

The Booze Cruise

By Victoria Alvarez

Out of breath and only slightly pissed, I stumbled out of the car and slammed the door. As I gained balance on five-inch heels and lowered my too-tight Forever 21 dress, the valet's shrill voice continued to echo in the dark empty parking lot. *Dear God, aren't you supposed to be pleasant?* I thought to myself as I attempted to flatten my frizzing hair. Florida weather is merciless. I grabbed my lipgloss and blindly applied as the others grabbed their belongings.

"I'm really trying not to be a dick, but you guys need to hurry up if you want to catch the ship. You haven't even ordered tickets yet and the doors are closing in five minutes," the valet said with a slightly less catholic-elementary-school-teacher tone. I think she noticed my glares.

"Yo, Sam, she's right. Pick up the pace. You can reapply once we get inside and you'll actually have a mirror, you dumbass," Em said with a snort as Cam and Aaron followed behind her.

It was Em's 22nd birthday—not all that important of a birthday, but just enough for everyone to have a mini existential crisis. In just a few short months, I would be in New York and she would be in LA, both pursuing impossible dreams. Both fully aware that we are going to be treated like someone's coffee bitch, and what's worse, *be grateful for it*. These lingering months before graduation was really the only time to be socially acceptable alcoholics, so even the birthdays that weren't "so special" were a perfect excuse to go all out. I had come to the realization that I have to consciously savor the moments of my youth. I had to try to put my personal shit aside and be present with the people I care about—well, that's what my college counselor said at least.

"That'll be thirteen dollars," the cashier's voice was as bland as most of the boys' in my year's future prospects. I stared at her fake orange face, light blue eye shadow, all the way down to her bright pink lips and still remained with this one unsettling thought: thirteen dollars was a little cheap for a high-end booze cruise.

"Wait, Em, are you sure this is *just* a booze cruise?" I asked.

"Yeah, bro, chill. You've been tense since the moment you got in the car. I know it's hard, but try not to think about it tonight, okay?"

Great, wasn't even thinking about it until you brought it up.

"Yeah, you're right. Let's have fun, ya birthday bitch." I forced a smile.

The four of us ran up the ramp (doing this in heels should have been considered an extreme sport) and were the last ones greeted at the door. Aaron reached for my hand. I pretended I didn't notice and fixed my hair.

"I can't believe we even made it! Let's go explore," Em said with a bright smile. I felt Aaron's eyes on me as we walked to the main floor.

Suddenly, the smells of cigarettes, sex, despair, drugs, divorce (and only a hint of Vegas) hit me all at once. I saw tables of green with men wearing uniformed suits, preparing for the night. I looked at the multiple floors above us and could only make out rows and rows of cleverly themed slot machines. I breathed slowly. I tried to settle my pulse. *This is really not what I fucking need right now.*

The carpet was dull, with little swirls and lines that made pointless patterns. The only elements that seemed to be "high-end" were the gaudy chandeliers that hung above us. I wouldn't be surprised if someone had died here. The ship started to move. Cam turned and mouthed the word "fuck" as he walked with Em to the metal staircase.

Aaron held me back and accomplished to put his arm around me. He kissed my cheek. I took a shaky breath and wove my fingers through his relaxed hand that draped over my shoulder. We would have looked cute if I wasn't trying to hide the panic attack.

"Babe. Don't get pissed but...are you okay? This kinda seems like it'd be pretty triggering for you." I let go of his hand and walked faster. I could hear his mini temper tantrum behind me. I didn't care. I didn't feel like being touched.

Em didn't say a word as we walked up the stairs to the roof bar. I walked onto the wooden deck, took one look at everyone present, and felt the sudden urge to throw myself overboard on sheer principle. Everyone was wearing tourist shirts, Hawaiian button-downs, and shameless judgment as they stared back at us.

I looked like a straight up hooker. But so did Em, so at least I wasn't alone.

She promised a four tier club on the water, not this floating Walmart of booze cruises where gamblers go to die. So, naturally, I grabbed my tightest, laciest dress in my closet. Em wore a “top” that was really just lingerie. Cam and Aaron were wearing bowties for shit’s sake.

An old man at the bar beckoned for me. I looked at Em, shrugged, and walked toward him.

Aaron got all “territorial” on me and yelled, “Sam, where the hell do you think you’re going?”

I turned toward him and walked backward as I yelled my need for alcohol. The rest of the group followed shortly after that.

The old man—excuse me, I’m being rude, he had a name and it’s Hal—had a long Hulk Hogan mustache. Hal wore a big bandana that covered half of his disappearing mullet. His skin was tan and worn. His leather pants squeaked and his Cocoa Beach tourist shirt had a hole in it. Hal’s teeth were either cracked or missing. He whistled as he talked. He and his wife had been going on this booze cruise for five years. They loved this shit. Could you believe that?

“Get these two girls the rum pineapple explosion bucket,” Hal said with a slight whistle between each syllable. *Bucket? Bucket of rum? Hal, I love you man.* The bartender stared at Hal and then at me.

“Can I see your ID?” the bartender asked. I confidently showed my ID. All she did was frown.

“Wait, 1997? Aren’t you not 21 yet?” she asked. Hal suddenly disappeared. *Jesus Christ do I have to pull out a fucking calculator?* Aaron appeared in Hal’s place and put his arm around me. I shrugged it off.

I smiled and let out a light laugh and said, “I’m 21, going to be 22 very soon, actually. My friend over here is 22 today.”

Em pulled out her ID and reordered the bucket. The bartender ignored her and stared at both of us. I looked at her name tag, *Suzie with a Z. Got it.*

“Hey, Suzie. No disrespect, but people born in 2000 are 19 right now. So if you...” I trailed off as she turned around and prepared both of our buckets. She wasn’t shy and had a heavy hand. Suzie with a Z plopped the buckets in front of us—filled to the top.

“You’re totally right. Sorry about that, sweetie. It’s weird serving people born after the 1980s,” she said before she let out a long sigh.

Em grabbed her bucket and began to down it. I know her too well. She's also going through some shit and this probably made it way worse.

"Hey, Em. I know it's not what we thought, but I think after a few of these it'd feel like we were at a high-end club," I said before I slurped my bucket of rum through a hot pink straw.

"Yeah. I just feel bad. I mean everything that happened with you and your parents..."

"Can you not? I'm trying to have fun. Not think about the fuckery that is my family, okay?" I snapped.

"I'm...I'm sorry, Sam. I wanted to get your mind off of it and then I take you here," Em said with a low voice. *Fuck I'm a dick.* I moved us away from the bar and to the side of the boat.

"Hey, I didn't mean to guilt trip. You're going through a lot too with, well..."

"My ex fucking my best friend, yes, it happens," she said too casually as she nodded in agreement. My first smile of the night stretched across my face before she burst into laughter. I joined in and, briefly, forgot about it all.

Aaron and Cam found us before they made their way to the slots. Aaron, Em, and even Cam continued to ask if I was okay as they lost ten dollars each on the KISS themed slot machine. I replied with empty "I'm fines" and the multiple "no, I'm not bothered by you playing in front of me" each time their hands pulled the fucking lever.

I finished another bucket as I stared at the people alone at the slots. I gazed at their endless rum and cokes in hand. I watched as their cigarette ash fell to the floor.

I excused myself when Cam won five dollars back from the twenty that he lost playing the *Cheers* slot machine. I had to see Suzie with a Z.

"Hey, mama, can I have another?" I asked her with a rum induced grin.

She smiled and asked, "Why aren't you playing? You get free drinks if you stay at the slots for more than thirty minutes."

"Nah, I'm good."

"Oh, you don't gamble?"

"Bad luck, don't want to risk it, ya know? Anyway, just the refill, please."

I left Suzie with a Z after a random old man who looked like a retired member of Twisted Sister slapped her ass and begged for another shot of Jack. I got up to say something but Suzie's reciprocation made me want to finish my bucket elsewhere.

I wanted to watch the people at the tables. The retired frat men, with their beer bellies still intact, screaming as one another wins a couple more bucks. I wanted to go to the third floor "club" (which was really just a small panel of wood on the floor) and listen to the two obscenely high reggae performers do UB40 covers. The freshly married middle-aged couple gripping each others' butts as they slowed danced to off key "The Way You Do The Things You Do." I wanted to enjoy the people watching and come up with tragic backstories for each of them as Aaron wrapped his arms around me and joined in ridiculous storytelling. The old woman who made bank on her favorite machine propped her Crocs on the chair next to her.

But I felt like screaming into the emptiness of the ocean. Jumping into the cold waters and swimming to the closest body of land. To stop saying I was okay when I wasn't. Actually feeling safe to be vulnerable and allowing Aaron to love me. I wanted to call my father. Tell him I loved him as much as I told him I hated him. But I was tired of being like him, sad and alone. I refused to let these moments go, like he did.

As I walked down the metal stairs, I kept thinking about Suzie with a Z. Her voice: *Oh, you don't gamble?* Honestly, I didn't know why my parents didn't get divorced sooner. After the years of debt, the alarming withdraws from my college savings, the foreclosure—but no, it took a declaration of bankruptcy to do it. Thank the Lord I got emancipated when I did.

Oh, you don't gamble?

I reached the last step and found my beautiful losers pouting from their losses. I laughed a real laugh and smiled a real smile as they roasted the people around us.

Oh, you don't gamble?

I hugged Aaron and laid my head on his chest. I felt his rapid heartbeat and knew I couldn't harm it.

Oh, you don't gamble?

I don't gamble. Daddy dearest has that covered.