

# The Best Place in Town

by Stuart Evers

David Falmer couldn't pinpoint the exact moment he lost control of John's stag party; but he knew it was long before the topic of conversation had turned to hookers. By then it was late, and instead of eating dinner at the Sunbird – a restaurant highly recommended by one of David's guidebooks – they were sitting around a smoked-glass table in a neon-lit cocktail bar. Nearby, too close for David's liking, clusters of young Americans stood in short dresses and sportswear, their teeth glowing a ghoulish blue-white. They made David feel old; tired, niggardly and old.

'Little Angels,' John's future brother-in-law, Richard, said. 'You can't come to Vegas and not go to Little Angels. There's like a law against it. It's like the law of the stag.'

Brightly coloured spotlights bounced off the table. David's itinerary was being used as a coaster; Richard had said they didn't need it anyway: he'd been to Vegas loads of times. Whatever you wanted, whether it was the perfect steak and eggs, the finest champagne

cocktail, the lowest buy in Texas hold 'em game or the most enthusiastic whore, Richard always seemed to know the best place in town.

In his broad Yorkshire accent, Richard was describing a Chicana prostitute called Rosalita: her mouth, her legs, her breasts, her behind. David looked to John, hoping to exchange a raised eyebrow; but John was listening intently. Richard was enjoying himself, recreating in lavish detail Rosalita's floor show; the four other men lapping it up. To David it sounded both painful and intensely unerotic. For a moment he wondered whether this was all an act; another of Richard's tall tales, but the details seemed all too plausible.

John leant forward and asked Richard something that was muffled by the sound of a party cheering another stag to down his drink.

'Five hundred in all,' Richard replied. 'And believe me, I'd have paid double that just to see those tits.'

David picked up a spare packet of cigarettes and lit one.

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More drinks arrived and they drank them down, then ordered another round, then another. David watched

John laugh, watched the others laugh, and felt like he was watching himself laugh along. He smoked his cigarette down to the filter, the taste uncommon and salty in his mouth. He plucked another from a pack and lit it from the butt of the one he was smoking. He wished he could be sitting outside somewhere smoking that cigarette, sat anywhere but there, there with Richard and the others. These are my friends, he thought. Phil, Ben, Simon, Dan, John. And I know nothing of them now: nothing. It was as though they'd abandoned their personalities at the airport.

Richard was telling a story about the guy he went to the Little Angels with. He did all the accents and his timing was clockwork; despite himself David laughed along with the others. He shook his head and tried to hide it, but he was laughing. Richard was a salesman by trade and he'd sold himself to Phil and Ben and Simon and Dan; though David knew something wasn't quite right with John.

On the surface, John seemed to be having a good time, but David could see the clench in his jaw, the same sense of disappointment that had been there the first time he'd got married. This time was supposed to be different: the 3,000 mile journey, the identical suits, the celebration of a man passing from one stage of life to another. But it was not enough. It was not extraordinary; not in the way that John had imagined

it. And though John was being loud and boorish, David was sure that part of him was imagining himself there fifteen years before, how it would have felt back then, after Helen, but before Alice, and before everything else.

David missed the punchline of Richard's story and looked out over the room while the men laughed again and reached for their drinks. He saw himself reflected in the glass of the bar and put the cigarette to his lips. His face ghosted behind the smoke, his mouth almost obscured.

'You're smoking?' John said, clapping David on the leg. 'Christ, I haven't seen you smoke in years.'

David shrugged.

'You okay?' John said.

'I'm fine. Just a bit tired. Must be the jet lag,' David said.

'This is my stag, remember?' John said, 'so fuck jet lag okay? I missed out last time and I'm shagged if I'm missing out this time, so just get a drink down your neck and join the party. I know Richard is . . . I know okay, but he knows all the best places. I mean this is pretty cool isn't it?'

David nodded, wondering what the Sunbird would have been like, and whether there was any chance of them making the helicopter tour to the Grand Canyon the following day.

'Look,' John said, 'I really appreciate all the organization and stuff, but you've got to be a bit, you know, flexible. What do you think, best man?'

David smiled and crushed out his cigarette.

'I think it's time for a drink,' he said.

The drinks arrived, a pink concoction this time, garnished with a hunk of pineapple. David was about to propose a toast when Richard held his drink aloft.

'To the little angels,' Richard said. 'And the old devils!'

David downed his drink and without a word headed for the toilets.

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Two hours later, David was quite lost. After leaving the bar, he'd bought some cigarettes and wandered off the strip, turning onto streets without any clear destination in mind. The heat and the cigarettes reminded him of a long sultry summer when he and John had been seeing a pair of Canadian women. Marie, the one David had fallen for, was a tall, tousled-haired girl who liked gin and tonics, painting her toenails and talking dirty. In his single bed they'd lain awake for hours, smoking and watching the sunlight's slow dance on the walls. He could have listened to her talk for ever,

and as he walked and smoked, David wondered how and why he hadn't.

John was wild then. His first marriage scared him: one morning of waking and realizing that this was it, there was to be nothing else, had left him petrified. He and Helen were living in an unfamiliar part of town in a rented flat decorated with cast-off furniture from Helen's parents. It was oppressive, all the pieces too grand for a one-bedroom attic flat with a damp kitchen and leaky plumbing. David liked Helen, liked her seriousness and her neat style and clipped intelligence. Her rational, logical nature was balanced by a wicked streak and a breezy sense of humour. She was, as John would later say, far too good for the likes of them.

He walked out on her after six months. He'd been out at some party and had taken the opportunity to get acquainted with one of the waitresses. At two in the morning he hammered on David's door carrying a small rucksack and bag of records. He didn't leave for six years; years that coursed through David as he walked. He smoked and walked and wished that he was with John; younger, leaner, having seen less of the world and themselves.

He threw down his cigarette and looked around him. For the last few minutes he'd been walking down deserted alleys, those alleys leading on to dusty two-way tracks blown with raggedy bits of paper, flattened

cigarette packets and crushed tin cans. He looked around and was faintly relieved to see a shop – Li's 24-hour Liquor store – some way in the distance.

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A series of bells pealed as he opened the door. It was cool inside and he walked the aisles with a kind of dreamy light-headedness. The store was brightly lit and the rows of products, comfortingly recognizable but different, Americanized, looked almost fake under the fluorescent lamps. He touched the handle on the refrigerator door, held it, then opened it. He took out a bottle of root beer and then made his way over to a display case that held three donuts: his body clock was confused enough to believe that this was breakfast and those items the closest he could find to such a meal.

The man behind the counter looked up from a black and white portable television. He rang up the items and said something which sounded like three dollar twenty. David fumbled with his wallet and handed Li – if that's who he was – a five. The change was placed on the counter and the man went back to his television programme. David stood there for a moment, unsure what to do. He had planned to ask for a taxi number, eat his makeshift breakfast and then get back to the hotel, change out of his suit, go down to the

pool and swim, then shower and go to sleep in the huge bed with the silky pillows. But for a moment that all seemed a preposterous idea. He picked up his coins, his bag of donuts and the root beer and left the shop, the door jingling like loose change as he exited.

Outside it was fully dark, the sky pricked with stars and spilled light from far-off casinos. David sat down at a concrete picnic table and tucked in to his donuts. They were slightly stale, the glaze dry and powdery, and he ate them quickly without any real enjoyment. He cracked the seal on the root beer and took a long pull on it, the medicinal smell reminding him of the times he and John used to hang around in the Newbury branch of McDonald's, drinking root beer through plastic straws and talking about Susan Tucker, the sixth former who worked the Saturday shift.

He lit a cigarette and looked up and down the road. There were no cars or people, no lights even. He kicked a stone with his boot and spat for no other reason than there was no one to see him do it. Just as he did, the man from the shop came out, took a pack of Camels from his pocket and lit one.

'Delphinium?' he said.

'I'm sorry?'

The man gestured with his cigarette behind him.

'You go Delphinium? Everyone come here, they all going. I can tell, you going Delphinium.'

David didn't know how to respond, but smiled a big dumb smile and hoped that would do. But the man from the shop then sidled up to David and tugged at his jacket sleeves. He had his cigarette wedged into the corner of his mouth.

'Look – Delphinium,' he said, pointing to a cluster of lights in the distance. 'Good casino, best in town.'

The man looked around, his face confused and wrinkled. 'Where's car?'

'I'm sorry?' David said.

'You no come in car?'

'Oh, I see. No. I walked.'

The man tugged on his sleeve once more and pointed to a thin fenced-in track. 'Ten minutes. Fifteen most. I use for motorbike.'

At the end of the pathway were the lights, and they were enticing. He squinted his eyes and the colours went to pixels. The man urged him forward and David started to walk rather slowly along it. He wondered then whether this was entering into a trap. Whether he would be later bludgeoned or murdered, or robbed then raped. But he couldn't go back, couldn't now ask for the taxi number or a ride back to the strip. It was the Delphinium or nothing. The man was waving him on, and David was smiling, feeling trapped even out in the open expanse of the desert.

'Tell them Li sent you,' the man said almost as an afterthought. David waved back, determined he would do no such thing. When he got to the Delphinium he would have a drink, a cocktail of some kind, and then get the concierge to call him a taxi. He thought about that as he walked, the cocktail – a whiskey sour he was thinking, or maybe a Martini – and the taxi, or perhaps a limo. Yes, he thought, a limousine; imagine the looks from the stag party as he tooted the horn, their blank faces as they wondered whether he'd won a million on the slots. Yes, he thought, cocktails and limousines, home and bed.

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It took twenty minutes to arrive at the fifties-style facade of the Delphinium Casino and Hotel. It was brightly lit by two large searchlights and was swarming with people. Uniformed valets whisked away broad-finned cars as doormen greeted their owners at the revolving doors. The people entering the casino were different from the kind he'd seen at the tables and slots on the strip. They were smart, these people; couples mainly: the men in sharply fitted suits, the women in elegant, flowing gowns. At the door, the bouncers said hello to every well-dressed patron.

David straightened his tie and ran his hands through his thinning hair. One drink, he told himself, and then he'd call a taxi. He could hear the chatter, could feel the excitement of the patrons flooding through the door.

'Good evening, sir,' the doorman said. 'Welcome to the Delphinium.'

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Inside, the lobby smelled richly of tobacco, leather and freshly cut flowers. Men and women streamed through it and down the grand stairway. At its foot, the dark smoky bar area was full; groups were talking and drinking, some sat at booths, others on round tables; others standing, cigarettes aloft in long holders. Once through the door, David paused, taking in the sound of women's heels on marble, of muffled conversations, of soft piped music. 'Isn't this just to die for?' a woman wearing an emerald dress with silver brocade said to her companion as she walked by. 'Isn't it just divine?'

Realizing he was blocking the door, David walked slowly in the couple's wake, passing two payphone booths and the reception desk, thinking of just how much John would have loved this place: its clubby gentility, its well-dressed women and effortless American chic. Ava Gardner would fit in here, he

thought, Frank Sinatra, Dorothy Parker, but most of all John. He could imagine him, drink in hand, talking his way around the room like he'd been born to do just that, a smile on his lips and women swooning at his accent.

David reached the stairs and was about to descend to the bustling bar when a man hailed him. He was slick-haired and wet-lipped, his face that of utmost concern.

'Excuse me, sir, can I perhaps be of assistance?'

David looked at the man, then at the staircase. 'I'd just like to have a drink, actually, if that's okay.'

The man smiled and looked slightly relieved. 'But of course, sir,' he said. 'You may also like to know that Miss Amelia will be on stage in' – he took out his pocket watch and looked at its face – 'a little under fifteen minutes. She will be performing in the Oak Bar, which is through the double doors to the left of the bar area.' With that he bowed his head, clicked his heels and walked off towards reception.

David moved slowly, slightly confusedly. He heard snippets of conversation, the high giggling laughs of flirting women, the gruff chuckles of men. He could not keep his eyes from the tables. If the men looked like movie stars, the women – their hairstyles curled and coiled, their waistlines obviously cinched by corsetry – seemed other-worldly. Their make-up was

immaculate, and when David's glance fell on one of the women for too long, his was met with a look of withering contempt. Embarrassed, he kept his head down until he reached the bar.

'Hello, sir, what can I get you?' the bartender said. Like the earlier employee of the hotel, he was impeccably dressed with an oiled widow's peak and a manicured pencil moustache.

'I thought a cocktail,' David said. 'It seems everyone else is drinking cocktails.'

'A wise decision, sir. And is there a particular cocktail you would like . . .?'

'Well, I did think—'

'Begging your pardon, sir, but I would recommend the Manhattan. I pride myself on making the finest Manhattan in the county.'

David lit a cigarette and nodded. 'A Manhattan sounds great, thank you.'

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In the nearest booth, three couples were discussing their Malibu beach homes, the problems of domestic staff and plans for a Parisian holiday. One of the men had recently bought a Triumph Thunderbird motorcycle and was talking about it in rapturous terms. The woman to his right said that, as far as she

was concerned, it was absurd to be scared about the big things in the world when you could die at any moment – especially on the back of a motorcycle.

'Oh, Bunny, what a mind you have!' her companion said. 'Do you really see the same tragedy in a motorcycle accident as you do in global apocalypse?' He was biting down on a thin cigar and wore rimless spectacles. His gas-blue suit was snug on his shoulders.

'Oh you do tease me so, Harry. You know perfectly well what I mean. How you die is immaterial. Whether alone or with the whole of the world: the effect is all very much the same,' Bunny said. Her hair was braided, her dress a thin slip of black velvet.

'This,' an overweight yet not unattractive man said wagging his finger, 'sounds dangerously close to politics. And we all know the rules where that's concerned.'

'It's more . . .' Bunny said, drawing on her cigarette, 'a philosophical issue, wouldn't you say so, Harry?'

'I wouldn't know; I care little or nothing for either,' Harry said. 'What I *can* say is that no matter how much of a death trap it is, no matter if it could cause a thermonuclear war, I wouldn't give up that Thunderbird. Not ever.'

His wife, a bird-like woman with blonde bangs and small scar on her chin, put her gloved hand on his jacket sleeve.

‘And I’m glad too. He’s such a dreamboat with that thing between his legs.’

They laughed, all of them, and David looked away hurriedly in case they caught him eavesdropping. He crushed out his cigarette and hunted in his pocket for the fold-up map of the strip and its environs. Part of him felt vindicated for leaving the party; the other deeply disappointed that he hadn’t come across this place either online or in one of the many guidebooks he’d bought. He opened out the map and took a sip of his cocktail. Then another more lengthy one. It was divine.

‘Is the drink to your satisfaction?’ the bartender said.

‘Yes,’ David said. ‘It is . . . delicious.’

‘Can I perhaps get you another, sir?’

‘That would be wonderful, thanks.’

But the bartender stopped his effortless drift to the bourbon and bitters and glanced down at the counter.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said with a bowed head. ‘But could you possibly refrain from reading at the bar? It is, I’m afraid, against the hotel rules.’

‘Oh,’ David said, ‘I’m sorry, I was just trying to—’

‘I understand of course, sir,’ the bartender said, deftly folding the map and handing it to David, ‘but this is a bar in which people should feel comfortable. And our patrons tend not to feel comfortable with clientele who arrive alone and sit at the bar reading. I do hope you understand.’

David looked around the room and down at the space where his map had been. He put the folded-up map inside his coat pocket. The bartender placed a silver bowl filled with cashew nuts in front of him.

‘Thank you sir,’ the bartender said. ‘I’m glad you understand.’

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By the second Manhattan, David wondered if he was drunk or simply hallucinating from the heat and the walking. To his right an amorous couple sat in a small two-person booth. They were talking in low voices with a restrained, almost prudish vocabulary. Still it seemed to be doing the trick for them; the man’s hand was on her thigh and pressing for higher. His partner – a woman who was not his wife – was only pretending to stop him. David felt hot under his suit and he undid the top button on his shirt. He tapped his hand against his packet of cigarettes and wondered where the



others were. In a limousine, more than likely, in a car taking them to the edge of the city.

The couple stopped their petting and stood, as did the three couples in the larger booth. David looked over his shoulder at them. They were like dolls, animated things swishing through large double doors.

'If you wish to catch Miss Amelia, sir,' the bartender said, 'it might be wise to make a move to the Oak Room. A waitress will serve you at your table.'

'What kind of songs does she sing?' David said. 'I wasn't. I mean, I didn't come here specifically to see her, so...'

'She's wonderful,' he said. 'She plays a mean version of "Summertime". And "As Time Goes By" and "Moon River". She has a voice like smoke on velvet.' He smiled wistfully and went to attend to another customer. He was a square-jawed, quarterback type and he leaned over to the bartender, slipping him a bill. The bartender looked at his fingernails and another bill was produced. Then the man rejoined his group, placing his hand at the base of his wife's spine.

David looked around at the room. There was barely a soul in there now, just a few couples too wrapped up in each other to care about the music. And there was no music. No background music at all. There was the rush from the other room, the smattering of applause, the sound of low talk, but nothing else. No

trills of mobile phones, no slot machine jingles, no noise bleed from headphones, the air was untroubled, as relaxed as an old, soft shoe.

'I need to go and run an errand. Can I make you another drink before I go,' the bartender said.

'Er, no I think. I think I should be getting back to the hotel now.'

'Are you not staying with us, sir?'

'No. I'm staying at the—'

'I'm sure sir doesn't need to tell me all of his business, now, does he? So can I get you one last drink for the road?'

David looked at his watch but he didn't now know whether it was six in the morning, six in the evening or six o'clock British time.

'Okay, yes I will. But can I ask you a question?' David said. 'Why is it that you're not in any of the guidebooks, or on any of the maps.'

'Oh that's quite simple, sir,' the bartender said, 'the management believe that marketing is crass and unnecessary and only attracts the kind of clientele unsuited to the Delphinium.'

He put the drink down on a paper napkin. 'Enjoy, sir,' he said. 'I will be right back.'

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When the bartender returned it was with the quarterback. An old Bakelite phone was passed from behind the bar and the man had a low urgent conversation with someone.

'You'd think he was having an affair, wouldn't you?' a voice said. David turned round to see a wild-haired man, greying at the temples, a thin beard and dark glasses. He was wearing a silver lamé lounge suit with a southern bow tie. The bartender made his excuses to David and hurriedly put a beer down next to the man.

'But the thing is you never can tell, can you? You just never can tell.' And with that he started to laugh; laugh like he couldn't stop. He put his hands up as if to apologize and hailed the bartender.

'Hey, bud, get this guy a drink. My shout.'

The bartender went back to his bourbon and the man next to David offered his hand to shake, his mouth withholding his amusement.

'Name's Flagstaff.' David drank the last from his glass and looked at the man. He had friendly, hound-dog features and a drinker's nose. He shook his hand.

'David. David Falmer.'

'Well, David Falmer, you're a long way from home, ain't ya?'

'I came here by mistake,' David said. 'I was out walking, and then, you know, suddenly I was just here.'

'Sometimes that's the best way to find what you're looking for, man,' Flagstaff said and went back to his drink. He started to laugh again and managed to choke on his beer trying to hide it. Beer suds matted his beard and dripped onto his suit. He wiped away the foam and laughed out loud.

'Oh man, you should see your face! What a picture. What a fucking photograph! I've been watching you for an hour now and I still can't believe it. Tell me this, I mean really, tell me you don't really think that this is all for *real*, do you?'

David thought of the perfect hairstyles, the cigarette cases, the vintage watches.

'I'm sorry, I don't—'

'Horseshit, buddy boy! You thought' – Flagstaff was rocking back and forth on his barstool now – 'shit, what did you think? That this was some kind of Las Vegas Brigadoon? That all these people were ghosts or some shit like that? Christ, you English are dumb. I've met a lot of English people and they've all been dumb, but you? You're the dumbest I ever met.'

He slapped the bar hard. David felt the contagious nature of the laughter.

'I never really . . .' David said, suddenly realizing how stupid he'd been. 'So what the—'

'What the fuck is going on? Good question, pal, good fucking question.' He sucked on his bottle of beer and moved his stool closer to David.

'Through there is some woman singing songs written before these people's grandpappies were born. She's Cold War Chic, Miss Amelia, and all these are her Cold War Kids. That's what they call themselves, Cold War Kids. It's all just make believe. Just a bunch of phoney fucking rich kids dressing up in their grandfathers' suits and their grandmammy's petticoats. They run around pretending like it's nineteen-fifty-two, or maybe it's nineteen-fifty-five, I can never remember. Last week they had a pretend three-minute warning and all of them spent the night in the fallout centre in the basement. Happy fucking days, right?'

Flagstaff drained his beer and beckoned the bartender over. 'Check this out,' he said with a smile.

'Say, bud, can you get me another beer and maybe some of those cheese crackers you do?' The bartender nodded. 'Oh and can you confirm the exact year it is? I'm going a bit senile, you know?'

'For the last time, Mr Flagstaff,' the bartender said, 'such talk is strictly against casino policy.'

'You see!' Flagstaff said, 'what a bunch of fucking phonies.'

Flagstaff laughed and despite himself David joined him. He saw himself sitting there, slack-jawed,

and realized how stupid he must have seemed. They clinked glasses and Flagstaff bought another drink. They fell into an easy conversation about why young men and women would want to relive years that they hadn't experienced.

It was the kind of discussion he would have once had with John: light, funny, but with just enough seriousness to keep it from frivolity. They were the conversations which would end with John telling a truth, a long rambling truth about his life. The fact of his mother's death, his workaholic father, his easy infatuations and the guilt he still felt about Helen. The abortion, the dreams that had been crushed under the weight of his own expectation and his own laziness.

David would listen and offer no advice save for a comforting nod, or the occasional 'I see'. But that John, the John who talked with a soft candour, late at night, had long since been boxed up and packaged away. There were no doubts now, no uncomfortable barking dogs in the back of his mind, just dates and times and plans and resolutions. And when he thought about it like that, David realized how wrong he'd got it all.

'I should get going,' David said. 'I've left my friend and . . . I just need to get back.'

'Gee, Dave, I'm hurt. I thought you were sticking around for my act.'

'I'd love to but . . . I really need to get back.'

'Gimme a cigarette,' Flagstaff said. 'I'll give you a sneak preview before you go.'

Flagstaff took a Zippo lighter from his pocket and lit the cigarette. He inhaled once then blew out a perfect circle, then a perfect square, then an equilateral triangle. David was stunned, a memory coming back fully formed.

'Oh my god, you're the smoking guy!' David said. Flagstaff looked up at him and smiled the widest, maddest smile David had ever seen. Flagstaff kept smiling and blowing squares and circles and triangles.

'Must be twenty-five years ago, now,' David said, 'but I remember it so clearly. Remember you so clearly. You had long hair then and this big old beard and you blew all these shapes. Impossible shapes. It was the best thing I ever saw on Paul Daniels' Magic Show, I mean honestly.'

Flagstaff's smile faltered, then disappeared. His eyes went dark and narrow. It felt like the whole room had gone silent.

'Don't you ever mention that cocksucker's name around me, okay? Ever.'

He blew out a Star of David.

'Daniels . . . Daniels is a fucking louse. A bald fucking dwarf with a rug that wouldn't fool a drunk Ray Charles.'

He knocked back his drink and blew a pentagon. David must have looked alarmed, so Flagstaff put a hand on his arm.

'Look, Dave, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be so . . . I don't know, but it still cuts me right to the quick. Twenty-five years later and still it cuts me. See, I was supposed to open for Daniels on his world tour. Back in eighty-three. Two hundred dates worldwide, television specials, you fucking name it. He gives me the contract and I push him for more of a cut of the door. The management, they give me a little extra but not as much as I wanted. I tell them that I'm a draw, that I'm selling 'em out every night. My manager tells me to take the deal, that I've pushed them as far as they'll go, and I say I'll think about it. That weekend I go out and get high. Get so high I don't remember nothing about it, so high no one finds me for a week. My manager's all trying to hush it up and he's pretty certain that Daniels' people haven't found out. We do a rehearsal show and I fucking rock the joint. And that's when Daniels sees how much the audience loves me. The putz got scared. I mean he was real scared, jealous as all hell.'

He blew a perfect hexagon and laughed.

'Or at least that's what I thought at the time, right? I'm not naive, even back then my act was, shall we say, not without its controversy? But fuck it, the deal was on the table and I should have taken it. Should

have bitten Daniels' fucking hand off, but ha ha, I knew best. Guts of the young, right? Only a fucking idiot would have pushed it. Everyone was telling me to sign on the line that is dotted, but I was too busy playing a pissing contest with a midget magician. By the time I'd calmed down, Daniels had already won and had offered the slot to some fucking trapeze artist or something.'

He shook his head and blew a complicated series of shapes that eventually formed the American flag.

'Thing is that a few months before, back when we were still friendly, Daniels had warned me about throwing things away. We were backstage in the bar, after the show you saw. We'd had a few drinks and I was asking him how a such an short, ugly dude like him had managed to get a prime-time television show, a sexy blonde wife, and a two-hundred-date world tour. He turns to me and says: "You know what, Flagstaff, I don't know. All I do know is that you only get one talent in this life. Whether it's god-given or comes from your genes or your DNA, I don't know either. But Flagstaff. I do know that you only get one talent. Only one. So you best make the most of it while you can."'

The smoke faded and he blew on the end of his cigarette. He chuckled to himself.

'Not much of a philosopher, that Daniels, but he was right. Maybe if I'd listened I'd have signed that deal and racked up enough money for my retirement and

then I wouldn't be here telling fifty year old jokes, blowing smoke ring elephants and jacking off in my dressing room. Listening's always been a problem for me. I hear, but I don't listen.'

Flagstaff rolled his cigarette in the ashtray, then put it out. David thought of John, the old flat, his Canadian girlfriend and all the times he had listened, every time he'd given a well-placed hand on the arm, or offered the softness of 'I understand'. David said, 'I'm good at listening, actually. It's what I do best, I suppose.'

To this Flagstaff just laughed, patted David on the back and said so long. By his drink a pale smoke trunk and a pair of tusks hung in the empty air.

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An hour or two later, David opened the door to his hotel room. John was curled up in an easy chair, rocking slightly. He was in his underwear, his hair ruffled and a empty bottle at his feet. He didn't seem to notice David come in.

'I'm sorry,' David said. 'I lost track of time. I went for a walk see, and before I knew it I was out in the middle of nowhere, I mean, really lost...'

David wanted to tell John all about Flagstaff, about the casino, and its clientele, but the words died

on his lips. He could see that his friend was shaking, his body stuttering in the twilight.

‘Are you okay?’ David said. ‘What the hell happened?’

John looked at his friend and then to the floor. ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ John said. ‘I don’t ever want to talk about it.’



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