

Las Vegas on \$39 a Day

A True Adventure

How three nitwits ate, drank, slept, traveled, and played their way through Las Vegas on a shoestring, and mostly lived to tell about it.



Tales from

THE NEON GUTTER

By Matt, with Burt and Dan

Authors' Notes:

1. The following trip took place in December of 2024 and is factual to the best of our recollection and notes. Occasionally, we may exaggerate some aspect, but that was only to get people to laugh at us. And the shocking coffee scene in Chapter 14 is not exaggerated at all.
2. All of the deals and offers that we took advantage of were real and available to the public. Some of those deals may no longer be valid. However, it's Vegas, and when one deal disappears, some new one appears.
3. We strongly encourage others to learn from, imitate, and improve upon our adventure. Lord knows, there is room for improvement. If you do, we want to hear about it.
4. Apologies to Robert Frost. He never intended his elegant prose to be attached to our nonsense.

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Las Vegas on \$39 a Day - A True Adventure
By Matt, Burt, and Dan
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This is a monumental work of immense value. Some names and places may have been changed to protect the innocent, and to also keep the authors from being sued by people who would likely win libel lawsuits. Any resemblance to actual people, dead or alive, is probably coincidental because stuff gets really murky in here.

*Dedicated to Randy Shandis,
because he ordered us to*

Table of Contents

PART I	1
Chapter 1 - I Took The One Less Travelled	2
Chapter 2 - Whose Sheets Are These, I Think I Know	8
Chapter 3 - Like Nothing Else By Day, Like Ghosts By Night	14
Chapter 4 - The Danger Not An Inch Outside	21
PART II	27
Chapter 5 - But I Am Done With Apple-Picking Now	28
Chapter 6 - My Little Horse Must Think it Queer	33
Chapter 7- The Afternoon Knows What the Morning Never Suspected	38
Chapter 8 - And Miles to Go	46
Chapter 9 - I Have Outwalked The Furthest City Light	53
Chapter 10 - I Am Overtired of the Great Harvest I Myself Desired	60
PART III	65
Chapter 11 - The Heart is Still Aching to Seek, But the Feet Question Whither?	66
Chapter 12 - Our Missiles Always Make Too Short An Arc	74
Chapter 13 - The Best Way Out Is Always Through	82
Chapter 14 - Begin The Hours of This Day Slow	88
Chapter 15 - Little—Less—Nothing!—And That Ended It	96
Epilogue - I Shall Laugh The Worst Laugh I Ever Laughed	103

PART I

Monday, December 9, 2024

Chapter 1 -

I Took The One Less Travelled

I FLEW IN FROM DENVER AND LANDED IN VEGAS just after three in the afternoon¹. Burt did too, but coming from Chicago. Dan would join us a little later in the day. What were we doing in Las Vegas? We were going to vacation on \$39 a Day: all food, all lodging, all transportation, and all regrettable purchases.² Why were we doing that? Because it seemed like a dumb idea, and dumb ideas are the only ones we ever have.

I did this many years ago for \$19 a Day with our friends Stinky and Robert, before I even knew Burt existed. Chronicling that adventure had launched our careers as Vegas connoisseurs. This time it was Dan, Burt, and me. Thanks to inflation, our budget had doubled to \$39 bucks a day for

¹ We chose mid-December because there's a lull in travel between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and it's among the cheapest times to go to Vegas. In the past, Vegas has literally given away rooms at this time of year. Now, there were still plenty on offer for six or seven dollars a night, but that was before the dreaded "resort fee" of \$40-\$50 a night that almost every casino tacks on.

² To make the challenge something anyone as dumb as us could reproduce, or even improve on, we had rules to \$39 a Day: (a) The challenge started the moment we left Harry Reid Airport and ended the moment we returned. (b) We could only use offers available to anyone of legal age. So, no using accumulated comps, or a mailer for a free room, or any other tricks that wasn't available to any schmuck. (c) Our budget covered everything except tips, because it's not fair to make the people who serve us and rely on those tips to suffer for our "art. (d) We could not sneak anything into Vegas in our bags. Not food, not a car, not casino chips or extra money. (e) Win or lose, any money spent gambling was gone from your budget. Money won could not be added to the budget (except matchplay and freeplay), but the money wagered counted against it. This was to prove that anyone could do a trip like this, and you didn't need to get lucky to live on \$39 a day. (f) Free play could be used by us if it was available to the public. We assumed a maximum return rate of 75% on free slot play, so that one lucky hand of video poker didn't put us on easy street. If a casino gave us \$10 in free play and we won \$12 with it, only \$7.50 was credited to our budget. If we won less than \$7.50, then only the actual win was credited. (g) Matchplay could be used if you could play it with an (almost) certainty that you'd win. We did this by using matchplays to bet against each other (red versus black at roulette, or pass versus don't pass at craps), where regardless of outcome, one of us would ALMOST always win, and we would share the profit, aka Stupaking (see Footnote 5).

the 72 hours. I no longer had dreams of fame or respect; I just expected to do stupid stuff and to fill some of the endless hours between now and death.

I had my doubts we could do it again. Since the corporate bean counters took over Vegas, leveraged buyouts with debt, and scrambled to please stockholders every quarter, the City has become a crueler place for the budget conscious. No more \$2 buffets or \$9 rooms. But staying within budget wasn't what worried me; I was mostly unsure whether it would still be fun, and whether the sacrifices we'd make to stay under budget would put undue strain on Dan, Burt, and my friendship.

My personality has been described more than once as being "like a farting dog." Funny and sort of charming for a couple minutes, but people start to wonder if medication is needed when subjected to it for 72 straight hours. Dan and Burt are more like farting cats: quieter, but every bit as unpleasant. And we would be side-by-side the entire time. In other words, there was a more-than-zero chance someone wouldn't make it out alive.

Burt:

As I exited the jetway and walked into McCarran, err, Harry Reid airport, I felt a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. I've probably made this trip from Chicago a hundred times in my life. The mauve carpet patterns, the sounds of the slot machines, the broken moving walkways. They all felt extremely familiar. But I have to admit to being nervous about this trip. The Big Empire's original \$19-a-Day adventure was legendary, and famous for not just its thrift, but also its ridiculousness. And now we were trying to do something similar in an era when, by all accounts, it just wasn't possible.

Vegas has changed. It's not the place from 25 years ago where we would spend an evening playing quarter craps and eating affordable but incredible Thai food in a strip mall on Sahara. To do this trip, on this little money, in 2024 would require pain: physical and emotional. That was an unfamiliar feeling. And as I headed toward baggage claim to meet Matt, I debated whether I should eat a meal, or two, or three in the airport now, right now, before the clock on our 72 hours had started. But as I passed a Burger King and Auntie Em's and Cinnabon, I decided against it. There'd be plenty of time to eat crappy food on this trip. No need to start now. Bigger challenges lay ahead.

I found Burt near baggage claim searching for a place to fill his water bottle, or so he said. Sometimes he gets anxious and just walks around new places asking strangers to hold his hand. I helped him to a bottle filling station near the exit. Water, it turns out, isn't always easily available in Las Vegas. If you're as cheap as us, you should carry your own bottle and fill it when you can.

Our travel in Vegas would be by foot and bus, unless we learned how to fly. (I practiced pretty hard, but never got beyond briefly levitating.) A 72-hour bus pass costs \$20 and gets you all over the Vegas Valley. People look down their noses at public transit, but in many ways it's like a limo. You sit in the back while a uniformed professional drives and opens and closes the doors for you. The big differences are that you have to walk to a stop and wait for a bus, it is much noisier and dirtier than a limo, the seats are not very comfortable, and you ride with strangers who might make you cry. Every time I've ever been in a limo, it was people I knew who made me cry. On the plus side, strangers might give you free beer at bus stops, and you don't lose your security deposit for puking on a bus. That's included in the price.

The airport bus station is located on Level Zero. It's called Zero because that's what they think of people who ride buses. Two routes, 108 and 109, head north from here on different paths ending at the same terminus near downtown. The 108 runs closer to the Strip, and we took it because Burt had a line on some free crap at the Wynn. Free crap is the lifeblood of a cheapskate. Well, free crap and blood. You'd probably die if you had a tote bag full of free crap but no blood inside you.

After an uneventful ride to the intersection of Paradise Boulevard and Desert Inn Drive, we disembarked and walked west about a mile to the Wynn. Then we walked about two more wandering the hotel halls trying to figure out where a new poker site called Club WPT Gold was holding a free drawing in which each person might win either a free seat in a \$5 million dollar tournament, a golden-wrapped McLaren GT, or some gimcrack worth less than a dollar. Guess what we won. Answer: gimcracks. I got a deck of cards, and Burt got a promotional hat, which he immediately put on and then asked every person we passed, "Do you want to know when to hold them?" He'd point to the hat and say, "I know. I'm a pro." As they hurried away, he'd yell, "I know when to fold them, too!"

We escaped the Wynn as the sun set and the bright lights of the Las Vegas Strip flickered on. We hopped on the double-decker Deuce bus, which serves tourists up and down the Strip and Downtown. We climbed upstairs and let the courteous and professional driver take us north. When's the last time you saw a two-story limo? Never. So, suck it, Buffett and Bezos.

Burt had booked the lodging and found a Super 8 that bragged about its location on Las Vegas Boulevard that, after a \$12 resort fee, came to \$45 a night for our first two nights. It was more than we wanted to pay, but still the cheapest deal out there. For our last night, we would take

advantage of a “free” night “reward” from the MyVegas app³ that required playing dumb online slots for countless hours, and still demanded \$42 worth of resort fees and taxes.

Burt:

It took months of planning and tracking room rates until we ended up where we did. Hotel reviews were never consulted. Bed bug reports? No problem. Legionnaire’s Disease? How bad could it be? Frequent violent crime in the neighborhood? We’ll keep our heads down and won’t snitch. Our priorities were 95% price, 5% location. If we could have saved \$5 by spending the night in Laughlin and taking a bus back and forth each day, we probably would have. By the time we booked our room, at a non-refundable rate, we were excited enough by the price that we “tipped” the booking site 1% of the room rate without resort fee, or an additional 66 cents. You’re welcome.

The bus ride was the first time I had heard of Burt’s largesse toward some random web site, and he steadfastly insisted that the 66 cents be split three ways. I said nothing, hoping that my simple gesture of pointing my thumbs down and making raspberries expressed my thoughts.

Our deeply discounted motel was on Las Vegas Boulevard as promised, but in the no-man’s land north of the Strat and south of Downtown called the Naked City. Decades ago, this forlorn stretch was full of run-down motels with colorful neon signs, strip clubs, adult toy stores, and wedding chapels. Nowadays, most of the motels are shuttered, the wedding chapels are in disrepair, and a new breed of young entrepreneur is making a go of it in the cheap storefronts. Among the vacant buildings are clothiers, tattoo shops, and a smattering of interesting ethnic restaurants offering pupusas, Banh mis, mariscos, and curries.

Our motel sat on a narrow lot between the Thunderbird Motel once owned by Bob Stupak and a wedding chapel offering Dracula themed ceremonies complete with a coffin and one officiated by a little person Elvis. Our room was on the first floor, its door opening to an alley on the backside of the Thunderbird and its shuttered drag bar. The Super 8 had no pool, no courtyard, no casino. Just rooms.

Once inside, we found the double queen to be fine: tidy, functional, and redolent with the smell of industrial cleaners. A giant black and white photo of 90s-era Vegas hung on the wall to remind us that Vegas used to be more fun. In short, it was great for the price, and appropriate for

³ MyVegas is a free slot app that rewards its users for playing the slots with a range of low-quality rewards. It is possible to play MyVegas without spending a dime, but the app is set up like a minefield and you have to tread carefully to get free play chips and avoid the hard-sell tactics to buy them. Most of the rewards are garbage, like a free appetizer when you buy a meal, or 10% off the rack rate for a room. However, a few are worth pursuing, such as some freeplay or a free hotel night. With the hotel nights, you are still on the hook for the resort fee and the parking, which MGM properties are now charging even for hotel guests. There is a world of information on various web sites about how to best game MyVegas.

our mission, but not a place I'd spend time with anyone but a cheap hooker or my cheaper friends, Dan and Burt.

By the time we'd thrown our bags in the room, our companion Dan reported his arrival in town. We had a few minutes before he reached the Super 8, so Burt and I explored the neighborhood.

A few doors down Las Vegas Boulevard stood the white Shalimar Motel, which is larger than the Super 8 and no nicer, but has its own wedding chapel in the lobby. It's the perfect place if you want to have a quickie wedding and a regrettable honeymoon all in one place. Burt asked the front desk about room rates and if we could sit in on a marriage ceremony. The kind man told us rooms were typically about \$100 on weekdays and \$120 on weekends. As for observing a wedding, the clerk said we'd need the permission of the betrothed.

"What if we hide so they can't see us?" I asked.

"In the chapel?" The man looked confused.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm really good at hiding. Except for the breathing, they won't even know I'm there."

"You can't do that."

"What if we're already in the chapel before the wedding starts?" I suggested. "Wouldn't they then need our permission to get married?"

The man shook his head. "That's not how it works."

I could tell we were at an impasse. Just one more time I was right and everyone else was wrong. I've learned over the years that the most diplomatic way to resolve these issues is by taking a dump in a planter out front, but Burt said he had a better idea. Then he showed me a really shiny coin and I forgot my original plan. He did not give me the coin.



(Above) The Thunderbird Motel next door to our Super 8.

(Left) The empty sidewalks of Las Vegas, which would become our second home for the next three days.



The industrially-clean accommodations of the Super 8 Motel in the Naked City.

Chapter 2 - *Whose Sheets Are These, I Think I Know*

WE GOT BACK TO THE SUPER 8 just as Dan turned up. In his luggage, he brought a can of mace and a personal bedsheet.

Burt:

I made a mental note that there was not enough mace, nor bedsheets, for all of us. Dan did, however, bring a bunch of useless “compression” socks that we could all wear. Before I could compress them into Dan’s forehead, Matt interrupted.

I was bemused by the mace and asked, “What kind of strangers do you expect to run into at slot clubs and hot dog carts?”

Dan scowled at me. “It’s not for strangers.”

The bedsheet, he explained, was a precaution against bedbugs. I guess bedbugs are very respectful, and if you sleep in your own sheet the bedbugs will avoid you. They definitely wouldn’t infest the bedsheet. That would be tacky. No matter: there were no bedbugs at the Super 8.

Dan:

This is the part they don’t want you to read. They want to keep you in the dark. They are trying to keep the truth from you. By they, I mean Matt and Burt. By the truth, I mean two things. One: there is a very good way to make sure you get enough to eat when traveling on a poet’s budget. And two: that I drove my own car to Las Vegas rather than flying in.

This experiment stipulates that apart from airfare, all expenses in Las Vegas count toward the budget once you arrive. Driving my own car meant that I didn't have to find a way from Harry Reid to the Super 8 that would count as an expense. Driving into Vegas from San Francisco also gave me the chance to pull off in the tiny California town of Baker and eat two gyro-and-fries combos at The Mad Greek restaurant, a famous stop there. That meant I got to Vegas beyond fully fed and caffeinated on Dr Pepper at no impact to the budget.

My Prius gave me these forgivable little handicaps that I felt I should come clean about. One other thing is that my arrival later in the evening shortened my 72-hour experiment time to 69 hours. A number which also should have been our daily budget. That's one truth that they don't want you to know.

My Prius also gave me a good, scenic, 9-hour trip. California's central valley was cold and foggy. When the fog fills I-5, it's a little daunting to drive in it, but by the time I got out of Bakersfield, the sun was in evidence. In the high desert town of Tehachapi—a pass sometimes closed due to ice—the weather was as warm as it had been all day, a refreshing 60F. I was cold and worried that I would be cold all weekend. But the Prius lulled me on the road with a wonderfully nostalgic soundtrack along the route, especially after Barstow. That's where the drive from my home in northern California became the same as the drive we all used to take when we lived in southern California and attended classes at UCI. Wall of Voodoo's "On Interstate 15," a twangy instrumental, brought me right back. Whatever the trip was going to bring, it was going to bring VEGAS.

Not that I have any reason to explain—so I won't. However, it was necessary that I drove. Vegas was only the first part of a 2-week odyssey for me, but that's a story for another time. And it's a story that involves an extra bedsheet and a can of mace.

On this trip, phone use was circumscribed for the three of us in Las Vegas. That doesn't mean we weren't constantly on our phones. But phones could only be used for the trip itself: finding free play, using apps to get more free play, finding cheap eats, and figuring out bus routes. Because I'm self-employed, I also demanded a little leeway on following up with the few clients I had to follow up with. But no reading the news, no checking email to while away the time on city buses, and absolutely no Subway Surfers!

Matt and Burt were waiting for me at the swank-u-luxe Super 8 Wyndham. SUPER, it turns out, is an acrostic:

S is for stripped down

U is for utilitarian

P is for what the parking lot smells like

E is for extra ordinary (as opposed to extraordinary)

R is for rambunctious locals blasting music and screaming from 3 - 4 a.m. every other Wednesday after you've just walked 20 miles on the Las Vegas Strip.

8 is because back in 1888, it cost \$8 per night to stay there.

If I'd have known about the R, I would have suggested staying elsewhere. But I'm getting ahead of the story. After the 2.5 seconds it took me to take in the bland serviceability of the Super 8, the three of us left for the night, traveling in freebie style: by foot. We walked up S Las Vegas Blvd., the northern length of it, through the less highly trodden district of the city.

We left most of our stuff in the room, including spare bedsheets, but not mace, and headed north toward Downtown where we had cheap business to attend to.

The world is full of doors. Some are locked and some aren't, but you'll never know which are which until you pull the handles. We're big believers in pulling handles (and fingers) and entering rooms until someone tells us to leave. So, we explored the doors along the mile or so walk up Las Vegas Boulevard. This area is devoid of casinos, or even any major businesses, and it's a little sleepy at night. Among the empty store fronts are barber shops, shoe shine stands, and storage rentals whose owners had gone home for the night.

One door we opened looked from the outside like it belonged to a dry cleaner or a print shop. The only giveaway that what lay behind was something more could be found in a small neon sign in the bottom corner of a curtained window. "Las Vegas Magic Theater." A family of four exited as we approached.

"What's in there? A magic show?" Dan asked.

"Yeah," the father said.

"Any good?"

"Yeah," he said again as he hustled his wife and children away from the three strange, overly-curious men walking through the Naked City on a cold Monday night.

Inside was indeed a magic theater. An intimate one, and that family of four appeared to have been the entire audience for the evening. Standing in front of the small stage and amid the comfortable seating for maybe 30-40 people was Losander, an imposing man dressed as only magicians and vampires do. He generously answered our questions and explained that this is his

theater where he and his friends perform. He also invents illusions, some of which he has sold to Vegas's biggest names, like Penn and Teller and David Copperfield. In this space, he does his own shows, even tailoring illusions to the audience's special requests. Some days, there might be five shows. On a Monday night in December, only one.

The Las Vegas Magic Theater seems pretty cool and personal, very different from watching a trick 500 feet away in a huge arena. I'm no fan of magic, or magicians⁴, but the intimacy of a show like this would be more fun and feel more like real magic than the over-produced spectacles on the Strip. The Las Vegas Magic Theater is priced reasonably, too. More than our budgets allowed, but cheap enough for a family of four. Plus, maybe I could get Losander to make me invisible so I could go back to hide in the Shalimar's chapel.

Did I mention that popcorn and drinks are included?

We thanked Losander and let him close up for the night, putting away his magic handkerchiefs, cards, and doves.

A little farther north we found a place called the Old Havana Lounge that appeared from the outside to exist in a weird zone between opened and closed. Dark, but not completely dark. No sign said it was open, but none said it was closed, either. The door opened when we pulled the handle, though, and we stepped into a small bar full of white seats and white tables. Several TVs on the wall showed sports. In the corner was a small bar, and in the back an enormous humidor. A lone man sitting in the middle, sorting through business papers. He seemed startled by us.

The Old Havana Lounge was this man's cigar lounge. He told us a little about the place, which felt about as relaxed and unhurried as a bar could be. We then explained our mission to live cheaply and get free crap, and he didn't bat an eye or tell us we were idiots. Instead, he advised us to skip Fremont Street because it's a tourist trap. On that we all agreed, although we sadly were headed there for business. He said to visit the Arts District on Main Street and promised to put up our Neon Gutter podcast sticker, which is sure to bring the class of his joint down about four notches.

The gentleman at the Old Havana Lounge did not offer us any free crap, none of his high-end liquor or smokes, no matter how long we lingered and hinted. We eventually thanked him for his time and headed back out to Las Vegas Boulevard. We had real work to do, and dinner to eat. We traveled into the nighttime dead zone just south of Downtown, past the courthouse, the bail bond joints, federal buildings, and nondescript law offices, until we reached the dreaded, obnoxiously loud, and heartbreakingly pointless Fremont Street Experience.

⁴ Matt was bullied as a teenager by a girl who could do magic; that's a story for another time. And despite not being big fans of magic per se, we came back to see Losander perform on a subsequent trip and can confidently say his show is fantastic and highly recommended. You and your friends will be entertained and amazed.

What started thirty years ago as an idea to revitalize downtown with a party vibe has become just a gathering of the drunks who stay too long, are too loud, and don't clean up. There is no direction to the Fremont Street Experience, no art to it, just a belief that quantity is better than quality. More of everything: Noise, weed, stupidity, and aggressive panhandling. There's music, sure, but none of it is good, and different songs come at you from five directions, each louder than the last. What was supposed to be street performers are now just talentless hustlers frisking you for money while wearing the cheapest costumes they could find.

Dan:

Yep.



In case you wondering if we had fun.



The intimate showroom of the Las Vegas Magic Theater.



The unassuming marquee of the Old Havana Lounge, which may now feature a Neon Gutter sticker on premises.

Dan bundles up as we reach the outskirts of Downtown Las



Chapter 3 -

Like Nothing Else By Day, Like Ghosts By Night

HAPPILY, OUR FIRST STOP WAS THE EL CORTEZ, and it sits just beyond the Experience's assault on the senses. This hotel is an adobe grand dame, the oldest continuously operated casino in town since it opened in 1941. When we first came to Vegas Jackie Gaughan owned it, and it looked its age, like a former showgirl who stayed out by the pool too long. There were quarter craps, wood-paneled walls, faded carpets, and a Big Mouth Billy Bass mounted in the gaming pit. My wife Amy dubbed it Jackie's Basement, because it had the worn-in feel of downstairs at your grandparents' house. Plus, Jackie really slept upstairs in a modest suite. Recently, though, the place has found new life, keeping some old school charm while dressing itself up and raising the table minimums out of our league. Its age was why the El Co used to be cheap, and now age is why it's expensive.

None of that was relevant to us, though. EVERYONE'S table limits were out of our league. We were in Jackie's Basement for the same reason we used to go into our grandparents': to find free stuff. Slot club members who show a recent airplane boarding pass score \$10 in free slot play, a \$25 blackjack matchplay, and a free well drink or domestic beer. We checked in at the club, flashed our Southwest tickets and got our goodies.

While the \$25 blackjack matchplay is nice, we couldn't afford it on our budget. Sure, a win would have meant \$50 in our pocket. But a loss would cost \$25, leaving the loser among us with \$14

remaining for the day, which didn't even cover a share of the Super 8 room. We had a safe strategy for roulette or craps matchplays⁵, but blackjack was just too risky.

We ran our freeplay through the best video poker machines we could find, tracking our play so as to cash out as soon as the credit was gone and before spending the winnings. Lady Luck was on our side and we pocketed \$7.50 apiece alongside a few keno crayons, a shiny piece of foil we picked up outside because it looked like a quarter, our room keys, and (for Dan) a can of mace.

The El Co's sports book is operated by Station Casinos and had banners plastered all over with an irresistible offer for their gaming app, STN Sports. Bet \$50 and if you lose, they give your money back. A lot of sports book apps have similar come-ons, but only return your money in credit to use on future bets. STN Sports promised cold hard cash. Win, you win. Lose, you break even. All we needed to do to make some dough was for two of us to bet opposite sides of a game. Winner makes \$50 minus the 10% vig, loser gets his bet back. We net \$45.45. Zero risk.

That was the easy part. The hard part was navigating the app. The banners at the El Cortez bragged about how easy it was to use and to get your money out of. Neither of those were true. The app is hot garbage, the electronic equivalent of a chili dog from 7-Eleven. No, wait, a chili dog from 7-Eleven that got run over in the parking lot. It's also the proud owner (as of this writing) of a miserable 2.0 out of 5 rating in the app store, with one reviewer saying that using it made him wish for the old days of shady offshore betting operations.

Worse, during Monday Night Football, the El Co sports book was closed and there was nobody who could help us set up accounts or deposit money into them, which the app required for some weird reason. We'd have to come back during the day to deposit money, meaning waiting to get our hands on all that sweet, free cash.

"Terrible customer service," muttered Burt. "Someone needs to let them know this is unacceptable. Maybe send a letter to their headquarters."

We took our free drink coupons to the plush seating of the Parlour Bar and ordered our free cold beverages.

⁵ "Stupaking" is named for the process we used to convert our one-use chips into real cash at Bob Stupak's Vegas World. In Stupaking, two guys bet on either side of an even-money wager, like red/black at roulette, or pass/don't pass at craps. If two people Stupak with \$10 in real money to match the coupon, each bet is worth \$20. The winner wins \$20, and gets his \$10 back. The loser is out his \$10 real dollars. The net profit is \$10 (the \$20 win minus the \$10 loss), which is shared among the players. We treat Stupaking like it's guaranteed, but there is a slight risk. Say we bet red and black and then the ball lands on green. Theoretically, green comes up 5.36% of the time (on a double zero wheel), or one out of 19 spins. At craps, say we bet Pass and Don't Pass, and the come-out roll is a 12. We lose the pass, while the don't is a push. In other words, we'd be out half our money and matchplays. The odds are better for the player at craps, but it takes longer, and receives more scrutiny from pit bosses. At roulette, it's one spin and it's all decided. At craps, it might take several rolls to determine a winner or loser, which is a problem since Stupaking isn't exactly encouraged by casinos, and we have been shut down by a pit boss in the past. For that reason, we usually risk the worse odds of the wheel.

The Cowboys-Bengals Monday Night matchup was in the second half and the score was tied. Feeling flush from our video poker winnings, Burt and I wagered a quarter against each other on the winner. I took Cincinnati and he took Dallas, saying something about cheerleaders.

Burt:

She has a name, sir. It's Debbie.

Feeling left out of the action, Dan wagered a quarter against Burt and me combined, certain that the game would end in a tie. I have watched zero hours of football recently, but I think Dan has watched a negative amount. He isn't a sports fan and had no idea that when NFL games are tied they go into overtime. Ties are about as likely as us paying for an upgrade.

Burt and I could have told Dan this, but it was better for our wallets and his education to keep quiet. We also hoped that Dan losing one quarter wouldn't trigger him to break out the can of mace.

My zero hours of NFL research paid off because the Bengals won in overtime on what I am officially calling the most spectacular 40-yard pass play with a minute left in football history. I took 25 cents off Burt and 12.5 more off Dan. Suddenly, I had 37.5 cents in mad money, and I knew exactly how to get the most out of it.

"Let's find a gum ball machine!"

Suddenly surly, Dan and Burt told me to calm down and insisted we keep moving. We had money to earn.

Our next stop was the easily forgotten Downtown Grand. The former Lady Luck sits a block off Fremont Street and is mostly referred to by its guests as, "What was the name of that place we stayed, honey?" My only lasting memory of this place is a previous trip where an Italian-American pit boss right out of Scorsese's "Casino" used hand gestures and profanities to tell us exactly why these newfangled electronic craps games are garbage and where he'd like to stick them. We named him Johnny Dice.

Mr. Dice wasn't there on this Monday, probably burying a body in the desert. But the slot club, which appears to occupy a former broom closet, was open and staffed by a woman who should be in one, not working with the public. We had \$10 matchplay coupons from the American Casino Guide.

After redeeming the coupons, Burt and I bet against each other at roulette. A quick flick of the dealer's wrist, the ball spun and so did Burt.

"Wheeeeeee!" he shouted as he careened across the casino floor. "I feel like a princess!"

Burt:

That isn't what I said! As I was running around the casino, high-fiving the other gamblers and squealing with delight from our impending big roulette win, an old lady told her friend to "look at that little princess." I merely repeated the story.

The ball landed black. We lost a \$10 on red, but we won \$20 on black. As a result, each of us added an easy net of \$3.33 of jingle jangle to our pockets as we bolted out of the Downtown Grand and back to Fremont Street proper.

A giant metal Christmas Tree reminded us that it was December, and celebrations of peace and joy were just around the corner. More, though, we were reminded how fucking awful Downtown has become. We weaved past over-amplified and competing stages larded with cover bands going through the motions. We dodged scantily clad women wanting ten bucks for a photo, and we dipped between kiosks selling the sort of useless crap that goes from Vegas to curio hutches in mobile homes, to garage sales, to dumpsters. We pinballed off dirtbags reeking of weed, drunk schoolteachers, and fat middle-aged men wearing Tommy Bahama shirts and smoking giant cigars to get to the once wonderful—and currently shitty—Binion's.

What was once the Mecca of great craps, poker, and blackjack is now a haunted shell of bad games, tired carpet, and endless empty space. Binion's owners seem to have looked at their casino floor and decide to let two-thirds go to seed, and keep the rest vacant. There's very little reason to gamble or visit here, unless you want to stay in one of the "haunted" Apache hotel rooms.

Burt:

Binion's is literally haunted. On our last trip, I spent a night in their hotel. Everywhere you look are dumb signs proclaiming various ghost sightings. But Ted Binion as my witness, I was woken up by a voice that sounded like a low-level salesman on a phone call arranging a meeting for later that afternoon. The voice sounded like it was RIGHT IN THE ROOM with me. This is not a joke.

Our plan at Binion's was to use another American Casino Guide coupon for two-for-one burgers at the cafe. As we do everywhere, we checked to see if we already have slot club cards, and if not, what promotions were available to new members. Dan and I already belonged, but Burt did not and got a chintzy \$5 in free slot play. That's an amount so paltry it would offend anyone but us. Hell, as you'll see later, for five free bucks Burt would happily jeopardize decades-old friendships and risk being stranded overnight in the middle of nowhere. He quickly converted the freeplay into winnings, netting us each a cool \$1.25 in free cash.

Even better, a cocktail waitress showed up to take our drink orders. I felt an illicit thrill from getting a free beer just for sitting there watching my friend whittle down some freeplay. It was a thrill akin to finding a ten-dollar bill in the gutter and pocketing it while a young child just up ahead, crying while holding a birthday card and a birthday balloon, searches frantically all around. I mean, I'm guessing it's like that. Every bit as joyful for me. The beers were welcome, but even better is that holding them gave us cover at the cafe for not ordering drinks with our meals. Paying for beverages was not in the budget.

We took a table and concocted our order plan that included an ACG 2-for-1 burger coupon. Burgers were normally \$14. Fries were a couple bucks extra and not covered by the coupon, so too rich for our blood. Like a matchplay, 2-for-1s work best with an even number of people. With three, there was an odd man out, just like when a dear friend of mine married a girl I liked and they both agreed not to include me. Not in the wedding, not in the marriage, and not in any future communications.

Dan had gorged himself on Greek food moments before arriving in town. Not hungry, he made a meal by adding a side salad to one of our burgers, and a cup of soup to the other. Total for the soup and salad was \$7. Now, add the price of a burger and a bit of tax and we paid \$7.58 each.

The burger was okay, certainly not worth the price without a coupon. As the saying goes, though, "Beggars can't be choosers, but they can eat all the packets of saltines on the table."

Of course, no trip to Binion's is complete without their complimentary photo with one million dollars. Like everything Binion's, this promotion has gotten worse over time. It was once a black-and-white photograph with 100 very rare \$10,000 bills framed within a giant horseshoe. The picture was taken by casino staff, developed, printed, and given to you in a keepsake folder.

After years of family squabbling among the Binion children, Benny's daughter Becky took control of the casino and promptly ran it into the ground, selling off the bills and replacing them with a display of run-of-the-mill stacks of \$100 bills. But you still got a photo. Now, the display has downgraded again. There's still money under plexiglass, but also an iPad where you click the screen to take your own photo and then enter an email address to have it sent to yourself. Most people don't bother and just use their phones. Eventually, it'll probably be a selfie station in front of a Pepsi banner, and you pay five bucks.

After Binion's we headed to the Golden Nugget, which promised a \$10 matchplay for new club members, which Dan and I were. It was almost midnight and the slot club was closed. A sign directed us to the cashier cage. This caused a minor hubbub because the sign-up process was long, and the cage was understaffed. A few dozen restless gamblers with real cashier business backed up behind us as we were waited on. The line snaked past the slot machines and blackjack tables. Some of those waiting no doubt wanted to cash in tens of thousands in chips. However, our need to Stupak

the roulette wheel for a \$3.33 profit each took precedence. The importance of our mission far outweighed the cumulative hours of time we wasted for the Golden Nugget's paying customers.



Burt and Dan partake of complimentary cocktails and Monday Night Football at the El

Dry 2-for-1 burgers and bleh potato salad pair well with our free beer at Binion's Cafe.



Actual customers wait in line at the Golden Nugget cashier while Dan and Matt argue with staff.

Chapter 4 - *The Danger Not An Inch Outside*

THE CLOCK CRAWLED PAST THE WITCHING HOUR, and Fremont Street's Monday night patrons mostly scattered for the night. Nobody told the sound guy, though, and the overhead speakers kept blaring as though someone's life depended on it, and that someone was 99% deaf. This was classic rock, a music I was sick of before I reached puberty (I was a late bloomer), but has become the inescapable soundtrack of my generation. We grow older and wiser, but the music stays the same. Bon Jovi, U2, and hair metal bands will haunt me into old age, joining me on every trip to the market, the doctor's office, and eventually the mandatory sing-alongs at the old folks' home. It has been chosen for me by the powers that be, and the soundtrack of my life will be the same twenty songs that I never wanted.

Dan:

Damn that's depressing. That's why I only make my own music!

Burt:

That one by A-ha is pretty good, though.

In service to cheapness, we soldiered on through the aural assault to get to the D, where \$50 in matchplay was gifted to anyone with a boarding pass from Southwest or Spirit Airlines. We simply showed ours with a slot club card and were handed two \$25 promotional chips apiece. The chips are a classy touch, way better than a little slip of paper from a computer.

On a previous trip to the D, we tried Stupaking our airplane freeplay, and the pit boss stopped us.

“No, sir,” he said as we put the chips on the pass and don’t pass at craps. “I will not let you do that.”

“Do what?” Burt asked, feigning innocence.

“You and your friend here can’t split the matchplays.”

“He’s not my friend,” Burt insisted. “I don’t even know him.”

The pit boss shook his head. “I just saw you talking to him.”

“Okay,” Burt conceded, “I know him, but he’s not my friend. He’s a jerk.”

I let out a long, wet fart loud enough to compete with Fremont Street to illustrate Burt’s point. Making an easy buck is always more important to me than my reputation. But the pit boss wasn’t buying it, and we were sent away from the craps table.

This night, Burt and I found a busy roulette wheel far away from any supervisor and bet our \$50 each on opposing colors as quickly as we could. The dealer spun the ball, and time slowed to a crawl as we waited for it to land before an authority figure was wise to our shenanigans. It finally landed on black, our bets were paid, and we sped to the casino cage with our heads down, \$16.67 plus for each of us. Plus, Dan still had \$50 in matchplay we could use later.

After that hearty profit, we could afford to do a little gambling, literally. We went up the second floor where the D keeps its tiny horses on a tiny race track. The hotel is home to the last Sigma Derby machine in the world. The table-sized game features miniature tiny horses who circle a track, and upon which you can bet as little as a quarter a race. It was one of the few gambling opportunities we could afford. Win or lose, you get your money’s worth of entertainment from watching the race while you and nine of your closest friends and strangers yell at them.

We knew something was wrong when we got off the escalator and heard no screaming and saw no crowd. Our fears were confirmed once we reached the Sigma Derby. It was out of service as it often is; it’s an ancient, complicated mechanical machine with a dwindling supply of spare parts.

Maybe we should have taken the Derby’s disrepair as an omen and called it a night, but we’re idiots and it only made us hungry for more cash. Greed drove us further down Fremont Street to the Circa Hotel. D’s sister casino. It’s downtown’s newest and most lavish joint, and sits on the land once occupied by Jackie Gaughan’s beloved Las Vegas Club. Now that space serves a much more well-heeled clientele. The hotel is notable for how spacious it makes the cramped corner at Fremont and Main Streets feel. It also has a swanky outdoor pool that doubles as a sportsbook with drive-in-theater-sized screens.

The Circa’s promotion was to declare, “Say Hi to Matthew,” at the slot club, for which they give you a \$25 matchplay chip. We have no idea who Matthew is but said the phrase and got our freebies for more Stupaking.

Stupaking requires only two people, one for each side of the bet, and I was the odd man out this time. I waited by a bar and dreamt of the things I'd do with the geyser of cash Dan and Burt would strike on the roulette wheel. Except, they returned ashen-faced, as though Dan's mace had gone off in his pocket, and then again in Burt's.

"What happened?" I asked.

"We lost," Dan finally managed to get out, glassy-eyed, his voice shaking.

"You couldn't have." Panic flushed through me as I tried to process the news.

"Green zero," Burt muttered over and over while staring at his hands.

The zeros, which only come up a little over five percent of the time on a double-zero wheel, were the only way to lose at Stupaking.

We stood stunned in the center of the casino for a few minutes and tried to process that the near-impossible had just happened, and that we had collectively lost \$50 of real money alongside the matchplay. The loss zeroed out our profit from the D and shot a huge hole right through the budget. This, right after the Sigma Derby disappointment, was surely a sign that we had pushed too hard. We could bear no more tragedy, or risk losing any more of our meager funds this early in the trip.

At nearly 2 A.M., Fremont Street had finally calmed, and we were alone under the Experience canopy with the overpowering smell of weed and the homeless people smoking it. On our way south to the Super 8, we passed the stately Nevada Supreme Court, warmly illuminated from the inside by a giant chandelier. We talked about our chances of filing a lawsuit against the Circa and against the Matthew we were coerced into greeting. That idea died, though, when we realized it probably costs more than \$50 to hire a lawyer.

Burt:

Note: we have since confirmed it costs more than \$50.

We continued our quiet walk while contemplating the mistakes we had made and what had led us to being near destitute, slogging through the Naked City during the darkest, coldest hours of the night, past sex shops, budget motels, and chapels filled with loving couples full of hope and horniness.

We stumbled into our industrially-clean room at the Super 8 and fell into a deep, dreamless slumber with a creeping fear that the loss at the Circa was a warning from the gods of what was to come. Perhaps our entire quest was doomed from the start.

Dan:

It is not normal for anyone to spend an entire vacation chasing match plays and trying to find free food and money. If you'd like to do Vegas on a budget, you certainly can follow our recipe. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at the bottom line; however, this is as much a work trip as it is a vacation. You'll be hoofing it around town, into and out of casinos, chasing your tail to find the casino club booths, standing in lines to show airline boarding passes (genuine or forged) for the promised free play promotions. This is not a normal way to "vacation."

But it is our way.

Our way is also not the way of Las Vegas. We knew we were going to Stupak match plays and free plays, when possible. Turns out, casinos notice these days when you Stupak a bet, and they don't like it. They call you out. Some flatly prohibit it by refusing the bet, a right that casinos reserve. You have to be both discreet and shameless. For folks who aren't us, that will make it harder to duplicate our efforts unless you invest in a disguise kit and some acting fundamentals.

The roulette croupier at Circa spotted me and Scott as cronies right away when one of us took red and the other black.

"Do you know each other?" She asked.

I pointed at the person next to Burt. "Who, him?"

"No, that guy you were talking to over there." She indicated Burt.

"I was just complimenting his shoes."

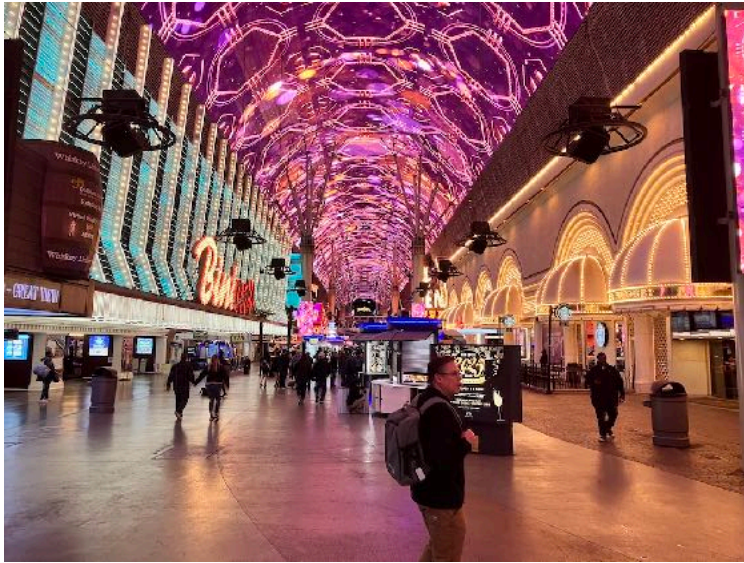
She knew I was lying. Being a roulette croupier who spends every third rotation doing sexy platform dances did not make her a fool. She saw through us, and I think my lie made her mad. That's why she tapped the little magnetic device under the roulette table with her foot, and sure enough, the roulette wheel followed its program and came up with a green zero. Both of our match-play bets lost, and we'd taken a hard hit to our bottom line.

This is the worst thing about Vegas today. No respect for Stupaking!

Losing made me sad, and being sad made me thirsty. Not buying water means you have to drink Las Vegas water, which isn't the best. It has a flavor, which water should not. Having to drink tap water for three days was, I saw, going to make me crabby. I was not wrong. I wish I could have bet on that one! At least in the case of betting on crabbiness, I know that ties go into overtime.

Before bed, I remembered that I wanted to count the cash in my wallet. I intended to use only cash for this so-called vacation. I was carrying \$144.

Day 1 Results			
	Burt	Matt	Dan
72-Hour Bus Pass	-\$20	-\$20	-\$20
Monday Night Football Bets	-\$0.12	\$0.38	-\$0.25
El Cortez Freeplay	\$7.50	\$7.50	\$7.50
Binion's Cafe Dinner	-\$7.58	-\$7.58	-\$7.58
Binion's Freeplay	\$1.25	\$1.25	\$1.25
Downtown Grand Matchplay	\$3.34	\$3.33	\$3.33
Golden Nugget Matchplay	\$3.33	\$3.34	\$3.33
D Matchplay	\$16.67	\$16.66	\$16.67
Circa Matchplay	-\$16.67	-\$16.66	-\$16.67
Super 8 Motel	-\$14.88	-\$14.88	-\$14.88
Day 1 Total	-\$27.30	-\$26.66	-\$27.16
Freebies	1 hat, 2 cocktails	1 deck of cards, 2 cocktails	2 cocktails



Late, late at night, the Fremont Street Experience drains of customers, like toilet water swirling into the sewer.

The inoperable Sigma Derby lures customers to come closer before breaking their hearts.



Upon our return to the Super 8, we chose sleep over matrimony.

PART II

Tuesday, December 10, 2024

Chapter 5 -

But I Am Done With Apple-Picking Now

THE SUN DIDN'T SHINE IN THE MORNING. A low, gray band of clouds blotted it out. We rose, used the motel's wifi to make sure that everything was fine at home, then cleaned ourselves and laid out the day's plan, which was an epic walk. We would start downtown and march all the way to the South Point Hotel, six miles beyond the Mandalay Bay, the southernmost casino on the Strip. Our goal was to start in the morning and reach our destination by midnight, where our destination's Coronado Cafe has some of the city's last great graveyard specials. The daylong journey would be rewarded with a menu full of sub-\$5 eggs, pancakes, hamburgers, and biscuits and gravy. This would be twelve miles if you went straight, but we wouldn't. We'd wander in and out of casinos and shops, stopping to eat, to pull on door handles, for horseplay, and to veer this way and that to get a view of shiny baubles and alluring promotions.

The Super 8 had promised us free coffee, and we eventually found it, locked behind an unmarked door off the small lobby. So, yes, there was java, but the motel just treated it like Fort Knox. It tasted bad, like mud and mouse turds, but had caffeine. We'd need the stimulant, partly because our day would be grueling, and partly because we'd already started repeating jokes and getting on each other's nerves.

Our first order of business was sustenance. To save a few bucks, we planned to buy fruit and granola bars at the nearest supermarket, an Albertson's about a mile east of Las Vegas Boulevard on Charleston. We would have walked there if we didn't have so many steps slated for later. So, we took our free caffeine and headed to the nearest bus stop. The bus approached and looked like it might arrive before us. We chased it while holding our open coffees, hot brown water sloshing onto our pants and hands. I'd like to say we looked elegant doing it, but if I were a bus driver and saw a bunch

of guys in their fifties doddering toward me through a Walgreen's parking lot while drenching themselves in hot liquids, I'd wait until the last minute, slam the doors shut, and have a story I could tell in the break room for weeks.

Ultimately, we had to drop the coffees and sprint to reach the bus just in time. We climbed aboard, breathing heavily, and walked to the back, passing locals openly snickering at us.

The short ride gave us time to make out a grocery list and a game plan. Also, time to bitch at each other because we had consumed hardly any caffeine. Before the trip, Burt had downloaded an Albertson's flyer featuring apples for 69 cents a pound, which was our fruit of choice because they travel better than bananas.

Dear reader, this next portion may be miserably tedious to read for describing the process of purchasing groceries. I assure you, this is intentional; we want you to feel exactly what we did.

The Albertsons is behind a Tacos El Gordo and across Charleston from Freddy's Reptiles. It's a typical grocery store except for a dim room right off the entrance that looked like a free clinic waiting room, only darker, with slot machines, and a worse magazine selection. I have no idea who this tiny casino was supposed to appeal to other than people needing low-cost vaccinations, but maybe that's a big market. I wondered, does one gamble before or after grocery shopping? Before, one might blow the food money. After, one might hit a hot streak while the ice cream melts.

Following our plan, Burt, Dan, and I grabbed the cheapest box of granola bars and a jar of peanuts that were on sale, then headed for the produce section. Have you ever bought apples? I haven't. Just apple-flavored candy. I had no idea there were so many choices, and so many prices: red delicious, gala, fuji, honey crisp, organic, or extra pesticide. Round and round the displays we went until we found the apple that matched Burt's coupon. But when we went to pay, they rang up at a heady two bucks per pound, way past what we were willing to pay. Burt was enraged.

"The coupon says these should be 69 cents," he reported to the cashier, showing his phone.

The cashier looked at the coupon, but doing anything about it was beyond his pay grade. He called over another employee, and the two of them were confused together. A queue of customers formed behind us, not unlike at the Golden Nugget the previous evening, and it wasn't until that line snaked up the canned vegetable aisle that the employees figured out that Burt had downloaded an offer for a store in Idaho.

Burt accepted no responsibility for the mistake. While Burt continued to rage against the machine, or at least the minimum wage workers of that machine, Dan and I pretended not to know him. I browsed 29 ways to satisfy your man in a checkout stand magazine while Dan hustled back to

the produce section and found three pounds of replacement apples for 99-cents, which saved us a couple bucks over Burt's choice, but at what cost to our souls?

Burt:

I thought about traveling to Idaho to get the price on apples that we deserved. But some fairly quick calculations, while customers waited behind us, confirmed that this would probably be counterproductive. The 90 cents that Albertson's collectively screwed us out of might seem small. But with the mountain of cheapness we were attempting to climb, it may be the difference between a hot meal and starvation, or a dose of life-saving penicillin we would surely require at some point during the trip.

We walked north from the Albertson's while eating apples in silence, except for Burt who grouched, "I can't taste the extra thirty cents a pound." "This is how they get you. The old bait and switch." And, "Their headquarters should expect a sternly-worded letter."

We navigated north toward East Fremont Street to catch a bus to downtown where we'd take care of more business before starting the long walk to the South Point's graveyard specials. The area we passed through is not nice, with broken sidewalks, derelict buildings, small warehouses, and liquor stores. As we passed a row of rundown homes with cluttered dirt yards, a man walked toward us. He was dressed unusually nice for the area. Actually, unusually nice for any neighborhood. He had his hair slicked back and wore slacks, a button-down shirt, and two neckties. Not one, two, side by side in complementing colors. It was too meticulous to be a mistake. Maybe he was on his way to a job interview. Maybe he was on his way to two. He gave us wide berth as he passed.

Our Fremont Street bus stop sat in front of a Mexican tire shop so busy doing rotations and balances that they didn't even bother advertising itself on the empty and rotting shell of sign. A few people were already waiting for the 208, which is good news: the bus didn't just pass. A few minutes later, our chariot arrived. And, boy, did it stink. We knew the rodeo was in town, but we didn't know they had been letting the horses shit in the buses.

The overwhelming stench of manure filled the bus, so strong that Burt said, "Oh, great, now I have three sternly-worded letters to write."

It was a long and malodorous ride to the edge of downtown, where we hopped off and hoofed it the short distance to the El Cortez. Our plan was to hit the sportsbook again, sign up for the STN Sports app and deposit \$50 each, so that we could make our guaranteed bets. Unlike the previous night, a manager was on duty, and he could enroll us and take our deposits.

That's not to say the process went smoothly. Quite the opposite. Despite having the app on our phones, we still had to physically hand over cash and have the manager to enter stuff into a

computer, including getting Burt's birthdate wrong. Then, we had to check the app to make sure the greenbacks we just gave them showed up in our accounts.

While we waited for STN Sports archaic registration process, we wandered up the stairs near the El Cortez's lobby. They spiraled up and around a Christmas tree to the executive offices and other space on the second floor. We saw Kenny Epstein, the hotel's current owner, walking into an office but he closed the door before we could ask him what he could give us for free. We found a spa and a barbershop, and also the ballroom where we once hosted a Big Empire Cocktail Soiree. That was before the hotel got all classy.

Monday night's roulette loss still stung, but the rodeo was in town, and in that spirit we decided that when you fall off a horse you get right back on. Even if that horse had just taken a massive shit on the 208 bus. We walked to the D where Burt and Dan each Stupaked half of Dan's unused \$50 matchplay at roulette with the aim of redeeming themselves and relining our pockets.

But no. My traveling companions somehow managed to lose...again. This time the ball landed on double zero and we lost another \$50, or \$16.67 each. That amounted to more than 40% of the day's budget. To rub salt in our wounds, the D still hadn't repaired the Sigma Derby machine.

Dan:

I am not a conspiracy theorist. Except for this one thing.

Without any evidence or any way to prove it, I am completely sure that roulette tables, specifically those at the D and the Circa, have a little device built in that can force the ball to land on a zero. They see two clowns who obviously know each other betting on opposite sides, and the croupier, trained in acting like nothing special is happening, moves their foot to that little peddle, or pushes their thumb over that little switch, and WHAM! Zero. It's all magnets.

Magnets! How do they work? Also, chemtrails. What's the deal? And Bigfoot.

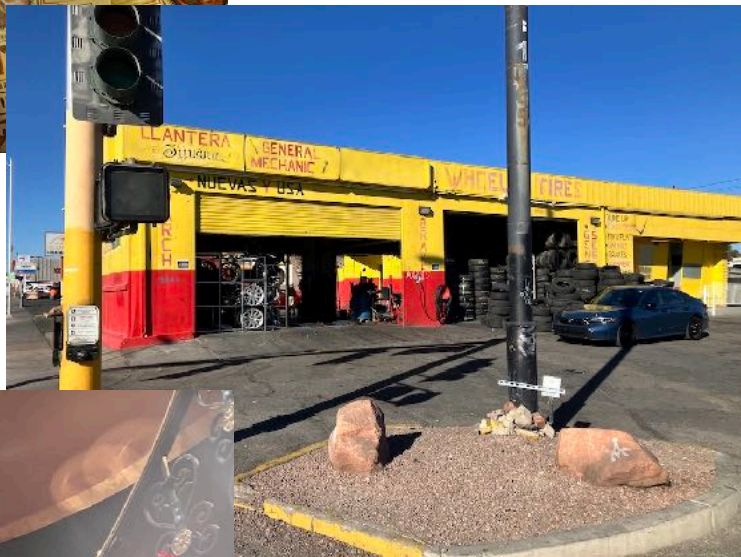
Burt checked his phone for the nearest stationary store to buy a ream of paper for all the sternly-worded letters he planned. Dan spouted his magnet theory, which seemed unlikely to me. I doubted a casino would risk its license just to screw over a few pikers like us. They'd be more likely to take us out back and break our arms the way Benny Binion used to do. As someone who deals with facts and statistics for a living, I believe a far more realistic explanation for the losses was that Dan and Burt live shameful lives, and losing was the universe's way of exacting a penance.

The free coffee at the Super 8, available to those who can solve the riddle of where it may be.



Burt was happy to "Share the fun" at Albertson's until the apple debacle. That's when the fun stopped.

The llanteria where we waited for the bus to take us downtown.



Dan and Burt share some holiday magic at the El Cortez.

Chapter 6 -

My Little Horse Must Think it Queer

IT WAS NOON. THE TEMPERATURE HUNG IN THE FIFTIES. The sky was as gray as our moods as we made our way to the Plaza to begin the long march from downtown to the South Point.

At the Plaza, we got distracted by horses. The parking lot south of the casino had been turned into a rodeo arena, and events were underway with free admission. The price was right, so we took seats in the bleachers to watch burly men wrestle sheep to the ground, partially because it was fun but mostly because, ten minutes into our mission, we were already procrastinating.

Soon, though, the cowboys took a break, and we were forced to confront what lay ahead: a very, very long walk. We left the Plaza and headed south on Main Street. That is, until we were forced into the street by a gentleman leading his horse up the sidewalk.

“Jesus Christ,” Burt grumbled. “You can’t even walk in this town.”

“Another sternly-worded letter?” Dan asked, and Burt nodded.

Cowboy traffic petered out by the time we reached the federal buildings. We continued south and stopped at the newish English Hotel just north of Charleston. This is a fancy boutique place, the kind of sleek modern glass structure that would have been unthinkable in this area twenty years ago. Then again, nobody would have called this area the Arts District back when it housed exterminators and warehouses. Rents are up, and the hipsters have moved in.

“Let’s check it out,” suggested Burt. And so, we entered the English’s lobby. It looked and smelled about four social classes nicer than we did.

Burt approached the counter, took a deep breath, and asked the clerk, “What can you give us for free?”

An awkward silence fell over the lobby. Matt stared. Dan gripped his mace in readiness for any response. The polite young woman responded as though she didn't get this question a hundred times a day. God knows, we ask it that often. We watched her brow furrow as she struggled to come up with a diplomatic way to say, "Get the hell out, you hobos." Burt then explained to her that we were headed to the South Point by foot and were doing it as cheaply as humanly possible.

"Walking?" she asked, trying to hide her disbelief.

We then explained our whole mission, and the clerk's coworker joined to listen, both of them stifling a laugh. I assume that's because we are so funny, and not because they thought we were idiots. A few well-dressed guests filtered in and out of the lobby, and I noticed a couple stop at a small station for coffee and ice water.

Still mad about losing my cup while running for the bus, I asked, "What about coffee? Can we have that for free?"

Dan:

The smell of coffee hit my nose immediately. It wasn't just "coffee." It was coffee. Hours before, the Super 8 had offered us brown burn-water in its converted broom closet, with only packets of Splenda and non-dairy whitener as flavor-masking options. We'd spilled most of the necessary liquid running for the bus, and then dumped the rest so we could sprint, so I'd not remotely had my fill. And, to be honest, scalding my hand was a far worse pain than the loss of that sorry excuse for a morning beverage. It was actually more of a relief not to have to drink it.

The English Hotel, on the other hand — a hand in an entirely different universe — had a freshly brewed carafe of rich-smelling dark roast. I detected hints of cacao and blackberry, oak and juniper, with just the subtlest overtone of hickory smoke. The silver, heat-maintaining tureen hovered over high-end cups beside a thermos of cream nestled in ice. There was a basket offering numerous sweetening options for those who need it (not I). And there was a large water jug, dewy with condensation, full of ice water infused with slices of citrus.

"Can I have some coffee on the house?" I gasped, trying not to sound like a dying zombie, and failing at it. The kind clerk, who may perhaps be a greater gift to earth than Mother Teresa, said "Uh... I guess so."

I filled a foam cup. Quivering, I added a splash of half-and-half. I drank. And then I had no earthly problems whatsoever. I was ready to samba all the way to South Point and back.

“Oh, and here’s something else for free,” the clerk said. She handed each of us a heavy red leather English Hotel keychain, and we happily accepted them.

Feeling we had gotten all we could out of the kind people here, and that we had wasted enough of their time, we thanked the English Hotel staff and continued our journey.

“Good luck on your walk,” the clerk said as we exited, and I believe she meant it.

Dan:

The feet go first, that I knew. My whole youth was punctuated by a few, shiny day-long adventures at amusement parks: Six Flags, King’s Island, Peony Park, and mostly Disneyland, close enough to my home in my teen years that we could hear the nightly fireworks. Of course the feet went first. You were vertical and your blood dropped down your legs all day until your dogs began barking.

I had worked to combat this with good, scientific equipment: compression socks. The tight black haberdashery held my feet firmly but tenderly, snaked over my ankles and up to engulf my calves in the hosiery equivalent of tough love. For their own reasons, perhaps stoicism or aversion to new-fangled technologies, my traveling companions waved off the pairs I’d brought for them. They’d come in a four-pack, and I certainly didn’t mind sharing.

Our route took us down Main Street and to the Gambler’s General Store, the décor of which is about as utilitarian as the name. But that doesn’t matter. What does is that the austere shop is like a casino museum or library, except that everything is for sale. We perused a vast array of books, both professional and self-published. Half had solid info and half were crackpot musings. There were full-sized gaming tables, slots, and video poker machines, and clay poker chips in a rainbow of colors for as cheap as ten cents apiece. Thousands of dice from a hundred living and dead casinos were splayed out on a table, waiting to be thrown. Shelves were stacked used playing cards. On the walls and in binders were photos of long-gone casinos and long-gone casino legends. an umbrella stand by the front door was stuffed with the rattan sticks used by stickmen at the craps table. I wondered whether casinos provided those or if dealers had to bring their own.

We could have stayed all day at the Gambler’s General Store (without spending a dime), but our march had just begun and we had, to paraphrase Robert Frost, miles to go before we ate cheap pancakes, and miles to go before we ate cheap pancakes. We continued south on Main Street until it joined Las Vegas Boulevard near the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, which has the charm and warmth of an Enterprise Car Rental office.

The Strat was once the beloved and galactically weird Bob Stupak's Vegas World. The ugly, sky-scraping concrete tower of its namesake was his biggest dream, and also what bankrupted him and forced the sale of his hotel to businessmen without his imagination, steel balls, or bad taste. I have a love-hate relationship with the Strat. I hate it for whitewashing Bob's weirdness, but I also love to hate it for whitewashing Bob's weirdness. We entered only because we were there.

As we entered, fire alarms blared throughout the casino, sharp chirping and wailing sirens accompanied every few seconds by a robotic voice telling gamblers not to be alarmed; it was just a test. The few guests on the floor seem unfazed and kept spinning reels and being disappointed. Maybe the alarm is always going. Maybe that's the Strat's thing. The sound did complement the dreary, soulless ambience. Burt covered his ears and added the Strat to his sternly-worded letter list.

Just south of the Strat is the Aztec Inn Casino, a slots-only storefront in front of a row of low-slung and shuttered motel buildings. The Aztec was busier than the Strat, even without the allure of wailing fire alarms. This is a true low roller joint without any pretense. Just tired chairs, old slots, a bar, and a section cordoned off as a restaurant. The way we like it. We took note that the Aztec offers a basic \$5 breakfast and an otherwise decently-priced menu ranging from waffles to Thai. More exciting, though, were the machines that had video poker for as cheap as a penny. One hundred hands for a dollar. If we ever bring back the Big Empire Penny Slot Tournament, it will be here. Hell, it will have to be.



There's a new and exciting movement happening among today's youth.



(Above) Burt enters the mecca known as the Gambler's General Store.



(Above) We wish we'd had horses to ride instead

(Right) The gay elegance of the Aztec Casino and its one-cent video poker machines.



Chapter 7-

The Afternoon Knows What the Morning Never Suspected

IT WAS AFTER TWO IN THE AFTERNOON when we left the Aztec Inn. Our next stop was the Fontainebleau, a metallic blue monolith south of the Sahara and across from Circus Circus. We had about ten hours to traverse the eleven crow-flies miles to the South Point for the graveyard specials, but we'd need more than grit and determination to make it. We'd need more food.

The Fontainebleau is Las Vegas' newest and shiniest megaresort which, if rumors are true, isn't doing so hot. We hear that it hasn't drawn the big spenders they had hoped for. The frequent and generous promos landing in my inbox seemed to confirm that.

The Fontainebleau's structure and shell were built under a different name before the financial meltdown in 2007. It sat derelict for over a decade as it traded hands and was envisioned short-pocketed owners to become many things before the namesake Florida hotel took the lead and finally finished it with a lot of white leather and gold filigree. The cavernous casino is the epitome of bland luxury, like the duty-free area in a Russian airport. Or like being inside the biggest 1988 Cadillac Eldorado in the world.

Burt:

Side note: Inaugural Big Empire Sigma Derby Handicapper Champion, Bob "Lethargio" Black once owned the world's largest Cadillac Eldorado. I believe he traded it for one of Classy Freddie Blassie's canes.

None of that mattered to us because we were only here for the slot club promotion, which is among the most generous in Vegas. New members get \$15 in free play and \$15 in food credit to use in the highfalutin' food court. Both credits are loaded onto the your slot card.

We successfully cashed out our free play on video poker machines, along with some prompt and complimentary cocktail service. We also noticed that some of the craps tables are irregular. Specifically, they are Bob Stupak's invention "Crapless craps" where the numbers of two, three, and twelve are no longer craps, but instead points. Like most of Stupak's inventions, this variation is designed to confuse players with convoluted rules that look good but actually put more money in the casino's pocket. It's a crummier game for the player.

Worse, though, the Fontainebleau was like almost every other casino on the Strip and added a third zero to many of its roulette wheels. That extra zero juices the house edge to nearly 8%. The casino floor also had double-zero roulette, which is 50% better for the gambler but still a sucker's bet. Knowing they're guilty of gouging, casinos hide the third zero by making it a symbol instead of a number (here it was a bowtie). No matter what shade the lipstick, though, triple-zero roulette is still a pig.

I asked the triple-zero dealer, "Why do people play this table when there's double-zero right over there?"

She shrugged and said, "Because they don't know any better."

That was an honest answer. Strip casinos hope you're rich and also so bad at math that they can fleece you. It exposed the reality that the Fontainebleau and others rely on ignorance, and their business strategy is to maximize profits not because of a superior product or service, but by relying on people not knowing any better. In other words, Strip casinos are ethically no better than a dude hyping dubious health supplements on Sunday morning AM radio. I don't know. Maybe hunger was making me grumpy.

Burt:

Goddamn, he's grumpy. Who the hell plays roulette anyway? You can't even win trying to Stupak it.

We went upstairs to the Fontainebleau's massively sized, massively overpriced, and underwhelmingly optioned food court, where \$15 in credit would pay for a slice of pizza and a Coke, most of one burrito, or half of a burger combo. After weighing the caloric value of the different options we chose Mexican.

We used our credit plus a dollar each, and then we waited. Oh, lord, did we wait. The burrito stand wasn't doing anything special. This wasn't Michelin stars, or even Bib Gourmand. On a December Tuesday afternoon, we were the only customers except the slot club employee who had signed us up for our accounts a few minutes earlier. Yet, the two workers took their time, meticulously and methodically making the food. Like 15-20 minutes just to wrap some scrambled

eggs and extra greasy chorizo in a tortilla. Even still, they got Dan's order wrong, and the quality was north of Taco Bell but south of Chipotle.

Dan:

I was pleasantly surprised that we were pretty near lunch at the Fontainebleau (pronounced correctly with a cartoonishly thick American approximation of a French accent) before my feet began to ask me what the hell was going on. And by that time, it was lunch time. The inexorable wait for my breakfast burrito gave them even more time to relax as the compression socks passively squeezed the blood back up toward my upper body.

While we ate, Burt and I found the perfect game for our STN Sports bet. The University of Incarnate Word was 34.5 point underdogs to Duke. I love underdogs almost as much as I love Jesus, and Burt loves powerhouses that run up the score on little guys, and probably also Satan. We agreed that I would take UIW and he would, of course, take the Blue Devils. I think he would have taken them no matter what color they were. To add a little spice to the bet, Burt and I wagered an additional quarter between ourselves on who would win with me betting on good and Burt betting on evil. And then we made an extra side-wager on whether Dan would bet on the tie.

Because the spread on our bet was 34.5, there was no way for our bet to end in a tie. So, regardless of outcome, one of us would win and the other would get his money back. We placed our bets in the app, finished our food, and continued our journey, blissfully unaware that collecting from STN Sports would be even more difficult than signing up for it.

Burt:

As his rants about roulette and food courts will indicate, not to mention this whole cockamamie trip idea, Matt was becoming more of a zealot by the day. It was also suspicious that he chose perhaps the most religiously sounding school in the country (Is it even really a school? Do they even have a basketball team?) and made me bet on a team with a devil as a mascot. Someone needs to write him a sternly-worded letter telling him to lighten up a bit.

Dan, having learned nothing during Monday Night Football, asked, "Can basketball games end in ties? I'm betting on a tie!" Burt paid me the quarter, then told him that basketball games never end in ties.

Dan pondered for a moment, and asked. "Can they be rained out?"

"They're played indoors."

"I'm out of ideas. I'll take Duke. That's my neighbor's dog's name."

We left the Fontaine-blah with our bellies full of grease and eggs. We skipped right over Circus Circus, which is sort of sad. How low must a vacation be when a dingy clown-themed casino covered in kid snot is out of budget? However, we did stop by its special-needs cousin, Slots-a-Fun, just to see how the little casino's rebirth with a vintage theme was progressing.

Derelict and seemingly on life support for several years with half of its floor vacant or used for storage, someone jolted this Strip-front casino back to relevancy with a few \$5 tables, slots that take real coins, and \$2 food offerings, like hot dogs, shrimp cocktails, popcorn, and beers. We were greeted at the entrance by a series of automated mini bowling lanes that used pint-sized pins and balls. They looked like cheap fun until we found that a single game cost \$7. That's more than double what a real bowling alley costs, and as much as we planned to splurge on any meal this trip.

Continuing south, we stopped in at the enormous Resorts World, whose theme is, I guess, a world of resorts. The property has three hotels, all of which would be fancier than I'm used to. They cater to a range of clientele from those okay with cotton bathrobes in the bathroom to those demanding silk. It's hard to tell what the casino is going for, or why, actually. All I know is the place is pricey and boring, but unlike Fontainebleau, at least has interesting options in the food court that we couldn't afford. We were only there because Burt had some business to take care of. He wouldn't say what or with whom, just that Dan and I needed to turn and face a wall and count to three hundred slowly while he conducted it.

"Let's go," Burt said when he got back to us, walking quickly and stuffing something into his pocket.

"I'm only at 265," said Dan as he turned away from the wall. I felt envious; I was at 203, but only because I had thrown in a few beads from my Rosary.

"If you want to live, we go now," Burt replied. "And we go out the back."

He was gone, demonstrating the form that nearly qualified him for speed walking at the Tokyo Olympics, and glancing both ways as he hustled down a hallway.

"Can we keep counting?" Dan asked as he and I tried to catch up.

"And doing my Rosary?" I added.

Burt was too far ahead to hear us. Dan looked at me, shrugged and said, "I like to finish what I start. Two hundred-sixty-six. Two hundred-sixty-seven..."

Burt:

Note to our readers: If you know what's good for you, forget you ever read that. But just to be clear, there's no reason for you to count to 300.

Dan and I finally caught up to Burt on Sammy Davis, Jr. Boulevard, which runs parallel to the Strip, west of Resorts World. It's an industrial street with access to employee parking lots and small businesses catering to the hotels, like showgirl and casino supply stores, scooter rentals, plus something called the Erotic Heritage Museum. Definitely not a place I wanted to go with these two guys. It had a banner hanging on the front for something called "Puppetry of the Penis." Dan explained that it's exactly what it sounds like.

Dan:

When I'd been married for about three years, my mother-in-law got my wife and I tickets to the San Francisco tour stop of Puppetry of the Penis, a two-man act from Australia. I don't know what she was thinking. Maybe in some cultures, one year of marriage is the paper anniversary, 25 is silver, and three is penis.

Two men in capes, and nothing else, came on stage and proceeded to do about 15 tricks with their cocks, twisting them into different configurations. This would have taken any 3rd grader about a minute and a half, but this comic dick-a-loo duo found a way to make this a 75-minute performance.

Half way through, a guy in the audience stood, confessed to the small crowd, "I guess I'm country," and walked out. That was the highlight of the show.

What the show is like now, some 20 years later, I could hardly imagine.

I'll stick with Bert and Ernie, thanks.

Burt hustled us south down Sammy Davis, Jr., under the I-15 freeway where it turns into Dean Martin Drive, and toward the Rio, which was our next destination because he had bought four passes for KISS-themed mini-golf for \$9.90 on eBay during a manic episode where he thought the perfect way to take a break during an epic walk was by putting a ball around under blacklight images of Paul Stanley and Ace Frehley. The problem for us right now was that there's no way into the Rio from Dean Martin. You have to go keep going south across Flamingo and loop back around.

"Is anyone following us?" Burt asked. The answer was no. There were only trucks full of cowboys.

The sun was low in the sky now, the horizon turning orange. We were about halfway to the South Point. My feet hurt. Not enough to quit, but enough to make me search for shortcuts. I spotted a series of tunnels across a vacant lot to the west of us. If we climbed a chain link fence, cut through the lot, and then crawled through the tunnels we'd save a few hundred steps. I was about to suggest

this when the last of the day's light shone through the tunnels and exposed the silhouettes of tents and people living in them. I doubted they'd welcome us walking through their living rooms just to save a little discomfort on our odyssey of stupidity.

Around we went, south of Flamingo to Hotel Rio Drive, and then back to the front of the hotel with my feet feeling every step. The only positive of this meandering was that I found a hardbound novel about cowboys on the road. It looked like it had been run over by a thousand trucks, and the rancher prose on each page had been tattooed with tire treads. No hoof prints, though. And I wondered which Wrangler-wearers in town had gotten so mad at this book that they tossed it out their window.

The Rio was once the belle of the ball, a cool, tropical paradise with humongous rooms, a decadent pool, and the best buffet in town with a Mongolian grill. Singers Chef Rico and Rio Rita caroused the tables and serenaded folks stuffing their faces with soft serve and popcorn shrimp. At some point, Caesars bought the place and ground it down to its nubs to wring out whatever cash they could. It was now more like the favelas than the beaches of its namesake. Giant parts of the casino were unused space. Junk stores filled storefronts of the indoor shopping plaza, restaurants went belly up, and a musty smell filled the vacuum.

Burt:

The Rio was one of my favorite places to stay in the 90s before I went full cheapo. It really was the coolest place for a time. I recall seeing Tiger Woods and Bruce Willis playing blackjack together in the high limit area behind Shutters Bar. These days, you'd be lucky to spot one or two cast members from Presto P.I.

Now, the Rio is under new ownership that promises to bring back its former glory. I'm not sure where they've started, but it's not in the casino. Everything is still old, threadbare and sad. They do have a new slot club, though, which offered new members \$8 each in "Frio" play. Eight felt like a beancounter compromise, the result of a focus group or some accountants who balked at offering ten but were afraid five wouldn't be enough to lure gamblers in. They were wrong. We'd hand over our social security numbers and passwords for \$2. Hell, I once enrolled in a slot club just to get two Grandma's cookies, the same kind I get after giving blood.

We took our Frio play, ran it through some video poker machines, pocketed the winnings, and searched for KISS World in the Masquerade Village. This area was once a lively space with hourly parades of floats hung from the ceiling, music, dancers, and acrobats on a stage. Now, the space was empty save for some convention-hall chairs, a big screen TV showing the rodeo, and a country band on the stage.

Buried in the back of the Village was KISS World, a half-assed museum and memorabilia store for the cosplay rock band, and a cheap way for them to store the less valuable detritus from an overlong career. Also, there was a small black-lit miniature golf course consisting of a few ramps, some cargo boxes as obstacles, a giant fluorescent guitar, and the chance to hit a ball up Gene Simmons' tongue on the 18th hole. The retail price was \$13 per person, which I assume a cowboy with two bored kids playing behind us paid. They were the only other people on the course. Thanks to Burt's savvy shopping, though, we paid about what it was worth: \$3.30 apiece. The very best of KISS's oeuvre played during our round. Interestingly, the very best of KISS is also among the very worst of human achievement.

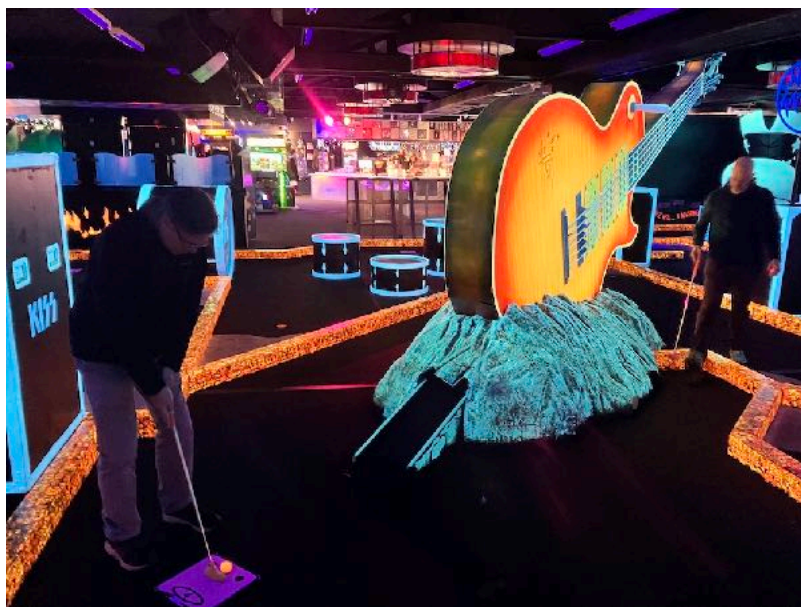
No matter, I had fun playing with Burt and Dan, mostly because they were as bad as me. Dan liked it because there are ties in golf, and Burt because it was dark and, "Nobody's gonna find me here." Better still, I made a small profit on side bets. While Burt had the lowest overall score, I won the holes with the most money riding on them and netted 75 cents. Both my companions got holes in one.

If you are a KISS or mini-golf fan, I strongly urge you to find discounts before plunking down any money. I also strongly urge you to think hard about your life choices and where you went wrong to end up an adult fan of either. If you aren't into KISS, maybe try the similar "Twilight Zone" mini-golf on the Strip. It ain't worth full freight, but there are deep discounts for it, too.



We worried this excellent deal at the Fontainebleau would attract undesirables, but it only attracted us.

You have to get off the Strip to see the real beauty of Vegas.



Burt takes his sweet time lining up his putt, like it's the fucking Masters.

Chapter 8 - *And Miles to Go*

THE SUN HAD SET BY THE TIME we escaped the Rio. All the putting assuaged Burt's weird concern that someone was following him and he stopped looking back every few steps. Although our ultimate destination was to the south, we headed west to the Gold Coast next door to the Rio. The Coast's web site promised free bingo for people over 50, which would be the first good thing to happen to any of us since we reached that landmark. Other than the colonoscopies, that is, but those aren't free.

Dan:

I knew that this walk was bullshit from the get go. The scientist in me knew it even more than the reporter or the underworked athlete. Matt looked up the distance from Union Plaza to the South Point and crowed, it's 12 miles! We can do that!

Whether he ignored the nature of walking in Las Vegas out of naivety or a purposeful malevolence didn't matter. We all knew from the start that wandering into and out of casinos, through them to casino cages at the back, hither and yon on overpasses, and out of our way for aa \$5 bingo card or free cocktail would add many miles to the total. The day before, just walking from the Super 8 through downtown and back had been a five-mile taste of the hell to come, though any map app would have estimated it about 3 miles tops.

Now we were veering far off the road that would carry our tiring bodies deep off the Strip, far beyond the lights of Vegas. We were heading in the wrong direction entirely, and for what? For a free bingo play. Bingo!

OK, I admit I've never played Bingo in Las Vegas (or KISS mini-golf), and I was kind of looking forward to it. Still, each step off our course, and each necessary step backtracking, was starting to feel like a personal attack from some force beyond. And that force was Matt and Burt. Fucking Matt and Burt.

That's when I took out my new necklaces.

In the days before my drive to Vegas, I had made three amazingly attractive necklaces to wear. They were strung on dental floss, which is both strong and sanitary. The gems that I sewed onto this thread were made of two ingredients: dried mango and beef jerky. The mango shone in a stunning range of orange, from the yellowish to the reddish; and the jerky was a darker red-brown to accentuate and be accented by the mango. On two of the necklaces, each mango-jerky counterpoint was wrapped in see-through cellophane so that the colors could be fully appreciated. The third necklace made use of silvery aluminum foil, and the materials inside were wrapped into tooth-like shapes, giving an overall effect of native art. Very fetching!

Edible and wearable, these fine objet d'art broke no rule. Clothing did not count against our budget. That these particular items of apparel were edible was just part of their nature.

And yes I had made three. Because if you're going to eat a necklace, you have to be able to share.

I knew Matt to be as stubborn as a rock and Burt to be generally a little dim, but I truly did not expect them to refuse and decline to make use of the articles of clothing that I had so generously crafted for them. Some harrumphing about unorthodoxy. Some unsupported accusations that it was "cheating" instead of what it truly was: brilliantly gaming the fucking system!

Bingo was our next stop. Dinner was many miles away. My necklace was going to help get me from one to the other. I had seven edible "gems" when I looped the stunning silver-foil

necklace over my head. By the time the pitch darkness north of South Point had fully engulfed us, I'd be flossing my teeth (but still wildly hungry).

Bingo may be less fun than mini-golf, but at least this wasn't KISS themed. Better still, it was a chance to sit down and rest our feet. Except, the Gold Coast lied. There was no free bingo, just an extra game if you already paid for two. Upon learning this, Burt steamed, his ears turned crimson, his teeth ground. He stormed into the bingo hall with a vengeance and hunted the employees down like a cheetah does gazelles. I knew what was coming, and I stayed out of his way. So did Dan. We shuffled to the other side of the room and pretended to take a keen interest in the water coolers while Burt cornered a confused young woman.

Dan and I busied ourselves filling water bottles, but got chewed out by a Gold Coast employee. Apparently, even water is too precious for them to give to us for free. Soon, though, that scolding was drowned out by Burt's rising voice from across the room.

"Free means free! You tell your manager to expect a sternly-worded letter! ! A super-sternly-worded one!"

The employee responded meekly, too quiet for us to hear from our side of the room.

"Two letters!" Burt erupted. "Super-duper stern!"

Burt, red as a beet and body shaking, pointed at Dan and me, snapped his fingers, and then stormed out, bowling through the stream of elderly people on their way into the bingo room for the next session. Dan and I followed, exiting the Gold Coast and returning to Flamingo Road in the cold, dark winter night. But it wasn't until we had crossed over I-15, passed Caesars Palace, and reached the Strip proper that we caught up with him.

Burt:

December 11, 2024

To the Boyd Gaming Corporation:

Dear Sam,

Although you and I have not spoken personally for some time, I felt I needed to share with you a disturbing incident at one of your properties. During a recent visit to the Gold Coast, I found that your hotel was neither on a Coast of any kind nor particularly Golden. To elucidate, I bring your attention to the Bingo Parlor...

The remainder of this letter can be obtained by written request to burt@neongutter.com.

Burt was still steaming, muttering to himself, and practicing signing his name in the air. I decided this was not a good time to inform him that the ragtag team of lovable rascals from

Incarnate Word had shocked the college basketball world by losing to Duke by only 26 points. That meant me and Jesus won the STN Sport app, and I was credited with a win of \$45.45. Burt and Satan would only get their \$50 wager back. More importantly, I had won another quarter off Burt from our side bet.

Our next stop was the Park MGM, formerly the magic-themed Monte Carlo casino, and now the only smoke-free resort on the Strip. Its entrance is consumed by Eataly, a village of Italian restaurants, delis, and markets full of pastries, pastas and heavenly garlic smells well beyond our budget. Deeper within, though, we had business. I had \$25 in freeplay (\$6.25 apiece in profit) waiting as a reward for playing mind-numbing hours of fake slots on my phone. I got my credits, sat down, played video poker, and hit a royal flush, the drama of which is drastically reduced when it's on a Deuces Wild machine, where instead of a thousand dollar payout you get something like three bucks. No matter, free money is always great, and so is not walking.

But we had to. We still had miles to go and about five hours until midnight. We strolled past New York New York and crossed Tropicana Boulevard, named after a casino that is no more. It was demolished last year to supposedly make way for a baseball stadium right on the Strip, and that will cater to anyone who wants to take four hours out of swimming, gambling, drinking, and gorging themselves on crab legs to watch guys bunting, spitting and yanking at their jock straps.

We walked right past the Excalibur and its rundown casino, but entered the Luxor to get some water. The place has lost its way. When it opened, it went all in on the Egyptian theme. The hotel and casino were pyramid shaped. There was a Nile River with a boat ride that circumnavigated the gaming floor. Guests could watch an interactive show about the "secrets" of the pyramid and interact with talking camels. Even the Sigma Derby was themed, with bettors wagering on canal boats or camels instead of horses.

All of that is long gone, though, along with most references to Egypt. Now, the great mystery of the pyramid is why they are unable to vent the smell of the Nathan's Hot Dog stand on the second floor. Probably because they're prominently featured, near a Mexican restaurant. There's a display of Titanic artifacts, shows by prop comic Carrot Top, the Blue Man Group, and some topless ladies. Plus, an arena that pays tribute to the failed dream of turning video games into a spectator sport. In other words, a themeless hodgepodge.

Burt:

In my research for this trip I stumbled upon a 90-minute "documentary" about the Luxor on YouTube that had been shot with a VHS camcorder in the 1990s. It exposed all of the satanic imagery and symbolism that was displayed in every corner of the hotel when it was built. It was poorly produced and nonsensical, so right up my alley. I tried to get the guys to take a

few minutes to explore some of the unique areas I had heard about in the video, but Matt said “Not today, Satan!” Zealot.

We would return to the Luxor the following day because we had a “free” night in the hotel waiting for us. For now, though, we only passed through on our way to Mandalay Bay, the last casino on the Strip proper and before the darkest six miles to South Point.

I had another \$25 in freeplay at the Mandalay Bay, earned through even more mind-numbing slot play, and Burt had earned a complimentary “signature cocktail,” via the same app. I was going to share my profits, Burt was not going to share his drink. Dan had no business to attend to, so he rested his feet in the empty sports book and asked strangers what games allowed ties.

Burt and I did several agonizing laps of the confusing casino in search of the slot club. The overhead signage was of little use and often contradicted itself, but we eventually found our destination and got our rewards redeemed. While I went off to find video poker, Burt headed to the bar for his fancy drink.

Dan:

First were the feet. Then it was the knees. It didn't help that the lower strip has so many stairways and overpasses crossing the impossibly busy roads we used to skip across at ground level way back in the 90s. My knees had no hose, and they were pretty pissed about it. They got their way — elevation and motionlessness — when we finally got to Mandalay Bay, and Matt and Burt did a few extra laps around that massive property looking for the casino club where Burt could get his free fancy cocktail.

I sat, legs up, in the sports book, and fell into a troubled, twilight sleep. I don't know how I rose from that semi-comfortable chair before a full 8 hours of REM, but I think I was partly fueled by the sadistic glee that Matt and Burt had now put in an extra quarter mile for a free cocktail and a couple slot spins.

Burt woke a napping Dan when he returned to the sports book.

“What is that?” Dan pointed at the drink, somewhat peeved at being woken, and more peeved at not having a cocktail of his own.

“It's my signature cocktail.”

“I didn't know we could afford expensive drinks on our budget,” Dan lamented, suddenly craving something, anything, overpriced.

“We can't. This was free. So don't even think about it,” Burt snapped.

“What’s the signature?” queried Dan, rightfully expecting such a drink to have umbrellas, tiny swords, sparklers, or something that played show tunes.

Burt repeated what the bartender told him: the Luxor had no “signature” cocktail (hell, the Luxor has no signature, period), but he could have anything up to a certain price point. At home, Burt drinks top-shelf stuff while writing angry letters, so has a lot of experience with high-priced hooch, and ordered the fanciest peppermint schnapps they had, the kind with gold flakes in it.

After cashing out the video poker winnings I headed to meet my friends in the sports book. When I got there, Dan stood over the table, slightly hunched with his back to me.

“Where’s Burt?” I asked.

“Went to the bathroom,” answered Dan.

“What are you doing?”

“Adding the signature to his drink.” Dan shook something followed by a zipping sound. Then he sat down.

Burt returned and broke out the jar of peanuts we had bought what felt like weeks earlier but was really only that morning. He commented on how good his drink was, how he could “really taste the gold.”

The soft seats in the cavernous book lured us to get comfy, but the longer we sat the stiffer our joints got, which weakened our resolve to continue the journey deeper into the night and farther into the unknown.

Sitting is such a nice thing to do.



Matt reacts to Dan's "brilliant" hack of walking around wearing mango and beef jerky.

Burt's "signature" cocktail after it received Dan's loving attention.



The glittering tackiness of the Excalibur's exterior belies the grim tackiness of the interior.

Chapter 9 -

I Have Outwalked The Furthest City Light

TIME AND HUNGER WERE THE ENEMIES. We hadn't eaten since the Fontainebleau nearly eight hours prior. Midnight and its graveyard specials loomed. Besides, when we say we're going to do something, we mean it. Unless it's work, or, like, finishing painting the guest room that we started twelve years ago. With great effort, we forced ourselves out of Mandalay's Bay's comfy chairs and gingerly hobbled toward the exit while our muscles stretched and warmed.

In the Mandalay Bay's porte cochere, a fireplug of a doorman greeted us and asked where we were headed, assuming we needed a cab.

"To South Point," Burt said.

"All right," he flagged for a taxi.

"Oh, no," I said. "we're walking."

The doorman did a double take and narrowed his eyes. "You're walking?"

Dan nodded. "Yeah, what is it, about six miles? Is there a sidewalk?"

The man whistled long and low as he looked out into the dark, cold night. "Gentleman, I do not recommend it. In that direction you will only find death and despair, a vast wasteland of broken dreams and forgotten hope."

I gulped loudly.

He then shrugged. "I do it all the time. I walk it, I run it, I bike it. Sometimes I skip. Piece of cake. I'd swim it if I could." He pointed down Las Vegas Boulevard. "Go that way."

Dan:

As we headed south into the desert's darkness, the pain quickly moved into my hips. The interplay between the ball-ends of my femurs and my pelvic sockets came starkly into my awareness in exquisitely torturous detail. With each shuffle-step forward over rocky ground and gravelly berm, I could feel the impacts of my deadened feet, vibrating past my stiffened knees into those two joints, and all the nerves there were waking up to a type of sensation they claimed they were not supposed to be feeling.

Matt, with half a foot on me, mostly in his legs, soldiered on at breakneck speed, the hare to my tortoise. I realize in retrospect that this gait was the most comfortable for him, and asking him to slow would have made his burden heavier. I'm glad he didn't. But at the time, I was pissy at the assumption I'd keep pace with him—until finally, I decided not to. I knew that for me, the monk walk, one unhurried and unpausing step after the next, would get me to that industrial-quality chuck steak on a seeded bun that waited at the end of this slog.

What I didn't expect was the last stage of pain. Feet, okay. Knees, to be expected. Hips, unusual, but reasonable. The last pain was the worst: the taint. In the cold air, just a smidge above freezing, with my body in long johns that weren't nearly as wicking as their packaging claimed, the sweat and clamminess that concentrated just behind my scrotum turned into a sticky chaffing.

If you think this is unpleasant to read about, I guarantee that reading about it is a slice of heaven compared to walking miles with it.

It was well past 8 PM and the temperature hovered just above freezing when we left the lights of the Strip behind, stiff, tired, and hungry. South of Mandalay Bay, the gleaming facade of Las Vegas falls away. The last bastion is the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign where influencers line up to have their pictures taken. And until you get there, the sidewalk has stanchions to separate pedestrians from drunk drivers roaring out of town as fast as they can. Immediately beyond the sign, that protection disappears as though the city is saying, "You're not our problem anymore."

We passed an enormous suburban shopping mall, generically named Town Hall, and then buildings petered out, the dazzling lights were behind us, and before us were stretched emptiness. Vacant lots interspersed with gas stations, fast food joints, and timeshares. The sidewalk became intermittent, leaving pedestrians like us to walk through the debris and gravel in vacant lots, across culverts and ditches, through scrub brush, and under huge signs with phone numbers to call if you want 100 raw acres of land. White crosses and plastic flowers dotted the roadside to commemorate

morons killed by cars as they tried to walk in the dark along a highway just to get a cheap meal. I took these as a sign, an omen if you will, that the graveyard specials at the South Point were so good they're worth risking your life for.

Dan:

Headlights flashed past from behind us, illuminating the edges of what must have been acres scrub and scree. Out there, beyond the beams, it was dark and flat, terrifying only if you thought about it. A place to wake up in utter confusion after too much of what Vegas offered. A place to leave something unwanted. Or a place to bury it. As we walked, I glanced out that way on occasion, taunting myself with the unseen terror that could be lurking there. Rats, definitely. Rabid raccoons, probably. Zombies, plausibly. And then with a particularly stark white light, a pair of headlights from behind lit up a small white cross.

It was in the flared gothic style, white around the edges with a gold-colored central cross. It was plastic, stuck into the earth and slightly tilted backwards as in the style of centuries-old headstones succumbing to gravity and the slow settling of the ground below. Around it was gathered a menagerie of small offerings. A plastic-wrapped bouquet of dried flower stalks, a frayed rope string with three small metal bells, a summer squash tipped on its side so that its full circular bottom shone like a tiny, forsaken sun. There was also an empty 7-11 cup in the shelter of the cross.

Another car passed, and the shadow of the cross appeared, stretched out long against the barren gravel, and vanished.

"Let's make haste," I suggested. I tried to sound practical, but I was spooked.

An hour later, we were still so far from the South Point that we couldn't see it. Another challenge was that a difference in our paces emerged and we started to separate. I like to keep moving once I start, and move as fast as I can until I run out of steam. Burt was somewhere in the middle, while Dan was more methodical, pacing himself for the entire trip. Occasionally I would find myself telling a hilarious story, or one where my heroics saved lives, only to turn around and find myself alone, and my traveling companions far behind, still traversing some boulders or barbed wire. I would have to wait for them to catch up before retelling my wonderful tales with new embellishments. And yet, they insisted, "Keep going. Faster. Don't worry about us. No, faster still."

Halfway through the night's journey, we came across the Bootlegger's Bistro, a legendary Italian restaurant known as the place to hang if you're old enough to remember Vintage Vegas. It

was well past dinner time, even for Europeans, when we pulled the door handle. It gave way and we poked our heads into the dining room, classically decorated with dark booths, red tablecloths, and photos of old-school celebs. It smelled heavenly, warm with tomato and garlic, and clearly out of our price range. It was so nice, in fact, that Burt didn't ask what they could give us for free.

Back outside, we could see our breath in the frigid night. My feet felt raw. My calves were tight and my lower back barked with each step. I think we all questioned continuing something that started out as a dumb idea before the pain even kicked in. It turns out that sometimes dumb ideas are dumb for a reason.

After another mile, we saw casino lights. But they were from the Silverton, to the west and across the interstate, a seemingly impossible distance away. I noted that because we planned a trip there the next night. Shortly after that, however, the South Point rose over the horizon, a glowing dot beyond a string of timeshare properties named after nicer places than this, like Tahiti and Cancun.

Had it been dropped onto the Strip, the South Point might have looked dinky among the 4,000 and 5,000 room hotels. In the middle of nowhere, though, its 2100-room tower appeared monolithic, a massive slab of casino. The mere sight buoyed us. We could see the finish line, where pancakes and eggs awaited, and we knew could get there. We lumbered on through the patchwork of suburban and undeveloped lots, our destination growing in the distance. Not that we were close; there were still miles to go, but they were a fraction of what we had already covered.

Bus after bus whizzed past us during the trip, all looking warm and well lit, and all available to us with our passes. We ignored them, though, as we soldiered on until, at just past eleven PM, with our feet, legs and backs on the verge of giving out, and our water supply low, we arrived. There were tears of joy, I lit a firecracker I had saved just for this occasion, and there might have even been some manly hugs.

The celebration was premature, though, because reaching the South Point's property was not the same as reaching the casino. We still had to cross a massive parking lot, find the entrance, and figure out how deep into the enormous structure the Coronado Cafe and its cheap eats were. And so, we trudged on, dodging cars and stumbling over curbs until we found a door.

We had completed our journey, and with almost an hour to spare before the cafe offered their late night eats. To fill that time, we staggered to the nearest seats in the nearest bar among dudes in Wrangler jeans and Stetson hats drinking Coors Light and talking to each other about their qualifying times or lasso styles. We had no freeplay here, and no tricks to get free drinks, so we sat quietly with our water bottles and hoped nobody would kick us out.

The South Point is the headquarters for the National Finals Rodeo. While we saw cowboys all over town, nothing compared to the concentration here. And these were the real ones, not people playing dress up while watching events. The folks in the bars, at the tables, and playing the slots

were the real deal, dirty still from competing in events with names like steer roping, barrel racing, goat herding, and mare sniffing.

Rigor mortis set in. Our bodies stiffened and our feet throbbed as we watched rodeo highlights on the TVs and argued over whether the winners were the ones who got off the angry bulls the fastest or stayed on the longest. An argument can be made for either, but two out of three of us were pretty sure that there were no ties. The longer we sat, the harder it became to move. Out of fear that if I remained still they would find me dead in that chair at dawn, I forced myself to get up, walk around the casino, and figure out where the Cafe was so that we would not waste precious time or steps at midnight.

Dan:

By the time we drunkstumbled the last steps of our twenty-something-mile day into South Point, we were walking every bit as bow-legged as the rodeo cowboys who packed the bar and gaming areas. I cursed Matt and Burt for the inefficiency of every extra detour in or through a mid-strip casino. My feet had gone into a dissociative torpor.

My first action upon sitting was to get those compression socks off of me. I took them off with a flourish, began air-drying them propellor style, and shouted, "Woo-wee, these fuckers are ripe!"

All were utterly charmed by this.

Burt:

It's counterintuitive to think that by ending a long walk and getting off of our feet that the level of discomfort would rise dramatically, and yet that's exactly what occurred. Not a sharp pain like the corner of a craps die thrown directly into one's knuckles. More of a dull pain like the aroma of the Imperial Palace hitting your nose when reaching the top of the 2nd floor escalator entrance from the Strip. Due to budgetary restraints, we were unable to take advantage of the bar that was situated a mere five feet away to dull the aches. So Dan did the next best thing by taking off his shoes, putting his feet up on the cocktail table, and peeling off his compression socks. To their credit, no one in the bar batted an eye.

South Point's Coronado Cafe was enormous. At first I thought it was the buffet, especially because a line of customers had already queued at the entrance in wait for the midnight specials. I wondered, how far did all these people walk to get here? Regardless, the gathering was a testament to the pent up demand for cheap late night food in Las Vegas.

I returned to find Burt and Dan both idly staring at the ceiling in a half-conscious state, and Dan barefooted. I informed them that we better get in line so that we would be served quickly. The reason was because the last bus headed north from the South Point came at 1:18 AM. If we missed it, we'd either be walking back or waiting six hours for the first one in the morning. After a minor struggle, my friends rose and joined me in a ginger shuffle toward the Cafe. Our limbs drew no attention here, as many of the cowboys had similarly stiff-legged gaits, only from doing something more manly than walking 20 miles just to eat pancakes for less than five bucks.

We didn't want to stand in line, but we did want to eat, so we took our lumps and got behind about three dozen cowboys. Luckily, the Coronado Cafe is used to a lineup and moved us along quickly when midnight tolled. The waiters were ready for cheapskates and served us with a professionalism we didn't deserve. Ours didn't even bat an eye when we ordered three dishes for under five bucks apiece and no drinks. The food came quickly and without spit or loogies hidden in it. Trust me, I've learned to look carefully wherever I dine.

This meal was meant to be the crowning achievement of the day. A reward for our hard work and a keen eye on the bottom line. Twenty-something miles of steps with stops all over town over more than 15 hours had brought us here. Yet, the moment felt hollow. Maybe it was because we were so damn tired. Maybe it was because the food was mediocre, as though the South Point's chefs were unaware of what it took us to get here, and were simply cranking out average breakfasts, albeit for \$4.45. Or maybe, the disappointment came from realizing the journey was over. It was like the time I ate an entire Costco pizza by myself. I expected pride, but instead I just threw up.

We ate in near silence, our bones settling, our flesh forming to the chairs. Yes, we made it to the graveyard special in the dumbest way possible. And yes, we ate dinner for less than five bucks. But now the rest of our lives would be a denouement. What could we ever do to top this? Cure cancer? Not quite. World Peace? Only if it comes with ham.

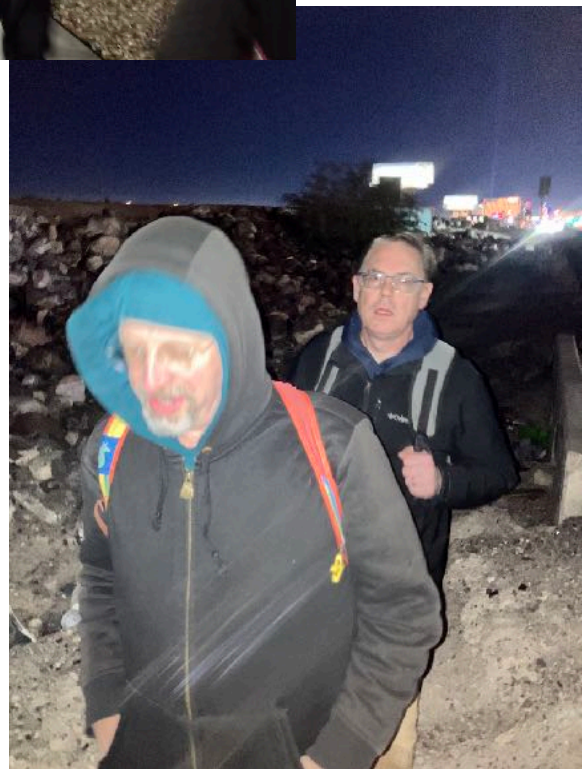


(Left) South of Mandalay Bay, the long journey into night begins for Burt, Dan, and

(Below) "When the Fun Stops."



The backside of the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign. What it doesn't say is, "You're on your own now."



A glowing beacon of hope at the end of a long walk.

Chapter 10 -

I Am Overtired of the Great Harvest I Myself Desired

THIRTY MINUTES LATER AND RELATIVELY FULL OF FOOD, we dreaded the return to the cold night and the trip back to the Super 8. It was near impossible to roust our stiff joints and exhausted muscles, but we had to if we wanted to catch that last bus.

We hobbled out of the hotel and to the bus stop, which is conveniently placed within the South Point parking lot. A few employees getting off their shifts waited alongside us for the northbound 117. It would take us far enough north to transfer to the Deuce, which would carry us the rest of our way along Las Vegas Boulevard.

Exiting the bus meant once again rousing ourselves from comfort and warmth to stand in the cold. It was 1:30 AM, and there was nobody else at the bus stop except an elderly man who twitched nervously and cackled at some unspoken joke. Maybe the joke was us, and even an oddball tweaker knew what fools we were, but I like to think it was just his choice of drugs.

The Deuce is luxe by bus standards. The route runs double-deckers up and down the Strip outfitted to appeal to tourists who would never be caught dead on public transit back home. At this time of night, and this far away from the tourist zone, we could sit in the front row on the top deck with a commanding view as we rolled up the vacant Strip, the spectacular lights and giant hotels building to a crescendo as we passed MGM Grand, Planet Hollywood, Paris, Horseshoe, Bellagio, Caesars, Flamingo, and all the other behemoths we couldn't afford to sleep, gamble, or eat in.

Our stop would be past them all, north of the Stratosphere and in front of a dive bar called Dino's that's open 24 hours a day, but whose doors are always locked. Nobody gets in without ringing a buzzer and the bartender getting a good look at you on CCTV. They also have a "no

backpack” rule, presumably to keep out the nerds who only want to talk about books and compare pencils.

In our pre-trip planning, we thought a nightcap at Dino’s would be the ideal way to celebrate the day’s epic accomplishment. We’d split the ice cold \$7 pitcher of Pabst Blue Ribbon they advertised on their web site while regaling the other night owls with our triumphant odyssey. There would be awe, cheers, offers of free drinks, and barflies begging to marry us.

But when the bartender buzzed us in we found none of that. Dino’s is worn down in a carefully curated way. The stools and bar are tired. It has a couple pool tables, punk rock memorabilia, counterculture stickers on the walls, and a low stage for famously raucous karaoke nights. I bet when it’s packed the lounge is wild. At two a.m. midweek, not so much.

The only two patrons sat at the bar and weren’t interested in our accomplishments. There was no cold pitcher waiting, either. The bartender said they didn’t even have PBR on tap (even thought the web site still promises it as of this writing). Upon hearing this, I could feel the heat coming off Burt.

Burt:

Does anyone have Dino’s mailing address?

We ordered three bottles of the cheapest beer and sat by ourselves, sore, tired and maybe a little sick of each other.

Beyond Dino’s was the last leg of our quest, the final 1500 feet up Las Vegas Boulevard to the Super 8. It felt like ages ago when we had left that morning, full of optimism and hope about our adventure, and about the free coffee we were about to spill all over ourselves. But it had actually only been 18 hours. We said nothing as we entered our room and crawled into the beds. I was even too tired to comment on Dan wrapping himself in his sheet from home (until now).

Within moments, I had fallen into a deep sleep, my back unclenching and thanking me for finally being still. My calves released and my thighs relaxed. What followed was some of the best sleep ever for two of us, but not the third.

Dan:

My body dropped like a scone into the bay. Not a stone, but a scone. I felt waterlogged, weighted, and overcome with stillness and dissolution. Sweet sleep crept in like a fog. And then pumping house music blasted in like a titular hero in a Marvel movie.

UMP! UMP! UMP! UMP!

Some complete and total fucking subhuman piece of shit asshole had driven around the far end of the Super 8 and was now passing our hotel window blaring full-volume techno from a car stereo in the parking strip just outside! Shit was loud! I moaned a weak echo. The music shut off, and a moment later, cranked again. Off again. On again, off again, on again for quite a while. Something was happening one or two stories above our ground-floor room.

Hurt people hurt people. I know that. But the evil incarnate motherfucker who seemed to own the mobile party sound system was now yelling a conversation with someone hollering down from above. He wanted their attention. Whoever it was, didn't want to have to give it, and they were upset to have it demanded in this way. When the car owner got upset, he used the blaring music to get them to acknowledge him.

Maybe this was some Vegas local in a lover's spat. Maybe the couple had just married that afternoon in the chapel next door, but the medieval-knights-themed wedding hadn't been potent enough to make a bond to last beyond a half rotation of the earth. Whatever was going on, it was loud, it was outside our window, and it was just about as obnoxious as anything I'd ever experienced after walking 20 miles in a day.

I got up, went to the door, knowing Burt and Matt would be right there to back me up. I flung the door open, jumped the punk, and beat the ever loving snot out of him. Except, of course, I didn't because I was so exhausted, and I didn't want to get involved. And Matt and Burt apparently were playing possum.

The scene went on for about 20 minutes. Thumping music. No music, but yelling. No yelling, but more music. Repeat.

The voice from outside screamed, "Well, now everybody's awake!"

It would have been funny, except it was not at all. I heard the perpetrator walk past our window, and soon he was somewhere else in the parking lot with a stern male voice talking to him. Maybe a police officer on graveyard shift. Maybe a less catatonic guest at the old Super 8. Whatever it was, their voices faded enough for me to fall asleep.

Though the next day was going to be another full one, we didn't need to set an alarm. The same asshole was back around 8:30 the next morning, hollering his woes to wake up the world on a sleepy Wednesday morning.

I fumbled for my mace, but couldn't get myself upright fast enough.

Day 2 Results			
	Burt	Matt	Dan
Groceries at Albertson's	-\$3.15	-\$3.15	-\$3.15
D Matchplay	-\$16.67	-\$16.67	-\$16.67
Fontainebleau Freeplay	\$11.25	\$11.25	\$11.25
Fontainebleau Foodcourt Lunch	-\$1.00	-\$1.00	-\$1.00
STN Sports Free Bet	\$15.15	\$15.15	\$15.15
Intramural Basketball Bet	-\$0.25	\$0.25	
Rio Freeplay	\$6.00	\$6.00	\$6.00
KISS Minigolf	-\$3.30	-\$3.30	-\$3.30
KISS Minigolf sidebets	-\$0.75	\$0.50	\$0.25
Park MGM Freeplay	\$6.25	\$6.25	\$6.25
Mandalay Bay Freeplay	\$6.25	\$6.25	\$6.25
South Point Dinner	-\$5.00	-\$5.00	-\$5.00
Dino's Beer	-\$4.00	-\$4.00	-\$4.00
Super 8 Motel	-\$14.88	-\$14.88	-\$14.88
Day 2 Total	-\$4.10	-\$2.35	-\$2.85
Freebies	1 key chain, 3 cocktails	1 key chain, 3 cocktails	1 key chain, 3 cocktails



The anti-climactic reward for all of our hard work.



Home Sweet Home. We return to the luxury and silence at the Super 8.

PART III

Wednesday and Thursday,
December 11 and 12, 2024

Chapter 11 -

The Heart is Still Aching to Seek, But the Feet Question Whither?

YOU'D THINK AFTER A DAY AS FULL as Tuesday that we'd sleep in, let our muscles heal, and luxuriate in the overpowering smell of the Super 8's industrial cleaners. This wasn't the case at all.

My deep and uninterrupted sleep ended about 9:30 AM by the knowledge that there was still a lot of freeplay to churn and bad food to eat. I heard Burt already moving about, and weak daylight leaked in around the edges of the curtains. As I stretched and yawned I happily found that, while sore, I could move my legs and feet, and my back no longer ached. I thanked God that I had survived.

Burt reported similarly good sleep and that he would not need a cane or scooter to get about. Although, he said, he would not say no if offered one of the ones that obese people ride at Walmart.

Burt:

I spent a couple years in my twenties racing my Jazzy Zero Turn Scooter for pink slips on the southeast Florida circuit. Alas, those halcyon days are behind me.

Dan reported that he had not been so lucky. Already wide awake, he was furious that Burt and I had slept so well while, according to him, a raucous fight had raged right outside our room and kept him awake and in fear for his life. There was music, threats, slamming doors, and multiple people shouting and squabbling, with the authorities being called to calm it all down.

"I heard nothing," I said skeptically.

"Me either," Burt agreed. "It couldn't have been that loud."

Dan vibrated with fury and insisted that the fight had been real and terrifying. To demonstrate, he covered his left hand with a white sock. "Okay, this is the instigator." Then he covered his right with a black one, "And this is his girlfriend." His hands wrestled, his body writhed as though controlled by the socks as he alternated deep and falsetto voices until the scene culminated with his left hand shouting, "Well, now everybody's awake!" loud enough to make it so.

Out of breath, Dan slumped against the dresser and challenged us. "Now do you believe me?"

I didn't answer right away because I laughed so hard I fell off the bed. It was perhaps the most accomplished puppet artistry I have ever seen. And with no penises! With just two knee-highs Dan had brought the fight to us.

"Do Scarface!" I requested. "Or The Battle of Algiers."

Before Dan could fulfill my request, Burt intervened. "I believe you. Now can we get back to being cheap bastards?"

Our day's plans included the D's Sigma Derby, some free entertainment, a highly discounted dinner, and our biggest freeplay score yet for dessert. That score, in fact, was worth a trip to the most difficult to reach casino on Las Vegas Boulevard, one farther south than even the South Point. The journey would require the precise use of multiple infrequent buses careful to pull off without getting stranded. Our first task, though, would be an unpleasant one. That is, trying to cash out of the STN Sports app that had been a nightmare to sign up for.

Burt warned us, "This might take more work than we'd like."

"Meaning what?" I asked, a little afraid to know the answer.

"Meaning," Burt replied as he pointed at Dan. "Bring the socks."

In fact, Dan had to bring all his socks—puppet and compression—because we'd be sleeping in a different hotel that night. Using no car meant carrying our belongings with us until we could check in to the Luxor that evening.

The Luxor! An honest-to-god Strip resort. Granted, it looks to be on life support and receiving barely enough maintenance to prevent total collapse. Still, it has a pool and restaurants, and once upon a time had been themed with pride, as opposed to how its owners now treat the pyramid and Sphinx like a regrettable tattoo they can't afford to erase. We loaded clothes, electronics, toiletries, bedsheets, and mace into our backpacks and set out for a day with less walking but more carrying.

A good sportsbook app would make cashing out easy. But STN Sports is not at all good. It only offered dubious redemption methods that didn't connect to any of our banks, or required us to pay a fee just to get our own money. Plus, the app only worked in Nevada. Once we left, we could not

get our money. The only reasonable option was to visit an affiliated sports book and collect in person. This is why we hoofed it back to the El Cortez a third time. After all, we deposited our money there, so they should let us withdraw it.

From the Super 8, it is faster and easier to just walk to Downtown than to ride the bus. The good news was that we could move at a leisurely pace and carry our bad Super 8 coffee without fear of spilling it. That made the trek at least a little more pleasant, even if the coffee wasn't. What would have made it even better is if Dan got out the sock puppets. He tried to entertain me with bare hands and a Señor Wences routine, but it just wasn't the same.

Before noon on a Wednesday, Fremont Street was like a sleeping hobo: disheveled, smelly and passed out exactly where the previous night had ended. The blaring music hadn't started, but the smells of dried vomit and stale weed settled over everything like a blanket. The B-team panhandlers, those without costumes, angrily shook cups at passersby.

Inside the El Cortez, a lone staffer worked the sports book, and she had no idea how to cash out our accounts. She suggested we call STN Sports, which Burt promptly did, using a voice that is best described as stern as he tried to out-manuever and outlast the useless customer service rep who refused to deviate from a script designed to give non answers, feign sympathy, and blame everyone but the garbage app. He told Burt that we should contact our banks and demand that they allow transactions with whatever dubious platform STN Sports used. In other words, "It's your problem to solve."

We had one last thing to try. We could go to one of the physical Station casinos and see if the namesake sports book could sort it out. The nearest was Palace Station, way down on Sahara and west of the Interstate. In other words, a lot of walking and bus riding.

Burt:

While our lower extremities did feel better than the night before, additional walking was the last thing we wanted to add to our agenda. To be fair, the app was new on the market and they were working out the kinks. But in speaking to customer service, the STN Sports app staff showed little inclination to help us. They underestimated how far three goofs, living on pennies a day, would go to get dozens of dollars back in their pockets.

Before leaving downtown we decided to visit the D and see if our beloved Sigma Derby machine had been fixed. It had not; it had gotten worse. The horses were off the track. Hell, the track was out of the machine, exposing its guts, which were primarily ancient, dusty motherboards with Coke-can-sized transistors and bundles of wires fatter than a bowl of spaghetti at an Italian wedding. Three men in maintenance uniforms had disassembled it all. The player stations had been pried loose, while bits and pieces of our beloved game lay all over the carpet. This broke our hearts

because those 25-cent ponies were pretty much the only gambling we could afford, and it now appeared unlikely to be working again before our trip ended.

Presiding over the repairs was a gentleman in a Sigma Derby T-shirt. He perused an elaborate, colorful spreadsheet while sipping a martini. The cocktail waitresses knew him, the repairmen knew him, everybody but us knew him.

“That guy looks like he’s in charge.” Burt said before walking toward him with what can only be described as a stern stride.

Burt:

I thought this gentleman must work for the D, the Sigma Derby Corporation of America®, or perhaps the National Toy Thoroughbred Racing Association, and so I asked him if he had any idea when the machine might be back up and running.

The man, in fact, did not work for the D, for the ponies, or for anyone. He was Ski, perhaps the world’s most dedicated Sigma Derby player. His paperwork represented decades of wagering and logging results, somewhere around 18,000 races just at the D. He wasn’t supervising, he had come to town as he did every month just to play the plastic ponies, and he was waiting for the machine to be fixed.

Ski wasn’t optimistic. Over the years he’d seen myriad Sigma Derby failures: horses stopping mid race, complete machine shut downs, and more quarter jams than at the stickiest adult arcade in town. The D’s machine, though, was suffering from a broken chain, which lie beneath the track and dragged the horses around the track. It’s like the kind on a bicycle but just different enough that you can’t just go buy one. He told us that a similar failure had permanently killed the Sigma Derby at the MGM.

Ski told us how there were Sigma Derby machines in pretty much every major casino in the 80s and 90s. The Luxor’s had racing camels, Caesars Palace had chariots. Harvey’s in Tahoe had two back-to-back, and the Vegas Hilton also had a pair. They are maintenance pigs, though, and as they broke down the casinos took them out to the stables and shot them. By the 2010s, there only two working machines in Vegas: The Frontier and MGM. The Frontier’s moved to the D and is the last operational game in the world. Over seven billion people on this planet, and only ten seats at the Sigma Derby, making it a more exclusive gaming opportunity than even the most high stakes salon privé in Monte Carlo.

The D’s owner, Derek Stevens, tries to buy the broken machines collecting dust in the basements of other casinos for his Sigma Derby boneyard. The day he runs out of parts to buy, the little plastic ponies may be turned into little plastic glue. In the meantime, the D expends a ridiculous amount of resources and manpower to keep a 40-year-old, unprofitable machine alive.

Despite being a hardcore fan who calculates probabilities and charts race results, Ski has no illusions that he can beat the machine. Just as he and I got deep into the deltas, lambdas, and standard deviations of the game, Burt said, “We need to go.”

“Be quiet,” I snapped. “The adults are having a conversation.”

“If we want our STN Sports money we have to go,” he explained.

We bid a fond farewell to our new friend Ski and promised to stay in touch⁶.

Our granola bars and (according to Burt) overpriced apples weren’t going to hold us until we got to the Palace Station. So, as we walked south through the Arts District we stopped at a place called Tacotarian, which has reasonably-priced tacos. I found out why: they don’t put meat or cheese in them. They call it “vegan,” but I call it bait and switch. The three of us were by far the least hip people in the joint, but we weren’t the only ones with our own water bottles for a change. For hipsters, it’s about saving the planet. For us, it’s about saving a couple bucks.

Even though Tacotarian is vegan, it’s also delicious. Fried avocados, fake meat chorizo and steak, and the weird-textured cheese that’s par for dairy-free menus. Put it all together and it’s good street-style tacos with really good salsa and tortillas.

Burt ordered first and paid about \$6 for a couple tacos. I ordered second and unwittingly struck upon the Wednesday special, a “Dorado” taco for only 99 cents. It felt like being the millionth customer at a grocery store or something. Dan ordered after me and got nothing but Dorados. Back at our table, Burt steamed at how cheaply Dan and I had gotten off. No matter how delicious his pricier tacos were, they left a bitter aftertaste.

Burt:

Writing this, months later, I can confirm that my bitterness over this has not subsided. Ever since, I have vowed to never order fast food without requiring the staff to explicitly explain any possible “great deals” that I might have otherwise overlooked on every single menu item. It only takes an extra 10-15 minutes for me to order this way, and I’ve only been banned by a handful of restaurants since embarking on this strategy, so I’m sticking with it.

We had some time to kill in the Arts District before a bus would arrive to ferry us to Palace Station. We wandered among the tattoo shops, vintage clothes stores, coffee shops, and a place that called itself an antique store. It wasn’t. It was an indoor flea market full of rented out stalls where people tried to sell the old crap clogging their garages, all priced under the misguided idea that their trash is someone else’s treasure. There was a plethora of battered old Hot Wheels, dogeared Playboys, and torn comic books featuring long forgotten superheroes. One gem stood out, though, a

⁶ We actually have. Ski puts up with us.

genuine stuffed baboon baring its fangs. The seller wanted over four grand, which may or may not be a good price. I haven't priced stuffed baboons in a while, and my wife says I already have more than I need.

Burt:

Traveling to the Palace Station, well out of the way for our day's plans, was a definite pain in the ass and a pain in our sore calves. But as we approached the entrance, we were feeling good about the significant cash return we'd finally receive from the STN app promotion. That good feeling was short lived.

The Palace Station sports book was considerably larger than the El Cortez's and had multiple employees on staff. But they also could not access the accounts that we established in their system using their software. To the staff's credit, they were genuinely mad on our behalf at the STN Sport fuckup.

"You know what I would do if I were you?" asked an older man behind the counter.

"Write a sternly-worded letter?" answered Burt.

The man scratched his chin. "Hmmm, I guess you could try that. What I would do, though—"

The sports book manager emerged from a back room and interrupted the older man. He asked us to write down our email addresses, names, and the amount in our accounts on little slips of paper. He did not describe the alchemy he was about to perform, but it had something to do with him going into his office, opening an ancient scroll, reciting an incantation backward, accessing our accounts in the STN Sports database, and changing some data. Only after that ritual would we maybe, possibly, get paid. Sounds like a really sophisticated and secure system the Station folks have there.

We waited in the sports book while counter staff went back and forth from the back room, each telling us to wait just a few more minutes. Burt paced. After ten minutes, he looked at his watch and said, "I'm going to contact the Gaming Commission."

"By letter?" the older man at the counter asked, stifling a laugh.

A few minutes later, Burt pointed at Dan. "You got the socks?"

Dan nodded solemnly.

"Stand by."

Time passed and we grew anxious because we had no idea what was taking so long or whether we'd ever get our money. Bettors moved around us, placing bets and cashing tickets, and the giant screens showed real horses running on real tracks—a pale imitation of Sigma Derby. Dan slipped the socks onto his hands and then had one of them ask Burt and me, "Time for the nuclear option?"

Before either of us could answer, though, the manager came out of his office waving a sheaf of papers. “I think I got it sorted.”

We approached the counter. The manager handed the papers to a cashier and watched over the man’s shoulder as he put cold hard cash into our hands. We were made whole, fifty dollars apiece, plus an extra 45 dollars to me. They shorted me 45 cents, though, and that now sits abandoned in a STN Sports app account that I deleted the moment we left Palace Station. I hope someone got fired at year end when their books didn’t balance.

Burt, I, and one of Dan’s socks thanked the Palace Station staff for their diligence. To be clear, none of this was the fault of the fine people working there. It’s the fault of a very shitty app and a corporation who eagerly foists garbage on its customers.

Dan:

Hot take: sports betting is for fools. In fact, spectator sports are a bunch of hooey! A lot of dudes pretending to be from different cities getting paid millions for playing a game while people gawk at them. How is this helping anybody? It’s jingoism practice for people with no real meaning in their lives. And what makes it worse is that my reliable source of winning sports bets from the 1980s and 90s (Matt) has lost his golden touch. Nowadays, every time I throw in money on one of his bets, that bet loses. Meanwhile, when I don’t bet with him—those bets win. Apart from marble races, sports are a waste of time. Go Balls of Chaos!

Burt:

When did Chomsky start contributing to this trip report?



(Above and Left) Sigma Derby technicians at the D repair the beloved machine while three men annoy them with dumb questions.

A surprisingly decent and affordable vegan taco at Tacotarian.



Derby superfan Ski shows off his rare Sigma Derby shirt.

The Off-Strip Palace Station, where problems of Station's creation are finally resolved.



Chapter 12 -

Our Missiles Always Make Too Short An Arc

AFTER RESOLVING THAT NIGHTMARE, WE DESERVED A BREAK. We walked south to Area 15, the home of psychedelic art installations, arcades, and bars. The main attraction there is Omega Mart, a confounding interactive grocery art installation store where every single product, from dish soap to cheese blocks, is a twisted fake and integral to a larger mystery that visitors are challenged to solve.

Omega Mart costs money, more than our daily budget. What didn't cost was wandering around the rest of Area 15 to check out the giant mushrooms, steampunk pieces, and to peek into the lounges and eateries we couldn't afford. Burt had found a free app-based puzzle that sent us on a scavenger hunt looking for clues in lockers and fake medical specimens to solve some sort of post-apocalyptic dilemma⁷. The puzzle was engaging and challenging, but more importantly gave us a reason to be there so that security wouldn't accuse us of loitering.

The sun had set by the time we left Area 15 and walked east on Desert Inn Road toward the Strip. We were getting hungry again. Vegas is full of restaurants, many of them decent or better. For the average tourist, dining is as easy as deciding the type of food desired and then figuring out who has it nearby. For us, though, it wasn't so easy. No dinner on the Strip was affordable. Instead, we hopped on the bus again and headed south, this time to the Silverton, below the Strip, but not as

⁷ The Area 15 app and subsequent treasure hunt is free for all and fun. Check it out: <https://area15.com/experiences/origin-quest/>

close to California as the South Point. Or the M Resort, which was even further, and where we planned to make our biggest score of the trip.

A Silverton promotion promised fifteen dollars in dining credit for new slot club members. I had already used this one, but Burt and Dan couldn't remember. We decided to give it a try and hope we could get thirty bucks in free grub in their cafe. If we were wrong and Burt and Dan were already members, we'd be stranded in the middle of nowhere with no food.

On The Strip, we caught the Deuce to the South Strip Transit Terminal behind the airport. There, we transferred to the 117 and continued farther down Las Vegas Boulevard, this time seeing the empty lots and culverts we had slogged through the night before.

"Remember that boulder?" Dan asked at one point. "Matt tripped over it."

"And look," Burt reminisced warmly, "there's that rusty rebar I snagged my pants on."

The Silverton is on Blue Diamond Highway, but on the other side of the freeway from Las Vegas Boulevard. That meant another dark walk. From the bus stop where we got off it looked manageable. That is, until we got to the hotel. Being near it was not the same as accessing it. The Silverton seems to have a chain link fence and cement moat all the way around their massive property. Still scarred by the previous grueling day, none of us wanted extra steps, but the architects built this place with no consideration for pedestrians, just for all the fat cats in Impalas, Accords, and RAV4s.

Our tempers grew short and our appetites grew long as we trekked all the way around the casino, hotel, Bass Pro Shop, parking lots, bushes, outbuildings, and convention centers. We passed under a bridge and through a debris field where we encountered a pit bull in the shadows guarding a trash bag full of bagels.

Dan asked, "Think those bagels are fresh?"

"Why else would that dog be guarding them?" I replied.

Dan crouched and circled the pitbull. "I think I can take him."

It growled.

"It's not that much farther to the casino," offered Burt, trying out a new role as a voice of reason.

"You know for sure we'll get food credit?" Dan asked, still circling.

"No."

"I'm so hungry, and I think I can take this dog." Dan lunged, and the pitbull bared its teeth.

"Fight!" I shouted. "Fight! Fight!"

"Let's just go inside," Burt urged.

"I see pumpernickel." Dan inched closer.

“Fight! Fight!” This was a no-lose situation for me: I either got free bagels or to watch a man get mauled by an angry dog.

Dan reached for the bag. The dog leapt forward, snarling and emerging from the dark. The moonlight glinted off its spiked collar and revealed a body scarred from previous battles.

Dan leapt back. “How’s the food at the cafe?” he asked.

The dog stalked forward, its black eyes locked on him.

“No idea.”

Dan backed further away and said, “That’s good enough for me.”

“Boo!” I hissed.

We left the bagels behind as we continued around the Silverton’s barrier until it gave way to shrubs that we could cut through. It was nearly eight o’clock, and we were one giant parking lot away from potentially deeply discounted food.

It’s harder getting into Drai’s nightclub wearing a propeller beanie than it is getting into the Silverton slot club. At the slot club counter, we knew more about the casino’s promotions than the club’s staff and had to explain what was written on their own coupons. Although Dan and Burt were indeed new to the club, the nasty little ladies tried to deny the promised \$30 food credit by accusing them of being given the coupons by others, never making it clear why that mattered. Then they argued that we printed them off the Internet. This was true, but only because that’s where they were posted, and printing them was in the coupon’s instructions.

Finally, and only after the threat of a sternly-worded letter, the two guardians of the Silverton’s cherished slot treasures grudgingly initiated Dan and Burt into Las Vegas’ most exclusive slot club, granting them the hard-earned free food credit. The staff surely wasn’t happy about it, though.

Our hunger was at peak levels, the levels at which we get nasty enough with each other to occasionally draw tears. Nothing is off limits: my clothes, the slightly feminine swish in my stride, how my jokes aren’t nearly as funny as I think they are, my body odor. Now that I think about it, everyone was just being nasty to me. But they did it well, and tears poured down my cheeks by the time we sat down in a booth at the Sundance Grill. Fortunately, service was quick, and I forgot my shortcomings while poring over the dinner options.

“How’s the schnitzel?” Dan asked the waitress, intrigued to see a German specialty on the menu, especially in a casino outfitted as a lodge, named after a legendary western mining town, and that features a giant aquarium filled with exotic fish and swimming mermaids.

“It doesn’t look very good,” the waitress told him while shaking her head.

“Really?” He seemed skeptical. This may be the first time in our lives that a waitress had ever told any of us to avoid the daily special, and yet Dan struggled to break free from the schnitzel’s allure. “I was really looking forward to it.”

She wrinkled her nose. "It's dry and sort of shriveled."

"It might still be good, though."

Burt tried to help. "Dry and shriveled like an old man's balls."

"Yeah, but..." Dan rubbed his chin.

"On a nude beach, all sunburnt and covered in sand." I added.

Dan asked, "Is it sandy?"

She shook her head and was clearly growing either weary or uncomfortable. "No. Just dry... and shriveled."

Dan hesitated, but the spell had been broken. He backed away from the schnitzel and instead chose the loco moco, which Burt agreed did not like old man's balls, just poop. I safely ordered the non-genital-like club sandwich, and Burt had a tuna melt.

When the waitress returned she avoided eye contact. The food was fine, which on our budget, meant fantastic. This was the first meal of the trip that left me full and satisfied, and cost about \$5 each after the hard-earned food credit.

Dan:

Loco moco is the classic breakfast of surfers the world over, but especially Hawaii. I know a ton about this as a world-renowned surfer, though primarily from the Internet. Loco moco is, ideally, a high-quality ground beef patty cooked rare, served on white rice (your carbs) with a fried egg on top for extra protein. Decorate with chopped green onion and a drizzle of teriyaki sauce. Yum to the max.

At the Silverton, however, the chef substitutes an industrial beef patty of indeterminate quality—indeterminate until a couple of hours later. The chef removes the artful drizzle of teriyaki for a drowning deluge of brown gravy with predominant flavors of salt and more salt. And to make up for the missing finesse, the chef provides three times the necessary amount of rice so that only the hungriest of wave-hounds will be able to finish the entire dish. For "Yum to the max," substitute. "At least it only cost five dollars."

The meal seemed to fortify Burt because he suddenly he gained the energy to take another run at the slot club's dragon ladies. This time, he angled for five dollars in slot play in exchange for giving the Silverton his phone number and allowing them to send unlimited promotional text messages. I don't remember the entire process, only that his number had to be entered one place on a web site, which would open a page that confirmed the number had been entered. He then had to present his phone to those awful women to prove he enrolled. They would then direct him to a kiosk where he could complete the process. All that before even cashing out the freeplay.

The last bus was leaving in seven minutes, and if we missed it—to put it succinctly—we were fucked. We'd be stuck at the Silverton and never get to the M for our biggest freeplay score. As cheap as I am, I wasn't risking my entire evening and a much larger payout for five bucks of video poker that required jumping more hoops than a dog in a Circus Circus performance, and then racing across a giant parking lot to a bus stop. Six dollars, maybe, But not five.

Dan:

Cognitive dissonance. Matt wanted every dime squeezed from this trip. But now he was turning his back on about 38 dimes. Of course, if we missed the bus, none of us would spring for an Uber at a cost upwards of 200 dimes. And we sure as shit didn't want to walk back out of the far-too-spacious-acreage of The Silverton to the M, which would have been nearly as long a walk as we'd taken yesterday.

So I watched Matt storm away while Burt, pious in his dedication to the project, went to tangle again with the uncooperative ladies at the cashier's cage. Classic middle-child behavior, I walked half as fast as Matt toward the exit, trying to keep both he and Burt within view. Of course this was impossible in the casino where sight-lines are purposefully disrupted. Soon, both were out of view and I turned in two complete circles, absolutely befuddling myself. When I chose to walk on, I found a different exit than the one we came in. I had no idea which way I was facing or which way to go. Burt and Matt? I had no idea where they were.

At times like this, my ancient Hebraic heritage kicks in. I looked up. There was Kishka the Bagel directly overhead. To her south shown the constellation of Mickey the Mohel. His scalp points due west, and that's the way I went.

And so, we split up for the first time on the trip with me doing the responsible thing of making a beeline for the casino doors. I was sore at Burt for even considering his foolishness. The last thing I saw before exiting was Burt standing in line with two angry women awaiting him at the end, and Dan torn between the two of us, half staying and half going.

Burt:

Matt had me sufficiently spooked about my decision to cash in this freeplay, but judging by the public transportation app's current ETA for the last bus, I thought I could make it. Once getting the \$5 in freeplay added to my account, I dashed to the first video poker machine I could find and played quickly and perhaps recklessly. I cashed out with a princely total of

\$11.25. I could practically pay for a stretch limo ride to the M for that amount, I'm quite sure. Bus be damned! But then I realized that regardless of actual profits, my assumed profit for \$5 in freeplay would max out at \$3.75 under our rules. And I had to evenly split it three-ways. I was only walking away with \$1.25 in the black for myself on our expense spreadsheet. I could barely buy two apples for that! I knew I'd have to make the bus by hook or by crook.

There was clearly only one correct choice, and I relished what I expected to be the most comfortable and satisfying ride of my life, warmed to the core by the sight of my hubristic friend shrinking to a tiny dot as he ran after the departing bus, shivering in the cold and dark, thinking hard about the consequences of his actions, of all the times he ever questioned my wisdom, of how foolish he had been. I hoped the coyotes didn't get him. Nah, I was indifferent about that.

Except, I got turned around as I left the casino and didn't know which direction the stop was. The clock ticked, my heart thumped, and I swear I heard the diesel rumble of a bus approaching. I reached the Silverton's boundary with no stop in sight and scrambled along the shrubs and rocks that separated it from the road. My phone buzzed in my pocket, but I was too frantic to answer.

Dan:

My bus app said the bus was going to arrive in either 1 or 7 minutes. It kept changing its mind.

Burt:

I half ran, half hobbled, out of the casino in the direction I thought the bus stop was. When I got past the garage to the surface parking lot, my heart sank. I now had a clear view of the bus stop and it was empty. No Matt. No Dan. No sign of a bus. Obviously they arrived before me and all my freeplay shenanigans, and with neither of them in sight it was equally clear that the last bus and come, picked them up, and gone. I looked around frantically and saw no one but a deranged homeless drifter looking for trash in the bushes a couple hundred meters away. I picked up my phone to call Matt, sure that I would hear maniacal laughter as soon as he picked up.

Finally, I spotted a bus shelter in the darkness beyond the parking lot lights where two shadowy silhouettes already waited. Their presence put me at ease because it meant the bus hadn't just come by. Still, I figured I better run to make sure. A car drove by and illuminated the stop and its occupants: Dan and Burt, who had somehow reached the stop before me. How? I don't know, but I was certain they didn't deserve to be there. I did. That's called justice.

However, through some black magic, Burt had avoided the comeuppance he richly deserved, and I now needed a face-saving excuse for why I was the last to arrive. I had plenty of time to think about it because there was still some distance to the stop, and I sure as hell wasn't going to give my friends the satisfaction of seeing me panic run. The last bus out was imminent and missing it would be an even bigger disgrace, so I strode briskly but also with panache, like someone who needed to use the bathroom right away but only because he had drunk a lot of very expensive wine.

"What happened to you?" Burt asked as I arrived, a sour tinge of smugness in his voice.

"And do you need to go potty?" asked Dan.

"I read on the Internet that there was something really cool in the bushes over there," I explained.

"What was it?" They asked.

"Something really cool," I simply answered wanting to leave them wondering. "The only thing worth nearly missing the bus for."

Burt explained that he had been anxiously texting and calling Dan and me because there was nobody else at the stop when he arrived, and he worried he had missed the bus. Had I known that buzzing was him I would have answered. And I would have replied, in a calm collected voice as I scrambled through bushes, that he did indeed miss his ride and to go back inside and wait until morning.

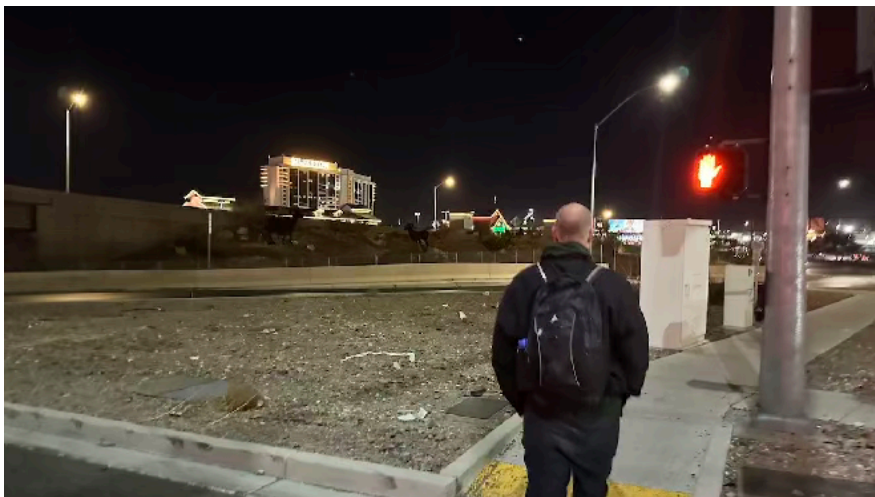
"I cashed out," he said. "Your share is \$1.25."

"I don't care." I replied and held out my hand. "Give it to me. I saw something worth way more than that in the bushes."



Inside Area 15, where art and commerce colorfully collide.

Dan ask whether tennis, kickball, Connect-4, bowling, swimming, three-legged races, and many other activities can end in ties.



We enter the matrix surrounding the Silverton, designed to exhaust pedestrians before they can reach an entrance.

Chapter 13 -

The Best Way Out Is Always Through

THE 117 ARRIVED AND I RODE IN SILENCE, back to the South Strip Transit Terminal, ignoring Dan and Burt's queries about what I saw in the bushes. I was too busy imagining a scenario where Burt missed the bus, and then the Regional Transit Commission discontinued service to Silverton because they were one passenger short of their quota. Stranded, he'd become a janitor who slept in a closet among mops and disinfectants, and survived off shriveled and dry scraps of "schnitzel."

One day far in the future, I envisioned, I would take a few of my many grandkids to the Silverton in my very nice flying car to show them the robot mermaids. I would run into my old friend, now hunched over and weakened by decades of manual labor.

"You were right," he would say to me as tears rolled down his cheeks. "By god, you were right about that bus. Always do what your grandpa says, kids."

I would order my grandkids to get away from the creepy old man.

The bus's last stop was the South Strip Transit Terminal, and its arrival jolted me back to reality, the unpleasant and unjust one where Burt was still with us and still talking about his free play triumph. We transferred to the 122 bus with our destination being the M Resort, the most remote casino on Las Vegas Boulevard, four miles beyond the South Point. The reason, of course, was our big score. The M's slot club, Penn Gaming, had offered a variable sign-up bonus plus \$100 if we linked our accounts to an ESPNBet sports book app. Burt and I successfully navigated the app's signup maze before the trip, but it had stymied Dan. Still, between the two of us we had accumulated \$240 in potential free gaming goodness.

The M is a small hotel by Vegas standards, but swank by any standards. The floors were polished within an inch of their marble lives, the columns draped in tapestry, and the lighting warm and dim. A few players haunted the slot machines late on this weeknight, and the pit had more people working the tables than wagering at them. The place felt serious, like real estate developers came here to broker deals, and not for dumbasses like us—or anyone—to have fun.

The woman at the slot club had no trouble loading my credit onto a slot card, but told me I could not use it as free play, only in the gift shop or in the restaurants, where our credit was worth double. So, Dan, Burt, and I were sitting on a mountain of \$240 in sunscreen and aspirin, or \$480 in steaks and calamari at fancy joints like Anthony's Steakhouse and Marinelli's Italian, where we'd probably look, and definitely smell, out of place. But, we had just eaten that huge meal at the Silverton, and returning to the M the next day would be logistically impossible. Luckily, the slot club employees once again knew less than we did about their own casino's promotions. The credit was, in fact, good as freeplay at the live games. Our slot card let us generate freeplay coupons spit at the casino kiosks.

Because the place was so dead, we'd be noticed Stupaking the credit at roulette or craps without raising all sorts of red flags. So, we hit the blackjack tables and ran through the \$240 one minimum bet at a time. The dealer was nonplused to have his nose picking interrupted by our presence. He said nothing and dealt robotically. Within ten minutes, we'd run through our freeplay, but earned a stack of chips worth \$152.50, all of it free money, and each of our shares (\$50.83) being way more than the entire day's budget.

The last 122 bus heading north arrived at the M at 11:28 PM. The property isn't nearly as labyrinthine as the Silverton's, and I only turned around a couple times before we found the bus stop. The cold weather hit even harder this evening while waiting for the bus. Part of that was because I had factored in more than a half hour of spare time just in case Burt got waylaid by an offer he couldn't refuse, like fifty cents for someone to punch us in the nuts.

Burt:

If anyone knows of such an offer to punch Matt in the nuts, please send us an email.

The other part of why we were cold was that being broke wears you down. There is no respite from having no money, and no margin for comfort. Every moment of our trip had been spent planning our next move and measuring the impact of each compromise or sacrifice. Need water? Stay parched until you find a drinking fountain. Want to warm up? Find someplace and pretend you're not loitering. A decent meal? Walk twenty miles. Fifty-odd hours into this boondoggle the long hours and crummy conditions were taking their toll. I didn't want to stop being cheap, but I wanted being cheap to stop being so cruel.

The saving grace was that at the end of this trip was a hotel room whose door didn't open to an alley. At 12:01 AM on Thursday we got off at our familiar friend, the South Strip Transit Terminal. The place buzzed with more activity than any casino we had visited that day. People charged phones, used the bathrooms, argued, and waited in the warm lobby for buses coming and going from its 18 bays. Security hunted miscreants and vandals.

Even in the depths of night, the Deuce comes at least every 20 minutes, and when it did it was empty. We climbed up top and once again planted ourselves at the front window with a panoramic view of the Strip's gaudy lights.

By the time we reached the Luxor, exhaustion had overtaken me. Burt had the reservation for our "free" room and stood in the understaffed front desk's post-midnight line while Dan and I struggled to stay upright. Given the sad state of the casino, I expected little more than a lumpy bed and a flat pillow, but that would be more than enough.

Our "complimentary" room was acquired through the MyVegas slot app. It wasn't exactly free because of the "resort fee," which is like salmonella is to gas station sushi: you're getting it whether you want it or not. The \$42 fee gave us access to both wifi and free local phone calls, neither of which we had time or interest to use this late at night, no matter how badly we wanted to know if local businesses had Prince Albert in a can.

Before we could get to the room, though, Burt had \$25 in free slot play, also from MyVegas. We scoured the casino floor for video poker but it was dominated by the latest generation of hyperactive slots with multiple seizure-inducing screens with animated buffaloes, pots of gold, and wheels of fortune. The search gave us an opportunity to observe the myriad ways that the MGM corporation has let the Luxor slide into decay. Signage is old, occasionally directing guests to things that have been renamed or long gone. Carpet is threadbare. The upstairs is a mishmash of restaurants and shops that would feel more at home in an outlet mall. We finally found the VP, in a ghetto way off the main floor. A handful of ancient machines with broken buttons and burnt-in screens sat in clusters. The walls and carpet were even more neglected. Cocktail waitresses zipped through to a service door on the side to serve the more appealing clientele in other areas of the casino

Burt played through at a leisurely pace while hoping the cocktail waitresses would eventually notice him. They didn't, though, even when Dan used a sock puppet to draw attention. Finally, thirsty and annoyed, he burnt through all \$25, booked the profit, and agreed to take us to the room.

"First, though," he said, "I need to get a mailing address."

We expected our room to be worth what we paid. They weren't giving rooms with great views, Jacuzzi tubs, or recent remodeling to freeloaders like us. But we didn't expect—or even know—that there were rooms on the first floor. Like our room at the Super 8, we weren't worthy of an

elevator ride. Granted, we weren't in the pyramid, but instead in one of the two dark towers that were added to the Luxor back when it was still popular. From the casino we wound through several hallways, past the remainders of room service left to rot, and down a ramp so that we were actually lower than the casino. I worried about two things: first that our room was in a dank basement, and second that I would never find my way out, especially given the hotel's crap signage.

Once we reached it, the room was surprisingly nice: modern, clean, newish furniture and plenty of space. The view out the window was of shrubs and walls, but we didn't care. We just wanted to drop the belongings we'd carried all day and go to sleep. Well, Dan and I did. Burt wanted to do some bookkeeping. He figured that since our trip was in the homestretch, now was the time to determine total up the numbers and settle accounts. He pulled out a green visor, sat in a chair, and punched numbers into a spreadsheet of his own making, and which he said would figure out how much each of us had spent, won, and owed. Not well, mind you, because he was as tired as us, and also pretty shit at spreadsheets.

Burt pulled off his visor. "Matt, you owe Dan \$14.17. I owe Matt \$13.08, and Dan owes me 'Format Error sum E16 colon F24.'"

"I don't have any extra colons right now," Dan said, "Can I pay you tomorrow?"

"Okay, but with interest it might be two colons."

With finances settled, we turned out the light and drifted off. At least, Burt and I did. Dan just sort of hovered until the two of us were comfortable under the covers.

"Aren't you going to bed?" I asked him.

"There's something I have to do," he replied before leaving the room. A moment later there came a loud ruckus from the hallway. Banging, yelling, something thrown against the wall. The Luxor's sound insulation must have been good because the screaming and shouting was clearly loud and animated but sounded muffled in the room.

"What the hell is going on out there?" I reluctantly rose from bed to investigate. I opened the door a crack.

"Well, now everyone's awake!" Dan screamed in the hallway while frantically waving his arms.

I quickly shut the door. Burt rolled over on his side and covered his head. Eventually, the yowling subsided, the hallway went silent, and Dan returned to the room.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded. "I just needed to get that out of my system."

Those were the last words any of us said before Dan climbed into bed, the lights went out and we enjoyed the relatively luxurious accommodations and ensuing quiet. I don't think Dan even broke out his extra bed sheet.

Dan:

I think I proved something pretty definitively: that Scott and Matt are damn gaslighters! They clearly heard my commotion in the Luxor hall, along with the other half a dozen people who poked their heads out to see me slam dancing with the walls. Soft spoken as I am, I know that I wasn't nearly at the dB level as the crazy shouter from the Super 8 parking lot and his car-stereo backing music.

I will go to my grave knowing that no matter what those two say, the commotion from the night before at the Super 8 had them awake and shaking under the sheets. Why have they pretended to sleep through it? There would be no reason apart from being hobbyist gaslighters.

As I slept, this truth permeated my subconscious. Clearly, this whole noble experiment of a trip was nothing but a sham, a chance to make me feel like I was losing my mind. For Pete's sake, they made me walk 20 miles in near-freezing weather, thus chaffing the hell of out of my nethers!

I had had enough! Too bad it was only one more day. Well, no more self-sacrifice and penny-pinching for this solid citizen! In the morning, I would be singing a different tune.



Approaching the far-south M Resort to cash in our biggest score of the trip.



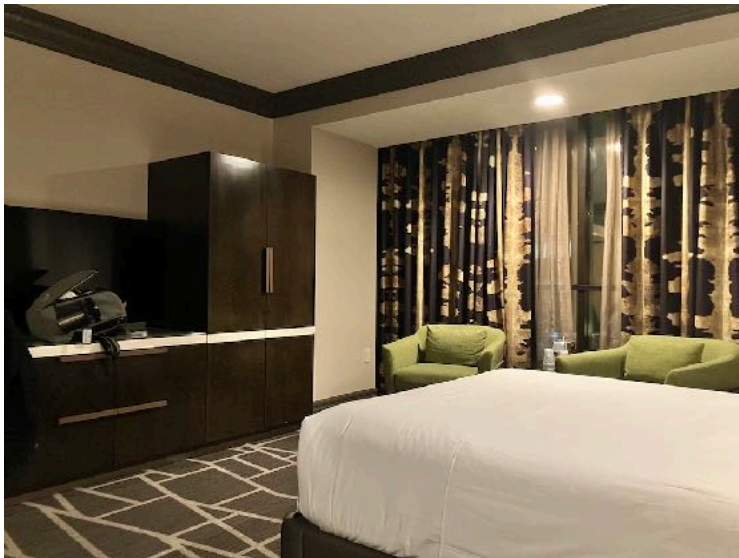
When a sternly-worded letter just won't do.



While waiting for a bus at the South Strip Transit Terminal, Dan learns about Canadian Football.



An obelisk welcomes guests to the Luxor, at least until the MGM Corporation figures out how to make it dispense overpriced iced coffees.



The relatively deluxe accommodations of our ground floor room at the Luxor.

Chapter 14 -

Begin The Hours of This Day Slow

I WISH WE COULD HAVE KEPT THE LUXOR'S heavy curtains drawn and slept in on the last morning of our trip, but there is no rest for the poor. About six hours after Dan's last hallway yowl, we busied ourselves with showers and packing our belongings once again. The mood was good despite our exhaustion because the end of our journey was in sight and victory was assured barring any ridiculous expenditures. We were almost certain to beat our goal by a long shot, with the only question now being how badly would we trounce Vegas?

Once our victory was final, we could return to normalcy, which for Dan and me was being able to eat reasonably, to sleep in our own beds, and to see our wives and dogs. For Burt, it was returning home to the grocery store he was familiar with and the produce staff who already know and are prepared for his apple demands. I'd miss Dan's sock puppets, who felt like family now. And I'd miss Burt's wildly naïve estimates of how far apart things are, and how difficult it would be to get to them. But I'd have the satisfaction of our shared triumph to keep me warm until our next adventure.

The Luxor's room was an upgrade over the Super 8's but a downgrade in caffeine access. If a secret room where guests got free coffee existed, nobody told us, and the crappy casino signage gave no direction. I guess that's how they keep that resort fee at the low, low \$42 a night.

Dan woke up irascible, banging stuff in the room, and saying bad words. "I need caffeine," he growled, followed by, "Poop! Boogers!"

"Okay, relax," I said. "It's just coffee."

Dan whipped out his can of mace and a sock and shoved both in my face. "Say that again. I dare you." Then the sock said, "Be-yotch!"

I didn't. Instead, I tried to cheer him up with knock-knock jokes, almost half of which I knew the punchlines to.

Eight jokes in, Dan asked me, "Have you ever thought you could commit murder?"

"Well, that's an interesting question," I replied. "I think I have a knock-knock joke about that."

Dan continued, "I didn't—until now."

"Fascinating," I replied. "Let's explore that."

"Happily," he growled.

The Strip is like a giant airport concourse full of mediocre shops and restaurants shamelessly gouging trapped tourists and claiming convenience. "Think people will pay \$14 for a bottle of water?" asks one resort executive. "Only one way to find out," replies another as he proofreads his press release touting the value and usefulness of resort fees.

Luckily, a couple of places in Planet Hollywood's strange Miracle Mile mall still offer cheap eats. It's probably the only way to get people to hike from the Strip through the casino and then around to the back of a shopping center whose name even tells you it's a hell of a hike. The Miracle Mile feels familiar; it's populated by the same stores as the dying mall in your hometown. But if you've come to Vegas for Buffalo Wild Wings and Foot Locker, you're doing it wrong. You should be coming to Vegas for plastic pony races and Serge's Showgirl Wigs.

Blondie's, a generic sports bar in the back of the Miracle Mile, advertised eggs, sausage, and potatoes for \$6. Across the way, La Salsa Cantina, a Mexican restaurant for Americans who hate spicy food, offered the same plus tortillas for a dollar more. Of course, we forewent the tortillas and the extra buck.

"Hmmm. What has lobster in it?" I asked the waitress. You see, when I already know I'm ordering the cheapest thing on the menu, I pretend to consider other options. It's very important that my server not know I'm a cheapskate.

"We don't serve lobster," answered the young waitress.

I frowned as though that changed my plans. "Well, what expensive arthropods do you have?"

"Coffee, damnit!" interrupted Dan, slamming his fist on the table. "I need coffee."

"Coffee? For everyone?" The waitress asked.

"No!" Burt and I declared loud enough to make it clear that Dan was alone in this extravagance, a beverage not included with \$6 breakfast.

Then I added, "But only because I only drink coffee with lobster, which you don't serve."

The waitress wrote down Dan's request. I assumed she'd come back to my question about shellfish but instead said, "So, three breakfast specials and one coffee that may not be shared?"

How did she know? I wondered. What clued her in that despite my query we would all be having the exact same meal that everyone else at Blondies's at 10 AM on a Thursday was having? I may never know, but while I puzzled over that, Burt emerged from his shock and asked Dan, "Do you even know how much the coffee is?"

Dan seemed indifferent. "How much is it?"

"Six dollars," the waitress answered while scrutinizing his body language, which betrayed no surprise. Mine did as I threw myself back, my mouth flying open and huffing loudly.

Dan shrugged, "Yeah, that's fine."

I nearly fell out of my chair, and Burt really did. The outrageous price was one thing, but Dan's nonchalance was another. It felt transgressive, a mockery of our \$39-a-Day ethos, where every sacrifice had been at the altar of savings, eschewing luxury, comfort, and some basic needs. We were so close to the finish line, not only beating \$39 a Day but crushing it.

Dan:

Now who is the gaslighter? Well, not me. I had transcended this farce of an experiment. I was beating the 72-hour deadline for figuring out this whole ridiculous prank. I was done with the shenanigans entirely and ready for a big, bottomless cup of go-juice.

After that, I'd saunter over to the Venetian's barbershop, if there was one, for a beard trim and a scalp shave. And then, I'd get fitted for a new zoot suit in purple paisley, because I'd always wanted one. And since there was no budget, I figured now was as good a time as any.

But first: coffee.

The waitress departed, and Burt climbed off the floor.

"Floor's clean," he said. "I checked it thoroughly."

Burt:

I was regretting the detailed and partially accurate accounting I had done the night before. Instead of giving Dan the motivation to finish the challenge strong, the documented savings we had hard-earned thus far only emboldened him to fritter it away on hot bean water. Do you know how many apples you can buy with six dollars? I do, sister. You can be sure of that.

An awkward silence hung over the table as we waited for our food. This was mostly because Burt and I wanted to discuss that six-dollar coffee and Dan clearly didn't. He rapped his fingers on the table, ate a plastic straw, did three laps of the restaurant, stared down an unsuspecting customer and demanded, "What are you looking at?"

When our breakfasts arrived they came with one large but average-looking cup of coffee. Dan zoomed across the dining room back to our table, grabbed the mug and slurped from it. As soon as the java hit his lips his mood shifted and he unclenched his fists. He also made sure we knew how much he enjoyed it.

"Whooooo! Whooo, that's good. That's a goooood cuppa Joe! Mmmm, boy!"

Maybe that cup did satisfy, but surely not as much as my mediocre eggs, sausage, and potatoes did since they were seasoned with salt, pepper, and a piquant dollop of superiority.

Burt just shook his head. "I can't believe you ordered coffee."

Dan shrugged. "Budget, shmudget. Anyway, I'm still under your ridiculous 'budget,' so why not?"

I could think of 39 reasons. Dan's frivolous purchase exposed a philosophical rift among us. On one side was the admirable, honorable and worthy concept of being as cheap as possible. Thirty-nine dollars a day was the upper limit but we set no floor, and the less we spent the more monumental our achievement. The cheaper we were, the greater our chance of breaking Las Vegas, a machine greased with the hard-earned dollars of the working man. Only frugality could bring its gears to a grinding halt and make all the dandy-fop executives in their penthouses understand what people truly want. It's not \$25 cocktails and \$200 steaks. It's value, it's the glorious feeling of winning, even away from the tables and slots. If we were cheap enough, maybe they'd start scattering pennies in the pools, give us the almonds in the minibar for free, and let guests use the valeted cars to run errands.

Burt:

Note: We have checked, and they do not, in fact, allow guests to use the valeted cars to run errands.

On the other side of the debate was the preposterous idea of making yourself as comfortable as possible within a set budget. Of tiptoeing right up to the \$39 cliff and perilously teetering over the edge with an overpriced beverage in hand.

That coffee gave some of our hard-fought victory right back to the Vegas villains who gleefully rubbed their hands, counted their profits, and plotted. "If the rubes will pay \$6 for some tinted hot water, how else can we screw them? A pillow surcharge? Elevator usage fees? Using the stairs is still complimentary... for now."

“Enjoying your coffee?” Burt asked.

“Amazing. Nearly as good as MacDonal’d’s.” Dan said and then noticed the contempt with which Burt and I eyed him.

“I don’t judge you,” Burt replied. “But I judge your choices, and choosing to order that coffee is the sort of choice only an idiot would make.”

“An idiot with coffee,” Dan snorted before taking an exaggerated, showy sip but missing his mouth and dribbling nearly a dollar’s worth of coffee (at prevailing rates) down his shirt. “I don’t care. Refills are free. And that stain looks pretty good. Kind of punk. The kind of look that says, ‘I’m not falling for your bullshit anymore.’”

We finished breakfast in a standoff with neither the correct nor incorrect side of the argument acknowledging any merit in the other’s position. The good thing is that we are adults and we are friends, so we could put this behind us and focus on our shared goals.

I mean, we could. We didn’t, but at least it was an option. Instead, we let the disagreement fester and build into a simmering resentment that lingers to this day and makes any mention of coffee painful for us all.

Dan:

Except me. Mmmm, this is good java!

Once Dan had his fill of caffeine and verbal abuse, we trekked out of the Miracle Mile and Planet Hollywood. We hopped the Deuce down the Strip to the Pinball Hall of Fame. The Hall sits right by the traffic island where tourists and influencers line up to get their photo taken with the “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign. As we exited the bus, we saw an elderly bride and groom under the famous marquee while being serenaded by a man who maybe looked like Elvis to old folks with cataracts. The impersonator did the Presley Lunge, pinwheeled his arm, and pronounced the couple man and wife to a smattering of applause.

The non-profit Pinball Hall of Fame is a no-frills warehouse packed with hundreds of machines covering all eras of arcade games. Generally, the oldest machines are to the left as you enter, the newer ones to the right. Except for the very newest ones, which seem to be right up front and along the center. Then there are classic video games and other arcade oddities mixed throughout. Everything in the Hall of Fame is playable, or at least aspires to be. The creaky old mechanical machines break down faster than the Hall’s volunteers can repair them, resulting in a lot of out of order signs. Older games, going back to the 1950s and earlier cost a quarter a play, the latest ones with fancy graphics and movie tie-ins cost a buck.

One could easily spend hours and scores of dollars here, but not us. We scoured the aisles for our favorites, mine being Attack from Mars and Banzai Run, but also for machines upon which

someone had left some free credits. This is the arcade equivalent of sticking your finger into pay phones in search of dimes. The strategy paid off. I found a Tron video game with a pile of credits and a broken joystick that made it nearly impossible to play well. That's okay, I suck at Tron, and not having control actually improved my scores.

Burt:

I love the Pinball Hall of Fame and only regret that I don't get to it on enough Vegas trips. After playing a number of machines I tried my hand at The Big Hurt (1995, Gottlieb), a machine with a baseball theme and featuring 90's White Sox legend Frank Thomas (2024, Nugenex Total-T). But after inserting one of my precious quarters, nothing happened. Normally, I would just let it go, consider it a donation to the non-profit Hall of Fame, and move on to something else. But 25-cents had a different meaning and value on this trip. I approached an employee and whined that the game ate my quarter. They quickly opened the machine, and as they worked to get the jammed quarter out, they inadvertently added nearly a dozen free credits. They handed me my quarter, looked at the credits display, and said "I guess it's your lucky day, sir." They walked away as I said, "Thank you," and before I could ask if they offered complimentary coffee.

While fending off a bunch of dumb kids who wanted to play the game, I managed to let Matt and Dan know that entirely free entertainment was available in the form of The Big Hurt.

After blowing through the free credits and a dollar, I explored the pinball catacombs until I found Dan still working a Simpsons-themed machine as though making tantric love to it; a subtle nudge here, a slight shift of his hips there, and a lot of growls and whispers. The machine responded with dings, flashing lights, and multiple balls.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I approached while giving him wide berth.

"High score," he answered as he ground his pelvis against the coin return. "Oh, yeah, that's the stuff."

"I didn't know you were good at this," I said while thinking of how I could use this new information. Maybe taking him on a national, months-long tour of pinball rooms where we'd hustle the locals out of dozens of quarters.

"I'm not. It's the coffee."

Burt, also out of quarters, joined us a few minutes later. He and I waited in disgust at Dan's erotic cajoling and with envy at his rapidly rising score. Finally, his last ball went down the drain, his game ended, and he manipulated the flipper buttons to add his initials to the leaderboard.

“Ready to go?” Burt asked.

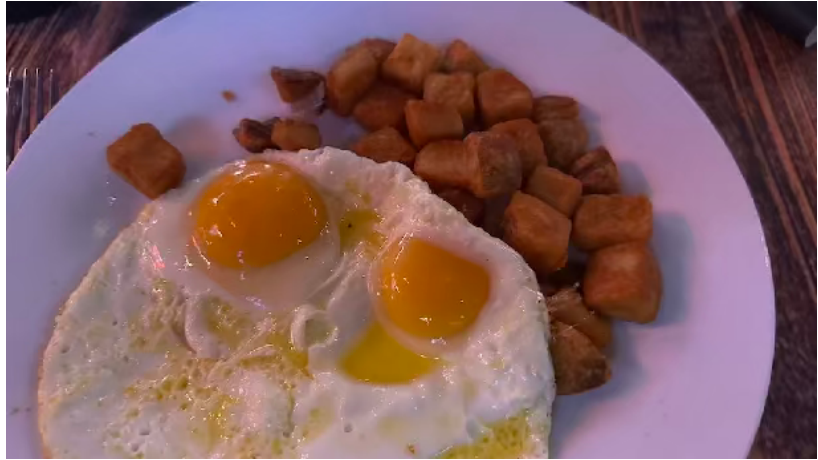
“I need a cigarette,” said Dan.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” I cautioned. “Cigarettes are very expensive.”

Dan:

Plus, I don't smoke.

A \$6 breakfast on the Strip.



Matt reacts appropriately to Dan's extravagant coffee purchase. Not shown: Burt on the floor.

Yes, the Pinball Hall of Fame, located on the Strip south of Mandalay Bay, is really big.



Chapter 15 -

Little—Less—Nothing!—And That Ended It

WE HAD REACHED THE WANING HOURS of our three-day journey. Soon, we would return to the airport where it all began and the clock would stop. With success assured, despite one egregious purchase, we could have begun the celebration, but instead we soldiered on, determined to squeeze every last drop from the Vegas lemon.

The Deuce ferried us back up the Strip to Flamingo Boulevard where we would catch a crosstown bus west for a freeplay opportunity at the off-Strip Silver Sevens Hotel. While we waited at the bus stop in front of the Horseshoe, two cowboys in full regalia walking by stopped.

“You look like you could use a beer!” one shouted at us.

Normally, this would feel like an insult. Why would he say that? Just because we were loitering at a bus stop, we had battered backpacks and the stiff gait of guys who had walked over 40 miles in the last couple of days, were wearing the same clothes we arrived to town in, and, maybe, because I had wet myself just a little bit?

I say normally because nothing feels like an insult when it’s followed by free ice cold beers, which the cowboys handed us. They then continued down the road, a couple of Jonny Applebeers making the world a better place one Miller High Life at a time.

Dan:

The mid-day beer was the perfect thing to take the edge off the caffeine. Seven refills (coming to less than a dollar each, mind you) can give a body a little bit of the jangles. But with the bus pulling up and no drinks allowed upon it, we had to shotgun the High Life and leave the bottles for some unknown recycler to collect. The buzz was quick, intense and

short lived, and made me feel okay about having to have passed up my after breakfast shave, trim and zoot suit.

The Silver Sevens, previously the Continental and then Terrible's, is a small, budget hotel off the Strip, but close enough to have just as many traffic headaches. It's on Paradise Road, which is also the road that would take us back to the airport.

Everything about the Sevens feels like a compromise, like the furnished corporate apartment of casinos. Maybe that's why the titular Sevens are only a second-tier precious metal and not platinum or gold. The handful of table games are chipless, meaning all your bets are placed using a tablet. There is only one real dining option serving bland fare. The employees didn't want to be there and were not very nice to three gentleman who, for all they knew, had \$10,000 in their dirty pockets despite having arrived by bus after polishing off some street beers. The casino also smelled bad enough that Dan realized he, in fact, could have enjoyed a cigarette just to mask the rest of the smells.

On top of that, no freeplay awaited us. We had signed up for the slot club of one of the hotel's previous incarnations and didn't qualify for any new member promotions. If not for that street beer, the trip here would have been a complete bust.

Luckily, the Virgin Hotel is a short walk (less than 20 miles) from the Silver Sevens, and also along the bus route that would soon take us back to the airport. This was another opportunity for free play at a slot club we had yet to join. Or, so we thought.

Virgin had taken over the old Hard Rock property, a hotel which had lived the life of a rock star, bursting onto the scene young and hip, with wild pool parties and drawing the prettiest clientele in town. It didn't grow up, though. It just got older and sadder, still trying to stuff itself into the old leather pants. By its end, the Hard Rock was just the old guy at the party retelling the same old stories about its Camaro and the concerts it used to go to.

The Virgin is not cool and it's hard to tell if it even wants to be. It has the generic luxury feel of the Strip's other new properties. It was quiet, too, on this early December Thursday afternoon. At the slot club, Burt and I learned that, just like at Silver Sevens, our info had been inherited from the previous tenant. So had our photos, apparently, because the slot club host declared to me, "You signed up a long time ago. So long ago that you still had hair."

Dan was not yet a member, which made sense given that the Hard Rock had been for cool people. Sometimes it pays to be a square, though, and he was rewarded with \$10 of freeplay, and served a cocktail while he burned through it. While he wagered through his free money, Burt complained about being shut out of this and the Silver Seven's promotion and how it's a poor way to introduce old guests to a new property. However, he had an idea of how he could share his concerns with both properties' management.

By the time Dan finished his rusty nail and credits, we needed to head for the airport. We couldn't squeeze in another casino promo, no matter how insistent Burt was that it would only take an hour to catch a bus out to Pahrump and back, where he heard they gave new club members a roll of nickels. All we had time for was to catch the 108 South to the airport, the finish line of our trip.

It only took a couple free beers from cowboys to condition our bus stop expectations, and we were disappointed when we got nothing while waiting. Nary a Buzz Ball or Four Loko was to be had. I guarantee you that more people would use public transit if they got free beer at every stop. Parched, we boarded and headed south.

"Gentleman," Burt said to Dan and me, "congratulations. We did it."

"Easily!" I shouted.

"Perfectly!" added Dan.

Burt cautioned, "I wouldn't say perfect. There were mistakes."

"Like what?" asked Dan as I focused on the coffee stain on his shirt.

Burt continued, "I'll get into those later. For now, let's celebrate a job well done."

We settled back into our hard plastic seats and basked in the achievement while I still stared at the coffee stain. We had come into this trip with the goal of spending less than \$39 a day, and we did it. Hell, we exceeded it. Through hard work, sacrifice, and careful planning, we had done something monumental and believed to be impossible. What we had done was just as significant and valuable for society as growing the world's longest fingernails or enduring the world's most lit fireworks strapped to one's body. Important stuff that needed to be recorded in the book of records.

I imagined the tidal wave of praise and adulation headed for us in the months to come. Casinos would fold to the pressure of our stunt and eliminate resort fees, bring back \$3.99 buffets, free coffee mugs, and sprawling lounges just off the casino floor where a player on a cold streak could catch his breath while listening to some live R&B. Nightclubs and deejay booths would be ripped out to make room for quarter craps tables, dollar blackjack, and a field of Sigma Derbys.

Would we need publicists? Would we need stylists and wigs for our TV appearances? Were the Internet pipes fat enough to handle the traffic our podcast would generate? What would we do to top this achievement? And what would be my first extravagant purchase once I reached the airport? A gold-plated neck pillow?

These were all good problems to have. Definitely a lot better than the ones I'm used to, and they required less lying to my wife.

Our 72-hour RTC passes expired while we were on the bus to the airport. We exited at the airport's Zero Level with a handful of other cheap travelers and a lot of service workers. The doors to Harry Reid Airport opened wide and a wonderland spilled out ahead of us full of limitless burgers, cinnamon rolls, pretzels, beers, candy, newspapers, and souvenir magnets. Free from the shackles of our budget, we could consume to our heart's content. Even better, Dan was leaving and

Burt and my flights were in different areas of the airport. We could pig out in private, free from each other's judgment.

I strolled to my concourse scheming over what I would consume first. I was hungry, I was tired, and I craved sweets. Except, a sandwich was \$20. A bag of cashews \$12. Candy bars \$5. One slice of lousy pizza cost over \$8. For Christ's sake, it was like being back on the Strip. None of those options would taste good enough to overcome the sour taste of gouging.

I sat down at my gate and grew angrier as I waited for my flight. No way was I paying those prices. No way would I feed the greasy, open maws of the airport fat cats. I'd be home in only five hours. I had food there, and I could wait.

I made it home after my wife had already gone to bed, stomach growling and slightly dehydrated, but satisfied for having beaten the system and for having fought the good fight for cheapskates everywhere. Burt, Dan, and I were legends now. Cheap gods. Kings of Penny Mountain. Nothing could ever spoil that.

Except... Two days after getting home, I received a letter in the mail. It was sternly worded.

Burt:

Perhaps you're expecting a sternly-worded conclusion from me to follow here. There is a time and a place for that, and this is neither. If you have read this far along, I don't need to convince you that modern-day corporate America, with its deceptive sales on fruit, phony free bingo promotions, and "easy" sportsbook cash outs is rotten to its core. For the moment, you should put the truth of this out of your mind entirely. For this space is dedicated to the celebration of overcoming impossible odds with nothing more than internet coupons, shoe leather, and good old American grit.

Perhaps you think that "overcoming impossible odds" is overstating our accomplishment? Consider this. Every single day in Las Vegas there are people winning thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of dollars more than they ever thought possible when their Boeing 737 landed at the airport. And despite the routine nature of these victories, most people who have been to Las Vegas, and even more who have not, will tell you that this is the definition of overcoming the odds. But in fact very few tourists, nay, absolutely none of them ever come to Las Vegas and sleep, eat, gamble and weep for only a penny per hour. A literal penny per hour.

This, my friends, isn't a long shot coming in. It's threading a Luxor Sigma Derby camel through the eye of a needle.

*The contradiction is that this accomplishment was designed to be able to be in reach of anyone of any means, and yet the odds of it actually being fulfilled were and are astronomical. As I recall all that occurred over these 72 hours in *The Desert of The Meadows, in the Gutter of the Neon*, I'm reminded of these words:*

"Impressed with the liveliest sensibility on this pleasing occasion, I will claim the indulgence of dilating the more copiously on the subjects of our mutual felicitation—When we consider the magnitude of the prize we contended for, the doubtful nature of the Contest, and the favorable manner in which it has terminated, we shall find the greatest possible reason for gratitude and rejoicing..."

-George Washington in a non-sternly worded letter to the States, 1783.

Dan:

After all, I didn't have the heart to let Burt and Matt down. This is an unkind way to put it, but the two of them were so butt-hurt over my bottomless cup of coffee (less than \$1 per refill, mind), that I decided to hold it together for them until departure.

We embraced and parted ways on the outer concourse, and I watched them vanish into the bustling crowd before I opened my photo app and deleted the screen cap of my plane ticket. Then I deleted the airline app altogether. Then I reversed course, went outside, and hailed a taxi to the Venetian, with a quick side stop to buy a very pricey cigar. The cabbie didn't want me smoking in his car, but a \$300 tip changed his mind.

At the Venetian, I settled for a semi-suite, but added on the spa package that would give me a four-hour pass to the luxury hot pools as well as a 90-minute massage. That night, I slept soundly in my accommodations, undisturbed by my well-meaning but hopelessly cheap compatriots. There were no hoodlums peeling through the parking lot, or if there were, the sound was muted through 32 stories of space and architecture.

In the morning, I got my shave and haircut and got fitted for my purple paisley zoot suit. Then I took a cab back to the airport, booked my flight upon arrival and flew home first class. It was expensive to ship my Prius home, especially because I had taken the keys with me, so a locksmith and the Las Vegas Toyota dealership had to get involved.

My credit card bill, when it arrived, was predictably high. Despite being predictable, it was shocking. Luckily, it arrived the same day as my zoot suit, which made me feel jolly once I put it on. That day, the postal carrier also brought me a sternly-worded letter, which I still use as a coaster for my coffee mug.

Days 3/4 Results			
	Burt	Matt	Dan
Tacotarian Lunch	-\$6.48	-\$5.39	-\$6.50
Silverton Freeplay	\$1.25	\$1.25	\$1.25
Silverton Dinner	-\$5.42	-\$5.42	-\$5.42
M Freeplay	\$50.83	\$50.83	\$50.83
Luxor Freeplay	\$6.25	\$6.25	\$6.25
Luxor Hotel (Resort Fee)	-\$13.98	-\$13.98	-\$13.98
Blondies Breakfast	-\$6.75	-\$6.75	-\$14.00
Pinball Hall of Fame	-\$2.00	-\$1.00	-\$2.25
Virgin Hotel Freeplay	\$2.50	\$2.50	\$2.50
Days 3/4 Total	\$26.20	\$28.29	\$18.68
Freebies	2 cocktails, 1 street beer	1 cocktail	2 cocktails, 1 street beer



No beer tastes better than a free street beer.



Once the street beers hit, Dan and burt found a quiet alcove at the Virgin Hotel for a quick catnap.

Epilogue -

I Shall Laugh The Worst Laugh I Ever Laughed

I LOOK FONDLY BACK ON THIS TRIP NOW. The pain and the effort feel negligible in comparison to the accomplishment. Would Burt and Dan? I don't know for sure, but I bet they would. One thing is certain, though: I am still receiving sternly-worded letters, including one postmarked Idaho.

Grand Totals			
	Burt	Matt	Dan
Day 1	-\$27.16	-\$26.66	-\$27.30
Day 2	-\$4.10	-\$2.35	-\$2.85
Days 3/4	\$12.02	\$21.63	\$19.54
Grand Total	-\$5.06	-\$0.72	-\$11.47
Freebies	1 hat, 1 keychain, 7 cocktails, 1 street beer	1 deck of cards, 1 keychain, 6 cocktails	1 keychain, 7 cocktails, 1 street beer