

## **Strip Search**

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There's a story my grandfather tells about the time Frank Sinatra bought drinks for him and his buddies. They were at Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas, at what my grandfather describes as a "top-drawer" restaurant near the showroom, where they had just seen Sinatra sing. A woman was sitting alone in the corner, looking glum, and one of my grandfather's friends struck up a conversation. She was sad, she told them, because she had been a girlfriend of Sinatra's. They were engaged, but he had gone and married Barbara, his fourth wife.

Whether or not this was true, my grandfather and his buddies reasoned, there was no sense in a pretty girl drinking alone, and they sat down with her and began ordering rounds. A little while later, Sinatra walked in with Barbara and had a drink at the bar. When my grandfather asked for the tab, the bartender shook his head. "Anyone drinking with her is a friend of Sinatra's," he said. "Drinks are on him."

I liked this story for its glamorous details: the casual thrill of the top-drawer restaurant, the lonely bar rat's brush with fame, my grandfather in the same room as Frank Sinatra. My grandparents, who for a long time went to Las Vegas once or twice a year, are quite glamorous themselves, in the way that people used to be glamorous. Their house has a wet bar in the living room and oil portraits of them over the fireplace -- my grandfather with his pencil-thin mustache; my grandmother in a teal gown, her red hair in an Ava Gardner set. On the night I was born, they almost missed the 3 a.m. phone call from my father, because they were just returning from a party.

But I also liked the story because it was about Las Vegas, a place that, in their recountings, had an electric sense of possibility shimmering through it, like a current. When I pressed my grandfather for specifics about what, exactly, it was about the city they liked so much, he could say only, rather vaguely, "the ambience." I would have attributed any ambience in the city to legalized gambling, but my grandparents weren't gamblers, he said, having never had the temperament for it. No, to hear him tell it, it was something in the city itself, bricked into the infrastructure, or diasporized throughout the atmosphere like a fine mist. "There's just no place like Las Vegas," he said.

I wanted to see it for myself, the city they'd liked enough to return to year after year. If they could find something they liked there, couldn't I? Outside of the feverish vortex of what I knew only as Las Vegas, the three-day vacation destination, maybe there was a Las Vegas, the city, and maybe it was as marvelous as they remembered.

That Las Vegas exists at all seems remarkable when it is seen from the air. It clings to the desert floor like a lichen, unpunctuated by anything traditionally associated with the growth of a city: no river, no grid of farmed land, no signs of large-scale industry. It is adrift in a bright, barren landscape that has only a few major roads drawn across it. From

above, even its 125,000 hotel rooms don't add up to much, a handful of dun-colored buildings, the barracks of a lonely frontier outpost swallowed by the enormous sweep of the desert. The only hint of the scale of the place was the sun flashing, as we banked into our descent, off what must have been an enormous expanse of glass.

Any potential ambience in the Las Vegas airport was pretty well obscured by a bank of slot machines that stood between the gate and the exit, where I wandered for several minutes like Theseus hunting the minotaur, disoriented by the electronic babble. At least I knew I'd landed in the right town. A huge video screen hung overhead, advertising current shows with snippets of dancing girls in saucy poses. Outside, my rental-car shuttle drove up behind a van labeled Luck Transportation. As I got in, I thought I was still hearing slot machines, but it was the opening sound effects of Pink Floyd's "Money" on the radio.

Like my grandparents, I've never been much of a gambler, and as we pulled away from the airport, I asked the shuttle driver what there was to do in Las Vegas besides gambling and the standard shows. He screwed up his face, thinking. His companion shook her head. "There's nothing else here," she said. After a minute, she said, "Clubs?" hopefully, as though she had found a loophole.

"There's a Mormon temple," said the driver, piloting the van across five lanes of traffic. "They were supposedly the city's original settlers." Well, that was sort of interesting, I said. I hadn't thought about Las Vegas having a historical side. The woman gave a little snort.

"There's no history here," she said. "Something gets old enough to be historical, they just tear it down."

Later, as I drove toward town in my rental car, I passed old cocktail lounges and tiny desert motels, their neon lettering faded in the sun. It seemed a little as though I had touched down in another country, one with its own rules and mores. It felt promising. Ahead, the late-afternoon sun lit the long axis of the Strip, a jumbled silhouette of buildings and signs, suspending it in a golden haze. At a stoplight, I rolled down my window and listened for the sounds of traffic or commerce, but the desert was silent, as though the entire scene were just a fantastic trick of the light.

I had reserved a room that night at the Golden Nugget, which is one of the older hotels in Las Vegas, built in 1946. When I headed through the casino, at the end of the evening, it was packed. The poker tables glowed greenly under the lights, like little lagoons, and a chorus of ululations rose from the slot machines. The mood was somber. The tables were crowded with men grimly following each snap of the cards, women in short-shorts hanging from their arms. Rows of gray-haired ladies, their pocketbooks clutched in their laps, stared into the whirling depths of the slot machines.

On the way to the elevator I passed a glass case with a sign that advertised the "world's largest gold nugget on public display." The nugget had been found in 1980 in

Wedderburn, Australia, and it was about the size of a spit of meat in a gyro shop. Two men were standing solemnly in front of the case, their hands clasped behind their backs. "Can you imagine how he felt when he discovered that?" one asked the other. "In that first moment?" The nugget gleamed against its proscenium of black velvet. Arranged around the base of its stand were other, lesser nuggets, including a watch fob strung, decadently, with chunks of gold the size of Oreos, which was once owned by a wealthy railroad tycoon. A placard next to it pointed out that the nuggets were worn smooth from a lifetime of handling. The glass we peered through was as thick as a bank teller's, and smudged. People streamed past us on their way to the slots. The air rang with the brief trills of near-jackpots and, occasionally, the sustained vibrato of someone hitting it big. When the man walked away, his friend and I stayed behind, gazing silently into the case.

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Las Vegas is the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the United States, a distinction it has held since the era of the mega-hotel began here in the early '90s. Its population of 1.6 million permanent residents increases each month by about 4,000. Many newcomers take jobs in the service sector as well as in construction -- growth industries which, though they fluctuate, have mostly been booming.

In real life, the city loses the seamless homogeneity it has in pictures. For a mile or so on the Strip, the development has transformed every square foot of available space, but toward the margins, the cartoon-like coherence of lights and facades pulls apart into a patchwork of old and new: vacant lots and arena-size complexes, whitewashed motels and flashing signs. It is a city that is continuously, vigorously recreating itself, and its growth has the feeling of something large and emphatic, but imprecise, like a series of lobbed grenades. Driving down Las Vegas Boulevard, I saw the sign for the Algiers hotel, a beloved old landmark (I had read), where I had tried to make a reservation online but couldn't find an available room. No wonder: The sign was standing in the middle of a cleared lot.

I had read about a store called Serge's Showgirl Wigs, the town's flagship purveyor of hairpieces for the entertainment industry, and on one of my first circuits around town I came across it. The wigs at Serge's are intricate and unsubtle. Many achieve a complexity of hair architecture rarely found on a human scalp. The house specialty seemed to be an amped-up version of the Florence Henderson 'do, with a high tornado of hair at the crown, elfish points over the ears and long streamers in back. At a mirror, a young woman with Pucci stilettos and a well-engineered bosom inspected her reflection in a honey-and-caramel cascade of ringlets. She looked remarkable in the wig, like a human Barbie.

Most of Serge's wigs run in the hundreds of dollars. But there is a discount arm of the operation across the parking lot, and I spent some time there browsing among the Styrofoam heads. Trying on a wig is faintly humiliating. The woman assisting me pulled a tight, brownish skullcap over my regular hair as I sat in front of a salon-style mirror surrounded with lights. I looked like Marcel Marceau, doing his makeup backstage. But

when she dropped a platinum-blond bob over the skullcap, the synthetic strands, pale as cornsilk, slipped around my face. My startled reflection stared back at me, simultaneously tawdry and high-toned, like a temptress assassin in an old Bond film. I wore the wig out of the store.

That night, in my room at the Golden Nugget, I caught part of a TV show about the history of Las Vegas, with footage from the days of Bugsy Siegel, the mobster who helped usher in the casino era. The Strip was unrecognizable, a low-tech carnival of twinkling neon signs and motor inns. I watched through the mid-'90s, when several of the big old hotels were imploded within a couple of years of one another. These implosions were grand affairs, often accompanied by fireworks, and tens of thousands of people would turn out to watch them. The spectacle was hyperbolic and vain, like a lot of things in Las Vegas, but there was something cathartic and celebratory about it, too, and in the way the camera lingered lovingly on the hotels as they came down one at a time, then imploded them in quick succession: bang, bang, bang; plumes of dust and debris mushrooming in slow motion while people applauded from the rooftops.

I was looking for a different Las Vegas, but I was becoming less sure where that was, if it existed at all. I decided to try to find a lounge to go to that evening, preferably one with a live act, but nobody famous, or imitating the famous. I chose a place in my guidebook called Pogo's Tavern, which supposedly had an old jazz drummer named Irv Kluger playing on Friday nights along with other vets of the Big Band days. I did a little research on Kluger, who had, since the '40s, played with musicians such as Artie Shaw and Dizzy Gillespie, and decided I ought to call to make sure he was still alive and on the bill. "He sure is, honey," said the woman who answered. "And tonight is our 35th anniversary, so you should come on over."

Pogo's Tavern is in a strip mall so distant from downtown that it was almost off the top of my map, but when I walked in, I had the feeling it was what I was looking for. It is a tiny place, with cavernous red booths, an old jukebox and a free-standing elliptical bar that takes up half of the room. The light in Pogo's is golden and warm, and it bathed the people who lined the bar. A middle-aged woman in a gold lamé top was playing video poker next to a lean old man with a big diamond ring. I was the youngest person in the room by about 30 years. As I crossed the bar, a short man of about 70 in big glasses and an open-necked shirt looked me up and down. He came up to me, carrying a trombone and walking a black poodle on a lead. "So what took you so long?" he said, out of one side of his mouth, like Humphrey Bogart.

Set into the far wall was a miniscule shoebox of a stage lined with gold foil streamers. Kluger, his drums, and an upright-bass player were crammed into it. Kluger looks a little like Einstein; he has a halo of snow-white hair and a slightly hang-dog air. He was wearing a turquoise mock turtleneck and a black jacket, and he spun his drumsticks expertly now and then, gazing gloomily around the room. At one point, in the middle of a song, he checked his watch. In front of the stage there was a keyboardist in suspenders who sang and did between-song patter, and the trombonist, who played standing in front of the door to the kitchen, backlit by fluorescent light.

Irv Kluger and his All Stars were terrific. Their jazzy music was loud and lively and seamless. It rolled robustly off the little stage in waves. People slow-danced between the tables. A woman celebrating her birthday got up after a few drinks and sang a couple numbers, forgetting the words, which the trombonist fed her in a stage whisper. "*If it should rain,*" he hissed, and buzzed an accompaniment into his mouthpiece. The bartender, the woman whom I had talked to that morning, did a little boxstep behind the cash register.

When I finally got up to leave, the man with the diamond ring shook my hand. "Come back when you can," he said. Onstage, the band was twinkle-toeing it toward the big finale. Kluger tore around the skins in a frenzy, the bassist plunking along behind. The keyboardist drew out a tinkling flourish, sticking the landing. Kluger twirled a drumstick, caught it smartly between thumb and finger, and gave the room a private little smile.

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One thing I couldn't get over, as I drove around, was how much the style of the place had changed, how different the new construction looked from the Las Vegas I had expected, the iconic signs, the glittering hotels I had seen in movies. In their places were these galactic complexes, each a fully realized little city revolving around a particular theme: New York, Arabia, outer space, Coca-Cola. About the only thing the new Las Vegas hadn't gotten around to imitating was the old Las Vegas. The old Las Vegas seemed to have disappeared entirely.

The day after Pogo's, I was driving past a fenced lot on Las Vegas Boulevard, north of town, when I noticed a sliver of painted metal above the chain link. The lot is across the street from the Las Vegas Cultural Center, a multipurpose facility on what the city calls its "cultural corridor," and when I poked my head in and began looking around I was directed to the office of a woman named Melanie Coffee. Coffee is the curator of the Neon Museum, a project that collects signs from doomed hotels and other local buildings. Hanging on one wall in her office is a large framed blueprint of the original neon sign for the Stardust Hotel, the one with the Jetsons-era font and the four-pointed stars.

The fenced lot I had seen was the boneyard, where the old signs languish until they can be preserved and displayed, a project for which Coffee is fund-raising. Until then, tours of the lot can be made by appointment, for a modest fee. Coffee used to work in the music business in L.A., and she has the mellow artsiness of a ex-punk rocker. "I have a tour at 3," she said, considering. "But if you wanted, I could take you over there for a quick look."

The entrance to the lot was on a side street, across from a house that Coffee said was holding a month-long eviction sale, and whose front yard was littered with armchairs and lawnmower parts. She worked on the padlock, and after a minute swung open the gate with a flourish. In front of us stood a giant high-heeled shoe, painted silver and studded with light bulbs, which had been rescued from the roof of the Silver Slipper on its demolition day in 1988.

I had expected a few relics, prostrate in the dust. But the boneyard was a crowded metropolis of signs and artifacts. They towered over us, like a scene from "Jason and the Argonauts": the W from the old Showboat Hotel, two stories tall; the Coin King, a jolly monarch running his hands through a shower of neon pennies, from the defunct slots establishment the Coin Palace; a giant, three-dimensional crown from the Royal Nevada Hotel; a Paul-Bunyan-size pool player, constructed in the round from sheet metal, from the roof of the old Doc and Eddy's pool hall; the ornate corner section, called a bullnose, of the original Golden Nugget building.

Dan Romano, the Neon Museum's facilities manager, said that neon began to be widely used in Las Vegas in the '30s and '40s, when people began traveling into town by car, and could see the signs from a long way off. Neon fell out of favor in the late '80s, when Las Vegas's tourism board ushered in an era of "family entertainment," and all the big new hotels started using LED screens and what Romano called "coved" neon, a hidden light source that casts a tasteful glow.

What the signs lacked in dignity, they made up for in personality. Their builders, carried away with the power to transform the darkness, had constructed, in effect, an entire fantasy city over the real one, and the distinctive vernacular of points and lines that they created is still immediate and dramatic. Once, Coffee said, an old signmaker took a tour of the lot, inspecting the craftsmanship on the signs, most of which were made by hand. She pointed out footholds across the broad face of the W for the people who had to climb up to replace burned-out bulbs. She showed me how the angles of the pool player's face had been created from dozens of flat scraps welded together.

In a far corner of the lot we found a set of the original letters from Caesars Palace, faded blue and with an exaggerated "A-Funny-Thing-Happened-on-the-Way-to-the-Forum" flair to the font. It was an odd feeling to see them lying there in the sun. I wondered if I'd seen them printed on an ashtray of my grandfather's or in one of his old photographs. They looked exactly the way I'd pictured them.

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My last night in Las Vegas I decided to visit Caesars Palace, to try to find the restaurant where my grandfather had seen Sinatra. At 10 o'clock on a weekend night, the Strip was gridlocked. People hung out of their sunroofs, their woofers grumbling out chest-compression bass. As I circled the block, I saw the new, improved Stardust sign, its blocky, sans-serif logo shimmering in the night sky. It took me an hour and a half to drive a mile down the Strip to Caesars, and when I got to valet parking, it was full.

I stuck my head out the window -- at the last minute I had put on the blond wig from Serge's -- and hollered at the valet, who was handing over a Mercedes SUV. "Are you guys really full?" I said, hoping the wig was on straight. He blinked at me, and then gave me a covert "over here" waggle of his fingers. "I'll get you in," he said.

Caesar's Palace today is a sprawling complex of Roman-themed attractions: the new showroom called the Colosseum; the Forum Shops; the Atlantis Aquarium; shows in which statues "come to life" and tell stories. It seems to have grown up organically around the original hotel; from inside, the buildings extend in all directions, and it is hard to get one's bearings. The casino and the shops were so packed I had trouble pushing my way through. Finally reaching the front desk, I asked a kid who looked about 19 where the old showroom was. He looked blank. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he said. "There's a bar that way" -- he pointed through a gantlet of video screens -- "but there's no showroom over there."

The bar seemed right -- it overlooked a pool, which my grandfather had mentioned -- but it was so small and fancy I hesitated to go in. Across the way there was a half-enclosed room whose door was flanked by two nude bronze statues holding ostrich-feather fans. This, it turned out, was the high-rollers' room, and I made a quick circuit through the icy air conditioning, drawing unfriendly stares from the closely shaven men in dark suits who stood watch at the back of the room.

Finally I spotted, in a roped-off area behind the craps tables, a man in a uniform who looked a little younger than my grandfather, standing by himself. I was looking for a certain restaurant, I said, and then I told him my grandfather's story. He listened, nodding. "That's probably the restaurant," he said, pointing at the bar, "or one of those behind us." Then he pointed to the high-rollers' room. "That's the old showroom," he said. "Frank Sinatra played right over there." He grinned a little at the memory, and rocked back on his heels.

I looked around. The room seemed different, now that he mentioned it, from the rest of the place. It wasn't trying as hard. The ceilings were lower and the lighting softer. People stood around genteelly, cocktails in hand. At the entrance to the old showroom, a woman was getting her picture taken with one of the bronze nudes. It seemed remarkable that the room was there at all, more or less intact, a dim, rarified chamber at the center of the high-tech clamor.

I tried to imagine my grandfather here, dressed to the nines, cigar in hand, breezing through the crowd with my grandmother on one arm. It wasn't hard, actually. Except for at the high-rollers' tables, there was a pervasive *joie de vivre* in the place. I wandered back through the street of luxury shops called the Appian Way, where people strolled along a walkway made to look like a winding cobblestone street, under a vaulted ceiling painted with fluffy clouds and glowing (I noticed) from lights hidden in an alcove underneath. Almost to my dismay, the combined effect of the imported marble and the cove lighting and the fake Roman statues was a dawning sense of enchantment. I wasn't just amused by the scene. I was captivated by it. It was absurd and contrived, and thoroughly delightful.

On my way out I passed a young couple standing beside a marble column. "That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen," the guy said to his companion, gazing at the ceiling. "Isn't it?" she said, and glanced at me. We smiled ridiculously at one another. I caught a

glimpse of us in a window behind them: three people standing in front of a ritzy clothing store, one of us in an unnaturally blond wig that was slipping a little over her eyes, on a fake ancient Roman highway on a fake afternoon in the middle of the night in Nevada. We looked like we were having the time of our lives.