

Unmarked Highway

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Jason roamed through the rows of slot machines, waiting for his inner signal, his gambler's hunch that told him that chance was about to smile on him. In the seven months since he had arrived in Las Vegas, he had built no appreciable stake; in fact, he was nearly broke, despite his steady job at the shipping company. He'd had to borrow money from his brother in Portland a couple of times just for the necessities.

He stopped at one of the quarter slots, slipped in a coin, and was reaching for the handle when a piercing shriek hit him from the side.

"That's mine, that's mine, that's mine! I've been playing this row for half an hour now, and that's mine!"

This shrill salvo was launched at point-blank range from the old woman that Jason had spotted at the end of the row, and who was now nearly stepping on his toes in the thrust of her agitation. She was wearing an eye-searing lavender polyester pantsuit with a blast of artificial flowers pinned to her bosom, powder blue jogging shoes, and the mandatory glove on her slot-handle hand. She was at least seventy years old.

Jason dropped his hand and recoiled. His lanky five-foot eleven gave him considerable advantage over her small, weedy frame, but he knew better than to cross a slot junkie: their proprietary zeal was legend.

"Well, I am begging your pardon, lady. Something about the fact that you were fifteen feet from this machine gave me the silly idea that it was open."

She glared menacingly and rattled both of her paper cups that were brimming with quarters: a circus-clothed copperhead about to strike. "You listen up, young man. I've been playing this row, and that machine, for half an hour, and if you're going to make trouble, I'll just call an officer."

She twisted up her little apple-doll head and scuttled even closer to him, so that he could see the glittering magpie eyes that matched the voice. He reached up and gave the slot handle a sharp snap. A cherry, a plum, and an orange—out plopped two quarters. Jason executed a ceremonial bow and swept his arm up towards the machine.

"Your tip, madame. My compliments."

He strode away towards the blackjack tables. Crazy old women! he thought. You can have your damn machine, you viper. Slots are a sucker bet anyway. This looks like it's going to be a real corker of a night.

Jason began slowing down at the head of the first bank of tables directly across from the lounge, where a washed-out Cher look-alike was tremulously warbling a dead pop song to a few slack bodies in the audience. The Mint was one of the largest and oldest of the downtown hotel/casinos, and had the most two-dollar-minimum tables. Jason had had some luck there, and he always felt comfortable at its tables.

He ambled from table to table, peering over the shoulders of the players to see how they worked their hands. It was an early weekday evening in mid-August; the shows wouldn't start for a couple of hours, which made the table traffic just moderate. The first twinges of apprehension and excitement were working on Jason's stomach—no matter how many times he had come to play at the casinos, the feeling of cold but eager anticipation was always the same.

He watched an obese old man who held an ace and a six against the dealer's up-card queen. The man was smoking a large green cigar, to the obvious displeasure of the woman to his right, who hit her fourteen with a four.

He turned to her and mumbled in a mushy drinker's voice, "You took my four, lady. I would'a had twenny-one. Look." He started to pick up the cards and show her his seventeen.

"Please keep your cards on the table, sir," came the flat voice of the dealer.

The old man crammed his cards underneath his two silver dollars and clamped down fiercely on his cigar, loosing the ash directly into his drink without his notice. The dealer turned up a nine and swept the coins into his tray. The old man grumbled something Jason didn't hear and swallowed his clouded drink. "You took my four," he said again, staring absently ahead.

Morons, Jason thought, with a stab of pleasure. Sticking a soft seventeen against a queen. Morons. He looped around the sparsely populated twenty-five-dollar tables. A dealer stood at an empty table with a pile of chips in front of

him. He was staring dully ahead while his hands stacked the chips in opposing columns and designs—squares, triangles, towering single rows—all dispatched with rapid, remarkableadroitness. The gestures were hieratic, a priestly ritual. Jason watched as though hypnotized. All it takes is a hot streak, a good run. Who knows? he asked himself. I could pile up some cash, take off—go anywhere—all I need are the cards, the damned cards.

His attention was snatched by a loud commotion over by the craps tables. He went over to a table surrounded by a small noisy crowd. They were all gaping at a short, impeccably dressed silver-haired man who was throwing the dice. A tall, stunning red-haired woman at least thirty years his junior was gripping his arm. The man was putting a thousand dollars a throw on the Come line, as well as stacking hundred-dollar chips on a number of side bets.

“Hard eight pays six to one, field bets open, whoops, seven, line away,” the stickman gabbled, trying to fuel the bettors at the already inflamed table.

The silver-haired man lost steadily, the slight smile on his face never changing. Jason turned sharply away. Big timer, he thought. Why doesn't he just put his money in the toilet? And with his floozy nailed to his arm. Pimp!

He walked back to the blackjack tables and began questing in earnest. He was very fussy about the table where he chose to sit, judging the other players, his table position, and, particularly, the dealer. He was looking for an uncrowded table with an open third base, the position furthest to the dealer's right. As the last person to be dealt to, he could scan the hits of the other players and read their cards so that he could adjust his strategy.

He wandered among the tables until he spotted a dealer he had never seen before. She was strikingly tall, taller than him, and quite thin. She had a long, sharp nose and chin, dark crescent-shaped eyes, and smooth olive skin. Her hair was long and shimmeringly black, with a confounding flare of white that began at one temple and streaked to the back. She appeared to be in her mid-thirties, a few years older than Jason.

He ran a nervous hand through his thick red hair. Better check this one out. He moved behind the middle of the crowded table and watched her swift, graceful shuffle of the cards. She had very long, thin fingers, which worked the cards with expert precision. She was a “helicopter” dealer, a flashy style in which the dealer arcs the cards high in the air, spinning them like a helicopter blade, causing them to softly flutter down in front of the players. The best dealers could do this without revolving towards each of the six player “slots” on the table, simply adjusting the height of their hands and the snap of their wrist. The sensational dealers could do all this while frequently landing the second card for each player directly down on the first. She was doing this consistently, and without visible effort.

Jason marveled at her catlike deftness and control. He watched the play through several decks, doing some rudimentary card counting. He would adjust his bets upward if the deck was “ten-rich,” a favorable condition where a significant number of cards had been dealt without many face cards having appeared. The deck had been steadily ten-rich since his arrival.

As soon as third base was unoccupied, Jason slipped in. After a hand was completed he laid a twenty-dollar bill up above the betting circle. The dealer whipped it away and Jason noticed her long, sharp nails, painted bright red. She plucked ten silver dollars and two five-dollar chips out of her tray and quickly slid them on the green felt to his position. He looked up at her name tag. It read:

Welcome to the Mint
Mara Serafina
Live it Up

“That's a nice name,” Jason blurted. “Is that all your first name, or what?”

She glanced at him, expressionless. “It is my name,” she said, and turned to deal.

Jason shifted uncomfortably. He never spoke to dealers, except to ask for change. Her glance had given him a peculiar chill. He was uncomfortable, feeling that he was at some kind of disadvantage. He quickly ordered a bourbon and Seven-Up from the cocktail waitress. It was his father's drink, the drink Jason always ordered at the tables. His father had died with that drink in his hand at the dinner table, when Jason was seventeen. Jason's wanderings had begun not long after.

He settled into playing. The table was filled with two-dollar bettors, the “unpaid shills,” as the jargon had it. It was their steady, ignorant losing, not the wagers of the high rollers, that stoked the gravy train for the casinos. Jason loathed the idea that he might be one of them, but he felt that fortune was sure to bless him soon.

He won a few hands and busted a few. The cards had been inconclusive. Now, though, the count was plus four. He slipped two five-dollar chips into his betting circle. He was dealt a thirteen against the dealer's eight. He was hit a six, she had a ten underneath. Nice, he thought, as a little tingle spurred his belly.

Many hands and a couple more drinks went by. Mara was uncannily nimble with the cards; Jason had never seen better. She was shuffling up for the shift change when an errant card popped out and landed on the floor to Jason's left. He felt his eye, then his hand, drawn to the card. He bent to pick it up.

“Don't touch that,” she hissed. “Card down,” she said.

He was almost out of his chair, leaning towards the card,

when he looked back at her. Her face was a mask of scorn. He yanked himself back up while a floorman came and picked up the card. Jason was embarrassed and enraged at himself. He knew very well that casino security mandated that players couldn't pick up a card from a casino floor—too many chances for subterfuge—and he was furious that he would be looked upon as an amateur or a stooge.

Unnerved, he stared at Mara. Her face was composed; she was turning the cards over to the next dealer. One of the bettors who had been lucky slipped a ten-dollar chip towards her for a tip. She turned to him and gave him a dazzling, luminous smile, radiating good will and beneficence. Her small, slightly pointed teeth gleamed.

Jason got up, feeling confused and slightly nauseated. He lurched towards the craps tables, then turned and looked back at his blackjack table. Mara was walking towards the lounge. There seemed to be a strange shimmer or haze around her; Jason couldn't focus. Must be the drinks, he thought. I've got to get out of here.

He plunged out the door. The dry desert air flared his nostrils. He still hadn't gotten used to the jarring transition from the insulation of the casinos—no natural air or light, total temperature control, never a clock in sight—to the scorching air outside.

The foot traffic outside the Mint was considerable. The howling heart of downtown—millions of dollars of flaming neon, in every direction the glittering facades of huge casinos, the streets popping with tourists, cocktail-carrying drunks, hustlers—and Jason was usually gratified to simply be its reserved witness. He would come downtown or to the Strip even when he had no gambling to do, but tonight he felt restless and disturbed. He glanced up at the Union Plaza hotel clock. It was nearly midnight, eighty-nine degrees. He walked towards the parking lot to drive home.

He lived on the outskirts of town, off of the highway to Reno. The land had only been partially developed—there was still a lot of mesquite and open scrub between scattered homes. Jason lived in a ramshackle duplex on a one-acre parcel, with his landlord, Ned, on the other side. Ned was in his late forties, a heavy drinker who claimed to once have owned a farm in Minnesota. Ned had animals all over the property: a tiny nighthawk in a cage, a couple of scraggly chickens, a spaniel, a tough, old red rooster, and a large, black female cat.

Ned rarely left the property; he was always tending to the animals or one of the many junker cars strewn about the land. Jason avoided him when possible. He had little knowledge of Ned's personal life and he didn't care to know more. Jason's years of wandering had made him cautious around people, and suspicious of entanglements. He thought his era's declarations of "love your brother" to be absurd, a fool's play, a bad bet.

Jason awoke the next morning to the ringing screech of the

hawk. He peered groggily out the window into the yard. Sibyl, the cat, was preening her glossy black coat in the already-sweltering sun, the odd white streak on her flank the only break in her potent darkness. Jonas, the rooster, Jason's favorite among the beasts, was ambling about the yard, randomly pecking at the earth. The two animals were occasional adversaries, but seemed to have established an uneasy truce. Jason idly watched them for a while, and then readied himself for work.

Jason was a clerk at a large shipping firm in the small warehousing and light industrial section of the city. It was another in a long succession of jobs he had held throughout the West since he had left, still a child, his small hometown in central Oregon almost fifteen years ago. He would work for a year or two and then give in to the compulsion to push on. He had never made friends easily; packing up his scant belongings and leaving another town in his old station wagon was never an occasion for regret.

His Vegas job was to get the "homeless" packages—the bad addresses, the wrong names, the undeliverables—to their destination. Vegas was a town of drifters, fugitives, and false names; Jason was always on the phone trying to connect these floating elements. He liked to think of himself as a detective, someone who could discern motivation and hidden clues. But the job was essentially just a means to gamble.

That night, Jason walked into the Horseshoe a little after eight. It was one of the "theme" casinos, a Wild West motif showily done up in red and black. The security guards all carried shiny six-shooters. Jason was standing by the \$1,000,000 display, a ten-foot block of acrylic with a million dollars worth of ten-thousand-dollar bills embedded in a horseshoe-shaped design. The casino offered free photographs instantly developed for any pilgrim who wished to pose in front of the icon. Jason was listening to a middle-aged couple who were positioning themselves in front of the block.

"A million bucks, you bet! Wait 'til Sally sees this shot. Jesus, nobody in Pocatello has ever seen a one-thousand-dollar bill, much less a ten. Christ!" said the man, shifting nervously about.

"Hush up and straighten your hair. Gosh, that green suit looks queer against that carpet. Stand up straight, William," said his wife, adjusting his lapels.

It was then that Jason noticed the woman taking the pictures. She was in her early twenties, tall and slender, with a cascade of lustrous blond hair. When she stood up from the camera tripod, Jason gaped at her lovely, bright features. He waited for the couple to leave, feeling a warm nervousness.

"Uh, excuse me. I play cards around here a lot, but I've never seen you around. Have you worked here long?"

She wore absolutely no makeup, a rarity for a woman in Las Vegas. He thought that she was as lovely a woman as he had ever seen.

She cocked her head and scanned him for a moment. “Well, I got in from Salt Lake about two weeks ago. My sister works as a cashier here and she told me about the job.” She paused and looked at him again, glanced around and lowered her tone. “I just want to make enough money to move on, Montana, maybe; I’m not sure.” She bent to adjust the camera.

“Yeah, you don’t look very Vegasy. Don’t you think the casinos are a weird place to work?” he asked.

“Well, it’s just my karma, I guess. I’m really into photography. In fact, that’s why I want to go to Montana, to take pictures. This is just a stopover.”

Jason was feeling a little light-headed. He stepped a little closer to her and enthusiastically said, “Your karma, huh? That’s a word you don’t hear in these parts. Are you a Buddhist?”

She flashed him a glowing smile as she continued to make some adjustments to the camera. “Nah, I’ve just dabbled a bit in various philosophies on my own. No big deal. What’s your story?”

Jason drew back a bit and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Well, I’m just sorta passing through myself. I mean, I’ve been here a while but I feel restless. Montana, huh? Yeah, I’ve spent some time there; it’s real pretty.”

“Uh-huh. I can’t wait to go.” She shot him a quick glance. “I’ve got kind of a bad feeling about this place. In fact, I’d be real careful, if I were you.”

He laughed and said, “Oh, I don’t think any harm can come from a little card playing. Listen, I’ll let you get back to your work, but what’s your name?”

“Sandy. Well, Cassandra, really. What’s yours?”

“Jason. I’ll come back and talk to you again sometime.” He walked quickly away, with her staring at him with a searching look on her face. Man, she’s unbelievable, he thought. What a beauty!

He passed by the craps tables on the way out. A one-armed man was rubbing the dice on the stump of his missing arm and muttering a little sing-song chant before he tossed the dice. Jason shook his head as he stepped outside. He thought about going to the Jolley Trolley for a drink, and then thought otherwise.

I’ll just go home and forget about blackjack for a night. As he was stepping off the curb he glanced up and saw the sparkling lights on one of the covered walkways leading to the Mint. He lost his balance and fell to his knees in the

street. “God damn it,” he swore fiercely. He quickly sprang up. No one on the bustling sidewalk paid him any attention. Then he moved towards the Mint as though he was pulled on a rope. Damn, I’ll just go over and play a few hands.

He walked immediately to the blackjack tables. His throat felt dry and constricted; he was breathing with difficulty. He walked quickly up and down the rows, hardly looking at the tables. Then he saw her—Mara Serafina. She was shuffling; again he was enthralled with her wizardry with the cards. She was wearing a glinting satiny top, all black, except for a tiny red heart up on her left shoulder. There were only two other bettors.

He slid into third base and pushed a twenty to the coin tray. His change shot back with charmed promptness; she didn’t glance up. Many dealers never looked at the players, instead fixing on the puppet’s motions of the bettor’s hands: shuffle, deal, hit, stick, collect, pay out, shuffle. Jason usually loved the anonymity of it, but now it oppressed him. He wanted her to look at him, to get some kind of recognition from her, though he couldn’t have said why. She was shuffling.

“Um, you have, you know, you really have amazing skill with the cards. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody so quick. I play around here a lot,” his voice weakly trailed off.

She turned to him and unbound a rapturous, bedazzling smile. Her entire face was transformed, she looked years younger; there seemed to be an engulfing kind of haze or glow around her. Jason was spellbound. She said nothing and turned to deal. Her face assumed its natural, somewhat sullen cast. Jason felt both elated and ill—he could not think clearly. He blindly pushed some chips into the betting circle. It was only after the first hand was over that he noticed that he had stuck on a fourteen when she had a nine showing—he had been staring at her face all along.

Damn, what’s wrong with me? he thought. Am I going to play the pigeon just because this hag has a Hollywood smile? Jesus! He squared his shoulders and began trying to count the cards. He was consistently winning, but he had never had so much trouble card counting. He felt nothing of that gratifying surge that usually accompanied his winning. He lost count of the cards many times and had to begin over.

He furtively glanced at Mara’s face a number of times, but she had not looked at him since the smile. When he had lost count of the cards for what seemed to be the hundredth time, he gathered all his chips together and started putting them in his pockets. This is idiotic, he thought. I need some fresh air. He got up as she was shuffling and pushed a five-dollar chip towards her tray as a tip. He looked up at her face and was horrified to see a curling sneer on her full lips; her visage was a show of contempt and revulsion. He shuddered, and quickly turned from the

table, almost tripping over one of the coin men wheeling a dolly filled with the weighty trays of silver dollars. What is with that witch? And what's wrong with me? he thought.

He walked unsteadily out of the casino into the sharp desert air. The street was ablaze with lights; he had a strange, disconnected memory of a little incubation box with a bright bulb that he had made for a helpless chick when he was a child. Then Mara's image flitted through his mind. He took a few numbed steps, and then noticed the Horseshoe opposite. He plunged through the doors and wobbled to the block of bills, which Cassandra was polishing with a white cloth.

"Sandy, listen, I know this is going to sound weird, like some kind of strange pickup line, but, you know, about Montana, I think maybe I'm going to leave town real soon, and maybe I'll drive you up there. Nothing weird, you know, just for the company."

His voice faltered. It sounded to him as though his words were clumsily climbing out of a deep, far-off cave.

She looked startled. "Well, I don't know. Vegas does kind of give me the creeps, but I don't even know you. It's not like I take off on trips with strangers every day. But just for the sake of conversation, when do you think you might be leaving?"

"Well, I'm not certain. Soon, real soon. Maybe even this weekend. Tomorrow's Friday. If you're working tomorrow night I'll come by and tell you. It will give you some time to think it over."

She looked steadily at him, then said, "I don't know. There's nothing holding me here, and you seem all right. Perhaps we could talk about it over a drink. I have this feeling though, that there is more for you here than you think." She gave him a solemn smile.

He ran his hand through his dusky red hair. "No, there are too many oddballs here. I know when it's time to go. I'll come back and talk to you tomorrow night."

He arrived home exhausted and went straight to bed. He awoke in the morning to some kind of commotion in the backyard. Peering out his curtain, he saw Ned and a couple of his drinking buddies crowded around a tree stump laughing, beers in hand. Ned was holding his old, rusty hatchet while one of his cronies, his back to Jason, knelt and struggled with something on the stump. When the man shifted to a crouch, Jason saw what was going on. They had Jonas, the old rooster, on the stump. Ned brought the hatchet awkwardly down, but only succeeded in opening a great gash on the bird's neck. Jonas broke free of the man's grip and flopped heavily to the earth. He spasmodically lurched about, huge spurts of blood splotching his dirty red feathers. The men laughed uproariously. Ned pinned the bird with his foot and took another clumsy swipe at Jonas's head. The head was just hanging by a few

stringy muscles now, but the bird continued to twitch and squirm in shuddering spasms.

Jason ran to the bathroom and vomited. "Those bastards, those bastards," he muttered several times. He went back to the window and looked out. He couldn't see the bird's body or Ned and his friends. As he was about to turn away, he saw Sibyl darting across the yard. The cat had Jonas's head in her mouth, her crescent-shaped eyes gleaming. Another wave of nausea overtook Jason.

He left early for work to drive through the desert to calm down. He headed slowly up one of the arterial roads off of the Reno highway, looking at the swirling sheets of sand that kicked up from the desert floor. It was one of those powerfully windy days that occasionally took place in the area. The city was almost entirely encircled by low mountains, and when the high desert winds made their play, great gusting cross-currents would rip through the city, sandblasting everything and snatching light objects into the air.

Damn, I should just hit the highway now, he thought. I'm just living some bullshit fantasy about Sandy anyway, and I'm getting fleeced in Vegas.

He drove past a lone house trailer ten miles out of the city, surrounded by old, broken appliances and skeletal chairs, its walls bleached by the unrelenting sun. An old man, apparently blind, pattered about these burnt offerings. Why is he even here? Jason thought as he slowed to look. The old man turned at the sound of the car, paused, and raised a withered right arm, pointing back in the direction of the city. Jesus, you can't get away from the weirdos even out here. He reluctantly turned and headed back to Las Vegas. From a few miles distant, the city looked like a shimmering mirage.

His workday passed in dreary tedium. At noon he sat gazing dully out the window. He glanced up and saw the top of the Mint spearing the bright blue sky. As though controlled by invisible strings, he immediately got on the phone to his brother in Portland and made arrangements for him to wire a \$1,000 loan that afternoon by Western Union. He got up and continued to stare out the window, rubbing his temples. The tremendous headache he had had all day had not abated. Damn, he thought, I'm acting almost like a robot. I better clear my head before I put any serious change on the tables tonight. He sighed and said aloud, "Christ, I'll be glad when this day is over."

When Jason got off work he went to Western Union and picked up the thousand dollars in cash. He then went to the MGM Grand, the sumptuous casino on the Strip, and parked himself in the jai alai room. He sat for hours, barely conscious of the graceful pirouetting and incredible leaps of the players. He never placed a bet, but he drank steadily, though the liquor failed to relax him.

Maybe I should go to Caesar's and lay it down, he

thought. It's just the kind of glitzy place to make a showy play. No. The Thunderbird. Yeah, the Thunderbird...No, I should probably be close to Sandy so I can run over and show her the dough.

He had it all planned. He was going to find a table and wait out the cards until the count had reached at least plus six, the dealer good, the table hot, and he was going to plunk down a grand in one moment and pick up two in the next, and then he and Sandy were going to kiss this desert hellhole goodbye.

He glanced at his watch: twenty to twelve. It's time to play some serious blackjack, he thought.

He drove downtown as if he were in a dream. The Strip was throbbing with cars and lights and people, a luminescent floodtide spilling its banks, pooling in the glittering grottoes of the great casino parking lots, and gushing towards the open sea of the desert. Jason hardly noticed the swarming mass as he made his way downtown. The Nugget, he thought. The Golden Nugget. What better place to gather the gold? And it's catty-corner to the Horseshoe. Damn, Sandy and I could be on the road by three. Jason's headache had grown steadily worse, but he was barely conscious of it in his agitation.

He parked in the Nugget lot and went in one of the side entrances. The casino was pulsing with activity. Loud cries came from the craps tables, roulette wheels were splashed with chips, a resonant flushing of coins issued from the rows of slot machines. Jason saw none of it. He walked quickly to the front of the casino, to the big windows that looked out on the crowded sidewalks, onto the equally crowded sidewalks on the other side, out onto the brightly lit windows of the Mint.

Jason's chest heaved. A comet of pain shot past his temple. He rolled forward, feeling as though he was being poured out of a flask. He was in the Mint in an instant, streaming through the crowds behind the blackjack tables. She's not here, she's not here, he thought. Bright spots, as though someone had snapped a flashbulb at him, kept appearing in front of his eyes, and his legs felt as though he was on one of those moving runways at airports. She's not here, she's not here, he repeated to himself as he moved around and around the tables.

Then he saw her. She was uncovering one of the auxiliary tables, getting it ready for the influx of people that let out of the show at midnight. She was dressed all in black, a long, tight, low-cut dress of material that had a strange sparkle. She had just finished checking the cards when Jason numbly moved to the table. He stood directly in front of her and flipped ten one-hundred-dollar bills onto the middle betting circle. She looked up, a delicate smile on her face. Jason said nothing, staring back into the dark wells of her eyes.

"Money plays," she said in a low, quick voice. A pit boss

appeared behind her to her left. He looked calmly at Jason. Mara took up the cards and shuffled them with blistering speed. She placed the deck in front of Jason, who, still standing, stiffly made the cut. There was a roaring in his ears; sweat streamed down his back.

Mara dealt. The cards seemed to flutter down in slow motion. The diamond-check pattern on their backs seemed very pretty to Jason. She had a six for an up card. Jason mechanically reached forward and looked at his cards. The king of hearts and the queen of spades. He set them under his money. She turned up her other card, a five. She hit herself a two, an ace, another two, and a five. Twenty-one.

She scooped up the cards and snapped his money into the bill slot on the side of the table. She looked up and said, "I'm sorry," and gave him a small, sympathetic smile. She slowly shuffled the cards at the empty table. A spell was broken—she could have been any dealer anywhere.

Jason backed a step or two away, fantastically confused. It seemed as though all his roads had converged to this place, this moment. He had a foreign feeling, as though a mask had dropped away, as though someone had finally seen him clearly, as though he'd finally seen himself clearly, weaknesses and all. He wanted to offer Mara something. He tried to speak but couldn't; instead he staggered backwards, and then opened his right hand towards her, a hand both empty and full, a gesture that seemed to both give and receive.

Jason lurched outside, as though a string holding him had softly snapped. His breathing was ragged, and his eyes moist with tears. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Jason, Jason, what's wrong? You look terrible! I was on a break outside the Shoe and I saw you come out. Are you OK?"

Jason couldn't answer, but just nodded his head a few times. He took a few deep breaths, his body pleasuring in the hot, crisp desert air. In a moment he said, "Sandy, I know this sounds crazy, but I think I'm going to stay—or that I have to stay." He looked around, gesturing at the sparkling absurdness that is the core of an evening in downtown Las Vegas. "I can't quite explain it, but I just get the sense that maybe I could make a home here, weird as that sounds."

She gave him a searching look and then a friendly smile. "Yes, you're right. You should trust those kinds of feelings. I've got to go back inside. I'll see you, Jason. Good luck." She gave his arm a squeeze and headed back to the Horseshoe.

Jason stretched his arms skyward and took a deep breath. In the chaotic, splintered lightning of the downtown street, he saw only the open, interminable vault of the sky. He headed out to the parking lot to drive to his home in the desert.