INSIDE: SHUFFLE OFF TO A BUFFALO SANDWICH

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BENOIT

THE DON'T PLAYER

He bets against luck, against opportunity, against people. He wagers on misfortune. And my wife has left me for him.

A STORY BY

MARC BOOKMAN

My wife left me three weeks ago for a man we met at a Las Vegas craps table during our last vacation. We both know it isn't working, she wrote on a napkin when she left; I would have preferred she'd written nothing at all. She didn't really have to; after all, the collapse of our marriage was only a little less obvious than the erupting volcano in front of the Mirage. But she wasn't telling the truth, either, at least not the whole truth. Some people stay in failing marriages for 50 years because they have nowhere better to go. My wife thought she was heading some place better, and in fairness to her it's a lot easier to make mistakes when things don't figure to get much worse.

I remember the day they met, it was almost a year ago and we were killing time at a $3 craps table during one of those afternoons too hot to sit by the pool. Louise had already taken an herbal wrap and salt glow in the spa — I still don't know what those are, but she looked like she'd swallowed a few ounces of plutonium — and we had a couple of hours before dinner. Engelbert was at the Desert Inn that night, and Louise was wearing the T-shirt she had bought in the gift shop the day before. You would be amazed how fast his stuff goes, she had said. On the shirt Engelbert was wearing an all-white suit with white shoes and a white belt. Details I remember.

I always let Louise pick the table we go to, and the one she chose was practically empty: an older couple betting the minimum without odds, two underage kids blowing the profits they had made selling marijuana to their high school buddies, and Milt, don't call him Milton whatever you do. He was wearing a string tie and cowboy hat, but the rodeo wasn't in town and I had a sneaking suspicion he was something other than what he was trying to be. Of course we're all guilty of that, but he was too damned obvious about it, as if boldness alone might get him over, might back down any inquiries. Whatever it was, I didn't like him right off, and that was before I noticed he was playing the Don't Pass line.

Craps tables have a life of their own. You can be in any corner of a casino and know there's a hot one by the sharp roar piercing the smoke every 45 seconds or so, distinct from any noise that might emanate from a roulette or blackjack table or even the sports book at playoff time. Players will back up three and four deep just to watch, just to be near the action, the heat, while the dealers move their hands as if treading water, paying out chips in robotic fashion as the crowd screams in their ears. When that seven finally comes, as it must, the gasp is agonizing, like the wind being kicked out of 10 chests simultaneously. Only then, slowly, and with deep regret, the gamblers gather their chips in their fists, not counting, never counting, but sorting their winnings by color and slouching away from the table saying to each other that if only we had made that last point, all hell might have broken loose. Oh, we might have done some real damage then, they say, exhilaration already fading away but the intoxicant of action still pumping blood and inflating lungs and goddamn if only every table could be like that one. But most of them aren't like that at all. Most are like the one Milt was playing, dead as a doornail and as routine as a lawyer's suits. There is no

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illustration by Christian Northeas

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action at this table. The stickman listlessly turns the dice while the dealers wait for the older couple to bet; after each toss they huddle to decide their next investment, usually a sucker play like Field or Hard Six, something that pays long and shows up longer. The teenagers have a little money on practically every number on the board, and Milt is betting Don't. It's his game, he has a rack of black chips, hundreds, in front of him, and the pit bosses are eyeing him like vultures might check out a roast rack of lamb with mint jelly in the desert. Even without the money, though, it's the Don't player who sets the tone for the table. Try to imagine everyone in a section of a stadium rooting for the home team, and one guy, all decked out in the visitor's togs, going crazy when his team gets ahead. The Don't player expects crime and interest rates to go up and voter turnout to go down, he knows that extra points hit crossbars and hockey pucks hit posts and home runs blow foul in the wind. He worships the transparent insect wing of incremental mathematics, he believes in the odds and bets against luck, chance, opportunity, against people. Like Henry Miller's weather prophet, the Don't player anticipates that things will get worse and wagers accordingly. It's for this kind of person, Milt in particular, that my wife has left me.

He was adjusting his string tie as we approached the table, oblivious to the fact that he was holding up the game, and it seemed the dealers were scared to say anything to him, since he had all the money and everyone else was playing the minimum. You didn't have to be a genius to figure out these table dynamics, and I sure as hell wasn't too pleased about them. No one likes to see grown men kowtowing for a buck.

"What's the holdup?" I said, laying out money for a $12 six and a $12 eight. Milt had taken a comb from his pocket and was now straightening his hair.

"No holdup, sir," the stickman said, looking over anxiously to see if Milt had finished his personal grooming. After a few seconds, and with comb still in hand, he backed up the Don't bet with appropriate odds; the stickman pushed the dice in the direction of the older couple.

"Give me those threes just one time," the older woman said, but the throw was a seven, and Milt pumped his arm in a gesture reminiscent of Kirk Gibson's when he hit that famous home run for the Dodgers. "Yesss," he said to himself. To this day I have not forgotten that. Don't players usually recognize their own weaknesses; that is, they know that for a minuscule advantage in the odds they are betting against everyone else at the table, and so they always take their winning gracefully and without drawing a great deal of attention to themselves. Milt's behavior told me more than I needed to know about him, but apparently less than Louise could comprehend. All she saw was a winner, a man cashing in his hundreds for thousands — neither of us had ever seen that pinkish-white chip before — while we played the $3 pass line and rooted twice as hard as he did.

"What sort of bet is *that*?" Louise whispered when she noticed that Milt's money was not on the same line as the rest of the table. It would be just like me, she was thinking, to have been making the wrong bets all these years. Or worse, and more simply, to have been leaving the money in the wrong place! "He's betting that the old guy doesn't make his four," I explained as the older man yelled out, "How about that Bishop Two-Two for me now?" He threw the dice hard, so hard in fact that they bounced back to his end of the table, but no more effectively than his wife had only moments before, and they came up seven. The dealer delicately removed our money from the felt, as if it were simply on loan to the casino, then pushed another pile of black chips Milt's way. There was a look of admiration in Louise's eyes, but I give her credit for this: It was not the money that impressed her, it was the fleeting glimpse of success now smoothing out his shirt and telling the boys that it was "time to step things up a bit." She was just so hopeful about finding that easy point, the one that always gets made and defies the odds.

A FEW MINUTES LATER WE HAD LOST THE $50 we were willing to lose, and I was getting ready to jump into a quick shower before Engelbert.

"I think I'll take a look at the gift shop one more time," Louise said, and right then I knew what the cards held for us. Mind you, Milt hadn't even looked her way, but like they always said about Warren Beatty, he didn't have to. He had the curly hair, the shoulders, the big rattlesnake boots and eyes to match, he had the whole package, and only a fool wouldn't know where my close-to-ex-anyway-wife was heading. I didn't even follow her down.

I MET LOUISE FOUR YEARS AGO THIS MAY at Garden State Park's Derby Day. She was standing at the finish line, well on her way with mint juleps, screaming her head off for some horse named If I Were a Bell; and I didn't think it was because the owner had selected the proper use of the subjunctive. When the horse won and she made no move to go to the cashier's window, I found out that she was playing the Pick Seven, and had to hit six more horses in a row to collect.

"I guess you're a little excitable," I said, not knowing the half of it at the time.

"I just like to see them run," she said. This turned out not to be the truth at all; her horse was out of the next race by the backstretch, and I don't believe she even saw the end of it, her head already buried in the program to find some other exotic wager that might lift her from the asphalt and highways of Garden State to the greener turf of Gulfstream or Santa Anita or any other place where the smell of money overpowered the smell of manure. What I thought at the time, standing under the wire stinking of mint and dreaming of Kentucky bluegrass, was that we had gambling in common — not exactly a foundation for true love, but a spark, a thread for conversation, anyway. Except I was wrong even about that. We both loved to gamble, but there are all sorts of gambling, and we were like a couple devoted to the cinema — one wants to go to the Ritz to see foreign films, the other wants to stay home and watch made-for-television movies. I won't say which was which, and I won't compare shooting craps to Stroheim. What I will say is that Louise had no sense of gambling as fun, no sense of losing a couple of bucks and chalking it up to a day's entertainment. She was only interested in the big strike: the lottery, the double tri-

fecta, the whirring cherry-cherry-cherry of the slot machine. Her eventual marriage to me was something less than that.

What we did have in common was a little sexual chemistry — what Louise later termed "that damned Southern electricity" — and a lot of loneliness. This proved to be, not surprisingly, like building a house on the San Andreas fault. There is a settling-in process that takes place with newlyweds, a feeling-out time about whose side of the bed the alarm clock goes on and how many eight-minute snooze intervals will be allowed, but for us there was no period of adjustment, at least not over toothbrushes and shower lengths. Our compromises were less tangible, and thus more subject to dispute regarding their resolutions. What it was, ultimately, was that Louise wanted us to be rich, and the first step was to think rich. I had never had money — then as now I worked in a bookstore, paid hourly but I got to choose the music that played while customers shopped — and, although I understood the concept of having excess money, I had never charted a course to realize the idea. This annoyed my wife no end, but until she actually left me I assumed that her carping was the usual noise a spouse had to endure when the magnetic poles of a marriage start pushing away from each other. As it turned out, we were yet further repudiation of the counterintuitive axiom that opposites attract.

You think small, Louise said, only seconds after I had broken the ceremonial champagne glass underfoot to consecrate our vows. She was referring to the band I had selected, a tasteful threesome with the chutzpah to advertise that their sound echoed the classic Bill Evans trios of the early '60s. (Later that evening, with a curiosity fueled by very bad wine, I confronted them about this. The piano player claimed that I had misread the ad, that they billed themselves as reminiscent of the Will Evans trio, "a panhandle honky-tonk group of considerable renown 30 years ago." This explained to my satisfaction the ad nauseam versions of "Miles and Miles of Texas.") But I was soon to learn that Louise considered my thinking small on virtually every subject except family, which she refused to start "under these circumstances." By this she meant the squalor of my apartment, a one-bedroom walk-up with some beautiful built-in wooden bookcases but a minor radiator leak problem during the winter months. It's hard to know what Louise envisioned; none of these faults were hidden from her view, and no sane person would accuse her of digging gold by marrying a bookstore clerk. As bizarre as it sounds, I think she viewed our marriage as a starter home, and when she couldn't add central air or another bedroom, she decided on a different home. One with greater possibilities.

By the time we visited Las Vegas for that long weekend, almost a year ago, our relationship had deteriorated into a bad business arrangement, the sort of partnership where one wants to recapitalize and the other wants to hire an arsonist. While Louise was grabbing hold of Milt's string tie in search of a better life, I set out on a futile attempt to adjust my wife's value system. Believe me when I say that this last sentence reads more idiotically than it actually was. We still lived together, and even after Vegas I felt that things could be salvaged. I stopped gambling entirely, and involved us in a desperate clash with other cultural activities we had steadfastly avoided in the past. Readings at Borders, classical music at the Mann, Sunday mornings at the Art Museum, but all to no avail. There's more to this life than striking it rich, I said at every opportunity, but Louise was like a big dog not yet ready to come in, and after a while I just stopped pulling on the leash. It was no use, and the marriage was over, and when I saw the note on the kitchen table I didn't need to read it. It's like when you're rushing to the train station, and you get to the platform all out of breath and no one is there. You don't need to check the station clock to know the train has moved on without you.

TRY TO GET HOLD OF FAILURE. PUT YOUR FINgers around its neck, cover its mouth with a pillow, but it does no good. Like a noxious fume it follows you around, you can't shoo it away, you can't change your clothes, you just have to live with it until the stench has run its course and found another lost soul to envelop. That my marriage had ended was of less regret to me than I'd expected — although I didn't realize how little fun I was having during its term, I felt my spirits actually lift soon after Louise headed west. But that *I* might have caused the split haunted me. It was like dropping a fly ball and luckily turning it into a double play — you still blew the pop-up, there was no getting around that.

Louise viewed our marriage as a starter home, and when she couldn't add central air or another bedroom, she looked for different possibilities.

For the past three weeks, then, I've been pondering this dissolution. But actively so. For one thing, I hired a man named Ricketts to check out this Milt character. Milt Belinsky, it turned out. All I can tell you is that he plays Don't at the Desert Inn and goes about 6-foot-4 with a Western look, I said to Ricketts, who seemed to know the man I was talking about just from that. Turns out he's half-owner of a whorehouse called Maxine's Rancho Deluxe, out Route 15 on the way to Salt Lake. Ricketts sent me one of their ads, a phony thousand-dollar bill that says, "We've Already Tested So You'll Never Have To — No AIDS" on the back. That's when it all fit together, and Louise is such a damned fool.

DON'T MISUNDERSTAND ME. LOUISE IS NO whore. For one thing there isn't enough money in it. But she had fallen for an illusion, a man who played the percentages *and* didn't care what people thought of him, who could get any woman he wanted *and* ran a cathouse. So yesterday morning I decided to fly out to Vegas and try, one last time, to explain this grand illusion to her. She wasn't coming back to me, I knew that, but someone had to tell her that a man whose independent streak was painted on the backs of women, who bet against people at a craps table for fun and against people at Rancho DeLuxe for a living was a man who would ultimately bring her to grief. And who better than an almost ex-husband to deliver news such as this?

I HAD A WINDOW SEAT ON THE FLIGHT OUT. ALL the way to the Mississippi and beyond we flew over a cloud cover that didn't open for even a glimpse of the earth below, and then, just past St. Louis, the whole front peeled off like a turned-down sheet on an army bunk. I had never seen that before, a weather formation as clean as the map on the evening news, and for some reason I took it as a good sign, the way the sky opened up to reveal neatly squared farms and thin roads that stretched across miles of prairie to towns that could barely be made out from 30,000 feet. There was an order to all this, not a mystical and heavenly order but one grounded in hard work and the idea that you got what you deserved in this world.

"Look at that," I said to myself, forgetting for a moment that I was sitting next to a stranger, forgetting in that way that lonely people occasionally do. I didn't say it loudly; the comment might well have been overlooked or ignored by someone with something else to do. But my neighbor, I now noticed, was neither reading nor writing nor listening to music. He was waiting.

"Nimbus clouds," he said. "They can lay a sheet over three whole states, but somewhere the clouds have to end, right?"

The next moment was the turning point. If I simply said "Right," there would be no conversation; I could go back to what I was doing, and he could wait for the remainder of the flight. But I wasn't exactly busy myself.

"I guess you're right," I said. "I just don't think I've ever been on the ground where they ended, that's all."

"I don't think it works that way," my neighbor said. "It's a little like wondering why you always see a rainbow, but you're never standing on the spot it hits the earth. Standing in one spot, the clouds look like they just drift away. Same with rainbows. You need to be moving to get the big picture."

"Isn't that a shame," I said, more to myself than to him; mercifully he didn't follow up on it. Instead we introduced ourselves. I told him I was going to Vegas for a little vacationing, which was a big lie, and that I needed to track down a few old acquaintances who might still be living there, which was a significantly smaller one.

"I don't live in Vegas myself," he said. "Down the road in a little town called Laughlin. Kind of a retirement home for gamblers," he laughed.

"Old gamblers don't die broke," I said, repeating the unofficial town motto, "they die in Laughlin."

"You've been there?"

"Stopped in once on my way to see the dogs at Caliente," I said.

"You're a real gambler, huh?"

The truth was that I liked to play, but I wasn't dying to win, and I didn't know how that would sound. "You ever heard of Maxine's Rancho Deluxe?" I said instead.

"Sure. They advertise on fake money littered all over the streets. That's how you can spot a tourist, he's bending down to pick it up. I don't think they get much action from Laughlin, though. You stay *there*?"

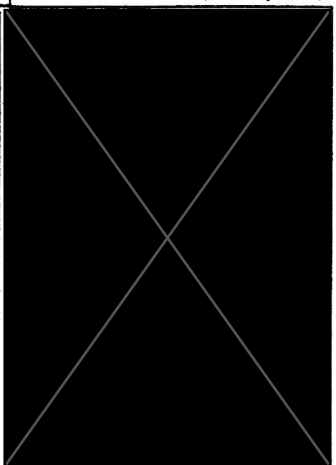
I let that one hang in the air unanswered. I could have said I'd never even visited Maxine's, but when you're talking about whorehouses, that sort of denial doesn't always ring true. The morning snack and coffee were being offered anyway, so the conversation died a natural death. Soon we were out of the Midwest and flying over rivers

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carving valleys out of little mountain ranges that grew larger and larger, and then suddenly we were sailing right through the Grand Canyon and you could see rings in the rock, rings that had added up year after year to a million years. For a second as we crossed Lake Mead on our descent I thought that maybe I shouldn't have come, that this trip wasn't going to change a thing except perhaps to leave me a little less sure of my own self, but it was late for that kind of thinking. The wheels of the plane were already screeching on the desert runway, and soon people were piling out as if they couldn't wait to play the airport slots. There was a limo that listed Maxine's Rancho DeLuxe as one of its destinations, but I wasn't ready for that, and besides Ricketts had told me that Milt lived year round at the Desert Inn. I hopped a cab and got to the Strip in eight minutes; when I paid the fare, the driver told me to "be careful." I don't know if I had the sort of face that required such advice, or if this was his standard counsel to tourists. (Most everyone else in town said "good luck," a bromide that took on the cadence of a mantra after a while.) In any case, the advice seemed sound, and I intended to follow it. Which makes what happened a few minutes later that much harder to fathom.



THEY WERE AT THE POOL, two beautiful people in chaise longues taking in a bit of noonday sun, and for some reason this annoyed me, possibly because I was dressed for weather 40 or so degrees cooler.

"Louise," I said, standing over her in the sun, waking her with my shadow. "How are you and your pimp boyfriend doing?" You can tell folks that you were acting out of character until the cows come home, but it won't do any good. Most people don't believe you, and the ones who know you well won't think that what you said or did was out of character, anyway.

Louise didn't budge, but that four-letter word got Milt up. I suppose he had heard it before.

"Do I know you?" he said, but of course he knew me, or at least knew who I was. I mean, how many possibilities were there? He didn't wait for an answer anyway; instead he threw his drink in my face. He was about twice my size, and this was not a response I expected. To that moment I had experienced very little high drama in my life, and none at all poolside in Vegas, so it may have been my naivete that led me to think I was going to be punched into the water.

"What are you doing here?" Louise said, still horizontal, her voice the tone one might use to give instructions to a foreigner. It dawned on me then how horribly far she had come from the girl I'd met screaming her head off at the finish line at Garden State. She was still young — Milt had a good 15 years on her — but no longer desperate, no longer searching for that quick fix that would land her, I suppose, exactly where she was right now. She tipped her pink sunglasses down to get a better look at me.

"You shouldn't have come," she said.

"This is wrong," I said, motioning around with my hands at the pool, the cabanas, nothing really.

"You shouldn't have come," she said again the very same way, as if I hadn't heard her the first time because if I had I wouldn't still be standing there blocking her sunshine. Milt tilted his glass to his mouth, and then remembering it was empty, put it down at the side of the pool and moved behind Louise's chair, where he rocked back and forth and held on to her shoulders. When a waiter walked by, he bent down, picked up the glass, and shook it once, as if he were bidding at an auction. All of a sudden I felt very sorry for him.

"I know," I said, not really to either of them but to myself. When the waiter returned with Milt's drink, I turned around and walked back to the hotel lobby. From the checkout desk I could see them both, rotated around on their stomachs as if on spits, having put the minor disturbance of my appearance behind them, and just like that I found myself with some free time. I was in Vegas, place of my honeymoon and — a reasonable guess — my divorce, and I had every intention of salvaging the trip. A roar went up inside the casino, and I didn't need much urging to investigate. Wouldn't you know the place was practically empty but for one packed craps table.

I had two hours before the next flight out, and two hours happens to be the perfect length of time to spend at a hot table. The thought crossed my mind, as I approached the crowd, that I had snapped out of a foul mood more quickly than appropriate for a man who had just had a drink tossed in his face by his wife's lover, that my trip had been a thoroughgoing waste of time and ill-conceived in the first place; in short, that I had

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een kidding myself about everything and had no business criticizing Milt or Louise or anyone. Such n insight is not easily accepted after hours of drinking in a singles ar, let alone in the time it takes to hange a 50 into chips, and I hrugged off my own condemnaion rather than holding it up to crutiny. Besides, I was certain hat there was one final lesson to e learned, and I wanted to be learheaded when it came.

Two huge men in cowboy ats — very much like the hat I aw Milt wearing that first time, xcept that these men seemed to eel good in them — stood at opposite ends of the table hollering at ach other and assorted fellow layers.

"I *am* a lineman for the coun-y," the shooter sang, emphasizing *m* as if he needed to be reminded.

"It's a reckless wind that earns to wander," his friend at the ther end bellowed even louder.

Then both men pointed to the ealer, who was patiently turning he dice over with his stick until heir banter was completed. "And e don't need a weatherman to now which way the wind blows," ney screamed. The crowd roared, ne dealer pushed the dice toward ne first man, who picked them up s if they were diamond cufflinks nd, in apparent contrast to the ood of the table, softly lofted the ice toward his friend, where they ist managed to touch off the back all and add up to six. It seemed nat everyone made some money om the roll.

"I *am* a lineman for the coun-y," the shooter sang.

"It's a reckless wind that earns to wander."

"And *he* don't need a weather-an to know which way the wind lows."

Then the dice went out again, nd this time they added up to ine, a result that made the table ven more joyful than before. I was olding my 50 dollars' worth in ıy hand, but I made no move to in the game.

"There's a spot right here," ne dealer said, tapping his stick on n empty chip rack directly next to ne shooter. This seemed like the orst sort of omen to me, and ome of the others at the table apeared to agree — although everyne is a *stranger* at the beginning of craps game, the word redefines self as "any late arrival" when the ame heats up. But the shooter ought otherwise.

"Come on in," he boomed, nd put his arm around me. "Why should we be the only ones to make money?" he said, gesturing to the rest of the table. For a second I thought about Milt, betting Don't Pass. Shaking the ice in his drink at the pool. The shooter took his hat off and put it on my head; I had to tip it back to see the felt. "I *am* a lineman for the county," he yelled.

I put all 50 on my new friends, and while they went through the rest of their routine, I looked out one last time at the pool. Milt and Louise were still there, spun around again on their backs to tan evenly, and Louise appeared to be filling out a keno card. As if she were still at Garden State trying for the Pick Seven.

The crowd roared. The dealer pushed the dice toward the first man, who softly lofted them toward his friend . . .

That's when it occurred to me that the man on the plane was wrong. You didn't have to be moving to see the big picture, you just had to get yourself to the right place. I know how it sounds, what with me standing between two singing cowboys at a Vegas craps table, but I had finally gotten myself to that right place. I could see the mistakes, the ill judgments; but also glimmers of hope and optimism, chances to do better, to be happier. Shards of possibility. For a moment, for one last moment, I wished that Louise could be standing beside me to see them as well, but I knew, even as I indulged the whim, that the right place for me was not the right place for her. She would have to find her own place, see her own picture, understand her own possibilities. Yet even as these ideas were coming to me the table let out a whoop, and I took my eyes away from Milt and Louise for the last time. I had 90 minutes until my plane was leaving, and this roll looked like it might go on forever.