

The Door in the Ceiling

The room was cast in neon red, like a photographer's dark room. Chika didn't know where they were, a private room in some club. The music was very loud, but she could still make out the vague droning of the man sitting next to her, which was not to say that she could make any sense of what he was saying. He was facing her, so she assumed he was talking to her, but the truth was, he wasn't even looking at her, not her eyes, not her face, not even her body, he was staring vacantly over her shoulder. His eyes were wide, his pupils dilated despite the darkness of the room, most likely the effect of whatever drug he was on. She couldn't remember what drugs she had taken, how she had got there, or who she had come with. She was confused, like she had just woken up, and in a way she had, she had just come down off of something, partially at any rate, just enough to be genuinely aware, that hairsbreadth difference between being buzzed and drunk. There she sat, in a red room, watching a stranger talk through her, to the empty space behind her head.

When she stood and moved the man didn't even notice. His mouth kept moving, though his voice was slowly lost in the music. He was talking for the benefit of no one but the speaker. There were others in the room, but they didn't notice her. She didn't recognize any of them. Instinct told her where the door was, so she walked where it led. She looked around the room as she walked, dreamily, still very relaxed from residual high. The ceiling and one wall were mirrors, the other walls were white, pink-red in the light. Black couches lined the white walls, except for one patch of wall where the door was. There were no couches, or seats of any kind by the mirror wall. Short, black tables were set out randomly in the room, each holding a multitude of half-finished drinks; she had no idea how anyone could tell whose was whose. As she approached the door it slowly melted into the red-white of the wall and disappeared. Puzzled she reached her hand and ran her fingers across the coarse surface; it made her fingers tingle. She lingered for a moment running her hands over the wall, confused, but not alarmed, by the lack of door. Slowly, she turned and started towards the mirror wall.

It was eerie, watching herself walk towards herself in the red light. She was wearing a form-fitting black dress, with some cutouts on each side of the waist, displaying the slope of her hips low enough to tease the likelihood that she wasn't wearing anything underneath. The same cutouts left her sides exposed up until just below her bust, leaving just enough bare skin to reveal her ribcage tattoo, a black and red rose. Aside from the cutouts the dress was rather chaste, long sleeves, high neck, skirt extending just above the knees. She didn't remember choosing that dress, it felt like someone else had dressed her.

Finally, after the remnants of the drugs blurred the short walk to the mirror wall into an unforgettable life experience, she reached the mirror's edge. Her makeup was on point. Somehow, regardless of whatever revelries she had engaged in, she hadn't smeared it at all. With a certain sense of pride, she took herself in; her black, wavy hair hanging just below her shoulders, her dark Asian eyes, her high cheekbones, and her slender form. She looked hot, and it was OK to accept that. She touched the mirror, and thought just for a moment that she could feel her own fingertips through her reflection. Locking eyes with herself, she walked to her right, running her fingers across the smooth, cool surface, searching for an opening, searching for a door.

She reached the corner where the white wall, tainted red, met the mirror. All she found there were a couple of snoring drunks passed out on a black couch. Unfazed, she turned around, focused on the opposite corner and walked towards it. Upon reaching the opposite corner she turned around and leaned up against the mirror wall, pressing her cheek to the surface so that her eye was inline with the

mirror's edge. She was searching for an irregularity in the surface. Having no other recourse, she came to the conclusion that there was no hidden door in the mirror, it was just a mirror.

Still unfazed, she walked to the center of the room, and slowly turned to each corner. There was a move she learned when she was a teenager taking ballroom, something from Cha Cha, though she didn't remember what it was called. She planted one leg, for her as the woman, the right leg, probably... the drink made her a bit uncertain, and turned herself slowly with the other, like the arms on a clock. The analogy of the clock seemed very appropriate to her. In her mind she could even hear the tick as she pulled a slow 360 in the middle of the room, studying every wall, every person. There were no exits, and everyone in the room was way more high than she was.

The lights flickered. In that brief space between darkness, light, and darkness, she swore that everyone was staring at her with eyes full of loathing. When the lights turned back on everyone was occupying themselves as they had been before: staring into space and fondling their clothes with Ecstasy-tinged sensitivity, talking to each other with Meth-Head energy, making out softly and gently, making out so hard and passionately it looked more painful than pleasurable, or just simply being passed out.

Nonetheless, she was unnerved by the image of everyone glaring at her, but she allowed reason to convince her it was just a trick of the brain, the residual effect of the drugs. Regardless, she wasn't sure what to do. There was no way that there was not an exit, but she was still too high to figure out where it was. All that needed to be done was to sit down and enjoy the last of the buzz, until she became completely coherent. She looked back at the spot on the couch she had vacated just moments before. The guy, Bug Eyes, whoever he was, was still talking into space. Even high, she still felt a little nervous around him. Searching for a place to sit, she found an empty space next to a young awkward looking woman staring dreamily up at the mirror ceiling. The woman had dark lipstick, which looked black in the red light, her hair was either very light blonde or dyed gray. She wore a checkered flannel shirt buttoned up to her neck, a black skirt, tights with a cartoonish witch on a broom-stick pattern, and Houndstooth Converse knockoffs. Chika made her way to the empty seat and sat down next to the young woman.

Chika leaned into the couch, trying to relax every muscle in her body. She laid her hand on the seat and almost unconsciously began to knead the velvety fabric. The woman next to her took hold of her hand and gently squeezed it.

Confused, Chika turned to the woman, "sorry was that bothering you?"

"No, I just felt like I wanted to hold your hand. Is that cool?"

The woman's eyes were probably blue. Chika shrugged in reply. She didn't mind. They both stared up at themselves, holding hands, lost in their respective stream of consciousness. For a while, it felt as though their only tether to reality was the warmth of their interlocked fingers. Chika's mind drifted through memories, future plans in daytime drama format, and the vague concern that she couldn't remember what she had taken, how she had gotten there, and, perhaps most importantly, where "there" was. Reason told her to be worried, while every sense in her body told her that everything was fine, and that all was well.

"Do you know where we are?" It was her voice, asking Houndstooth-shoe girl.

The awkward looking girl turned her lazy head, smiling, her eyes lost in peaceful stupor.

"I honestly don't know. But I really like it here."

Chika smiled in response and turned back to her reflection. No need to worry just yet. The couch was soft, the company was nice, a pleasant evening all in all. Was it the evening? She didn't have a watch, she didn't have a purse, didn't have a phone. Surely, she never went anywhere without her phone, but then again, she didn't know if she even had one. She tried to remember anything before "waking up" on the couch, but the effort made her head hurt, like trying to understand a complex problem, or a syllogism. How did she know what a syllogism was but couldn't remember what she did for a living? Perhaps it was time to worry after all.

Again, the lights flickered off. When they turned back on a man in a black suit was standing in front of Chika staring down at her. His eyes were intense. His gloved hands were clenched at his side. His black hair slicked back. His cheekbones high and formidable.

"Oh, he's Asian just like you!" said her new friend, who seemed to be amazed at the coincidence.

Chika replied, not taking her eyes off the strange man "yes, Japanese, just like me."

"You can tell he's Japanese? I can't tell the difference between any of you. Oh, shit, I'm sorry that sounded really bad."

Ordinarily Chika would've been at least a little offended, but the man and his off the charts creep-factor had her undivided, drug-tinged attention. Besides, neither of them would remember what they said in the morning.

"That's fine I can't always tell either."

"Where did you even come from?" Houndstooth asked the man. "I swear you weren't there a second ago."

The man did not reply, he did not look at her, he just stared down at Chika, intense and disapproving, as though he knew every shameful thing Chika had ever done, every shameful thought she had ever had.

"You need to move along psycho-boy," Chika said to the man.

No reply. No acknowledgment that he had been spoken to.

"You're weirding me out man," Houndstooth told him.

Chika decided it was time for a new seat. She stood and found Houndstooth rising with her, not letting go of her hand.

"I'm going with you."

Two is safer than one. She allowed it. Houndstooth locked arms and leaned her head against Chika's shoulder, leaning most of her weight against her new best friend. That was fine, she was remarkably light.

As Chika led Houndstooth away her shoulder brushed the man's chest. The touch felt like a magnet brushing metal. It required effort, a modicum at least, to pull away.

The pair walked away from the man, past a row of druggies sprawled out on the couches, searching for an open spot. Chika glanced up at the mirror over her shoulder and saw him still standing

in the same place, staring at them. Somehow it seemed the ceiling had gotten lower; she could see his inverted reflection, also staring, two creepers stacked on top of each other.

“Ugh, he makes my skin crawl.”

“Me too. I like your dress.”

“Thanks, I like your shoes.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot what shoes I was wearing, I like them too.”

At last they found a spot in the corner of the room next to the mirror wall, between two couples making out. The sound of their wet kisses was vaguely nauseating. She wasn't sure how she could hear it so well with the music playing. Chika watched the man in the mirror, he wasn't moving.

“Do you like girls? Houndstooth asked.

“I don't know I've never tried one.”

“Me neither, but I've been thinking about it since you sat down,” there was a tone of expectancy and hope in her voice. She was also probably lying, perhaps thinking that concealing her familiarity with women might make it more appealing to Chika. Although, it is often the case that when trying new things, one prefers to be led by the voice of experience.

Chika was a little incredulous that the woman wanted to “experiment” when they had a psycho as their captive audience. Her fight or flight response was struggling to overcome the effects of whatever chemicals she had ingested. The creep at the other end of the room, who was still staring, unblinking, was her primary focus, though she still managed to brush away one of Houndstooth's wandering hands.

“Not right now. That guy's still staring at us.”

“Who cares let him watch.”

Chika regarded herself as a solid 8.5, she was trying not to be vain, Houndstooth was a 5.8. She was cute in her own way, but Chika didn't feel like wasting a new experience on a rounding error 6.

“You're making me feel uncomfortable.”

Embarrassed, Houndstooth backed off slowly; first removing her free hand from Chika's thigh, then her head from Chika's shoulder, then unlocking arms, and then finally unclasping hands. They were just two strangers sitting on a couch. Houndstooth felt terribly awkward; Chika was just focused on the weirdo.

The man finally moved, in her direction. She stood and started walking away, feeling a little bad that Houndstooth would forever think it was because of her. But Houndstooth would find another 5.8 lipstick lez to play with, or maybe she actually was a lesbian and wanted a long-term partner. Regardless, Chika wished her well, and given there was apparently no way out of the room it was likely they would run into each other again.

Adrenaline was slowly swallowing up what remained of the high, and flight was still the best option. Somehow it seemed the man had gotten bigger. If it did come to fight, she had no idea what to do. Looking around the room she was convinced that she couldn't rely on help from anyone else. Everyone was acting weird, very unnatural, barely aware of their surroundings. No one seemed to care

that they were in a room with no exit. Yet Houndstooth had had normal reactions, to Chika's rejection, so she must be mostly normal, though she'd be useless in a fight. Lesbians are tough though, right? There was probably an offensive stereotype somewhere in that, but she needed to find allies.

Chika found an empty space on a couch in the opposite corner next to the mirror wall. She sat in the first empty space she could find to pull off her heels, they were slowing her down.

"What's a nice girl like you doing on a couch like this?"

A skinny guy with a sock cap who smelled like he bathed in weed was asking. Given its variation on a horrendous cliché, she decided it wasn't the worst pickup line she'd heard. She kicked her heels to the side and turned toward Sockcap. He wore a loose-fitting flannel shirt (another flannel shirt?) which was unbuttoned enough to reveal a wife-beater and a small-link chain. He wore chinos and a pretty decent pair of dress shoes; Chika didn't recognize the brand. His style was weirdly disjointed. The black sockcap, the diamond stud earrings, the loose flannel, the overpowering smell of weed, all gave off a very different impression than the well-fitted pants and the obviously name brand department store shoes.

"Just hanging out," was all she could think to say.

"That's cool," he pulled a joint from his shirt pocket, "Do you smoke?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't want any right now, I need to stay sharp."

"Sharp?"

"See that guy?"

Sockcap followed Chika's gaze to the man in black, the only one in the room standing.

Weirded out he replied: "Yeah, I do, is he like bothering you or something?"

Worried and almost afraid she said: "He's been staring at me all night. Well, not all night, just for the last couple minutes."

Scoffing: "It doesn't matter how long it's been, it's weird and inappropriate."

Appreciative: "You're right, it doesn't matter how long it's been. He's creepy as hell."

Agreeable: "You're not wrong. Do you smoke?"

Gently teasing: "You already asked me that."

Chill: "Right, what I meant to say was do you mind if I smoke?"

With a genuine touch of vulnerability: "Maybe you could stay sharp with me? I'm worried about what this guy might do."

Touched by both her need and confidence in him: "Yeah, absolutely. We'll stay frosty."

Chika hadn't even seen him pull the blunt from his shirt pocket, but he replaced it and joined her in her vigil.

After a brief silence Sockcap spoke again: "I hope you're not like, trying to make an old boyfriend jealous or something."

“Oh no, I've never seen that guy before. He just showed up, right after the lights flickered a second ago. I don't know where he came from, he was standing right in front of me, just staring.”

Chika locked her arm with Sockcap, knowing he couldn't help her any more than Houndstooth could. Speaking of Houndstooth, Chika looked across the room and found that she had already moved on to a pretty young thing in a strapless, probably navy dress, it was hard to tell with the red light. The new young lady looked a little nervous, she looked like she had dressed in what she thought people might like to see her in, more so than in what she felt comfortable wearing. Chika turned from Houndstooth and her new Nervous Nellie to the man, who had moved closer.

“So, what's your deal?”

He shrugged, “nothing much, I'm a stockbroker, came to a party, just chillin'. What about you?”

She didn't feel like talking about herself, and she had no desire to truly connect. Talking was simply a means to an end. Beyond that she couldn't remember any substantive details about her life prior to the red room.

“Nothing much. Do you know where we are? I don't even know what party this is or who's house.”

“Oh yeah it's umm...” a confused look swept over Sockcap's face. He laughed and shrugged again, “I don't know. Guess that was some pretty good weed. It's all good though, everyone's having a good time except for Kakahara over there. I made a new friend,” meaning Chika of course, “it's a successful night I'd say. Hey, let me get your number.”

Chika turned from the man to Sockcap, “I really do appreciate you helping me out, but I'm not sure about exchanging numbers just yet.”

“Understood, we'll just hang for a bit. Hopefully you'll see what a nice guy I am, and fingers-crossed next time I ask, you'll say yes.”

She did find Sockcap fairly charming, borderline cheesy, but if he were to ask again, she would probably give him her number; she didn't want to make that too obvious, but she did lean closer to him, hoping he'd pick up on the hint. She turned back to the man in black. He had vanished.

She heard Sockcap's voice, “Oh jeez how'd you get over there?”

Chika turned and found that the man was standing behind her. His eyes were full of hate. His jaw was locked tight. He reached a gloved hand towards her. Chika started up, tripped over Sockcap's legs, and fell backwards on to the floor, spraining her wrist and bruising her tailbone. Sockcap stood and helped her up. He put his arm around her and held her close, which she liked; ironically less for safety and more for the contact. Sockcap's loose shirt hid the fact that he was pretty cut. What clothes concealed touch revealed. Playing the hero, Sockcap held his hand up towards Kakahara in the “stop” formation.

“I don't know what your deal is man, but you need to back off. You're freakin' her out and bringing me down.”

No one else in the room seemed to notice what was happening. Chika looked back to Houndstooth and found her making out with Navy Nervous Nellie. Why was no one else looking? Why

was no one filming this on their phone? Everyone was completely oblivious. It was her and Sockcap against Kakiyara.

Kakiyara turned from Chika to Sockcap. His steely face broke into a strange and completely unnatural smile. When his eyes were focused on Sockcap, they went dead, there was no feeling whatsoever in them. The smile itself looked like a toddler being told to smile and just showing teeth in a picture. Beyond that it was unnaturally wide, as though the man's mouth somehow grew as the lips separated to reveal teeth tinted red in the light.

Slowly, painfully slowly, he turned away from Sockcap, and again focused on Chika. As his head and gaze moved, his face morphed back into the expression that Chika had become all too familiar with. Hateful eyes, stone face.

“Look man, everyone but you are here to have a good time. You’re bringing everybody down is pretty damn selfish if you ask me.”

Kakiyara's robotic head turned from Chika back to Sockcap. He raised a hand and motioned Sockcap to him. Being an idiot apparently, he walked towards Kakiyara, despite Chika trying to hold him back. Kakiyara pulled him close, and began whispering in his ear, never taking his eyes off of Chika. Dread welled up within her, and she started backing away. The whispering stopped. Sockcap slowly turned towards her. She was startled to see tears in angry eyes.

“You deserve whatever he does to you.”

All at once she felt the accusing eyes of everyone in the room on her, yet when she looked around they were all engrossed in conversation, making out, kneading the couch, Bug Eyes, where she had started, was still talking to nothing. The disinterest was just a facade. The room was directed towards her, she could feel it.

She stumbled away, limping, her ankle pleading with her to stop, until she found an empty piece of couch to collapse on, at which point the whirlwind noise in her head and the pain in her feet abruptly stopped. Exhausted, nearly sober, she stretched, extending her legs out onto the floor, trying to melt her upper body into the couch, her torso and arms were the only part of her still connected with the faux velvet, the rest of her body was supported in a contorted arch by her bare feet on a cold tile floor. That was uncomfortable. She knew she shouldn't relax at all, but something in her mind chose denial; as such she pulled herself up onto the couch and curled into a ball, trying to ignore the weirdo watching her from a distance.

She closed her eyes and tried to conjure up peaceful memories, yoga instructions, wise injunctions, useful platitudes, but found none. All she discovered was a cold presence moving closer to her every time she drew a breath.

A warm hand gently lighted on her head. She heard a soothing voice but couldn't make out what it was saying. She found her head lying on a lap. Gentle caresses ran up and down her arm. She felt as though she had been forgiven of everything, though she wasn't sure what she had done wrong. She opened her eyes and saw Kakiyara staring down her with black eyes older than hell.

She stumbled out onto the floor, crawling backwards, struggling to rise to her feet. She looked up at the ceiling and saw her reflection surrounded by the partygoers. They were screaming and raving at her. She turned from the ceiling to her surroundings and found herself alone in the middle of the floor. Once again, she looked up at the ceiling and saw her reflection being torn to bloody pieces by the crowd.

In a panic she leapt to her feet and immediately bumped into a couple slow dancing. When she turned to apologize, everyone was in the middle of the room swaying peacefully to a song she had only just become aware of. Looking back in the direction she had come, she saw that Kakihara had not moved from the couch. Neither had Bug Eyes, he was having the greatest conversation he had never had.

Kakihara stood, and slowly walked toward the crowd of dancers. Chika was terrified. Hot tears of fear were running mascara in dark rivulets down her face. She struggled to move through the crowd to the opposite end.

She bumped into a young, well-dressed man, who effortlessly swept her into his arms. He was tender, and very high. Against her better judgement, she lingered, allowing herself to be comforted by his touch, by his soft eyes, and warm hands. His hands, firm, but gentle, led her in a dance she didn't realize that she knew. Every step came so naturally with him. In the back of her mind she knew it was a lie, but she could not extricate herself from it. Peace, however momentary, was the true seducer, the man was simply a conduit. Kakihara appeared over his shoulder, sliding his hands across the man's arms to grip his hands from behind. The three of them moved in tandem, a trifecta locked in a perverse waltz. Eyeing Chika, Kakihara began whispering in the stranger's ear. The stranger's eyes slowly transformed into razors. He squeezed Chika's hands so hard that she cried out in pain. He released them with such force that she fell backwards, bumping into another couple.

She stumbled past the new couple trying to find a way out of the crowd, but she was having trouble even seeing past them. Somehow the mass of people had swallowed up the rest of the room. She couldn't find Bug Eyes, or the couches, or the mirror wall; there were only people.

Frustrated, she turned from one mass of humanity to another, trying to ignore the overwhelming sweat-stench of their bodies. She bounced off an untold number of faceless and nameless people, into the arms of a tall black man, with shoulders like a mountain range, who towered over everyone. No sooner was she dancing with him than he leaned over, bending his ear to Kakihara. Subsequently, he pushed her away, brushing her off like someone would brush a bug off their shirt.

The tall man pushed her into the living stereotype of a nerd, who was clearly thrilled to be interacting with her. He talked excitedly, though she couldn't hear what he was saying; Kakihara was making his way through the crowd behind him. Everything moved in slow motion up until the point where he leaned over the nerd and began whispering. The nerd walked away in disgust, Kakihara vanished, and in their wake she found Houndstooth, Nervous Nellie was nowhere to be seen.

Houndstooth was friendly, "hey! I thought I'd bump into you again."

Her face turned from friendly to concerned as she saw the state Chika was in.

"What's wrong?"

"That guy's been following me, and I don't know what he's doing but everyone else..."

Chika glanced over her shoulder and saw the formerly dancing crowd standing motionless, staring hatefully at her back. She turned quickly back to Houndstooth trying to push them out of her mind.

Chika, was growing desperate, whatever was happening she couldn't handle it, and by that point she knew it wasn't the drugs. Her voice was shaking when she asked:

“Do you think we could get out of here?”

There was a vague look of triumph in Houndstooth’s eyes. Vulnerability is an odd sort of aphrodisiac. The vulnerable gets to be taken care of, and to a certain extent, taken advantage of. The momentarily stronger in the grouping gets to take care of, and to a certain extent, take advantage of. It’s still entirely symbiotic, a fulfillment of both need and desire. Chika needed and desired protection, and while there was a cost to it, the price paid could reap the auxiliary benefits of love, affection, and pleasure.

A hand from the crowd laid itself gently on Houndstooth’s shoulder, and any sense of security Chika had was immediately shattered. Kakihara studied Chika, half of his face concealed by Houndstooth’s still friendly, still excited to probably bone face. His lips emerged from the red shadows by Houndstooth’s ears and began whispering. Her eyes, formerly so full of that intoxicating cocktail of love and lust, morphed into confusion, into disgust, and finally, into hate.

Chika pulled herself away from Houndstooth. Struggled backwards against a crowd she refused to even look at, and finally found herself falling flat on her back on the hard tile floor. She struggled upward onto her elbows so that her forearms lay slack against the floor, embarrassed by the momentary immodesty of the fall. The crowd of people stood in the center of the room, staring down at her in a mass of black and red. Kakihara drifted, whispering, turning the last friendly face into one of hate.

She stood, slowly, turning her back to the motionless crowd, and limped towards a couch, it didn’t matter which one at that point.

Bug eyes was the only one unaffected. He kept on talking. Chika chose a couch farthest from the mass of people now standing in complete silence, the music had stopped, she hadn’t noticed until then. She sat down and tried to ignore all the people staring at her. The floor held her undivided attention.

Trying to find anywhere to look other than the mass of hate, she looked up at the ceiling. Her breath quickened. In the reflection, on the far side of the room, past the clot of people, was a door. She let her gaze slowly drift from the door in the ceiling, her only escape, to the solid wall directly beneath it. There was no door in her world. Once again, she turned to the floor, a neutral object was her only solace.

All at once she felt a weight insert itself at the other end of the couch. She didn’t bother to look up. She could feel his eyes boring holes into her. There was nowhere to go. No way to leave. It was better just to ignore it. Except the weight moved closer. Better to face it, maybe. There was no better anymore, everything was some degree and shade of bad. She looked up and saw Kakihara slowly moving towards her. She turned away, she had no idea what was coming, but she was determined to enjoy the remaining few moments she had with that floor, with any memory she could make up, any daydream. She lingered on them for as long as she could.

A cold hand came to rest on hers. She felt her body, her consciousness, drawn into him from the point of contact. She lost herself in his gravity. Her mind drifted into darkness, leaving only awareness, but lacking any sense of self. There was no longer any point of reference. In him, and in the eyes of the on-lookers, she became as nothing.