

*Dave Margoshes*

### **Truckee Your Blues Away**

They stopped for gas in Elko and Bruce suggested coffee. "It's a long way to Reno and I need it."

"How about right here?" Lena asked. There was a cafe next to the gas station, with two semi-trailers and rigs parked outside.

"Oh, let's check out one of the places."

Lena shook her head. "We'll be in Reno tonight."

"We need coffee anyway."

"We'll never get to the coast," Lena said. She shrugged, smiling, and Bruce started the car.

"What's your hurry, anyway? We're on holiday."

They followed the neon lights to a gaudy casino-hotel called The Silver Slipper where a giant grubstaker beckoned to them with a glittering pan of gold in one hand, a pistol in the other and a luminescent leer on his grotesque face. You had to walk through his legs to get to the door. Inside, an ancient woman, the used-up flesh hanging like baggy drapes from her bones, sat wearily hunched on a camp stool at a belching slot machine, feeding nickel after nickel into the blind bandit from an overflowing tray at its gaping mouth, a faded expression of boredom and idiocy blending in her shallow, yellowish eyes. Fascinated, Bruce took up a position behind another machine, wasting a handful of nickels, to stare at the woman while Lena went to the can.

"Who's your girlfriend?" she asked when they were seated in a booth out of the din and glare of the main room. She reached for a menu but was distracted by a Keno card and a set of rules stacked in a pile next to the sugar bowl.

"She's weird, okay," Bruce said. "Did you see her? Christ, I watched her for five minutes and her expression never changed. She didn't look at the machine, the nickels, nothing."

"This is a weird place," Lena said, her shoulders rising slightly in a shrug. "A weird state, a weird country. I can't make anything out of this."

They studied the Keno rules until the waitress came and they ordered coffee. Lena asked for a piece of blueberry pie.

"Pie for you?" The waitress was a small, compactly built girl, probably younger than Lena but older looking, with dark hair swirled into an elaborate concoction surrounding her head and dark, narrow eyes thick with mascara beneath exaggerated brows. She gave off a faint fragrance of dead flowers.

"No thanks, I'm driving," Bruce said, smiling.

The girl made a face and wheeled around with a subtle grace. He watched her hips recede behind the long plastic counter, then linked his eyes to Lena's. "So this is Nevada," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Italian?" Lena asked.

"I don't get you."

"The waitress, your new girlfriend. Is she Italian?"

"Could be, dark enough, and looked hot-blooded. And she had purple eyelids. Is that a giveaway?"

She made an exasperated sound and smiled. "How long've we been married?"

"I'm not sure. Seven, eight years...wait, eight. Why?"

"Some memory, Don't you remember our Italian waitress joke?"

"Oh, yeah, you were gonna get me an Italian waitress for my birthday or something like that. I'm surprised *you* remembered."

"That's not the kind of thing women forget," Lena said, her smile receding slightly. Her fine-boned face was pale, the slight lines around her eyes etched deeper by tiredness. "For a time, I was really thinking seriously about doing it, getting you one. Then I figured if you really wanted one badly enough you'd take care of it yourself." She paused, started to say something else, then checked herself. The waitress came back, saving her from having to go on.

Bruce smiled at the waitress, murmured a "thank you" but avoided her eyes. The lids really were purple, he noticed as he lowered his head over his cup. When she was gone, he raised his eyes to find Lena watching him. "I haven't thought about that for a long time," he said simply. Then, after a moment: "Why is that something you wouldn't forget? Because I wanted one or because you wanted me to have it?"

They looked at each other for a long moment, their eyes steady. Then Lena shrugged and picked up her fork.

On their way out, they paused in the casino to watch the merciless woman in her bored assault on the slot machine. Nothing of the scene had changed, neither the pile of nickels in the tray, the hunch of her

shoulders, the piston-like movement of her arm as she grasped the rubber-tipped handle and brought it down, the jangling flash of the machine itself as its three blind eyes spun through their changes, nor the dazed, opaque expression of her eyes.

"Do you suppose she's always been sitting there, forever, or does she have a past?" Lena asked as they walked to the car. The sun had gone down and dusk was sinking around them.

"Like that Greek who had to push the rock up the mountain," Bruce said. That wasn't exactly what he meant, he realized, but he made no effort to correct himself.

They drove for several miles in silence, watching the receding horizon grow dark over the stark dry mountains. Purple clouds caught the final rays of shattered sunlight and spun them through the windshield, blinding him. He lit a cigarette and drove with one hand, his free elbow propped up on the open window, his hand cupped over his eyes, smoke curling gently down on his pensive face.

"What are you thinking about?" Lena asked. She was sitting close to him, her knees bent and her feet beneath her on the seat. She'd loosened her hair and was massaging her throat with the bandana she'd taken from around her head.

"Nothing," Bruce said, turning to her, smiling. "I was just thinking ... no, nothing." He turned back to the road.

"What?"

"Oh, just . . . I understand prostitution's legal in Nevada. This would be a good time for you to get me that birthday present."

"It's not your birthday," Lena said coolly. She frowned slightly, the color rising almost unnoticeably to her high cheeks, and placed a slim hand on his head, tousling his hair. "So I guess you lose again."

"Guess so," Bruce said. They grinned at each other and he gripped her hand, squeezing it. She turned on the radio.

It was almost 2 a.m. when the lights of Sparks and Reno came flashing down the highway toward them, drawing them forward like a chain attached to the front bumper of the car pulling them through a tunnel of darkness to the far lighted exit. They passed cheap looking motels with "vacancy" signs glowing dimly. The searchlight atop Harrah's pulled them deeper into the city, their eyes widening.

"What a fucking town," Bruce said.

They crossed a bridge over the Truckee River and they could see the mist rising off the water in the glare of headlamps. "Keep on truckee, Momma," Lena said, laughing.

"Truckee your blues away," he answered.

It was a Tuesday and Bruce wanted to take a chance on going downtown without a reservation. Lena sighed but didn't protest. The traffic on Virginia Avenue was thick so he went two blocks further before turning left. They saw the lights of the Arlington Plaza and pulled in the drive ramp. He stopped the car in front of the lobby and a bellman came trotting out through the swinging doors, a fabricated smile building on his gray face.

"Any vacancies?" Bruce asked.

The bellman cocked his head. The tag on his left breast pocket said "Pinky." He was short and wiry, with brown hands and a deep cleft in his chin. "You'll have to ask at the desk, sir," he said. "But I think there're a few nice rooms left." He winked.

Bruce went inside the lobby and talked to a blonde woman with an oddly twisted mouth. She checked them in. Pinky brought in their overnight bag and Lena checked the lock on the trunk, then followed him. A painfully thin boy with pimples on his forehead took the car keys.

Their room was on the 11th floor, facing the heart of the city and its still pulsating lights, with a king-sized bed and an attractive black leatherette love seat. "Very nice," Bruce said. He gave the bellman a dollar.

He sat on the loveseat while Lena showered, the drapes open, staring out at the city, smoking a cigarette slowly and letting the tiredness seep gently out of his body. This was their fourth day on the road. When the cigarette had burned down to his fingers he lit another.

Lena came padding up behind him, wrapped in a towel. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Want to go out and have a drink?"

"Oh, wow, are you crazy? It's bed for me. You go if you want to, but don't forget we're supposed to be in San Francisco at dinner time tomorrow, and it's still a few hours drive. Aren't you tired?"

"Yeah, I'm bushed." He shrugged, crushed out the cigarette and took off his shirt. He watched her through narrow eyes as she put on her nightgown, his gaze following the sweep of her arms as they raised high above her head, her breasts flattened by the lifting motion. The nightgown tumbled down her body, past her tight slim belly and over the soft flow of her hips.

Lena smiled at him. "What are you looking at?"

"Just looking."

"Aren't you going to take a shower?"

"Yeah, I guess so." He stripped and stood naked for a moment at the window, wondering if anyone could see him. He didn't think so. He heard the rustle of sheets as Lena crawled into bed.

"This is terrific," she said.

He went into the bathroom and showered quickly. When he came out he paused beside the bed and looked down at her face. Her eyes were closed and he could hear the steady, easy rhythm of her breathing. A strand of her dark hair covered one eye like a bruise. He crawled in beside her, rolled across the big bed until he was pressed up against her back and touched her neck gently.

"I'm asleep," Lena said.

Bruce laughed and rolled over, sighing loudly. After a moment, he said, "You in any terrific hurry to get to the city?"

There was a long silence. Bruce began to count to himself, slowly. "You know we're supposed to be at the Knudsons tomorrow night," she said finally.

"We're on holiday. What's 'supposed to' mean?"

"Oh, I don't care. Do what you like. I'm just along for the ride."

He could hear her screwing her face into the pillow, as if trying to flee from him into feathers. He wanted to touch her again but he didn't. He lay on his back, his head propped up slightly on the pillow, staring out the window across the room at the beacon which pulsed from the top of Harrah's. "I thought I might take a chance on one of those Italian waitresses tomorrow," he said.

"You bastard."

"Hey, I'm only kidding."

"Close the drapes, please. If we're going to stay, we might as well get some sleep in the morning. The light will wake us up."

"Okay," he said. He got out of bed and padded silently across the room, then back to bed in darkness.

Something in the air — neither heat nor light — seemed to wake him, something as ephemeral as the city itself, breathing in his ear. He went to the window and peered through the drapes, looking down on empty streets, across a midtown as drab and weary-looking as any city's by day, the sun bright in his narrow eyes as it climbed over the dry brown mountains to the east. He felt alone, like someone who wakes up in a cramped Greyhound seat to find the bus empty, rows of suitcases staring down forlornly at him from their racks. On his way to the bathroom, he glanc-

ed at his watch on the bedtable; it was 10:15. The loneliest time of all in this town, he thought, after the last losers have gone home to bed to nurse their wounds and the first arrivals haven't stirred yet from theirs with fresh hopes. Like 3 in the morning in any other town.

He showered, brushed his teeth, shaved and brushed his hair carefully, with a minimum amount of noise. He dressed in slacks, fresh shirt and a sports jacket, omitting the tie, and slipped into black loafers, then tiptoed into the bedroom to scoop his keys, loose change and wallet off the dresser.

"Where are you going?" Lena asked sleepily. She was curled in the bed facing him, her face puffed with sleep, hair tangled. Her eyes were only half open and her words were blurred.

He grinned at her as he strapped the watch on. "I'm going downtown to shake up a little action. Go back to sleep. I'll be back in a few hours."

She sighed, moved uncertainly under the covers, then lifted herself onto a crooked elbow. "Wait for me. I'll go along." Her eyes opened wider, blinking.

"The hell you will. Go back to sleep. I told you, I'm going to try my luck with one of those waitresses." The grin was fixed on his pale face and his voice was soft. "I've always been a law-abiding sort but here it's legal. Why should you care anyway? It'll save you having to buy me a present this year." He leaned over the bed and kissed the top of her head. "Go back to sleep. I'll be back in a few hours."

He didn't wait for a reply, turning on his heels and heading for the door. He had the room key in his jacket pocket. He took the elevator down, nodded to the two girls at the main desk and went out through the lobby door, turning left and taking a deep breath of the hot, dry air.

At the corner of West and Second he glanced up at the street signs to get his bearings, then headed right on Second, letting the towering Harrah's building be his guide. For the first block, Second was like a fringe-of-downtown street anywhere, with a grocery, a drug store, a radio and TV repair shop. On the next block, the neon began, first with a pawn shop, then a bar marquee advertising topless dancers and an arrow pointing down an alley. On the next street there were two more topless bars. He stopped in front of the first one and peered in the doorway. The room was dark, reeking of sweat and alcohol. He could see a dimly lit stage, stark and empty. He walked on and turned left on Virginia, crossing both streets diagonally and heading for Harrah's.

The slot machine area of the casino was more crowded than he'd thought it would be. He cashed in a dollar for a roll of nickels and

wandered aimlessly through the rows of jangling machines and weary looking middle-aged women, shoving his coins randomly into a slot here and there, pulling at handles absently. His palm grew moist from the clammy metal he cradled as he walked. On one machine he hit a small pay-out and found himself grinning idiotically in a wall mirror as nickel after nickel came spitting out into the tray, ringing hollowly. He scooped them up with his free hand and counted fourteen, then fed them methodically back into the machine.

Back on the street outside, he had to blink his eyes in the sharp light. Foot traffic was thickening already and taxis clogged the street. He dodged across to the Silver Sour and went to the bar. He had a bloody Mary, lit a cigarette and sat on a stool with his back to the bar, letting his eyes wander across the smoky room. There were large paintings of nude women hanging on the walls, young, fresh-faced, high-breasted realistically painted women with ornate hats and feather boas draped around their necks. Their nipples were unnaturally large, unhealthily pink. A live woman in tight pink shorts and a halter passed by him, jostling his elbow.

"Sorry," she said, smiling. Her blonde face was as sharp and unreal as those of the girls in the paintings.

"That's all right," Bruce said, swiveling on his stool.

He ordered another bloody Mary and sipped at it as he wandered across the room and downstairs, standing for several minutes over a blackjack table watching a chain-smoking Chinese man and a sharply dressed middle-aged man with a flat midwestern accent and a slick pompadour play against a wry-mouthed, red-haired dealer in an ill-fitting uniform dress. The dealer cocked her head at him as she raked in chips and smiled wryly. "Sit down, take a load off."

"Maybe later," Bruce said.

He went out and wandered down Virginia, going from one club to another without staying long at any. Across the street, at the Primadonna, he bought ten dollars worth of chips, a bourbon on the rocks like the man beside him at the bar, a lean, sandy-faced man with a tight collar and a broad-brimmed hat, was having, and prowled the floor until he found a blackjack table empty. The dealer was a short blonde girl with clear blue eyes and good breasts. She was shuffling, a bored expression on her face. She smiled quickly when Bruce sat down, shoving a coaster across the table to him, then an ashtray when he lit a cigarette. She said nothing. Bruce raised the corners of his lips in greeting.

He bet two chips, drew an 18 and held. She went over. He left the four chips in the circle, then promptly lost them when he pulled a 16 and got a queen on his first hit.

He slid two more chips into the circle. The girl shuffled the cards and he cut. The white tag on her left breast said "Wendy." He won on a 20, stayed with the four chips and won again on an 18. The girl frowned slightly as she stacked the chips on his pile.

"Tough racket, eh?"

She smiled. "Not too tough."

She shuffled and he tapped the deck. The girl's eyes were large, with no trace of make-up. One eyebrow was slightly crooked, with a slight bump in the clear skin above it, perhaps the result of an old hurt. He drew a king and a jack and grinned as he slid the cards under his pile of chips. The girl went over with a 24.

"Been here long?" he asked.

"The club or Reno?"

"Reno."

"A few months."

"Like it?"

The girl shrugged. "It's better than Moline."

Bruce laughed. She flicked cards at him and he peeked under their edges. "Hit." She dealt him a 4 and he nodded. She dealt herself another card, frowned and counted out two stacks of chips. He counted his winnings and slid all but five of his chips next to his empty glass. "Buy you a drink?"

"Sure." She turned her head. "Frank?"

The pitboss came up beside her, a tall, swarthy man with thick lips. The upper lip, which he curled at Bruce, looked as if it had been split some time ago and was almost completely healed. "Bourbon and ice," Bruce said and looked at the girl. "Same," she said quietly.

He lost the five chips on the next deal when he stayed with 18 and she hit 21. He bet two more and lost again. The drinks came and he finished his quickly when a heavy woman in a green sweater, green slacks and green eyeshade sat down on the end stool. He scooped his remaining chips into a cupped hand and nodded at the girl. "Thanks, Wendy."

"Anytime." Her smile faded before he turned away.

He cashed in his chips, \$27 worth, and put the bills in his wallet. Outside, the hot air brought moisture to his forehead. The street was crowded. He walked up Virginia behind two girls in tight blue jeans, watching the easy sway of their hips, and turned right on Second. He stopped at a jewelry store, scanned the window and went inside. A gray-haired woman with a pinched face smiled at him from the other side of the glass counter. "May I help you, sir?" Her dress looked like something his mother had once worn.



"I'd like to see a necklace in the window. It's jade. I'll show you." He led the woman to the entranceway so he could point it out. It was a nicely carved stone, Indian work, on a thin gold chain. He examined it under a strong light in the shop and paid \$35 for it.

"I should have stayed at the table a little longer," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, just a joke. Could you gift wrap it please?"

"Surely, sir. Do you wish to enclose a card?"

He hesitated. "Yeah, sure, if you have something blank."

She brought him a small folded card with a flower printed on the front. He found a ball-point next to the cash register and scribbled "Happy Birthday, baby" inside the card. He put the card in a small pink envelope under the ribbon she tied expertly around the small package. A red bow went on last.

"Thank you," Bruce said. He went out and continued down Second, pausing to cross the street and peer again into the topless bar. A slim girl with long white hair danced lazily on the poorly lit stage. She wore black bikini panties and black slippers. Her breasts were slim, pear-shaped, firm. Her hair dangled over her shoulders, reaching to the tips of her breasts. The girl's eyes were closed and her shoulders swayed slowly. Bruce stood in the doorway watching her until the song ended and the jukebox began to whirr. The girl stopped, raised her chin and shook her head lazily. She looked at him with disinterest and he moved on.

The bellman Pinky was on duty in the lobby. They nodded to each other and Bruce rang for the elevator. "Sure hot out," he said.

"It's always like that," Pinky said. "This time of year, it's always like that." The cleft in the man's chin seemed deeper than it had been the night before, and his eyes had a pink sheen around the lashes, as if a night's rest had sharpened his features, put him more finely into focus.

The elevator door opened and Bruce nodded and went in. He whistled softly as the leather-padded cage rose. The whistle grew louder as he walked down the hall to their room, a slightly off-key version of a song they'd heard on the car radio the night before. He paused at the door to listen for a moment, then turned the key and went in.

"Hey hon, wake up. I'm back." He went through the narrow corridor which passed the bathroom and opened onto the bedroom. The room was empty.

"Lena!" He backtracked into the bathroom, calling her name again. The shower stall was damp but fresh towels hung neatly on the racks beside it.

He went back to the bedroom, looking at his watch. It was just past two. The bed had been made and the ashtrays cleaned. All traces of their occupancy — stray shoes, Lena's handbag, hair pins — were out of sight. He stood in the middle of the room, looking around him, a small package with a ribbon and a red bow in his hand, a feeling of familiar emptiness beginning to grow in the pit of his stomach. He opened the top drawer of the dresser. Except for a Gideon's Bible and some hotel stationery, it was empty. He dropped the package into the drawer and closed it quietly.

He went into the bathroom, saw with a glance that the sink was bare of combs, brushes, shaving kit and the like, and turned to the closet. Hangers swayed forlornly from their fixed rod, bare and mocking. The suitcase was gone from the shelf. In the corner, on the floor, was a crumpled paper bag. He carried it into the bedroom and dumped its contents on the bed: the shirt and jeans he'd worn the day before, a pair of dirty underpants and dirty socks, his toothbrush, razor, comb and brush.

He sat on the bed inside the clutter and sighed heavily.

"Damn," he said softly.

He sat there for several minutes gazing across the room and through the window at the city. The neon was dead but through the clear still air he could read lettering on signs blocks away. Directly in his vision was a tall, gleaming black building with no signs, more like an office building than a club or a hotel. He wondered idly what it was, what was going on behind its windowless walls right at that moment.

He went downstairs, putting on his sunglasses in the elevator. The bellman looked up as he emerged into the lobby.

"I'd like my car," Bruce said.

"Yes, sir," Pinky said. "Have the ticket?"

He slapped at his shirt pocket absently. "I guess I lost it. A green Chrysler, Manitoba plates. I'll recognize the keys."

The bellman turned to a board lined with keys on pegs and studied it for a moment. "Oh, I remember now. The lady took it, about an hour ago."

"The lady?"

"Your wife," Pinky said hesitantly. His eyes were a startling dark brown. They seemed to grow darker with doubt.

"Oh, that's right. She said . . ." Bruce let the sentence trail off. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned faintly. "That's all right. I don't need it."

He nodded to the bellman and started to turn away.

"Just a second sir, she left this envelope for you."

Bruce was staring at the cleft in Pinky's chin as he reached for the envelope. If you slipped, he thought, you could fall into that thing and never be found. "Thanks". He went outside and stood in front of the hotel while he slit the envelope open with a fingernail. There was a note inside, hand written in Lena's careful script on a sheet of blue hotel stationery.

"Decided to go on and have dinner with the Knudsons as planned. Knew you wouldn't mind. Have a happy birthday and come on when you feel like it. Keep on Truckee." There was no signature.

He closed his eyes and laughed softly, then the laugh turned into a curse — not for her nor for himself, but an undirected oath which sounded familiar to him but peculiar at the same time, like an answer to a question no one had asked. He folded the note, put it back in the envelope and tucked that into his inside breast pocket. Then he straightened his chin and turned left, heading for Second.

He didn't pause at the entrance but went right in and found a stool at the bar. In the mirror behind the bottles he could see the empty stage. A thick woman with bleached blond hair was wiping her hands on a towel down the bar. When she came up, he ordered a bourbon on the rocks. A few men were sitting at a table near the stage with a girl in underwear, the long-haired blonde he had seen dancing before. Otherwise, the place was empty. A scratchy country and western song played on the jukebox. He drank the bourbon in one gulp and ordered another and a glass of water. The whiskey tasted awful. After a while, the girl in the underwear came and sat on the stool beside him. She was wearing the same black panties and a lacy black bra to match. She smelled faintly of dead flowers. Her eyes were small and almost hidden behind long lashes.

"Buy a working girl a drink?" she asked. She was smiling.

"Sure." Bruce said. Despite the color of her hair, she was Italian, he supposed.