

"The Angel of Fremont Street"  
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The flimsier ones look almost like abandoned plastic bags or discarded call-girl calling cards whirling precariously in a too-slight breeze. These are the personifications of "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" - false faces slipped on for a weekend and left behind, left to pile up in the corners of the Strip like any other trash.

Elizabeth barely notices them anymore. She used to kick them off with revulsion, disgust, when they'd wrap around her legs, eddies of almost-wind kicked up by her strides, but now her kicks are mechanical, almost like part of a dance. The flimsies always try to cling to anyone solid. They never realize that she's a discard, too.

Elizabeth is one of the most vivid discards anyone on the night side of Vegas has ever seen, and no one knows why.

She didn't even know she was a discard at first. Venus found her on the roof of the Flamingo, looking down at empty, dusty streets and the buzz of dying neon, and told her. *You're a persona. You're something someone pretended to be for a while, then cast off. A mask.* Some strange mask, because alone of all of them, Elizabeth seems just to be a regular girl. Venus was a drag queen, paint and sequins and desperate yearning for femininity. Hal, sitting on the front steps of the 7-11, was a drug dealer, cast off when his originator went straight, left Vegas. The flimsies are all millionaires and supermodels, just like everyone who thinks they're reincarnated claims to have been Cleopatra.

Elizabeth is twenty years old. She is here for college. She is from a suburb of New York City. She has a few brothers; one has a potassium deficiency, so the first thing she learned to bake was banana bread. Yes, she loves to bake. Yes, she misses her family.

She only began to believe Venus when she realized that she doesn't remember her last name, her brothers' names. She doesn't remember much of a childhood and an adolescence - just enough to fill in requisite blanks.

All personae are born of a desire - a *need* - to be seen as something *else*.

Venus needed to be seen as a beautiful woman. Victor needed to be seen as a tough guy. The flimsies needed to be seen as someone important.

Elizabeth needed to be seen as human.

The first year, after Venus talked her down from the ledge, she walked around the city a lot, little black ballet flats scuffing in the dust. She listened to the hums and whispers of the flimsies, and mostly avoided the more solid discards. She mapped the city out in her mind, returned to places like the reflection pool and the door with the stain that looks like an angel, patches of tenacious grass where it shouldn't be.

The second year, she hung out almost exclusively on the ghost of Fremont Street. On? With? Doesn't matter, really. Elizabeth prowled the streets of just-killed Fremont, back when it was dangerous and disreputable. She put her heels up on a little table at Glitter Gulch and watched an endless flicker of strippers and their endless flicker of sparkles and spandex, their eyes by turns vacant or sorrowful or angry, depending on what drugs they'd been on when they used the persona, if any at all. The strippers are somewhere between the flimsies and the more permanent personae - the girls who end up at places like Glitter Gulch don't tend to stay in Vegas, or alive, long enough to create a persona like Venus's. Just a simple shield against the eyes of losing gamblers on their third drink -- name, rank, serial number.

The third year, she ventured back out on the Strip, onto its comparative noise and hustle, flimsies everywhere. She waded through flimsies in casino lobbies, darted backstage and watched the showgirls get ready. They are more solid than the strippers. Better-treated, they tend to last longer. Elizabeth sat on back stairs and watched them line their eyes with practiced hands and have their ghostlike conversations, talking not to each other but to people who aren't in the room, haven't been for years.

The fourth year, she walked off the Strip and back into her neighborhood. Where she'd originated. Hal sat on the front stoop of the 7-11 and grinned at her. Venus quirked an eyebrow - *You're still here. Interesting.*

There was one place in all of the night side of Vegas she never went. She strode through dark alleys, meditated in casinos, sat with Hal on the corner in front of the Tropicana and watched the city flicker bright with temporary lives, but she

never went behind the coffeehouse, never investigated a little strip of nearby apartments. She felt repelled, shoved out, and that only made her angry. Stuck here, a discard, she should be able to go wherever she wanted.

Hal stood beside her at the edge of the zone, looking out at an empty lot, feeling her imaginary gut clench like her insubstantial hands. *Why?*

He bowed his head. *This is your point of origin.*

*I don't remember.*

*You weren't really here yet.*

*How do you know all this?*

*I was here, he admitted. Not that night. But later.*

Hal had known her originator. Had known this whole time. Had recognized her soon as Venus brought her down. Had never told her. *I was hoping you'd fade,* he said. *I was hoping I'd never have to tell you.*

She looked back out at the lot. *This isn't where it happened,* she said with quiet certainty.

Hal shook his head. *This is where he grabbed her.*

Hal walked with her, retraced the path. He led her to an apartment that she recognized instantly, and her gut screamed at her to leave, but she had to know.

She remembered.

It is as if she is hovering near the ceiling, watching it happen - the girl with Elizabeth's hair face down on the bed, naked, wrists bound with an old tube sock, its mate gagging her, the knot visibly tangling the back of that hair - the rapist on top of her, the girl going rag-doll limp, the rapist's gun, the shoes on the floor - Elizabeth's little black ballet flats peeking out from Elizabeth's crumpled jeans, everything she's wearing right now in a heap on the rapist's floor, and against her will, Elizabeth is drawn in as the rapist finishes, removes the gag - and the girl who is not really Elizabeth speaks unexpectedly, and the rapist, unexpectedly, listens.

The girl who is not really Elizabeth keeps talking, and as she talks, Elizabeth feels herself form - a wall of words infused with the unspoken prayer *Please don't kill me*, an almost-full Self. *My name is Elizabeth. I'm from New York City. No, I have brothers. I came here for school, UNLV.*

Elizabeth felt the fracture, felt the girl push her into the world, and then she abruptly lost the vision. She fled, all the way to the Tropicana, and Hal followed. She watched the Strip, shaking, and he was silent beside her until she asked, *Did she live?*

Hal nodded, not looking at her. *She kept him talking for three hours. She created you, though she didn't know that's what she was doing. She made him see her - you - as a person. Made you harder to kill.*

*Why create me? Why not just talk about herself?*

*I think she didn't want him to have anything of herself.*

*So she gave him everything of me.*

Hal had no answer, and neither did she.

The fifth year, she spent prowling the desert at the edge of Las Vegas. She did not speak to anyone. She stood on the edge and watched the flimsies disappear,

whirling into the desert, and becoming nothing.

The sixth year, she returned. It was Venus who saw her first, who walked with her until she started talking. *This is why I'm always wearing the same thing, I guess. You and Hal and everyone else, everyone but the flimsies, you guys cycle through outfits. Me, it's just this. Because for me it was just one night.*

*Sounds about right. You okay?*

Elizabeth shrugged. *I'm better. I don't know if I'm okay.*

*Will you talk to him?*

She would; she did. She found him at the 7-11. *Did you love her?* she asked.

He looked away, across the street. *She loved me like a brother.*

She sat beside him. After a while she leaned against him. *What happened then?*

*She got pregnant. Her boyfriend took her out of town; a few months later, he came back alone. My originator left town a few months after that, so I don't know anything else.*

*You think they're okay?*

*I think we'll never know.*

The seventh year, she learned to recognize discards like herself. None of them were anywhere near as vivid, as close to real as herself -- they were more like the flimsies, but made out of moments instead of weekends. Single moments of trauma. She held hands. She talked. She sang. She helped them along til they faded, not knowing why she could not fade, not knowing what would happen if she did. She walked them out to the desert; she promised to remember them, and

she let them go.

The eighth year, she moved into a hotel room on the ghost of Fremont Street. Venus was based on the Strip, and Hal out by the desert, the lonely streets where only locals go; Elizabeth felt a kinship with Fremont, though. Maybe because it was a discard, too - tossed aside for the new Vegas, roofed in and cleaned up. Elizabeth watched the flutter of the flimsies in the old casinos, the girls of Glitter Gulch.

They started coming to her - the discards like her, torn out of trauma and pain. They were sent to her. Sent by Hal, by Venus, by the other discards strong enough to speak. Everyone knew where to go if you needed help letting go. *The angel of Fremont Street.*

She asked Venus, *What happens when they fade?*

*Maybe they go to heaven.*

*But they're not souls. Not really. They're fragments, moments, hopes, fears, masks. Shed skins.*

Venus shrugged. *I don't know, baby.*

The ninth year, she accepted it. All of it. She accepted that she was created just to take the pain, the humiliation, the horror. She accepted that the girl didn't know - that she did not curse or condemn. That she was only trying to live.

She accepted that she herself might exist indefinitely. Nine years and no signs of fading.

She accepted that, because of what she was, she could help people, help discards - she could remember so they could rest.

The tenth year, she sees her. A girl walking down the street, solid and silent as herself - it takes a bit of following her to see that the girl is real. Not a discard.

Real, but on the night side anyway.

The girl stops in front of the vacant lot and stares across, shaking; Elizabeth looks at her more closely, and *knows* her. Red hair now, and glasses. But it is Elizabeth's face there, altered only in the storytelling, the spinning out of the persona, the shield, the prayer. It is Elizabeth's progenitor, ten years later. Remembering.

Elizabeth stands before the girl, and the girl stares through her, seeing things that are ten years gone. *It's okay*, she whispers, and the girl almost seems to hear. She holds the girl, slipping behind her and wrapping her arms around her shoulders, Elizabeth's dark, insubstantial hair sharing space with the girl's red curls. They stand that way for a long moment, and it's all Elizabeth can do, just whisper, *It's okay* as the girl cries starts to cry, starts to releases ten years of tension and fear, as the girl's mind spills out relief and lets go of old terror, and, *It's over*, and the girl chokes out a so-quiet, "I'm sorry," and Elizabeth realizes that, somehow, the girl figured it out or dreamed it or something - the fact that, one night in the darkness spinning story for her life, she created a shield so real that it lived beyond her, one shard of pain caught forever on the night side of a city she abandoned.

Elizabeth rests her head on the girl's shoulder and whispers, *I know*, and she thinks maybe the girl hears her.