

## My Arrival in Horseshoe, Nevada

A puff of dust attacked me as I stepped from the bus carrying what I hoped was my own luggage. It swirled in my eyes like a scolding for some evil deed I might have done. I coughed and tears blurred my vision as I stumbled to a bench outside the station. The giant vehicle that had been my home for some unknown number of days, pulled away with an extremely unpleasant surge of exhaust and left me alone in Horseshoe, Nevada.

Horseshoe. Now there's a name. The wooden sign above my head swung threateningly back and forth. I never thought about how important a name was until about two days ago when I realized I'd lost mine.

It seems funny to me that I can remember the names of things all around me, but I can't for the life of me remember my own. I reach in my jacket and pull out the book I purchased in the last town we stopped in. It's a book called *What shall we name the baby?* The clerk at the store, a rumped sort of fellow with yellowish teeth, smiled and nodded, thinking that I was continuing the cycle of life, when all I really wanted to do was to find out who I am. I've been through the book so many times now that the pages are wavy, but nothing rings a bell.

A couple of days ago I woke up on the bus. I had no idea how I got there or where I was going. I couldn't remember where I came from or even my own name. For several minutes I thought that I must still be sleeping and that I was having some kind of weird dream. I tried to shift in my seat, but my legs were stuck to the vinyl and it felt like my skin was being peeled. A man with round, ruddy cheeks that looked as if they had been exposed to continuous flames, dozed across the aisle. Clasped tightly to his chest was a dirty backpack that rose and lowered with each breath. A book lay next to him on the

seat, its pages fluttering indecisively back and forth in the breeze of the half open window. I could hear muffled music coming from the seat in front of me and occasionally an ear-phoned head would bob into view.

I felt sick to my stomach. I hunkered down in the protection of my seat. What on earth was going on? Had I been drugged? Just then a lady wearing a flowered dress the size of a rain poncho forced her way down the aisle, squeezing her generous body between the seats. She looked at me through glasses that came to sharp points on the corners and smiled. Did she know who I was? But she passed by my seat, wobbling her way toward the back of the bus.

I pinched myself. I'm not sure why. I guess I wanted to see if I was dreaming, but I'm sure that you can feel a pinch in a dream as well as in real life. I looked out the window. The dark asphalt of the highway seemed to continue forever toward nothing. The land was sparse except for a couple of far off miniature mountains quietly rising out of their empty surroundings. Where were we going? Where had I come from?

My heart was skipping as I peered over my seat toward the bus driver half expecting to see a skeleton with a bus cap taking us all to the underworld. But the driver seemed to be a mere mortal as I checked his reflection in the narrow mirror above his head. Then I spotted a well-worn duffle bag stuffed under the seat. Was it mine? I glanced around guiltily, then slowly leaned down and undid the zipper. Feeling like a criminal, I poked through some clothes, a bottle of water, a partially eaten sandwich, and a lump of cash with a thick, red rubber band around it. There was no name on the bag and no driver's license inside. There was no ID of any kind. What kind of a person travels without ID? What kind of a person was I?

Then I had a comforting thought. Perhaps someone would be there to meet me at the next station - a close friend with whom I had shared a dorm room in college or a boyfriend that had talked me into coming to see him because he missed me so much or maybe even my parents. My parents. I didn't even know who my parents were! My body felt icy cold and I began to shake.

As the bus pulled to a stop, I remained in my seat, watching the passengers exit my world. Some were greeted by waiting friends and family, but most seemed to be alone, like me, and the platform emptied quickly. "You've got 20 minutes," the bus driver announced gruffly to those of us who remained. A couple of people pried themselves out of their seats and wandered into the station while the rest of us waited.

After what seemed like an hour, the driver returned, crunching loudly on chips, closed the doors, and drove the great beast back onto the road.

I stayed on the bus for three more stops, always checking out the window for someone eagerly waiting to see me get off the bus, but there was never anyone. By the fourth stop, my aching legs begged me for some relief. It was very difficult for me to leave the bus. Its strange how attached you can become to something when it is the only thing you know. I bought a fresh sandwich and the name book on that stop using some of the rubber banded money.

When I returned to the bus, the seat across from me was empty. I had become quite accustomed to the rosy sleeping man and it disrupted the new little life that I was trying to construct to have him leave the picture. But just before the driver shut the doors, the man shuffled back onto the bus and thankfully returned to the same seat, his face looking more flushed than ever.

I finally decided that, as much as I wanted to, I couldn't hide on the bus forever. I would get off at the next town and find the police station and tell them my story. They would probably think that I was crazy, and well, they probably would be right. I guess my brain had exploded in some hidden way.

So here I was in Horseshoe. I leafed through the name book. I should probably choose a name just so people can call me something, but which one? I never until this moment realized the responsibility of naming someone. No wonder most new parents take the full nine months to come to a decision. Jane was too simple, Isabella too extravagant. I ran my finger down the page – Kaitlynn, Karen, Kristen. Kristen. I could live with that. Kristen Jones. It could be anyone's name.

I swatted at a fly that had landed on the open page, took a deep breath, and wandered inside the station. It had a couple of picnic tables and a vending machine and two matching doorways, one labeled "Ladies" and the other "Gents". It smelled like a herd of elephants had passed through. At the far side of the room, two men sat on stools, one man in front of the counter and the other behind. They looked similar and dusty.

"Excuse me," my voice sounded hoarse.

"Yes, missy?" the man behind the counter responded as he stroked a beard that was begging for some grooming.

Missy... perhaps I was a Missy. "Could you tell me how to get to the police station?" The words choked out of my mouth.

Both men looked startled. "Has there been some kind of trouble?"

"Oh no, I...um... I'm just new in town and I thought that maybe they would have some information about the place."

The pair narrowed their eyes, sizing me up. They knew that I was lying. I started to sweat. “Well, the police station certainly ain’t no visitor’s center.” The man behind the counter nudged his friend and chuckled. “But it’s just a block up the street.”

I thanked him and headed for the door, desperate to escape their company. “They’ve got some nice rooms that are pretty cheap,” bearded guy called after me and I could hear them laughing at their own wittiness.

My throat tightened as I held back the tears. I felt frightened and alone, but angry and cheated all at the same time. I could see the word “POLICE” painted in bold letters on a non assuming building just ahead. The streets were empty except for a few cars and I suddenly wondered what time it was. I pulled the heavy door to the station and slipped inside. It banged loudly sending an embarrassing echo through the building.

A man who looked like he had been plucked from a John Wayne western, boots and all, sat with his feet propped up on the desk. I half expected him to say, “Howdy, partner.”

“May I help you?” I was surprised by the depth of his voice. He uncrossed his legs and sat upright. He looked unusually tall from the waist up. The shiny star pinned to his shirt kept winking at me.

“I have kind of a strange story.” My voice sounded empty compared to his.

He leaned back in his chair, crossed his hands behind his head, and repositioned his boots on his desk. “I’ve heard a lot of strange stories. I don’t suppose that yours will be stranger than any of the others. Why don’t you sit on down.” He motioned toward a chair. His voice spread throughout the room like a rich layer of frosting, coating everything in sight.

I told him everything. More than I needed to. Words poured out of my mouth. The cowboy never said a word. He nodded, intertwined his tapered fingers, and undid them again.

When I had finished, he stood up and paced behind his desk, his heels clicking against the wooden planks of the floor. "I saw something like this in a movie once." He forced both of his hands through his stiff hair, making it stick out in little spikes. "I'm sending you to Reno."

So back on the bus I go, carrying a slip of paper decorated with Mr. Sheriff's letterhead that says "Reno Mental Health Clinic". I guess I have a referral or one might call it a letter of recommendation. It was comforting to be back on the bus in some strange sort of way, with its motor humming and miles of highway speeding by.

I took a taxi in Reno and paid the unshaven man with a turban from the rubber banded wad. The mental health professionals were very excited about my case, a bit too excited for my liking. Several members of the staff were called in, thankfully none of them were wearing white coats, and I repeated my story, with a little less gusto this time.

"A classic case," announced a slender gentleman with circular glasses and a small, inverted triangle on his chin. The others nodded in agreement and commented sporadically.

And so I was accepted into their society, perhaps "admitted" is the proper term, and given a bed in a white room with gauze curtains and a painting on the wall of a bouquet of flowers. I am to have group therapy every afternoon at 4 pm starting Thursday. Of course I have no idea what day it is, but I am confident that someone will let me know.

In the mean time, my picture is being sent electronically across the country to missing person departments to see if anyone knows me, just like America's Most Wanted.

The beds here are very high and my legs were dangling as I sat on the edge of the mattress looking through my gauzy curtains at the outside world. My door was wide open, but someone knocked just the same. A woman clutching a clipboard stepped across the threshold. "Good morning, Kristen," she chirped, glancing down at her notes. I was having second thoughts about my new name and the way this woman pronounced it made me even more uneasy. "There is a couple here to see you."

A well-groomed man with graying side burns peeked around the door, bringing with him a strong dose of cologne. He was accompanied by a petite woman whose hair was unnaturally tall and black. "Hello," the man said loudly as if I were hard of hearing rather than a person without an identity. The woman fluttered her well-manicured fingers in my direction. They both stared directly at me, looking me over as one might inspect a melon for flaws before making a purchase.

"I'm sorry, but you are not our daughter," the gentleman admitted while his wife shook her head causing the ebony mass to wobble.

I wasn't sure how to respond to such a statement since I hadn't suggested that I might be. "I'm sorry," I stammered. And the couple left. From that day on there was a steady stream of prospective parents, siblings, and friends. I felt like an open house as buyers walked through, checking closets and bedrooms, but always leaving disappointed.

I was visited by three sisters that looked enough alike to be triplets. I, on the other hand, looked nothing like them. I could have saved them a trip if they had sent me their

picture. They entered my room with quiet whispers as if they were identifying a body in a morgue. “She doesn’t have the scar on her forearm,” stated sister number one.

“Nor the bump on the bridge of her nose,” sister number two added.

“She could have had that fixed,” pointed out number three.

Another woman burst into tears the moments she saw me, tears of disappointment not joy, mind you. As she mopped her soggy face with a wadded Kleenex, she proceeded to tell me the story of her missing daughter and her drug habit and the no-goods with which she had gotten involved, even though she had given her daughter everything she had ever wanted.

Well, time has passed and the number of visitors that I receive has greatly diminished. Actually, there is barely a trickle. My hope of “being discovered” has pretty much vanished. I wish that the husband with three children would have claimed me or that nice, elderly couple from Oklahoma. I think I would like Oklahoma. I wonder when the next bus leaves.