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Tigers in Red Weather

Written by Liza Klaussmann

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Liza Klaussmann

TIGERS IN RED WEATHER

PICADOR



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To my grandmother, for the bravery.

And to the rest of my family, for everything else.

NICK

1945: September

"I'm not sure if it's a blessing or a curse," Helena said.

"At least it's something different," Nick said. "No more goddamn ration books. No more taking the bus everywhere. Hughes said he's bought a Buick. Hallelujah."

"Lord knows where he got it," Helena said. "Probably from some cheat fixer."

"Who cares," said Nick, stretching her arms lazily toward the New England night sky.

They were sitting in the backyard of their house on Elm Street wearing their slips and drinking gin neat out of old jelly jars. It was the hottest Indian summer anyone in Cambridge could remember.

Nick eyed the record player sitting precariously in the window. The needle was skipping.

"It's too hot to do anything but drink," she said, laying her head back against the rusting garden chair. Louis Armstrong was stuck repeating that he had a right to sing the blues. "The first thing I'm going to do when I get to Florida is get Hughes to buy me a whole bushel of good needles."

"That man," Helena said, sighing.

"I know," Nick said. "He really is too beautiful. And a Buick and fine record needles. What more could a girl ask for?"

Helena giggled into her glass. She sat up. "I think I'm drunk."

Nick slammed her glass down on the arm of the chair, causing the metal to tremble. "We should dance."

The oak tree in the backyard cut pieces from the moon and the sky was already a deep midnight color despite the warmth of the air. The fragrance of summer lingered, as if no one had told the grass that the middle of September had rung in. Nick could hear the nocturnal musings of the woman in the triple-decker next door. Tasting the flavor of the week.

She looked at Helena as she waltzed her across the grass. Helena could have turned into that kind of woman, Nick thought, with her body like a polished cello and wartime beaux. But her cousin had managed to retain a freshness, all sandy curls and smooth skin. She hadn't gone ashen like the women who had gone to bed with one too many strangers blown up by mines or riddled by Schmeissers. Nick had seen those women wilting on the ration lines, or creeping out of the post office, threatening to fade away into nothingness.

But Helena was getting married again.

"You're getting married again," Nick exclaimed, a bit drunkenly, as if the thought had just crossed her mind.

"I know. Can you believe it?" Helena sighed, her hand warm against Nick's back. "Mrs. Avery Lewis. Do you think it sounds as good as Mrs. Charles Fenner?"

"It's lovely," Nick lied, spinning Helena out and away.

To her ear, the name Avery Lewis sounded exactly like what he was: some Hollywood wannabe selling insurance and pretending he had dated Lana Turner, or whoever it was he was always going on about. "Fen would probably have liked him, you know."

"Oh, no. Fen would have hated him. Fen was a boy. A sweet boy."

"Dear Fen."

"Dear Fen." Helena stopped dancing and walked back to the gin glass waiting for her on the chair. "But now I have Avery." She sipped from it. "And I get to move to Hollywood, and maybe have a baby. At least this way I won't turn into an old maid, mad as a hatter and warts on my nose. A third wheel at the fireside beside you and Hughes. Heaven forbid."

"No third wheel, no warts, and one Avery Lewis, to boot."

"Yes, now we'll both really have someone of our own. That's important," Helena said thoughtfully. "I just wonder . . ." She trailed off.

"Wonder what?"

"Well, if . . . if it'll be the same with Avery. You know, the way it was with Fen."

"You mean in bed?" Nick turned quickly to face her cousin. "Well, I'll be goddamned. Has the virginal Helena actually mentioned the act?"

"You're mean," Helena said.

"I know," Nick said.

"I am drunk," Helena said. "But I do wonder. Fen is the only boy I really loved, before Avery, I mean. But Avery is a man."

"Well, if you love him I'm sure it will be just grand."

"Of course, you're right." Helena finished off her gin. "Oh, Nick. I can't believe it's all changing. We've been so happy here, despite everything."

"Don't get weepy. We'll see each other, every summer. Unless your new husband is allergic to the East Coast."

"We'll go to the Island. Just like our mothers. Houses right next door."

Nick smiled, thinking about Tiger House, its airy rooms,

the expanse of green lawn that disappeared into the blue of the harbor. And the small, sweet cottage next door, which her father had built for Helena's mother as a gift.

"Houses, husbands, and midnight gin parties," Nick said. "Nothing's going to change. Not in any way that really matters. It will be like always."

Nick's train from Boston was delayed and she had to fight her way through the crowds at Penn Station, all rushing off to be somewhere in a muddle of luggage and hats and kisses and lost tickets. Helena must be halfway across the county by now, she thought. Nick had closed up the apartment herself and given the final instructions to the landlady as to where everything was to be sent; boxes of novels and poetry to Florida, suitcases full of corsets to Hollywood.

The train, when she finally got on it, smelled like bleach and excitement. The Havana Special, which ran all the way from New York to Miami, would be the first overnight journey she had ever taken alone. She kept pressing her nose to the inside of her wrist, inhaling her lily-of-the-valley perfume like a smelling salt. In the dizziness of it all, she almost forgot to tip the porter.

Inside her roomette, Nick set her leather case on the rack and clicked it open, checking the contents again to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. One nightgown for the train (white), and one for Hughes (green, with matching dressing gown). Two ivory silk slips, three matching pairs of ivory silk underpants and brassieres (she could wash them every other day until the rest of her things arrived in St. Augustine), her ditty kit (travel vial of perfume; one lipstick, red; the precious Floris hand cream Hughes had brought her from London; one toothbrush and paste; one

washcloth; and one cake of Ivory soap), two cotton dresses, two cotton blouses, one pair of gabardine trousers (her Katharine Hepburn trousers), two cotton skirts, and one good summer-weight wool suit (cream). She also counted out three pairs of cotton gloves (two white, one cream), and her mother's pink-and-green silk scarf.

Her mother had loved that scarf; she always wore it when she was traveling to Europe. Now it belonged to Nick. And although she wasn't going as far as Paris just yet, going to meet Hughes after so long seemed more like going to China.

"Beyond here be dragons," she said to the suitcase.

Nick heard the whistle blow and quickly snapped the lid shut and sat down. Now that the war was over, the scene outside the window, women waving handkerchiefs and red-eyed children, was less affecting. No one was going off to die, they were just going to an old aunt's house, or some boring work appointment. For her, though, it felt exciting; the world was new. She was going to see Hughes. Hughes. She whispered his name like a talisman. Now that she was only a day away from him, she thought she might go crazy with the waiting. Funny, how that was. Six months, but the last few hours were unbearable.

The last time they had seen each other was spring, when his escort ship had docked in New York for repairs and he had gotten liberty. They had stayed on board the *U.S.S. Jacob Jones*, in one of the rooms for married officers. There were fleas, and just when Hughes had his hand down her skirt, her ankles began to burn. She had tried to concentrate on the tip of his fingers searching her out. His lips on the pulse in her neck. But couldn't help crying out.

"Hughes, there's something in the bed."

"I know, Jesus."

They had both rushed to the shower to find their legs covered in red bites and the water in the drain a pool of pepper. Hughes cursed the ship, cursed the war. Nick wondered if he'd notice her naked body. Instead, he turned his back and began soaping himself.

But he had taken her to the 21 Club. And it had been one of those moments when it seemed that the whole world was conspiring for their happiness. Hughes, who would never take money from his parents and wouldn't let Nick spend her own, didn't earn enough on his lieutenant junior's salary for a meal there. But he knew how much she loved the stories of the sharkskin-suited gangsters and their glamorous molls who had kicked up their heels there during Prohibition.

"We can only have two martinis and a bowl of olives and celery," he said.

"We don't have to go there at all, if we can't afford it," Nick said, looking at her husband's face. It was sad; sad and something else she couldn't put her finger on.

"No," he said. "We can afford just this. But then we have to leave."

They arrived in the dark-paneled Bar Room, with its crush of toys and sporting artifacts hanging from the ceiling, and Nick instantly felt the impact of her own youth and beauty. She could feel the eyes of the men and women at small tables pass over her red shantung dress and glance off her short, thick black hair. One of the things she loved about Hughes was that he had never wanted her to resemble the celluloid blonds tacked up in every boy's room across the country. And she didn't. She was a little too severe-looking, her lines a little too crisp, to be considered pretty. Sometimes it felt like a never-ending battle to prove to the world that, in her difference, she was special,

discrete. But there, at the urbane 21 Club, she felt her own rightness. It was a place full of streamlined women, with intelligent eyes, like bullet trains. And there was Hughes, so honey blond, with his elegant hands and long legs and Service Dress Blues.

The waiter seated them at table 29. There was a couple to their right. The woman was smoking and pointing out lines from a slender book.

"In that line, I really see the whole film," the woman said.

"Yes," the man said, with just a touch of uncertainty.

"And in some ways, it is so Bogart."

"It does seem like he could have been the only logical choice."

Nick looked at Hughes. She wanted to communicate to him how much she loved him for taking her here, for spending too much money just to have a cocktail, for letting her be herself. She tried to radiate all these things in her smile. She didn't want to talk just yet.

"Do you know what?" the woman said, her pitch rising suddenly. "We're at their table. Do you realize we're at their table and we're talking about them?"

"Are we really?" The man took another sip from his Scotch.

"Oh, that is so 21," the woman said, laughing.

Nick leaned in. "Whose table, do you think?" she whispered to Hughes behind her gloved hand.

"I'm sorry?" Hughes said distractedly.

"They said they're at someone's table. Whose table?"

Nick realized that the woman was now eyeing them. She had heard her, seen her try to hide her curiosity behind her hand. Nick flushed and looked down at the red-and-white-checked tablecloth.

"Why, it's Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall's table,

dear," the woman said. She said it kindly. "They went on their first date at this table. It's one of the things they brag about here."

"Oh, really?" Nick tried to hit a note somewhere between polite and nonchalant. She smoothed her styled hair with her palms, feeling the softness of the suede loosening the hairspray.

"Oh, Dick, let's give them the table." The woman was laughing again. "Are you two lovers?"

"Yes," said Nick, feeling bold, sophisticated. "But we're also married."

"That's a rarity," the man chuckled.

"Yes, indeed, it is," the woman said. "And that deserves Bogart and Bacall's table."

"Oh, please don't let us disturb you," Nick said.

"Nonsense," the man said, picking up his Scotch and the woman's champagne cocktail.

"Oh, really, you've been bedeviled by my wife," Hughes said. "Nick . . ."

"Oh, we'd love it," the woman said. "And she is especially bedeviling."

Nick looked at Hughes, who smiled at her.

"Yes, she is," he said. "Come on then, darling. We're all on the move for you."

The martini that arrived reminded Nick of the sea and their house on the island: clean, briny and utterly familiar.

"Hughes. This may be the best supper I've ever had. From now on, I only want martinis, olives, and celery."

Hughes put his hand to her face. "I'm sorry about all of this."

"How can you say that? Look where we are."

"We should get the bill," he said, motioning to the waiter.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

"It's fine. May we have the bill, please?" Hughes was looking at the door. Not at Nick, not at her red dress, or her shiny black hair that she'd had to keep in a net on the train all the way from Cambridge to Penn Station.

The waiter glided away.

Nick fiddled with her handbag because she didn't want to look at Hughes. The couple who had switched seats with them had left, although the woman had squeezed her shoulder and winked at Nick when she'd risen. She tried to stop herself wondering what Hughes might be thinking about. There was so much that she didn't know about him, not really, and although she always wanted to confront, to slice him open in one deft movement and peer inside, something animal in her told her it was the wrong way to proceed with him.

"Sir, madam." Nick looked up. A man with the air of a walrus had appeared at their table. "I'm the manager. Is anything wrong?"

"No," Hughes said, glancing around, presumably for the waiter. "I'd only asked for the bill . . ."

"I see," the Walrus said. "Well, it's entirely possible that you weren't aware, sir, but dinner," and here he paused, letting his handle-bar mustache take full effect, "dinner is on the house for the navy tonight."

"I'm sorry?" Hughes said.

"Son," the Walrus smiled. "What can I bring you?"

Nick laughed. "A steak, oh please a steak," she said, and everything else vanished.

"A steak for the lady," the Walrus said, still looking at Hughes.

Hughes grinned, and suddenly Nick saw the boy she'd married revealed in the untouchable man who'd come back to her. A boy in a stiff cardboard collar and a very pressed

blue uniform. And their predicament, which was just like everyone else's.

"A steak, if you can find one in this city. Or this country for that matter," Hughes said. "I wasn't sure they still existed."

"They still exist at the 21 Club, sir, such as they are." The Walrus snapped his fingers at the waiter. "Two more martinis for the navy man."

Later, it was the fleas, again. And Hughes was tired, he said, from the steak. Nick folded her red dress and put on the black nightgown, which he wouldn't see in the dark. She lay on the bed listening to the noise of the fixers, working on the ship in the dock. The empty hammering of the steel.

Just outside of Newark, Nick decided to go to the lounge. She had packed three hard-boiled eggs and a ham sandwich for dinner so she wouldn't have to spend the three dollars in the dining car. But she couldn't resist the lure of the bar. It had been advertised as serving all the "new drinks," and she had put aside fifty cents for extras.

The Havana Special. No husband, no mother, no cousin: she could be anyone. She smoothed her gray skirt and applied her lipstick. She inspected herself in the mirror; one dark lock fell over her left eye. She was about to step into the corridor when she remembered her gloves. As she slipped them on, she smelled her wrist once more before closing the door sharply behind her.

Entering the lounge car, with its curved wooden bar and low-slung burgundy seats, Nick felt a trickle of sweat begin to pool between her breasts. She ran her gloved hand over her upper lip and instantly regretted the gesture. A waiter approached and showed her to an empty table. She ordered

a martini with extra olives, wondering if they would charge her more for them. She pushed back the felt curtain and stared out into the night. Her own reflection stared back. Behind her head she could see a man in a navy blazer looking at her. She tried to make out if he was handsome, but a passing train obliterated his image.

She leaned away from the window and crossed her legs, feeling the shift of her nylons between her thighs. The waiter brought her drink and when Nick offered up her cigarette to be lit he fumbled to locate his lighter. The man across the way stepped in, flicking a silver Zippo. All the young men back from the war carried Zippos, as if they were issued along with the uniform.

"Thank you," Nick said, keeping her eyes on her cigarette.

"You're welcome."

The waiter disappeared behind a partition of frosted glass.

"May I join you?" the man asked. There was nothing hesitant in his request.

Nick motioned to the seat, without looking up. "I'm not staying long," she said.

"Where are you headed?"

"St. Augustine."

He had dark hair, slicked back with pomade. He was handsome, she supposed, in a Palm Springs sort of way. Perhaps a little too much cologne.

"I'm going to Miami," he said. "I'm going to see my parents in Miami."

"How nice for you," Nick said.

"Yes, it is." He smiled at her. "What about you? Why St. Augustine?"

"I have a brother there," Nick said. "He's decommissioning his ship. I'm going to see him."

"How nice for him," the man said.

"Yes, it is." This time, Nick smiled back.

"I'm Dennis," the man said, extending his hand.

"Helena," said Nick.

"Like the mountain."

"Like the mountain. How original."

"I'm an original guy. You just don't know me very well, yet."

"If I knew you better, I would feel differently?"

"Who can say?" Dennis finished his drink. "I'm having another drink. Would you like another drink, Helena?"

"I don't think so," Nick said.

"I see. Drinking alone. How sad for me."

"Who knows, if you hang around long enough, maybe you'll find a companion." The martini was making her feel brave.

"I don't want another companion," Dennis said. He sighed. "Trains make me lonely."

Nick was aware of the night rushing by, the whine of steel hitting steel.

"Yes," she said. "They are lonely." She pulled out a cigarette. "I suppose I will have that drink."

Dennis signaled to the waiter. This time Nick's martini had only one olive. For some reason, it made her ashamed.

"What's your brother like?"

"He's lovely," she said. "And very blond."

"So you don't look alike."

"No, we don't."

"Well, he's one lucky guy to have a sister like you."

"Do you think so? I don't know how lucky he should feel, really."

"I'd like a sister like you." He grinned at her.

Nick didn't like the way he said it, or the way he grinned, as if there was a complicity between them. Now that he was too close to her, she could see that he had brown hairs protruding from his nostrils.

"I have to go now," she said, trying to keep her balance as she rose to her feet.

"Oh, come on."

"Don't bother getting up."

"Don't get all huffy. I was only kidding."

Nick walked out of the lounge. He could pay for both her damn drinks.

"Any time you want some brotherly love," she heard him call after her, laughing, before the compartment door cut him off.

Back in her roomette, she practically ripped her blouse trying to get it off. Her head was pounding. She pulled off her skirt, and standing in only her brassiere and underpants, she bent over the small sink and splashed water over her breasts and around her neck. She switched off the overhead light and pushed the window down to let in some fresh air. The porter had turned down her bed while she had been in the lounge. She sat on it and lit a cigarette. When she was finished with that one, she lit another and pressed her head against the pane. The darkness went by. After a while, she lay down, the smell of the smoke lingering around her.

It was five o'clock in the morning when they pulled into Richmond. The sound of people moving in and out of the train had woken her up. She hadn't closed the curtains and the window was still open.

"Goddamn it," Nick said. She tried to inch herself up the bed, aware that she was still wearing only her brassiere and underpants, for all the boarding passengers to see. The far

curtain was just out of reach, so she tugged at the one nearest and got behind it. Standing there, covered only in green felt, she peered out. Nick thought she could detect the earthy traces of the James River. The air was more gentle here in the South. Not like at Tiger House, where the sea took it by force. There was also the smell of pine, cleaning away the last vestiges of her martini. She pulled the other curtain shut, tied the sash of her robe around her waist, opened the door, and called to the porter for coffee.

She would be in St. Augustine by eleven tonight. And with Hughes. Had she dreamt of him? She tried to remember. The porter came with the steaming coffee. She drank it, watching the sleepy passengers boarding for Florida. Helena would be arriving in Hollywood soon. She wondered what Avery Lewis's house looked like. Poor Helena. Word had come early on in the fighting that Fen was dead—it had taken him all of two months to get himself married and killed. Who knows what their life would have been like if he had survived? They were both a couple of children and neither one had any money.

Helena's mother, her Aunt Frances, had not made a brilliant marriage either. Still, she had never seemed unhappy that she was forced to make do with less. Nick had never heard her complain about the fact that her older sister had been the one to inherit Tiger House, or marry a man who made oodles in bobbins and spools, while she had virtually nothing. It hadn't occurred to Nick that her aunt might have wanted things to be different. But thinking now of Helena's strange, mad dash to get married again, her need to have someone of her own, as she had put it, made Nick wonder if Aunt Frances had ever wished she'd been the one in the big house.

Perhaps it didn't really matter. After all, Nick couldn't

remember a summer that Aunt Francis and her mother weren't in each other's pockets. Even after Helena's father died, when the Depression came. And even when her own father died and her mother was so unwell. Nick stopped herself. She didn't want to think about that right now.

She pulled two of the eggs out of their brown-paper bag and cracked them on the window sill, revealing the shiny white skin. No, everything was new now, just waiting to be discovered. And she would. She and Hughes would do it together. She was hungry for it, she would stuff the world whole into her mouth and bite down.