

on freemont street | Nikki Dolson

It's my wife's turn to order, but instead of asking for eggs, she says, "I don't want to be married anymore." Our waiter turns and walks away.

"Honey?" I reach my hand across the table.

"I'm leaving," she says, and does, sliding off the green pleather-clad seat and between an elderly couple coming down the aisle. She makes it out the front door while the newcomers block me in. The old man, sporting a white comb-over, says to me, "You okay, son?"

"My wife left me, I think." My heart is pounding, and sudden fear has me sweating even in the refrigerator-cool of the restaurant.

"They do come back sometimes. Mine did." He tilts his head at his wife. She smiles at us. My smile is half-hearted and I push past them.

It's barely 8 a.m. in Las Vegas, and the temperature is well past 90 degrees. This early in the morning, the streets are still quiet. The last of the local gamblers and drinkers have gone home. I see my wife walking slowly past a strip mall a half block away. As I cross the street to catch up with her, I wonder if she knew I would follow her now like I did a year ago, abandoning our Midwest beginnings for Mojave Desert uncertainties. No real job prospect, but the promise of a life with her was enough for me.

I am a welder without a steady job. All I can find is day labor. I stand near grocery store parking lots where others, the unemployed, the unmoored, and I wait for a construction foreman to swing by in his work truck and pick some of us. The foremen know my face now, and three or four days a week I can count on getting picked and making a little money. It's not enough though. My wife makes the real money working as a cocktail waitress, but she's only killing time. She is a dancer, lithe and strong. She wants to dance in the same casinos Frank Sinatra sang in, like her mother. Her mother is five-foot-seven. At five-foot-one, my wife can't even get an audition for one of those shows. Besides, the old casinos are dying; the Dunes, the Aladdin, and other landmark casinos have disappeared. They were demolished to make room for the new media world—digital

cleavage and g-stringed asses on thirty-foot wide screens that hang low over the bumper-to-bumper Las Vegas Strip traffic.

I fall in step with her. We watch our reflections in the windows of still-locked pawnshops and dry cleaners. These stores won't open until 10 a.m., but they'll stay open until midnight.

She says, "I'm tired of just getting by."

"I'll find a steady job. I'll clean bathrooms, haul garbage."

I want to reach for her but she's been twitchy lately and not sleeping. She'll get up in the middle of the night, walk from our tiny apartment to the corner convenience store and play nickel slot machines for hours.

"Like I want a trash man for a husband." She runs a hand through her dark, curly hair. "I'm done lying in this rut with you."

I grab her arm. "What's your problem?"

"I'm pregnant." She leans against me. "I'll never dance now."

I open my mouth but there are no words. I think about what her mother said the week before we left. She said my wife ended her career as a dancer. Her mother never had real talent, only spectacular tits. My wife, she has talent. I tilt her face up to mine. I imagine a baby girl with big brown eyes like hers and maybe my chin. "You can dance anywhere. Even here," I say.

"I can't." She looks around for people watching. There are more cars out now: a cab drives by, and another couple of cars wait at the intersection ahead of us. I can see the old couple seated in the diner. Her head is bowed over a menu and he's looking out the window in our direction.

"Right here," I say. She shakes her head but takes a step forward. I lean against a storefront and give her a nod. She takes another step then she's leaping and twisting in the air. For a moment, she is weightless. Her hair fans out behind her, and her arms open wide to the world. When she lands, I take her in my arms and we dance to the rhythm of the passing cars.

Nikki Dolson's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in StoryGlossia, The Back Alley, and the al. She lives near Chicago with her family.