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Las Vegas Paperboy

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LAS VEGAS PAPERBOY

By

Matthew O'Brien

Bachelor's Degree in History

University of West Georgia

1995

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts -- Creative Writing

Department of English

College of Liberal Arts

The Graduate College

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We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

Matthew O'Brien

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Chapter One

It all starts with an exclamation point-riddled news release, clumsily crafted by a California blonde who used to work in the television industry and e-mailed to her media list first thing in the morning. Slumped at his desk, which is decorated with coffee cups and yellowed newspapers, a white, middle-aged, paunchy reporter is jolted from his caffeine coma by an e-mail alert. He shrinks his Match.com window and full-screens his inbox. Skimming the release, headlined “Here’s the Situation!” and sub-headlined “*Jersey Shore*-Themed Slot Machines to Debut on the Strip,” he notices the contact is Miss Hot Former TV Anchor, who he considers a friend and has secretly wanted to screw for several years. He calls her to confirm the release, casually inquires about her love life (she is, of course, single ... as long as he’s interested in the release), then says he’ll call back if his editor green-lights the story.

The assistant business editor was laid off six months ago, so the reporter e-mails a pitch directly to the business editor. Two hours later, after lunch, it’s approved via BlackBerry. The reporter copies the release and pastes it into a Word document, then calls back Miss Hot Former TV Anchor, who reminds him that Snooki and the Situation are quoted in the release and suggests he contact the floor manager at Luxor, which has exclusive rights to the slot machines. He calls the manager, types his quote into the Word doc, then Wikipedias “Jersey Shore” and skims the entry, finding his lead: “Las Vegas, get ready for some GTL, baby! Gym, tanning, laundry.” Finally, he smooths out the transitions, changes a few adjectives and verbs, and files the story at the end of his workday.

After a day defined by a two-hour power lunch with a casino executive and several short meetings with a consultant hired by his publisher friend and golf partner to further bleed the budget, the business editor—white, middle-aged, paunchy—edits the story on deadline. He doesn't have time to fact-check it; he simply skims for typos and glaring mistakes. Forgetting to run spell-check, he drags and drops the story into the design folder, feeling intensely professional and productive.

The designer, a twenty-three-year-old former intern who makes \$25,000 a year and has been sexually harassed by every male staffer from the janitor to the editor, has been on the clock since three p.m., but doesn't receive stories to lay out until ten. The first seven hours of her shift were spent surfing design sites and daily papers, instant-messaging friends, and updating her résumé. The last hour will be a blurred frenzy of dropping stories into news holes, cropping and blowing up courtesy art, and tightening and loosening text. There's no time or incentive for creativity.

After the pages are printed out and proofed, a machine burns them onto plates, which are placed on the press—a direct descendant of Gutenberg's baby—and the antiquated steel beast stirs to life in the late morning, prodded by hardened, tattooed throwbacks to the Industrial Age. These men, as newsprint is fed to the press and colored, folded, and cut, communicate with a bastardized form of sign language: B for black, C for cyan, M for magenta. When that fails, they yell over the clatter and hiss, "The registration's off, rookie!" or "Check the yellow water, old-timer!" They climb and hump and tweak the press, like the crew of a ship that could

sink at any moment. Somehow they make port: crisp, complete newspapers flashing from the shadows on a conveyor belt—one of life's minor miracles. The papers are stacked and bundled, placed on a pallet, then forklifted into the back of a truck, which, as its door is dropped and latched, lurches toward the delivery warehouse.

Chapter Two

After crawling out of bed at nine-thirty a.m. and writing at the desk in my dining room/office for three hours, with detours to Facebook, SuicideGirls, and LasVegasSportsBetting.com, I wolfed down lunch: a PBJ and a generic granola bar from Smith's. I checked my teeth for food in the mirror and collected my Moleskine notebook from the top of the dresser and a bottle of water from the fridge. Earphones on, I dropped my iPod into my pocket. Then I put on a pair of aviator shades and a floppy hat and exited the government-subsidized apartment.

The sun, which had been staring at the door for five hours, greeted me with disdain. It was the first day of summer and already a hundred degrees. Weaving through the courtyard, which was cluttered with broken toys, water-starved plants, and sun-bleached patio sets, I shouldered through a gate and climbed into my car, a 1997 Toyota Camry with three hubcaps, a busted-out headlight, and 201,884 miles.

Engine coughing, I angled onto Charleston Boulevard, then started south on Maryland Parkway. The streets and sidewalks were still, except for an employment agency, which swarmed with activity, and the dizzying illusion of motion created by the rising heat. Beyond glass-strewn lots, boarded-up buildings, and barely breathing mini-malls, the Strip strutted across the horizon, its swagger compromised by the skeletons of unfinished hotel-casinos that were beginning to fade and rust. I wondered, half-listening to NPR, if I could survive another summer on the route. If I could survive another summer in Vegas.

Cutting through the empty parking lot of a business complex bordering the airport, past "For Lease" signs decorating dark windows, I rounded the building and

beelined toward a ramp cluttered with cars: a '79 Pinto, '08 E-Class Benz, Hummer, cab, limo. I've even seen a hearse—body in back, according to rumors—among the cars of carriers. Nothing's sacred on the route these days.

I parked next to an idling '72 Ford pickup and climbed out of my car. Wearing a long-sleeve Beatles T-shirt, cargo pants, and canvas Chucks, I walked up the ramp and entered the warehouse through the loading-dock door. A pyramid of papers rose from the pallet. Like Egyptian laborers in reverse, carriers swarmed the pyramid and slowly dismantled it, lifting bundles of papers by the plastic ties and placing them in carts. They rolled the carts to tall, narrow tables in the shadows of the warehouse.

Greeted by the familiar smell of fresh ink, suntan lotion, and body odor, circulated by industrial floor fans, I hurried to my table and collected the manifest and mail. I corralled a cart, glanced at the manifest, and threw four bundles and thirteen singles into the well. Then I wheeled toward the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ethan, the warehouse manager, weaving toward me. He was five-foot-seven (but seemed shorter, as he was perpetually hunched over) and had spiky, sandy-brown hair, a porn mustache, pitted face, and paunch and was, as usual, wearing Coke-bottle glasses held together by Scotch tape, a button-down shirt adorned with ink and coffee, baggy khakis, and white orthopedic walking shoes. I sped up.

“Dylan!” he said, as I reached the door.

My iPod was off, but he didn't know that. I hit the ramp and picked up speed. Waving a piece of paper, he pursued, finally catching me at my car.

“What’s going on with 3220 Swenson Street, Apartment 106?” he said, out of breath.

I stacked two bundles and the singles on the passenger seat, noting the front-page headlines—“Obama Expected to Announce Troop Withdrawal,” “Man Robs Bank to Get Prison Healthcare,” “Summer Brings Triple-Figure Temps to LV”—then removed one of the earbuds.

“What happened at 3220 Swenson, Apartment 106?” Fleeing the winters and an even icier ex-wife, Ethan moved to Vegas from Minnesota in the early '90s and sounded like a character in *Fargo*.

“I don’t know. Did someone die?” I tossed the two other bundles into the back seat.

“They started two days ago and haven’t received a paper. They’re threatening to cancel their subscription.”

That’d be tragic, I thought. “Did they check the doorstep? That’s usually where I put it.”

“All I know is they didn’t get their paper.”

“Someone probably stole it,” I said, rolling the cart at him and meeting his crossed eyes. “That complex is crawling with delinquents.”

He caught the cart clumsily. “Make sure they get one today. *Hand* it to them if you have to.”

I waved over my shoulder, then disappeared into the car. After starting the engine and turning on the AC, I removed a pencil from the glove compartment,

draped the mail over the scalding steering wheel, and updated my route book.

Finally, I hung the book from the rearview mirror and flipped to page one.

Chapter Three

After five years of writing and editing for a free alt-weekly financed by sex ads, I was laid off in January 2009 and am now throwing a paper route in the shadow of the Las Vegas Strip. The route's twenty-six miles long, has a hundred and sixty-eight subscribers, and pays twenty-three cents a paper. I deliver it Monday through Friday. Before taxes and after gas, which is more than four dollars a gallon, I make a hundred and fifty dollars a week, while killing my car ... and the environment.

The paper is the *Las Vegas Daily Express*. Founded in 1905 (the same year as the city) by a group of mustached railroad men, the *Express* was a mouthpiece for Union Pacific and had a fierce pioneer spirit. It has changed ownership several times—it's now owned by a conglomerate based in Kansas City—but continues to coddle the main industry in town and still has a mean independent streak. One of the few surviving afternoon papers, it's pro-gun and anti-government. It endorsed Libertarian candidate Harry Browne in the 2000 presidential election, Bush in '04, and McCain in '08.

The front-page section of the *Daily Express* is a loose and random collection of syndicated stories that I've already read on Yahoo! and Google. On the rare occasion a local story runs in the section, it's a hit piece on Democratic Sen. Harry Reid, an anti-tax diatribe disguised as news, or a knees-bleeding blowjob about a casino opening published in hopes of securing an advertising contract. The only reasons I open it are to skim the gossip column on Page 5A and the seven-day forecast on the penultimate page. I usually get through it while idling at a red light on the route.

The local news section breaks stories and has substance, but suffers from conventionality, hack writing, and a lack of personality. It's mostly crime reports, recaps of government meetings, and rudimentary dispatches from Carson City, presented straight-faced in inverted-pyramid form. (It's as if all the stories are written by the same boring, burned-out drone or the reporting is entered into a computer, which spits out the unreadable results.) It exhibits little enterprise or initiative, the result of the paper laying off its investigative staff. But the section's most egregious sin is the editorial page, which is written by a cadre of gun nuts, wingnuts, racists, and male chauvinists stuck in the 1770s. I imagine them arriving at the office on horseback, wearing powdered wigs, breeches, and buckled shoes. After reading an editorial, which I rarely do and only when I'm sitting down, I often have to check the date at the top of the page to make sure we are, indeed, in the twenty-first century.

The population of Las Vegas is two million and the circulation of the *Daily Express* 150,000, but its sports section feels decidedly small town. Its columnists are simple and provincial and most of its stories are related to L.A., the nearest big city. (Twenty-inch game stories on the Angels?) The section is heavy on UFC and NASCAR, and box scores and standings, and light on local features and profiles. In the summer, without football and basketball propping it up, it's especially flat. It's the only major-metro sports section I know of that carries a regular hunting column.

The deeper you dig into the *Daily Express*, the shallower it becomes. Section D, Business, is one of the biggest disgraces in modern journalism—four pages, including the stocks, of quarterly reports and profiles of old, white Mormon men. At

the bottom of the recession, while Caesars Palace and the rest of Vegas burned, its reporters fiddled at the fax machine and waited for news releases they could rewrite. They had a chance to document one of the most dramatic busts since the Mayan civilization ... and they went to Starbucks. They were handed a Pulitzer ... and turned it into scrap metal. The business editor, whose section refers to gambling as “gaming,” should be stoned to death by subscribers at Town Square mall and replaced by someone with balls and a brain.

Las Vegas is known as the “Entertainment Capital of the World.” But judging by the flyweight arts and entertainment section, there’s nothing going on in dreary, old Sin City. The section, entirely devoid of news, is a patchwork of mundane features, formulaic previews (that run on the same page as the ad for the show), and candy-ass reviews, all set on the Strip. Its staff is middle-aged and square and it reflects their taste; in other words, it has none. Like the business page, A&E is only published four days a week and isn’t of interest to anyone under fifty.

I’m thirty-four, loathe UFC and NASCAR, and voted for Nader, Kerry, and Obama, and the *Daily Express* is owned by the same company as the alt-weekly I worked for. This is a complicated relationship, to say the least.

But I can’t quit. The jobs section is stuck at a half page and summer is no time to be homeless in Vegas (unless you don’t mind sleeping in an abandoned building or underground flood channel). A hundred and twenty-five degrees on the street, a hundred and fifty in the car. It’s a dry heat, but so is hell. Shirtless schizophrenics howl at the sun and recite Revelations. The headlines bleed on the page. The city

falls silent—except for my Camry, rattling toward the route with an orange parking-violation sticker affixed to the driver-side window.

* * *

The summer after college, I was scanning the jobs section of the *Atlanta Journal-Citizen*, trying to figure out a way to support my writing. An ad caught my eye: “Earn extra cash! The *Journal-Citizen* is hiring newspaper carriers for weekday afternoon routes. If you’re at least eighteen years old and have a reliable, insured vehicle and valid driver’s license—and want to earn \$800 to \$1,200 a month working two hours a day—we want to hear from you.” I called the number ... and two days later, my 1988 Honda Civic was weighed down with papers and I was trying to read a route book while merging onto Georgia 400 north and sweating uncontrollably.

The route, which wound through the dogwood-lined suburbs of Atlanta, turned out to be the ideal job for an aspiring writer. I read at night, wrote in the morning and early afternoon, and delivered the paper mid-afternoon. The route was quiet and thrown mostly from the car, allowing my mind to drift and contemplate story lines, settings, characters, dialogue, and themes. And I took home two hundred dollars a week, enough to live on.

Also, I enjoyed working outdoors, especially in the fall and spring, when with the windows rolled down and the right song on the radio anything seemed possible. The scenery—serpentine driveways, lush lawns, colonial mansions—was inspiring. One day I’m going to live in this neighborhood, I thought! My girlfriend (not my

boss) looked over my shoulder, as she bagged in the back seat barefoot and sung along with Ryan Adams, the Strokes, and the White Stripes.

Though hard on the car, and the self-confidence, the route was easy money. I could've delivered it blindfolded. But I didn't want to become stuck, like some carriers at the warehouse—forty-five years old and nowhere to go except the next address, nothing to look forward to except the weekend. Plus, my girlfriend and I broke up and I was playing bar trivia six nights a week with a team of eccentrics who knew way too much about TV, movies, sports, and science. I needed a change.

So I turned in my route book, loaded up the Civic, and moved to Las Vegas.

It seemed to make sense at the time. Judging from *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Literary Las Vegas*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (I'd never visited the city), it was an intriguing place to set short stories and novels. I could sports-bet without having to call a toll-free number and whisper to a drone I didn't know in the Caribbean. And I wanted to explore the West and Southwest.

It was a fateful decision—one I dissect daily on the route this time of year.

After staying at a circus-themed hotel-casino on the Strip, I found an apartment downtown and began freelancing for *CityBeat*, a paper that covers underground news and culture. I was hired as a staff writer six months later and eventually named news editor. The city was booming and the paper grew along with it, from sixty pages in 2005 to a hundred in '07.

Then the economy tanked. Fewer people visited Vegas and those who did were more conservative with their money. *CityBeat* shrunk to sixty pages. The

publisher called me into the conference room, where the human-resources manager waited with a manila folder.

The paper was back where it started ... and so was I. In Las Vegas, everything ends up where it began.

When I moved away from Atlanta, I thought I'd thrown my last paper. But a few months after getting laid off, realizing my severance pay was dwindling and I didn't want to freelance full time, I was scanning the jobs section of the *Daily Express*, marker in hand, and I stopped at a familiar ad: "Newspaper Carriers Wanted!" Recalling my old route, I circled the ad.

But this route, like many things in Vegas, is different. It cuts through the crowded and crumbling service-industry slums east of the Strip, which are strategically obscured by the false fronts and flashing lights. It's lined with apartments and condos and delivered mostly by foot. The scenery—barbwire fences, dirt yards, cookie-cutter stucco buildings—is depressing. I *don't* want to live in this neighborhood! There's no girlfriend in the back seat.

Bordered by Maryland Parkway and Desert Inn, Paradise, and Flamingo roads, the route zigzags through an area that was once, according to legend, home to the stars. "Dean Martin Lived Here!" screams a sign in front of the fifty-year-old Ambassador apartments. Louis Prima lived two doors down, a subscriber and longtime Sierra Vista Square tenant swore to me shortly after I took over the route in the spring of 2009. Judy Garland lived in apartment 127, said the blue-haired, bespectacled manager of the Fountains.

“She used to sit by the pool and act like she was drinking water,” she added in a whisper, “but everyone knew it was vodka.”

In a city that slaughters its past like a disobedient mobster, promotional claims and front-porch gossip are difficult to confirm or deny. But it’s safe to say the area, which was posh and within a mile of the Desert Inn, Stardust, and Sahara hotel-casinos, was home to gangsters, magicians, casino executives, comedians, lounge singers, and the occasional showroom star. Showgirls—topless and stretched on chaise lounges—surrounded the pools, earning the neighborhood the nickname “Naked City.”

Now the area, like many Las Vegas headliners, is past its prime. The mid-century-modern buildings are dingy, their trim faded. There are no showgirls by the pools, which have been drained and filled with gravel. It’s home to maids, cabbies, card dealers, front-desk clerks, punk rockers, and retirees. Drug dealers and prostitutes pirouette on the street corners, earning it the nicknames “Crack Alley” and the “Ho Stroll.”

“It’s a ten-dollar-rock block,” said Popeye, a crackhead who flies a sign—“Being Homeless Sucks! Compassion Doesn’t”—at Flamingo and Swenson.

When not stealing glances at the route book, which tells me where to turn and what addresses to deliver to, I see sneakers swinging from power lines, people carrying electronic equipment (TVs, VCRs, computer monitors), and dumpster divers, scrappers, and pawnners digging through trash bins. A sun-drunk man stands on the corner of Cambridge Street and Sierra Vista Drive with his shirt tied around

his waist and his pants draped over his shoulders, caution tape strung through the belt loops. The Strip provides a cartoonish backdrop to it all.

Recent *Daily Express* headlines from the area include “Baby’s Body Found in Dumpster,” “Street Shootout Leaves Two Dead,” and “Girl Scout Robbed in Broad Daylight.” In 2010, fifteen murders, forty-seven sexual assaults, a hundred and fifty-seven robberies, two hundred and thirty-two burglaries, two hundred and eighty-eight car burglaries, and three hundred and twenty-one car thefts were reported in these six square miles. Though washed-up and transient, and yet to emerge from the recession of the mid-’70s, the neighborhood isn’t as hellish as the headlines and statistics suggest. Most of the crimes are committed on four or five blocks, which I get in and out of quickly. The majority of the residents are law-abiding and hardworking and just trying to survive ... and one layoff, injury, or addiction away from the streets. There are even pockets of prosperity—high-rent apartments, urban-style lofts, high-rise condos—amid the ruins. Vegas is random like that. It doesn’t have bad neighborhoods, only bad blocks.

Since I’m paid per paper—I make thirty dollars a day regardless of whether the route takes two hours or four—I try to keep a steady pace. I’m like a marathon runner; every action is purposeful and precise. (My personal record is one hour, fifty-six minutes, and eleven seconds, but it usually takes two and a half hours.) I roll the papers in the car, which is easier than it sounds: take the top one off the stack, fold it, fish a rubber band from the cup holder, slip it over the paper, then flip it onto the floorboard. My three golden rules: never arrive at the warehouse before the

papers, log all “stops” (canceled subscriptions) in the route book, log “starts” (new subscriptions) after the second complaint.

The first two rules should be self-explanatory; it’s a waste of time to sit around the warehouse and wait for the papers and I don’t want to deliver papers I’m not getting paid for. The third rule’s more complicated. For various reasons (patience, busyness, forgetfulness, etc.), about half of new subscribers don’t complain when the paper’s not delivered. If they don’t complain, I don’t log their address in the route book. If they complain, I make note of it, but still don’t log their address in the book, because oftentimes they only complain once. If they complain twice, I know they’re *serious* about getting the paper and I gladly deliver it.

So when my Camry squeaked to a stop in front of 3220 Swenson Street, Building 16—a two-story, beige-and-maroon structure in the back of a complex called the Desert Villas—I scooped four papers from the floorboard and climbed out of the car. Drying clothes and a “\$99 Move-In Special” banner flapped against the façade. Nodding along to the National, I slid a paper to Apartment 102 from twenty-five feet away, stopping it on the doormat. Then, with a flick of the wrist, I sent papers screaming toward the balconies of apartments 103 and 108, scattering pigeons and splitting potted plants. Finally, I approached 106. I hung the last paper on the doorknob, knocked loudly, then disappeared into the harsh Mojave glare.

Chapter Four

Though I usually grab my papers and go, there are times I roll them at the warehouse: when it's raining and we have to double-bag, when there are more than two inserts (loose ads), and when Terrance Nathaniel Taylor, or "TNT" as he's known in the Vegas Wrestling Alliance, is around.

Terry, whose table is directly behind mine, was born in L.A. in the late '60s to a civil rights activist and a shell-shocked drill sergeant who was "more abusive than Ike Turner." A military brat, he grew up in Idaho, Panama, and Arkansas before returning to SoCal for high school. He studied film at San Francisco State, but was expelled for writing a screenplay about a biracial man who's cryogenically frozen and wakes in the twenty-fourth century amid a world war between blacks and whites. Eventually he earned a political science degree from Evergreen State.

After college, Terry moved to Las Vegas to live with his mom, who was divorced and addicted to video poker. He has delivered the *Daily Express* for more than five years. He's also a sketch artist, substitute teacher, and pro-wrestling promoter and manager. (It seems everyone in Vegas is unemployed or has three or four jobs.) A product of the '80s and VWA, he wears Frankie Goes to Hollywood T-shirts, skinny jeans or parachute pants, and cowboy boots and drives an '87 Carolina-blue Camaro with a T-top, shiny rims, and bright yellow flames licking the sides.

After collecting my papers, which had been counted and stacked by the warehouse manager, I set them on my table and popped one of the plastic ties. I then

read aloud the above-the-fold headline: “Obama Outlines Plan for Troop Withdrawal.”

As I retrieved a bag of rubber bands from the bottom shelf of the table, Terry—five-foot-ten, thin and muscular, graying dreadlocks tied in a ponytail—peered out from behind his papers.

“Me and Obama are a couple of mixed-blooded brothers from around the way from back in the day, so I know a scam when I see one,” he said, slipping a rubber band over a paper and pitching it blindly into his cart. “He may be fooling everyone else, but he ain’t fooling me. He’s commander in chief. If he wanted to, he’d have those soldiers home by now. But he’s trying to be all things to all people. He’s trying to act like the political left and right are two wrestlers going at it and he’s this hapless referee we’re supposed to feel sorry for. Fuck that! He’s an overrated pretty boy.”

“We’re supposed to feel sorry for him?” I said over my shoulder, beginning to roll my papers. “Because of the partisanship?”

“This war—which has been going on for ten years, the longest in American history—was based on a lie to steal oil, and we’re supposed to feel sorry for Obama because he inherited this mess from Bush. *Please!* FDR inherited the Great Depression from Hoover and he didn’t whine and complain like a schoolgirl with a skinned knee—and he was in a wheelchair.

“Let me put it in terms everyone here can understand,” continued Terry, above the fans and surrounded by brown-skinned men and women in hats who appeared to be ignoring him or couldn’t speak English. “Say the pressmen didn’t do

their job and we have to print *and* deliver the papers. You think the subscribers are going to feel sorry for us? They're going to want their papers delivered and they're going to be pissed if they're late. We need to start holding Obama to the same standards as everyone else."

"You think people still feel sorry for him?"

"God yes! I could shoot a rubber band in here and hit somebody who feels sorry for him. It's mostly because he's cute. Voting for Obama is like hiring a woman to be your receptionist because she looks like Dolly Parton. As Jay-Z said, I'm straight like Indian hair, but I'll admit it: He's pretty! If he was an ugly nigger, he would've never got elected. If he looked like Flavor Flav, he wouldn't be getting away with this. You got to be Denzel or Will Smith cute to get away with this shit."

My first six months at the *Daily Express*, I challenged Terry regularly—but soon realized it was as futile as throwing an unrolled paper into the wind. His opinions, influenced by travel, *Star Trek*, and Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky tomes, were formed in his youth and had hardened by the time he set foot on the campus of San Francisco State. He listens to what people say, but dismisses it. So I've learned to prod or selectively disagree or grudgingly agree with him.

"Yeah, he looked and sounded good last night," I said, frisbeeing another paper into my cart, "but didn't say that much."

"He's a *pimp*. His goal, like any pimp, is to style and profile. He'd make a great professional wrestling personality: He looks good on camera, sounds good, he's charismatic. He'd be right at home in the VWA, but he doesn't belong in the White House. He doesn't have the backbone for it. He can't stand up and say, 'I'm

commander in chief and ordering you to stop using nuclear missiles, no more black ops, torture, or accidentally bombing weddings and writing it off as collateral damage. No more dumping white phosphorus on civilians or raping in Abu Ghraib. No more! There's a new sheriff in town and his name is Barack Obama!"

"I think you're expecting a little too much from him."

"The thing I hate most in life is wasted potential and he's the living embodiment of that."

"What do you mean? You're throwing a paper route and he's president of the United States."

"I ain't going to be on this route forever and any Tom, Dick, or Harry can be president of the United States. Look at Nixon and W."

I laughed. "You got a point." Despite the fans, the air in the warehouse was stifling and still. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my sleeve, being careful not to get any war paint on my face. "His first two years in office, I let Obama get away with blaming Bush. The next two years I need to see more results."

"I didn't give him two years," said Terry, who voted for Green Party candidate Cynthia McKinney in 2008. "I gave him two months. No, two *weeks*. I don't have any sympathy for the brother. If you're going to feel sorry for a black man, feel sorry for the one at the corner of Trop and the Strip begging for spare change, 'cause he doesn't have any power. But the president of the United States is practically God and doesn't have an excuse. It's about getting the job done. There are fifteen million unemployed Americans wondering how they're going to pay their bills and rent and how they're going to feed their children."

I stopped rolling, picked up the top paper, and squinted at the ten-point text. “It says he’s going to bring home ten thousand troops by the end of the year and twenty thousand more by next summer.”

Terry laughed. “What if I decide I’m going to deliver ten of these papers today, twenty more by the end of the week, and throw the rest of them away? Boss man ain’t going to like that. And when you’re president of the United States, the majority of the population is your boss. They want *all* the troops to come home. The polls in the paper show it.

“But the difference between a paperboy and the president is a paperboy can’t hide behind the corporate elite. The oil industry and gun industry and nuclear industry are telling Obama, in their own way, forget what the public says. Do what we say and when you retire, we got you covered. But turn on us and you’ll end up like JFK or Dr. King.”

I popped another plastic tie. My hands were black with ink and my cart half full. “Obama becoming president hasn’t changed your life at all?”

“We’ve had black governors, black mayors, black dogcatchers, black paperboys—and guess what? We’re still not living in a utopia. It’s still not enough.”

Terry rolled his last paper and dunked it into his cart, which threatened to overflow. He then collected his mail from the tabletop.

“If you were president, what would’ve you said last night?” I asked him.

“It’s more about what I would’ve said at the inaugural address.” He cleared his throat, patted down his dreads, and stood up straight behind the table. “On behalf of the United States of America, I want to apologize to the world because this

inbred retard'—I would've pointed at Bush—'lied in order to get us into war and I'm here to expose the lie and let you know that from now on things are going to be different. We're pulling all troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan immediately and making a new New Deal. We're going to train everyone in the ghettos, barrios, and trailer parks to install solar panels and grow and process industrial hemp, which can make fuel, fabric, paper, and plastic. We're going to raise taxes on the rich. If that means you have to move out of your *MTV Cribs* mansion and into a three-bedroom, two-bath, so be it. If that means you have to take a taxi instead of a limo, so be it. If that means you got to settle for one yacht instead of having a yacht on the Pacific Coast and one on the Atlantic, because you're too lazy to sail through the Panama Canal, so be it. ..."

He busted out laughing and stumbled to his cart. As he pushed past my table, I turned toward him. "Did you even watch the speech last night?"

"God no!" he said over his shoulder, mail sticking out of the back pocket of his jeans. "I can't stand to listen to that motherfucker. The sound of his voice is like nails on a chalkboard to me." He turned around, looked at me, and flashed his VWA smile, still pushing his cart toward the loading-dock door. "Anyway," he said, "that's just not my idea of a good time."

Chapter Five

Terry wasn't around. There were few headlines of note. It was a hundred and six degrees and deathly dry (three percent humidity, according to the paper) and there was little movement on the route. So I'll take this time to tell you more about my eight years in Vegas, which have been marked by sky-suite highs and storm-drain lows.

After a three-day drive, during which I encountered flooding in the South and blinding sunlight in the Southwest, I arrived in June 2003 with a duffel bag of clothes, five-year-old desktop computer, and \$1,000 cash earned on the old route. I checked into Circus Circus, which I'd learned of in *Fear and Loathing*. It was mid-week and slow and rooms were twenty-nine dollars a night. I'll stay here while searching for work and more permanent accommodations, I thought, staring out at the Strip, which sprouted from the desert floor like flowers in bloom. But after an introductory session of blackjack and flurry of NBA and MLB bets, my bankroll was down to seven hundred dollars and the desk clerk told me the weekend rate was ninety-nine a night. I had to find an apartment—posthaste.

My first few days in Vegas, I was anchored to the Strip. Late mornings and early afternoons were spent exploring sports books and casinos. At four-thirty, I downed the day's lone meal: the dinner buffet at Circus Circus. Nights, which sprinted toward the early morning (the hours between ten and two seemed to evaporate), were a blur of big-screen TVs, playing cards, circus clowns, the double-D breasts of cocktail waitresses, and watered-down vodka-cranberries. The apartment search introduced me to the rest of the city. Observing cinder-block walls, box-

shaped hovels, and construction sites, I felt like an actor who'd stepped off set. Spanish tile crept up the mountains like bacteria. It was as if the developers realized relatively few eyes would see this side of Sin City, so why dump additional money and effort into the design?

All the apartments looked similar (two-story, stucco, Spanish tile) and were named Palm Shadows, Dolphin Cove, Rancho Verde, or some variation of those words. Many were managed by middle-aged women who smoked and wore too much makeup. In gravelly, unsympathetic tones, they told me, since I didn't have a job or local references, they'd need three months of rent and a security deposit. Inevitably, I slumped out of the office, head down.

As the sun set, silhouetting the mountains and painting the sky orange and lavender, I considered my options: borrow money from my parents; return to Atlanta, with stories of the Strip ... and my tail between my legs; continue west to L.A., San Diego, or San Francisco, where my cousin Eliza lives, and weigh the prospects there. I often wonder how different my life would be if I'd returned to Atlanta or continued west. Would I have a full-time job? A wife? Kids? Would I be more content than I am now, delivering a libertarian newspaper and living in a city where the library is most crowded when it hosts a court-ordered DUI class?

The neighborhoods I visited that day looked, sounded, and smelled the same, but downtown was unique. It featured a skyline that, though stunted, was devoid of castles and pyramids, and a silence more meditative than awkward. Urine and Mexican food fouled the air. Possessing a soul absent in the surrounding suburbs, the area also had an abundance of affordable housing—and the slumlords didn't

demand references or a security deposit. A photo ID and cash sufficed. Sitting in the office of La Casa, a middle-income apartment complex on a pawnshop-strewn section of Las Vegas Boulevard, I handed the manager—heavysset, Hispanic, faded polo shirt speckled with paint—my driver’s license and five hundred dollars. She photocopied the license, then returned it with a set of keys. I moved in immediately and spent the first night on the floor, two towels from Circus Circus serving as a mattress.

I figured I’d live at La Casa for six months to a year, then find a more spacious apartment or a house or condo. Eight years later, I’m still here, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. For half a decade, my biggest regret was not investing in real estate after moving to Vegas. Now, it’s what I’m most thankful for.

The following week, I began to look for work. I’d heard Las Vegas was flush with jobs and indeed it was ... if you were willing to pitch cards, lug luggage, or wield a hammer in one hundred and fifteen-degree heat. I wanted to write, so I contacted every editor in the valley; even the gambling and adult-entertainment rags didn’t respond. Broke and frustrated, I was forced to temp for an agency specializing in manual labor—stacking pallets in shipping yards, loading and unloading trucks, setting up and tearing down events—which proved no more rewarding than the route.

Eventually, I heard back from editors at *CityBeat* and the *Las Vegas Star*, the *Daily Express*’ liberal rival. They requested a résumé and clips. Having no journalism experience, I could only offer them an unpublished short story and scenes from a screenplay (a Merchant Ivory wannabe, which grew out of a paper I wrote while

pursuing a history degree, about Napoleon Bonaparte's final years of life on Saint Helena). I thanked them for responding, attached my résumé and writing samples to the e-mail, and hesitantly hit "send," assuming I'd never hear from them again. But when I followed up with the editor of *CityBeat*, he encouraged me to pitch stories and, at the start of the school year, the *Star* editor assigned me high school football games.

When not temping or freelancing, I worked on a collection of short stories set in Vegas. I also played blackjack and bet on sports, entertained friends and family, and explored the outdoors within an hour drive. (I didn't trust the Civic enough to venture any farther.) The natural beauty of the desert contrasted sharply with the city, and I had to touch the sandstone, creosote, and bristlecone pines to confirm they were real. A rule was established: at least once every three months, escape the green-felt jungle and sit, legs crossed, on a red rock.

Big sky, clean air, legal gambling, free time to write, my byline in the paper—it felt like I was living a dream. But I was going into debt and didn't have health insurance, so when *CityBeat* offered me a staff position at \$35,000 a year, I couldn't turn it down. I set aside the story collection and dedicated myself to the paper, working sixty hours a week covering sports, nightlife, politics, the environment, and anything else of interest. I also contributed to a media column that skewered the *Daily Express*.

I liked the job, but began to dislike Las Vegas. Examining the city under a harsh light, I couldn't ignore its flaws: unchecked growth, unengaged citizens, corrupt politicians, an underfunded education system, a lack of social services.

When you pull back the curtains of Oz, it loses much of its magic. It was also becoming expensive and, late afternoons, a veil of smog obscured the mountains. Each year, the quality of life declined. It started to feel less like a desert paradise where anything was possible and more like any other big city in America, minus the history and culture.

A year after being named news editor, I noticed executives from the *Daily Express* in the publisher's office, which was comparable to Union generals in a Confederate camp. My mind froze. Before it could reboot and process the situation, the office manager summoned the staff to the conference room and the publisher, red faced and fidgety, announced we'd been sold to the *Express*. A chill swept through the room and colors became muted. We'd lost the war and were at the mercy of our mortal enemy, destined to face a firing squad—but that would've been too honorable a fate. Instead, they merged our paper with their impotent alt-weekly, keeping the *CityBeat* name, putting their people in charge, and executing only the black and female freelance columnists.

I was demoted to staff writer and kicked out of my office and into the newsroom, but otherwise left alone to brood, report, and write ... until the recession, when I was laid off along with a twenty-two-year-old intern and fifty-seven-year-old photographer and father of four. Staring at the manila folder, I was tempted to tell the publisher, part of the new regime, that he's a vindictive prick, a close-minded and coldblooded hit man. That I'm amazed by how far talentless people can climb in this town if they show up for work, avoid addictions, and suck enough corporate cock. Not wanting to jeopardize my severance package, I remained silent and

continued to stare at the folder, which seemed to be the only thing in the room. It, not the publisher, explained that revenue is down and the company has to cut expenses. It, not the publisher, explained that my position was being eliminated.

Escorted out of the building by the human-resources manager, I climbed into the Camry, which I bought after being named news editor, and started south on I-15. I was too numb to think and relying on instinct, which guided me away from the city. As traffic thinned and strip malls gave way to the desert, I exited and parked on a dirt road that led to a housing development in the foothills. The sign out front promised 3,500-square-foot homes from the \$400s, but only a few wooden frames had been erected and the bulldozers slept like beasts that would never stir.

Leaning against the hood of the car, I surveyed the valley. The veil of smog had lifted, one of the few positive effects of the recession, and the stucco palaces looked like Monopoly pieces placed tightly together on a board. In the morning light, the Strip was exposed: flimsy, childish, a model on an architect's table. The billboards lining the interstate seemed shin high. This city is a mirage, I mused, a playground for fools and false dreamers, a watering hole for the morally parched. That was the lone cogent thought I had before climbing back into the car and merging onto I-15 north. Three months later, I drove onto the route.

Chapter Six

“The future ain’t what it used to be.”

This observation, courtesy of New York Yankees hall-of-famer Yogi Berra, was “Quote of the Day.” Reading it in the labyrinth of Rancho Manor apartments, papers tucked under my arm and Tom Waits growling into my ear, I surrendered a rare smile. The master of the malapropism had, once again, stumbled on the truth.

Since taking over the route, I’ve seen the recession as a series of syndicated headlines: “Deacon Robs Bank,” “Former CEO Delivering Pizza,” “Stay-at-Home Moms Strip to Help Pay the Bills,” “Illegal Immigrants Sneaking Back into Mexico,” “Senior Citizen on Oxygen Dies When Electricity Is Shut Off.” The local headlines have been equally dramatic: “Cabbie Killed for \$2,” “Suicide Rate on the Rise,” “Foreclosure Signs—Not Residents—Greet Trick-or-Treaters,” “Public Libraries to Close Because of Budget Concerns,” “Construction Industry Not Expected to Rebound Till 2020.”

Indeed, Yogi. The future ain’t what it used to be, especially in Vegas.

Before the recession, Las Vegas was one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Seventy thousand people a year moved here—the population doubled every decade—and forty million visited. (It edged out Mecca as the most popular tourist destination in the world.) The unemployment rate rarely rose above five percent, the average price of a home was \$300,000, and the casinos raked in more than eight billion dollars a year. Journalists christened it the “New Detroit” and the “First City of the 21st Century.”

Now, 50,000 residents a year leave Las Vegas—“Even the white people are leaving,” a Mexican maintenance man on the route told me—and visitation is down thirty percent. The unemployment rate rarely drops below thirteen percent, the average price of a home is \$115,000, and casino revenue is down fifty percent. The unemployed and underemployed dress up in chintzy costumes (Mr. T, Bret Michaels, Captain Jack Sparrow) and pose for photos for tips on the Strip and Fremont Street. The dopeman is accepting food stamps in lieu of money. The five-dollar blowjob is back in vogue. Las Vegas is the “New Detroit” and the “First City of the 21st Century” ... just not in the sense the journalists envisioned.

With these thoughts and stats swimming in my head, I rounded a building and noticed Zach—six-foot-five, three hundred and fifty pounds, shaved head, and goatee—pacing on the patio of Apartment 1018, smoking a cigarette. Zach, a thirty-two-year-old web designer and developer, was laid off from an online software company a year and a half ago. He lives with his mom and stepdad, who subscribe to the *Daily Express*.

From our conversations on the route, I’d learned Zach was born in Midland, Texas, and raised in Cheyenne, Wyoming. His biological father, who was never married to Zach’s mother and didn’t have any custodial rights, repeatedly threatened to kidnap him, so he wasn’t allowed to play outside. Consequently, he never learned to ride a bike. But by the age of ten he’d read *War and Peace*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and many other classics and was a computer and video-game prodigy. (One of his uncles worked at Texas Instruments and always gave him electronics for his birthday.) Home-schooled by his mom, who

suffers from depression and collects disability, he never earned a high-school diploma; nonetheless, he got into an exclusive art institute in the Bay Area. After dropping out, he joined his mom and stepdad, a union electrician who's currently unemployed, in Las Vegas in the late nineties.

Approaching the patio, I fished the iPod from my pocket and pressed "Pause."

"Any luck with the job search?" I said, handing Zach a paper.

He placed it on top of a stool by the front door and exhaled. "It's been rough. There aren't many jobs out there and the few postings I've seen for designers and developers are for nine dollars an hour. It's offensive. But in this economy, companies are willing to hire people who aren't as experienced as I am for a lot less money, and I guess those jobs are appealing if you're a kid who learned HTML in college. Thing is, you'd be better off working at Starbucks, because you'd make more money."

"I've seen a similar trend in journalism," I said, removing the earphones and flipping the cord over my shoulder, "newspapers laying off veteran reporters and hiring kids fresh out of j-school."

"At my last job, the IT guy was hired to install antennas—and as soon as they rolled out the antennas, they laid him off. He took the first job he could get after that, which paid twelve dollars an hour. The second day he was there they said, 'The toilet's broken. You think you can fix it?' So now he's their IT guy and janitor, and he has a master's in engineering."

Wearing a wife beater that failed to conceal his gut, cargo shorts, and combat boots, a chain wallet snaking into his pocket, Zach paced to the far end of the patio

and turned around. "I could sit in a cubicle surrounded by retards and make twelve dollars an hour working for a shady company doing tacky design on purpose, but why bother? It'd be more honorable to suck dick on Fremont Street."

Standing on the walkway that leads to the patio, I laughed, looked down, and shuffled my feet. "Did you hear about the job fair at the Plaza hotel downtown? Five thousand people showed up and fights broke out."

"Do you remember the last time fights broke out at job fairs in America?" said Zach, his blue eyes becoming intense and clashing with his smoke-stained teeth. "Do you know what we call that period of time? When you have five thousand people lining up for fifty jobs, there's a term for that in economics. It's called a depression."

He flicked the butt onto the dirt lawn, then removed a crumpled pack of Marlboros from his pocket. After tapping a cigarette from the pack, he felt for his lighter.

"I never thought I'd see Vegas reduced to this so soon," I said.

He stuffed the lighter back into his pocket and exhaled. "The city is at a crossroads, and it's in much more danger than people realize. It's based on one main industry and one supplementary industry. Well, gambling has suffered greatly and development has gone into the toilet, so we're at the bottom rung of American cities with Detroit. Every month the two flip-flop on which one has more foreclosures, higher unemployment, and more people leaving. Hell, *Forbes* listed Vegas as the fourth worst economy on the *planet*."

"I saw that in the paper."

“It’s Lagos, Dublin, Dubai, and Las Vegas. The only thing keeping Vegas going right now is gambling, but there are a lot of countries in the Caribbean and Pacific Rim that could host casinos. My personal opinion is that as more and more casinos open in those countries, Las Vegas will eventually vanish.”

“Nevada has a lot of towns that died when the gold and silver ran out. Boom and then bust. But I don’t see that happening to Vegas in the next ten or twenty years.”

“I do. In fact, it already is. The people I know who live on the outskirts of town are the only residents within three or four blocks. It’s empty out there. People are losing their jobs and homes and getting the hell out of Dodge.

“I mean, if Wayne Newton can’t hang on to his home, what chance does a maid at the Excalibur have?”

“Where do you see Vegas in forty or fifty years?”

He snorted, producing a puff of smoke. “Forty or fifty years? It’ll be gone in twenty, because the water is going to run out. We could’ve prevented it in the eighties or nineties, but it’s too late now. We should’ve conserved water instead of building things like the fountain in front of the Bellagio, which might as well be in the shape of Steve Wynn’s cock.”

“Nothing here? Nothing at all?”

“Nothing like actual civilization. I think it will go back to a natural desert environment. Look at the outskirts of Detroit, where the plains have taken over the city. Grass is growing through the streets. There are thirty-square-block areas

where no one lives, where the animals have returned, deer wandering down the roads. Why couldn't it happen here?"

"I'm guessing you won't feel sorry if it does."

"Not at all. They built a city of two million people in a place that's inhospitable to human life. You'd be just as likely to build on the surface of the moon or in the Antarctic. Think about the amount of resources required every day just to keep this town from dying. It's one of the hottest and driest places in the Western hemisphere and it's only sustained by people coming here to throw away money."

"Has there been a low point for you in all of this?"

"Not yet, but it's coming. I can feel it. The unemployment rate is rising. Homicides are on the rise. Robberies are, too. Nope, not yet, but it's coming."

I smiled and reached for the cord of my earphones. "I can always count on you to cheer me up, Zach."

He exhaled, then flicked another butt onto the lawn. "People tell me I'm a pessimist. I'm not and I'd love to be proven wrong. I always tell them to feel free to argue with me. If they can come up with anything that contradicts what I say, I'll listen. But I don't say things because I like to hear myself talk. It's all based on observation, and my observation is that Vegas is fucked."

Chapter Seven

After getting laid off, and having some time to think, I realized I had little reason to remain in Las Vegas. No social network, girlfriend, or job. Summer loomed. The economy lay in ruins. Why stay, I was forced to ask myself? For the free parking and \$10.99 dinner buffets?

I also sensed that if I didn't leave Las Vegas then, I never would. Having lived in the city for five and a half years, I was thirty-two and still had time to start over somewhere else—to re-establish my writing career, surround myself with sensible women, be baptized by the humidity—but not much time. I felt like a lifer, on the verge of being institutionalized, faced with his one opportunity to escape. Regardless of your background, beliefs, and resolve, Vegas changes you. It forces you to compromise. You question your sanity and do things you never thought you'd do. It hardens and ages you. When my *CityBeat* desk was cleaned out and its possessions mailed to me in a cardboard box, I discovered my press pass and hardly recognized myself. My hair was close cropped and a rich brown-black, my eyes big and clear. I appeared to be laughing, not simply smiling, and my teeth shone through the smudged plastic laminate. My skin was smooth, clean shaven. I was twenty-seven, but looked seventeen. A reluctant glance in the rearview revealed a different man: riotous hair streaked gray and small, red-rimmed eyes; chapped lips concealing tea-stained teeth; sandpaper skin shaded by stubble. I looked seventeen years older, not seven, and bore the appearance of someone who survived a traumatic experience, but had yet to come to terms with it.

The thought of serving a life sentence in Las Vegas and eventually being buried in its unforgiving soil left me short of breath and, over the next several weeks, I pursued opportunities in other cities—journalism jobs in L.A., San Diego, and San Francisco, MFA creative-writing programs in Austin, Irvine, and Seattle, teaching English in Seoul, South Korea. Nothing panned out. No other city would have me. Stuck in Vegas, I was forced to freelance, but didn't want to spend sixty hours a week researching and writing stories that paid twenty cents a word and were forgotten the day after being published. So I searched for a part-time job that would supplement my income and lighten my workload, giving me free time to write creatively.

That's how I found myself scanning the *Daily Express*, marker in hand, and stopping at the "Newspaper Carriers Wanted!" ad.

The job was degrading. I returned to a world I worked in immediately after college, one I thought I'd escaped, one littered with minefields of memories, and went from having a byline in the paper to delivering it. But I tried to stay positive. Getting reacquainted with a route book, I reminded myself that *CityBeat* is a place to launch a career, not continue it, and it was time to move on. I want to revisit my short-story collection, write a novel, and travel, I thought as my hands learned the intricacies of rolling with rubber bands instead of plastic bags. Countless writers have blown through Vegas and been forgotten, I observed, scaling another set of stairs. Why not stay and leave a legacy?

Two and a half years later, amid the hellish heat and prolonged recession, the optimism has evaporated. I measure time with the date on the front page. Today is

July Fourth and the paper is cluttered with full-page ads featuring winners from an assortment of neighborhood casinos. Cheesy graphics—fireworks, an American flag, the Statue of Liberty—and red, white, and blue backgrounds. “Congratulations and Happy Fourth of July!” “John P. won \$2,000.” “Mary D. won \$2,800.” “Jose C. won \$3,500.” In their headshots, the winners are clear-eyed, clean-faced, and smiling, showing off full sets of polished teeth. A few of them fan out dollar bills below their faces. The ads are dotted with asterisks, but the fine print at the bottom is (intentionally or unintentionally) out of register and unreadable.

Even in the warped world of Sin City marketing, these ads stand out as false and disingenuous. My mind drifted and I imagined casinos coming clean and featuring losers. Stark graphics—beer bottles, an unpaid bill, a sad face—and black and gray backgrounds. “Apologies!” “Jim T. lost \$3,500.” “Lisa G. lost \$4,000.” “Juan S. lost \$5,200.” In their headshots, the losers were red-eyed, blemished, and morose, concealing incomplete sets of rotted teeth. A few of them held pistols to their heads, and dime-sized asterisks referred readers to crisp bold print: “Gambling Can Ruin Your Life!”

A horn jarred me from my thoughts. The light was green and I hit the gas. In the rearview mirror, I made out a Ford pickup driven by a man with spiky salt-and-pepper hair and a goatee, who was hunched over the wheel. I didn’t dare study myself again. I refused to confirm what I strongly suspected: I looked more like the losers than I was willing to admit.

Chapter Eight

Driving to the warehouse, I had a dark vision of the day ahead. Ten pages of mail—all complaints. Ethan, the warehouse manager, demanding an explanation, with Carl's Jr. coffee breath. Hours of additional work, no additional pay.

The source of my anxiety: Yesterday (July Sixth), I delivered the July Fifth paper. I sensed something was amiss when, after hanging my floppy hat on the coat rack and washing my hands, I turned on the TV, stretched out on the couch, and began to read the paper, which seemed even more repetitive than usual. Reaching a story about U.S. military dogs with PTSD, which I immediately recognized, I checked the date at the top of the page and on my phone. They didn't match.

Slipping back into my sweaty Chucks, I walked to the dumpster, where I'd discarded papers left over from the route. They, too, were dated July Fifth. As I returned to my apartment, I realized that a stack of day-old papers stood next to the new ones on the loading dock and I pulled from the wrong pile and all one hundred and fifty-two of my customers (circulation dips mid-summer, as "snowbirds" suspend their subscription and flee northward) received yesterday's news. The realization left me short of breath, then I exhaled and collapsed on the couch. There's nothing I can do about it now, I thought, working the remote; once delivered, a route is permanent record. It, like the ink on the newsprint, can't be changed.

Parking behind the warehouse and walking up the ramp, I braced for the blowback. I pulled down the brim of my hat, pushed the shades up the bridge of my nose, donned the earphones, played Ray LaMontagne's *Trouble*, and progressed

slowly and submissively in rhythm with the beat. I'd accepted my fate. But entering the warehouse, eyes adjusting in the half-light, I discovered my papers stacked perfectly on the loading dock, mail tucked under the plastic tie and showing only two complaints. I looked up. Ethan was in his office or making a Carl's Jr. run. Relieved, I rounded up a cart, checked the date of the papers (lesson learned), and tossed them into the well. I then retrieved two copies of the July Sixth paper from the morgue and pushed toward the door like a bobsledder at the beginning of a run.

On my way to the route, rolling the papers unconsciously, I marveled at the fact that I received only two complaints. Were they going to pour in today and tomorrow, I wondered? Are ninety-nine percent of my customers senile? Or did they notice the mistake and not report it? My two and a half years of experience told me that most of them got the paper, read it, and didn't realize it was the same one as the day before. This, I thought, was a damning statement about the *Daily Express* (and most major-metro papers). It covers the same subjects in the same style day after day. It simply changes the names, dates, and locations—and even if it didn't, I discovered through this accidental experiment, few readers would notice.

But if the boring, boilerplate paper doesn't appear on their lawn, driveway, or doorstep, or is more than a few feet from where they're accustomed to finding it, subscribers freak out. Why? Certainly not because they're anxious to read it or it makes them smarter or feeds their soul. It's part of a routine. They wake or return from work and find the paper—a subconscious sign that all is right in the world—take in the fresh air, exhale. (For some subscribers, it's the only time they leave the house.) They sit at the dining-room table stirring a cup of coffee or in a La-Z-Boy

chair, beer perched on a coaster, and unfold the paper, skim the front-page headlines, and peel off their favorite section. For fifteen, thirty, forty-five minutes, or longer, they get lost in the pages, which shield them from (rather than expose them to) the outside world. The news is bleak, but reading it is comforting.

The sad truth is, I admitted as I reached the route, I could deliver property-tax listings every weekday afternoon and my customers wouldn't know the difference.

Chapter Nine

Swenson Street Mobile Home Park isn't open or closed, functioning or entirely dysfunctional, alive or dead.

When the trailer park north of Flamingo Road was sold to a developer in late 2007, tenants were told (via a notice taped to their door) they had six months to move out. Some of them hauled their fragile doublewides to other parks. Some sold them to the new owner—for one-fifth of the original value—and moved into a relative's home, weekly motel, or low-rent apartment. Some, having nowhere to go, never left at all.

Charles Bowen was one of the holdouts. A sixty-seven-year-old public high school teacher, Mr. Bo (as he's known to his students) has lived at the mobile home park since it opened in 1989. When the park was sold, he told the old owner, new owner, mailman, media, homeowner association, and anyone else who'd listen that he wouldn't leave without a fight. "I plan to die here," he said repeatedly, "one way or another." A potentially ugly scene—Mr. Bo owns a shotgun and seems to have little regard for his life—was averted when, at the onset of the recession, the developer decided to keep the park open and continue to collect rent, instead of bulldozing the trailers and building a \$150 million high-rise condo on the land.

When I punched in the code, the gate squeaked open slowly, as if discouraging guests, and I pushed into the park, which was surrounded by a crumbling cinder-block wall. The manager's office was boarded up and adorned with graffiti. Shells of old trailers, entrails spilling out of doors and windows, sat on deserted lots. Rib cage showing, a stray cat dashed across the street. Landing a

newspaper squarely on the driveway of Trailer Fifty-Two and pulling up to Trailer Fifty-Seven, I noticed Mr. Bo, who has a bad back and requests that the paper be delivered to his door, struggling from his sun-bleached 1993 Accord, manila folder in hand. He was six-foot-two and skeletal and, as usual, wearing a fishing hat, flannel shirt, garden gloves (he's germaphobic), jeans, and high-mileage Hush Puppies. I parked in front of the driveway and cut the engine.

"How's school going?" I said, approaching the rusted carport and handing him his paper.

Mr. Bo, who teaches at a year-round school, tucked the paper under his arm, wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, and exhaled. "When you teach high school, people think you're taking a chance being surrounded by all these gangsters and desperate youths, but the problem is never the kids. It's the administrators. In Vegas, we have a revolving door of principals who turn schools on their head, and teachers have to start over every few years. If they'd just come in and let us do our jobs, education in this city would be much better off."

He set the folder, bulging with tests, on the stairs and placed the newspaper on top of it. "You bust your balls giving these principals what they want and it's never enough. Then eventually, they just walk out on you. You come to school at the beginning of the year or one day during the semester and—poof—they're gone. They got promoted or quit or became addicted to gambling, drugs, or sex and lost everything. Their lives are just as miserable as everyone else's.

"That's how school is going, Dylan." He smiled slyly. "How are you?"

I stepped into the shade of the carport and crossed my arms. "I'm all right. Just trying to survive another summer."

"I've survived thirty-four of them here. They don't get any easier."

Mr. Bo was born and raised in a small town in south-central Ohio, which I've always imagined as being much like Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg. His parents were abusive alcoholics and by the age of fourteen he was on his own. In and out of juvenile detention, he managed to graduate high school and eventually earned a philosophy degree from Mount Union College, then spent two years in Greece studying Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, and others. An interest in acting led him to L.A. Finding it expensive and saturated with actors, he moved to Las Vegas in the mid-'70s and apprenticed at local playhouses and worked an assortment of odd jobs, including a five-year stint as a ticket taker at a porn theater.

"How long you been teaching?" I asked him.

"Twenty-six years," he said wearily. He then retold a story I'd heard a handful of times: As he was beginning to land lead roles and commercials, Mr. Bo was rear-ended by a drunk driver at the intersection of Fremont and Eastern. He broke several ribs and fractured his spine. It took twenty-two stitches to close the semicircular gash on his forehead; once again, he removed his hat and showed me the scar. The recovery was long, lonely, excruciating. For more than a year, he was confined to a twin-sized bed in his dark and disordered studio apartment, where, when in the mood, he read and watched TV and movies. Vibrant and charismatic before the accident—I tried to imagine him in one of his portfolio pictures, flying through the air like Fred Astaire, but my mind couldn't bridge the gulf—he became

weak and withdrawn. “If I had a gun then,” he said, “I would’ve killed myself.”

Encouraged by a friend who thought it’d be good for him to get out of the house and interact with younger people, Mr. Bo eventually applied to be a substitute teacher in the Clark County School District. His inaugural assignment was a special-ed class at Rancho High, an at-risk school overrun with gangs. The principal was sure that Mr. Bo would be overwhelmed and dispirited, but he emerged from the classroom with a new sense of purpose (and the students seemed inspired, too). He took over the class as a permanent substitute—and has taught in the school district ever since.

“And how many principals have you had?”

He paused. “Thirteen. That’s one every two years. I’ve had a few for less than a year and only one for more than five.”

“Were any of them any good?”

“Two were excellent, two were evil, and the rest fell somewhere in between. The main problem is they’re given autonomous power. They’re tyrants and get away with everything, unless it’s egregious—and even then they’re not punished. They just get transferred or in some cases promoted and a new principal comes in and the cycle starts over.”

He leaned against the railing, and my shoulder found the side of the trailer.

“Fortunately,” he continued, “it doesn’t really affect the students. Our kids are resilient. They’re smart. They’re hip. Vegas teens are very mature, because the culture they grow up in is so candid. It’s also violent. A few months ago, a teacher at my school was murdered by a gang of youths. Six or seven parents of my students have been killed in as many years. And every year, I lose at least one student to a car

accident, gang warfare, suicide, or something like that. In the Midwest, where I'm from, there's a car accident every five to ten years and a couple kids die and it's a tragedy in the community. Here, that kind of thing's hardly noticed."

"What do most of them do after they graduate?"

"You encourage them to go to college. You cite statistics that show that people with degrees are more likely to get a job, but what they see contradicts that. In Vegas, you can drop out of high school and earn fifty or sixty thousand dollars a year parking cars or dealing cards, so why would they want to go to college and incur debt? Traditionally, a lot of them have worked in casinos or as beauticians or construction workers. Now they all want to be chefs, because of the cooking shows on TV.

"Of course, we've also sent our fair share of students to top-notch colleges and universities—Harvard, Stanford, UC Berkeley—and they've gone on to do great things. A fellow teacher put his three kids through our schools and one's a doctor, one's a lawyer, and the other just graduated from college. You get the education you want at any school you attend. It's all about motivation."

"Funding helps, too," I added. Mr. Bo often notes that Nevada spends the least amount of money per pupil in the United States. He blames this largely on the casinos, which pay a pittance in taxes. (Nevada's gambling tax—the percentage of gross earnings the casinos pay the state—is six and three quarters percent, among the lowest in the world.) He compares them to strip miners, who "take as much as they can and leave as little as possible." But Mr. Bo doesn't stop there. He says the casinos target teachers and, in collaboration with lackeys including the *Daily*

Express, attempt to portray them as corrupt and incompetent, so they seem unworthy of raises and the gambling tax isn't increased. This smear campaign, he contends, has helped put teachers at the bottom of the state's social structure, side by side with the homeless.

"Funding can provide more teachers, better teachers, and better technology," he said, "but it can't make students want to learn. That has to come from within. Of course, the state has to do better funding-wise than simply putting donation boxes in all of the DMVs."

I squinted and uncrossed my arms. "What?"

"Instead of giving teachers a raise last year, the governor put a donation box in every DMV in Nevada. The total amount collected was three hundred dollars. There are thirty thousand teachers in the state, so that gave us a raise of one penny per, though it hasn't shown up in my paycheck."

"That's messed up," I said, shaking my head.

"Some of it's our own fault," said Mr. Bo. "Teachers give their heart and soul, but they're politically naïve. They don't know how to fight those kinds of battles, because they give everything to their students and don't pay attention to anything else. They're dedicated and sheepish and therefore ripe when a wolf approaches in the form of an administrator or casino lobbyist."

I pushed off the trailer with my shoulder and stood up straight, hands in pockets. "You talk about the casinos and how they don't give enough money to education, but you frequent them, right?" A month ago, after delivering the papers, I dropped by the Las Vegas Hilton to look at the latest betting lines. En route to the

race and sports book, I noticed Mr. Bo slumped over a video-poker machine, banging away at the buttons. I acted like I didn't see him—even in Vegas, gambling is a private and personal matter—but as I passed, he turned toward me, as if expecting my arrival. His eyes were lost and vacant. I smiled awkwardly, waved, and continued on my way.

Mr. Bo removed his round-framed glasses, which hung from his neck on a frayed cord, and cleaned the lenses with a handkerchief. A perfect silence pervaded the park. Closing his bloodshot blue eyes, he put on the glasses. "I gamble, drink, and smoke and usually in a binge-like fashion. Teaching is stressful and when it becomes too much I tend to cut loose. I've had gambling bouts, many that weren't pretty and one that lasted more than six months. Gamblers Anonymous says it eventually leads to prison, insanity, or death. Well, it's driven me insane and to the point where I wanted to die. I haven't been to prison, but there are self-imposed sentences we serve.

"The casinos, of course, downplay addictions. They say that only two or three percent of locals who gamble are addicted. That's a crock of shit. I guarantee you twenty, thirty, maybe forty percent of local gamblers are addicted and losing more money than they can afford. The casinos also claim it's entertainment. Personally, I've never found it entertaining when I'm feeding my life savings to a slot machine. As you know, those machines are everywhere in town—grocery stores, drugstores, bars—so for a person prone to gambling, it's hard to escape. It can grab you. It can grab anyone. If Jesus was resurrected and came to Vegas, it could grab him, too."

I smiled and pulled my hands from my pockets. Mr. Bo set his foot on the stairs, exposing an argyle sock. Face lined with the map to misery and his eyebrows bushy and gray, he was looking more and more like Henry Fonda in *On Golden Pond*.

“I know you like teaching,” I said, “but sometimes I think it’s bringing you down.”

“That’s the irony of it,” he said. “Twenty-six years ago, teaching saved my life; now it’s killing me. The best thing about it is the kids. I like working at an at-risk school, because the students may get upset and get in your face and swear at you, but they’re honest and they don’t let me feel sorry for myself. At the same time, it takes all of my energy and I have health problems. Some days are battles. As I said, the administrative wars can crush you.”

“You going to be able to retire soon?” The cracked concrete, abandoned household appliances, and sagging palm trees seemed to answer for him.

“I won’t be able to, because of the car accident. I was literally on my back for two years and it took ten years to get over it, so I started late as a teacher. I’m going to have to work till I drop. I tell my students at the beginning of each year, ‘Hi, I’m Mr. Bowen. I’m sixty-whatever years old and not feeling particularly well. If I drop and flop, do me a favor. Walk slowly—very slowly—to the nurse’s office and tell her I’m ready to go to that great classroom in the sky.’”

A tyrannical wind ruffled the folder and tests. I rolled my neck and stretched my arms, then took a step toward Mr. Bo. “Hang in there,” I said, patting him on the shoulder.

He stood up and winced while clutching his back. "I'll be all right. When I'm in a classroom and there are thirty or forty kids sitting in front of me, and I'm challenged in this world of cell phones, iPods, and Twitter to compete for their attention, I feel immortal. And that's all teaching is: helping students find something other than themselves to be interested in. It's a rewarding relationship, the most rewarding of my life. My only complaint is we should be paid a living wage. If we were paid a fair and honest salary, I'd have little reason to complain."

"What would you do then?"

"I don't know," he said, reaching for the folder and paper. "Gamble, drink, and smoke, I guess."

Chapter Ten

As the polished, pearl-white Range Rover cut across three lanes of traffic, without signaling and forcing me to punch my pad-less brakes, I put forth an educated guess: personalized California plates. The SUV made a sharp turn and I saw the familiar red cursive font of the state name and the blue block letters and numbers, which read “STOPH8N.” Brushing McDonald’s sweet tea from the front of my shirt, I sat on the horn. I then screamed futilely, “Fucking douche!”

On the route, especially during the summer, it’s easy to suggest that L.A. passed down its worst attributes to Las Vegas: traffic, smog, never-ending construction projects, suicidal drivers, road rage. Some of the moves I’ve seen would make Tony Stewart blush. Rolling stops when turning right on red, using the shoulder to pass, U-turns from the outside lane—they’re all standard procedure on these wide, straight, and lightly patrolled streets. The speed limit is a mere suggestion, crosswalks a deadly joke. On average, two and a half cars run every red light. Motorists don’t yield to ambulances; they try to outrun them. A war is waged for each inch of asphalt.

I wish I could say that I’ve preserved my genteel, Southern driving style and am, one by one, converting motorists here, but that’s not the case. I’ve gone from Hoke Colburn of *Driving Miss Daisy* to Mad Max. If I hadn’t, I would’ve been run off the road and left cowering behind the wheel, hazard lights flashing, as cars blurred by honking and drivers jeered and flipped me the finger. I speed, shun my blinker, and interpret yellow as “go!” I tailgate and act like I own the center turn lane. I don’t slow down when someone wants to change lanes and, most disloyal of all to my

roots, don't wave on the rare occasion someone lets me over. I hardly recognize myself in the rearview mirror.

Weaving through rush-hour traffic, trying to deliver the papers by the five p.m. deadline, I occasionally remind myself that I carry the minimum car insurance required by state law (liability). If I cause an accident, my insurance company covers the expenses, except my own. If I'm in an accident and someone else is at fault, their company covers my expenses—but twenty-five percent of Vegas drivers are uninsured. I'm also conscious of the fact that I don't have health insurance (and tell myself it's bad luck anyway). When I was laid off, *CityBeat* covered my insurance for three months and then I got quotes from COBRA and a handful of private companies, all of which proved too expensive. So I visit the dentist once every two years and my doctor is WebMD. If I'm seriously injured on the route, the paramedics will cart me to UMC (the overcrowded, scandal-ridden public hospital) and taxpayers will be forced to foot the bill. I'm scared to touch my balls in the shower, because if I find a lump there's nothing I can do about it.

I supported President Obama's health care plan, but may be bankrupt or dead by the time the heart of it goes into effect.

Not having health insurance is a blind gamble, but carrying only liability is a smart, calculated play. The Blue Book value of my Camry is \$1,500. To fully insure it, with a five-hundred-dollar deductible, would cost \$1,000 every six months. In half a year, including the deductible, I'd pay the full value of the car, which is depreciating with every start, gear shift, turn, stop, and newspaper that touches its already compromised interior. Saying it's in poor condition is kind: The CD player is

jammed; the power locks don't work; the tires are bald, steel wires showing; one of the brake lights is out; the passenger-side door doesn't open from the exterior; the sunglasses holder opens on its own; the CV joints click ominously.

And, as Popeye pointed out as I pulled up to Flamingo and Swenson, "The radiator's taking a piss."

"I know," I said through the driver-side window. "I top it off every day before leaving for work."

Clutching his cardboard sign, he continued up the median to my window. Scrunched face, protruding chin, exaggerated forearms—it was obvious how he earned his street name. A deep, raspy voice added to the likeness.

Every other year, the county conducts a census of the homeless. The most recent one, released in 2010, counted 9,000 street people, which is ridiculously low. By my estimation, there are more than a thousand on my route alone. I see them at seemingly every park, intersection, convenience store, abandoned building, and fast-food restaurant that I enter or pass and have befriended a few of them, including Popeye. We met when I got a flat tire on Flamingo and he helped change it. While loosening the lug nuts and cranking the jack, apparently unconcerned with the traffic a few feet away, he told me he's from Alabama and ended up in Vegas when his wife drove off in the tractor-trailer they owned together, leaving behind only a pillow and blanket. I later learned, through passing conversations, that he has been homeless ever since (six years) and is in his mid-fifties, though he looks much older. He sleeps in a storm drain just downstream from Swenson Street Mobile Home Park and his life is a loop of panhandling, buying crack rocks at Siegel Suites, and smoking

them in the tunnel—which struck me as a miserable existence, until I mused that most of us lead similar lives.

“Here you go,” I said, keeping an eye on the turn signal and handing him a Hot ‘n Spicy McChicken and strawberry sundae in a bag and a Diet Dr. Pepper.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.” He set the food and drink on the median, next to a skyline of water bottles, then returned to the window. “Except you and a few other folks, everyone in this town is angry and in a hurry.”

“And blind,” I added. “Some SoCal bro almost took me out back there.”

“Probably the same guy that gave me seven cents.”

“You serious?”

“Yep. And acted all proud when he done it.”

I looked at the light and then at Popeye, who was wearing a soiled sailor cap, unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, bleached jeans, and exhaust-tinged sneakers. His skin was leathered. “That reminds me. I got a sign idea for you.”

“Oh yeah? What?”

I paused. ““Why Lie? Went to UNLV.””

The light turned green. Pulling away, I waved. In the side mirror, I saw him wave back, flash a gummy smile, and theatrically tip his cap.

Chapter Eleven

On this day in 1973, according to the “Time Capsule” section of the *Daily Express*, the *Washington Post* broke the news that many phone and face-to-face conversations in the White House, which was mired in the Watergate scandal, had been recorded (the so-called Nixon tapes). Today, the *Express* reported that a variety of snow globes—from country-western to Elvis to extraterrestrial—are available at local souvenir shops. Has print journalism fallen that far that fast?

The most disappointing piece in the paper, however, was a news brief about a construction worker killed building a strip club. Published a week after the tragedy, the brief included the five *Ws*—Eduardo Emanuel Rodriguez, crushed by the bucket of a front loader, Bottoms Up Adult Cabaret, 1:05 p.m., he accidentally threw a switch while reaching into the cab for his smokes—but little else. Cutting across Pacific Chateau’s rusted and deserted playground, I wondered where Rodriguez was from, how he ended up in Vegas, what he thought of the city. Did he have a family? Can I make a donation in his memory (or is that information included only in the obits of prominent white citizens)?

Reported with the matter-of-factness of a planning commission meeting, the brief haunted me on the route. I speculated that Rodriguez, like many Hispanic construction workers in Las Vegas, was born in Mexico or Central America and had left his homeland in search of a better life. Perhaps some of the money he earned was wired to relatives south of the border. How had they learned of his death? Did the distance dull or sharpen the pain? Would he be buried here or flown home? Amid all of the assumptions and questions, I was sure of one thing: Eduardo

Emanuel Rodriguez was an optimist, a dreamer. Pessimists may cross the border, but not the city line.

Rodriguez, I noted, was representative of most Las Vegans. Whether from Monterey, California, or Monterrey, Mexico, we left lives that were in some way incomplete and started over in a foreign land. The climate is harsh. There's culture shock (or, in this case, lack-of-culture shock). The loneliness and emptiness and isolation can be crippling. For every one of us who scores a job on the Strip and home in the suburbs, another flies a sign at a street corner and sleeps in a storm drain. For every publisher, there's a paperboy. For every dream realized, one's crushed by the bucket of a front loader.

Chapter Twelve

As I entered the warehouse, Terry exited, cart in tow. He lowered his *Risky Business*-era Ray-Bans and winked. I nodded, then shuffled into the shadows and collected my mail and newspapers and two stacks of inserts (loose ads that have to be placed in the papers). Destined for the door, I turned toward Mr. Powell, a longtime bellman who was laid off two years ago. He was hunched over his table, rolling papers.

“How much do we get paid for these inserts, Mr. Powell?”

“Half a penny per,” he said, continuing to roll.

“I’ve never seen a half penny. Where do they get those?”

“Don’t know. They must have a machine back there that can cut a penny in half.”

Weaving through stacks of papers, I smiled ... until seeing Ethan break free from a circle of carriers and angle for the door. He straddled the shade line and raised his hand, signaling me to stop. As I passed without slowing, nearly clipping his toes and giving him a reason to wear the orthopedic shoes, he glanced into my cart.

“Just wanted to make sure you had the inserts,” he said, as I rocketed down the ramp.

* * *

Around the corner from the warehouse, I steered the Camry into a moribund business park and followed the driveway to the back. Terry’s Camaro sat in the shade of a cinder-block wall. I parked behind him, underhanded the inserts into a

dumpster, then opened his passenger-side door. Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" and a plume of smoke greeted me.

"You couldn't wait?" I said, sitting and closing the door.

Terry was holding a joint in his left hand, a folded newspaper in his right.

"Not after reading this story. You see this shit?"

"No. I haven't read the paper." I motioned for the joint and he passed it.

"An Australian cookbook said 'freshly ground black people' instead of 'freshly ground black pepper.' They had to reprint fifteen thousand copies and apologize."

"That's hilarious," I said, exhaling.

"Hilarious? To who? The Klan? That's one hell of a typo. It's a Freudian slip if I ever saw one."

I took another hit and passed the joint. "You think the person who wrote that doesn't like black people?"

"It may have been an honest mistake, but what are the chances? They could've just as easily said 'black pebbles' or 'black poodles,' but they said 'black people.' It had to be on purpose."

He took a hit, held his breath, then exhaled through his nose. "You hear people say that children shouldn't watch violence on TV, because it desensitizes them. Well, whites have been desensitized to the black condition; that's what happens when most of the blacks they see on TV are pimps, gangbangers, and drug dealers. If they saw positive people in our community, it'd have the opposite effect and they'd be less likely to make a slip like that."

“I’m not sure the cookbook mistake and how blacks are portrayed on TV are related, but obviously they’re unfairly portrayed by the media. I like the *First 48*, that crime show on A&E, but it bothers me that most of the suspects are black.”

“It leaves the impression that we’re all criminals. Sure, there are a few shows that portray blacks in a positive light, but most of them aren’t popular and you have to seek them out. If you watch the free or basic-cable channels, you’re going to see a lot of cop shows where blacks are being chased down.”

“Did you see that Rodney King got arrested again? He was driving recklessly and got booked for suspicion of DUI.”

Terry shook his head. “That’s his own damn fault. How many times do you have to get hit upside the head before you realize the pigs can’t be trusted? Next time they start beating up a brother I hope he’s an intellectual, not some dumb motherfucker who’s going to get on TV and say something stupid. They always pick the most retarded folks to be spokespeople for the black community. Why they asking Rodney King and Tracy Morgan a damn thing? They need to talk to Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates. It’s as if they’re going out of their way to find fools to put up on the screen.

“Seriously, Rodney King ain’t bright. When those pigs hit him they must’ve knocked something lose. Maybe he got dain bramaged. I mean, take the bus, nigger! You ain’t had *no* luck with cars! If I get pulled over and beaten senseless in front of the whole world, first thing I’m doing is getting a bus pass.”

Laughing violently, he took the roach from my fingers. I reached for the paper, which was on the center console, and skimmed the headlines. “Wealth Gap

Between Whites and Blacks Widens During Recession,” I read aloud. I turned to Terry, who, eyes bloodshot, was staring at the roach. “The cookbook story bothered you, but this didn’t?”

“This one’s easier to explain.” He hit the roach, stubbed it out in the ashtray, exhaled. “Because of sexism, women don’t make as much money as men, so they’re drawn to rich guys. Knowing this, the white man engineers the economy in such a way that anyone darker than a paper bag, which includes people from Ice-T to Wesley Snipes, is denied economic opportunities out of fear that he’ll be able to attract a Reese Witherspoon or Natalie Portman look-alike. It’s sexism, racism, and capitalism all wrapped in one.

“America’s the richest, most powerful nation in history and there’s no reason it should have unemployment and poverty. It could be sharing the wealth. But if it did, it might look like Cuba. In nineteen fifty-nine, at the end of the Cuban Revolution, two-thirds of the population was pale. Today two-thirds is tan and brown. For the past fifty years they’ve had universal health care and education, and Afro-Cubans have had access to the same medical attention and schooling as Euro-Cubans, making them more likely to breed. Wall Street and the CIA are watching this and thinking they don’t want our population to darken, so they’re doing what they can to keep the wealth concentrated at the top.

“That’s why you have a gap between whites and blacks, and it’s only going to widen in a recession, when the rich get richer and the poor poorer.”

Squinting, I tilted my head. “So as we speak, white men are huddled in a room somewhere coming up with ways to keep black men away from white women?”

“It’s more of an ideological thing,” said Terry. “Take Paul Newman for example. He had those salad dressings and popcorn and wine and all the profits went to charities. Most people in his financial position start hanging around country clubs and going to yacht parties, and become immersed in that culture. Next thing you know they’re pulling strings with the rest of the puppet masters, protecting their own interests and not giving a damn about anyone else.

“So it’s not like whites come out of the womb racist. It’s ingrained in their culture, whether they’re from a trailer in Alabama or penthouse in New York, and it’s related to the fear of being bred out.”

Terry took the newspaper and placed it on his lap. Unbuttoning an African-print pouch that hung from his neck, he removed a bag of marijuana and book of rolling papers and set them on a headline that read “Democrats and Republicans at Odds Over Debt Plan.” He then folded a sheet of rolling paper, crumbled weed into the crease, and began to roll a joint.

I smiled. “And you play into that fear.”

“I date white women, but that’s just me. That’s my preference.” He licked the edge of the sheet and twisted the joint delicately.

“Why?”

“Hope for the future,” he said, flicking his lighter. “People say it’s human nature to destroy ourselves, that we’ll never have the kind of utopia seen in *Star Trek*, but the past hundred years prove otherwise. In nineteen eleven, my taste in women would’ve gotten me lynched. Now, at worst, I’ll get my heart broken. If we

can make that kind of progress in a hundred years, imagine how much we can make by the twenty-third century.”

“What’s that got to do with white women?”

He shifted in his seat. “In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver said men die for freedom, but black men die for white women. More than two thousand of them died in the late eighteen and early nineteen hundreds for just being near a white woman. I’m avenging those men and fighting romantic segregation, for lack of a better term. It’s Cupid meets Jim Crow. Being with a black woman is just more of the same, more of what I’m expected to do. Being with a white woman is proof that humanity is improving.”

“You just want some white pussy, man.”

“Actually, I’m picky. Any old fat, ugly white woman won’t do. From a white supremacist’s perspective, that’s killing two birds with one stone. They get rid of the ugly white women and pair them up with niggers and fix two problems at once. I want the fine white wine. Top shelf or nothing.”

“You’re so shallow,” I slurred, ignoring the fact that he often hits on older homeless women on his route.

“Who ain’t? If you had a choice between Kristen Stewart and Kathy Bates, who you going to pick?”

I took a long pull from the joint. The music faded out, the cassette flipped noisily, and “Escape” shot from the speakers.

“How are the white women of Vegas treating you?” I asked Terry, passing him the joint.

“Not well,” he said. “The prime example is Alicia. She left me for a dude who looked like Friar Tuck from *Robin Hood*: fat, drunk, funky haircut. You know the haircut I’m talking about? Bald on top with a moat of hair surrounding it? And I guarantee you dude did not write poetry, was not a pro-wrestling manager, and has not given speeches at political rallies. He probably worked at a shoe store. Is he rich? Did he graduate from an Ivy League school? What’s he got that I ain’t got? Certainly not hair. White skin of course.”

“Definitely not hair,” I agreed, admiring his dreads, “but how do you know it was about skin color?”

“In the Bruce Lee biopic *Dragon*, there’s a scene where Linda Lee’s mother tells her she doesn’t want half-Asian grandchildren, so Bruce storms out of the house and hops onto his motorcycle in the rain. Linda has the option of staying with her mom or hopping on the bike with Bruce and driving off. She gets on the bike. Linda Lee was the exception to the rule, because she had the courage to defy family and friends and run away with an Asian.

“Now this is where sexism and capitalism come in. To keep white women from being courageous, they’re brought up surrounded by My Little Pony/Strawberry Shortcake/Hello Kitty-type stuff. A tomboy or feminist has the courage to stand up to family and friends, but a princess on a pedestal doesn’t. That’s why white girls play with Barbie, wear tutus and tiaras, and wave wands. It keeps them dainty and subservient—and from running into the rain and hopping onto Bruce Lee’s bike.”

Hand on chin, I stared at Terry. “That weed is up on you, man.”

“What I’m saying has nothing to do with the weed. I’ve been preaching this gospel, sober or high, for years.”

“I agree with some of what you said, but you didn’t connect the dots.”

“What dots do I need to connect? From my perspective, they’re connecting like a motherfucker.”

“None right now,” I said, opening the door. “I need to get these papers out.”

Hand clenched, I extended my left arm. He balled his right hand and bumped it against my fist. Climbing out of the car, I turned around.

“Thanks, man.”

He smiled. “No problem, brother.”

As I shut the door, he turned up the music, lip-synced the lyrics, and banged his head to the beat.

Chapter Thirteen

Today, after the route, I dropped by the Las Vegas Hilton and hurried into the race and sports book. As I entered the shadowy, cavernous space, a man beneath a soiled baseball cap exited mumbling to himself, "When you bet against them they win, when you bet on them they lose." Ignoring his warning, I weaved through the tables, chairs, and patrons and pulled up in front of the celestial spread of the betting board. The Cubs were +120 against the Brewers.

Following my instincts and the advice of a handicapper in the paper, I shuffled to a window, fished the last twenty-five dollars from my wallet, and put it on Chicago. I then found a seat toward the back.

To my right, in the race book, swimming pool-sized screens broadcast horseracing from Belmont Park, Balmoral Park, Los Alamitos, and other tracks. Men in fedoras sprung from the desks, cigars in mouth, and spurred on their ponies. In the sports book, TVs of various sizes showed action from around the Major Leagues. Bearded men in ball caps pinched cigarettes, sipped watered-down drinks, and stared skyward as if watching their lives unfold in fast forward. (They were the same people, I speculated, responsible for the fifteen-minute waits at ATMs on Sunday mornings during the NFL season.) When one man clapped, another placed his head in his hands. Every "Hell yeah!" was met by a "God no." After three innings, the Cubs led one to nothing.

Line sheets curled in their hands like lineup cards, everyone in the sports book was a manager. A bunch of Casey Fucking Stengels. "Throw strikes!" "Why'd you swing at that?" "Bunt the bleeping guy over!" They bitched in English, Spanish,

Filipino, Chinese, Korean, German, French, and a mash-up of these and other languages. A Somalian cabby commiserated with a high-rolling Japanese pai gow player, a homeless credit hustler with a casino executive. Sports betting is an international language and the book a democratic forum featuring a cross section of the men and, to a lesser extent, women who live in or visit Las Vegas. If someone tells you the city's diverse, this is what they're talking about. The Cubs led three to two after six.

The cocktail waitress, Shelley, who appeared to be in her mid-thirties and had highlighted, shoulder-length hair and balloon-like breasts, repeated the same route, as if on rails, and took the same orders from the same men who gave her the same (meager) tips. She wore a veil of indifference, but I sensed disdain. She didn't like her customers or approve of their lifestyle, and the job was hell on her back and feet. If not for the divorce, kids, and underwater home, she'd tell the beverage manager to kiss her fat ass and she'd move back to Southern California. The security guard also made the rounds by rote. He and the waitress were the only people in the place who didn't seem to notice that the Brewers scored once in the eighth and again in the ninth to beat the Cubs four to three.

A handful of patrons struggled to their feet and limped, heads down, toward the exit. Others rose with vigor, removed betting slips from their wallets, and strutted to the window, analyzing the game with the person in front of or behind them in line. I remained seated. Half-empty beer bottles and cocktail glasses leaned in the cup holders, and napkins and betting slips were strewn across the floor like leaves. Fifteen minutes after the final out, Shelley's call of "cocktails" went

unanswered. Two seats to my left, a three-hundred-pound man with a pitted face and dark, wiry hair was muttering about murder, the CIA, and World War III. A row back and to my right, a skeletal, sunburned man was sleeping behind his dollar-store shades, cigarette burning between his fingers. The Cubs-Brewers game wasn't a curiosity or opportunity for fantasy-league points for these stragglers, but the difference between a dinner buffet and dumpster diving, between buying a new pair of socks and underwear and boosting them, between a weekly motel and a tumbleweed-littered lot. A subpar performance by a rookie reliever can turn cotton into cardboard in Vegas.

The loss will force me to use my credit card for gas, iced tea, and rubber bands until getting paid at the beginning of August, but it felt much heavier than that. It was symbolic of the last several years: seeming like I had a hold of something—the *CityBeat* gig, a serious girlfriend, stability, my emotions—then watching it slip away. I tilted the twenty-five-dollar ticket toward the light. The bold block letters read like a list of all my failures.

Shortly, my thoughts turned to the handicapper in the paper. On the tottering ladder of Las Vegas professions, the tout stands somewhere near the bottom rung, between smut-card slapper and shell-game operator. My most enlightening experience with a “sharpie” took place six months ago. While at *CityBeat*, I interviewed Steve “St. Louis” Cavallo, a pro sports bettor who has his own website, newsletter, and weekly radio show and a clean reputation, an accomplishment itself in this industry and town. Cavallo added me to his email list and I attended a few of his live remotes, so upon receiving an invitation from my brother to enter his

office's college football bowl contest, I forwarded it to Steve with a note: "Bunch of PR squares. The pot's usually more than a grand. Easy money. I pay the fee, you make the picks, and we split the dough?" Cavallo, a college football specialist, agreed and I eagerly awaited the first game, Washington State versus Colorado State. The Cougars were favored by four and a half and we laid the points. The Rams won straight up. Through fifteen games, we were four and eleven and went on to finish twelve and twenty-three (thirty-four percent). We placed fiftieth in a field of fifty-nine, out of view of the winner, "Brandi from Branding," and in clear sight of my nephew Eli, who was five at the time.

A cleaning lady appeared at the end of my row and began to empty the ashtrays into a dustbin. I stood and started for the door. Tearing the ticket to pieces, I released the confetti over a trashcan, then staggered into the stifling, blue-gray night.

Chapter Fourteen

Two types of people get free papers on my route: the homeless and pretty women.

As I pulled up in front of building five of University Gardens, a two-story motel-turned-apartment-complex north of UNLV, she emerged from unit one fifty-eight and started toward the parking lot. She had black hair that fell halfway down her back, was five-foot-three, and delicately thin. Canvas bag slung over her shoulder, she was wearing cream-colored Ray-Bans, a white tank top, orange armband, long black skirt, and lime-green Chuck Taylors. I removed my hat, ran my fingers through my hair, peeked in the rearview mirror. I then collected three papers and climbed out of the car.

Hitting on a woman while delivering a route may seem like mission impossible, but I've managed to succeed once or twice (and have even been hit on a few times). I follow three simple rules. Number one: keep it casual.

"Hey, how's it going?" I said to her.

"OK," she said.

I stopped on the sidewalk. "Just OK?"

"Yeah." She paused, then continued toward the parking lot. "Just another day."

Number two: don't try to hide that you're a paperboy.

I held up the papers. "I work for the *Daily Express*. You don't subscribe to it?"

She stopped and turned around. "No, I don't read newspapers unless someone recommends me a story," she said with a Spanish accent. "I have websites I visit."

“What sites?” I asked, taking two steps toward her.

“There are some about criticism that I like. One’s called Salon Critique. It’s in Spanish and it’s about art and literature.”

“You an artist?”

“Uh-huh.”

Number three: let her know the route is not your life’s ambition.

“Cool. I’m a writer.”

“Interesting. I like writers.”

I blushed. “I was a writer and editor at *CityBeat* for five years. Now I’m working on a novel and throwing this paper route to support my fiction habit.”

She took a few steps toward me. “What’s your novel about?”

“Actually, it’s set on the route. It’s a fictionalized version of my real-life experiences.”

“Are you going to write about me?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “We’ll see.”

She smiled—straight white teeth contrasting with almond skin. “I’m Sofia,” she said, extending a child-like hand.

I shook it and told her my name. “Where you from, Sofia?”

“People think I’m from Brazil, but I’m Cuban.”

“A communist, huh?”

“A revolutionary.” Her face turned to stone and she raised a fist.

I laughed. “How’d you end up in Vegas?”

“My mom came first. She knew somebody here and then she brought me and my sister.”

“Do you like it?”

“That’s a tough question. There are things I like about it and things I don’t, but I’m taking advantage of the opportunities. It’s been good for me in that sense.”

As she shook her keys and adjusted the strap of the bag, I noticed a scar on her chest. It was a half-inch wide and centered and it snaked beneath her top.

“Would you be interested in getting the paper free for a week to see if you like it?” I asked her.

“If you could recommend me stories or it has images I could use for my art.”

I shrugged. “OK. I’ll highlight a few things tomorrow, then leave it at your door.”

“Thank you,” she said, continuing toward the parking lot.

“No problemo.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Hasta luego.”

I hurried into the courtyard, which was lined with palm trees and featured a pool and cinder-block laundry room, and delivered papers to units one fifty-three, one sixty-six, and one seventy-five. Returning to the car, I removed the route book from the rearview mirror. I then reached into the glove compartment for a pencil and added Sofia’s address to the book. Smiling, I put it back on the mirror and turned the page.

Chapter Fifteen

After stacking my papers in a cart, I scooped up the top one and scurried to a nearby table. Thumbing through the pages, I paused at a correction: “Due to information provided by the courts, Denise J. Merced, 36, was incorrectly listed as being fined for prostitution in Tuesday’s paper. The charge was failure to stop at a railroad crossing.” I pulled a pen from my pocket, circled the correction, and wrote “Whoops!” in the margin. Deeper into Section A, I stopped at a story headlined “Armed Somalis Prey on Refugees Fleeing Famine” and scrawled “Tragic. Must Read.” Finally, above a feature story about a new coffee shop in the university district, I suggested “Friday at 5 p.m.?” An hour and a half later, I placed the paper on Sofia’s doormat.

The next day I noticed a piece of paper taped to her door. Drawing near, I saw that it was a sketch—a woman and two children, huddled together, approaching a rifle-toting man, the ghost-shaped subjects silhouetted by an unsympathetic sun. “See You Tomorrow at 5!” was inscribed on the top right-hand corner, accompanied by Sofia’s signature, and I realized this was her response to the refugee story. Marveling at its stark power and being careful not to wrinkle or get ink on it, I peeled the sketch from the door, carried it to the car in the palm of my hand, and taped it to the dashboard. I admired it the rest of the route and, arriving home, stuck it on the fridge.

Today, in anticipation of seeing Sofia, I arrived at the warehouse at one p.m. I was hoping the truck would show up early or on schedule and after the route I’d have time to swing by my apartment and freshen up and change before meeting her

at the coffee shop. But the truck, which is never early or on schedule when I want it to be, backed up to the loading dock at two twenty and I finished the route at four forty-five. Driving directly to the café, I ducked into the restroom and washed my hands—the ink staining the porcelain sink—and splashed water on my face. I then returned to the main room and sat by the window.

A few minutes after five, Sofia entered the shop and approached the table wearing a red T-shirt with a hammer and sickle logo, skinny jeans, and emerald-green ballet flats. A peace-sign pendant swung from her neck on a ball chain. Sitting and smiling, she removed her Ray-Bans and a black Army cap and set the shades in the well of the hat. I asked her what she wanted to drink, then hurried to the counter.

Sipping iced coffee, Sofia told me she was born in Havana in 1986 and grew up in Playa, a municipality on the city's northwest coast. Her home was five blocks from the beach and she has distinct memories of the deep, blue-green ocean, where she learned to swim by being tossed from the rocks into the waves, and the tropical storms that batter the island in the late summer and early fall. When she was three, her parents divorced and her mother, a teacher, raised her and her older sister Camila. She's attached to her mom, she admitted, but hasn't spoken to her dad, who moved to Costa Rica after the divorce, in several years.

When I asked about her sister, Sofia, who has brown-green eyes (the same color as mine) and coral-pink lips, said she is married with kids and lives in suburban L.A. She added that they're opposites and have been as long as she can remember. As a child, Camila was shy, quiet, and accommodating and Sofia, perhaps

to appear older or provide a contrast, was bold, loud, and stubborn. When they'd board a bus with their mom and there wasn't a seat, Camila would stand in the aisle and face the front, head down; Sofia would spin around, arms crossed, look passengers in the eye, and shout, "Someone get up and give my mom a seat! Can't you see she has two little girls with her?"

Periodically, Sofia's mom would go out at night and leave her and her sister at home. Camila would sleep till dawn, while Sofia explored the spacious, two-level house they inherited from their grandfather, a government official in the 1960s and '70s. During one of these early morning explorations, when nine or ten years old, she stumbled on a book about Flemish painters. Irreligious, she didn't recognize the biblical references of Rubens, van Dyck, and van Eyck, but the images seemed to tell stories that were much more magical and intense than the ones she was reading at school. She also discovered Balzac, Tolstoy, Lorca, Garcia Márquez, and Martí on the shelves and her love of art and literature was born.

Her junior and senior years of high school, Sofia lost interest in art and literature and turned to theater, she explained, rolling her Rs and illustrating with her hands. Sipping iced tea, I studied her speech and movement, which were akin to performance art. She also hung out with friends, dated, partied, and rebelled against her mother. A single parent, her mom was the nurturer and disciplinarian, and Sofia had trouble reconciling how she could be so warm one minute and so cold the next. Their relationship soured.

"It got really bad, because I didn't want to think of her as a friend," said Sofia, bare feet perched on the edge of her seat. "To me she was the enemy. Growing up

with one parent, that's what happens. It was hard for her, I'm sure. She had to be the mom and dad."

In 2004, needing new challenges and wanting to give her daughters some space, Sofia's mom moved to Las Vegas. Camila followed six months later. Sofia lived with her dad for two years in San Jose, then, lonely and depressed, decided to join her mom and sister in Sin City. Her dad loaned her \$2,500 and referred her to a "travel agent," who said he'd get her to the U.S. border in four days. Granted a Nicaraguan visa, she took a charter bus from San Jose to Managua ... was stowed, with fourteen other Cubans, in the trailer of an eighteen-wheeler and smuggled through Honduras and El Salvador and into Guatemala ... rode shotgun in a '77 Cadillac Coupe de Ville driven by a Guatemalan with a cowboy hat on his greasy head and a pistol on his lame hip, who, at the Mexican border, demanded money from the party of eight ... crossed the Usumacinta River on a wooden raft ... was pedaled in a pedicab to a waiting van, which transported her to Tapachula, Chiapas ... was bussed from Tapachula to Matamoros ... then, two weeks after setting off from San Jose, walked across a bridge spanning the Rio Grande and into Brownsville, Texas, where, after proving that she was Cuban and didn't hold a grudge against America, she was paroled at an immigration station.

The following morning, Sofia boarded a Greyhound bus and began her journey west. The connections proved traumatic, as she didn't speak English or know the terrain, and she couldn't figure out how to use a vending machine to get a snack or soda. This leg of her migration felt the most foreign, perilous. The land was so vast—Texas alone more than six times the size of Cuba—she visualized it as a

coffee-colored ocean littered with cacti and tumbleweeds, and couldn't escape the thought that it would swallow her. But three days after departing Brownsville, in September 2006, the bus crawled over Hoover Dam and descended into the Vegas Valley.

"I saw the Strip and the lights and I immediately liked it," said Sofia, twirling her hair. "It looked alive. I thought it was attractive and interesting in the sense that there was so much activity. It seemed so much brighter and cleaner than anything I'd seen on my trip."

I wondered if Eduardo Emanuel Rodriguez had taken this same route. What he thought when he saw the city's pulsing main artery. How Sofia's Las Vegas story would end.

Sofia moved in with her mother and sister, who were living in a two-bedroom apartment in the shadow of the Strip (just west of what is now my route), and slept on the couch. She learned English by taking ESL classes at a community center, reading Poe, Steinbeck, and Thoreau, and listening to hip-hop. Eventually, she got a job selling perfume at Macy's at Fashion Show Mall and enrolled in the College of Southern Nevada, where she earned an associate degree. She now has her own apartment, works part time at Macy's, and studies art at UNLV. Like many Las Vegans, myself included, she's developed an intense love-hate relationship with the city—she loves the desert, big sky, and solitude, but hates the superficiality and lack of history and culture—and hopes to leave when she graduates. Beyond that, she doesn't have a blueprint.

“I try not to have a plan,” she said, segueing into the story about the scar on her chest.

Shortly after being born, Sofia was diagnosed with a heart murmur. Doctors monitored the murmur for a year and determined that her aortic valve wasn't working properly and it was replaced with a mechanical device. When she was eighteen, before she moved from Cuba to Costa Rica, the device was replaced with a pig's valve. This congenital heart defect doesn't require treatment or inhibit her in any way—but when your breastbone has been pried open twice before you're twenty, she said, you tend to live day to day.

For the second time, Sofia and I reached the bottom of our cups. The window of the coffee shop framed the sunset (one of the things I love about Las Vegas), slightly off-center, an orange and lavender explosion. We'd talked for two and a half hours about music, movies, communism, health care, the arts, and many other subjects, and I was struck by her vitality and lack of inhibition. Does this woman ever slow down, I wondered? Has she ever blushed? A listener in a town of talkers—like young George Willard in Winesburg, Ohio—I often play the role of therapist, nodding along knowingly as friends, fellow carriers, subscribers, and the homeless unload their problems on me. I'm a bartender offering a paper instead of a pilsner and, at times, it's a burden. But with Sofia, whose worldview stretches well beyond Barstow, it was a blessing, which led to my last question:

“Can I take you out next Friday night?”

Chapter Sixteen

“Can you believe papers are still printed and delivered this way?” I asked Zach, approaching his apartment and holding up a smudged pulp of newsprint lassoed with a pink rubber band.

Standing on the patio smoking, Zach reached for the paper, set it on the stool, and wiped his hand on his cut-off denim shorts. “No,” he said, “and they’re not going to be for much longer.” He took a drag and exhaled. “The problem with printing and delivering newspapers is it creates a lot of expenses: ink, paper, the press, carriers. It costs, say, ten cents just to print and deliver each copy. If it was only online, one copy would cost about the same as 150,000.”

“I feel like a rider with the Pony Express,” I said, crossing my arms.

He ignored my comment and started toward the far end of the patio. “They wouldn’t even need a newsroom,” he continued over his shoulder. “The reporters and editors could work from a coffee shop on laptops, drinking lattes, and have one nerd at home coding and archiving all the text. When you were at *CityBeat*, how often did you need to be in the office?”

I paused. “Two or three hours a week.”

“Right. They wouldn’t have to pay a power bill—think of how expensive it must be in this hellish heat—or hire a janitor. All they’d pay for is data storage, which is ridiculously cheap. They could run the whole paper off a hosting account that costs twenty dollars a month.”

I uncrossed my arms. “It must be more profitable for the *Express* to print and deliver the paper than to just have it online. Otherwise, the greedy bastards would’ve made the leap.”

“It’s not even close,” said Zach, U-turning and starting back to the near end of the patio. “The production cost of putting out an issue online is probably less than a thousand dollars. If they were smart, they could set up the whole system in two hours and sell a few banner ads to cover the expenses. They’d be instantly profitable.”

“So why don’t they do it?”

Zach flashed a sarcastic, yellow-brown smile. “Because they’re run by a bunch of idiots who want to be Charles Foster Kane. They’re Mormon guys in late middle age who drive Porsches, play golf, and don’t know anything about information technology. As I understand it, it’s a retirement home for burnouts tied to the old way of doing things.”

“Do you read the paper?” I asked, pointing toward the stool.

“I don’t read the hard copy, but their RSS feed goes into my Google Reader, so when they post a story I get it there.”

“What do you think about it?”

He sighed. “It’s a typical mid-sized American metro paper, which means it’s boring and relatively conservative. As you know, it focuses on local politics and breaking news. It also runs a lot of celebrity items—Nicki Minaj celebrated her birthday at the Mirage and crap like that. The problem is, as far as I’m concerned, there’s not much locally I give a shit about and I certainly don’t care where Nicki

Minaj celebrates her birthday. If I want local arts news, I visit a few specific sites. They have better coverage than the *Express* and they're not even getting paid for it. Why would I read a paper full of buffet ads trying to find arts coverage that's no better than what is on my friends' blogs? I do read the crime stories, out of prurience and to see where people are getting jacked, so I can avoid those areas. I just scan for headlines that are tailored to my interests, but I don't find many."

"The editorial page is really conservative."

"I wouldn't read one of their editorials if I got a blowjob for it. I'm just not interested in what upper-middle-class white guys have to say about the capital gains tax."

I laughed.

"There's nothing special about the paper," he continued, after lighting a cigarette. "It's no worse than any other rag in a city this size, but it's not going to win a Pulitzer anytime soon. If I worked there, I'd be looking for another job. I think journalism, in the near future, is going to be closer to the 'feedsites' Warren Ellis described in *Transmetropolitan*—basically, web streams of data created by people who carry cameras and microphones with them and keep an eye out for interesting stuff and report on it. Kind of like Twitter or the Huffington Post. I explained this to every publication in town—the *Express*, the *Star*, *CityBeat*—but nobody listened."

"No paperboys?" I said with a smile.

Zach shook his head. "Nope. Sorry. But that brings up another point." He took a drag, then exhaled and set off for the far end of the patio. "Media executives don't understand that news is no longer delivered in discrete editions. Google Reader and

other feeds deliver a constant stream of information. Why does the *Daily Express* publish once a day and not every time news breaks and a story is filed? Because printing is expensive and they have to have enough content to cover the costs. It was the same thing with vinyl records. The only reason albums existed is because it was cheaper to put ten songs on one record than one on ten.”

I squinted. “So immediately stop printing the paper and just publish online?”

“Go digital and focus more on local news and information of real value, but they’re not capable of that.” He was waving his arms wildly and ash rained to the earth. “You worked for them; you know how they are. They’re the kind of people who think a three-martini lunch is a reasonable way of doing business in the twenty-first century. They’re still trying to sell print advertising to casino executives who are increasingly looking at them like they’re retarded. They have no vision and vision is key now. The newspaper industry is changing more than it has since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.”

“They still get their newsprint by train,” I added.

Soaked in sweat, he pulled up at the near end of the patio and looked me in the eyes.

“You can make the dinosaur analogy. Newspapers are big, dumb animals that survived a long time largely because of their bulk, but now smaller, more clever organisms—blogs, news feeds, social-networking sites—are running circles around them and the recession is the Ice Age. Why did mammals survive the Ice Age and dinosaurs didn’t? Dinosaurs required more resources.”

“You don’t think the *Express* will survive the recession?”

He shook his head.

“Come on,” I said.

“I don’t think they can adapt quickly enough.”

“A one hundred and fifty thousand-circulation, major-metro paper that’s been around since nineteen hundred and five?”

“How many other major-metro papers have disappeared? The *Rocky Mountain News* for one, and it was a bigger, older, and more respected than the *Daily Express*.”

“How do you see it happening?” I asked.

He took a hit, then flicked the butt onto the lawn. As he started to speak, smoke issued from his mouth and nose. “Every so often, one of the upper-management ’tard boys will see an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* about the future of newspapers and he’ll hire a consultant, who’ll say you’re doing this and this and this wrong. The ’tard boy will say, ‘OK. Thanks.’ Then he’ll fire the consultant, who will slink off with his color-coded charts, and ignore everything he said, because he doesn’t want to change.

“About a year before the paper shutter, they’re going to try a major shift—focus on the online brand, post more videos, or something like that. But the change is going to be overseen by the same aging people who don’t understand what’s going on and it’s going to fail miserably, because everyone else will have made the move years ago. It’ll be like a horse and buggy manufacturer trying to make cars after Ford.

“The world of media is changing, whether the weekend cowboys at the *Daily Express* like it or not. If you want to survive, you evolve. If you don’t, you die. And you can sit around and cry as long as you want about the good old days of reporting when you stole swigs from a flask and typed on a Remington, and nobody’s going to care anymore than they cared about the old drunk in the bar talking about how great it was when you could make the wheels of your buggy with a lathe and strip of iron. Like Citizen Kane, they’re dealing with changing times and a recession and they’re spending money in all the wrong places and losing control of their empire. Eventually, they’ll hole up in their underwater stucco palaces, estranged from friends and former colleagues, and die uttering the word ‘Rosebud.’”

Chapter Seventeen

Falling in love is the ultimate gamble in Las Vegas. You peek at your pocket cards, try to keep a blank face, then push your heart into the pot. Blood stains the chips and felt. You hope for a queen or diamonds, but the flop only offers a jack and spades—a bleak and uncertain interpretation of the future. Not prepared to fold, you bluff and pray for a miracle on Fourth and Fifth streets. More bad omens: an eight and the ace of spades. The hole cards haven't been shown, but you know you've lost. In this no-limit, one-on-one conflict, your opponent knew you better than you knew her, though neither of you'd been at the table for more than an hour. You relive the flop, turn, and river and wonder how a promising hand withered so quickly. Deciding that the details don't matter, you flip your cards carelessly across the table and rise from the chair. You went all in; now you want out. Walking away, you hear her rake the pot and, through the fog of war, you can almost picture her sad but stern face, a mirror image of the queen of hearts.

My first six months in Vegas, I didn't play the dating game. I was focused on furnishing my apartment, temping and freelancing, and familiarizing myself with the city. On the rare occasion I had extra cash, it was spent in a sports book or casino. But while at *CityBeat*, with more money and public interaction, I dated a procession of beautiful, brilliant women—most of whom were, to borrow a phrase from Terry, nuttier than squirrel shit. Jenny, a bipolar art teacher, would sneak out of my apartment late at night, spurred by some perceived slight, and wander the immortal alleys till dawn. April, an accountant with a punk-rock edge, lived with her parents in the suburbs and sold prescription drugs on the side. After we broke up, Inez, the

daughter of a prominent casino executive, would call at all hours and leave venomous, three-minute-long voicemails. (“You’re always going to be alone.”) I couldn’t take these women anywhere, and certainly not to one of the wedding chapels surrounding my shanty.

When laid off, I, once again, walked away from the game. The dismissal felt like getting dumped and a fault line formed in my once rock-solid confidence. My world was shaken. Denial, anger, depression—I experienced the same stages as someone grieving or going through a divorce. The red rocks of the untouched desert, my Camp David, seemed too isolating, coffee with a friend too intimate, so I holed up in my apartment and read, watched TV, surfed the Net, and blazed trails across the tattered carpet. Like the wind, loneliness leaned on the Spanish tile and stucco and stick, working its way in; I couldn’t close the blinds or turn off the lights—the solitude was suffocating—and phone calls from telemarketers were a welcome surprise. (“Yes, I have fifteen to twenty minutes to take part in a survey.”) At night, when a black ceiling dropped from the deep, blue sky, my throat was too tight to swallow solid food. I sipped soup and lost twenty-five pounds. Sleep proved as elusive as a royal flush.

When I met Sofia, more than two and a half years after getting laid off, I was still scarred and breathing heavily from crawling out of that hell. But the sting of the bad beat had subsided. Lessons had been learned. Guarded but optimistic, like a born gambler, I was ready to sit back down at the table.

* * *

As the last paper landed, I angled into a carwash and parked at a vacuum station. Opening the Camry's coin holder, I discovered a meager collection of pennies, nickels, and dimes—a sure sign that I've been trying to stretch my money. I removed the route book from the rearview mirror and tossed it into the trunk; it slid across a Nevada road atlas and came to rest against a duffel bag containing a basketball and tennis racket. I continued to the change machine, where I broke three dollar bills. Returning to the car, I plucked papers from the passenger-side floorboard, then dislodged the mats, shook them violently—sand, crumbs, pebbles, rubber bands, flakes of newsprint—and arranged them on the asphalt. I dropped four quarters into the machine and it roared to life.

After raking the nozzle across the mats and floorboards, I backed the car into an adjacent bay. Four more quarters found the bottom of a bin and I selected “High-Pressure Soap,” drew the spray gun from its holster, and pulled the trigger, targeting the hood, tires, bumpers, windows, and license plates. Soapy, brown water spilled onto the concrete. Circling the car, trying to keep pace with the timer, I hit “High-Pressure Rinse.” The runoff became clear. Finally, I finished the “Spot-Free Rinse,” just as the gun shut off, and wiped the soles of my shoes on the wet concrete.

Arriving home, after stopping at Target, I hurried into the bathroom and undressed. The shower water soothed my skin. Arms dangling and legs shoulder width apart, the spray centered on my chest, I could feel each one of my pores closing. My first movement in more than a minute was to squat for the soap. As I washed my hands and forearms, the water at my feet went black. I squeezed a dime-sized dollop of shampoo onto my fingers and massaged it into my scalp, then

scrubbed from head to toe with a washcloth. After working the conditioner into a lather, I turned to the mirror on the back wall of the stall, finger-painted my face and neck white with shaving cream, and guided the blade slowly down the contours, sparing only the five-day-old mustache. (I couldn't imagine a Cuban woman being attracted to a man who didn't have some form of facial hair.) Finally, I rinsed off and reached for the faucet.

Standing in front of the mirror, a towel wrapped around my waist, I slapped on some aftershave and brushed my teeth. I then gargled a cap full of mouthwash. En route to the dresser, I stopped at the closet and picked out a teal button-down shirt and gray slacks and spread them on the bed. A clean pair of boxer-briefs replaced the towel. After slipping into the shirt and slacks, I laced up secondhand, high-top Diesels and returned to the restroom, where I spit out the mouthwash, ran styling cream through my hair, and took a last look at the mirror. The paperboy cleans up pretty well, I thought, before collecting my keys and wallet from the dresser and a backpack and Mini Maglite from the living-room closet.

The worst thing you can do when picking up a date is arrive more than fifteen minutes late. The second-worst thing you can do is be early. (You don't want to appear overanxious and she may not be ready and you don't want to rush her.) On the way to Sofia's, I recalled this personal philosophy and slowed down, arriving at her complex a few minutes after seven. I wondered if any of the tenants would recognize me. Probably not, I decided, parking my beaming car—the trusty steed cleans up pretty well, too—in an uncovered spot and straightening my collar. Before killing the engine, I rolled down the passenger-side window.

I approached Sofia's apartment not with a paper but a bilingual book of poems by Neruda. I knocked on the door and she answered promptly, dressed in a royal-blue blouse, long black skirt, and combat boots. Her hair seemed even straighter and shinier than usual. A hint of makeup accentuated her flawless features. We hugged, then I handed her the book and she scanned the cover and smiled. She thumbed to the inscription: "I'll read the English versions to you if you read the Spanish ones to me." She laughed, said "Of course," and set the book on a stool just inside the doorway.

As we neared the Camry, I walked ahead of Sofia and opened the passenger-side door as discreetly as possible when using the interior handle. She thanked me, unaware that the exterior handle was broken. I closed the door and circled the car swiftly.

"I came up with a theme for the night," I said, starting south on Swenson.

"Oh yeah."

"Yeah. Everything in this city is themed, so I thought, Why not?"

"What's the theme?"

"Highs and lows and everything in between," I said, turning into the driveway of Swenson Street Mobile Home Park and pulling up in a small lot outside the gate.

I popped the trunk, climbed out of the car. Leaning over the well, Sofia standing at my side, I opened a package of athletic socks that I bought at Target and stuffed several pair into the backpack. I then pulled the Maglite from my pocket and cut it on. A pale, blue-purple circle illuminated the route book. After returning the

flashlight to my pocket, I shook into the backpack, closed the trunk, and turned to Sofia.

“You ready to meet Popeye?”

On Monday, hearing the paper land on her doormat, Sofia hurried outside and said hello; we talked for half an hour in the shade of the stairway leading to the second level. She complained about her job at the mall, noted that she preferred the dry heat of the desert to the humidity of the Caribbean, and described her latest art project, a series of sketches related to “the displaced.” Her art project led to the topic of homelessness and I told her about Popeye and where he lived. I added that there’s an underground (literally) art gallery downstream from his camp. Sofia’s eyes popped and her mouth opened wide. She placed her hand on my bicep, then insisted I take her down there. I said I would, but had not brought it up since. The only clue I’d given her about our plans for the evening was a text that read: “Wear something appropriate for an upscale restaurant, but shoes you don’t mind getting dirty.”

In the weed-lined lot in front of the trailer park, the Strip swallowing the sun, Sofia didn’t flinch. “Hell yeah!” she said, without a hint of apprehension.

I ushered her across a strip of desert and accessed the sidewalk of Swenson Street. Thirty paces north, my sneakers strayed from the concrete and found compact sand, which rolled to a natural wash bottomed with a stream of runoff. A team of ducks drifted on the surface. As Sofia and I angled down the embankment and settled on a dry shelf, the ducks zigzagged upstream. We turned downstream, facing three eight-by-eight tunnels that shot under Swenson.

“I’m going to see who’s around and make sure it’s safe,” I said, removing the flashlight. “I’ll be right back.”

Sofia nodded and I disappeared into the right tunnel, which was mostly dry, and discovered Popeye reclining in his camp, smoking a cigarette. I asked him if it was OK if we said hello. “Come on down,” he replied, exhaling. On the way out of the tunnel, I studied Sofia’s silhouette, which was framed by the inlet, and wondered if anyone as beautiful and stylish as her had set foot in this ditch.

“He said we could come in.” I waved Sofia forward and she followed me into the darkness.

A thread of water weaved down the left side of the tunnel. The right side was cluttered with a row of camps varying in sophistication. The first camp consisted of a cardboard mat and a milk crate that served as a nightstand, the second a queen-sized mattress balanced on cinderblocks, a tattered La-Z-Boy chair, and elevated storage space (two grocery carts covered with rust). An obese man wearing only boxer shorts occupied the next camp—a tangle of blankets spread across the floor. Flat on his back, leg and chest hair contrasting his fair skin, he was snoring. Sofia and I tiptoed past him, rounded a bend, and approached Popeye’s camp: a soiled, twin-sized mattress and two plastic bags bulging with clothes. His cardboard sign was propped against the wall, beneath a collage of warped and faded porno pictures.

“Sorry about that,” he said to Sofia, referring to the photos. “It gets lonely down here. They keep me company.”

“No problem,” she said. “I don’t mind.”

“Thanks for letting us come in,” I said.

He surveyed the floor, which was littered with cigarette butts and miniature zip-lock bags. "It's a mess. If it don't rain soon, I'll have to clean it up myself."

"How'd it go today?" I said, pointing at the sign. "You make any money?"

"Twenty or twenty-five bucks, but it's all gone. I ate at Jack in the Box, then bought a pack of cigarettes at the store. On my way out, I sat down at a video-poker machine. Should've never done that."

"No luck?"

"Not a bit. The machine just chewed my money up." He took a pull from the cigarette, then flicked the butt into the water. "Gambling's the worst addiction of all. Sometimes the dopeman is dry or you can't find him, but that machine's there twenty-four/seven."

Uncharacteristically, Sofia was quiet. But when Popeye and I finished catching up, she asked him if it's dangerous to live down here. Only when it rains, he said.

"This tunnel can fill up in five minutes flat." His voice, accompanied by the snoring, echoed in the drain. "My buddy Dennis, who stays at the front of the tunnel, got washed away last year and had to crawl out of a manhole. He's scared to sleep back here now."

Sofia also asked him about his background. He repeated what he'd told me—he's from Alabama, his wife drove off in the tractor-trailer they owned, and he has been homeless since—then added that he's a grandfather, but has never met his grandchildren. He pulled a flip phone from his pocket and showed us a photo of his youngest grandkid, a newborn girl with dark, matted hair and big, black eyes.

“That’s Kayla,” he said, beaming. “I hope to hold her one day. If not in this life, another.”

As the conversation waned, I asked Popeye if he needed socks. “Always,” he said. I shook out of the backpack and handed him several pair, requesting that keep what he needs and share the rest with his neighbors.

“I know the family next door could use ’em.” He motioned toward the far wall. “They just got evicted and don’t have nothing.”

Sofia and I said we’d try to return tomorrow with food and clothes, then I aimed the flashlight downstream. The beam died in the darkness.

“We’re going to check out the art gallery,” I told Popeye.

“All right,” he said. “Y’all be careful.”

Sofia and I started downstream. The three tunnels opened into a wide chamber, runoff blackening the left half of the floor. We walked alongside the stream, the smell of mildew pervading the air, and occasionally glanced over our shoulders. The silhouettes of camps cluttered the inlets, creating a skyline that replaced the Strip.

Beyond the bathroom—brown, Jackson Pollock-style stains on the walls and crumpled napkins on the floor—the tunnel merged with another, forming a channel that was thirty feet wide and fifteen feet high. We entered the channel and paused beneath a ceiling grate. The dying light of the day angled in through the bars, illuminating the right wall, which was alive with color. Approaching the wall, I played the flashlight over a yellow, black, and red mural that stretched from floor to ceiling; Sofia and I studied its intricate symbols and letters for a few minutes, but

couldn't decipher them. Farther downstream, past a tangle of tumbleweeds, we discovered an anime girl with softball-sized eyes, a dab of a nose, and a pixie haircut, who seemed to regard us with as much curiosity as we regarded her. A tablet inscribed "Hello Darkness My Old Friend/I've Come to Talk with You Again" brushed against her bare shoulder.

Wild-style graffiti covered every inch of the wall—a seemingly never-ending scroll of text. We followed it until it degenerated into artless scrawls. We then splashed across the stream and, stepping over empty spray-paint cans, started back toward the inlets along the opposite wall.

* * *

Forty-five minutes later, Sofia and I were sitting in the dining room of the Stratosphere tower's Top of the World restaurant. Our noses and foreheads glistened with sweat, our shoes were caked with mud. We looked at each other and laughed, surprised that we'd made it past the maître d' and acknowledging the absurd contrast between our first two destinations.

On cue, the waiter returned and set two glasses of wine on the table. Sofia and I raised our glasses.

"The sky's the limit," I said, looking into her eyes.

The glasses clinked above the din of the dining room and we sipped the wine and then turned toward the slanted, plate-glass window. A thousand feet below, the valley floor spread out like a picnic blanket. The room slowly revolved: the faint outline of I-15 ... the splash of neon marking Fremont Street ... the string of pearls approaching McCarran airport. Lambs, I thought, being led to the slaughter. I found

Paradise Road and followed it south to the paper route. While the newer parts of town were gridded and well lit, the route was dark and indistinct. Popeye is down there somewhere, being swallowed by the shadows, trying to keep the demons at bay with the faint glow of his crack pipe.

At last, the Strip—a kaleidoscope of colors bruised by abandoned hotel-casino projects—came into view. As we stared down the throat of the fire-breathing dragon, I flashed back to my first aerial view of the boulevard from the fourteenth floor of Circus Circus. It seemed so boundless and wild and full of possibilities. I felt like I was looking into the future. Now, I felt like I was dwelling on the past and, though still profound in scope, all I saw was a collection of gaudy buildings elbowing for room along the old highway to L.A.

“Everything looks so calm from up here,” said Sofia.

It was as if we were staring at the surface of a sleeping sea. Or at Earth from outer space. The colors and distance hid the harsh realities of life—the banal, degrading, and heartless things we do on a daily basis. We were left to imagine what was going on beneath those dark roofs, behind those mirrored windows, inside of those toy cars.

A body plummeted past the plate-glass window. Sofia and I flinched, then spotted the cable wires. It wasn't another Stratosphere swan dive, but a customer of the SkyJump, a controlled free fall from the top of the tower. Our lips red with wine, Sofia and I laughed.

The plates were being bussed and we were finishing our second glass of wine and Sofia was talking about the tunnels and how she identified with Popeye and the

other inhabitants. Since leaving Cuba, she said, she has felt homeless. Hands carving the mood-lit air, she segued to the art gallery and how it reminded her of cave paintings—“So prehistoric!” she declared—and I wanted to hold her hand, but was afraid she’d stop talking. (Her arms and mouth seemed intricately linked.) I leaned forward and placed my palm on the table and her hand found mine, a bird returning to its nest, and all the wattage of the Strip was routed through my body. She kept talking, illustrating with her free hand.

* * *

We were a hundred feet above Fremont Street, hurtling toward the mouth of the dragon. I made out the Binion’s sign flashing on the horizon—ten fifty-three p.m., ninety-one degrees—then everything started to spin. With each rotation, I saw Sofia’s silhouette: hair horizontal, hands clutching the strap, a duffel bag containing her purse hanging from the harness. She, too, was spinning. We picked up speed and were swallowed by the dragon and met by the heat of more than twelve million lights. The tourists, vendors, buskers, panhandlers, and costumed characters at our feet didn’t seem to notice us, as we whisked past the Fremont and Four Queens and then Binion’s and the Golden Nugget. I high-fived Vegas Vic. Sofia shot under Sassy Sally’s leg. As we approached the landing platform, which was occupied by men in matching fluorescent-green shirts, a pit formed in my stomach. We were moving too fast and couldn’t stop.

Chapter Eighteen

Sofia placed my hand on her scar and guided it slowly up and down. She released my hand, inviting me to explore the scar on my own. It was soft and cold and, unlike the rest of her body, devoid of sweat. It took several seconds for my fingers to travel from top to bottom—the scar is at least six inches long, I speculated—and while it was smooth on the surface, I could feel the splinters of her breastbone beneath the skin.

After contemplating the scar with my eyes closed, like a blind man reading braille, I propped myself up on my elbow and looked at Sofia. She was laying on the bed—naked, hands at her side, feet shoulder-width apart—her petite form perfectly proportioned. In the spectral light of her bedroom, the scar appeared paler than the rest of her body. It bisected her breasts, reminding me of a geometric diagram that confused me in middle school or a crop formation attributed to aliens. In the tunnel, she'd told me the pig valve works "almost too well." Indeed, I could feel her heart pounding, and not only was her core warm, but so were her hands and feet.

Beyond her bony left hip, the Neruda book was perched perilously on the edge of the bed. I recalled a stanza I read to her moments earlier:

"It is not so much light that falls
over the world
extended by your body
its suffocating snow,
as brightness, pouring itself out of you,
as if you were"

burning inside.☐

Under your skin the moon is alive.”

Chapter Nineteen

Mr. Bo's hat was angled up, showing his scar, and his glasses balanced on the tip of his nose. In his gloved hands he held a copy of the paper. He squinted over the frame of the glasses at a double-deck headline on the back page: "U.S. Military Spends More Than \$20 Billion on AC in Iraq and Afghanistan."

"In one year," I said to him. "Can you believe that?"

He reassembled the paper and placed it on the trunk of his car, next to the mail. He then pushed the glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Have I told you about my friend Jerry?"

He had told me about Jerry, but it was a hundred and four degrees and the shade of the carport provided refuge and I had my sweet tea in hand. "No, I don't think so."

He leaned back against the trunk. "Jerry was a lifer in the school district and had done everything. He was a track coach, a counselor, and an excellent English teacher, probably the best teacher of *The Catcher in the Rye* I've ever seen. The kids loved anything he taught—*The Call of the Wild*, *1984*, several Shakespeare plays, none of which were *Romeo and Juliet*. He despised that play and taught the histories instead. Unlike me, he was quiet and easy going, but we shared the same philosophy. Kids who were failing every other class usually got Bs or Cs in ours.

"Jerry started in junior high and worked his way up to high school. He was with the district thirty-three years and had seen many changes, from the simple days of the eighties to the growth of the nineties to the reformist movement of the past decade. As his career was winding down, things got bad. We were going

through a principal every two years and each of them had their own unique brand of torture. They'd bring in advisers and consultants from out of state—and you know how particular Nevada is—as if we were a bunch of bumpkins who didn't know anything about education. That's one of the great tragedies of this city: the smart, well-meaning people get run over by small-minded, know-nothing psychopaths.”

He paused and stared at the colorless landscape of the trailer park, as if recalling every principal who'd pushed him around. They all seemed to be gathered behind a stand of dying palm trees. His hands hung below his waist, entwined, and he twiddled his thumbs. I sipped the tea and thought about the post-merger regime at *CityBeat*.

“Jerry ended up leaving the district?” I said.

His thumbs stopped moving. “The administrative bullshit finally got to him. He had two years till retirement, but said, ‘Fuck it. I’m going to Iraq.’”

“He chose a war zone over the school district?”

“Yep. I was upset about it, because I would've been crushed if anything happened to him. But he thought it was relatively safe—he was in the Green Zone working as a media liaison—and he believed in the mission. Jerry and I have different views on the war, but he's a real military man. He's not the John Wayne, gung-ho type.”

“Did he regret his decision?”

Mr. Bo shook his head. “Not at all. He put in his time and paid his dues at the school district, but the environment was too toxic. One of his favorite movies, and mine as well, is *Office Space*. In the end, I think he felt like a character in that film. He

was burned out and didn't want to go to work anymore. Now he's surrounded by people who are bright and well trained and he says the military's efficient. They give you a job to do and ask one question: What do you need to accomplish it? If the school district did that, teachers would be in heaven."

"He's still in the military?"

"Yeah. He works part time helping to train people in public relations. A few years ago, the school district had an opening in PR and he applied. He thought it'd be nice to finish his last two years in a job like that. He thought he might like it more than teaching. Also, it was a significant raise and you retire at your last salary, so it would've increased his pension. The interview went well. He showed them his portfolio—he taught journalism, too—and they were impressed. 'Wow, you must've had a great journalism lab at your school!' 'We didn't have a lab,' he said. 'We did this on my desktop computer.'

"But it was all for show. He didn't get the job. They'd already hired a friend of an administrator and were just going through the motions."

I shook my head.

"And that wasn't even the biggest insult he suffered at the school district," continued Mr. Bo, shifting on the trunk. "He was in the Reserve and was sent to Bosnia for a year on a peacekeeping mission. When you're called for military duty, you're guaranteed to get your job back, and the time you missed counts toward retirement. It's federal law. Well, when he got back, he went to see the human-resources director and she took off her glasses, looked across her desk, and said:

‘Mr. Cunningham, you don’t really expect us to pay for your year vacation in Bosnia, do you?’”

Mr. Bo and I laughed sarcastically. I took another sip of tea, leaned against the trailer, and said, “Are any of your former students serving overseas?”

He crossed his arms. “Yeah, but I don’t talk to them about it much. They tell me where they’re going and check in with me when they get back, and that’s all I need to know.”

He removed his glasses and began to clean the lenses with his handkerchief. “One of my principals once that told me that a military recruiter was going to speak to my class. I said, ‘Over my dead body.’ That led to a big administrative battle and she wrote me up for insubordination. I don’t have a problem with other teachers letting recruiters into their classroom, but my motto is: my class, my rules. I’d feel culpable if a kid was recruited on my time and got killed in action.”

“Have any of your former students been killed in the wars?”

“One was three or four weeks ago,” he said, putting on the glasses and turning toward me. “In fact, it was covered by the *Daily Express*.” He looked over his shoulder at the paper.

As Mr. Bo shared some background information about his former student, Christian Boyd, I recalled details from the *Daily Express* story: Boyd had been in the Army for four years ... he cracked jokes in foxholes to put his fellow soldiers at ease ... when his patrol was ambushed in Kandahar province, he stepped on an IED ... he was the last U.S. soldier killed in Afghanistan in July, the deadliest month for American troops in the ten-year war ... he was twenty-two years old.

Mr. Bo painted a vivid portrait of Boyd—gangly, acne-faced, thin mustache, prominent nose. I could see him walking up the driveway in his ROTC uniform, flight cap folded in his hand. His spiky, blond-brown hair shimmered in the light and he smiled self-consciously.

Boyd was raised by a procession of foster parents, explained Mr. Bo. This, he quickly pointed out, reveals more about the foster-care system than his former student, who was “a good kid.” Halfway through tenth grade, he was adopted by a couple who rented an apartment off Nellis Boulevard and he enrolled in Eldorado High, his seventh school since kindergarten. The following year, he took Mr. Bo’s U.S. history class.

“He once said, in front of everyone, ‘I want to be a gynecologist, so I can get a lot of pussy!’ As a teacher, you don’t always have a response. That was one of those times.”

After Boyd graduated, Mr. Bo saw him occasionally at home football games. He said the Army had helped mature Boyd and he’d hoped to use the GI Bill to attend college and study business. He planned to propose to his girlfriend, who also graduated from Eldorado.

“A loss like that is tough for a teacher, because you wonder what you could’ve done. What if I’d pushed him in a different direction? What if I’d encouraged him a little more? There’s a lot of second-guessing. The military can be a good option for some of our students. Problem is, you don’t know if it’ll lead to a long, comfortable career or them getting their legs blown off 8,000 miles from home.”

I exhaled, placed my free hand into my pocket, and looked down.

“Hopefully Chris, like Jerry, believed in the mission, but I’m not sure he did. I got the impression he was just a kid looking for something to do after high school. And they wonder why I don’t allow recruiters in my classroom. They can write me up until they get arthritis, but I won’t compromise on that. I’ll block the door with my own frail body if I have to.”

My straw made a slurping sound and I shook the cup. A few surviving ice cubes rattled in the styrofoam container. I turned to Mr. Bo. “I should get going.” Starting down the driveway, I smiled. “Enjoy the paper.”

He collected the mail and paper from the top of the trunk and glanced at the front page. “I don’t dislike it, but I wish the writing was better. It doesn’t bother that it’s conservative. Bill Buckley and I disagreed most of the time, but I liked to read him, because he was a craftsman. Smaller local papers like *CityBeat* pay their writers half of what the *Daily Express* does and the writing’s twice as good. For a major-metro paper, it has piss-poor writers and editors.”

I pulled up at the end of the driveway and shrugged. “Why do you subscribe to it?”

“For the ‘Time Capsule.’ It gives me events and dates to talk about with my students and is a conversation starter.”

“There are online almanacs,” I said, over the roof of my car.

“I like to see it in print. I’m an old dog.” He held up the paper and smiled.

“And if I didn’t subscribe to it, who would visit me, Dylan? Who would I talk to?”

Chapter Twenty

The road ahead, perfectly straight and visible for miles, was deserted. I checked the rearview. More blank asphalt. The speedometer read eighty, but the Camry didn't appear to be moving; the dotted yellow line and sand and creosote seemed to be sliding underneath it. Dwarfed by sandstone mountains and robot-like utility poles, a freight train inched across the driver-side window. Sofia (not a stack of papers) occupied the passenger seat—Ray-Bans, hair whipping in the wind, bare feet perched on the dashboard. When a mountain pass swallowed the train, her hair was the only thing moving in my field of view.

She leaned forward and squinted at the side mirror, then turned toward me.

“Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear,” she said, over Nina Simone.

“So I've heard,” I said, smiling.

“I like it when everyday things have another meaning.”

A diamond-shaped yellow sign was rapidly approaching. I pointed at the sign. Sofia looked.

“Rough road ahead,” she said, and we laughed.

The road trip, like most I've taken from Las Vegas, arose spontaneously. On Friday, Sofia accompanied me on the route and helped roll and deliver the papers. Toward the end of the route, near Paradise and Sierra Vista, she popped up in the rearview mirror (she sat in the back, allowing me to throw through the passenger-side window), war paint on her face, and suggested we get out of town this weekend. I was starting to really like her and had not been observing my rule of

escaping Vegas every three months, so I told her about Great Basin National Park, which I'd read about in the paper. She was intrigued, especially by Lehman Caves and the stargazing. When I left her apartment that night, we agreed that I'd pick her up at nine the next morning.

Now it was noon and the floorboard of the back seat cradled cashews, granola bars, and bottled water (for me and Sofia ... and the radiator) and we were on U.S. 93 somewhere between Panaca and Pioche. Sun Kil Moon droned from my phone. Approaching another unmarked town, I slowed down. The town, which we passed through in less than a minute, consisted of a church, law firm, airport, cemetery, taxidermy shop, and a handful of ranches.

"Let's play a game," said Sofia, leaning on the center console. "We have to come up with a movie idea using all the places in that town." She looked down, brow furrowed, then raised her head. "A rancher's daughter and a boy from church go hunting. She shoots a deer and he has it mounted for her." She paused. "A few years later, they get married and the attorney processes the paperwork." Her index finger found her lips. "Then, at her grandmother's funeral in the cemetery, they realize they don't want to live in this town forever and they pack their stuff and fly to L.A."

"L.A.?"

"Yeah, why not?"

I didn't respond.

"Your turn," she said.

I looked out the driver-side window and then at the road. "Two ranchers are in a land dispute. One shoots the other and has him stuffed by the taxidermist, who's

a close friend." I paused. "The murderer tries to catch a flight to Vegas, but he's arrested at the airport and hires the attorney to defend him." Another look out the window. "That same day, the dead rancher's memorial is held at the church and he's buried in the cemetery, as the credits roll."

"I like it," she said.

"Let's pitch it to the Coen brothers," I said.

On a long and lonely stretch north of Pioche, Sofia fell asleep. We passed a dirt road that led to a gravel pit—a mountain that had been flattened and hollowed. The beauty, mystery, and possibility of the desert are alluring, but people can't accept it for what it is. We have to change it, make it more demure. We have to control it. I looked at Sofia, whose mouth was open. She's the desert, I thought. You can't change her; love her for who she is or leave her.

My thoughts ricocheted to a litmus test I'd used on previous partners: Could I live with her in a small town, away from friends, family, and the heartbeat of a big city, and be content? I put Sofia to this test, using the town we based the game on, and decided I could be satisfied. Working overtime at the *Daily Express*, I occasionally delivered papers to the Strip and felt all alone among the masses. But here, with one other (slumbering) person in a ten-mile radius, I felt complete.

As if stirred by my thoughts, Sofia sat up and smiled. She kissed me on the cheek. Suddenly, the car was driving itself down a straightaway and I was five hundred feet tall and striding across the desert, scorpions and cattle skulls crunching beneath my bare feet. I ripped the power lines from the poles, absorbing the shock, and jump-roped. Eye level with the mountaintops, I alternated feet: left-

right-left-right-left-right. I worked the left foot for several beats, then the right. Side to side. Forward and backward. Double unders. Pushing a cloud away from my face, I let go of the lines and they continued to twirl: left-left-left-right-right-right.

“I have to pee,” said Sofia. A frown had supplanted her smile and she was clutching her crotch with both hands. Shortly, a yellow-orange light on the dashboard drew my attention away from her. The car was low on gas. I hadn’t seen a rest stop or service station for more than fifty miles and the prospect of one appearing beyond the looming mountain range seemed slim. U.S. 93 dead-ended at a wind farm. Parallels to *Don Quixote* danced in the air and, without coming to a complete stop, I careened east on U.S. 6—Sofia’s bladder full, the needle on E. Like a mirage, a gas station took shape on the left side of the road, just outside the park entrance.

After eating a late lunch at the visitor center, we toured Lehman Caves. A park ranger—five-foot-eight, mid-twenties, clean cut, flat nose, round stomach—escorted us and a German family of four from chamber to chamber, while reciting facts: the caves began to form hundreds of millions of years ago beneath an ocean; they were discovered in 1885 by miner and rancher Absalom Lehman; year round, they’re fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Sofia and I found the stalactites and shield formations intriguing, but soon grew bored. Handrails, smooth trails, Hollywood-style lighting—the Park Service stopped just short of making the caverns wheelchair accessible. It tamed the beast. Compared to our descent into the drains, this was Disneyland, and we rebelled like teens at a bad movie, using it as an excuse to hold hands, warm each other’s arms and legs, and kiss in the shadows.

For the second time in two weeks, in less than an hour, Sofia and I went from the bowels of the earth to the stratosphere. We were standing in the shadow of Wheeler Peak (elevation 13,063 feet) in a bristlecone pine grove. She was studying one pine, I another. It was stripped and gnarled and, according to a nearby sign, more than 4,000 years old. (Its needles were older than me.) I tried to visualize the world in 2000 BC and, though a history major, came up with only questions: Was that the Stone Age? Bronze? Iron? Were the Romans around? Had humans migrated to what is now Nevada? When did a hand first touch this twisted trunk? Another sign added that bristlecone pines can remain standing for hundreds of years after they die. This I could comprehend. After getting laid off, I appeared to be alive, though my core was hollow and rotted. I was a dead man standing. But now I could feel the energy of the soil flowing into my feet and up my legs and to my midsection. I could feel the sunlight bringing my limbs back to life.

As we coasted down Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive, I saw Sofia in the hawks circling overhead. We drove to Baker, Nevada, in search of food and lodging, and I saw her in the six-year-old girl running from her mom in the lobby of the Silver Spur Inn. We returned to the park at night and pulled into Mather Overlook; sitting on the hood of the car, reclining against the windshield, I saw her in the stars.

“What’s that?” she said, pointing up at three bright, blue-white spots that were perfectly aligned.

“Orion. That’s his belt and that’s his bow.” I traced them with my index finger.

Identifying constellations isn’t one of my strengths. In Vegas, they’re drawn on the sand not the sky. But the dark night and high elevation of Great Basin

provided a perfect window to the universe—the stars, planets, and satellites standing out as if on a blackboard. Anyone could impersonate Copernicus here.

“Stars twinkle and planets reflect light steadily,” I said, quoting from an exhibit at the visitor center. I hoped Sofia was a planet, but sensed she was a star.

“What planet is that?” she said, staring at a pearl above the horizon.

“Cuba.”

She laughed.

“Venus, I think.”

Tilting my head back and taking in the swath of gas, dust, and stars, I felt like I was in the womb of a pregnant woman. I glanced over my shoulder. Sofia and I were the only people on the overlook—the sole spectators at a Stones concert—but we weren’t alone. As animals rustled around in the brush, Sofia squeezed my hand. A shooting star streaked across the sky.

Uninspired by the options in Baker, we decided to drive to Ely. This was a gamble. It was after ten and Ely was seventy miles away and, without Internet access, we had no idea what the mining town had to offer. Halfway there, on U.S. 50 (“The Loneliest Road in America”), the trip reached its nadir. Our phones were dead and the car was quiet. Sofia sat motionless, staring blankly out the passenger-side window. My mission had shifted from having fun to getting there alive; I was a trucker trying to deliver a load.

For several miles, a light had been centered in the rearview mirror. Assuming it was a motorcycle, I’d paid it little attention, but it suddenly struck me as odd: bigger and brighter than a typical bike light and higher off the ground. It was tough

to tell if it was tailgating or miles away. In that sense, it reminded me of the stars above Mather Overlook. I slowed down and sped up, but the light didn't appear to get any closer or farther. I asked Sofia if she could tell what it was. She glanced at the side mirror, then turned around and shielded her eyes with her hand.

"I don't know," she said sedately.

We drove a few more miles without solving the mystery. Finally, I pulled over and Sofia and I stared into the side mirrors. Seconds passed, but the vehicle (or whatever it was) didn't. In unison, we climbed out of the car and stood in the jaws of the open doors, the light hovering at an indeterminate distance. A tractor-trailer approached from the east and another from the west, and as they converged on the light, it vanished.

"Did you see that?" I asked Sofia.

She climbed into the car.

As we continued toward Ely, the light reappeared. My eyes shifted between the road and rearview, Sofia's between the floorboard and side mirror, but our mouths remained still. Our thoughts were too loud to speak over. I was waiting for the light to reposition itself above the car and hoist it through a hatch and flash off to Andromeda or the other galaxy visible from the overlook. The thought didn't faze me. The galaxies looked inviting and I was burned out on Las Vegas. But another peek at the mirror brought me back to the Milky Way: As bored teens in suburban Atlanta, my friends and I bombarded passing cars with tennis balls, then absconded into the woods. In White Pine County, Nevada, where the legend of Area 51 is well known, teens simulate UFOs to spook the tourists, I suspected. I also pictured a

group of drone pilots crowded into the ground-control station of an Air Force base, surrounded by joysticks, monitors, and empty beer cans, laughing hysterically.

A leaning, bullet-riddled sign emerged from the darkness. "Ely Elev 6,435." I, again, checked the rearview and the light was gone. As I slowed down and cracked my window, the tension dissolved and I wondered if anyone had ever been so relieved to reach this city limit. Ely was bigger and more active than we expected, which lightened the mood even more. The Loneliest Road in America became Main Street and we passed banks, mom-and-pop shops, and humble hotel-casinos, before approaching a six-story, brick building awash in pink neon. The architecture screamed 1920s, the marquee "99 Cent Margaritas!" With little provocation, the car veered into the lot.

The interior of the Hotel Nevada proved to be as striking as the exterior. Working our way to the front desk, duffel bags slung over our shoulders, we were watched by mounted deer and moose and statues of miners and railroad men. Low-hanging lanterns added to the rustic, claustrophobic ambience. I reserved the sixty-dollar room with my credit card and we checked into the Cary Grant suite (presumably, he stayed at the hotel while working on a film), then we returned to the casino and sat at the bar. Sofia ordered a Stella; I had a Sierra Nevada. Hours later, having chatted with a biker and a smokejumper at the bar and lost a total of a hundred dollars at the blackjack table, we were sitting side by side, red eyed and pinching cigarettes, at The Hangover slot machines. I mimicked a motion that's customary in Vegas casinos: puff and pull. The reels spun and stopped, but the

symbols didn't line up. Mr. Chow mocked me. Without enough money in the machine to take another pull, I cashed out.

"That's a good title for a country song," I said, looking down at the curled piece of paper. "'Ten-Cent Ticket at the Hotel Nevada.'"

On the way back to the room, Sofia and I stopped at the café and ordered a pizza. We fed each other slices in bed while watching an old black-and-white movie and, for a faint moment, I felt like Grant: gallant, confident, adventurous. A leading man. Perhaps he frolicked with a starlet in this room, I speculated, offering Sofia another slice. The next thing I remembered was waking up to an OxiClean infomercial, in the clothes I wore to the bar, and a lavender light framing the window shade. In her same clothes, Sofia sprawled across the middle of the mattress. The pizza box balanced on the far edge, ending the fantasy. My head returned to the pillow and I promptly fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-One

The following Monday, I, once again, found myself making the walk of shame. Abused and neglected cars spread out behind me in alluvial-fan formation and in front of me loomed the loading-dock door. The heat intensified with each step I took up the ramp. Entering the shadows of the warehouse, I tried to block out my surroundings and preserve the zen afforded by the road trip, but I stumbled on Ethan, who was admonishing a rookie carrier for forgetting his mail. He's the antithesis of nature, I decreed, sidestepping him with my head down. As I tossed the bundles into a cart, a voice from the depths of the warehouse shattered the serenity I'd found at Great Basin National Park. It was Terry. Curious about what he was saying, I steered the cart toward my table, passing a family of four and a thirty-something man wearing a Dodgers cap and ankle monitor. Terry's voice became clear.

"The folks in the Lower Ninth Ward got hit the hardest and they were already dealing with poverty and racism," he said. Several carriers, including Mr. Powell, were within earshot of him, but he didn't appear to be addressing anyone in particular. "The question is, How are those people doing? Vegas odds say they ain't doing well. Ain't that right, Dylan?"

I let go of the cart, which parked itself next to my table. After fishing a bundle from the well, I flipped it onto the tabletop and popped the plastic tie. "What's that?" I said.

"It's the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and there's not a word about it in the paper. That's, of course, because little progress has been made in New Orleans.

They don't want to publicize failure. Also, in order to help the folks in the Ninth Ward, we'd have to tax the rich, and the boss men at the *Daily Express* don't want that."

"What anniversary is it?" I said, glancing at the date on the front page, then rolling the paper as I did the math in my head.

"Sixth," said Terry, while I was subtracting.

"Newspapers like to focus on round numbers, like five or ten or twenty."

"Here's some round numbers for 'em: Category Five, one hundred *billion* dollars of damage, a thousand dead."

"So the paper should publish updates on New Orleans every year?"

"Every year? They should do it every day."

I shook my head. "That's not practical, man."

"I'm not talking about what's practical; I'm talking about what's right." He pitched a paper into his cart. "But don't take my word for it. Listen to Mother Nature. Hurricane Irene is hitting the predominantly white East Coast as we speak. It's as if Mother Nature is saying, 'Oh, you don't care about black folks. Let's see if you care about whites.'"

"Katrina didn't affect only blacks. More than fifty percent of the people who died were white, Asian, or Hispanic."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"It was in the paper."

He held up a rolled copy of the *Daily Express*. "This paper?"

"Yeah, but it was a syndicated story."

“What percentage of the people who died were black?”

“Forty-nine, I think.”

“Forty-nine? As in just under fifty? I find that suspicious. Even if that number is accurate, what difference does it make? It’s obvious racism played a role in the rescue effort, rebuilding, and media coverage. You know damn well that if a hurricane had hit Orange County, we’d be hearing about it every year if not every day.”

“He may have a point there,” drawled Mr. Powell from five tables away.

“Look how they’re covering Irene,” pleaded Terry, holding up Section A as if it were a smoking gun. “Wall to wall.”

I, again, glanced at the front page. “Amid all this coverage of Irene, there isn’t any mention of Katrina?” I shook the section loose from the rest of the paper and began to leaf through it.

“You know who runs the *Daily Regret*,” said Terry, raising his voice. “Two old white guys who remind me of Randolph and Mortimer from *Trading Places*. You think it’s in their best interest to cover Katrina? They know the only way to help them folks in N’Orleans is to tax the rich, cut the military budget, and give that money to Habitat for Humanity, so they can go in there and rebuild homes. Imagine if the Pentagon was funded the same way as Habitat for Humanity ... if it couldn’t start a war unless it met its quota at a bake sale ... generals standing on the sidewalk waving towels, trying to get you to pull into their carwash. We wasted all that money invading and occupying Iraq, which this paper supported from the start. The nation-building going on there should be going on in New Orleans instead.”

He scanned the warehouse, searching for Ethan and the assistant managers—not to avoid a fight, but to start one.

“Forget Billy Ray Valentine,” he continued, invoking Eddie Murphy’s character in *Trading Places*. “The men that run this paper need to be visited by the ghosts from *A Christmas Carol*. Were they polite when they appeared at Scrooge’s house at two in the morning? Did they knock on the door and say, ‘Would you mind going on a spiritual journey?’ Hell no! They snatched his punk ass out of bed and said, ‘We have something to show you!’ That’s the attitude we need to take toward people who own media companies. Anything less, as the Right Guard commercial says, would be uncivilized.”

I pointed my index finger at fine print on the back page. “Katrina gets mentioned here, in the ‘Time Capsule’ section.”

Terry and Mr. Powell shook their heads.

“How’d you see that without a magnifying glass?” Terry laughed. “Sad thing is the editor probably considers that coverage. If he’s asked why they didn’t write about Katrina, he’ll point to that. I’d bet next month’s rent on it.”

I stopped rolling and turned around. “Rent? You live with your mom.”

Mr. Powell and a few carriers I don’t know by name laughed.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t pay rent,” said Terry, shrugging. “She charges me two hundred dollars a month.”

In my eight years in Vegas, I’ve returned to Atlanta for Christmas twice. I’ve never gone home for Thanksgiving. A perennial refugee, I’ve celebrated that holiday at casino buffets and girlfriends’ homes and, two years ago, I prepared hot plates

and handed them out to the homeless on my route. Last Thanksgiving, discovering that I didn't have plans, Terry invited me to his house. After hesitating (I didn't want to intrude), I accepted the invite and was surprised that the most radical black guy I knew in Las Vegas lived in Summerlin, one of the city's whitest suburbs. Terry shared the sparsely appointed, two-bedroom duplex with his mother and younger half brother Marvin. As Terry and I watched pro wrestling and passed a joint, Marvin, who was on his computer at the dining-room table, explained that Terry slept on the couch. Mom—short, stout, dark-skinned, and dressed in a nightgown and tube socks—barked orders from the kitchen: “Marvin, sprinkle some more pepper on that gravy” and “Bring me that damn joint, Terrance.” They obeyed apathetically.

The table set and the four of us seated, Mom, still in her nightgown, delivered a rambling, freestyle prayer over the WWE commentary. Marvin bowed his head and closed his eyes. Reacting to every kick, block, and body slam on the TV, Terry ignored the prayer. The Southern-style feast assailed my nostrils, but before the cornbread made it around to me, the half brothers were locked in a cutthroat debate about Israel and Palestine. “You seem to think it's OK that the brains of Palestinian kids are being blown to pink soup,” said Terry. The debate spanned the main course, but Mom didn't appear to hear a word of it. It was as if she was eating in a soundproof booth. As Terry retrieved the pecan pie from the oven, its rich aroma replacing the deep-fried turkey's, the quarrel continued. It spilled into the living room, where the brothers began to wrestle. “Stop that now, ya hear?” snapped Mom, rinsing a pan in the kitchen sink. A lamp crashed to the carpet. I thanked Mom for

taking me in and for the unprecedented meal and, assured she had everything in control, I snatched my coat off the rack and slipped out the door.

The flashback faded out, the warehouse in. Terry was trying to convince the carriers that we need to picket the *Daily Express* and demand that it be worker-owned.

“Create such a popular mass movement that they *have* to acquiesce,” he shouted. “If you have hundreds of people surrounding the office, attracting attention and keeping things from getting done, they’re going to cave in. If that doesn’t work we can just bum-rush the show. Kick down the doors and say, ‘We’re taking over!’”

“What good’s that going to do?” wondered Mr. Powell.

“First of all, paperboys would make the same amount of money as the publisher. How’s that sound to you?” The men and women continued to roll their papers, heads down. “Also, the power would be shared equally. One worker, one vote. We’d have a say in every major decision the company makes. And we’d rotate jobs to keep things interesting. One month you’re delivering the paper, Mr. Powell, the next you’re working the press. Dylan could deliver one month and edit the next. Minimum wage versus an equal cut. Taking orders versus voting. One skill versus many. There’s no comparison, in my mind. It’s like coach versus first class.”

Terry paused. His words echoed in the rafters. “But there is a catch,” he continued.

“Figured,” mumbled Mr. Powell.

“Democracy is not a spectator sport. You can’t have a successful worker-owned business if you’re a lazy motherfucker.” He looked around the warehouse

accusingly. "If you're the type of person who wants to sit on the couch all morning playing video games or watching 'The Price Is Right,' it ain't for you. You want to make as much money as the publisher? You got to work as many hours as him. No more of that three hours of work, eight hours of sleep, and thirteen hours of rest. You can't have it both ways, people."

He placed his last paper into his cart and pressed down the pile.

"I don't think we have to worry about that," I said. "Randy and Mortimer aren't going to be trading places with us anytime soon."

"If their old asses want to get into heaven they will," he said, glancing at his mail. "Or they better rewrite their wills and transfer their stocks to the employees of this company. It's the Scrooge thing. How else they going to avoid hell this late in the game?"

Mail curled in his hand, Terry pushed his cart to my table and pulled up. "You're right about one thing, though: They ain't going to do it willingly. People talk about crack and meth and heroin, but nothing's more addictive than the high life. You get that mansion, them fancy cars, fountain out front, pool out back. Once you get used to that, you're willing to do anything to keep it. All of a sudden someone comes along and says, 'Sorry, but because this company is now worker-owned, you can't afford that crib.' Basically, you've gone up to a crackhead and said we're taking all of your rock. They'll fight to the death over that."

Terry continued toward the back of the warehouse with his cart. "I don't know about y'all, but I'm spoiling for a fight." He stabbed his papers with the mail, which stood like a flag on claimed territory. "Let's get ready to rumble!" He let go of

the cart and shadowboxed. Hands returning to the cart, he chanted, "Hell no! Randolph and Mortimer have to go!" He pumped his fist in the air to punctuate the words. "No mo'! Randolph and Mortimer have to go!" He pounded on Mr. Powell's table. "Too po'! Randolph and Mortimer have to go!" Ethan emerged from a corner of the warehouse, clutching a box cutter, and approached Terry. As Ethan passed, Terry stared him down. "Fo' sho'! Randolph and Mortimer have to go!" Terry disappeared behind the curtain of light that covered the loading-dock door. "Reap, sow! Randolph and Mortimer have to go!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

September Fourth. My thirty-fifth birthday. And, according to the *Daily Express*, National Newspaper Carrier Day. (I'm not making this up.) The day, explained the paper, "honors Barney Flaherty, the first paperboy hired, in 1833, and all former and current newspaper carriers. Flaherty was hired on this date by Benjamin Day, publisher of the *New York Sun*." It went on to say that this marked the birth of the American newspaper industry as we know it, as Day debuted the *Sun*, which sold for a cent and relied on advertising not subscriptions. He also revolutionized the way papers were delivered, selling them by the bundle to "newsboys," who hawked them on the streets. It ended with a list of famous former carriers, including Harry Truman, John Wayne, Willie Mays, Warren Buffett, and Walt Disney.

The story, which I read shortly after arriving at Pacific Cove apartments, stayed with me as I weaved through the three hundred-unit complex. If a route's good enough for the greatest center fielder of all time, I thought as I parked beneath a rusted carport, it's good enough for me (though I conceded that Mays was most likely a child when he delivered papers). As I circled the gravel-filled pool, it dawned on me that Day's model was approaching its two hundredth birthday, but wouldn't live to see it. Reaching the back of the complex—cracked stucco, dirt yards, cars on cinder-blocks—I joked that it would've been nice if, in honor of National Newspaper Carrier Day, Ethan had decked the warehouse with balloons and streamers and let us eat cake.

One thought, however, haunted me the rest of the route and beyond: I was born on Newspaper Carrier Day. I tried to laugh it off, but couldn't. What a twisted

joke, a cruel irony. Is this my destiny? Will I ever escape the route? I planned to deliver it for six months to a year; it's been two and a half years and I'm no closer to turning in my route book. In Vegas, the things you want to last forever end and things you want to end last forever.

I flashed back to third grade and a scene that's fixed in my mind—green playground, brick school, blue sky. Sparked by a classmate's comments, I was contemplating the year 2000. It seemed so far away. I'll have a full-time job, be married with kids, and living in suburban Atlanta; this was fact not fancy. I could've sat on the swing for a week and not imagined that, more than a decade into the new millennium, I'd be single and delivering papers in the shadow of the Las Vegas Strip.

An image of Flaherty formed in my mind. He was roughly ten years old, with red hair and freckles, and wearing a tweed cap, suspenders, knickers, knee-high socks, and scuffed boots. A canvas bag hung from his shoulder. I'm a descendant of his, I thought while idling at a light, noting our Irish surnames and shared profession. An evolution poster appeared on the windshield, but instead of ape to man it portrayed Flaherty to me, and the gradually tall and erect profiles clutched a paper not a club. I'm the last of a breed that will soon be extinct.

Approaching Sofia's door, I noticed that it was bordered with balloons and streamers. What's the occasion? Newspaper Carrier Day? As I drew closer, I discovered that the door was dabbed with paper hearts, cupcakes, candles, and the numbers 3 and 5. A banner above the frame read, "Happy Birthday!" I dropped her newspaper and examined the decorations, which were handcrafted using construction paper, scissors, and colored pencils, then affixed to the door with

painter's tape. On the route, I live in the past and future. Unmoored, my mind drifts toward lost loves, bad beats, and *CityBeat* and a well-paying job, a committed relationship, contentment. This tribute by Sofia, who was at work, transported me to the present. I've been given flowers, plates of cookies, handwritten thank-you cards, and three-figure tips, but this was, by far, the most poignant thing anyone had done for me on the route.

Returning home, I reached into my mailbox and retrieved a glossy Las Vegas Hilton flier, which wished me a happy birthday and offered me an assortment of "gifts," including a twenty-five dollar sports bet match play. I wedged the flier under my free arm and reached deeper into the box, discovering an envelope from my parents. I opened it immediately, fingers smudging the flap. It contained a two hundred-dollar check and a card. In looping, cursive script, my mom wrote, "Happy thirty-fifth to my first born son! What a wonderful day it was when you arrived at 6:03 p.m.! Be sure to pause at that time and reflect on all of your accomplishments." I considered what I was doing at 3:03 Pacific time and realized I was on the route. My dad added, "Hard to believe you're thirty-five. The years pass by so quickly. You've done well over the first thirty-five years, but the best is yet to come. Your life and career are rounding into shape."