

PlaYing GaMes

By Cliff Aliperti

WHY WE LIKE IT: *There are two games going on in this engaging story about a coffee shop worker and one of his customers. The first has to do with old-fashioned (okay, retro) board games like Risk, Parcheesi and Sorry. The second and more interesting one has to do with the relationship dynamics of the players. There is a strong but subtle element of both intrigue and mystery in this story that draws you in to the deeper things going on beneath the words. Fluid prose and pitch perfect dialogue enhance our reading pleasure but it is the quietly powerful open-ended conclusion that lifts this tale above the competition. A beautifully written example of just how satisfying mainstream short fiction can be.*

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

Black coffee all but shot through her nostrils and she looked up at me after she'd finished choking. "What's that?" she asked.

"I was just wondering. I mean, you seem like you've got things together pretty well, but you always seem worn out and, dare I say it, miserable."

"Well, that's awful forward of you," she said.

I shrugged. "Swear out a complaint if you like," and I meant it, I didn't give a shit anymore. "But know that I have your best interests at heart."

Carol didn't come in for her morning coffee on Tuesday, but she and her husband, Tommy, waved to me from across the food court at about ten minutes of eight. Tommy, not Carol, approached and ordered two dinners, suggesting I grab one for myself on my way out and join them at one of the tables.

PLAYING GAMES
By Cliff Aliperti

It was before I learned a buck was a buck, and I was embarrassed to be working there. I served salads and sandwiches from the center stage of the mall food court. I appreciated the buck at first, blinded by any sized paycheck, but by the time I raised enough of a stake to ask out the brunette who sold fashion across the way, I must have been blind to any outside appraisal of my future prospects. The brunette chuckled and said no.

Mornings were the best part of the job. Serving coffee to other mall workers and retired mall walkers.

An exception was this blonde woman who came in for an extra large black coffee looking like she'd rolled out of bed sometime after parking her car. She parked in the fire zone by the huge glass entranceway every morning, grabbed her coffee, then sputtered away presumably to someplace nearby. She was thirtyish, maybe a little older, fit, had dirty blonde hair, though wasn't quite pretty because of a somewhat overwhelming nose. She wasn't ole Jimmy Durante or nothing, but I think it's safe to say they shared an outstanding feature. It didn't spoil her looks entirely and, honestly, if she could get a little extra sleep and fade those dark circles from under her eyes, she would have had an interesting look to her. She was polite but curiously aloof.

My self-esteem had taken a bruising with the brunette's rejection, so I entertained myself any way I could just to keep this lousy job and get paid. I took the tired blonde's rejection as a challenge and decided to go out of my way to warm her up to me. I was over-the-top friendly, doing anything I could to get more than a "Good morning" and "Thank you" out of her. My co-workers must have thought I had a thing for her, so they'd get out of my way when she

approached. My pet, they called her. Slowly I was able to pry more conversation out of her, yet I wasn't able to change her mood.

Finally, one day I just asked her point-blank, "Why you always so tired?"

Black coffee all but shot through her nostrils and she looked up at me after she'd finished choking. "What's that?" she asked.

"I was just wondering. I mean, you seem like you've got things together pretty well, but you always seem worn out and, dare I say it, miserable."

"Well, that's awful forward of you," she said.

I shrugged. "Swear out a complaint if you like," and I meant it, I didn't give a shit anymore. "But know that I have your best interests at heart."

She smiled—she actually smiled.

"Oh, you do, do you," she said, leaning on the counter and sipping her coffee. "Why should you care about me?"

I leaned forward and whispered at her. "Because this job sucks, lady, and I'm miserable myself. They say misery loves company, but I'm feeling just the opposite. Smile," I said.

She kept smiling.

"You're a piece of work," she said. "I work eight hours a day." I shrugged; she nodded. "I know, who doesn't, right? But then I go home and work my side business."

"And what's that?"

Her laugh was a cackle, so off-key it caught me off-guard. "Oh, nothing terrible." She rolled her eyes up. "Get your mind out of the gutter. I write copy, catalog descriptions and the like."

I leaned forward again and said, "Sexy."

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. Walking off she tossed her head over her shoulder and added, “Thanks for the smile.”

I enjoyed the new version of Carol who now greeted me every morning. I was right about the smile, she *was* a pretty woman, nose be damned. Friendly and intelligent too. We chatted about politics and current events, sometimes on Mondays she’d even bring up the football games. Carol was a good egg.

It was a couple of months after our breakthrough that she came in looking like her old tired self.

“Burning the candle again, I see.”

“Go to hell, Jeff,” she said, seeming like she meant it.

I threw my hands up defensively and went about getting her extra large black coffee without a word. I rang it up, but Carol was well aware of what her coffee cost and had her dollar ten on the counter before I had finished at the register.

“You all right?” I asked.

“Fine,” she said, taking her coffee to leave. She stopped about ten feet from me and returned to the counter, cutting in front of one of the elderly mall walkers to get to me.

“My husband wants to meet you,” she said.

“Your husband? I didn’t even know you were married.”

She wiggled her ringless fingers in front of me. “I don’t advertise, but yeah. I do the catalog copy for him. Anyway, he wants to meet you, Jeff.”

“Why?” I asked. She shrugged her shoulders. “Carol, this is a bit strange,” I said.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said. “It’s not like we’re screwing.”

Yeah, but why did she seem so worried then?

Carol came and went the next few mornings without any further mention of her husband. Then, one Thursday evening during the dinner rush, she blindsided me. “How unexpected,” I said, referring to the odd hour of Carol’s visit.

“I’m here with my husband,” she said in a confidential tone. “He wants to meet you.”

“Okay,” I said, my throat tight. This felt off.

He was an ordinary looking guy, about twice my age, say forty, forty-five. Glasses, neatly trimmed ash blond hair, clean-shaven, business casual dress with the top two buttons of his shirt undone to show the casual side. I shook his hand, his grip was firm.

“Carol’s told me quite a bit about you, Jeff. She likes you.” He winked. “I have an opportunity to offer you if you’re interested.”

I glanced at Carol and couldn’t tell if she was nervous or horny. Carol’s husband kept talking about some sort of opportunity, but I stopped hearing him. These were middle class people, they certainly weren’t going to make me rich. This had to be some sort of sex come-on, I thought, or worse, some sort of murder lure. After her husband finished his pitch there was an uncomfortable moment of silence broken only when I looked over to Carol, who now winked. Goosebumps rose on my back and shoulders.

“So, will you come along with us?”

“What’s that?”

“When you get off tonight. Will you come back to the house with us?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I can’t tonight. I’ve got a prior engagement,” I said.

“Well, what’s a good night for you then?”

For what? Christ, I wish I had listened better. I didn't know if I'd be helping with catalog copy, spicing up Carol and Mr. Carol's sex life, or getting my ass murdered.

"Um, whenever," I said.

Mr. Carol looked past my eyes trying to read me.

"Tuesday then?" he asked hopefully.

"O—Okay. Tuh—tuh—Tuesday," I said, freaked out by this point.

"Great, see you Tuesday then," he said, smiling and extending his hand once more.

I shook it and then he walked away. Before leaving Carol laid both of her soft warm hands atop mine on the counter. "You won't regret it," she said.

"Um, what time Tuesday?" I asked.

"Eight o'clock work for you?"

"PM?"

"Yep."

"Okay, eight it is then. And bring your overnight bag."

What the fuck?

Carol didn't come in for her morning coffee on Tuesday, but she and her husband, Tommy, waved to me from across the food court at about ten minutes of eight. Tommy, not Carol, approached and ordered two dinners, suggesting I grab one for myself on my way out and join them at one of the tables.

I didn't speak much as we ate, though noted they were both touchy-feely with me, Tommy with a firm grip on my shoulder as he laughed and Carol laying her hand over the top of mine on the table whenever she stressed a point. For all their chatter and all their good-humored

touching, I still didn't know what the hell was going on as I walked with them out of the mall, into the parking lot, and into the back seat of their little Celica.

Their house looked just like all the others on a tiny block of houses in a neighborhood too empty to judge. No kids about, houses either dark with cars in the driveway, or lighted at the front door with empty driveways. Probably all young hustlers like Tommy and Carol, paying the mortgage best they could while hoping for something more sometime soon. I could imagine the setting as a vision into my own near future, someday after I got the hell out of that mall.

"Take off your coat, make yourself comfortable," Carol said before we were even all the way inside. "Beer or something stronger?" she asked.

"Beer's fine," I said.

The little den was cluttered and not very neat. The couch was an ugly itchy-looking plaid hand-me-down, and the two chairs didn't match it or one another. Other than an ash tray, the table was clear, but there were books and magazines piled and strewn about the room in between the furniture. There was a TV in one corner, about twenty-five inches, and a heavily cluttered desk with a computer or word processor of some sort centered in front of the chair. Tommy motioned for me to take a seat on the couch. I nodded, followed his lead, and felt sure of a rash once I settled in.

"Okay, Jeff, I suppose you want to know what this is all about," he said, one eyebrow cocked.

"Honestly, yes," I said. "I've really only come this far out of curiosity."

"Well, don't worry, we're not going to hack you up and bury you out back," Tommy said.

I laughed without mirth, more sure of myself when it was just an unspoken idea that I'd had.

“No, I'm sure Carol has told you that I'm a writer.”

I didn't mean to be a wiseass, and I didn't laugh at him, but I did have to add: “Catalog copy?”

“Well, one has to pay the mortgage, so, yes, that's part of my gig. And, of course, I have a novel in the desk drawer, but that's neither here nor there. My interest in you has to do with the encyclopedia.”

“Encyclopedia,” I repeated, taking my beer from Carol and thanking her. She sat down next to me and put her hand over my thigh. I peered down at her hand, just loosely lying there, and then peered to Tommy, who didn't seem to notice or care.

“Have you told him?” she asked.

“Just getting there,” he said. “You see, Jeff, I've been hired to update and write the entries about board games.”

“I see.”

“No, you don't. But here it is, nice and simple. Most of these games work with two players, but are much better with three, often four. Mine and Carol's work don't allow us much time for friends, I'm afraid, so after she started telling me about you I thought, what the hey. Maybe Jeff will play with us.”

“In other words,” Carol said, squeezing my thigh, “will you be our friend, Jeff?”

The hand on my thigh was a masterstroke. It kept me confused. The request seemed odd, but I still couldn't help thinking there was more to it. If they pulled out the plastic Twister mat,

I'd know. Instead, Tommy was setting up a Monopoly board, I was being handed a little silver terrier, and I didn't have a clue as to where this was leading.

Four-and-a-half hours later, after lots of conversation about various board games and the encyclopedia in general, Carol went bust when she landed upon my Park Place, and I still wasn't sure what had happened here beyond the fact that I'd won the game and none of us really cared.

"So you see why we wanted you to spend the night?" Tommy said.

I looked up, even more confused.

"It's nearly two am."

"Oh," I said.

Carol kissed me, just on the cheek, but her breath was hot and smelled of beer.

"I'll get you a blanket," she said. "And I'll give you a ride to the mall in the morning."

I lay in the dark for at least an hour before boredom finally put me down for the night. If they were going to jump me, violently or otherwise, it probably would have happened already. Instead, next thing I knew, someone was shaking my shoulder and I looked up to see Carol in her typical morning gear.

"I let you sleep," she said, "since you didn't have a change of clothes or anything. Comb your hair on the ride."

"Arangh," I muttered, feeling years older as I rose from the couch, my shoulders and back tight, my cheek feeling raw from the damn cushion, if that's what you'd call it. When I stretched a book fell over my lap. It was the A volume of Tommy's encyclopedia with a Post-It note stuck on its cover. The Post-It simply said, "Thanks for your help." I flipped the pages expecting an envelope or even some loose bills, but there was nothing.

"Where's Tommy?" I asked.

“Oh, he’s got his little job he’s off to. Helps pay the electric.”

I nodded and rose. Carol was putting on her earrings. For a moment I thought of taking her in my arms, but then I decided that wasn’t her game. If it had been, Tommy was already gone and she was free to make her move. I fixed myself up best I could in their bathroom, matting my hair down with cool water and stealing a half-inch of toothpaste to rub over my teeth with a finger. Within ten minutes we were on the road.

“Uh, thanks for putting me up,” I said after she parked.

“The least we could do, the least. You helped a lot. You know, Tommy said, when we went to bed last night, that we ought to have you back for Parcheesi, Password, maybe even Risk.”

“No Twister?” I asked before I could catch myself.

She tilted her head back and laughed then leaned forward and tapped my nose with the tips of two fingers. “Silly,” she said. “Nothing like that.”

I’m still not sure if I was relieved or disappointed by that response.

“I’m just going to grab my coffee at Sevs this morning,” she said, “so, thanks again.”

She must have grabbed it at Sevs the following mornings as well because Carol was gone. Until the following Tuesday evening when she and Tommy arrived unannounced for dinner and asked if I was ready for Password. Carol hadn’t been kidding about what Tommy had said. Yes, there was Parcheesi, Risk, and many other games that we played. I recall Pictionary’s stick figures verging on the obscene until Tommy put a stop to it, and there was a round of Scrabble that turned awkward after I used the word “prick.” We played children’s games like Mousetrap, Operation, and Sorry; card games like Rook, Skip-Bo, and Uno; and tested ourselves with various editions of Trivial Pursuit, Tommy’s encyclopedic knowledge winning him every

round of that one. Weeks later we were laughing and shouting as we each yelled “Yahtzee!” in turn, but by the end of that night I’d noticed Tommy and Carol growing distant.

“That was great,” I said. “What’s planned for next week? I’d love to play a game of Clue, haven’t played that one since I was kid.”

“C for Clue,” Carol said, her voice flat.

“Carol and I have already done that one,” Tommy said. “I’m afraid this is it.”

“What do you mean, this is it?” I asked. “We’re having fun, aren’t we?”

“Oh, I hope you did, Jeff,” Carol said. “But this is Tommy’s work ... and we were already up to the M’s when we found you.”

“Seriously?” I asked. “That’s all this has been about?”

“I’ll keep you in mind for the next edition,” Tommy said. He rose and extended his hand. I shook it. “You really are a good player,” he said and then left the room.

“Do you want to stay ... or should I call you a cab?” Carol asked.

I took the cab. I was hurt and felt used—they had never paid me a cent beyond beers and use of their couch--but time passed and I forgot.

Until the day I saw the familiar Celica park in the fire zone by the mall doors and watched Carol jump out and approach. I turned and filled an extra large cup with black coffee, but when I turned back around to serve her I only saw Carol’s back as she passed by. This hurt even more than the time brunette had spurned me, and this was only over board games! Of course, it was more than that: I thought of Carol and Tommy as my friends. I took off my apron and walked around the front of my counter to see where Carol had gone.

She was about a hundred feet away at a kiosk that sold smoothies.

That night I picked up Volume A of Tommy's encyclopedia and thought about them. In the end I was thrilled that Carol and Tommy's plot hadn't been something sinister. I was alive and I even still had both my kidneys, the worst part of the entire experience was that I had liked them. A lot. I wondered if they really wrote any copy for the encyclopedia—I couldn't find their names in the acknowledgments, though I couldn't find any board game entries in the "A" edition either. Maybe it was all a ruse to make new friends. Friends, until they abandoned you. I never spoke with Carol again, and after a few months I didn't even see her come in for smoothies anymore. I later found out from the kid at the smoothie stand that they had him over for movies on the VCR every Tuesday night. "Something about an encyclopedia," he said. "I was hoping they wanted to fuck around, but nah."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I have a few stories that are totally baked from my imagination that I try to ground in reality, but Playing Games isn't one of those. So, yeah, write what you know, dummy: I worked the shitty mall job for a brief time after high school and there was a Carolish incident, but I wimped out before any of the good parts. It became a story you tell your friends and you all wonder what would have happened (I still believe my cowardice saved my kidneys). Years later as I tried to work this out on paper, the one thought that kept occurring to me was, man, they're playing some games with this guy. So, as I tried to figure out a good reason for Carol and Tommy to have our protagonist over, I made a list, crossed out the more malicious ideas in favor of the mundane, and wound up with the most literal of answers—they'd play games. The couple remains mysterious to Jeff because they remain mysterious to me. Jeff is rewarded with disillusionment spawned from my own curiosity, though he's adventurous in ways I never dared. I tend to read pretty wide, so I thought I'd have a look back through my Goodreads to see what I had finished up around the time I working on this story. As expected, it's all over the place those few weeks: Stephen King, Edith Wharton, John Steinbeck, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Varley (!), but it was also my first time reading a couple of Raymond Carver collections, so that may qualify as a pretty common answer as to what finally sparked this particular story, at least so far as the tone that grew out of the setting.*

Not sure if you guys want to print this bit or not, but many thanks to FOTD Senior Editor Charles Pinch, who provided some very valuable 'Atta boys' on the way to pointing out the flaws of my original ending. I read the story again for the first time in months and decided he was absolutely right. I gave thought to fixing what I had, but in the end I did a total overhaul before crossing my fingers and sending the story back. Thank you for pointing me towards telling a better story.

AUTHOR BIO: Cliff Aliperti is a Long Island-based writer, who has blogged about classic film for several years at his site

ImmortalEphemera.com. His fiction has appeared in CP Quarterly, Sheepshead Review, and on the From Whispers to Roars website.