

The Strip

The static wind whips dust into steel wool as Leda drives Highway 15 through the Cajon Pass. Orange haze the color of an abandoned birthstone melts at the foot of the mountains, a sticky residue of autumn wildfires surging to the west. On the radio, reports of threatened propane tanks. Not good enough. The certainty of destruction is what Leda needs, not the mere promise.

Pointing her aging silver car east, she follows the signs to Las Vegas where a casino is scheduled for demolition. Imploded. Dynamite strategically placed, the building to burst inward. A vaudeville blackout as main event. Thousands will line the Strip to watch.

A hard smile in the rear view mirror and she tries to remember what it's like to laugh without instruction. Her mother's face had the same broken capillaries, proof of a basic structural instability, warning of the disintegration to come. She hides these weaknesses beneath a seamless mask of ivory bisque, rose blush and eye shadow the chastising color of early lilac. If she can find the money, she will have the puffiness beneath her eyes repaired, repeat the collagen injections, have her skin tightened against her cheekbones like a chamois-hide drum. This is appropriate for a woman of forty.

Embrace change, relish aftermath is the only credo she allows herself. She is addicted to signs of intense personal danger — the singed hair, third degree burns, rapidly rising creeks and crumpled buildings of news footage. Floods are the best. Visually dramatic, quickly recovered from, no lingering air pollution, racial tensions or freeway damage. The sun shines the next day with a remarkable clarity.

Wearing her silk cocktail "wedding" dress, the champagne-colored one, and athletic shoes, in case she has to run from a toxic cloud, she will face the implosion square, feel the blast's heat, rock back on her heels from the shock wave, let smoke fill her lungs, find out years later it has caused an exotic form of cancer.

The speedometer floats freely to ninety-five. Moving vans crowd the lanes. Big rigs, U-Hauls. They're onto something.

The Stateline casinos, Whiskey Pete's and the Madonna Resort, fly by. She is saving herself, wants the first chrome to skin contact to take place on the Strip, her palm draped over the cool black ball of a slot machine's arm, her first tingling sip of free gin and tonic, the spinning cherries, lemons and lightning bolts, the loopy flute notes followed by

the sound of crashing coins, tickling something deep inside while smashing it hard at the same time. She wants to believe a quarter can buy her a future.

The road descends suddenly into a valley dark as a lake. The Strip floats in the distance, shimmering, detached. Every turret and peak outlined in incandescent bulbs that move like a virus.

Night turns to bruised day as she drives deeper into the neon canyon. Her hands become those of an exotic amphibian, striped in the honeyed, emerald and violet rays of opulent signage, welcome camouflage.

These are the colors of an oceanside amusement park when she was twelve years old, cool summer nights damp with salted fog, the heavy smell of fried clams, the sweet relief of lime Rickeys. Her sunburn stung as she was thrown against the Tilt-A-Whirl seat, the red enameled shell spinning on an impossible axis. She wanted the centrifugal force to slam her against its sides as she held her body rigid. Purple blotches from repeated batterings on the ride covered her legs, mixing with those left by the stranger. Still, the feel of his touch refused to fade.

She gave in to the gravity, her head fell back and her teeth sank into her tongue. At the sight of dried blood, her mother shuddered and turned away, refusing to ask even the basic questions.

"Valet, Ma'am?"

Arching and twisting her neck from the strain of the long drive, Leda looks with a direct and confident gaze at the parking attendant leaning towards her driver's window.

He thinks she deserves this.

"Of course," she says, her impatience a signal, duly noted. Despite the make and model, she is alone, but by no means lonely.

"You'll be staying how long?" he asks, accepting the palmed keys.

"As long as it takes," she says with a flirtatious smile.

The casino's porte cochere covers the car hoods in a reflected amber blanket of lights, like the ceiling of a commercial oven. A combustible, indigo heat blows in from the desert. The refrigerated casino smells of Shalimar, cigarettes, puckered flesh and floral tank tops, desperation and damp bar rags.

With its exploding sticks of dynamite, a Firecracker Jackpot slot machine beckons, its empty stool awaits Leda with a soft black surface as inviting as a first class airline seat. The flute of champagne, warmed nuts and sycophantic stewards will be along soon. Meanwhile, Leda exchanges a twenty dollar bill for a roll of quarters from an old woman pushing a change cart. She wears a short crimson dress cinched at the waist, black orthopedic shoes and holds her collection of bills folded, sorted and fanning out in her fingers. Leda avoids eye contact, barely glances at the woman's heavily lined and solemn face.

A crack of the quarter roll against a fresh change cup, tug of the slot's metal arm and Leda takes her place in the jet stream, her journey fueled by a certainty the next coin will bury her in silver.

"Hear that?" asks a brine-cured man wearing a shirt printed in Hawaiian maps. He drops a coin in the slot next to Leda's. "It's thunking. Not pinking," he says. "It's landing on a pile. This baby's gonna blow."

Five quarters plop into the chrome trough. He scoops up his winnings, presses a coin to her cheek. "It's warm" he says. "Sittin' at the bottom of a pile. It's an accident waiting to happen."

She accepts the coin, slips it into his machine, pulls ferociously on the polished lever, closes her eyes as tight as a fist and memorizes the teasing sounds. When she looks again a mission bell, pineapple and a clown hang indifferently across the payoff line. The man is gone. Leda feels abandoned, looks for a cocktail waitress to order a drink. Like antiseptic spray, a gin and tonic will erase the disappointment. The alcohol lifts her cruising altitude several thousand feet.

A steady flow of quarters, punctuated by the occasional two or five or ten coin payoff becomes an electric bosa nova, a mercurial mantra, a choreographed bullet ballet. The machine leads the dance, dipping down, spinning around, stopping wide-eyed, flash of promise. In sync, matching it move for move, Leda sense's a tender concern, right up to the moment when she is held backward, her partner's hand at the small of her back, her fate in his arms, eyes glued to tumbling barrels, finger tips feeling for the next coin, when she discovers a smooth, blank bottom, the change cup is empty, nada, no more. The slot's fluted bells suddenly sound like what they are, a dissonant, repetitive, downward scale.

In the ladies' room, a rouged and gardenia scented woman stands next to Leda, runs a comb through her hair, brittle from bleach, and pushes back a migrating shoulder pad on her dress, its fabric impregnated with straw-colored metal.

"Ooh, feels good," the bleached woman says with a generous wink, as she runs warm water over her hands. Leda notices her own hands are dirty from the black slot balls, her nails lack enamel. The bleached woman reminds Leda of a perfect lacquered accessory, something manufactured by illegal child labor in a Third World Country, fat-free hips achieved through obsessive exercise and multiple elective abortions. Every one of the operations, like some hurricane, given a name.

"Get lucky?" Leda asks, leaning into the mirror for fresh lipstick.

"Gambling or men?" the bleached woman shoots back with a percussive laugh.

"Same difference" Leda shrugs.

"Tell me," the bleached woman says, shaking water from her hands.

Her fake, open Louis Vuitton bag sits on the counter as she leaves to get a fresh towel from the char woman in the next room. Leda pockets the bleached woman's Visa card.

As she walks through the casino, stale air on her cheeks, she feels the damp, dog-like gaze of defeated men. Richard's voice instructs her to leave a message at the beep. The cash machine retains her card. A double Remy accompanies her back to her room.

The morning paper has maps to new housing projects. A hangover makes the print wavy and hard to read, like a mirage on the desert floor.

7-11 coffee, enough tubs of non-dairy creamer to fake a latte and Leda feels less tentative, the bubbles stripped from her veins.

The late morning sun blasts the concrete sidewalks of El Encanto white, amplifies the green of freshly sprouted lawns, ignites an elaborate chemical reaction, a stark parallel world. The wind-twisted flags look intent on escape from their posts in front of model homes. Stunted and held upright by guidewires, the few trees could pass for golf course markers. Distant mountains, like cutouts of marbled paper in a children's pop-up book, mark a knife-edged limit to the land.

Paper skeletons hang on doors, orange garbage bags lay stuffed in front yards like exhausted pumpkins. It is nearly the end of October, a time of transformation, magic and deceit. Leda is eleven years-old again, wearing a medieval maiden's costume hand-stitched by her mother as if it were some talisman or fetish, and she is running through the bottle-green night, embraced by moonlight, surprised by pockets of warm air, the dregs of a disappearing season. She breathes deep, feels the flashpoint in her lungs, an ineluctable, violet draw. She imagines she can see forever, all around, all at once and never again.

The subdivision's air is like hydrogen, thinner than that of the surrounding desert, blank, faintly scented by hybridized flowers, petunias and stock shriveling in the hot wind.

Standing at the intersection of Summerdale and Skycrest Drive, Leda remembers the children. In alphabetical order, boy, girl, boy, girl. Alex, Belle, Cal, Delia. The birthday parties and Easter egg hunts. Elliot would have cried his first day of school, Francis would have been Franky spelling her name in seashells on the beach.

"Whatever you want," Richard would say, shrugging, sighing, leaving the room. Have a child, or not. Her call. Either way, he didn't care.

A home at El Encanto strikes Leda as the perfect platform from which to watch disasters: a river of mud pouring through her backyard, flames dancing across her neighbors' roofs, the entire contents of her kitchen tumbling out of cabinets as chandeliers shiver and tinkle. Memorizing the sound of breaking glass, groaning beams, colliding epochs, she will replay the moments later, in her mind, when the ground

refuses to shake, when there are no excuses, when it is her only hope of surviving another sapphire day.

"Los Angeles is burning," the saleslady with the dehydrated face says, a contented shift to her head.

"Las Vegas is about to explode," Leda replies.

"Like the Fourth of July," the sales lady says, a thin smile playing across lips tinted the color of a surgical scar.

"What can we help you with today, honey" she adds brightly, tapping her fingernail on top of floor plan C's foyer.

Leda would like to ask about El Encanto's covenants and restrictions. Can women be served with divorce papers on the day they return from the sanatorium? Are husbands allowed to take the lawnmower, the hedge clippers, the trading stamps, but leave the children?

Could the sales staff please point her to the house most likely to attract floods, fire and the occasional lava gush from an errant volcano? Would the neighbors seek damages if she slept in her clothes, shoes laced and tied, in case she had to run? Or would they understand, possibly share, her fear of the absence of physical threat, find the prospect of calm, as she did, crippling?

"Nothing," Leda says, "just looking."

The fading afternoon light slices through the hotel room curtains like some solar alignment meant for stone monuments. Apocalyptic spirits are about to be released from the earth's core, a toll-free link established with the dead. A decaying green voice will order her to come out with her hands up. She chains the door.

The phone message light flashes. She returns Richard's call.

"Where the hell are you?" he demands.

"The checking account is frozen," Leda says.

"I reported you missing," he says.

"It's about time," Leda says and hangs up the phone.

After a long, leisurely shower, Leda stands at the half-steamed mirror styling her chestnut hair with the finishing brush she shoplifted from the beauty supply store that morning. It fit in her palm as if it belonged. Tiny red balls impaled on rigid rows of pins, spheres of blood plucked from her scalp, each encapsulating a separate, perfectly realized thought.

One-hundred strokes, she counts each one, this is the only ritual outside observers could ever ascribe to her. When she stops, she hears rhythmic pounding beneath an emphatic narration. The people next door are having sex while listening to CNN.

Makeup next, lipstick the color of movie blood. Would shocked looks greet her should she appear with her face painted like a paleolithic

cave wall? Bison and spears drawn in eyeliner, rouge splayed handprints caressing her cheeks, commemorating the hunt.

The stiff terry robe feels like an attendant's concern as she steps out of it and into the breeze of her silk dress. Its neckline is high, fabric hiding cleavage while celebrating form. The sensual drape has always pleased her, its simple cut appropriate for a casual wedding, perfect for an implosion.

On the sidewalk beneath the marquee for an impersonator's review, Sammy Davis Jr. sings "Mr. Bojangles." Death doesn't exist here. Las Vegas is proof of an afterlife.

At the show, she is seated too close to the stage and terrorized by the possibility of a kiss from the well-oiled Elvis, his stringy black ducktail falling into his eyes, back arched and buttocks pushing outward in a karate baboon pose.

John Belushi is who she wants to drag back to her room. They'd do speedballs together. This time he would survive. Las Vegas can change people's destinies.

"John," she will ask. "What's it like on the other side?"

"It's like the buffet at the Riviera," he will say, heating another heroin and cocaine cocktail in the room service spoon. "Only the shrimp are bigger and some nights there's filet mignon. The waiters still look tired, but they've got wings."

Thin lips twitching, he will twist a bandanna tourniquet around his arm, search for a vein, eyes hooded as if in sleep. As she lightly strokes his dark hair, he will arch a single eyebrow, bug-eyed, growl low and long. Anything for a laugh. Heroin. Speed. Killer bees. His skin will be grey, cold and moist to Leda's touch, like damp ashes or fresh mullet.

He'll plant his linguini and Jack Daniels mouth hard on hers. His flesh will have the soft give of overripe fruit as their bodies slap together like dolphins fighting their way back to the sea. Just before he comes, he'll check his reflection in the mirror, adjust a stray curl, resume his Samurai pose. Step on the hotel tray on his way to the bathroom.

In the curtained midnight morning, anointed by sweat and drug residue, they'll wake, fused in each others arms, a theater of musk and decay. Cigarettes, coffee, Mr. Daniels.

The supplies will be carried in her suitcase, syringes, spoons, a source for open flame. Check his heart rate, mop the oleaginous brow, calm the melancholy child, serve steaming vats of pasta, eliminate all cream sauces. Keep the public from destroying him cell by cell. The woman for whom John Belushi lived, Leda will play herself in their touring show.

Outside the showroom entrance, Elvis signs autographs for fans. If it weren't so close to the time, Leda would stick around to tell them she is impersonating herself, her life is a covert operation, force her signature on the gathered throng.

"Vodka rocks," she tells the bartender. He moves mechanically, like one of those hypnotic casino machines that continuously pushes at a pile of coins, daring them to fall over the edge. The mirror behind him frames a reef of sour faces.

She hasn't eaten all day. "With an onion," she adds. Indelicately it settles in her stomach, like pickled iron shavings, the daily minimum requirement of acid and metal.

Outside, a steady stream of bodies flows down the Strip towards ground zero, moving with the intensity of evacuees. Shoulders tight, drink held close to her chest, purse pressed to her side, Leda steps into the crowd.

"Excuse me," a man says, his hand brushing her breast. She feels a welcome panic, the hint of something beyond her control.

In the middle of the street, closed to traffic, Leda swerves to avoid a drunk stitching his way along the broken center line. Revelers mix cocktails on traffic islands. Children sit on the curb doing homework. A skinny, dark-haired girl looks at her.

Leda considers telling the girl that she's just come from the hospital where the girl's mother is recovering from a terrible accident. Once she got over the initial shock, accepted her new hairstyle and color, the two of them will live happily. Leda will never make her do homework in the street at night.

The girl frowns when she notices Leda's stare, whispers to her friend. They turn away, like sparrows folding into their wings.

The ground is littered with flyers for "entertainers," women spread eagle like sky-diving targets, sipping ersatz wine. Leda notices one whose seductive look fails to cover surprise at her plight. She didn't plan it this way. On call twenty-four hours, dressed in emerald sequins and ruby slippers, accepting only cash.

From behind, the rumble of a motorcycle cop passing through the procession of baby carriages and bicycles. A rollerblader slices the infrared haze, hot dog in one hand, cigarette in the other, a passing violation as he circles Leda.

A city of video cameras prepares for the end. Hand-held lenses swinging from plump armatures swathed in sagging flesh. Leda wonders who will be left to watch the tapes.

Stopping near a lagoon that smells of idling diesel engines, she imagines believers in white hotel sheet togas dunked beneath the surface. Behind them, a mock volcano erupts in saltpeter flames.

Slowly sipping her vodka, Leda studies the pocked pavement through the edge of the clear plastic cup. Looking up, she realizes everyone is facing in the same direction, like horses prepared for a storm. Crushing violets and alyssium, cursing briefly the white rose tree snagging his shirt,

a photographer sets his tripod down in front of her. A leaden buzz of news helicopters hangs above while a husband massages his wife's shoulders as if to tenderize them.

Leda wants to tell her how all losses should be celebrated like this, how John Belushi lives, what the hereafter holds.

"We're from Orlando," the woman says.

"Keep your eyes straight ahead," her husband orders. "It's almost ten o'clock."

A horn blows from the stack of a casino shaped like a river boat, as if in a fog and in danger of losing its way. Pressing a finger damp from ice cubes to her wrist, Leda searches for a pulse. The man next to her has stopped breathing.

A flash and a thick charge animate the air, then thunder and a charcoal cloud taller than the highest casino tower billows from the ground, floods the sky like a blood wound blossoming in water. A doomed bird attempts flight, the wind lifting feathers as the body falls dumbly back to earth. Leda wants to run towards it, plunge into its eider darkness. This is all she has ever wanted to do.

Shock waves pound her body, imprint the moment on her skin. She looks for signs in the flame necklace, collapsing stories and mushrooming cloud. Molecular bonds break as the building's bone, muscle, steel and glass part in an unearthly song, cleansing with its intentions.

Blood rushes through her head. Liquid courses through the street gutters. She thinks her ashes would be safe here, swept neat into a pile with a broom of palm fronds plucked from the nearest Egyptian tomb. She could be spread amongst the roses of Caesar's Palace. Return as multiple vermilion blooms. Her fallen face painting the sidewalk.

Applause, cheers from the crowd. A shift in wind. Silence. An anxious gush rises as the cloud moves towards them. Talons push at her back. The woman from Orlando snakes through the crush, her husband clinging to her shoulders. Leda loses a shoe. The hem of her dress is torn by a confused child. She realizes that she has three quarters, half a tube of lipstick, an empty notebook and a stolen credit card.

Leda steps onto a sidewalk and is surprised to find that it moves. Looking back at the swiftly approaching poison, she holds her breath in atonement, she no longer fears loss or pity. Inside the Mirage Casino, the air is scented with brimstone and jasmine, white tigers sleep in their grotto.

She orders a tall glass of tropical fruit juices tainted with rum, studies the pearlescent moon entangled in shreds of black cloud and thinks about the rare Mariposa lily. How, after years of lying dormant, it blooms again, nurtured and rising from the rain-soaked ashes of the wildfire. 20

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