

CHIP SCHEUER

Broadway Street Tunnel, 2005
Archival Pigment Print, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PETER SHEEHY

Burning the Fish

We'd just placed our order with a chubby, frizz-haired girl—a Lumberjack Slam for me, the Lemon Pepper Grilled Tilapia for Gillian—when the couple at the next table got into it. The woman stood and screamed at the man, Because I don't want *your brother* at our wedding! while the man theatrically picked apart his home fries. He stabbed a potato wedge and he waved the fork in the air like waving a small flag and then he poked the wedge into a pool of ketchup. I made the mistake of locking eyes with the man, and he winked at me, this slight confidence I couldn't name, while the woman's arms flailed like the arms of a car dealership balloon-man. Although her breasts bounced obediently.

You're bothering everyone here, Gillian said to the raving woman, and I agreed. Gillian executed a deliberate sip of ice water, the way acting classes had taught her to sip from a glass onstage, although she wasn't an *actress*, because that wasn't what she wanted. She managed a gift shop in a children's museum. The classes she'd been taking were more like her yoga, a practice in mindfulness because she was coming to this place in life where she was aware of how her arms moved, how she propped her neck and pointed her nose. In many ways I was in the same place—although I'd never acted, or practiced yoga, but I did jog and swim in the ocean—and Gillian and I agreed on such things. It was a cornerstone of our relationship, such agreements.

Bothering? Am I bothering your boyfriend here, String Cheese? The raving woman turned to me. Hello! and she lifted her tank top to expose a worn periwinkle bra struggling to hold together enormous breasts. She cupped a breast in the palm of each hand, and like weighing impossibly round grapefruits at the supermarket, trying to see which one was bigger without the help of a scale, she alternated hefting each breast: first her right, then the left, and the right again, then again the left.

The woman singsonged, Do. You. Like. What. You. See? to the tune of the "Star-Spangled Banner." Somewhere a man catcalled, here in the dining room at Denny's, the Las Vegas Strip.

I made no effort not to stare at the patriotic singsonging woman; if I'd turned away it would have made matters worse. She added, Why don't you take a picture? gesturing to the disposable camera on our table. The yellow Kodak lay like a severed hand, fascinating and grotesque.

Behind the woman and her breasts, a manager-type in a pastel collared shirt loped between tables, working his way from the far side of the dining room. Even for a young guy he wasn't concerned. When he reached our waitress he startled the poor girl by placing a hand on her thick shoulder. On his finger I noticed a wedding band. I was only starting to notice such things.

He nodded our waitress back to the kitchen and set to mollifying the raving woman, and eventually the raving woman smoothed down her tank and returned to her seat. The catcaller boomed and then he hooted, *Las Vegas!* The woman's fiancé stabbed the air with his fork, although throughout it all he hadn't said a word. The woman announced to the man, *Your brother will fuck everything up*, and the man pretended to fall asleep.

I drew a Parliament Light from the pack on our table, because it was Las Vegas and we could smoke where we pleased, in bathrooms and restaurants and hotel rooms. Gillian did the same. She reached for the lighter before I could get the cigarette going.

Wait your turn, I teased. She reached for the camera instead.

Before I'd met Gillian but not too long before, I'd had trouble sleeping. The entire spell lasted twelve weeks—far too long not to see a doctor, although I didn't think it serious, so no doctor was ever involved. My brother was the only one who knew, and on the other coast he didn't know all that much. I managed at least three hours each night, three and a half on average, sometimes four. On a few occasions I'd gotten five and a half. Asleep at three a.m. and waking at six, that's not all that unusual, that's around when I'd wake for work anyway. But asleep at eleven and awake again at two—when sleep became this thing I chased, a scorned lover, an unrequited love—that was unusual, and for twelve weeks that's how it was for me, I couldn't get sleep.

Gillian snapped a picture with the Kodak. We'd already taken a few silly ones along the Strip, with Elvis, with the Denny's sign out front. The Denny's was joined to the Casino Royale Hotel, and the two establishments shared a diamond-shaped sign on the sidewalk, a red and yellow Denny's logo capped with a smaller white strip reading Casino Royale in black, the whole thing trimmed in light bulbs. Each picture had me thinking, *That's how I'll remember us.*

We were coming on three months together and we were still learning, but it had always been that way. From the start we knew we wouldn't last. It was one of those agreements. In California we were transplants with no plans to stay.

The bells and long whistles of the Casino Royale seeped into the Denny's dining room, sprinkling on the sizzle of frying meat and the clattering pans in the open kitchen. No door or wall separated the two worlds: a utilitarian archway opened to rows of gleaming slot machines, all silver and mirrors, while the carpet underneath remained the same. On the other side, an old woman in a fish-print muumuu sat at a slot, her player's card around her neck like a pair of bifocals.

The night before, Gillian and I had attempted fish tacos, an experiment in the kitchen. We watched the news as we cooked, and that's when we'd heard rates at the Monte Carlo were cheap after that fire a while back, and *Seinfeld* was on after that, although by then it was clear Gillian and I were not ideal kitchen partners because the *pico de gallo* was soupy and we had scorched most of the mahimahi, likely destroying my grill pan in the process.

It was the first time I'd taken a tone with Gillian and the first time she'd done the same with me. So we felt the need to recharge, because our careers, our lives, our whatever-names-they-went-by—they had stalled without notice. We talked about work. San Diego had that effect, we concluded. Each day we'd been there longer than we'd realized. With the weather in May the same as it was in November, how easy to lose track of time.

We booked our course from the car, like partners in petty crime. Memorial Day weekend and we didn't have plans. We drove across great dry land. We smoked with windows down, although I'd been thinking of quitting. We booked two nights, Friday and Saturday. The man on the phone said some rooms on the top floors were still smoke damaged, but Gillian and I thought it perfect. Two nights high atop the Monte Carlo.

I feel like I've been making the right decisions lately, I'd told Gillian in the car. But isn't it frustrating when it takes so long to pay off? It's a long road.

A long and *winding* one.

Oh no, don't.

The nadir of the Beatles songbook! And Gillian did

her best Paul impression and we laughed about that, although I'm not sure she had pronounced that correctly, *nadir*, it's a funny word to hear spoken and one I hadn't heard before in Gillian's honeyed voice.

Two nights would be time enough for Gillian to get back for her next shift, and my office job was a joke and a nightmare at the same time but as an independent contractor I was still afforded some freedoms. I emailed in sick that morning.

It was good to get away.

Now we sat and we smoked and we waited for our food. Our relationship was accelerated, beautifully so, but it was still new. Gillian smiled and her eyes glided from end to end like spinning marbles. *People*, she said. The round-breasted woman crossed one leg over the other and she huffed in her chair, nose in the air.

Getting to know someone is like an Easter egg hunt, Gillian started. And the eggs are like these nuggets of information you uncover, and first there's an entire field full you're practically stepping all over them. But as your basket fills up, fewer and fewer eggs are left out there.

Our waitress reappeared, which seemed quick. She balanced our plates in her hands and she had to bend backward to slide each plate onto the table, first my Slam, with its pancakes and bacon and eggs—Eggs! Gillian cheered. Gillian pointed at my plate. That got me laughing. Then Gillian's plate, and the tilapia lay limp over a bed of yellowed rice dotted with peas. It wasn't a graceful move, the waitress's bend. When she straightened, I saw her gold nametag read Maggs, and below that, La Vergne, TN. She stood for a moment, then scurried to the kitchen.

Until one day, Gillian said, you find the *I-don't-want-your-fucking-brother-at-our-wedding* egg, hidden among a pile of rocks by the back fence, and she sawed into the tilapia. Looks better than the mahimahi, she said, and she measured a strip of whitish meat and lifted it into her mouth, although I thought we'd left the mahimahi behind in my kitchen, I thought that was the point, while the bells and whistles from the casino next door rang and swirled and the smoke from our cigarettes lingered, pinned beneath the ceiling. The round-breasted woman was working on a cigarette too, systematically blowing strings of smoke into her fiancé's face.

But I took the picture of Gillian as she continued at the fish. Gillian was fearless in many ways I admired. She was curious.

Empirical evidence, I said to her, replacing the camera as the centerpiece of the table. That anyone would order the tilapia at Denny's, because I truly couldn't believe it.

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I smoked a cigarette in bed in the morning, the smoky taste of our first night in my mouth like sleeping in my clothes, and Gillian stirred beside. She roused to take a drag, horizontal still, and she said, *This is the life*, passing the cigarette back to me. Ash had fallen to the bedsheet and she blew it away like blowing a dandelion. It was such an odd feeling, that morning cigarette on the twentieth floor, vitalizing and destructive both.

But the windows wouldn't open and the smoke had nowhere to go; already too much had gathered in the room, had been absorbed into the carpet and thick curtains. Some Monte Carlo chips cluttered the writing desk. Some Bally's chips. Not a lot of money. The disposable camera must have been somewhere too.

I dressed and kissed Gillian sweetly. I'm going to walk around a bit, I whispered, outside. She wanted to stay in hotel blankets.

My eyes pulsed, coming off the casino main floor into the daylight, the Nevada sun at work in the midmorning sky. During that sleepless spell last summer and fall, my eyes were what felt it most, overworked and taking in too much. This felt no different and it felt like dreaming.

The land was flat and the sun controlled it all.

* * *

In the shadow of a towering advertising arch, my eyes found time to adjust. I checked the time on my phone because clocks did not exist in the casino and I didn't wear a watch, and I didn't wear a watch because of work. Ten forty-seven, and it would only be worse come the afternoon. Twenty feet above, the advertising structure read the casino's name in invented Mediterranean script. A billboard promoted a man in a crisp tuxedo: MASTER MAGICIAN. The billboard was exaggeratedly red.

I made for the sidewalk, passing under the arch, and the arch itself was over defined, like set dressing. All the

buildings were like that. The Polo Towers across the street, pinkish and pasty. The MGM pyramid an unearthly green sheen. All in the middle of nowhere.

This was my first time in Las Vegas, which had motivated us after we'd burned the fish. Gillian had never been either and we were in the car before we could reconsider a trip so soon. Then again I could have been wrong. For whatever reasons, though, Las Vegas had never knocked on my door. Bachelor parties had been in Austin and New Orleans and Lake Tahoe and I wasn't much for gambling in the first place. Like John had said, *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.*

Escort cards glossed the grounds of the Strip, confetti the size of index cards. The sidewalks and streets and parking lots were littered with pictures of naked girls supposedly named Candy and Kristy, cartoon stars covering their nipples, phone numbers and prices printed in bold. Men in red smocks stood on street corners, fwapping stacks of cards against their open palms, offering them to passersby. Girls! Girls! they shouted. It had seemed less like litter the night before, but plastered to the pavement now, trampled underfoot, these cards were trash. The cards were everywhere.

I thought of the singsonging woman from Denny's and her perfectly round breasts and how I'd been thinking of her in bed last night, unbuttoning Gillian's top.

I'm lost—I lost all my spending money already, Gillian hiccupped.

I fumbled with her bra, reaching around her and working blind. I couldn't unhook the thing. I tried pinching the fabric with my fingers, coaxing the bra from her skin, pushing the hooks and clasps in their opposing directions. My hands were unreliable. Gillian arranged the bra so the fasteners were in front. She unhooked the thing herself and looked down at her chest. She gave a happy shake.

I could've done that, I said.

Who cares?

Gillian's breasts—I'd seen them many times. She was flat-chested; I was attracted to that. But I thought of that woman from Denny's, soon-to-be-married.

Looking for a date, Romeo? Now a man in a red smock fwapped the cards in his hand. He caught me staring, thinking of breasts. This man was a short man with a bulldog face, and he thrust a stack for me to take. I accepted

the cards and continued up the Strip, while the man in the red smock went on, I've got your girls right here, Romeo, talking to anyone who'd listen.

* * *

We lazed the rest of the afternoon in our room at the Monte Carlo. Gillian didn't leave the hotel. I'd left just the once, but the sun was not what I needed—we lived in San Diego and didn't vacation for weather—so I returned to Gillian in bed. She had unplugged the alarm clock while I'd been gone because the light bothered her, which seemed unbelievable and irrational but I knew it to be true.

We splurged on room service, eggs Benedict and mimosas, brought to us by a kid named Shel. We watched whatever was on cable while smoking cigarettes until we ran out of cigarettes. We avoided the swimming pools but we found the steam room in the fitness center. Everyone else is growing up, I said in the steam room, and I still feel like I'm spinning my wheels. We joked about smoking in the steam room. And when does that end? Gillian asked too. We recharged.

Then the sun was swallowed whole by neon and we adventured to the Bellagio, and to Caesars, both too rich for our pockets but we could pretend. Gillian had put on a dress she was excited about; I wore a tie and a vest. We bounced among Caesars' low tables, the stale taste of cigarettes on my lips.

Back when I wasn't sleeping I'd aggravated my smoking habits, because what else was I to do at four thirty in the morning? At that hour, the world still cozily incubated, a beautiful time to be awake. But ever since I'd been looking for a chance to quit, for good, and how funny, it occurred to me in the car, that Las Vegas could be that chance. Smoke if you got 'em then I'd go cold turkey. I'd be most effective that way. But there was Gillian to consider, and I wouldn't be quitting cigarettes, I'd be quitting cigarettes with Gillian. Or else I'd be leaving her behind.

Still, a roulette table was a fine place for a smoke. Gillian and I had agreed to play our separate games, and just one person bet alongside me, a man who could play Santa Claus come December if it wasn't for the stubby cigar between his lips and the beaded moccasins on his feet.

My brother called, of all people. He had that kind of timing. For a time I had fallen into a habit of calling

him at five in the morning, taking advantage of the time difference, when I'd been awake for hours and he never asked why.

The dealer gave a look like she knew I didn't belong, with my silly tie and vest. An escort card had wedged the flip part of my phone like a bookmark, a girl named Kayla. The dealer waved her hand over the table and she said, No cell phones at the tables, and then, No more bets. It was nearly one sentence.

I stuffed the phone into my pocket. Half a minute later, it shook again to signal a voice mail.

I lasted twenty or thirty spins or maybe more. Long enough to go up and longer still to come down. A salt-and-pepper man in a plucky vagabond sport coat had settled at table's end, a tiny American flag pinned to his lapel. A reserved and aloof woman twenty years his junior sipped drinks over his shoulder. I wondered if the woman was his daughter, or a niece, or else a love interest, and nothing clued me in: when she touched the man she fixed his hair. So I walked away.

Gillian was at the bar in the middle of it all and the bar had no walls. I wasn't looking for her yet, but there she was, chatting up the bartender.

How's the high life? I said. I stole a cigarette from her pack. Gillian was eager to light my smoke. The flame from her lighter stood tall and didn't waver. We were indoors.

Pretty girls don't light their own cigarettes, she said to me. So what's Santa really like? And this agreement unleashed in me a spate of endorphins like a net full of balloons. I spied the disposable camera in Gillian's purse. I pointed to the camera and back to the roulette table.

The bearded man with the moccasins tinkered with a neat pile of chips on the table. He took chips from one tower, sorted them in his palm, and created a new tower. Gillian snapped the picture and the flash went off and she laughed because she hadn't planned on that, but no one paid any mind, we weren't shooed away by security. The salt-and-pepper vagabond was still at it too, although the woman had disappeared from over his shoulder.

I'm up three-fifty! Gillian admitted and she ordered me a Seven and Seven for some reason, calling the bartender by name.

You never told me you were a card shark, I joked. I didn't think her a card shark, but there was still so

much we didn't know, even if we acted otherwise. I'd never seen her play cards. I dragged from my cigarette. My lungs flared.

You never told me you knew Santa, she said.

I pulled out my phone. Another girl was bookmarked there, and I palmed the card into my pocket, this one named Callie—if Gillian saw or noticed, she didn't say. I listened to my brother's message, nothing more than Hello, and I love and miss you, because he wouldn't know about Vegas.

Gillian asked about the call. I told her it was my brother and that was that, he was thousands of miles away. She certainly knew about my brother just as I knew Gillian's sisters: we could recite names yet our families would never meet.

We perched at the bar for two more rounds. At one point Gillian said, I think I'd like to die in surgery, because I'd already be under so it wouldn't hurt and there'd be no anxiety going in, so I wouldn't see it coming, it'd be just like dreaming, and it's true, that made me think, but what a thing to say. Gillian paid for the drinks, leaving a friendly tip for the bartender. Happy Memorial Day! we wished him when we left, and we navigated our way from Caesars because we were finished gambling.

We found a bar we liked at the Paris casino. The ceiling was painted as the sky.

We found another bar at the MGM when we tired of that.

We sang "This Land Is Your Land" on the way to the Tropicana and we jumped in the swimming pool there, by then drunk enough to swim in our underwear. A few hotel guests watched.

I don't think this is waterproof! Gillian had jumped in still wearing her watch. She unlatched it now and tossed it gently to land on her dress poolside. I hope it's not broken, she added. I like that watch, while I snapped a picture, careful not to drop the camera into the water.

At worst you'll have to replace the battery, I offered. Or maybe it's done for. I haven't a clue actually.

You don't wear a watch, do you.

I don't wear a watch.

You should get a watch. You'd look good with a watch.

I'm not a watch person.

Because you don't have a watch!

I snapped a few more pictures and Gillian laughed, Don't drop that! so I made a game of it, she'd reach to grab the camera from me and I'd pretend to drop it. Until finally she captured the thing and returned it to safety.

The water was a relief, cleansing and vitalizing. My fingers were weightless underwater, gliding against Gillian's skin, weaving between her fingers. Like a girl finding an Easter egg she asked, Why don't you think you're a watch person?

In time I'd gone through a dozen methods of counting the hours and minutes of the workday, between cigarette breaks, doodled on Post-its: pie charts with wedges representing half hours, or grids of squares like graph paper, or even for a few weeks simply doing the math each time I looked at the computer's clock and writing down the number of damn minutes left in the day.

Although this I never shared with Gillian because I thought it a private thing, and I worried what it said about me. But in the pool I said, I think I'm going to quit my job. I didn't mention the cigarettes.

Oh wow, Gillian said. Wow! She was trying different angles with her face, it seemed. You're going to quit your job? Although she asked the same way she'd asked if I was getting ice from the machine earlier. She retreated beneath the water's surface. She brushed my leg along the way. She reappeared at the far end of the pool.

And I was feeling the end of our trip. The long drive to San Diego loomed. When the sun rose again, it'd be time to return to our lives, to our crummy jobs. This was a short trip.

Gillian climbed from the water and unfolded in her bra and underwear. She shook like a Playboy bunny for my eyes only, across the pool, although she caught the teenage boy staring who was pretending to bury himself in a book with what must have been his parents lounging behind. Gillian blushed and hurried to where our clothes lay.

Come on, she said slipping into her dress, dragging the wet fabric against her wet legs. Let's get out of here.

I pulled myself from the water. Gillian tossed me my shirt and she gathered my pants. From the pocket she pulled an escort card.

Please, are you fucking holding onto these or what? And this too felt new, like the fish tacos. She flicked the card into the pool like a magician.

I snatched the pants and I put one leg through and then the other but before I pulled them to my waist Gillian reached in and she was close to me again.

Come on, she repeated, let's go back to the room, and as we were leaving I took a picture of the teenager with a dumb look on his face and then back in the room at the Monte Carlo our hands were all over each other and when we slept, we slept together.

* * *

But when I woke it was dark and still. Gillian was curled in sleep, in this bed we shared that was neither hers nor mine. The alarm clock was unplugged and powerless, sleeping well. My eyes found that feeling. The room was saturated with smoke. It felt like the middle of the night, and I knew what that felt like.

I rolled into Gillian and the shape of her body accepted mine, our bodies fit, my knees behind hers, my chest pressed to her back—her body emanating warmth like a village in a forest.

There was that net full of balloons again. They seemed to start in my chest and rise to my head, and I watched them float from my head and the bed and they bumped one another and bumped the television and the lamp on the desk before finding the ceiling. They gravitated to the curtains. To the window behind, the sky beyond.

I stayed that way for minutes. Each moment felt like one of those balloons drifting farther away, somehow pulled through the window and then through the night, up and away—until I left that village and set out in the forest, when I knew sleep wouldn't come.

I wandered the casino lobby. I wanted to stay away from the games so I made it outside. Las Vegas glowed under the night sky, this desert beacon. There was a fountain display because every hotel had one. The mushrooming fountain and its pool were framed by twin, flat granite staircases, and it all made for this replica plaza surrounded by mythological-looking statues, simply quiet at that hour. Also a sign for the Monte Carlo food court, where there was a Starbucks and Subway and Sbarro.

I settled on a cool granite step and retrieved the phone from my pocket, although this was no time to call my brother. Another escort card bookmarked the phone. Kari was the girl's name, spread-eagle in an office chair, her

hands covering her crotch. Naked but for a pair of stockings that climbed past her knees and a blue-and-yellow striped necktie loped around her neck. The tie's tail hung between her breasts, guided by their curves. Kari's breasts were sculpted, yellow stars over the nipples.

The thought crossed my mind to call the number on the card. The cell phone was in hand; I wouldn't have made the connection otherwise. What Kari would look like, if she would look like her picture. What she'd be wearing. If anyone who saw her outside a hotel room in Las Vegas would know what she was doing there.

Of course I didn't call. I flicked the card as Gillian had done, into the fountain with surprising accuracy. I said, Make a wish, because I didn't know what to wish for. The sun wouldn't rise for an hour and a half, and it'd be hours still before Gillian woke. Then we'd be gone.

If I had had a cigarette I would have smoked it. I could have wished for that. Even with my mouth as dry as it was, my body spent and used but why not, smoke if you got 'em, although I'd left the pack of Parliaments upstairs. Maybe I was thinking ahead.

I was thinking of quitting my job. But that was in another place, another time, so I tried to avoid thinking of that, of my computer, my Post-it notes, and I was thinking of avoiding thinking of all that, always thinking and never sleeping, while across the night sky drifted a flock of red, white, and blue balloons. The balloons led one another. The balloons slipped in a night cloud over Vegas. But where would they go?

I liked to think I could preserve it. At that hour, so many things seem possible. Like dreaming, I couldn't get straight what I'd remember, what I'd forget, what would happen and what wouldn't be, but what a simple way to put it: I couldn't sleep.

Peter Sheehy has found work as a hot dog vendor, a travel agent, a chestnut roaster, an 826 writing pirate, an editorial assistant, a start-up editor, a curriculum writer, and he once interviewed for a position as a summer camp counselor in Golden Gate Park although he's yet to hear back about the job. His fiction has appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, the *Madison Review*, *Inkwell*, and elsewhere. A Long Island native and San Francisco expat, he now lives in Queens, New York.