, into the bedded mass. Something stiff and coiling shifts, bucks against her with the muscular reflex of a large reptile. She scurries around the near corner, up the next block, then down the one after. She cannot stop to listen over the stitching of heels and ringing of bracelets, but she thinks she's heard a howling of pain.

Uncertain how she's arrived at a bar, she does not drink but laughs instead: holding the heels by their straps in one hand, her bare feet against the cold rungs of a high stool. The bartender brings her a glass of water without ice and when a man appears at her elbow, smiling, and asks where she got that laugh, it does not occur to her that her luck may have finally changed.

Changing her water for whiskey, the man sits by her and then with her and then she is in nothing but a nightshirt, standing in the dark, looking at her bed. A form is there, swaddled in the unwashed blankets. The room canters. She steadies herself against the wall and waits for the form to stir. Though the room dips and resettles, the figure in the bed does not move. It does not, she thinks, make sense that he has landed on her like this, the twists and knots of her bedding like a tourniquet upon the wound he has made of her evening. I am still, she begins, and then stops. I've had too much.

Not much of the room is visible from the corner, where she now stands. From the scant and slanted light of the window she spies the mounds of clothing along the floor, the heels, the

hooped bracelets, the upturned bottle that has bled and puddled beneath the bed. Next to it, she notes a faint glint in the broken stem of a wine glass.

She bends to the stem of the glass, catches herself on the tilting floorboards, stands to look at the bed again. The bound form is not quite visible in the final dark. Is he in there, she wonders, or isn't he? She recalls the borrowed heel digging into the deep tufts on the street earlier that night and palms the smooth, flat side of the stem's base, its broken root protruding from between middle and ring fingers.

Well? he says. The deep resonance of his voice startles her. It is not quite the voice she remembers from the bar. But she does not remember much.

You're awake, she says.

Are you going to, he says, or aren't you?

She does not know how to respond. She shifts on one knee and feels the tickle of the overshirt against her bare thigh.

Am I going to what? she asks.

She hears the bed groaning and sighing in the darkness, loses the shape that flickers against the faint light of the window. The voice cuts then, slits into a whisper, a kind of scampering hiss. If you can find me, it says, you'll have all the luck. But if you can't: and then nothing.

In the deeper black recess of the room she guides herself along the wall to where the lightswitch should be but is not, hears him hissing her onward. She releases the wheel of the glass stem, which drops and rolls somewhere below or behind her, and walks to him, follows his susurrance to the light that gills the underside of the closed bathroom door.

Beyond the door, shoved open as if against the force of another's hand, the bathroom's light reveals neither the man nor the luck he has promised but a fiercer hissing: the faucet spraying into the chipped basin. The glow that slants onto the bed behind her shows nothing but blankets like leaping dogs now lying prone.

She does not find him in any part of her room. Nor does she see him in the hall, the foyer. The street is empty but for even higher piles of refuse, now heaving from gutters, blocking sidewalks, obstructing roads. The next day and every one after, she senses him watching, wondering, wagering: Will she or won't she? She does not know the terms of his game. But now they're his to decide, all odds in his favor, and she no longer wants to play.