

Out of Vegas

by Paul de Denus

Here's the thing La Brie tells me about Las Vegas: *with every deal, somebody loses... just don't let it be you.* It's an obvious statement but the moment I step outside the airport doors and onto the noisy, crusty curb, I figure he just might be right.

The city has a way of putting you at a disadvantage, sets you back on your heels before you've gained your bearings. Maybe it's the circus atmosphere of flashing neon or the time-warp funhouse feel of the old and the new that creates the disorientation. Perhaps it's the moldy holdover stench of the Mob lingering down an alleyway that has you looking over your shoulder. Whatever it is, the night vibe feeds off that disadvantage, nibbles at the desperation of those who come here. I haven't lost anything yet, but not two minutes in Vegas, I feel like I'm already down.

I grab the first cab and a sullen Elvis look-alike in the front seat turns to greet me. His high bop of black hair shines in the yellow glow of the curb light. His boyish face is a washed-out white, like he's fallen into bleach. He works the Black Jack tables at the Quad part time. All the dealers there are imitations of some celebrity or other. In Vegas, nobody is real. I ask him if I look like anybody in particular. He gives me a stare in his rearview mirror, turns away knowing he's lingered too long.

"Nobody I'd remember," he says.

I tell him to take me to the Super 8 off of East Flamingo.

In the morning, I take another cab to Edgar's Pawn Shop. I have the driver drop me a half block away. I walk the strip, passing an aimless flow of wide-eyed zombies hopelessly grabbing for a future. In Vegas, you can choose who you want to be, at least for a while - a roller, a faker, a participant, a taker. It's a crapshoot until you step up to the real you.

The sign outside the pawnshop flashes neon, 'The Loan Ranger' with Edgar's Pawn & Loan painted in small letters on a strip of wood underneath. The store is vacant of customers. I pass long glass cases of jewelry that lead to the back where I find the manager's office. I pull the pawn ticket from my pocket and go in.

I don't take the Mercedes Edgar left for me down the block. Instead, I head three blocks east to an alley where I find the pickup truck I purchased and parked two weeks ago. It's not in great shape but it will do. The front passenger seat is missing. I've made good use of the space. Two AKM assault rifles with boxes of clips and rounds lay where the seat used to sit. I place the large zipped duffel bag I just picked up for La Brie under the dash. The bag is packed with enough unmarked bills to allow me to disappear for a lifetime. I quietly pull away and instead of heading south for the drop, I pull north up 15, off the strip and into the desert.

That thing La Brie told me about Vegas, how somebody loses on every deal, well, it tumbles around like rolled dice in my head and I've taken his words to heart. On this deal, I won't be the loser.

A white Armada follows a half-mile back, keeping its distance but keeping me in site; they were on to me as soon as I left the pawnshop. I know how this will go down. They'll tail me until I get near Mesquite, the next town, and then make their move. Like I said, in Vegas you can choose who you want to be. Roller, taker, participant, deal breaker. That's me, the last one, the former trusted one, the deal breaker. Somewhere between here and Mesquite, I'll pull over and end this tail, then disappear into the mountains, taking this deal for myself.

