

Everybody goes *Whooo*

“See that light?” Megan says to me, pointing to the south end of the Strip, where we can see, rising beyond the intervening hotels, the vertical column of light that shines all night from the apex of the Luxor’s pyramid. She and I and her mother Peggy are walking in the crowd, toward where the Stardust Hotel is going to be imploded at midnight.

“Do you know what’s in that light?” she says.

“Fog?” I say. I know it’s actually moths, but I don’t want to spoil her fun in telling me this.

“No! It’s bugs. Millions of bugs.”

“That’s pretty cool,” I say.

“And you know something else?”

“I know that there are exactly two million four hundred thousand two hundred and seventy-one bugs.”

“*No!* If you go close enough, you can see bats flying around eating the bugs.”

“Yuck. Who wants to eat bugs?”

Shut up! That’s what they eat.”

It occurs to me that I’ve never had a conversation like this before.

“And you know what else?”

"I know that you're going to yell at me if I give you the wrong answer."

"No! Sometimes owls come to eat the bats."

"Who eats the owls?"

"I don't know! You're asking stupid questions."

"I knew you were going to yell at me."

When a woman dresses up to meet you at the airport, even if she brings her eight-year-old daughter along, and even though you've known her only as an amiable overweight neighbor, you are de facto on a date. I came in expecting to start my vacation by having dinner with Peggy and her husband Robert, who lived next door to me when I spent my sabbatical in the nearby town of Pancake Flats. But suddenly it turns out that they've split up, and here we are.

It's not as if I'm embarrassed to be seen with her. Actually, she looks pretty good, in boots, black slacks, and a mock turtleneck with sparkly embroidery around the collar. And anyway I could stand to lose a few pounds myself. So the three of us make up a pretty good simulacrum of a moderately overweight family, strolling along, in the dry heat.

The one I feel bad about is Meghan. She's a lovely girl, with a way of looking grownups straight in the eye, and a confident looseness to the movement of her shoulders, a future beauty—but without a better rôle model she's never going to get there. She's already carrying that soft plumpness that is still cute now, but won't be cute much longer.

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A building wired with bombs has a sort of hypothetical look to it, alive, subjunctive, even glamorous, a way of standing there that seems to embody the two entangled facts of it being there and being not there. Spotlights play across its surface. The glass exterior has been taken away, so the tall slab of the building is mostly a plain gray in the light. The famous towering sign—the most beautiful on the Strip, whose oval outline filled itself in from the bottom up with blinking colored stars, which rose to surround the racy, angular letters of the word STARDUST, which then blazed up in a brilliant hash of white light—is gone, taken apart and trucked away to the Neon Museum.

It's a party crowd, all around us: locals and tourists, blue phone lights in every direction, a trace of weed in the air, girls with sparkly pocketbooks, couples with little kids, some with those chemically luminous bracelets. The air seems to press in on us, hard and prickly.

I've read somewhere on the Internet that some people have planned their vacations to coincide with a scheduled implosion, but that might be urban folklore. You would think that Americans would have had their fill of watching giant buildings collapse, but the opposite seems to be true. Maybe they've watched so many videos of 9/11 that they've developed a taste for it.

At a few minutes before twelve, the fireworks begin, launched from the other side of the building. People are already starting to make that *Whooo* noise, all more or less on the same pitch, like bachelorette girls at a drag show, but with a harder edge to it, the feeling of the crowd at a cage fight.

“Mommy!” Meghan says as the first explosions echo around us. “I can’t see! Lift me up!”

“I can’t,” Peggy says.

“I’ll do it,” I say. I get down on one knee, and Meghan climbs up to my shoulders, with one leg on either side of my neck, the way I once sat on my father’s shoulders at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. I try to push myself up from behind like a weight lifter, but she’s heavier than I expected. Peggy grabs my elbows. We strain and lift until finally I get on my feet.

Peggy holds on to me as I get my balance back. I stop myself just in time from saying, “You’re a big girl,” and so avoid calling attention to the weight issue.

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The fireworks aren’t what you’d see in a regular town, with a series of aerial shells leading up to the grand finale. Here it’s all grand finale, the bursts coming so loud and so close together that there’s no time to say “*Oohhh!*” or “*Ahhhh!*”

The fireworks stop, and everything goes dark, so dark that I can see the pink phosphene images of the last flashes. The crowd noise cranks up, hardens.

Then an array of timed flares flashes a giant number 10, taking up the whole face of the building, then 9, then 8, as the crowd, louder and louder, chants the numbers down.

At 0, the building goes white in a blaze of floodlights. From inside, the charges go off, a volley of cannon-fire so solid that we can feel it in our chests.

What happens then is that the Stardust just stands there in the white light. Concussions echo and slam back off the walls of the closer hotels. The building just

stands there as we stare into it for the long seconds it takes for time to catch up with itself, so many seconds that somebody behind us says, "It didn't work."

The middle falls first, almost gently, leaving a space into which both ends of the building tilt. Then it all comes down, fast, with a low-frequency crunch that sends tons of yellow dust boiling up into the floodlit sky, a tumbling cloud whose distinctly visible edges roll and churn like time-delay films of thunderheads forming.

The *Whooo* vocalizations surge higher, an ocean, a solid fury of shouts and shrieks and Rebel yells, a fusion of thrilled voices, blending in with the diminishing echoes of the final crunch. This goes on for at least half a minute, until gradually the crowd's voice begins to lose force, its long shapeless vowel loosening and descending. I get back down on my knees and Meghan climes off my shoulders.

"Was it fun?" I ask her.

"It was awesome," she says. She says this thoughtfully, soberly, without an exclamation point.

The crowd is beginning to spread out, most of us drifting south, in the same direction and at about the same speed as the thin trail of yellow dust floating above our heads. Meghan holds on to her mother's hand. A few people stop, turn around, and say "*Whooo!*" one last time.

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To borrow a line from Dr. Johnson, when a man is tired of Las Vegas, he is tired of life. I'm tired, but I guess I'm not tired enough. I still want to come back and rent a car and drive up to the high ground beyond the streetlights of the farthest subdivisions, where the lights of the whole city just spread out in front of you,

twinkling in the way lights seem to twinkle only in the West. You can see that it's alive. I'll be wearing khaki pants and a blue blazer whose shoulders follow the natural curve of my own shoulders, with no square shelf jutting out. I'll go to Caesars Palace and sit at the bar closest to the high-limit area, and hope that a hooker sits down next to me and strikes up a conversation. I'll tell her that she's beautiful, but that I'm wiped out at baccarat, and that I never carry my credit cards in the casino.

If it were any of my business to say anything to Meghan, I would like to tell her, "You're on your own. Nobody is ever going to stage an intervention about your weight. People are nice enough now that they won't body-shame you. You'll still be beautiful, but you'll be beautiful with an asterisk. When you get to college, your friends won't care. They all have a dirty little secret: they want other girls to be overweight because it makes them look thinner. "

I would like to tell her that the only implosions worth watching are the ones on YouTube that go wrong, where the people setting the explosives don't have the same level of expertise that demolition crews have in the United States. I'd particularly like her to see that great one in Shanghai, where instead of collapsing down into its own footprint the whole building rolls over and smashes into the building next to it.

Meghan pulls over toward me and takes my left hand, and the three of us are walking in a little chain. You can smell the dust, like the dust from inside a vacuum cleaner. Meghan lifts up her feet and swings between us.

The End