

The Easy One

Jamie Joyner stands astride the casino floor at the Bellagio in Las Vegas and scans the room for a path forward. It's early, midafternoon, before the big bettors appear, but still a serious place. She senses an opening, smooths her dress, arches her back, and steps out, heels clicking and hips swaying. As she walks, she observes the people around her: hefty Midwestern women sipping whiskey through straws, butts suctioned to stools; black men from Compton shooting craps, gold teeth agleam; and horny aimless Marines, faces as hard as their dicks, one of whom propositions Jamie as she whisks past him.

From a distance Jamie projects an easy confidence that belies anxiety. Tomorrow she will be the maid of honor when her ex-husband Trey marries Larry Parker, his boyfriend. She will wear a red silk organza gown, a Luly Yang, that will make Larry jealous. She will toast the newlyweds and soothe Trey's parents, who dislike their new son-in-law. She will pass out rings and dutifully endorse the new union. She will smile and eat precious food and dance. And when all is done, she will free herself from a world she wandered into but never wished for.

Jamie sees the high roller slot machines in the distance and quickens her pace. When she arrives, she locates *Huevos*, her favorite game, a video world of peripatetic squawking eggs. She sits down, feeds *Huevos* some bills, lights a cigarette, and pushes go: reels spin, music plays, objects tumble, and a voice shouts, “Good show!” It’s fun. She pushes go again and smokes and drinks and wins and loses and descends deeper and deeper into *Huevos*-land. Eggs cry *eggs-celent* and *eggs-static* and *eggs-traordinary* and throw sombreros and shotguns into the air. Jamie loves it. She loves the nonsense and possibility of each whirling adventure, each beginning and ending, and each frozen resolution when the inevitable becomes real. She can play for hours and walk away refreshed only richer or poorer.

After an hour of mixed fortune and good laughs, Jamie cashes out and heads to a nearby cocktail lounge. The wedding rehearsal starts at six and she wants to fortify herself. Like her, most of the guests have traveled to indulge Trey and Larry’s love of Sin City. She’s a fan too but isn’t accustomed to visiting alone.

Jamie orders a martini. When it arrives, she sips it and watches a thin man play video poker a few seats down. He stands out for his plaid shorts, yellow polo shirt, and oxygen tubes. His long blond hair and intense expression remind her of Kurt Cobain. She guesses he is a few years older than her, perhaps ten. He is agitated and talks to the machine as he plays. He looks up, catches her eye, and says, “Ain’t it fun.”

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“Ewwwww. Nooooo,” complains Jamie.

It’s an hour later and oxygen man is kneeling on Jamie’s hotel room bed handing her the oxygen cannula. It looks like a strange whistle. His name is Ben Ardmore and he’s a local. They’re both naked.

“You’ll like it,” he says, coaxing her. “Do it like I showed you.”

She presses the strange device into her nose as Ben positions the tubes behind her ears. He arranges everything and turns on the oxygen. It hisses quietly.

“Close your eyes. It’ll feel better,” he says rubbing Jamie’s back. She breathes slowly, in and out, in and out.

“I feel light headed,” she says. “It tickles. Why do you need it?”

Ben shuts off the oxygen and unhooks her.

“You don’t have to...” she says, afraid she has embarrassed him.

“I don’t exactly ‘need’ it. At least not for oxygen.”

Jamie takes in his meaning as he shoots her a smile. His looseness pleased her. He was intense without being clumsy and curious without losing focus. He gently guided her from front to back to front and helped free her tangled hair from the headboard. She remembers how her sense of his disability added to her pleasure and shouts, “You little fucker,” and shoves him out of the bed with her feet. They tussle and laugh hysterically.

“How many women fall for that trick?” she asks, catching her breath.

“You’re the first ever,” he says. She flips him off and kisses him and pinches his nipples and they wrestle, which leads to a back rubs, a shower, and a mini-bar rout by which time it is past six.

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At a quiet, uncrowded roulette table, Ben stacks chips and studies the numbers, as Jamie runs her hand over the felt. The croupier asks if they are newlyweds and Jamie answers yes. Ben plays along and pecks her cheek and calls her sweetie. He lays down some chips, the croupier closes the table, spins the wheel, and releases the ivory ball, which circles maddeningly, flirts with the pockets, and finally rattles into the zero. Someone groans and Ben explains that zero never pays. He continues

to bet and lose and is becoming frustrated when Jamie suggests the three, which hits on the next spin, a thirty-five-to-one winner.

“Wow,” says Ben. “Thanks. Now I can pay rent. Why the three?”

“I don’t know. It’s one less than four?”

“Makes total sense,” says Ben. He cashes out his winnings and they grab a quick bite at the Shake Shack, where he asks why Jamie’s phone is ringing and she explains about the missed rehearsal, Trey and Larry, and tomorrow. Ben is nonplussed.

“I’m doing it for his mom,” clarifies Jamie. “If you hadn’t come along I would have spent this evening praising Judy Garland and admiring teeth.”

“Happy to be a distraction,” says Ben. “How long were you married?”

“Seven years. Got married out of college. We divorced a couple years ago.”

“And didn’t you know...uh, couldn’t you tell...”

“Guess how many times I’ve been asked that question?”

“Just curious.”

“Do the math. Our bodies have nine holes and our brains have eight-six billion neurons. That’s a lot of combinations. Have you ever been married?”

“Once. We’re divorced. She lives in LA.”

“Why did you split?”

“She wanted kids and I didn’t”

“So, your futures looked different.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Us too. Our snow globes didn’t match.”

“How’s that?”

“You know, out little bubble worlds.” Jamie imitates shaking a snow globe. “He had different stuff in his than mine. Mine was all picket fences, backyard barbeques, a gondola in Venice, a Cialis commercial. His was blue swimming pools, late nights, black tuxes, and little dogs. I could have managed the other stuff.”

“What’s in your snow globe now?” asks Ben.

“Haven’t a clue. Let’s go back upstairs.”

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Jamie tries to focus on a soft wash of yellow light as she lifts her head and groans, shaking with euphoria. It’s dark outside and the clock is beaming nine. Round two was rougher than round one. Ben’s boots stayed on and her black panties are tied around his neck. They may both have rug rash. Ben loosens his grip, she slowly crawls out from underneath him, and he slumps against the headboard. His ragged shallow breathing reminds her of a wounded animal’s. She hands him a half-drunk bottle of Dom Perignon and he takes a swig.

“This is good shit.”

“The boys only do good shit,” says Jamie, admitting that Trey is paying for her room and extras. Her phone rings and she picks up. It’s Larry. Apparently, Trey hates Kahlil Gibran. Larry just found out at rehearsal and is hysterical. Their readings were a secret.

“Work it out,” scolds Jamie. “You’re big boys now.”

Trey comes on the phone and asks, “Are you in bed JJ?” She motions for Ben to be quiet.

“Goodness no. I’m watching Oprah. Sorry I couldn’t break away for rehearsal.”

“You’re in bed. I know that sound,” says Trey suspiciously. “Did you get the champagne and chocolate I sent?”

“Yes. Lovely. Thank you. Was that a bribe to make sure I show up?”

“Maybe,” says Trey. “Don’t stay out too late.”

“Bye,” says Jamie, giggling and hanging up. She often doesn’t consider Trey gay; she considers him more in love with someone else.

“What are you, their mother?” asks Ben.

“In a way. I did give birth to them,” she says.

Jamie can tell by Ben’s expression that there is no way to explain it. She straddles him and teases him with a chocolate truffle, which he bites into. She likes him, even though she hardly knows him. She can’t remember how many men she has been with since the divorce. It doesn’t matter.



The Strip is hopping when Ben and Jamie climb into a cab and head toward a jazz club in west Las Vegas. Neon tracers dance on windows as Jamie recedes into her thoughts. They pass strip malls, gas stations, sports bars, and warehouses, interspersed with brick-walled neighborhoods where actual families live. They had wanted to marry Jamie in Vegas instead of in his parent’s church, but they couldn’t afford it.

When they get to the jazz club, Ben introduces Jamie to the owner and asks her to wait in the green room while he chats with some friends. She checks out the room’s floor-to-ceiling black-and-white photos of jazz greats such as Charlie Mingus, Dave Brubeck, and Ella Fitzgerald and sees one of Ben standing next to a grand piano, gripping the neck of a glistening bass. His jagged signature suits him. He’s completely bald. Earlier she found out that he sometimes works as a rock-climbing guide. Clearly, he has many occupations.

The club owner comes over and hands Jamie a drink. “Without a doubt, you are not Ben’s sister.”

“Who is he?” asks Jamie. “Ben.”

The owner looks her over. He is standing too close, something she hates.

“Who is he?”

“Just a hometown boy done good.”

Jamie examines Ben’s photo again. He’s content and smiling. Happy. She wonders how other people see him and how other people see her. When Trey came out, he said that his college friends wanted her and because he had her, they saw him as strong and male-worthy, an ironic situation but better than despair.

Voices interrupt Jamie’s thoughts, stage technicians calling places. She turns to face the club owner, to thank him and head for a table.

“Don’t do it,” he says.

“Don’t do what?”

“Hurt Ben.”

“Why would I hurt him? I hardly know him.”

“I don’t know,” says the club owner. “But you look like someone who could hurt someone.”

“I can’t,” whispers Jamie, shaking her head. “I can’t hurt anybody.”

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The club lights dim and Ben joins Jamie at the table. He’s wearing a shiny short-sleeved black shirt. He orders drinks and the musicians come onstage, a drummer, a guitarist, a female vocalist, a saxophonist, and pianist.

The show begins and Jamie listens intently as the musicians pass melodies, beats, counterpoints, and rhythms back and forth, playing and improvising, signaling and nodding, motioning and digging, laying the foundation. She doesn't know a lot about jazz but likes it. Ben is rapt. He closes his eyes and nods and yells *yeah* or *uh* and periodically drums the table, acknowledging his friends' performances. At intermission he tells Jamie that he will catch up after the show and heads backstage.

When the second act begins, Ben is announced as a guest artist and carries his bass onstage to loud applause. She Googled him before the show and found out he has two Grammy nominations. Jamie wonders why he didn't mention his music earlier.

Ben plays in the background for a couple of numbers but soon takes over. During a long version of *A Nightingale Sang in Barkley Square*, he launches into a solo, nodding and rocking and loosening his grip and yelping and leading the room into a smooth passage with blurry edges and fat undertones that soften and spread like warm jam. Jamie enters a blissful fugue state, where time disappears and a deep calm envelops her. After a while, a gentle voice quietly doo-wops her back to reality.

When the show ends, Ben comes out and introduces Jamie to his musician friends. She is honored and tries to praise him, but words fail her. In the cab back to the Bellagio, she presses herself into his slender frame and he twirls her long dark hair around his fingers. Seeing him perform has changed her idea of him, of who he is and who he will be. She thinks about tomorrow's wedding and how often she tried to pin Trey down, make sense of his predilections and contradictions, absorb his apologies and remorse, and squeeze herself into a world that didn't fit her. Ben's seems to fit everywhere.

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The next morning, Ben heads home to his condo to feed his cat and catch up on business. He will meet Jamie later at the reception. She calls Larry to add Ben to the guest list and endures some teasing. She reminds Larry that he and Trey owe her.

She puts on a swimsuit, goes to the pool, and sets up in a lounge chair. For the next couple hours, she swims and reads and listens to Coldplay. Men make eye contact, but she avoids them. She feels good and the desert heat feels great. Ben phones to say he may be late and she says okay but begins to worry and texts *don't be a butt*. A half hour later he texts *it's better than being an ass*, which does not comfort her.

Later, walking back to her room, she thinks about her toast and whether it should be serious or funny. Trey relies on her to make sense, to keep the peace, so funny is risky. She decides that if Ben makes it she will be Amy Schumer and if not Sara Silverman. In her room she does her hair, dresses, and wraps a white orchid corsage around her wrist. She looks in the mirror and fingers her pearls. She likes to think she is lovely. She tidies up her hair and sucks in her cheeks. Her lipstick and dress match perfectly.

The private chapel is packed when she arrives. Yellow roses and pale green cacti adorn the altar, a tasteful homage to the desert. She knows what to do. She has been over everything with Trey a dozen times. She recognizes her old massage therapist and waves. Trey's accounting firm colleagues and a small contingent of his new gay friends are seated up front. She sits down and nods and smiles and scolds herself for being nervous. The minister appears and she stands and joins him at the altar.

The wedding music begins. Trey and Larry enter from the back, walk down the aisle, and embrace Jamie. The minister speaks and the boys stare lovingly into each other's eyes. Trey reads Shakespeare and Larry reads Bob Dylan, their voices thick with emotion. They make their vows and Trey hands rings to Jamie, gold Celtic knots. She does her part, they finish the ceremony, and the men kiss. Trey breaks away, quickly embraces Jamie, and whispers, "Thank you." The men kiss again, deeper and longer this time, the room applauds, Trey shouts, "Champagne," and everyone heads to the ballroom next door for the reception.

On Jamie's way over, Trey's mother intercepts her and says, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," bowing dramatically and pressing the back of Jamie's hand to her forehead. They chat. She is unabashedly grateful that Jamie is still in her son's life.

"How are you?" Trey's mother asks, finally.

"Great. Never better," says Jamie.

"I'm so happy for you."

At the reception, diaphanous curtains drift, arpeggios soar, and sculpted male waiters wearing white gloves pass ornate appetizers, shiny quail eggs piled with Beluga caviar and cubed foie gras impaled on toothpicks. Jamie remembers the Albertsons cake from her own wedding and feels wistful. She searches for Ben but does not see him. She tries not to worry; he said he might be late. Trey's father toasts the newlyweds, the waiters pour more Dom, and the room's energy kicks up a notch. Jamie mingles with Trey's college friends and, after a while, he finds her and pulls her aside. She can't hide her sadness and he strokes her hair.

"I don't see him," she says.

"See who?" asks Trey.

"That bastard, Ben."

"Who is Ben?"

"You know, the guy I invited. I told Larry this morning."

Trey stops and holds Jamie at arm's length. "I don't think so, JJ. You and your boy toys. Enough already. The Bellagio is expensive."

She searches his face for any clue that he is kidding.

"He is on the list, isn't he?" she asks, concerned.

“Stop.” admonishes Trey, grinning and shaking his head. “You’re far too old for all this nonsense.”

She wants to kill him. She remembers when he first moved out and returned a week later, unsure of his needs and feelings. She remembers arriving home from work and finding him unconscious on the garage floor with the car running and rushing him to the Emergency Room, crying all the way, sick with guilt and worry. She remembers the hum of the Intensive Care Unit and Trey connected to a tangle of tubes. She remembers telling him that she could let him go and would let him go, if that was what he needed.

“You’re an ass,” screams Jamie pushing Trey backward harder than intended. He staggers into a waiter, knocks over a drink tray, and lands on his side. The arpeggios stop and Larry rushes over to help. The entire room is staring at Jamie.

“A toast,” she yells, raising her champagne flute. She is hot and emboldened. She yells again. “Come on everybody. A toast to the happy couple. Now. Come on. That’s right. Do it. Raise your glasses.”

It is her big moment. She has earned it. She believes Trey and Larry exist only because of her. They’re both on the floor staring up with glazed expressions. Trey’s mother has joined them.

Jamie begins to shout instructions again but stops when the ballroom door opens and Ben enters. He is wearing a red and green plaid sports coat, red Bermuda shorts, and green army boots. He sees Jamie’s salute and returns the gesture.

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Two hours later Ben and Jamie are dancing. He hums and she leans into him, so he can turn her. Nobody is watching. He pulls her tighter and suddenly she feels like his bass, absorbed in his arms, full of music. He gently kisses her cheek and says, “That was a nice toast.”

“I overdid it,” she slurs. She is more than a little drunk.

“Does he really hate musicals?” asks Ben.

“Hate? He takes pride in hating them. He has always been contrary. He’s a prick. You’re not a prick, are you?”

“Larry seems so nice,” says Ben, ignoring Jamie’s question.

“Larry is a dick,” says Jamie.

“Why is everyone suddenly a prick or a dick?” asks Ben. “You’re better than that.”

“Duh. Because I don’t have one,” says Jamie, patting Ben’s member. He removes her hand and pins it behind her back.

“He wanted me to wear one,” she whispers seductively. “I did. I can do it for you. You’ll like it.”

“It’s okay.” Ben says, soothing her.

“I loved him,” says Jamie.

“I know,” says Ben. “I know. Let’s go outside.”

The small private deck above the Bellagio fountain is empty. Geysers dance to Mozart. Jamie digs out a cigarette and lights it. Something about the evening isn’t right, even after her little spectacle. Something hasn’t changed. Out on the Strip, hordes of people are walking straight into nothing.

“When I first picked up the bass, I was terrible,” says Ben. “It was big. It felt, I don’t know, ugly, unmanageable, but I kept trying.”

“Please,” says Jamie. “No homespun wisdom.”

“Okay,” says Ben. “It is free and well intentioned.”

“I still don’t want it.”

The fountain arcs and whooshes and the Eiffel Tower at the Paris Hotel disappears into a watery cloud.

“Gimme a cigarette,” says Ben. Jamie lights one and hands it to him. He has been scolding her for smoking, so she is surprised.

“Are you going to smoke it?” she asks.

“You know I won’t. I just like holding it.”

“But you want to.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why don’t you smoke?”

“Because my first wife died of lung cancer after we divorced.”

The spray stops and the Eiffel Tower reappears.

“I’m sorry, Ben,” says Jamie. She wonders how many times she has said sorry and never meant it. First wife. She wonders if Ben knows he has slipped up. Worlds within worlds.

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago.” He taps his cigarette and ash disappears into the breeze.

“I’m married Jamie.”

“I know,” she says. “It’s okay.”

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Back in Jamie’s room, without his clothes, standing sideways, Ben resembles a solid flat-chested girl. He has a bit of a tummy and pale, lightly-tufted pubic hair. The only problem is his large,

distinctly male hands that look like small stringed instruments all on their own. Jamie seldom inspects so closely, but she wants to remember him, since it is their last night together.

After the reception, they played roulette again. Ben pretended to be a wealthy eccentric and Jamie his royal Portuguese wife, a former beauty queen, who spoke broken English. The ball landed on zero twice before they ran out of money and Ben ran out of energy.

He crawls into bed with Jamie and turns off the lamp. He is too tired for sex.

“It’s okay,” says Jamie. “We have the morning.”

“As you wish my Queen, my liege,” says Ben.

“Will you do something *egg-celent* for me tomorrow?” asks Jamie. “An un-wedding present?”

“Certainly,” says Ben.

“Will you kill Trey and Larry,” she asks. “Gash them about the head and ears, perhaps remove a testicle.”

“Which one first?”

“The testicle or the person?”

“The person, silly.”

“The skinniest one,” says Jamie. She imagines Trey and Larry making love, Trey cupping Larry’s head, and Larry crying out with joy. She always knew Trey liked men. She just didn’t know how much. She cuddles Ben from behind and wraps her arms around him. He grasps her hands and she feels loved for the first time in years.

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The next morning, Jamie's phone rings as she lays in bed checking the weather. She has been awake for a while, watching Ben sleep. It's Trey. He really likes Ben. She can bring him around anytime. She gets out of bed, heads to the bathroom for some privacy, and trips over Ben's boots.

"Ow. Fuck."

"Excuse me?" says Trey melodramatically.

"How was your evening?" asks Jamie. "I'm sorry about my little outburst."

"That is why I'm calling. We're worried sick about you."

"We have to break up," says Jamie. "Really. It's time. All of us. We have to break up."

Trey is silent.

"Okay. We can give you some time."

"I don't need time, Trey. I need to break up for real, as in not see you or Larry or your mother or friends ever again."

"You don't mean that. It's just your hangover talking."

Jamie gathers her strength and starts again. She's not used to speaking to Trey in this way.

"Look, you don't owe me anything, okay. We don't owe each other anything. I know we said forever at our wedding and when we signed the divorce, but we don't have to keep our vows. It's over. We're done."

"We'll talk later," says Trey, gently. "I'm glad you're having a good time." He hangs up and Jamie screams in frustration.

Ben walks into the bathroom rubbing his eyes and asks, "What happened?"

"I broke my toe on your ridiculous boot."

“Stop,” says Ben. “You’re hurting my boot’s feelings. Let’s see.” He kneels to inspect Jamie’s toe and kisses the inside of her ankle.

“It’s just bruised,” he says. “It’ll get better.”

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Jamie wanted Ben to do it standing up, military style, but he suggested otherwise. It’s your first time so you’ll remember it later, he said, and it should be a good memory. Instead, he moved a padded chair into the bathroom, covered it with a sheet, and dimmed the lights.

Jamie sits naked and still as Ben shaves her head with his electric razor. She had asked him about his photo after his show. He called it ritual cleansing.

Jamie imagines the razor’s dull buzz on a sound visualizer, an evenly spaced wave form. It is how people see her, especially Trey and Larry and perhaps Ben: steady, reliable, and certain. Too certain. She works things out, just barely. Her dark hair falls away beneath Ben’s smooth strokes and he sets the locks aside so she can donate them for a cancer wig.

When Trey came out, Jamie wanted to stay together. Others had before them. Why couldn’t they? Many things could remain: birthday parties, the annual trip to the coast, the way they said don’t forget and meant it. Larry could move in. It could work. It would work.

But it couldn’t. The picture was wrong, said Trey. Wrong. It wasn’t about body part on body part or even about love. It was about the differences in their worlds, the beauty of their worlds.

Ben works on the back of Jamie’s head near her neck.

“What’s your wife like?” she asks.

“Shhh, I’m concentrating.”

“That’s not an answer,” says Jamie.

“She’s nice. I’m the disgusting one.”

“So am I,” says Jamie. “How long have you been married?”

“Eight years or so. She’s my producer.”

“Or so?”

“Okay. Seven and change. My first wife...”

“...I know. Died. Why do men always round up?” asks Jamie.

“Because we’re competitive and never satisfied,” says Ben.

“Children?”

“With my first wife. A girl. Miranda. She lives with her grandmother. It was the right thing to do. I see her a few times a year.”

“I love that name,” says Jamie, choking back tears. She wanted to have children with Trey.

Ben finishes and Jamie is bald. She likes her apple-shaped head. She has never seen it before, except in baby pictures. Ben sits down and she shaves him. His head is avocado shaped.

“It itches,” says Ben. “Does yours?”

“Remember your learning-the-bass story last night?”

“Yeah.”

“It feels like the end to that story.”

“So, it hurts?”

“No. It makes sense.”

They make love for the last time in the shower, a slippery, clumsy final performance. Afterward they dress and pack. Ben shoves his oxygen tank into a duffel bag and asks Jamie to keep the plaid jacket.

“Why?” she asks, tugging at the garish cloth.

“I don’t know,” says Ben. “It was a onetime thing.”

“Does your wife care?” asks Jamie. “About this? You and me? The cannula? Other women?”

“Guess how many times I’ve been asked that question?” asks Ben.

“Sorry.”

“She loves that I love to improvise.”

Jamie smiles and says, “The beauty of your world.”

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In a dark corner of the casino, Jamie and Ben cuddle in a cocoon chair and share a cigarette. They’re playing a *Rolling Stones* slot machine. *The Bitch* blares from the chair speakers, as Mick’s preposterous, obscene red tongue grows and shrinks in rhythm to the music. As Jamie watches, she sees her reflection in the screen’s glass and says goodbye to her old self, to the one who grasps too tightly but can’t hang on, to the one who cares too much, to the one too young and too old and nothing in between, to the easy one.

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Jamie’s seat mate on the flight home, a teenage girl, covers her face as the plane ascends. It’s dusk and the sun is setting behind Red Rocks, Vegas’s massive ochre and scarlet western boundary.

“It’ll be okay,” comforts Jamie.

“I just don’t like the feeling,” says the girl.

“You’ll get used to it,” says Jamie.

Jamie shuts her window shade and reaches into her purse for Ben’s cannula and clutches it. She imagines his wife watching him play his bass, applauding him, celebrating him. She doesn’t think about Trey and Larry. She watches the shimmering lights of the Strip disappear. It has been an *egg-celent* trip, but she won’t return soon.