



Circus Circus

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MY NOT-YET EX-HUSBAND had taken our four-year-old daughter to Circus Circus, and had lost her.

In typical Dave fashion, ignoring my instructions, he calls my home phone, instead of my cell. I was out shopping at the Fresh and Easy, so by the time I got the message and called him back Caroline was already missing twenty minutes. I was a mess. I had plastic grocery bags dangling off my left wrist, car keys hooked onto my index finger, the phone pressed to my right ear, and it took me a few seconds to get what he was telling me. “She’s not with you?” I repeated, doubtful at first, as you had to be with Dave. “You can’t find her?” I asked if he had alerted security and it was only when he got annoyingly quiet and told me no, no he had not that I screamed. “David, you son of a bitch. I’m on my way. Call security. This is our daughter!”

I hung up, started untwisting the last of the grocery bags, which were cutting off the circulation of my hand, but before I could get free Dave had already called back. “What’s she wearing?”

“What’s who wearing?”

“They’re going to ask me what Caroline’s wearing.”

“She’s wearing her pumpkin dress, David. Are you on something? Don’t you remember anything? Her pumpkin dress. When you picked her up this morning she twirled around to show you. Little pumpkins, all over her. Call security!”

“OK, OK. I forget. Cut me a break.”

I would never, I told myself, cut the man a break again. By now I had tossed

down the groceries, slung my purse on my right shoulder, was slamming closed the front door (without locking it, I'd later find) and huffing downstairs, around the manicured rock garden paths, and out into the parking lot. My throat was burning—I'm a smoker, not used to that kind of running. My beat-up Dodge Neon barely fit into the condos' connected mini-garages, and I scraped the side-view mirror edging it out, then blamed Dave for this and every other way he had screwed with my life over the last five years. Oprah and Ellen and Rachel are always saying you learn from mistakes, and then you get wise and won't make them again. Horse crap! This was my second time round the marriage bend, and I hadn't learned a thing.

Cheating. Financial straits. The threat of single-motherhood. The eighteen pounds I'd regained since he'd left us. My self-worth shot to hell. On and on the list ran as I merged onto the highway. And now this. He couldn't keep his bloodshot eyes on his own daughter for one morning, he couldn't do me this one friggin favor, he had to consume my life with his nonstop drama. I raged at him as I curved around the 215, doing eighty in the left lane, honking at old drivers, the steering wheel bucking in my hands. The fiery gold of Mandalay Bay and the fake skyscrapers of New York New York slid into view, then loomed larger, backed by the blinding desert sun, and in the midst of all this light and anger and traffic, a sudden flashing in the rearview mirror. A cop.

My chest was pounding; my heart fell into my stomach, and I couldn't breathe. I ignored the policeman for two more flashes. I was considering letting him chase me all the way to Circus Circus. Then he turned on his lights, and it was no use. I didn't want the whole OJ Simpson thing going down. I slowed to 65, merged right, and at the next ramp pulled over, jammed the Neon into park and lay my sweating forehead against the burning steering wheel.



Back when I first met Dave I used to think I was immune to the losers who stumbled up to the cashier's cage at Sunset Station. Over ten years I'd gotten to recognize in their approach and pathetic expressions—clenched teeth, averted eyes, a con-man's seriousness—whether they were up or down for the evening. Sometimes I'd give them an encouraging word ("Tough night?") or a congratulatory smile ("Nice playing.") It wasn't the amount, I knew, but how

they felt about it that mattered. I'd get blue-haired retirees cashing in their cups of nickels like they'd just broken the bank, or underage junkies out fifty bucks looking suicidal.

Night in, night out I laughed off the flirtations of the local drunks sauntering up to me. I warned myself: Connie, your cup's full, you don't need another ounce of trouble in your life, you've played that game already, you want no part of these hustlers. It was easier for my co-workers, girls from Vietnam and Panama, acting like they couldn't speak English and all. I took my cue from them. I batted away false compliments with a stone grin. When some deadbeat spewing vapors of cigar and vodka asked what I was doing after work, I'd say I was scheduled for a double. I knew through the cage, over the counter, that these men could see my full chest and round shoulders—but not my out-of-control rear-end. I knew I looked prettier on their lucky nights, counting out their winnings, than I really was. And for those cashing-out after some big hit, making a play was their last hope of salvaging the night. Me or the graveyard steak special.

So I'd rebuffed Dave Strummer three times, all in the same week. He was on some kind of winning streak. (You begin to believe in such a thing, as a cashier in a casino.) Dave was a decent blackjack and more than decent poker player, but his best luck came at the roulette wheel, or so he always claimed. My first mistake had been giving him my name. I'd broken my own rules, opened the door just a tad when it should have remained firmly locked and bolted. "Connie," he called me, the second time I'd handed over his winnings, tasting my name on his lips, licking it off with his tongue. "Connie Buckhalter. Thank you for being the angel you are, this fine evening." He had wadded the money I'd counted into his right jeans pocket, turned away, turned back, and offered to take me to the Grand Café after my overnight. I laughed him off, but OK, yes, maybe a bit flirtatiously. The third time he cashed out that week I was working the cage alone, and I had counted out his 737 dollars and 3 cents, and the fixed glow in his eyes as he watched my hands push the pennies at him, and the two-day stubble of blonde facial hair (so soft you wanted to stroke it), and the ponytail that hung behind his Denver Broncos cap (I'd grown up a Broncos fan myself), and the way he called me sweetly by name, and his Nevada cowboy charm ("I don't expect a different answer, but a man that gives up too easy in this game ain't much of a man.") and the fact that I was half starving myself

on the South Beach Diet and could use a decent meal, all worked in his favor. I said I'd have a quick breakfast with him. We met at the Grand Café. Despite his winnings he ordered up the 3.99 eggs and sausage (cheapo, I should have noted) while I got the Garden Omelet (it had seemed healthy enough, but who was I fooling?) and otherwise Dave Strummer was a gentleman that morning. It was 5:30 A.M. We talked about Condoleezza Rice. He was a big fan, I guess you could say. I found out he worked at Just Brakes over on Pecos, as a mechanic, a "struts specialist" actually, and that title, and that he *had* a title, kind of impressed me. A complete gentleman.

I'd been recently divorced, and couldn't yet afford my own car, so I was bus-ing it on the Deuce that year, and Dave gave me a ride home from the casino in his leathery-smelling pickup. He dropped me off and went straight to work. That was some schedule he was on, I thought, all night gambling under the lights and all day working under the cars. He claimed he caught up on sleep on the weekends, but I never saw him do that either. So we developed the habit of each other, as if gambling and drink weren't habit enough for one man. After my late shifts he'd cash out around five or six, and we'd have breakfast and coffee and he'd drive me to my apartment. He never pressed things, and the less he pressed, the more open to them I became. It was me who invited him in, and he hesitated because he had work, but he stomped quietly up to the apartment in his work boots and made love with them still on in a pained-animal way I found sexy, and that too became part of the routine, and it might have gone on like that for a long time, both of us soured on life and neither of us looking for more, when more came.

What could I expect of a middle-aged mechanic and gambler, twice married, accustomed to Dave's work and play schedule? Did I think he'd suddenly start wall-papering a nursery? Scrubbing out diaper genies? What I actually thought was he'd want me to have it gotten rid of. I'd done that once before, with the first husband, and I still hadn't made it past the late night pangs. So at the Grand Café, when I spilled the beans, I was surprised that Dave didn't grimace, or just walk out, but glanced once to his left and leaned over his chicken fried steak and took my hand and admitted quietly, like it was some major secret, "I like babies. I like the way their hair smells."

That same week we were married at the Hitching Post chapel, a drive-through wedding. Our witness was Dave's assistant, Joey, some punk with acne,

just out of technical school in Sacramento. Joey was still on the clock and lazed out back in the bed through the ceremony, chewing tobacco and spitting through the gap in his teeth over the tailgate. When Dave put the ring on my hand his fingers were black with grease. Then he treated all three of us, me, him, and Joey, to donuts at Krispy Kreme, the place on Eastern, where you can watch the dough rolling out of the machine on a conveyor belt, watch lines of donuts getting frosted in a waterfall of white glaze. Dave and Joey went through a dozen. I let myself have one. It was still warm and gooey off the belt, and eating that donut I realized I could have demanded more of a celebration. I might have invited my mother down from Spokane, or my sister out from Wichita. But I wasn't a girl to complicate things, or ask for anything fancy. This time round, I was out to impress exactly no one. I was just grateful is all: for the ring, for that donut. I ate a second one: powdered, and strawberry-filled.



Now I rolled down the window of my Neon. The cop was an African-American, muscular, but with a paunch. He had to be at least six-three, because I saw only his waist and brown leather holster as he came to the door. Then he bent down, and dragged his mirrory sunglasses lower on his nose. "License and registration."

I wanted to explain what was happening, but I was kind of hysterical, and I swallowed the words, "My daughter's missing."

Above the sparkling glasses his eyes narrowed. Beneath them his face was peppered with gray fuzz. He crouched an inch lower, and asked me again for my license, calling me, "Miss." I blabbered some more as I rifled through my purse. "Lost," I said, "in Circus Circus." How could I explain the tears? How could I explain what I'd lived through the last six months, my dependency on Dave's salary, the pathetic truth that I didn't have the backbone to divorce the man? And now Caroline.

My fingers were trembling; I couldn't find my license. The cop was shaking his head and at that moment my cell rang out. I looked up at the pudgy reflection of my face in the cop's sunglasses. "Please," I said, "I gotta answer this. It's my husband. Our daughter's lost in Circus Circus. It's an emergency. Sir, do you understand? My four-year-old daughter's lost, in a casino, and this is my

husband, calling to say maybe he found her.”

The cop hesitated. He was slow and thoughtful, with a powerful neck and jowls and perfectly white teeth. On the fourth ring he finally nodded. “Answer the phone, Miss.”

Breathless, I clicked the green button. “Goddamn it David, tell me she’s with you.”

I heard his voice, stupid and calm. “What color eyes does she got? They’re filling out forms here, and I don’t know this shit?”

“Forms? What good are forms? All this time you’re filling out forms, instead of looking?”

“We’re looking everywhere. Don’t worry.”

We? The way he hesitated, I knew. *She* was with him too. Justine, his once and current girlfriend. I’d seen this woman only briefly and from a distance at Just Brakes. Still, I had a good picture of her in my mind: fake breasts, frizzled hair, high heels, long acrylic nails. Gum-chewing, bra-busting Justine. The memory stabbed at me again: how I’d come home my normal time on St. Patrick’s day from Sunset Station, how I had heard my husband loudly fucking this woman, with our daughter asleep just the next room over, how I had turned around and driven to work for another overtime shift at the casino, thinking *so this is what he’s playing at. He knew you’d come home. Well don’t give in, Connie. You’ve done this before. Don’t you give another man what he wants.*

An eighteen-wheeler crashed by too close, shaking the car windows. The cop looked over his shoulder as I yelled into the phone, “David, you listen to me. Are you listening? There’s a cop here. He pulled me over on I-15.” I looked up with sweating eyes. “Explain to this officer what’s going on, so he might let me off, and I can get over there? Explain what’s happened. Can you do that?”

For a moment Dave thought about it. He had a record (two drunk and disorderlies, I’d called the cops myself for the second one), and so he got nervous talking to the authorities, but he mumbled yes. I held the pink cell phone out through the window. The officer took the tiny device between two enormous fingers, glanced at it once, and raised it to his ear. “Hello?” he asked in a slow baritone. He listened for thirty seconds or so, nodding. “They got anyone watching the doors? They do. OK. Circus Circus? OK.” He glanced down at me, one eye squinting. “I’m gonna bring your wife over there myself. The security desk. I’m bringing her over. Yeah.” He bent down, handed back the phone,

and grasped the door through the open window. “Miss, you gotta calm down now. I’m gonna ask you to park your vehicle, and I’ll take you in my car. You’re in no condition to drive like this.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

“You’re gonna kill someone, state you’re in.”

“I *am* going to kill someone!”

“They’ll find her. Always do. Now my name’s Officer Townsend. Got it? You follow me. You OK to do this? Just to that parking lot over there. Got it?”

I liked Officer Townsend. It was comforting to have the sympathy, to have someone else take control. I did what he said, eased onto Russell Road behind his whirling lights, and parked next to him in the empty lot of an abandoned jukebox warehouse. Officer Townsend waved me over to his car, a deep navy, almost purple vehicle marked *Highway Patrol*. It was comforting to slide into the back seat, luxuriously roomy inside, and with the lights blaring soon he had us back on I-15, driving north at some crazy speed, then cutting off a semi to make the Sahara exit. All the time I was leaning forward into the grate and trying to explain about Dave. I was explaining how we’d dated only three months when Caroline had come into the picture. How Dave had agreed to marry me, but I knew his heart was never into it. How even though he was back with his old girlfriend I still needed him to watch our kid on Saturdays, when I had to work and Caroline didn’t have daycare. Officer Townsend looked into the rear-view mirror, and asked why I didn’t just ditch this guy. I told him how Dave was helping me out on weekends, and how I needed whatever he gave to make the ramped-up ARM mortgage.

“That right?” Officer Townsend’s face had softened. “Everyone’s asking me: *Are you underwater yet? He’s underwater. She’s underwater.* Here we are livin’ in the Mojave desert, but everyone’s all of a sudden underwater.”

“Exactly!” I told him Sunset Station was laying off cashiers, how I’d put in nine years already, but they were threatening if I didn’t work weekend doubles, I’d be next. I told him how Caroline was Dave’s responsibility too, and if I didn’t force him to see his own daughter he’d scrap us both, and he wouldn’t give me a friggin dime, whatever the courts ordered him to do. *That* I knew from experience. I’d be combing the streets for a place to live—only this time bankrupt and with my little girl in tow. One step forward, three steps back, that’s how my life went. I told him how Dave made decent money as a struts

specialist, and if I laid the guilt on heavy enough he still went through the motions, almost like a dad, sometimes like a husband. I was holding on for all I was worth. You had to.

Officer Townsend listened to me rant, huffing little blows of disapproval from his lips. By the time we pulled past the neon clown, then up to the valet parking beside the striped pink concrete circus tent, I was measuring the minutes again. Caroline must have been gone almost an hour by now. Missing children were usually killed in the first three hours, they said on Dateline. I stumbled out the car door, and stood next to a sign that said, “No Stopping. No Unloading. Please Pull Forward.” Springsteen’s *Dancing in the Dark* was playing on the overhead speakers. Officer Townsend came around the car and I followed him at a near jog into the dimly lit casino, across the faded lobby of worn carpeting and potted plants, all the time searching for any sign of a pumpkin dress. The policeman stopped to ask directions—more precious seconds wasted. We rushed past luggage carts lined up by a closet, past the Steakhouse I’d once gone to with my sister, and up finally to the Lost and Found security desk.

On a raised platform two guards were standing there, presiding like bored judges over the court of the casino. Both were older men. The one with sideburns and a cocky smile was scratching at his ear. The other, shorter, with glasses, reminded me of a Phys Ed teacher from school I used to hate, a Mr. Bowden, who’d made me sit on his lap once in the locker room. They each wore those fake silver badges of casino guards, an authority I knew meant absolutely zero. When they found out who I was they crossed their arms in unison. “We’re manning the exits and elevators, combing the slot aisles,” the cocky one explained. “A signal’s gone out casino-wide,” the Mr. Bowden-looking-one added. They now used the same system as the Metro police in serious situations like this. They’d find my daughter. They promised me there was nowhere anyone could take her. They had cameras taping every inch of this building. “I know it’s stressful, but you gotta relax,” the Phys Ed teacher said, holding up an open palm. “Happens all the time here. Folks lose their kids; folks find their kids. Absolutely no reason to think the worst.”

I thought: in a hotel full of rooms and wings and suites, what do you mean, no reason? Why were they standing here waiting, instead of out looking themselves? Why hadn’t they shut down the goddamned casino and combed through every square inch of it yet? “What if someone left with her before you were even notified?” I asked.

They exchanged glances with Officer Townsend. I was being unreasonably hysterical, those glances said. They quickly showed me the forms Dave had filled out in his pathetic third-grade cursive; and I confirmed the description my husband had given, adding that Caroline had sandy-brown hair (not “dark black,” as Dave had written) and it hung down to her shoulders (it was not “bobbied”) and she was wearing pink Velcro sandals, with a butterfly over the straps. I told them she sometimes answered to Linny, my pet nickname for her. I rummaged through my purse and gave them the only picture I had, from the Christmas concert: Caroline, an angel with sparkling wings, belting out Silent Night.

Behind me I heard Officer Townsend saying goodbye. “I’m getting called back out to the highway,” he said. “You all got things covered. They won’t let her out of this casino, Miss.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t believe a cop was just *leaving* like this, in an emergency.

“I gotta get back,” he said, tossing a thumb over his shoulder. He wished me luck.

Luck! I fumbled my purse closed, resisted pulling out a cigarette. (It would have looked bad, and I was still trying to catch my breath.) What preyed on me was the story of the Mendoza girl. In a nearby casino, while the girl’s parents gambled, some drugged-up teenager had lured the child into a game of hide-and-seek. From the arcade he had gotten the Mendoza girl into a bathroom stall, where he’d raped her, and snapped her neck. This happened nine years ago, but I remembered the story well—even Dave knew the story. The great family vacation era in Vegas had come crashing to an end. They had cleared out the amusement parks, limited hours to the arcades. Even this tired place, Circus Circus, with its TOY ZONE, its radio controlled cars, its wind-up yapping dogs, was now scheduled for implosion in six month’s time. Vegas had been the fastest growing city in America, but I never got why. They gussied it up nicely, but anyone who lived here knew it was no place to raise a family, no place to even *bring* a kid. I had wanted to leave as soon as Caroline was born. A life without escort fliers blowing past us on the playgrounds, massage parlors blinking in our strip malls—some saner kind of life, for me and my daughter.

The gym-teacher guard had his elbows up on the security desk, and was calmly chatting with his partner. I turned on my heel. I didn’t know where to

look first, so I dialed Dave's phone, but he didn't pick up after seven rings—and I was going to dial again when I saw him, summoned like a magic trick. He was walking towards us, eating popcorn from a bag. Popcorn! He spotted me at the desk and I could see the mild fear in his eyes. He walked over to a garbage can and tossed the half-full bag of popcorn, brushed off his hands, then turned back on his heel and greeted me with a slow, exaggerated wave.

"Where the hell were you?"

"Up in the arcade, by the little merry go round thing. She likes that damn bouncing hippo, you know?"

"Jesus Christ. How can you let this happen? How can you fucking let this happen?"

Dave wasn't even defensive, didn't even pretend to get jazzed up. He was working a piece of popcorn out of his teeth with closed lips. His eyes were drooping—but not from lack of sleep. His favorite drink, I knew, was a Jack and Coke, but when he gambled like this in the mornings he liked those watered-down casino Bloody Marys, and I could summon at will what two or four of those tasted like, on his lips, a few hours afterwards.

"You told me you were taking her to the Children's Museum."

He shrugged. "She asked to see the clowns. She likes this place."

I knew he was lying. "I want you to show me *exactly* where you last saw her. Don't shit me Dave." At that moment I had believed in a mother's intuition. I had that strong of a connection with my daughter, and I believed, if I knew where Caroline had last been, I'd know where she might wander. It was foolish thinking, but it was all I had.



We were usually inseparable, me and Caroline. That morning, though, she had been driving me completely batty (I'd put in the wrong color hair-ties, they hadn't matched her socks), and I had been relieved that Dave was taking her on for the day. Whatever he'd done to me, I still wanted the girl to have a father. My own dad had skipped town when I was six, and I'd always thought that was the first strike against my luck, when it came to men.

Dave thought he was a saint to still be taking her once a week. Since he'd walked out, he saw her on Saturdays, when I now worked my double. It was

always a big day for Caroline. Usually they went to some park in Green Valley—to Silver Springs, where Caroline liked to play in the sand of the beach volleyball court, or to Paseo Vista, her favorite park, where beneath the jungle gym she opened up imaginary ice cream shops. “Who wants ice cream?” she’d yell. She would take your order and then tell you in no uncertain terms the shop was out of that flavor. You had to run down all the flavors of ice cream, and when you couldn’t think of any more you had to ask, “Well, what *do* you have?” She’d make up a flavor like hot dog, or mac n’ cheese, or broccoli, and you had to order hot dog ice cream, and this sent the girl into hysterics. Dave didn’t have any patience for this nonsense; he’d walk away unless Caroline served him pretend chocolate. Yes, she was a controlling girl, but that smile and bursts of laughter made up for all the stubborn pouting. If I told Caroline at breakfast to use her spoon, and she didn’t want to use her spoon, she’d go, “I’m just *not* gonna to eat my cereal then.” Impossible! Such a piece! She needed constant attention, she talked your ears off, but she’d never run away from me in a store or park or arcade. This was exactly the opposite of what she’d do.

I told the security people me and Dave were headed upstairs, left them my number, and we started winding our way through the maze of slot machines. We circled up the spiral ramp, under the dangling trapeze wires, to the Midway, then around the Rattle & Roll, the Goblet Ball Game, and past the three dimensional elephant murals. A show was starting up on the Midway now. In a booming voice the ringmaster was announcing Vladimir, a blond teenager dressed in loose white pajamas who, by the time we had made it around the ramp, was balancing himself on one hand and spinning the rest of his body in some whacked-out Russian break-dance maneuver. I scanned the bleachers: rickety seats filled with Asian and black parents, their wide-eyed children perched on their knees, clapping for Vladimir.

Somberly, Dave led me around the Midway, past the McDonalds, to the bathroom of record. He was assuring me that yes, this was where he’d last seen her, but the guards had already looked here. I could sense in his slow walk that he had said or done something to make Caroline take off. I knew I wasn’t getting the real story. You never did.

Dave pointed me to the Ladies Room. Inside, a Mexican woman at the sink was simultaneously washing her older daughter’s hands and yelling at her son. He was maybe three years old, and was clenching his mother’s jeans and

screaming, "I am a zebra! I am a zebra!" None of the five stalls were locked or occupied, and I pushed each one open and ducked my head in. These were old, filthy bathrooms by Vegas standards. They were manual flush stalls, and in the fog of the moment this seemed an important detail to me. Caroline was terrified of the automatic flushers, which crashed and sucked before she'd finished peeing. Those were all the rage in the Forum Shops and Fashion Show Mall, and thanks to them she had very nearly gone on a public bathroom strike. Here, in dingy Circus Circus, she would have been delighted to find she could flush by herself. I didn't trust Dave as far as I could spit him, but at least for now the story jibed.

Before I left I called out one time, just to be certain, "Linny? Linny lollipop?"

Nothing. Outside Dave was standing next to the Mexican dad, who must have been waiting for his wife, daughter, and zebra. Both men had their thumbs in their pockets, both rocking on their heels, having a laugh—a bit of forced male-bonding.

I asked Dave, "You waited for her here? Right here? Dammit, you would have seen her leaving."

He swiped his face. "I don't know. Maybe I was in the john too. I forget. It's been a long morning."

I glared at him.

"OK, look," he admitted, "I was downstairs. Caroline wanted to come up and play Whac-a-Mole and see the clown thing." He turned to the Mexican man. "I can't take that shit. I hate clowns."

The other dad, a head shorter than Dave, had lifted his chin at this sudden confession, and nodded. "I hate clowns too man."

"So you didn't come up with her?" I asked.

"I was going to catch up, soon as I finished."

"David, she's four years old!"

He swiped his hand across his face, this time so hard he stretched his rutted cheeks down into his chin. "I know, I know. I feel lousy."

"Lousy. You feel lousy."

"I *feel* lousy! OK? And I've looked twenty times around here already."

I couldn't believe this. I paced off furiously. Over the endless thwack of the arcade's air hockey pucks, I searched for an attendant—anyone—to ask about Caroline. They were all Asians working these games, as if that were some kind

of hiring regulation. The first worker I ran into was an aged Chinese man, who was leaning up against a wall, watching some kids play skeeball. He looked at least 150 years old, but I thought how it could have been *him*, or anyone like him, who'd taken our daughter away from here. I asked if he'd seen a little girl, this tall. I described Caroline for him, polka dot pumpkins and all, but the man squinted at me, shaking his head, not understanding, and then held out a roll of quarters. I looked up in frustration. A black sign posted over the Frogger machine showed stick figure children holding the hands of stick figure parents, and read in bold white letters, **Please don't leave your kids unattended. We care about your children, and we want to ensure their utmost safety. Please help us do our job by doing yours.**

Dave caught up and outside the arcade I finally succumbed, and lit a cigarette. Caroline had been gone—what—nearly seventy minutes by now. Dave and I probably should have split up to look, but I wasn't thinking properly. My heart was thrumming, and even though I didn't want to be anywhere near him now, something in me relished his nervousness. Two concerned parents, looking for their daughter together.

While we circled the midway again I offered him a cigarette from my pack. Dave hesitated, then took two. He lit up with the Nascar Zippo we'd bought him last Father's Day. Our eyes met, then his pupils seemed to recede, ashen and distant. "Never been much of a father anyway. Now this shit."

I knew what he was suggesting. I wouldn't be baited.

He pointed the unlit cigarette at me. "Look, she's not going far. She likes this place too much. You gotta think: why would any kid leave here?"

"Exactly. That's what you've got to think. Where is she then, David?"

He looked out at the clowns in the midway and took a long pull of his cigarette, then stepped it out half-smoked on the worn carpet. He could be infuriatingly passive, and purposefully dumb, when he wanted to be. This served him well at Just Brakes, where he had an eerie calmness when he faced customers who blamed him for screwing him on the price of struts. If they got in his face, or accused him of taking longer on a fix than he'd said he would, he held his ground, rolling his lips over his teeth. He was used to drama; he faced it every week. And he played cards like that too, taking his winnings, taking his losses, completely at peace with whatever luck handed or stole from him. He snatched at love when it was there, left it behind when it left him. He used to say he'd be

happy if he died by 50, not too old and not too deep in debt. He didn't expect much from life, didn't try too hard. I'd once thought I could learn something from a man like Dave, but all I'd learned was how to trim your expectations down to zero.

We were circling the midway a second time when my cell phone squealed: an unfamiliar number. Then I heard the security guard's measured voice. "Miss, we found her. She's down here now, at the Lost and Found."

"Is she OK? Tell me she's OK."

"She looks fine."

"Who found her? Where was Caroline?"

He paused. "Why don't you come on down?"

I had begun walking at a tilt towards the exit ramp. "Has anything happened to my daughter?"

"Miss, the girl looks fine. Why don't you stop asking questions and get down here."

He hung up. Dave was a step behind, but I didn't stop to even tell him what had been said. I ran downstairs, around and around the ramp, with the clown show raging above us, its canned laughter and honks. I rushed through the slots, the machines singing out in a jangle of rushing coins and a steady, piercing siren. And by the Lost and Found desk there she was, Caroline, red cheeked and chubby and beaming her full set of baby teeth. She aimed up at me a rainbow tube of something labeled Pucker Powder. "Mom, look what she gave me," she said, and pointed to a woman standing to the left the desk. Justine, the girlfriend.

We locked eyes for a moment, before I knelt down to my daughter.

"It's sour!" Caroline was saying, "Taste it."

"Linny, Linny, Linny." I held her at arm's length, scanned her, hugged her close, and held her back out again. I kissed her forehead, and brushed her bangs from her eyes. Her lips were purple with powder. "Oh Linny, where the hell were you?" My voice was shrill.

"I said already." She pointed back to the desk, where they must have been questioning her, where Justine was still talking, looking at me, explaining.

Suddenly Dave was standing behind me. I felt him looming over us like some dread presence. Linny looked up at her father guiltily, and then at the desk, and then back down. "Don't never take off like that again," Dave was saying. "You hear me Lin?" He reached over my shoulder and ruffled Caroline's hair with his hand. In my arms her back went stiff.

I whispered in a fury. "Leave us alone, Dave."

He retreated towards Justine.

I said into Caroline's cheek, "You can't run off like that. How many times have I told you? Do you know how scared I've been?"

"I didn't run off. Justine took me to the rides." She pointed over my head at the girlfriend, now half-perched on a stool by a slot machine, where Dave was joining her. "We had lunch," Caroline explained. "And she bought me a red donut with sprinkles."

"A red donut—" I hugged her tight. Waves of relief were still washing over me—sweet as a waterfall of glaze. The obscene bells of the slots were ringing out everywhere, above us the trapeze lines dangled in an upside down arc, and that's how I felt: like a trapeze artist, who'd just swung from some great height and touched down on the platform, solid beneath the feet. Caroline's shoulders were meaty and strong. Nothing showed on her face, no pain, no sadness, no guile, only purple powder. I would have known right then if something bad had happened to her.

"Why weren't you with your father?"

"I wanted to ride the hippos. Justine took me."

I saw now that the girlfriend was approaching us: her long bare legs, her high-heeled clogs, her head shaking and tongue tutting between gum snaps. I raised myself to meet her, to block her off from Caroline. It was the first time we'd stood like this, face to face. She forced a smile—more like a sneer. She must have been over forty, but I had to admit she was pretty, in a last ditch, all-out effort kind of way. And she was thin—even that waist, pencil thin.

"Why were you left watching my daughter?"

Justine sighed, like she couldn't be bothered explaining all this again. She pointed at the guards. "I told them already. We were over in the Adventure-dome. At a picnic table, near the dinosaur paintings. I go to buy her a hot dog, two seconds later come back, and she's gone. I called Dave. It's like a maze in there. I looked and looked and I couldn't find her."

"Dave thought she was up by the arcade?"

"That's where *he* left us. Look, Dave's had a big morning. He didn't even know where we were at."

"How could you do this?"

"Do what, Connie?" Justine sighed, like we'd fought over this any number of

times already. "What have I done to you?"

"How could you just go and leave her like that?"

"I'm not her mother, Connie. Dave and I were supposed to head down to Laughlin today. Then you call and say you needed him again. He's sick of this shit. Go fight with Dave all you want, but don't blame me for your schedule. We did you a favor, watching her today. I did Dave a favor, while he got his table time in. He's up a grand, this morning, he'll tell you. Now you have your daughter back. Everything's great again." She pointed to Caroline, who was talking to the Phys-Ed security guard. "Relax Connie," Justine said, "It's over."

"Over?" I turned around, but I didn't know who to blame. I wanted to blame them all. I wanted to blame Dave for not giving a shit and Justine for leaving a four-year-old alone in a casino amusement park, the security guards for not keeping track of all this. A crime had been committed. Someone should be arrested. But these clowns with their badges had no power to arrest anyone. And what crime, exactly? Mr. Bowden was talking to Caroline. He had knelt on one knee, at her level, as if he were proposing, while she was sticking her tongue as far as it could go into the tube of pucker powder, trying to lick it out, and nodding at something he'd said to her. Dave was at the video poker, looking away from us and mindlessly pushing some buttons. His missing daughter had interrupted a winning streak.

Beside me Justine said, "Connie." Her tone had changed. Sympathy.

I didn't want to hear it. "You heartless bitch," I whispered. I turned to walk away, but she grabbed my elbow. "Connie, he doesn't want the kid anymore." I jerked my arm free of her. "Are you not getting this? She's a sweet girl. Listen to me."

"Why should I listen to you? You steal him away, you lose my daughter..."

"He can't be bothered anymore. Half the morning, I'm the one looking all over this goddamn casino for her. Connie, listen already. Woman to woman. You can't trust him anymore with Caroline."

I stood still. It was all something out of Dave's script. Playing the irresponsible dad. Gambling Caroline away, setting her loose in the casino with this old whore of his. He was perfectly glad how this had played out, glad I was furious, glad I'd push him the hell out of our life once and for all, glad to be done with us, up a thousand bucks today, still on a winning streak. And this one, Justine, was glad too. She'd wanted him to herself. My anger was what they were bet-

ting on. I was thinking, *This is the game he plays. He wants you to send him packing, cut him loose. He's not hiding any cards; he's showing them all. Don't give in, Connie. Don't give that man what he wants.*

"Enough's enough," Justine was saying. "Count your losses and call it a day."

I walked back and took Caroline's hand in a huff, turned and marched her over to the Security Desk. "Where do I get a taxi?"

The older guard with the sideburns raised himself up from the forms he was filling out and appraised me a moment with wide, questioning eyes and a half-smile. He was probably thinking this had ended well, the little girl safe and unharmed, that security had played some small role in helping a mom find her lost child. Anyone might have thought that. Only I knew differently.

Soon my daughter and I were strapped into the back seat of a yellow SUV cab, and I was directing the driver out toward the highway, where I'd left my beat-up car. The taxi's seatbelts didn't work, but my arm was rigid over Caroline, holding her tight. Down Las Vegas Boulevard, past Slots of Fun, past the Riviera, and I understood nothing had ended here; it was all just beginning.



I received the divorce papers in March. Dave had already moved out to Arizona, to a town called Show Low, in the White Mountains, where he claimed he'd be able to clean himself up. Justine's folks lived there, on a small farm near a lake. Dave had told Caroline that Bald Eagles lived next to the lake, and promised her that she could see their nests when she visited. Justine's family fixed up and sold used appliances and cars. Dave would give the father a hand, make a killing, so he said. I pictured a muddy swamp full of rusted washing machines, and ruined freezers, and the husks of shelled automobiles. Dave was supposed to come out to Nevada to see Caroline every few months. The chances of that were as slim as the chances of his alimony checks making it through summer. He'd won his hand. He was still a man on a winning streak. Three wives in a row, and not one of us slowing him down on his steady march towards fifty. Forget cleaning himself up: I knew there was an Apache Casino not twenty-minutes drive from Show Low, Arizona. I'd googled it on the Internet. He wasn't fooling me anymore.

Three nights after I received the papers, I watched the implosion of Circus

Circus on a flat screen television I could see from the cashier's cage, at work. There were fireworks slicing the air, the neon clown spinning his flywheel, and then the whole place lighting up with the flashes of synchronized detonations and finally collapsing in a ghostly haze of quiet smoke. It was over before you knew it, as these things always were. Dust rose from the fallen casino, and I thought what a hell of a time they're going to have cleaning up that mess.