

The Hoodlum

A Very Long BigEmpire.com Trip Report



By Matt

The following trip report contains long-winded sections containing boring hotel details. These sections are in italics, so feel free to skip past them and you won't miss any of the action.

Evening – Wednesday, January 26, 2011

As we get older, my friends and I lose our best excuse for doing stupid things: youth. We are nearly the age when we should know better, but we don't. To remain relatively youthful, we can hang around with older and older people. But eventually, we'll be short-sheeting the beds in a nursing home, and that's just sad.

Las Vegas is the last place that still lets us be idiots. It is a grand illusion constructed to let people they're still young. We come back each year for a few days to pretend we don't know better and that our antics still amuse strangers. We stay up late, drink too much and ignore the march of time.

I've offered Phil five bucks if he pees under a craps table and ten if he pees on one. It's a challenge he rejects at the start of every trip, but ends up at least considering by the end. Last year, Dan and I brought backpacks full of odd objects: baby shoes; wax fruit; bifocals and women's pants. We hid them in our friends' luggage. We put some in our own bags to confuse them and waited for the accusations to fly.

I hate the idea that someday I'll be too old for hijinx, because it means I'm too old, period. Then I'll just complain about the weather and be killing time until I live in a retirement home. When I feel like I'm on the inevitable slide into the grave, I at least have Las Vegas to reinvigorate me. That's why I was there with my friends, in January 2011. The pretense for the visit was to update our web site CheapoVegas, but we were really looking forward to horsing around and making each other laugh.

There were seven of us. I came from Denver. Mike, Phil and Steve drove from Southern California. Jerry flew in from Austin. Robert joined us from parts unknown, while Jeff met us a day into the trip from Phoenix. Our friendships formed decades ago, based on a shared love of jokes, and that's why we're still friends.

I didn't feel like I was on vacation until I landed on the C concourse of McCarran Airport on Wednesday evening. From there it was off to pick up luggage and get the rental car. In its effort to be efficient, Las Vegas has placed its rental cars in another state. It feels that way, at least. In reality, the facility is a few miles down the freeway, off at Warm Springs Road and down a hidden street in an industrial neighborhood. Once there, I stood in line. Any guest planning a weekend in Las Vegas should figure a fifth of his time will be needed for getting and returning a car.



I splurged and booked an "intermediate" instead of my usual "compact" or "economy". A rental agent led me past rows of Cadillacs, SUVs, convertibles, minivans, Ford Fusions and Mazda3s. We stopped at a Hyundai, the smallest car the company makes.

"There must be a mistake," I said. "I rented an intermediate."

"This is an intermediate."

"Then what's a compact?"

He pointed to a ten-speed bike. A businessman with a briefcase passed us on rollerskates. "And he got our last economy."

I folded my six-foot, five-inch frame into the car and joined traffic heading north toward downtown. I mashed the Hyundai's accelerator, and--several minutes later--wound the Hyundai up to almost highway speed. I exited Charleston and continued on surface streets where the limits were more to the little car's liking.

My friends and I stayed at the El Cortez. We've stayed here almost as often as anywhere else in town. Despite the claims of people who've never stayed here, the El Cortez is not unsafe. It's never been unsafe. It used to be run-down, though. Ten years ago, it was a step up from the Gold Spike, which was a step up from the Western. It wasn't as nice as the other downtown budget hotels like the Plaza and Las Vegas Club, and nowhere near as swank as the Golden Nugget or even Main Street Station.

Thanks to active and passionate ownership, the El Cortez now looks great. The property still has old infrastructure, but management has beautified it while keeping it classic. The rooms are simple, attractive and entirely functional. A block further from Fremont, the Ogden House, a former \$18-a-night flophouse, has become the El Co's Cabana Suites. They're for hipsters, all gussied up in bright green with fancy granite bathrooms, checkerboard tile, fluffy beds and modern touches like glassed-in showers, iPod docks and flatscreen TVs. We're not cool enough for them.

Most of us stayed in the El Cortez's "Pavilion", a euphemism for "Garage-top". The pavilion rooms sits atop the parking structure and have motel-style exterior entrances. They're furnished the same as the pricier tower rooms. They're also incredibly easy to get to from the car. Hell, someone could just lean over the railing to see if he left the sunglasses on the front seat.

While my friends doubled up in the Pavilion, I got my own room. My solo status was because a) nobody likes me, b) nobody likes the way I smell, and/or c) nobody likes the way I punch them in my sleep. I also punch people while I'm awake. That just depends on how much I've had to drink. My room was one of downtown's best-kept secrets: a vintage king suite.



Vintage

rooms--the cheapest the El Cortez offers--are small and old on the second and third floors of the hotel portion built in 1941. A staircase behind the blackjack pit leads to them and to a barbershop that still has Playboy magazines. They're in long, meandering halls. They have



shower-only bathrooms and just enough space for one queen bed. Those closest to the stairs ring all night with the sound of slots below. They would be quieter if only the El Co's machines weren't so damn loose.

Mixed in with those rooms are a handful of vintage king suites. That's what I had. It had a king-size bed as wide as a 57 Cadillac, a writing desk, a half-court-sized sectional sofa with coffee table, sitting chair, wet bar, safe, bar stools, closet, full bathroom and a fridge.

All seven of us could have slept in there, if my friends didn't mind me slugging them. The suites are the same price as regular tower rooms, but not listed on discount sites or the El Co's own web site. Guests have to call. Thanks to a promotion, the hotel rebated the entire \$45 a night plus tax in free slot play and dining credit.

The El Cortez gives all its guests a great funbook: five dollars free slot play, a five-dollar matchplay, five dollars in dining credit (enough for late night breakfast), a free cocktail and a free photo keychain. Each room also gets a coupon for free wine in the Flame steakhouse. It's not great wine, but it comes in a bottle made of glass. In other words, a lot better than the swill we brew up from old potatoes and Raisinettes. The American Casino Guide, the coupon book we promote, use and write a bit for, had coupons for another ten dollars in free slot play and half-off dinner in the Flame.



Mike, Steve and Phil arrived earlier in the day and had been swilling free cocktails and slobbering over billboards of naked ladies. When we were younger, we could spend all day traveling to Vegas and hit the ground running, scouring the valley for the cheapest meals, lowest minimum blackjack and scariest strip clubs. Now, we need a little time to get our bearings and settle in before we're ready to hunt. Rather than venture out, we used our coupons to dine at the Flame.

The Flame is neither the fanciest nor the best steakhouse in town. It's good for the money, though, and definitely good enough for four guys who are just as happy licking the melted cheese off wrappers in the dumpster behind Wendy's. It's not bad, and sometimes you can get a half-drunk Frosty with just a little spit in it.

We aren't used to eating places with padded seats, or where you order from a little book, not a backlit sign on the wall. Luckily, the hostess found us wandering around, picking food off other people's plates. When I sat on the floor she politely told me, "No, dear, you get to sit up here, like a big boy."

And a big boy I felt! By pointing at the menu with my fist, I ordered the last pound of fresh stone crab the Flame had on hand, a bowl of chicken gumbo and a side of garlic mash. Since I had snatched up the last fresh stone crabs, Mike first pouted, then kicked me under the table and finally ordered king crab. He asked the waitress if it came with a crown and she said no. This further irritated him. Steve had salmon and Phil ordered the filet. There were plenty of sides: mac and cheese, cole slaw, salads and mushrooms. To drink, we had our free Mondavi Cabernet, wiping the rim of the bottle before passing it along because we were in a nice restaurant. After coupons, our tabs were \$20 each. Everyone said theirs was good, except Phil who said his steak was perfect but that something was missing.

"I can't put my finger on what it is, though," he said, and then he stared off into space for the next hour or so.

Our waitress brought far more fresh bread with butter pats than we could eat, so we pocketed the leftovers. I know people think that's tacky. I'd agree if we hadn't devised such an elegant system for exactly these situations. We're not pigs; we don't all shovel as much bread and butter as we can down our pants. Instead, three of us take the rolls while Phil takes the butter. That way, only his pants get ruined when it melts.

While we ate, or as the rich call it "dined", Robert and Jerry fought their way through the airports, baggage claim, a polar bear on the loose, rental car shuttle and public transit to join us. Robert booked a compact, so he was sweaty and tired from pedaling. Jerry used the city's new bus service, the Westcliff Airport Express (WAX). It runs from the airport to downtown in thirty minutes for two bucks.



It has fewer transients, brawls, vomit and profanity than the two commuter routes from the airport so, while it's faster, it's less Vegas-y.

Once they arrived, it was time to gamble. We headed way the hell out of town to the Joker's Wild on the grimy eastern edge of Henderson, past where the street lights end and tumbleweeds scatter across Boulder Highway, to an area with squat bars full of toothless drunks. The Joker is their casino: smoky and stale, with something extra in the air:



sadness. It's secreted by the gamblers. They're regulars, on a first name basis with the dealers, settled into their favorite seats and grimly feeding nickels to their jackpot dreams. Years of being ground down by the odds makes them thin-skinned and humorless.

The locals crowded the craps table. Mom was there. She's usually there. Mom is a retiree in her seventies who wears a crisp plaid shirt and sharply creased pants. She looks like someone's grandma, the kind who spits on her thumb and rubs out smudges on grandkids' faces. Sometimes other people's grandkids. We call her Mom because of her passing resemblance to my mother. Also, because she has child-bearing hips.

Unlike my mom, though, the Joker's Wild's mom angle shoots to cheat the break-in dealers out of a few bucks and never tips. Over many trips, we've learned she spent 30 years as a secretary at the May Company, is still married to her one and only love (which is apparently a man, not a craps table), and she doesn't truck with today's kids and their hip hop and crazy beatnik slang. She's been led to believe our friend Burt has been married three times, in jail a couple, and spent his most recent wedding night shooting dice while his wife went to Chippendales.



A couple spots away from Mom hunched a player I hadn't seen before. Drinky was another retiree, with a fishing cap and a bulbous, open-pored drunkard's nose. Drinky chewed out a kid for sevens out.

"For fuck's sake," he grouched, "Stupid shit changed hands. These kids don't know nothing." The he yelled after the kid, "You don't change hands in the middle of the roll!"

I don't know what Drinky would have said to the kid had the switch from right to left hand resulted in a winner. Nobody knew because, obviously, it's physically impossible to win that way.

Drinky wasn't going to like our crew. We're not orthodox shooters. When the stickman gives one of us the dice, it's like giving the fat, drunk girl in the miniskirt the microphone at a karaoke bar. There's gonna be a show.

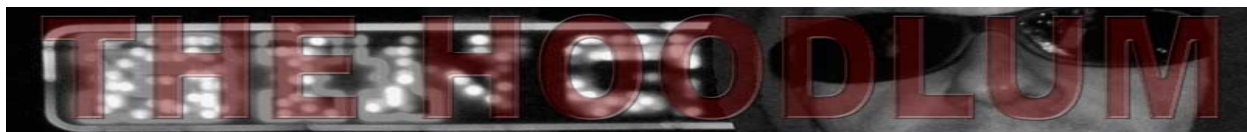
Mike and Phil have wilder arms than a flamenco dancer. Phil once chucked both dice not only off the table, but behind the boxman. They landed a good ten feet wide and twenty feet away in the blackjack pit. He's also chucked them hard enough to break knuckles. Robert, aka "Shakes", jitters violently before he shoots because he thinks it gives him luck. An epileptic once threatened to kick his ass for making fun of him. Stevie has a freewheeling knuckleball style that requires a lot of elbowroom and for the rest of us to chant in high-pitched voices "El Gripo!" I like to "hang 'em high", seeing how close to the ceiling I can get the dice before the stickman orders me to bring them down.

Because the Joker's Wild's table was packed, our crew squeezed into the game one at a time. Luckily, the dice were cold and most of the regulars were down to their last chips. I grabbed a slot next to Drinky. When my hands hit the rail, I felt a surge of energy. The vibrancy of being in Las Vegas, doing things that I shouldn't do, coursed through me. I was instantly twenty years younger, better looking and infinitely more clever.

My friends hovered behind the short stacks like buzzards over dying animals. Whenever the stickman shouted "Seven out", a regular said something unpleasant and left. Robert joined the game.

I noticed The Hoodlum at the other end of the table, between Jerry and Robert. I don't know how long he'd been playing, but I hadn't seen him before. He was young, but his skin resembled the beat leather of a fat lady's chaps. He wore both a skullcap and a hoodie, presumably to cover gang tattoos on his neck and scalp, or a very bad haircut. He scowled as I picked up the dice. His teeth were the color of pee after taking a lot of Vitamin E.

The Hoodlum had his dollar on the pass line. He gripped the rail and leaned forward slightly over the table, as though ready to leap across it, pull out a garotte and slit my throat if I sevens out. Nobody would even try to stop him, because I kind of deserve it and because he'd kill them too. My



palms sweat and my heart raced. I fumbled the dice. My eyes involuntarily locked on The Hoodlum's. I looked for a sign of humanity, some common ground where we could coexist. Maybe he quilled, too! I found nothing; he was an animal. I chucked the dice, trying to get rid of them as quickly as possible. There was no high arc, just a thud. I chanted under my breath, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die."

"Craps twelve. Take the line, triple the field."

If The Hoodlum moved, I couldn't tell. Still, I felt the increasing heat of his disappointment. Our staredown ended when the cocktail waitress served him a strawberry daquiri with extra cherries. His gnarled paw snatched it from her dainty hand. He tipped her, not with money but with a scowl. In that moment, free of his deadly stare, I focused on the dice.

Drinky berated me, "Come on, you dipshit. Stop throwing like a little girl on a Jerry Lewis telethon."

Without The Hoodlum's unsettling glare on me I could concentrate. I pitched the dice higher, into the "lucky zone" above my head and below the ceiling.

"Six, easy six, no field," said the stickman.

Jerry laughed, "My grandmother can throw a six."

"That's tough talk," Mom said to him. "I don't see your grandmother here."

Jerry set down his drink and told her, "Actually, it's just a saying. My grandmother passed away two years ago."

Mom snatched a few loose chips that probably wasn't hers and added it to her stack. "She should have taken better care of herself."

Players put out their odds and come bets. The dealers hustled to position the chips. I glanced at The Hoodlum as he put two more chips on the table. He glared from under his cap and hoodie. This time, however, he had a whipped cream mustache. I reflexively rubbed my finger over my own lip. He mouthed, "What?"

I don't know what it was about The Hoodlum that so unnerved me. I had seen a lot of unsavory characters in my twenty years in Las Vegas, but there was something more sinister about him. I tried to shake off my uneasiness. After all, nobody else seemed to be bothered. Besides, there was fifteen feet of table separating us, a burly pit boss nearby and two security guards patrolling the room. I needed to show him that I could be as young and tough as him, that he wasn't going to throw me off my game.

I threw the rocks with a flourish, high and deep, aiming for his knuckles and hoping he'd flinch. He didn't. He stood still as the dice came down inches from his face. He sipped his daquiri, the mustache thickening. The dice landed.



"Seven out."

Oh, crap. There was a collective groan from the other players. Drinky punched me in the kidney as he left the table. "God damn sissy." I didn't dare look at The Hoodlum. I kept my eyes fixed on the felt in front of me while the dealer took my chips. I felt his fury, I sensed him tensing his muscles, clenching his fists.

"We need to go," I told Mike, who had just taken Drinky's spot. Only Phil was still on the sidelines. He was still staring off into space.

"Why?"

"Look down there," I said, eyes still cast down. "See The Hoodlum?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Is he still staring at me?" I asked.

Mike nodded.

"If we don't leave, he'll kill me."

"I just got in," Mike protested.

I looked again at The Hoodlum, or where he should have been. He was gone. I caught a glimpse of him behind the other players coming around the table, charging my end. His creamy mustache shone in the casino lights. Thinking fast, I ducked and disappeared below the chip rail. My heart thumped and my chest constricted so much I struggled for air. My arthritic knees ached from the deep squat.

"Is he gone?" I asked from my crouched position.

Mike shook his head. "No."

I waited a second. "Now?"

"Uh-uh."

The Hoodlum stood over me, so close I could see the thick mat of hair on the palms of his hands and the dark red stains on his Dickies. I could smell the motor oil embedded in his palms.

I should have stood up and faced him like a man. To be fair to myself, though, I was scared shitless. I hoped that if I remained in a squat he'd mistake me for a rock. I was silent, like rocks are, and I tried very hard to look gray. The Hoodlum wasn't buying it. His thick hand moved toward my neck.

"Kill him!" screamed Robert as he pumped his fists in the air. He said it so loudly that everyone, even The Hoodlum, stopped and looked at my friend.

With all eyes on him, Robert smiled with embarrassment and said, "What? I love beatdowns."

The explanation made sense to everyone, even me. The Hoodlum turned his attention back to me. I was still motionless and thinking rocky thoughts. His rough, moist hand curled around my throat.



"Look at you. You're a disgrace," scolded Mom. In addition to fear, I now also felt shame.

"You look like a slob. Tuck your shirt in, for Pete's sake." She ordered. I was confused. My shirt was tucked in. It's always tucked in. It's always ironed, too. Same with my jeans and underwear. I like ironing stuff.

She continued, "And why are your jeans cuffed? They sell pants your size at the May Company, and for a good price." I realized that Mom was talking to The Hoodlum. This was good for me. Maybe she'd berate him until he forgot about killing me and go after her instead. I stayed down low because, once I squat, it takes me a while to get back up. The Hoodlum let go of my neck.

"What does your mother think of you? Don't you wash your hair? And why are you wearing that silly hood? It's not raining in here. You look like Sal Mineo, you little gangster."

Mom tapped The Hoodlum's chest with her finger to emphasize each of her points. He took a step back, farther from me. Then he took another step back as she expressed her disgust with his fashion sense, education, upbringing, manners and liberal use of Aqua Velva. We were watching experience and age crushing rebellious youth.

Mom ended her rant with, "You're no George Raft." They stood ten feet from the table. The Hoodlum had gone from seething to cowering. His eyes were watery and red, his lower lip trembled, his whip cream mustache dribbled off his chin. Mom marched back to the table. The rest of the players stared at him. He wiped his nose with his sleeve and ran for the exit.

"And don't come back!" I yelled about five minutes later, once I was absolutely certain The Hoodlum had completely left the building. The craps game resumed.

"Good job." I patted Mom on the back. "I was gonna tell him the same thing."

Mom shot me a sneer. "You're next, Squiggy." She returned to her place on the rail, looked at her rack and snapped, "I'm missing chips. Give them back."

"So," said a frowning Robert, "no bloodshed, then?"

Steve shook Phil's arm and snapped him from his reverie. He pointed to the spot vacated by The Hoodlum and Phil took it. He glumly put his money on the table to be changed.

A couple shooters later, Mom took her chips plus a few of her neighbors' and left. Probably there were no thrills in craps as exhilarating as browbeating a thug. Steve took The Hoodlum's vacated spot. He was the last of our crew to get in.

The game improved and all of us but Phil got vocal. He spent his time on the verge of tears and writing in a small notebook. The shooters delivered. Robert shook, Steve knuckled. Phil rolled the dice softly. Mike hurled the dice into the poker room. I hung 'em high. As my profits grew and the threat of



The Hoodlum faded, Vegas worked its magic. I felt invincible, alive and ready for anything. The Hoodlum may have been younger, but I could outrun youth. I could outsmart it, and I could live forever. I wanted to play all night.

"Good thing The Hoodlum left when he did," I said to Mike.

"Why's that?"

I slammed my fist into my hand. "Because I would've kicked his ass." I believed it.

"I was gonna split his skull open and eat his brains. Then Mom and I were gonna get it on. Right on the table."

"Okay, Matt," said Mike.

"We were going to have babies."

"That's probably enough," he said as he adjusted and readjusted his chips in the rail.

"And the babies were going to work at May Company." I went on like this for thirty minutes or so. Mike moved to another spot, so I told the cocktail waitress the rest of the story, about the babies' Ivy League educations and how they would destroy The Hoodlum's greasy offspring.

The come bets piled up. We put the dealers on the line, and stacked them on the hard ways. The cocktail waitress brought our drinks: red ones, blue ones, and girl drinks with speared pineapple slices. She brought Phil murky gray ones with wedges of avocado that he drank silently. I filled one rail and my chips spilled into the next.

The boxman looked at his watch and called, "Last shooter!" It was 11:30, or on Vegas terms, early evening. Normally, the Joker is our first stop. Tonight, however, the six of us agreed to quit early so we could get a cheap breakfast and put in a full day's work.

I wasn't ready to sleep. I wanted to keep shooting dice, winning money and shouting nonsense that confused the break-in dealers. I didn't want to go back to my hotel room and take out my contacts, take my arthritis medicine and try to fall asleep by counting the people who had achieved more than me at my age. My only hope was for the last shooter, a sad, round-faced bald man, like a Charlie Brown made out of Play-Doh, to get hot.

He didn't. He sevens out in two minutes. My only consolation was the money we won, which was a fortune. I mean a hundred bucks. That's forty pairs of shoes at the thrift. We had all won, Phil most of all. And yet he was the most indifferent to his newfound wealth.

"How much did you win?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "One-hundred-sixty-seven dollars. Not that it matters."



I didn't know what he meant and one thing I had learned is not to ask questions when I didn't understand. So I slapped him on the back and said, "You said it!" I turned to Mike, Jerry, Robert and Steve and said, "Who wants to ride with me? I'll tell you about Mom and my grandkids."

I guess Mike's Prius is cooler than I thought. I drove back to downtown alone, the radio cranked up to a radio station for cool young people.

Morning – Thursday, January 27 2011

I set my alarm for 9:00 with the plan to meet the others in the casino at 9:15. I woke up at 9:14 and only then realized that I had set the alarm for p.m. instead of a.m. I don't know how that happened because not understanding how to set remotes, alarm clocks and cellphones is an old person's problem. I didn't shower, shave, had fallen asleep in my clothes and my room was one flight of stairs from the blackjack pit. So I was only two minutes late to meet my friends.

Station Casinos offered five-dollar breakfast buffets during our trip. At Palace and Boulder, that's about what it's worth. Green Valley and Red Rock, though, have good eats. They took away the crab legs but otherwise served up the usual stuff. We chose Green Valley because we also needed to update our review of the place. We got there after ten, fed from the morning troughs, things like eggs benedict, fruit, bacon and hash browns, and then again from the lunch grub like cold cuts on rolls, a salad, some pizza, a bit of fruit, a couple slices of pie and a small brownie sundae with gelato and a sugar cone. I ate so much I was hardly motivated to put leftovers in my pockets, just a little Jell-o in my pants and taco meat in the shirt pocket.

We talked about the evening before: about Drinky and Mom, Mike chucking the dice and hitting the stickman in the face, and comparing cocktail totals. Phil said nothing. He just poked at his porridge with a spoon and moaned. Nobody brought up The Hoodlum, so I did.

"Remember how I was about to kick that punk's ass? I would have slapped him so hard he'd have been picking teeth out of his spine. And I would have pulled his hair until he cried."

I laughed. Phil, Jerry, Mike, Robert and Steve didn't. So I laughed even louder to make it sound like we were, on average, very amused.

"We're going to play downtown tonight, right?" asked Steve.

"Back to the Joker, baby," said I.

"We'll be safer downtown."



"Joker's a dollar table," I countered. "Downtown's three."

"You're saying we should risk our lives for a few measly bucks?" asked Robert.

"Yes."

Robert pulled out a napkin and pen. He did some quick calculations. When he finished he nodded. "The math works out."

"We're going to see The Hoodlum again," warned Jerry.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!" screamed Robert, slamming his fists on the table so hard Phil's porridge went airborne and landed on the floor.

"What if Mom's not there this time?" asked Mike.

"Then we won't make out and have babies."

Mike said, "I meant to protect you."

"Ooo, I'm soooo scared," I said sarcastically. "Waaa waaa, you're really making me afraid. I'm being sarcastic, in case you didn't know. Booga booga."

"Booga booga what?" asked Phil, snapping out of his fog.

Steve asked Phil, "What's bugging you, Phil? And I ask not because I care for your welfare, but because you're seriously bumming me out."

"Oh, I don't know," Phil moaned. "It's just, we've been to Las Vegas so many times and we always do the same stuff."

"Because it's fun," I said, but I thought, because it's what we did when we were young.

"Don't you ever--hey, where's my porridge?--don't you ever wonder if there's something more out there? Something with deeper meaning?"

"No," said Steve and Mike.

Jerry: "Not really."

I shook my head.

Robert added, "It's an all-you-can-eat buffet. What more could there be?"

Phil sighed. Actually, it was more of a honk, and abrupt enough that it startles a lady at the table next to us and she fell out of her seat. "I don't know, I feel like we're missing something."

Having no interest in contemplation, I got out the stack of CheapoVegas casino reviews. Today, we would hit the Strip, work until late afternoon and then convene at the Cosmopolitan. I wanted to see the progress of renovations at the Tropicana, so I chose it and the other hotels at the far South Strip: Mandalay Bay, Luxor, Excalibur, and Planet Hollywood to work my way back to the Cosmo where we were meeting in the afternoon.



Strip casinos take longer to review than downtown ones for several reasons. For one thing, the hotels are so bigger than some towns and it takes hours finding every restaurant and nightclub. The distances between the hotels are longer, too. I bet the pioneers on the Oregon Trail would have stayed on the East Coast had they been faced with the walk all the way from Mandalay Bay the MGM Grand.

The worst part, though, is that the Strip hotels keep changing. Lounges, shows and restaurants go out of fashion and get replaced faster than Crocs brand shoes. Downtown casinos rarely change, and most of them smell like it.

I took Jerry and Phil to their Strip destinations and then parked my Hyundai at the Tropicana. It is undergoing renovations that were about 75% done. The owners tore down the worst of the rooms, motel-types they called "garden rooms" because of their lovely view of the bouquets of litter in the parking lot.

They updated the rest, which had been chic in the 1970s with the mirrored ceilings and enough rattan furniture to make Mr. Rourke and Tattoo jealous.

The new decor is a South Beach Miami



theme. They have flat screen TVs, iPod docks and comfortable lounge chairs. I had stayed in one and it was better, but still sort of cheap, like it would get rub down quickly. The casino renovations look that way too. They kept the tiffany ceiling over the table pit, even though it doesn't fit the new theme. They laid some white tile that may or may not be fancy; to me it looks like a high school hallway. The renovated lounge isn't much better than what it replaced and lame compared to the glitz of the Cosmopolitan, or even the Luxor. The owners are packing the showroom with the kind of low-budget shows that have short lifespans: "Sideswipe", "Recycled Percussion" and a Beatles Tribute.

The new restaurants are better than the run-down eateries that had been there. The dismal buffet is gone. Biscayne, the steakhouse, and Bacio, the Italian restaurant, are



nondescript and not inviting from the outside. Their offerings aren't very appealing compared to the other new places on the Strip.

The biggest new eatery is Café Nikki, a sprawling South Beach restaurant that's the closest thing the Trop has to a coffee shop. It's in an awkward spot, but takes up a huge space, most of it empty tables from what I saw. The theme is hipster Miami and it overlooks the pool. The prices and the menu choices, though, are downright unbearable considering the low-cost alternative the Trop needs to be. Café Nikki serves lobster corn dogs and mahi mahi club sandwiches, but no cheap, simple breakfast. The last thing I want after waking up with a hangover and deep remorse is a \$14 quesadilla. I want bacon and eggs.

The Las Vegas Mob Experience is in the Tropicana. It was supposed to debut in December, then January, then February. It finally opened after we had gone home. But they already had the gift shop open, and empty, with a bored girl reading a Kindle behind the cash register. I haven't seen the museum, but their web site sucks. Online videos show the proprietors applauding the ancestors of mafiosos, for nothing more than being related to coldblooded killers. The museum glorifies the gruesome past, making light and fun entertainment of real-life killings and thievery. It's shallow, petty and assumes the audience is idiots who want a TV show in person.

Just like my left butt cheek is for me, the swimming pool is the Trop's best feature. And it has fewer pimples. Set in the center of the property, it has waterfalls, lagoons and pretty flowers. It doesn't offer a sand beach or a lazy river, but still is nice for the price. At least, it will be until Nikki Beach opens this summer and threatens to ruin it with loud music and spray-tanned drunkards puking in the planters.

After wrapping up the Trop, I crossed over Las Vegas Boulevard to the Excalibur and rode the underused Excalibur-Luxor-Mandalay Bay tram. It's a last vestige of the days before the MGM merger, when Circus Circus held the purse strings on these three properties and pinched pennies until their fingers turned green. The tram runs from Excalibur to Mandalay Bay, but it doesn't stop at Luxor in the middle. To get to there, a rider has to climb onto another train at Mandalay Bay and ride it north. I'm sure they saved a few bucks, but it wasn't worth it.

Despite the fake plants and some of the exterior showing its age, Mandalay Bay has held up well since it opened in 1998. Thirteen years old is middle-aged in Vegas years. A testament to its planning and selection of amenities is that the hotel hasn't changed much. They cut off the head of Lenin's statue outside the Red Square vodka bar, added an overpriced shark exhibit and changed shows a few times. The fancy French restaurant Fleur de Lys became a tapas bar, because that's the latest fad. Several years ago they added a second tower, called THEHotel. It is marginally swankier than the original tower. They put gambling and a beach club

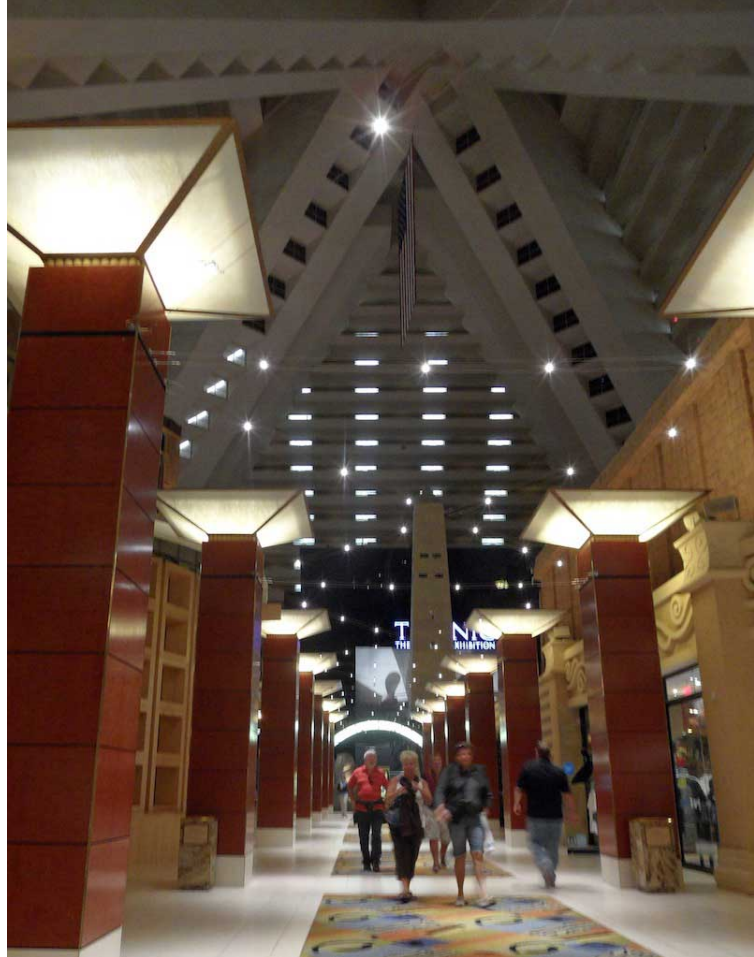


over the still-impressive sandy beach and wave machine in the pool. For the most part, though, the hotel and restaurants have remained steady.

Mandalay Bay started out as one of the nicest properties on the Strip. Over the last couple of years, though, MGM Resorts has repositioned it in the second tier. There it can be viewed as a value, and leave the snootiness to the Bellagio and Aria, Sheldon Adelson's joints and Steve Wynn's tributes to Steve Wynn.

Next door, the Luxor is a mess. When it opened, it was cheesy, as dedicated to its corny Pharaoh theme as Caesars once was to the Roman Empire. That was a very good thing. There were talking camels, a camel-racing Sigma Derby, a "Secrets of the Pharaohs" movie on an IMAX screen and a Nile boat ride around the casino that smelled like someone crapped in "It's a Small World."

The beancounters high up in MGM Resorts' executive chain must have been



embarrassed by the theme, or maybe they thought the animatronic camels ate too much. They de-themed the place, ripping out its tacky heart. The plan was to chase after 20somethings with boatloads of disposable cash. The results suck. The Luxor has become a hodge-podge of fake hipster crap trying too hard to copy the cool kids. It's the hotel equivalent of an Ed Hardy T-shirt.

The Luxor's big show is the much-hated magic-act Cirque du Soleil "Believe", starring douchebag Criss Angel. Lowbrow prop comic Carrot Top draws the people who found Gallagher and his watermelons too intellectual. The restaurants and nightclubs are copies of cool places, only decorated by accountants. They include the loud and dark Tacos and Tequila, the forgettable steakhouse Tender and the bleh buffet "More". The lounges are generic and overpriced, with stupid names like "playbar", "Aurora" and "Liquidity".



Beyond its lame attempts at hipness, the Luxor is worn down from a lack of care, like a baby with a lot of scabs. Its high ceiling echoes. The faded carpet, the fast food outlets scattered about and the remainders of its Egyptian theme give it the sense that nobody has given any real deep thought to planning. The pool is okay and nothing more.

I moved on from the Luxor to its even older and cheaper neighbor, the Excalibur, which is often just called the Ex. That's about right because people who stay here feel about it the way they do about a former lover: glad to be rid of it, yet in moments of desperation, willing to return for a regrettable fling.

It's cheap and never pretends to be anything else. This is the Strip casino most likely to have guests who gamble in sweatpants. And fit right in. It looks like a humongous miniature golf course castle. Luckily, guests don't have to time their entrance to clear a swinging door. The "family-friendly" Excalibur was created by people who think families like crappy, dingy stuff. The rooms are a decent deal, the bathrooms are small, and the mandatory resort fee can be add a well-hidden 50% surcharge.

The Excalibur's buffet is one of the cheapest on the Strip, and one of the worst. It's like a giant Golden Corral. Many Off-Strip buffets cost less and taste better, but first-time visitors don't know that. The other Ex dining choices are equally crummy, like Dick's Last Resort, a chain eatery that specializes in greasy foods served to you by insulting waiters. I thought that was Denny's shtick. The hotel also has fast food outlets like Krispy Kreme and Orange Julius, to help guests have a heart attack.



offers stripteasing male Australians who, they claim, have thunder down under their pants. I can't think of anything more depressing than dancing naked in front of a bunch of overweight, middle-aged moms sucking 32-ounce daquiris. That's why I do it at home, in front of a mirror, alone, in front of me sucking a Slurpee. The Excalibur also has a dinner show where knights joust in a huge dirt arena while the audience eats salty chicken with its fingers. Just like the casinos did it in Medieval times. Below the casino is the "Fun Dungeon". It's not literally a dungeon. It's not literally fun either. This basement has a low ceiling and dilapidated carnival games that suck cash out of kids as fast as the casino gets it from adults. The games are the same as those manned by tattooed dirtbags at state fairs: shooting a squirt gun at a clown's mouth; hitting a seesaw to send a rubber chicken flying; and weight guessing. At the fair, parents rush their kids past these booths, explaining they're a ripoff. In Vegas, the adults see them as a wonderful way for the little ones to spend a few hours so they can gamble.

I escaped the dungeon without being put on the rack, or having to make eye contact with any of the sad employees. It was now early afternoon and the Strip was filling with the long-weekenders. I returned to the Tropicana, got my car, drove to the Imperial Palace.

The Imperial Palace parking garage is not as creepy as the casino, but it is among the most scuffed-up and battered on the Strip. Only Hooters with its graffiti is more ragged. I made my way up the ramps to an empty spot, past the bumper scrapes on the wall, the brownish stains on the ground and the dirty shoeprints on the beams.

I wasn't responsible for reviewing the IP; I parked there because we'd eat dinner in one of its restaurants later. I made a beeline through the casino and onto the Strip before a crouching tiger, hidden dragon or dealertainer leapt from the shadows to attack or vamp.

It's freaking loud between the IP and Planet Hollywood, even in the afternoon. O'Shea's pumps out party music like a sausage factory making kielbasa. The Flamingo's Margaritaville lulls passersby into a tropical trance and then lures them into ordering big plates of nachos. Bally's weird late-80s entrance flashes stock prices and news, as though people don't come to Vegas to ignore that stuff. The least they could do is display only great news, even if they have to make it up. The Bellagio fountains belt out high-falutin' music to tell people that playing "Sex and the City" slots there is classier than at Casino Royale.



Planet
Hollywood,
formerly the
epically failed
Aladdin, still has
traces of its
Moroccan roots,
especially in the
Miracle Mile
shopping mall,
which used to be
called Desert
Passage. Overall,
though, the
owners have done



a better job scrubbing its former identity than the Luxor has. The facade now has twinkling, multi-colored spheres. The casino is festooned with lit columns and gazebos over the games to make it feel like "Bladerunner" took place in the South Pacific. Gone are the Aladdin's chintzy giant jewels and the Buick-sized genie's lamp. The hotel rooms have movie props and posters on the walls. Guests can end up with "Casablanca" or "Dude, Where's My Car". They won't know until they open the door.

Planet Hollywood has fixed most of the Aladdin's problems. Visitors can walk into it from the Strip now. They can park without having to walk all the way through the mall. The sportsbook is no longer an afterthought wrapped around a corner, but it's still small. The poker room has moved a few times. Its current location right on the casino floor is lousy. The restaurants are consistent with its efforts to be mid-tier. The buffet kept the name Spice Market from the Aladdin days as well as its reputation as a pretty good place to eat. Koi serves up Japanese. The chain restaurant P. F. Chang has Americanized Chinese. Yolo's is an bland and noisy Mexican eatery. Planet Dailies is a weird name for a coffee shop, but it has the longest menu I've ever seen. None of it's cheap. The best place to eat is also the quickest and least expensive: The Earl of Sandwich. It has a huge selection of large, tasty sandwiches and they all cost \$6. It's just a counter to order and get your grub before taking it to a table to eat.

I think Planet Hollywood has fewer restaurants than its neighbors because of the Miracle Mile shops. If everyone ate at the hotel, few would go to the mall for Cabo Wabo, Ocean One seafood, Blondie's sports bar, Fresh Bar and Grill, a fancy hamburger joint, a Brazilian



steakhouse and a seafood buffet. Plus, right next to the Planet Ho's Strip entrance is the bigass PBR Rockbar.

When I first heard of PBR Rock Bar and Grill, I thought Pabst Blue Ribbon had come to Las Vegas. The angry bronze bull bursting through the wall above its doors must be because someone mixed lager into its water trough. PBR doesn't stand for Pabst, though. Sadly, this PBR means Professional Bull Riders, though I have no idea what they have to do with the restaurant. There's the bull and a few photos, but the menu is generic greasy pub junk, the music is honky-tonk and their calendar of events shows no appearances by riders, rodeo clowns, Luke Perry or even cows. It's just a sports bar.

I needed to get to the Cosmopolitan to meet the gang. I walked across the street, went upstairs and settled into a chair in the Cosmo's third-floor "game room" and connected my iPod Touch to the outside world through the hotel's free property-wide wi-fi. The game room, which isn't really a room, is an open space among the hoity-toity restaurants. There's a free pool table, a bunch of board games and some comfortable chairs. There's another similar area elsewhere that has a book theme with a bunch of old hardbacks, the kind set decorators buy by the pound.

Steve got there early, too. Rather than join me and hear more about the beatdown I was gonna put on The Hoodlum later, he stayed in the casino. He got a cocktail, played a slot machine and hit a \$400 jackpot. He texted the news to me.

I texted back, "How much do I get?"

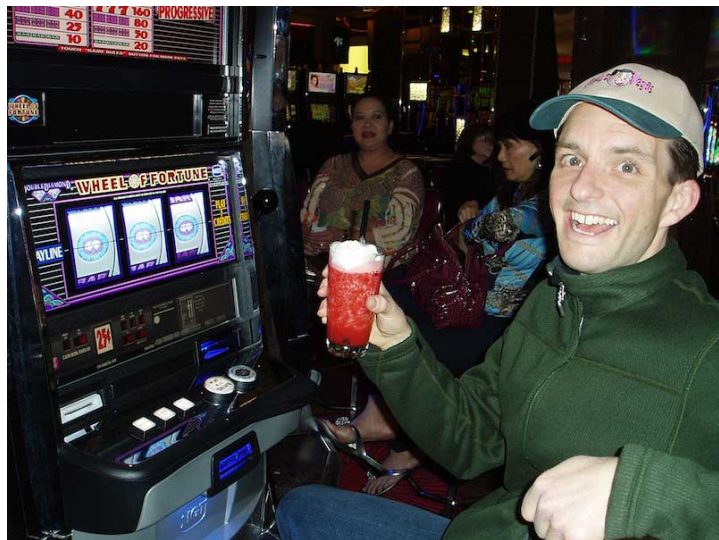
He didn't reply.

Eventually, Robert, Mike, Jerry and Steve joined me. Steve was physically heavier because he had taken his jackpot in quarters. Steve told the others of his big score. Everyone asked, "How much do I get?"

Phil moped in a few minutes later, his eyes red, either from crying or an allergic reaction to his makeup. When we told him of Steve's big win, he practically exploded. "You think I care about that? Don't you understand how trivial and petty that is?"

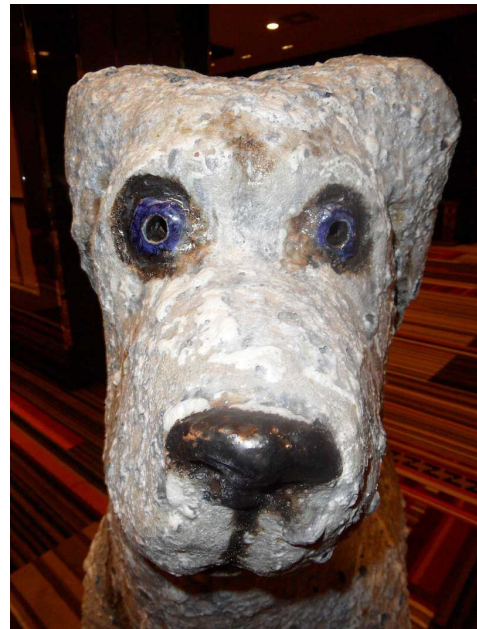
I had to admit to him that, no, I had no idea.

"Someday you'll learn," he grumbled.



We explored the Cosmopolitan. When Steve and I visited in December I thought I'd dislike the place like I have the other new properties that are more like ritzy shopping malls than fun places to screw around. Places like Encore and Aria aren't fun. They're just expensive and snooty. They have fancy stuff to look at and overpriced places to eat, massive casinos and snooty bars with \$17 chocolate martinis, but no imagination or flair.

I was very wrong about the Cosmo. I'll probably never stay or gamble there, but it's pretty damn cool. The hotel itself was supposed to be mostly condos before the economic collapse, so the rooms are decent sized and some have kitchenettes. Most rooms have balconies. The closets have eyeball wallpaper. The rooms also have all the stupid electronic gewgaws and minibar overcharges of the other high-end Strip joints. That's the crap most guests rarely use but some love to have just so they can tell the neighbors back home about it.



The Cosmopolitan has two towers on top of it of restaurants, meeting space and casino. It's all crammed into a narrow wedge between City Center and the old Jockey Club timeshare. Actually, the Jockey Club is no longer visible from the Strip. The Cosmo wraps around it like a phagocyte around bacteria. Someday, either Bellagio or Cosmo will make its owners an offer they can't refuse and it will be completely absorbed.

The Cosmopolitan is casino is elegant, lit up with twinkling lights and swirling colors. It's also the least interesting thing about the place. Nearest the Strip on the casino level are two mediocre amenities: The Henry, a wildly fancy coffee shop designed to look like an Oxford club where one might smoke a pipe while discussing first editions of Wilkie Collins novels; and the Bond lounge, a bar bedazzled with LED lights with a view of the Strip. In the back of the first floor is the hotel lobby, with columns made up of high-definition screens that slowly and seamlessly change themes. That is, provided none of the screens are on the fritz. So far, a few always seem to be.

People rave about the three-story tall chandelier in the center of the hotel. It's huge and flashy, with images projected onto the cascading sheets of crystals. Inside the chandelier is a lounge where guests can buy a glass of scotch for the price of a tank of gas. To me, this place is flashy but empty. Big freaking deal, an expensive bar with artificial exclusivity created by its prices.

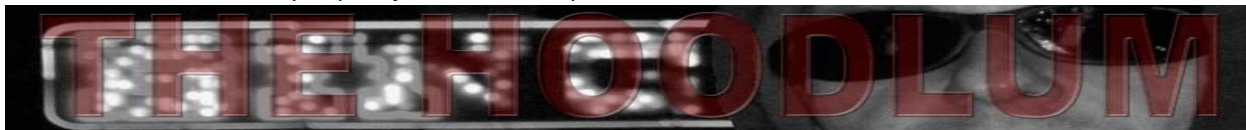


The parts of the Cosmopolitan that distinguish it from the other new hotels are below and above the casino. Below is the parking garage with sanctioned graffiti by celebrity wall painters like Shepard Fairey. I don't see Steve Wynn ever letting anyone spray paint his precious walls, unless it was with portraits of him. The garage also has the most advanced parking system in Las Vegas. Each parking spot has a light over it: red when occupied, green when vacant. Plus, directional signs at the intersections tell guests the total number of available spots in each direction. It still doesn't help the visitor remember where he parked his car when stumbling out, drunker than Miguel Cabrera after a Tigers win.



Above the casino are two floors of restaurants, convention space, art, shops and public areas. Aria has art, but most of it is show-offy, stuff, most likely expensive, but not amusing or fun. Some of it doesn't even fit the environment. In contrast, most of Cosmo's art is touchable. Many are Jules-Verne-futuristic, like a small sculpture of a blimp and some interactive telescopes that show pictures from a camera hidden nearby. There are giant high-heeled shoes that people climb into, some mixed-media wall hangings, five giant dogs, and a series of wooden hands signing something. I don't know what they say because I've never dated Marlee Matlin.

My favorite are the Art-o-Mats. These are repurposed cigarette vending machines, the kind from bars in the 70s with the pull knobs. The Art-o-Mats contain homemade art from a variety of artists, all packaged in cigarette-pack-sized boxes. Feed the machine five bucks and decide whether you want avant-garde temporary tattoos, a homemade pincushion, gemstone earrings or handmade trading cards. I bought something to bring home for my wife because I felt guilty and ashamed for being a bad husband for the last fourteen years. We're even now. Plus, it was small and easy to pack for the return trip.



All of the Art-o-Mat choices are better souvenirs than another "Crazy Girls" mug from the Riviera, which is what I gave my wife last year. Although, a permanent tattoo of the Crazy Girls' famous butt statue across your back may be the most memorable souvenir of all. It has been for me. It certainly gets a lot of comments when I go shirtless to church on Sundays.

The Cosmopolitan has better restaurants than its neighbors. What I like best me is that they're cool and casual without the jacked-up prices of the city's other celebrity restaurants. These aren't cheap, but they're more reasonable than the ripoffs next door at City Center or Bellagio. In fact, Cosmo has scared the crap out of some of the hot shots in town; two snooty French restaurants have shuttered and some other Strip big boys are rethinking their menus and dress codes to try to catch up.

Michelin three-star chef Jose Andres has two joints: China Poblano which serves Chinese and Mexican in a sit-down area and at walk-up counters; and Jaleo which is his tapas place that genuine Spanish tapas. Before the trip, I tried to make reservations for either restaurant, but the hotel's web site told me there was nothing available for eight weeks. Standing there, I asked if I could make reservations for the following night and the hostesses happily arranged it.

Comme Ca is a simple French restaurant where people can have froggy food and drinks for the price of a good buffet if they're careful. D.O.C.G. serves up bistro style food like salads and pizzas, while Scarpetta is the swanker, dimly lit Italian joint overlooking the Bellagio fountains. The obligatory steak house is called STK, and it looks tony. A Greek restaurant, Estiatorio Milos, is the priciest joint in the Cosmopolitan. I don't know much about it because I'll probably never eat there. The buffet is Wicked Spoon and its smaller than most of the Strip megabuffets. Its décor is louder too with a lot of orange and some wild chandeliers. The stations are smaller and manned by chefs. The dishes are pre-served in small portions. The promise is the food won't get as stale, which is true. It's also better than most buffets in quality, but it's still a buffet and a pale comparison to the hotel's other places to eat.

One restaurant is supposed to be a secret that everyone knows. A dark, unlabeled hallway beside Jaleo leads to a hidden New York-style pizza counter. The hall is covered with corny 60s record covers. The pizzeria sells slices for a few bucks.

The fourth floor of the



Cosmopolitan is the pool area. The Cosmo let dirtbags like us poke around. There are three pools, none of them big. The largest is the Boulevard, which is right up against the front of the property overlooking the Strip. It's a pretty dang cool view at dusk with the Bellagio next door and Paris' Eiffel Tower lighting up down the street. The two other water holes are practically backyard-sized. Blue daybeds and loungers surround the pools on tiers. There are some day/night bungalows, too, for people with a lot of money and no good idea how to spend it.

Around the pools are loads of places to loaf. One area has comfy chairs and flat screen TVs for watching sports. There are billiards tables, foosball that we played, ping pong, a free pinball machine and even a table-top shuffleboard.

Evening – Thursday, January 28, 2011

Before we left the Cosmopolitan we filled our pockets with as many free ashtrays, pens, cocktails glasses and wall fixtures as we could. We then went to the much dingier and less cool Imperial Palace for dinner with our pants clinking and rattling.

Not long ago, dinner at the Imperial Palace was on Amnesty International's list of human rights violations. Their restaurants brought back memories of summer camp cafeterias, after someone had barfed in the salad bar. There was the mediocre coffee shop, the brutal buffet, the drab steakhouse and some short-lived seafood joint named the Cockeyed Clam. I think that was supposed to have a naughty connotation like Pink Taco at the Hard Rock. Except, where Pink Taco sounds vulgar but relatively fresh, a Cockeyed Clam sounds like the bacteria-ravaged privates of an aging Tijuana prostitute.

Regardless, the Imperial Palace made a brilliant move by adding a Hash House a Go Go. Hash House is much-loved in Vegas with three outlets in town and another in San Diego. They're famous for breakfast, monstrous plates of bacon, eggs, sausage, French toast and pancakes the size of Paul Bunyan's head. Few can eat an entire meal, or even half of one. Those who do usually regret it.

What makes Hash House a perfect fit for the Imperial Palace is that the menu is familiar enough for its middle-of-the-road clientele, yet different enough to be interesting.

It was suggested to us by Justin and Amanda. They write the Vegas blog Hungry Wanderers. Mostly, they write about food, but they also write about other travel adventures too. In contrast to our site, theirs is thoughtful, useful and not nearly so full of shit. We met for dinner to size each other up and see if there were ways our sites could work together. Mainly, we wanted to see if they could sit



through an entire meal of hearing me talk about myself. Phil, still mopey, went on tangents about closet space, board games and his favorite prime numbers.

Hash House was a great suggestion for a group of nine. My only complaint was that it was a sit-down restaurant. I would have rather gotten a corn dog at the 7-Eleven and eaten it on the way out to the Joker's Wild. As night fell, I could no longer keep my thoughts of The Hoodlum from creeping in and dominating my thoughts.

The Hash House menu has something called "American farm food". That means pork tenderloin, fried chicken with waffles, chicken breast over pasta, burgers and meatloaf. All are big and presented nicely with a garnish of sage or a drizzle of gravy. The waffles are stuffed with bacon and the fried chicken is piled up like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The tenderloin is pounded until it's thin and covers half the table. The meatloaf is the size of a brick.

Jeff from Arizona, the seventh in our crew, arrived as we sat for dinner. Justin and Amanda are like us: they've got regular old jobs and write about Vegas as a hobby. They appreciate good food more than I do. I'm happy taking five bucks worth of processed bread products from the Hostess Thrift and eating them in a storm drain. The Hungry Wanderers, though, cut through the flash and give some thoughtful analysis.

We spent as much time telling Justin and Amanda about our exploits in Vegas as we did trying to put a dent in our meals. Phil even found some common ground with them on some board game of which he was crowned king or lord or world champion. Whatever, it earned him a free trip to Columbus, Ohio. Forgetting that some people had to work, we kept Justin and Amanda way past their bedtimes just to tell them how great we are.

One of the problems with reviewing a meal at Hash House a Go Go is that by the time you're done eating the huge portion it's hard to remember if it was any good.

"Oh, my," Amanda said, "look at the time. We bett-"

"I like to rollerblade," blurted out Mike. He then told of his dream to one day 'blade across America "to help stop badness."

"My kitten makes mouse salami," Jerry started another tale.

Finally, Justin and Amanda escaped. That was all right with me because I needed to get back to the Joker's Wild.

In the parking garage, Phil vomited. That's the highest compliment he's ever paid any restaurant. We all pretended it didn't happen. First, if we made a big deal about it, the Imperial Palace might make us clean it up. Second, if he were actually sick, someone would have to take him back



downtown and tuck him into bed and sing him lullabies and probably read him a story from one of the filthy magazines he brings. Third, what if he puked out of sadness? Sadness is contagious, so I try never to acknowledge it.

I wanted to face The Hoodlum. I wanted to look youth square in the eye and show it that I could not only keep up, but beat it. I also wanted to prove to my friends that I wasn't all talk and no action. I could prove them wrong like I'd wanted to do for years, through the thousands of times they had proven me wrong. Wrong about whether it was helium or spoiled ham that made your voice higher. Wrong about how much pressure it took to break a finger, and not quite correct about how many silent "r"s are in the word "excited". This time, I'd be right. That made me very, very excited.

We pointed our cars toward the desert, to the dark recesses of the valley beyond civilization. Mom wasn't at the Joker when we arrived. That was fine with me. I'd take down The Hoodlum alone. Except, he wasn't there either. Instead, a group of punks in droopy jeans and flat-brimmed ball caps loitered around the table. One in particular, whom we named Napoleon DynaDick, flitted about the table like an epileptic bee, butting in to strangers' conversations, making crude remarks to the cocktail waitress and becoming easily agitated. He didn't bet.

We all got in pretty quickly. All except Phil. Instead he just walked about the casino, looking at the various machines, occasionally stopping to caress one and weep. He was the last to join us, and only after we were winning. I took a slot as far away from Dynadick as I could.

Once again, the table reinvigorated me. The dice moved slowly as each player hit a point or two. Our stacks grew. So did the camaraderie, the good cheer and the volume. My friends were glad The Hoodlum wasn't there. I was disappointed.

I stayed sober for my fight, but my friends consumed red drinks, blue drinks, cocktails with pineapples on tiny spears, and murky gray beverages that fizzed. After Phil finally joined us, he asked the waitress to bring him something that would make him understand the meaning of life. She did and he said it was pretty good but he'd need several more before he knew if he understood.

It was almost closing time when he showed up. The Hoodlum skulked to the table wearing the same skullcap and hoodie. He made a spot for himself at the other end of the table where none existed between two old-timers. He pulled a ball of crumpled bills out of his pocket and threw them onto the table.

This was exactly what I wanted. Or was it? Now that he was here, all my courage and bravado leaked from me, like air out of a Chinese tire. I felt like the guy who knew exactly what to say to the pretty girl right up until he needed to say it.



Suddenly, beating him up didn't seem like such a good idea. For one thing, I'd get blood on my good pants. For another, there was a good chance it would be my blood. Failure was nearly as good a reason to avoid fighting as my extreme aversion to broken limbs and teeth. My friends watched me, waiting for me to react to The Hoodlum, but I stayed silent, trying to be nonchalant and hiding behind the player next to me.

"Money plays?" the dealer asked The Hoodlum.

"Garrrrrrr," he grunted, baring his wretched teeth and glowering under heavy eyelids. The young dealer smoothed out the singles, fives and a ten. "Change twenty-three."

She pushed some blues and a couple reds to him. He spat on the reds. She exchanged them for more blues. The game finally proceeded. The table moved through choppy waters, a point here, two seven-outs, another point and a crap. We weren't making money and there was no momentum building.

Robert leaned over and asked, "When are you two going to fight?"

"I'm waiting for him to make the first move."

Robert put out his hands, stuck out two thumbs down and made a raspberry.

To my relief, The Hoodlum either hadn't seen me, or was pretending not to notice. His glare stayed on the felt directly in front of him. I could have caught his attention or said something to alert him, but I was more than happy to feign ignorance if he did too.

Napoleon DynaDick stopped his gadflying and bought into the game. He entered a few slots down from The Hoodlum just as the dice got there. One thing I know for a fact from all my years of graduate studies is that jackasses don't throw points. This is just basic, freshman year physics. I moved my bets from the pass to don't pass.

DynaDick bet the pass and don't pass simultaneously, and cheered wildly when his first roll was a four. Good for me. A seven is twice as likely to be rolled as another four. I backed up my dollar with a full twenty in don't odds. He bet the field, the Big Six, and "Any Seven".

The Hoodlum slowly turned to look at Napoleon DynaDick. Steam poured from his nostrils. His eyes glowed and his teeth dripped blood. No, sorry, that was just strawberry daquiri. DynaDick was too high and drunk to recognize death snarling at him from three feet away. He was too busy insulting the cocktail waitress's mother and being scolded for grabbing the dice with both hands. I chuckled that my friends put their money on the line with this loser. After some deliberation, small talk about cell phones and picking at a scab on his forehead, Napoleon rolled again. Hard four.



The table erupted in cheers, except for Dynadick, who had no clue what he had done, and me, who had lost 21 dollars. I didn't lose my faith in science, though. That roll was an anomaly, not a typical outcome. I put myself back on the Don't. Napoleon made a bunch of bets, not a single one of them a line bet. After a lecture from the dealers that he had to bet the Pass or Don't so he could roll. The Hoodlum's grumbled at the delay. His fingers tore at the rail padding.

Ten: a six and a four. Easy enough for that loser to screw up, I figured, and I put another full twenty in odds on my Don't. Napoleon barked at the dealers, at his friend at the nearby blackjack table and at a giant invisible spider he thought was crawling through his ear. He swung furiously at it while throwing the dice.

"Ten the hard way. Pay the line, take the Dont's."

In Dynadick's four rolls of the dice I experienced an \$84 dollar swing between my loss and what I would have won betting the pass.

"Why are you betting the Dark Side?" Jerry asked me.

"Because I took physics," I said angrily. Something else I learned in college was that each roll of the dice was an independent event. What happened on the previous roll had no bearing on the next one. Streaks were illusions, not reality. They were just clumps in the infinite continuum. Or so I told myself as I bet the Don't again.

This time that son of a bitch rolled back-to-back nines and I was out another 16 bucks. The rest of the table was happy, though. Even The Hoodlum showed a glimmer of tolerance for the shooter's drug-fueled eccentricities by throwing a few pennies and a human tooth his way as a gesture of appreciation.

Science, I concluded, is bullshit. It is no match for reality. I moved my bet to the pass line, just in time for Napoleon to seven out. Eleven more dollars gone. I was now in the red for the evening while my friends were comfortably in the black. The meth head wandered away from the table, talking to himself and scratching at his leg.

I didn't feel young or energetic. The invincibility that came with winning was gone. I just stood there feeling old and broke. Meanwhile, The Hoodlum, with his dozens of dollars, exuded youth. He stood at the other end of the table with a strawberry daquiri in one hand and some Twizzlers in the other. I envied that at his age the entire world was wide open to him. He had yet to waste all the opportunities life would present to him.

The dice moved. I needed a miracle. I needed a hot shooter so I could press my bets, make them larger than my friends', catch up to their profits and feel the joy of gambling fill me. The next man



at the table, one of Napoleon's friends, wasn't it. He hit an eight and sevens out. The next was an elderly man with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel, exposing a silver buzzard's nest of hair. He hit a six, then sevens out.

Then came The Hoodlum. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, took the dice, rubbed them on the felt, turned one over, then the other, picked them up, licked them and chucked them down the table.

"Yo eleven!"

It was only a buck, but I was happy for any win. The Hoodlum set a point, sucked his daquiri through a straw, and hit the point. We cheered. He did it again and we cheered louder. Then again. When he did it a fourth time, my stack was in spitting distance of break-even. I didn't feel alive yet, and my knees ached, but I didn't feel ancient and useless.

As he won, The Hoodlum scowled less. I swear he even smiled when he hit a hard eight he'd hopped. After he hit another point, I even started to like him a little bit. I could almost see a little of myself in him. Really, were we so different? Did I need to fight with him when we could just as easily be friends? I could show him the wisdom of my years and he could, well, I don't know. Maybe change my oil.

This seemed an ideal time to bury the hatchet, to call a truce. Coexistence was better than nothing, and less likely to knock my teeth out than fighting. After all, we're just human; an engineer like me and a coldblooded contract killer like him.

"You can do it, Hoodlum," I shouted. I gave him thumbs up and a big smile. He acknowledged me for the first time, grinding his teeth and hissing. Maybe he wasn't ready to accept my olive branch. But he would be because I could be charming. And currently, nothing could hurt me.

He hit his point. My friends and I cheered. Winning is a drug. In fact, it's exactly like pharmaceutical Robitussin into which ecstasy's been dissolved. Or so I've been told. A winner is woozy, elated, thirsty and impulsive. He feels that everything he does is brilliant, that he can do no wrong and the world is pulling for him. He wants to share the experience with others.

I was winning. I shouted at The Hoodlum, "Let's go, Shooter, and I mean shooter in the literal sense!" His eyes glazed over. He probably didn't know what literal meant; vocabulary is not something they teach in the school of hard knocks. He fired an eleven.

The streak continued. The Hoodlum held the dice and hit his points, hit the hard ways, the come bets, a few hops and the field. The rails swelled with chips. Our reds were upgraded to greens. My friends and I high-fived and danced. I felt me bond with The Hoodlum strengthening.



"Throw 'em like they taught you in San Quentin!"

"Knock that point down like it was a little old lady!"

"Come on, Hoodlum, for once in your life make yourself useful."

He didn't respond. I took that as a good sign. His eyes only traveled from his chips to the dice, to the felt below my hands where they landed. We all made money.

"Last shooter!" called the boxman. It was 11:30. The Hoodlum grunted. He picked up the dice and threw them so hard they clapped like thunder against the backboard.

"Seven out!"

"Garrrrr," howled The Hoodlum. He slammed down his fist. He snatched up his chips and stormed to the cashier's cage. The rest of us stayed at the table to color up our mounds of blues and reds and calculate our profits. We chatted with the dealers, who were in good spirits thanks to the generous tipping that accompanied the hot streak.

I was energized, ready for anything. "Who wants to go rock climbing?" I asked my friends.

"So, you know him?" The boxman gestured to The Hoodlum who stood at the cashier cage forty feet away, rattling the bars and grunting at the workers. I shook my head.

The boxman eyes widened. "You don't know him?"

"Never met him before last night," I said. "But I want to get married again just so he can be my best man."

"I thought you were joking around with him."

"I was."

The boxman swallowed hard and said. "He'll kill you."

Robert rubbed his hands and grinned. He said, "Finally!"

I snorted. "My best friend in the whole world's going to kill me?"

"I thought you didn't know him."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't nitpick."

The boxman shrugged. "They say he killed a man in the parking lot for



THE HOODLUM

stepping on his shoes."

"I'm sure that's just a story," I said. "He's really just a big teddy bear."

The boxman shook his head. "They say he carved the guy's guts out with a switchblade."

"I saw the security video," said one of the dealers. "It was gruesome."

"So, that's what he was holding," said Steve who had played at the same end of the table as The Hoodlum. "I thought it was a weird-looking cell phone."

A hard lump of cold terror formed in my throat. "Why didn't they have him arrested?"

The boxman shrugged. "He's in our slot club."

I needed to leave the casino before. The Hoodlum, but we had chips to redeem. My nemesis was at the cage, I went to the bathroom to hide. Steve, Jerry, Jeff, Robert and Mike took cover elsewhere: behind the curtain in the Troubadour Lounge, under a blackjack table, in the ladies room and in the coffee shop. I wish I'd thought of the Joker's Wild's coffee shop; nobody ever goes there. Phil, meanwhile, stood in front of a video keno machine asking it, "Do you know the answers?"

After fifteen minutes, the boxman entered the men's room. He peed, washed his hands, farted and said, "He's gone, for now."

We came out of our hiding places and cashed our chips. Phil stayed at the keno game.

"Hope to see you tomorrow night." The boxman waved as we left. "And also, he's probably waiting for you out there."

We discussed our options. I reasoned that there were seven of us and only one of him. My friends reasoned that I was a jerk. Robert suggested we get forks from the coffee shop and puncture him to death, then tie him to the bumper of the Hyundai and drag him through the desert.

"What if we sacrifice one so that six may live?" suggested Mike.

My friends all looked at me, so I shouted, "Phil!"

He looked up from his machine. I told him that the meaning of life, the answer to all his questions awaited him in the parking lot.

"What does it look like?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "Wander around until you find it. Also, shout that you're unarmed and have a lot of money."

Phil stared at me with his sad eyes. "Should I take off my pants?"

"That couldn't hurt."

Six of us crouched by the casino's glass doors and watched as Phil made lazy circles in the wintry night, pants in hand, waving a wad of cash. He weaved between cars, asked people coming in and



leaving if they knew the meaning of life, and finally gave up. He sat on the curb, shivering. But The Hoodlum didn't come for him.

"Poor guy," said Steve. "He looks miserable."

He did, so we only left him out there for thirty more minutes before deciding we were probably safe. Then we dashed for our cars. Jeff tapped Phil on the shoulder as we went by him and Phil caught up to us just as we were shutting our doors.

"He'll find you!" yelled the boxman as we pulled out of the parking lot. "He always does."

I wasn't going to let him find me. I was done fighting The Hoodlum and his youth. I was done trying to prove anything. I decided to do what anyone does when faced with the reality that there were younger, tougher and faster people in the world: ignore it.

By the time we got to downtown it was well after midnight. The Gold Spike's "Sexy" blackjack tables were closing soon so we took our itch for three-dollar tables to our home turf, the El Cortez. Robert begged off to go to sleep. Phil said he still hadn't found what he was looking for.

Jerry asked, "Do you want some beef jerky?"

"Its something more," he replied. "I don't expect you guys to understand, but I've just felt ever since we got here that there is more to life, and more is expected of me in this world, than playing dice and cards."

Jerry shrugged. "When I don't know what I want I eat a few Slim Jims and then I'm happy."

Phil wandered off into the night while the rest of us settled in at a table.

I'm sure something hilarious happened, but I don't remember it. I was consumed by the realization that I wouldn't be going back to the Joker's Wild to confront The Hoodlum. Returning would be just like going back to all the other places I had failed to live up to expectations: my childhood home, my high school, my college, my first fourteen employers, McDonald's and that porta-potty at the county fair.

I tread water at the El Cortez as the dealers changed from Estonian to Spanish to Bulgarian to Chinese. Although they came from all over the world, their bewilderment at us was universal. They all gave us wan, tolerant smiles as we played, drank and made a ruckus.

About three a.m., we called it quits and walked to the Cafe Cortez for the traditional nightcap of late night pie. They were closed until five a.m.

We were too beat to walk elsewhere for sweet sustenance. When we were younger, we were never too tired. But tonight, I was exhausted. I dragged myself up the stairs to my suite and fell asleep.



Morning – Friday, January 28, 2011

I woke just after noon. The low January sun, brilliant and cold, streamed through the windows of my suite. Below on 6th Street, some gentlemen in a doo rag argued with a strung-out woman about sharing. Their fight carried to me as through they were in the next room.

Phil, to our amazement, had come out of his funk. He was and smiling. He told us of the people he met at gaming conventions, of the people he's met in dive bars near the LA Airport, and of a scheme he had if he ever encountered a dump truck with a half load of mulch and the keys in the ignition.

Mike said, "You seem to be feeling better."

Phil smiled. "Much better. Last night I found it. I finally figured out what was missing from my life. I now understand how to fill the emptiness in my soul."

"Was it beef jerky?" asked Jerry.

"No," Phil said, "but it's hard to explain. I'll have to show it to you."

I still had fifty dollars in food credit from my room deal, and my friends and I all had five bucks in credit from our funbooks. We squandered the sum total on late breakfast at the Cafe. At the El Cortez's coffee shop nothing is fantastic, although the fries are good, and nothing is awful, so long as you stick to the basics. I like their eggs, pancakes and sandwiches. Since it was after noon, I had a club sandwich. Others had chicken, eggs, pancakes and burgers.

Today would be easier than Thursday. In fact, I only had the massive MGM Grand on my schedule. Steve had Hooters, so I talked him into tag teaming. That way, I would help him do Hooter's, which takes a few minutes, and he'd cover half of the MGM Grand, which takes hours.

After lunch, Phil told us to follow him. He spoke rapidly and waved his arms as he led us through the casino. He explained how everyone has a purpose in life, a role in shaping the world and making it better for the next generation, and something about compassion and quantum mechanics that went over my head.

He led us down an alley of slots, past the piano bar, by the Subway counter and finally stopped by the casino exit, with its orange tinted glass doors.

He beamed with joy. "There it is."

"What, the doors?" Jeff asked.

"Don't be an idiot."

"Something beyond the doors?" guessed Jerry.



"No!" Phil was impatient. "Next to the doors. The Cougar-Licious slots."

He pointed to a bank of five machines flashing with neon pinks and lavenders. On the screens were rows and columns of middle-aged women tarted up in high-heels, pushup bras and tight dresses. One of them winked. Phil walked over to one and caressed its buttons.

"You put your money in, spin the wheels and try to line up three of the Cougar-Licious Ladies. If you should be so blessed, you enter a bonus round and give expensive gifts to them, like designer handbags and diamond necklaces, maybe a bedazzled cell phone. Depending on how much they like the gifts, you win more credits. And the ladies say naughty things to you."

"That's it?" asked Steve. His tone of disappointment spoke for the rest of us. "Those stupid slot machines are what's been missing from your life?"

Phil put his hands over where he imagined the games' ears were and replied with irritation, "I just explained to you: they're not stupid. The ladies are Cougar-Licious. You give them gifts and they say naughty things. Plus you can win money."

"And that's the meaning of life?" asked Mike.

"Not for everyone, no," Phil conceded. "Just for most people. This is our purpose here."

I scratched my head and tried to understand. "Putting money in these machines."

"Obviously this is more than your little brain can comprehend. I would try to explain, but I have more important things to do."

Phil put a five-dollar bill into a Cougar-Licious, sat down and said, "Hello, ladies. I'm back." His eyes glazed over as he watched the spinning reels and winking vixens. He was happy and he wasn't going anywhere.

Before the rest of us left downtown, we took our American Casino Guides and did a quick coupon run. We hit the Plaza first for five dollars in free slot play. Because of construction, the Plaza had been reduced to a few slot machines and a sports book. The table games were all gone. The lobby, restaurants and all of



upstairs had been gutted. After years of criminal neglect, the owners of downtown's flagship were finally hooking up the defibrillator and trying to get the old girl's heart beating again. She was pretty far gone, though, full of battered rooms, torn carpets, a pool deck that hadn't seen new chairs since the Kennedy administration, and a dwindling roster of amenities. The revival will have new rooms full of furniture bought out of the failed Fontainebleau on the Strip, a new lobby and a promise of five new restaurants.

The only reason anyone was in the small casino was to redeem free slot play. The slot club worker was beleaguered and alone. My friends and I waited our turn, though, and I converted my coupon into \$3.75.

From there, we went to the (Las) Vegas Club. It has the same owners as the Plaza, but is not getting the same upgrade. Instead, they are letting it sink further and further into a gutter of filth and grime. Where the Plaza is a grand dame stripped of her wealth but still exuding some class, the Club is the retarded sister locked in the basement. At least, that's the way it smells. The casino was empty except for a few patrons who turn a blind eye out of loyalty. I got five dollars more in free slot play, which I turned into \$2.50. I used the \$10 matchplays for the Club and Plaza, and made \$8 more dollars after tipping the dealer.

We crossed the street to the Golden Gate. It has weathered the recession fairly well. First they tinkered with the Bay Diner and screwed it up with a fancy menu replacing good old pancakes and eggs. But then they let Dupar's put a solid 24-hour coffee shop in the space. They cleaned up the tiny guest rooms. They added go-go dancers before everyone else downtown did. Even when it's not crowded, the Gate feels alive.

I used my \$5 matchplay at a blackjack table and was dealt twenty to the dealer's nineteen. I tipped a couple bucks and pocketed eight. I used my accumulated matchplay winnings to bankroll a run at the machines. The Gate's ACG coupon offered \$25 in free play if to anyone who put \$100 through the machines. I played a semi-decent Deuces Wild video poker machine. On average, I was supposed to lose three bucks while earning the 100 points.

That's the expected loss. My actual loss was \$62, a payback percentage of 38%. Brutal. I felt like George Custer, if the Indians had been Deuces Wild. At least I earned my \$25 in free play. I ran it through the machine and got more nine more bucks back. 36% payback. I wondered if I shouldn't have kept my eyes closed while playing. Or pressed the touch screen with my elbows. I walked over to the blackjack pit and asked the dealer I had to give me back her tip. She refused, security arrived, and I decided it was time to go to the Strip.

Covering the MGM Grand is like scoping out three regular-sized hotels. Part of the problem is size, and the other part is layout. Most of the restaurants are in a corridor at one end of the property, closer to Henderson than the Strip, but a few are located nearer to Las Vegas



Boulevard. The entertainment is similarly spread out, and some of it is hard to understand or describe, like the "CSI Experience", which promises to make forensics fun.

I've never liked the MGM Grand. I visited right when it opened in 1993 and drove forever through its string of parking garages. I prayed I'd remember where I left the car and not die of thirst on the walk to find it. Originally, the hotel had a half-assed "Wizard of Oz" theme, including an Emerald City that the hotel made you pay three bucks to go into. The green-glass facade is leftover from those early days. A giant lion that looked made out of car-sized Lego bricks faced the Strip.

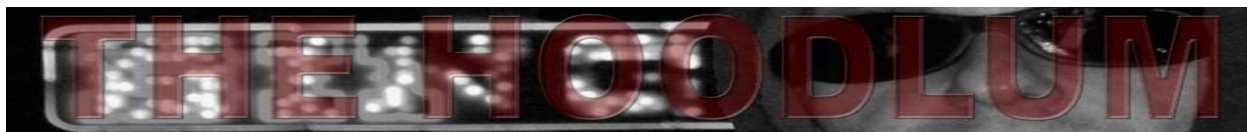
A very, very bad amusement park filled the backyard. It had some small rides, but no major roller coasters, and no customers. The park's gone now, as is the childcare, the Emerald City, the Lego lion, and other kid-friendly amenities. Today, the MGM Grand is still dull and pointless, but at a much higher cost. They've crammed it with celebrity chef restaurants like Joel Robuchon's mansion, where a single prix fixe meal can cost almost \$500, and Tom Colicchio's Craftsteak with its \$200-plus steaks.

The restaurants that don't have big names still have big prices. The Rainforest Cafe is sort of like a Hard Rock Cafe in both quality and execution. Except the rock stars are endangered animals, and they don't have the choice to not participate. Despite its Amazonian trappings and animatronics apes, the place doesn't share its profits with rainforest conservation efforts. Neither does it serve rainforest food, unless bacon burgers are indigenous to the tropics.

MGM has plenty of snooty nightclubs and bars, too, the kind that manufacture exclusivity by opening late, making the little people wait in long lines, and charging more for a bottle of mid-grade tequila than I paid for my car. One is called Studio 54 to conjure up images of the coke-fueled party heyday of 1980 New York. Another is Tabu, a nightclub so uninhibited that it doesn't even spell its name correctly.

To be fair, there are some nice things about the MGM Grand. The pool is big and fun. The lion habitat, which the keepers swear is way better for the big cats than Africa, is good for free. The poker room has a good mix of limits and is filled with more fish than the freezers at Red Lobster during Lent. The sportsbook is one of the city's largest and comfortable.

After a few wrong turns thanks to the MGM Grand's crappy signage, Steve and I found the bridge across Tropicana Avenue. Next stop: Hooter's. I feel bad for anyone planning a Las Vegas vacation here. It's the kind of mediocrity you're supposed to get away from on vacation. It's also a place that has nothing to draw people away from the bigger Strip hotels.



Hooter's restaurants make money by having hot wings served by girls in tight tank tops and short-shorts. I appreciate that because it's what I wear to work too. Their strategy works in most cities, because most cities are sleepy. But in Las Vegas it's redundant. Visitors already get everything from scantily clad ladies: car washes, haircuts, blackjack, tax forms and blowjobs. There are hundreds of restaurants already serving the greasy food that Hooter's serves.



Half the table games are dealt by men and women whose dignity is still intact, while the other half are dealt by the "Rack Pack", ladies who cram their boobs into miracle stretch fabric and their shame down into the deep dark recesses of their minds. The restaurants are a Hooter's, of course, and a coffee shop called the Mad Onion, which serves wings just like hooter's, and often for cheaper. The entertainment is usually raunchy comedians and cover bands; shows that don't cost much to produce and can disappear overnight. The swimming pool is small and noisy, but it has a waterfall and plenty of seats. The guest rooms have a tired thrift-store tropical motif and blonde-wood furniture. They're the crummiest on the southern half of the Strip.

Evening – Friday, January 28, 2011

Having completed our work, Steve and I returned to downtown to redeem more coupons and meet our friends. We stopped at Mermaids, a dismal slots-only storefront next door to the dismal Glitter Gulch strip club. Before it was Mermaids, it was Sassy Sally's, a sleazy clip joint with aggressive change girls and tacky gimmicks like free watches, "professional" slot players' gloves and free photos to lure people into playing the tightest slots in the Valley. Sassy Sally's got busted years ago for its aggressive tactics and reopened as the nominally-tropical Mermaids.



Since they can't con people anymore, Mermaids uses the next best thing to draw customers: cheap, greasy food and hooch. A filthy snack bar in the back has corn dogs, Twinkies, Oreos and whatever else fits in a deep fryer. They'd probably cook your cat for a corkage fee. Since Las Vegas is for doing the things we don't do at home, like showering every day and getting out of bed before



dinner, I bought a deep-fried Twinkie. I'd been warned not to, but if I listened to warnings I would have never mixed vicodin and bourbon. I paid 99 cents and watched a deeply unhappy man in a white toque jab one with a wooden dowel and dunk it in batter. He dropped it into boiling oil, pulled it out and sprinkled it with powdered sugar. I choked down nearly a third before it came oozing out my pores. Jeff, Jerry and Phil tag teamed the rest and still didn't finish before the grease cooled and coagulated.

After a deep-fried Twinkie, there was no place to go but up. We did by dinner at Jaleo in the Cosmopolitan. Jaleo is a Spanish tapas restaurant. The dishes are small and meant to be shared, so the larger the group the more grub to pass around. Since there were seven of us, we ate: salmon crudo, bruschetta, Iberico ham, carne asada, chicken and ham croquets, cod empanadas, dungeness crab in piquillo peppers, steamed mussels, sangria and a load more stuff I can't remember. Most of the dishes were about \$8 to \$10 for a taste for three or four people, but the carne asada was \$14. A couple of us shared sangria and a couple others asked for Cokes. They were served eight ounce aluminum bottles, for which Jaleo charged five bucks.

Most of us talked about the food. Phil spent the meal waxing poetic about Cougar-Licious. "Vicki, she's a minx and she's worth two times credit. Sabrina's a sweetheart, but she's small potatoes. A good listener, though. Roxanne's the real troublemaker, but how can you resist a redhead?"

The meal came to \$320, which seemed fair, even if all of those small bites didn't add up to a big meal. The food was overall quite good. Our waiter was in a hurry, or at least disinterested in anything more than moving fast. I know this because I offered to do a puppet show for him and he didn't stay. The restaurant tacked on a 22% tip. That pissed me off. I don't like when restaurants assume large



groups are incapable of tipping and add 18%, but 22% is ridiculous. We weren't told on the menu or anywhere else there'd be that steep a tip. I was in no mood to dispute the charge, though. Whipping out a calculator and arguing over restaurant bills is something old people did, and I was not going to be old tonight.

A young couple and his parents sat at the table next to us. Jaleo has some strange, supposedly whimsical, décor. The young woman was given a long off-road motorcycle seat mounted to four legs. She didn't have the sense of humor required to straddle it. She turned it lengthwise and then sat. She didn't realize that she now looked like she had a big stick up her ass.



She, her boyfriend and their parents didn't grasp the idea of sharing, either. They all ordered separate tapas and ate them alone.

Nobody threw up in the parking garage after dinner.

We bounced from high culture to low and went to the Western. I was surprised when Phil said he'd join us.

"What about your Cougar Ladies?" I asked.

"What about them?"

"Well, I thought they were teaching you the meaning of life?"

"They did." Phil shrugged. "And now I know. But learning it is sort of like taking a good shit after a big meal. You only have to do it once if you do it right. Speaking of which."

Phil left for the bathrooms in the back of the Western. I don't know why it's called that. There's not a damn thing about it that suggests big sky and dude ranches. There are no cows, no cowboy hats, and no mechanical bull. It has an outlaw reputation because of the hookers, junkies and bums, not train robbers and cattle rustlers.

The Western is east of the Fremont Street tourist district, farther than the section adjacent to the casinos that the City is reviving with new nightclubs and restaurants. It has no hotel; that part of the



property was shuttered in 2008 at the request of the Clark County Health Department, one month after my last stay in it. There is an glass-strewn parking lot next door and a former used car lot housing a taco truck across the street. The side of the casino once had a ten-foot tall penny painted on it to tell visitors that slots in that denomination were inside, but that's as gone as machines that take metal. Now, the marquee promotes two-dollar blackjack, dollar craps and the occasional drink special.

While joints like the Wynn and Cosmopolitan are at the top of the gambling ladder, the Western hangs from the bottom. It has an elderly, short-tempered woman serving cheap hooch, battered floors, fluorescent lights and the stench of burnt tobacco ground into the cracks. The bathrooms are tiled like an elementary school and the bar plays Norteno music. Despite the differences between high and low, though, the Wynn and Western are a lot alike. Gamblers throw dice, play cards, push buttons and suspend logic in the hopes they'll beat the odds. The games, despite the difference in cigarette burns on the felts, are the same.

The Western experience is closer to the bone, though. On the Strip, a player may drop two grand on the roulette wheel and other players have no idea it's his rent money. Here, a guy walks up, shakes the contents of his wallet onto the table and everyone knows it's all he's got.

We were there for the craps. The Western's table is the first thing a visitor sees when entering. It's only open five days a week and only until 11 p.m. On weeknights, it's quiet. On weekends, and welfare check days it's rowdy, belligerent and the best table in town. It's far more likely that something unexpected, wild and worth telling friends about will happen here than at Caesars Palace. Plus, there was no Hoodlum. He was probably crouched behind some planter in the Joker's Wild parking lot, waiting for me. I didn't care. I was done with him and the constant reminder of his presence that I couldn't keep up with the kids anymore.



There were no open spots. That's not to say the table was packed with players. Mostly, it was guys spending their Friday leaning against the rail. They didn't bet, but they commented on the action,



and on each other. When I tried to squeeze in, the deadbeats opened their palms to reveal a single blue dollar chip. They were simply waiting for the right time to play it.

Maybe a few of them got tired, or decided to save their dollars for another night, but a few spots eventually opened. My friends and I moved in one at a time. I stood directly opposite a barrel-chested older man who, despite his advanced age, was still worried what other people thought. He bragged to two bowl-haircutted dorks beside him about having owned car dealerships and being worth a fortune. That was, of course, bullshit. But this was the Western and nobody was going to deny a man his fantasy, unless it involved name-brand liquor. Then the Western bartenders would deny it.

The men eyed us suspiciously. Our nerdiness probably made us look like all the people keeping them down. My ballcap, which said "FBI" in bold letters didn't help much, either. Of course, had they looked closely, they would have seen that stood for "Female Body Inspector". And in fact, I wasn't certified for that. I bought the hat on a lark, but if a woman had asked me to perform an official inspection of her shape, I would have confessed I wasn't qualified.

We kept quiet, which isn't easy for me. I tried to fall into the rhythm of the game, get a feel for the table, and figure out who not to piss off. When I entered the table, the table was cold. That partially explains why half of the dozen people were standing idly by with their single chip. However, after the flashy pretend car dealership owner sevens out, the dice were handed to the skinnier of the bowl-haircutted guys. He laughed loud and nervously at nothing in particular and had a pronounced slope to his forehead.

He held the dice long enough to hit a couple of points and excite the six players who were actually betting. Since it's a dollar table with crappy double odds, all that action only added up to five bucks for me. Winning was crucial, though, because winning made me forget bad things. With the endorphins rushing through my system, I was once again alive and not worried about work deadlines and project proposals.

I asked the cocktail waitress for a Heineken. Tonight I wasn't driving and alcohol had been a missing ingredient in my recipe to be young and stupid the last two nights. Specifically, I expected it to provide the stupid, in a big way.

The single-chippers saw enough money flow out that a couple jumped into the game. One put a dollar on pass, another in the field. Skinny bowl-cut hit more numbers. Steve and Phil squeezed their way into the table. Mike, Jeff, Jerry and Robert hovered around the edges.



Skinny bowl-cut didn't seven out until one of the single-chippers in the field parlayed his buck into two, then tripled it. He scooped up his six bucks, snapped his fingers and said gleefully to nobody in particular, "That's what I'm talking about." I didn't remember him talking about six dollars.

The single chipper beside me had been riding the pass line and now had four bucks in his palm. He threw one to the middle of the table and hollered, "Hot limbs! Hot limbs!" The fellow next to him shouted it too. I had no idea what "hot limbs" was, but it sounded like fun to scream so I did. The two men stared at me and I piped down.

Skinny bowl-cut rolled an eleven and the two men went into fits of joy, slapping at each other, giggling and doing a dance. "Hot limbs!" they shouted again as the dealer pushed chips to the one who had bet. He threw one back out and yelled "Hot limbs" again. I yelled "hot limbs!" again too. It was fun to say, and like other craps jargon, saying it made me feel like I knew what I was doing.

It wasn't until Skinny bowl-cut hit his third eleven and I had drunk two Heinekens that I figured out that the call was not for "Hot limbs" but for a "Hot eleven." It's just that the guys yelling it were slurring from booze.

I didn't care; "Hot limbs" sounded better. And the other two players didn't mind me shouting it as long as they were winning money. In fact, the others who had watched my friends and me suspiciously, now accepted us and understood we were cheap bastards trying to shoot dice and get our drink on. A winning craps table is the fairest place in the world. Color, race, religion and sexuality are irrelevant as long as everyone's winning. When people lose, though, it's a horrible place.

The Western is where I get "Girl Drink Drunk". I was served the most toxic, least apple-like appletini ever. It was the color of infected urine, tasted like burnt tires and compelled me to assure the waitress I was not gay. I even pulled out a photo of my wife and son. Then I had another.

Eventually, Skinny bowl-cut sevens out and the dice passed to his friend, Fat bowl-cut. The table stayed warm. So did my head as I finished my fourth drink. With every drink, I felt younger and funnier. I came out of my shell, engaging the other players in conversation. I yelled "Hot limbs" whenever I damn well pleased.

I couldn't stomach another appletini, so I asked the waitress what the girliest drink they had was. She didn't flinch; Western workers want to know as little about their customers as they have to. She put her finger to her chin, thought for a moment and answered, "Sex on the Beach." That did sound girly, even if it was a concept I wasn't opposed to.

Sex on the Beach was sticky sweet, but did what a good cocktail should. My skin felt flush and my mouth sped up. "Hot Limbs! Hot limbs!" I hollered at the table, at my shoes, at a cop car driving by.



Because we were making money, and because The Hoodlum was nowhere to be seen, I was alive. I hollered to Fat bowl-cut to hit the point.

"Man, why do you call him that?" asked one, his fist now full of dollar chips.

"Well, look at him."

"He's not bowl-cut," he said, shaking his head. "He's Family Guy."

He was right. Fat bowl-cut had an uncanny resemblance to the father on that cartoon. Same bad hair, protruding chin and glasses.

"And the guy next to him," my neighbor continued, referring to Family Guy's friend. "That's Paul Lynde." He nailed it again.

I laughed out loud and high-fived my tablemates. I had a belly full of hooch. I had chips in front of me. I was surrounded by friends, new and old. I was alive. The arthritis was gone, my thinning hair felt thicker. I was more handsome and charming than I had been in a long time. Las Vegas' magic was working.

Just when the party peaked, the pit supervisor called "Last shooter!"

We cashed out our small wins and left in search of the next party. We stopped at the taco truck in the parking lot across the street. It was probably a bad sign that the cashier was making out with her boyfriend, who had his hands down her pants. But, as long as he wasn't also the chef, no harm no foul.

Robert, Jeff and I ordered pork tacos for a buck-fifty apiece. To my relief, the lovers stayed put while another fellow got to work in the back of the truck. The rest of our friends waited



with us in the cold January night for about five minutes. We recounted the game we had just played and exchanged stories about the nutjobs surrounding us. Phil was unusually vibrant and lucid, repeating the conversations around him verbatim.

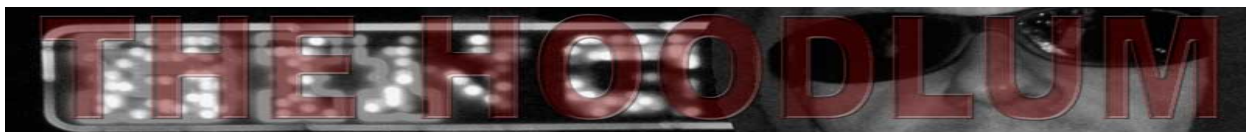
The tacos proved to be worth the wait. They were cubed pork on small, soft corn tortillas, covered in onions, cilantro and a creamy hot sauce. They were as good as the flashy tapas earlier in the evening. It wasn't just the booze that made me think so, either. It was the booze, the euphoria of winning and, partially, that they were very good.

The temperature was in the 40s. The air was crisp as we walked back to the populated part of downtown. Being Friday night, Fremont Street was lousy with tourists and local bums out to fleece them. Because begging is forbidden under the big light canopy, the homeless put on the shabbiest, dirtiest costumes they can assemble and pretend to be entertainers. The racket is that instead of handouts, they demand visitors to pay to have a picture taken with them. In front of Fitzgerald's we saw a man wearing a matted gorilla outfit without mask, riding in a wheelchair and smoking a cigarette. He hissed at us for sneaking a photo without paying. Farther on was "Yoda," made of a cheap Halloween mask and a grungy bathrobe.

Near the Four Queens, Spongebob Squarepants had been made from a large cardboard box and some yellow spraypaint. We also saw several bums attempting to look like Elvis two months after he died. A very fat woman had painted her body gold and was inchworming her way down the street toward the Plaza.



Tourists loved the bums' costumes, either because they were too drunk to realize the crappiness or because they were so drunk the crappiness delighted them. Either way, drunkenness ruled as men and women holding football-shaped jars or beer and giant neon-colored margarita glasses zig-zagged under the zip line. The booze made some romantic, as couple necked while leaning against the kiosk that sells hermit crabs, and heavily petted by the oxygen bar. It made others belligerent as husbands and wives shouted at each other, and strangers had to be separated by their friends who moved slowly



so as not to spill their cocktails, and because they were also pushing strollers with sleeping babies in them.

Fremont Street was a true sea of humanity, with a current of vomit running through it. The only thing everyone had in common was the desire for a good time. I was warm from the drinking and the taco. It wasn't even midnight and I was invincible, very funny and ready for anything. After two nights away from the heart of Vegas ruined by The Hoodlum, I was finally free.

We made our way through the crowd to the (Las) Vegas Club and its "fetish" blackjack pit. It's not really for fetishists. If it were, the dealers would be pregnant she-males and they'd let me wear nothing but a diaper. They won't; I asked. The pit's four tables are dealt by attractive women dressed as the most predictable of male fantasies: policewomen, schoolgirls and cheerleaders. They occasionally stop pitching cards to poledance to hip-hop.

The blackjack is lousy 6:5 but often only five dollars. The dealers are good at laughing at our stupid jokes and convincing us we're still amusing. It is a skill I wish all young women had. I understand how easy it is to ignore reality and believe that a dancer, waitress or dealer thinks I'm special, that she can't guess my age. In Vegas anyone can pay for that fantasy.

Except my friends and I are cheap bastards. We only pay for discounted fantasies, and then only if the odds are good. Nothing in the Fetish Pit was less than ten bucks, so we left and took our business off Fremont to the Gold Spike and its three underused tables of three-dollar "Sexy" blackjack with 3:2 rules. It's not really sexy. They dress like skanks, though. And while the hotel has cleaned up since its dingy past, it still feels looser, less regulated, more like something unexpected will happen.

We sat down at a table with a one-handed regular. When he first waved the stump over his cards to indicate a stand I didn't notice the missing appendage. I thought I saw a blur because I was drunk. He stayed planted at third base all night, quiet and serious about his three-dollar blackjack.

The former cocktail waitress at the Spike was a good sport. I once told her to bring me the most disgusting drink a gambler had asked for that day. She returned with brandy and milk. It was awful. When Steve and I asked for the girliest drink she knew, she brought back a Blowjob, a kahlua concoction with a thick head of whipped cream. When asked for the manliest drink, we got Black and Blue: a combination of Guinness and Blue Moon beers.

The new cocktail waitress, who was also one of the "sexy" blackjack dealers, was indifferent to our silliness. She rolled her eyes at the added workload when asked for the most disgusting drink. She didn't take this job to have to think. Her disinterest would have killed my buzz if only our dealer hadn't brought up her love for anal sex as she asked Phil to cut the deck. She called herself "Sandy", but that



wasn't her real name. She was short, wore a bikini top, and still had baby fat. She acted like she was listening to us, but she wasn't.

Sandy had a routine of cheap double entendres, the kind found on coffee mugs in the Spencer's Gifts adult section. She liked it up the butt, she liked it when you "stuck it in really deep", ostensibly referring to the cut card. I needed more booze before I found her charming, and probably some peyote before I'd believe she didn't use these lines on every male player.

If she hoped to generate big tips, she had the wrong players. We'd tip a couple bucks every few hands, but even the filthiest lip-licking wouldn't convince us to part with a red chip. Every time she shuffled, Phil stood up, walked behind her and looked at her ass. She pretended to like it.

The cocktail service wasn't fun but it was efficient. I was buzzed enough to make mistakes in basic strategy. But this was a night where mistakes were rewarded. I stood on sixteen against the dealer's ten and she busted. I forgot to split eights and was dealt a five. Stevie did even better. His twenty dollars swelled to almost a hundred bucks, won three bucks at a time. Phil did horribly, losing no matter how perfectly he played. Sandy droned on about foreplay, threesomes and dildos. We told jokes to each other and the one-handed guy.

Eventually, the dirty dealer rotated to an empty table and "Charisse" took the reins. She was prettier, taller, leaner, smarter and, best of all, meaner. Phil likes that. She wasn't a bullshit artist. She had no routine, just fast hands and wise ass comments. Her efficiency was appreciated only because we were winning. A speedy dealer sucks when we're losing.

It was one a.m. The bar crowd had emptied out. Ours was the only full blackjack table. The Gold Spike would only have the tables open two more hours. Now that I had a good buzz, was among my friends, laughing and winning, I didn't want the evening to end. None of us did. We played and made more mistakes. I ordered an appletini for Steve and he ordered something equally awful for me. We drank them and laughed some more. Charisse slapped Phil's hands when he got out of line. He liked that very much.

My winning turned to losing, but I didn't care. I was up so much for the trip and having so much fun. I was down about thirty bucks when the floor supervisor announced the tables were closing. I didn't have enough left in front of me to color up so I waited for my friends' stacks to be converted to red and green.

The little hand was on the three, but we still weren't ready for bed. We hit Fremont Street in search of a coffee shop for late night pie and conversation. It had become empty and dark. The tourists and the costumed characters were asleep. The kiosks were closed and the zip line was empty. A few



security guards on bicycles pedaled up and down. A drunk woman held up by two men staggered toward the Golden Nugget. A bum snored rested against a trashcan. The security gates were down in front of the gift shops.

We tried to add up our winnings over the weekends in our head but the alcohol and late hour clouded the arithmetic. We laughed at the repeating digital image on the Glitter Gulch strip club of a woman losing her top, only to have her breasts obscured by the word "Gadzook!"

I tried to ignore it, but I felt tiredness behind my eyes. All the alcohol and the late hour were taking their toll. I told myself I just needed a graveyard ham and eggs to perk me up. After all, I was in Las Vegas and I was winning. I was with my best friends and we were doing exactly the same things we had done for over twenty years. We had conquered age and were in control. We were on top of the world.

The Hoodlum walked out of Mermaids. He wore blue jeans, a white T-shirt and a leather jacket. His hair was slicked back with grease, either from a car or a can. He ate a deep-fried Twinkie, a dab of the cream filling hung from his chin. I stopped.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Come here."

"Go, go go!" I ordered my friends. "Just ignore him. Pretend he's not there."

I sped up, angling to the far side of Fremont Street. My friends hurried, trying to keep up. But in an instant, The Hoodlum was there, standing in front of me, jabbing the stick from his Twinkie into my chest.

I thought I had avoided him. Yet, here he was, just like the boxman said. I realized that he, or some other young person, would always be there, as a reminder of what was long gone for me, of all the squandered opportunities. My heart raced, my breath shortened and my hands were ice cold. I was a good foot taller than The Hoodlum, but standing face to face, he was larger than me.

"We don't want any trouble." My voice wavered. My friends stood behind me, not in support, but at a safe distance so any blood wouldn't splatter their clothes.

The Hoodlum swallowed the last half of his Twinkie and chewed with his mouth open. He looked me up and down and sneered.

"Do you want another?" I asked. I fumbled for my wallet. "Let me buy you one just to show no hard feelings."

He slapped the wallet from my hand. My credit cards spilled onto Fremont Street. I pleaded with him, "We're leaving tomorrow morning. Please don't kill me. Please, don't."

He clenched his fists.



"He's going to," said Phil.

"Looks like it," added Mike.

I closed my eyes. They say that when a man accepts death he becomes peaceful. They say a dying man no longer fears the end. That's horsecrap. I had never been so afraid in all my life, not even the time I was attacked by a lesbian softball team. Every part of my body wanted to go in a different direction. Sweat trickled down the insides of my arms. My toes curled in my shoes.

The Hoodlum wiped his mouth with his filthy hand and said, "Your time has passed, old man. You need to go home."

He reached down, picked up my wallet and took out two dollars. He threw the wallet at me and then walked back to Mermaids.

I collapsed on the street. My friends said I was out for five minutes. I was exhausted, tired from the booze and the late hours. I had pushed myself too hard all weekend trying to capture something that was no longer within my reach. I no longer knew why I was there. I felt lost.

My friends went to Dupar's Coffee Shop in the Golden Gate, but I didn't join them. I returned to the El Cortez. I put ten dollars into a Cougar-Licious slot machine and waited for the ladies to reveal themselves.

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Read more of our exploits at www.BigEmpire.com/vegas.

