

Odds Are

by Meakin Armstrong

We're on a bench in the park under some trees close to the carousel when she tells me I can't count on having a career as a professional gambler. Over in the distance someone is flying a kite so high up it's a speck almost lost in the bright summer sky. I keep my eye on the kite, a dark dot. She goes on. She's being diplomatic. She's using a mother technique: It's in my best interest to be more responsible. She needs me, *we* need me, to pull my weight for this relationship to work.

At this distance, it's hard to tell if that kite-flyer is a man or a woman. Whoever it is, the person is wearing a red t-shirt and black pants. Red and black, the Nazi colors. As for me, I'm wearing khakis and a blue shirt. Khaki and blue, the colors that conquered the world and made it safe for nine-to-five.

I look over at her: she's still talking and using cautious words with well-placed endearments—*sweetie, darling* and so on. It's hard to believe this conversation is still going on. I ask her, “How high do you think that kite is?” She leans back on the bench. She sighs. She crosses her legs. She has such long and beautiful legs.

Obviously, she's telling herself that she needs to be patient; she has a difficult boyfriend. She's about to try again when I say it first, “Marla, I was only joking.” I tell her that I know professional gambling is not a valid career choice. Gamblers wear big leather cowboy hats and gold-rimmed sunglasses. I'm in khaki pants and a blue shirt, for crying out loud.

I'm leaning out the window hanging a bird feeder from the fire escape. It isn't likely the birds will find their way to the feeder because we look out onto an air shaft but I put it there, just in case. The apartments across the way all have dirty windows. Squashed up against one of those windows I see a stuffed tiger with big black, button eyes. In another apartment, a TV is always on. I hang the bird feeder using that short piece of wire people use to close bread loaf

bags. I'm still leaning out the window when I tell her, "I read somewhere that they use pot seeds in parakeet food. The seeds keep the parakeets happy so they sing more."

"But then why don't people just plant the parakeet pot seeds?"

I come back in the apartment. She's lying on the bed in her underwear. She likes white cotton underwear. I like them on her too. "They spray them so the seeds won't grow. Only a parakeet can get stoned in this country."

Marla smiles. "You're a liar."

"I'd swear to god if I weren't an atheist."

She has the fan on high. We don't have an air conditioner. We never had one. Even last year, when the heat was so bad, we didn't have an air conditioner. She doesn't like the damp cool that comes from AC. At work, she runs a heater under her desk because she is chilled to her bones. I run my hand up and down her legs. "Too hot," Marla says. "Your hands are too hot."

I'm sitting at my job, answering phones. I have the fan on, to complement the blasting central air. People go up and down the halls flapping their hands, wearing scarves and sweaters, but I run my fan. It's a point of pride, my fan. My boss jokes about it, but Karee in the next cube over doesn't think it's funny. Karee frowns whenever she looks over at it. Everyday Karee wears a big hand-woven shawl. When she leaves the office, she puts it over the back of her chair. I think she hates me because of my fan, but I love the cool breeze on top of that expensive-feeling, damp central air.

When I go into my boss's office to tell him his messages, he first goes on about his kids and their latest adventures at Gymboree. Outside his window, people far below slog through the Times Square heat. Beyond the people and buildings are the New Jersey hills. I picture the boss's wife, out there in that blonde-wood wilderness, with knick-knacks and silk-flower bouquets. I see her chasing her kids and cleaning their little faces. Odds are, she is very happy.

On our bench under the trees and near the carousel, I point to a house for sale in the back of the *Times* magazine. Marla ignores me. No one flies a kite today. A jogger runs by. And old man smiles at me then checks out my girlfriend's legs. "Old dude just scoped you out," I say. She keeps on reading the paper. "Too bad about the bird feeder," she says. It fell down the air shaft and smashed to bits.

I think about my boss's wife, out there in that tickey-tacky wonderland while Marla reads the paper and bites at her lower lip. I watch her for the longest time: Marla makes me want silk flowers.

