

Central City

FICTION

From a distance, the senior citizens in the supermarket parking lot looked white and delicate as teacups. It was early November, and a light snow was falling. The seniors were waiting for a Western Adventures tour bus to Central City for a day of gambling, sightseeing, and a deluxe prime rib dinner, but Lee was late. It was her first time taking elderly passengers to the mountains, and she hoped that the bad weather would give them second thoughts, but they surged toward the bus.

The first to board was a tiny woman in a blue coat and a pink angora scarf and gloves, feathery things that trembled. On her lapel was a badge with a photograph of three blond children.

"You're late," she said, and sat down behind Lee.

"I got delayed. My son is sick," Lee said.

"Ah, a woman driver," a tall, heavy man remarked. He wore a cranberry-colored suit, a white cowboy hat, snakeskin boots, and gold rings on his fingers the size of walnuts. He smelled of cigar smoke. "Bud Sparrow," he told Lee, then sat down next to the tiny woman, and removed his hat. His head was bald and as shiny as an eggplant.

"Name?" he asked his seatmate.

After a moment, the woman told him her name was Margaret.

"Your kids?" he asked, pointing to Margaret's lapel badge.

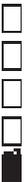
"My grandchildren. They live in Tucson."

"I've been there," he said. "I've been most everywhere."

The others boarded, and Lee passed out vouchers for the casinos and restaurant. She introduced herself, but people were chatting, and one woman was putting on slippers, leaving her bulbous boots in the aisle — a safety hazard.

Her company had given her one of the older buses with frayed upholstery and a rattling heater. She assumed that the seniors would complain about the condition of the bus and about her as the driver. They had to notice that she was rattled, too. Jim, her partner of four years, had left her last night. He was thirty, twelve years younger than Lee. They'd moved in August from Detroit to Denver to find work, but it hadn't panned out for Jim. He'd been mentioning prospects lately, insisting that he could always start over. Last night he told Lee he wanted to do it solo.

You'll never make it, she thought, knowing that the assessment applied to her and Jim. As he went on, describing fresh starts and



traveling light, she'd wondered how long he'd been rehearsing this scene, probably hoping for a major battle. She watched him pack in the bedroom, stuffing clothes, documents, and pillowcases in a suitcase, and then filling boxes with kitchen items, even light bulbs and refrigerator magnets.

"Don't forget to check the laundry basket," she'd told him. "You don't want to leave anything behind."

What a commotion he'd made, going through everything in the apartment, and then standing by the door, as if awaiting a teary-eyed farewell from her.

"Well, I tried," he said. "Gave it my best shot. I wish you luck. Maybe David will shape up. Anything can happen."

David was ten, and overweight, and hadn't even unpacked yet, hadn't made friends at school, just went there, returned to the apartment, watched TV, and ate snacks.

"It's back to the two of us," David told her this morning in a satisfied way, and begged to stay home — an upset stomach — but she insisted that he had to go to school.

She went down the aisle now, and placed the woman's boots in the overhead bin. Then she reminded passengers that they had to be at the bus at 4:00 for the return trip home, and asked if there were any questions.

"What if we're not there?" Bud Sparrow asked.

She groaned inwardly, but said, "We've never lost anyone so far. I can assure you that this bus won't leave without you."

"Hey, we got the time, lady. Take us to Reno," another man said.

"I've been there," Bud Sparrow said.

She was supposed to show a video on the many opportunities Western Adventures provided to groups, featuring lilting music and a bus filled with young people going skiing. She showed the video on Central City instead. The seniors muttered about knowing the town before it was converted to gambling. They applauded when the video ended.

She pulled out of the lot, cakes of snow sliding off the hood of the bus. The roads were slick, the trees sleeved in snow. It was bound to be worse in the mountains. She wished she were a passenger, not the driver, and recalled the time when she was eight and had gotten on a bus that was taking kids to a summer camp. No one noticed that she didn't have a suitcase or parents seeing her off. It was the most exhilarating thing that had ever happened to her.

The escapade became a story her parents told customers in their market, the scare she'd given them, and their embarrassment. Her father had hammed it up, making people laugh at the farfetched stories he told the camp officials to explain why Lee was there.



She would buy something for David today, she decided. He loved souvenirs, like the T-shirt she'd bought at Frontier Village in Cheyenne, one of her first trips for Western Adventures. He'd begged her for details about the trip, and she wondered if he showed off the souvenir at school, lying about his travels. Yes, she'd buy him something today, maybe fudge from one of the shops.

She glanced in the mirror at the passengers. Some were eating snacks, and pointing out sights, while others dozed. She was thinking that she'd have to find someone to take care of David, when a man launched into "She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain," the other passengers crooning in.

"Can it get any worse?" said Margaret.

Bud Sparrow shouted, "Hey, you people want some advice?"

The singing stopped.

"Play Black Jack, but don't hit on sixteen, and stay put if the dealer's showing a ten. Odds are he'll go over."

"What makes you such an authority?" the Reno man asked.

"I've been around," Bud answered.

"Hell, we've all been around," said the Reno man.

"These mountain roads," Margaret muttered. "It's not a good day to travel."

Huge rocks jutted out from hillsides as Lee rounded sharp curves, and oncoming cars had hats of snow on their roofs.

"Imagine what it must've been like for men to build these roads," Bud said. "That's what I told my wife when we first came out here."

"Has she passed on?" Margaret asked.

"Took up with another fella."

Lee glanced at the mirror. Bud Sparrow was grinning at her.

"My son suggested this trip," Margaret said, "but I was against it, and last night I had a dream that someone was knocking at my door, but I couldn't get up. Maybe it was a premonition. Would a dream like that scare you? You think it means something bad?"

"Nope," Bud said. "I'm a positive man."

"I don't like this snow," Margaret said. "And I've got this pain in my joints."

Margaret did look particularly frail, Lee thought.

"Lee, do you feel lucky?" Bud asked.

She waited a moment. "Yes, maybe luck's coming my way."

"The pain starts in my ankles and moves up," Margaret said, raising her voice.

"I have the full use of all my faculties," Bud told her.

The snow began to let up on the last leg of the trip, and sunlight tumbled through aspens and over the prows of the mountains. The



passengers cheered when they reached Central City. Lee stopped outside a casino, and reminded the seniors again of their schedule. When she opened the door, a woman in a red dance-hall dress boarded, and passed out a poker chip to each passenger. "Good luck to you, one and all."

Margaret got off first, and the rest followed, but Bud Sparrow stayed behind. "Ever been here before?" he asked Lee.

"It's a first for me."

"I've been here. Those others are amateurs. They'll lose some money, but tell themselves they had a good time. Let's get something to eat."

"I need to keep track of everyone," she said, but she was famished. She hadn't eaten a thing last night and this morning. Who could, after what had happened with Jim?

Bud didn't eat much in the restaurant, just watched her eat. He paid the bill, his wallet bulging with cash.

"I have to keep a ready supply of cash on hand in my line of work," he told her.

"And what line of work is that?"

"I'm a finder." He gave her a business card from his wallet and a magazine ad, yellow and creased, that showed two little boys in cowboy outfits. The caption said: "Looking for an old pal? Wild horses couldn't tear you apart, but time has." The ad claimed that Bud Sparrow could follow any trail for one-hundred dollars, plus an extra fifty if the missing party is found. "I've got a seventy-five percent success record."

Lee wondered about the lost people, the twenty-five percent, who'd never been found. "A finder. Fascinating," she said, though the ad seemed preposterous.

"Last person I located was a woman who left her family, a fairly typical occurrence," Bud said.

"How long have you been a finder?" she asked.

He looked at his watch. "Today, about three hours."

"You're looking for someone today? Who?"

"You," he said.

She felt a chill, and then a flush of embarrassment.

"Just joshing," he said. "Truth is I've been a finder the whole second part of my life. I sold cars before." He put the ad back in his wallet. "Keep the card. Never know when you might want my services."

He'd been chatting her up, that's all, looking for a potential client. She slipped his card into her pocket.

"Anyone you'd like to find, Lee?"

"My passengers."



He followed her out of the restaurant. She was glad to see some of the seniors on the street, holding shopping bags, and waving at her. She waved back, and a man across the street looked at his watch, and shouted, "It's going to be a long day. We've already seen the whole town."

"Greenhorns, like I told you," Bud said. "Let's live it up."

"Not today," she said, and got a wounded look from him. "Sorry, but I've got a lot on my mind."

"I guessed that," he said, and entered the casino, leaving her stranded on the street, feeling conspicuous and bereft. She went inside the cavernous casino, assaulted by throbbing lights and the delirious sound of gambling machines. She sat at a slot machine, staring at the screen, as if facing an important test. Then she saw Bud coming toward her, cradling a change bucket and two cocktails. She wasn't allowed to drink on the job, but she accepted the cocktail.

Bud had to remind her twice at the video poker machine that she'd erased good hands. "You've lost ten dollars," he said, and made an entry in a little notebook. "Let's play Black Jack. You said today could be your lucky day."

He bought drinks for the others at the table, after winning three consecutive hands. He slid chips to her, and when she showed him her cards, he whispered, "Bosom up, and hold." She pressed the cards to her chest and stayed at sixteen, and when the dealer went over, people applauded, their attention diverted by the sound of coins shooting from a machine. It was Margaret. She looked confused.

"Now what?" Lee heard her say.

"It don't seem to improve her attitude none," Bud said.

And then they began to lose. Bud made another entry in his notebook and told Lee they should quit while they were still ahead.

He strode down the street, and she felt a dot of pleasure when he took her hand. They stopped in front of an old opera house, its windows flamed by the sun. He told her about seeing the town years ago when the mines flourished. "The wife was with me then, but she failed to see the attraction. That woman was hard to please. Just once I wished she'd get excited about something. A movie, a meal, something."

"Just like someone I know, always finding fault."

"A gal like you must love your job. You get to travel and meet people. I've been all over the country myself, trying to track down old pals, like my friend Brad. Don't believe what anyone tells you about getting old and losing it. I'm walking proof that the second part doesn't have to be joyless."

She looked at him, feeling the mixed sensation she had toward



David — affection, and also a fear for him.

“How about lunch, Lee?”

“After that big breakfast? I’d like to find something for my son.”

“A son,” Bud said. He looked crestfallen.

“David. He’s ten. Very popular.”

They entered a souvenir shop, and she bought fudge and a T-shirt showing a bright image of Central City.

“Davey must be a big lad,” Bud said when she held up the shirt. They looked at other souvenirs, and he insisted on getting a computerized portrait shirt. He sat close to her, draping his arm around her shoulder. “Isn’t this something?” he said.

The clerk handed Bud the shirt. The photograph looked rusty, their faces blurry.

“Are you and your daughter enjoying the sights today?” the clerk asked Bud.

Lee saw him blush. He slipped the shirt into her shopping bag, went outside, and lit a cigar. She saw that his hands were shaking. “Let’s get that prime rib now,” she said.

He glanced back at the shop, and then escorted her into the restaurant.

“I won fifty dollars,” one of the seniors shouted to Lee. “You won’t believe the prime rib. Huge.”

Bud said little at the table, and she wanted to return to the sense of safety and hopefulness she’d felt earlier when he’d taken her hand.

“Tell me about the people you’ve tried to find,” she said.

“I’ve been doing it the whole second part of my life, or did I already tell you that?”

“You didn’t,” she lied.

“What does your husband do?”

“I don’t have a husband.”

“Ah, I see,” he said. “Well, Lee, folks who are owed money are easy to find. I do it for insurance companies, estates, and the like, but I prefer finding war buddies, old friends, and relatives. And I’ve been known to track down dead-beat husbands. You divorced?”

“Yes.”

“Me too,” he said brightly.

“I moved to Colorado with a man who left me last night.”

“By God, I could find him for you. I’ve got an outstanding success record,” he said, and went at his steak. “Juicy. Just right.”

“He was much younger than me. The age difference definitely played a part.”

“The boy’s father?”

“No, David’s father was in the Air Force. A supply sergeant, but



my son always says his father was a pilot. The pilot never bothered to see David after the divorce. I don't know where he is now."

"It'd be a cinch finding him, and that dope that left you. Anything else you want to tell me? I'll keep it in the strictest confidence."

She didn't have a name for what was happening to her, just the sense of diversion.

She could tell him anything, and Jim might be doing the same thing — telling someone, maybe a waitress in a roadside café — that he was starting over. He'd describe her as a demanding woman and David as a spoiled boy, but she surprised herself by talking about her ex.

"We were married for eight years, when I found out he was seeing another woman. Mary LaPlante," she said. "This was when we lived in the Adirondacks, and he was stationed —"

"Pretty country," he said.

She watched him write Mary LaPlante's name in his notebook. She could tell him every particular about the July day she'd followed her husband. David was with her in the car, along with bags of groceries, and now the smell of the warm upholstery came back to her. A carton of ice cream was melting, and she'd removed it from the bag, giving some to David. He was just a baby, and she'd spooned it in his mouth, taking the rest for herself, as if she were at a drive-in theater. Her husband was in his uniform, his regulation shoes looking painfully bright as he walked up the porch steps and entered the house. Below one of the upstairs windows, someone had begun to paint white over the gray, lending the house a hopeful look.

Mary LaPlante's name was on a silver mailbox spelled out in bold black letters that she'd wanted to touch, to press her fingers into the letters, and taste them.

"I could write a book for all the stories I've heard over the years, but I'd have to use made-up names and places," Bud said. He seemed to be waiting for a compliment.

"You're honorable," she told him, and ordered a drink.

Suddenly, loud music blared, and women in dance-hall outfits came on stage, doing a can-can routine. Then they left the stage, went to the seniors' tables, hugging men. One of the women planted a wet kiss on Bud's bald head. Bud grinned, and plunged a ten-dollar bill down the center of the woman's dress, and then put his arms around her waist. "Prime rib," he said. "Choice."

People laughed, took pictures, and congratulated Bud. He bowed elaborately, wiped his forehead, and fell back into his chair.

Why should she care that he was making a fool of himself, but she felt a deep disappointment.



Then the lights dimmed, a drum roll began, and a man announced, "Ladies and gents, the establishment is pleased to present Cindy, the First Lady of Magic."

A woman in black tights and a scarlet cape came on stage, followed by a thin man in a tuxedo. Nothing to write home about — their magic act — but Bud watched intently as Cindy did tricks with cards, coins, and scarves. Then her assistant announced the grand finale, and showed the audience a gold cage filled with doves.

Lee knew it would be Bud, when the assistant called for a volunteer. She watched him maneuver around the tables.

Cindy draped a shawl over the cage, then tapped it with a wand, and told Bud to remove the shawl. Naturally, the doves were gone.

"Wish you could do that with my bills," someone joked.

People clapped, the performers bowed, the dancers reappeared, Bud in front of them, looking confused. The dancers continued their show, stepping around Bud, jostling him, as if he were an unfortunate part of their act. Lee knew she should rescue him, and take him outside again, if only to pretend they'd discovered an essential connection, and not this sad confirmation of human folly, but she sat there, her head down, to spare herself the scolding looks of her passengers.

"I couldn't see a thing up there," Bud said, suddenly upon her. "All those spotlights."

Margaret was behind him, shaking her head. "You could've had a heart attack."

Bud looked at Margaret closely, as if trying to determine who she was. "My pump's just fine," he said.

"I won two-hundred dollars," Margaret said. "I'm ready to go home."

"But it's just the shank of the day," Bud said, "and I'm on a roll. I found two women." He told Margaret about his business, adding that he was on a case right now. "Our driver's trying to locate someone."

"Not anymore," Lee said.

He paused a moment. "I couldn't see a thing up there."

"I've never seen him around before," Margaret told Lee when Bud left for the restroom. "I don't think he's on the level."

"He's harmless. Just lonely," Lee said, and when Margaret left, she looked at Bud's notebook. Under a "Western Adventures" heading, she saw her name. She expected to see, "Two-Time Loser," but saw Mary LaPlante's name, and David's, even David's shirt size and age, and an entry for Margaret Hubble. "Three grandkids in Tucson. Won \$200."



When Lee went outside to round up passengers, she felt lightheaded, and accounted it to the drinks and the altitude. It really was a hopelessly small town. A person could go from one end to the other in no time, and pass the same places again. She was outside a casino, when she heard Bud hollering her name, Margaret behind him. His face was pink, glistening with sweat, when he caught up with her.

"You took off on me," he said. "I couldn't find you."

"I wanted to quit while we were ahead," Lee said, wondering if this sparring match was something she was doing for Margaret or for herself.

Bud looked bewildered. He kept checking his pockets. "I left our things in the casino. Wait for me?" He turned to Margaret, and tapped his head. "My memory has taken a leave of absence," he said, and went back down the street.

The magician and her assistant passed, dressed in regular clothes, Cindy muttering, "All you had to do was check the oil."

"You always ask too much of me," the assistant said.

"I'd like to take a wand to you," Cindy said.

"Mr. Sparrow's certainly taking his time," Margaret said. "Maybe he collared someone else, or forgot about us. I'll be on the bus."

Lee nodded. Who'd believe this day? An old coot had found two women, and had left both of them in the lurch. She'd have a good story to tell colleagues and David.

She went into a café, ordered coffee, and called home, hearing David's greeting on the answering machine. "Awfully sorry to miss your call, but we are indisposed at the moment. You know how it is."

"David, honey. Pick up the phone. I want to make sure everything's all right."

She waited what seemed a long time, everything more pressing now because of her schedule. When she went outside, the sun was slipping behind the mountains, the day folding itself away, and there was Margaret, bustling toward her.

"Everyone's on the bus, except you know who," Margaret said.

Lee shook her head, told Margaret she'd handle things, and then returned to the casino, but couldn't find Bud. She was heading to the manager's office when an image of David, walking alone in the snow, emerged. He'd be wearing sneakers, no hat or gloves on this cold day.

The manager laughed when she described Bud. "He should be easy to spot," he said.

She felt like a witness to a crime or accident, as she waited, hearing Bud being paged, none of the patrons stopping what they were doing to listen.



"Like kids, aren't they?" the manager said. "Bless their hearts. We've got our work cut out for us. Best to turn it over to the police. You got a missing person, lady."

She left, and then searched other casinos and shops, finding no sign of Bud.

The rest of the seniors had reclaimed their previous seats. Beyond them, she saw the town people milling about, and the flagrant casino lights thrashing on puddles in the street and road.

"We have to wait a bit for one of our passengers. I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for why he's late."

"In all my years," the Reno man said, "I've yet to hear a perfectly good explanation of anything."

People glanced at their watches and began to whisper, staring at her as if she were totally incompetent, their worries and disappointment mounting, like a lamentable chorus, over the rattling heater, so she played the video she was supposed to show at the start of the trip, turning up the volume. The seniors watched a driver in a crisp uniform greet young people near a gleaming bus that proclaimed, "Loaded with Expertise and Experience!"

She checked the time. Fifteen minutes had passed, and the video had ended. The passengers groaned when she hit the replay button. She knew that she should call headquarters, and she knew she'd be held responsible for today's problems. Passengers could say they'd seen her drinking.

"Miss, could you please turn up the heat?" a woman said.

Lee complied, then stepped off the bus to follow the route she and Bud had taken earlier. Twenty minutes, that's all, and then she'd call her company and the police.

She saw him coming toward the bus, taking his time. His ridiculous cowboy hat was crooked, like a damaged confection. He waved the shopping bag at her. "By God, I got it," he said, breathlessly.

"You had us all worried," she told him.

"You waited for me," he said, blushing, as if revealing something frank. "Something happened. A long story. I'll tell you more about it later. I got no place I'm expected to be."

"I have to get these people home."

"Duly noted," he said, giving her a salute and sitting down next to Margaret.

"This trip lived up to my worst expectations," Margaret muttered.

"You won two hundred bucks," Bud told her.

"You remembered," Margaret said.

"In my line of business, it's important to record facts. I can tell you what I won today, but that don't make me particular. This



does," he said, patting his breast pocket and his notebook.

Lee pulled out of town, hearing a loud round of applause. She glanced back at Bud and the rest of the passengers, huddled in their seats. She was determined to drive carefully, and keep the heater on high. She would wait in the supermarket parking lot, making sure their cars started. They would not be stranded.

"We'll be home soon," she said.

As if given permission, the seniors began to chat, talking about how they'd gotten suckered into losing money, but still had a good time. Lee heard them mention long-range future plans, even elaborate details about what they'd have for dinner tonight. She was tempted to ask Bud to explain what had happened when he went to find the shopping bag, but knew she'd regret it, even regret trying to see beyond this day, but she did picture David being thrilled to have the fudge and T-shirt. He might even lie at school about a trip he took to Central City, where great fortunes were won and lost, but didn't stories — even farfetched ones — matter every bit as much as the things people could never be sure of?

Everyone kept still on the outskirts of town, as if they were approaching a solemn place, though the town was brightly lit. The snow had let up, becoming little more than a slim reminder on the roads, like a linen tablecloth. People were going about their business in the supermarket parking lot, including a young man on a skinny racing bike.

"That's me, the one on the left," Bud was telling Margaret, in a rushed, breathless way, showing her the clipping of the two little boys in cowboy outfits. "The other kid's my old pal, Brad. Wild horses couldn't pull us apart, but time did. I've been looking for him for a long time."

Lee felt a constriction in her chest. Hadn't she thought the ad was preposterous? Was it really Bud in that old picture?

"Good for you," Margaret told him. "Now give it a rest. We've all lost people."

Leslee Becker has published a story collection, *The Sincere Café*. Her stories have appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Boston Review*, *Epoch*, and elsewhere. A former Stegner Fellow and Jones Lecturer at Stanford University, she now teaches at Colorado State University.

