

SALLY BREEN

Vertical Vegas

We have been express lifted to the thirty-first floor of *Monte Carlo* Casino. I'm standing at the window of our room, one of three thousand, and they are all full. The bed is a mess. You have already left—too busy to look at the view. I am gazing at the sheer elevation of the hotel as it runs on beside me, at the cream surface of its right wing, higher and more expansive than ten football fields. I am standing alone, framed by one window, a frame that repeats itself identically in hundreds of long lines. I look into the other rooms, notice the same details. The gold lamps, the dark wood furniture. The striped luxurious wallpaper. The inherited flourishes of a Mediterranean past. And only when I have fully registered the immensity of this thing I'm in, can I cast my eyes out. To the mighty stretch of Las Vegas. To everything getting bigger. To the city of endless lengths, endless heights, endless concrete and endless sand.

I remember the flight over the majestic red rock canyons. How you reached to squeeze my fingers. The parched mountains pierced with snow. The city stretching across the flat plain of the desert, the thousands of houses spreading back from the strip in the brown and dusty earth. It hardly ever rains in Las Vegas. Nothing grows roots. There are

no drains. Instead the city is settled, held down with concrete and it is only concrete that can give this desert's incessant horizon line any vertical symmetry. I look left and right at the massive casinos, knowing there are more of them I cannot see, and I am impressed, full of wonder, caught by the thrill and the horror of their size. I look further to the distant ragged horizon, to the giant red mountains that ring this city. Finding myself caught in this strange symbiotic exchange between the constructed topography of the casinos and the colossal real. And it's as if the casinos are trying to be the mountains; trying to call out to them across the expanse of the great American plain—this big, unforgiving country—and I know why bones, human and animal, used to litter the Spanish Trail.

From this grand height I cannot see the giant convention centre you have gone to with your loaded suitcase and your samples. It is somewhere further down the Strip at the other end of the desert. But I can see the impression of your skin. I look instead toward the back end of the *New York New York*; to where the twin towers are still standing; to the architectural gestures of a casino masquerading as a city, lined up as different levels, as different colours, textures, facades and shades, as separate buildings, interconnected by a rollercoaster that runs between them, out into the desert air and back in. I can make out the tip of the Lady Liberty's flame held aloft somewhere on the other side. Later, when I enter the *New York New York* on foot (via a quick tour of Manhattan and over the Brooklyn Bridge) I will see it is a dark casino. A space that imitates the crush and rush of its muse metropolis. After visiting the infamous Downtown Deli I will wander along the narrow alley ways of Greenwich Village, cobblestoned and lined with false-front tenement buildings, while also trying to navigate my pastrami sandwich, which is more like a giant mound, replete with a whole green pickle longer and almost wider than my

hand. And while I'm traipsing through Coney Island and gaming floors modelled on Central Park and laughing at the change machines which are actually New York Cabs I will be lost in *New York New York* for hours. It will happen in every casino, in every fake city. There is a moment on entering where you must relinquish the idea of ever finding a quick way out. I learn fast that the illusory effect of the mirage, of the distant oasis, is something that defines this city.

Every morning you make your way to the other end of the desert strip and I venture out. Walking alone doesn't bother me until I'm tired and hail a cab and the driver tells me only working girls walk the strip alone. I tell him I have never walked so much and he laughs and I wonder if that would bother you. It does not take hours to walk the strip, it takes days. It does not take days to visit every casino, it takes weeks. I can see the hotels looming in the distance ahead of me, behind me and even off the strip to the east and west their massive forms conjure and cajole. Everything is instant but seems to take on time and space forever. "After five days in Vegas you feel like you've been here for five years."¹ A strange circumstance where physical reality contradicts imaginary signification. "The buildings are so gargantuan that [you] think them closer... the distance boggling, unclear, otherworldly."² In Las Vegas size matters. I must allow for the time it takes just to leave our building. And then finally, I spill out of the casino with the thousands of other tourists, slightly bemused and relieved. I merge with the crowds amassing 24/7 on the expansive sidewalks of Vegas, all of us making our way slowly along the strip, held together by its long lines, intent on gazing and moving forward as if on some kind of perverted pilgrimage.

And the casinos know it. I tell you all about it later when you're back at the hotel after dark about the walkways that run the length of the strip purposefully convoluted—lined by barriers and directional diversions like complicated stairway structures and narrow escalators—leading me on tangents and one way directions. At times I have to wind my way through the casinos just to get back out onto the street. I have no choice but to follow. I am transported over side streets, carried into elaborate foyers, required to bottleneck at certain points and therefore be tempted to stop. I get caught in rooms which, “smell like plain hugeness, the smell of a room big enough to have weather.”³ And nothing is exempt from this game of snagging human attention—I'm swamped by the incessant affects of the “architecture of persuasion.”⁴ The holograms, dancing girls, choreographed waterfalls, spruikers, voice-overs, giant LCD screens the size of buildings, oxygen bars, the imitation Elvises, curling lights and flashing signs all get in my face, in my head and under my skin without any actual contact. Hovering just beyond me. I move and absorb and I'm saturated; and it is not until later that the effects of this engagement will appear like magic, like neon stigmata.

Las Vegas *is* about cruising and gazing but it is also high speed and fly-by. It is all these things. I freewheel along the Strip on my own two feet, on a Harley, in a helicopter, a Corvette, and a Cadillac. They sell all kinds of movement here, to alleviate the vertigo, the pressure of open skies and flat open space. People hire choppers, private planes, and strange celebrity-style people-movers that look like elongated A-Team vans. Limousines are as prevalent as dimes. And nearly as cheap. But I keep walking because gazing at the surfaces of these buildings in slow motion is just one part of a series of simultaneous experiences dealt out at street level, eye level and from the sky. My sense of placement is

shaken. I feel distorted—like the physical subject in an impressionist painting—my presence here is always only a glimmer in an atmosphere big enough to consume it. The monumentality of Vegas’s urban formations encourages this merging of physicality and surface, of awe and veneration, for as casino developer Steve Wynn famously declared, “Las Vegas is what God would have done... if he’d had the money.”⁵

Flying down the Strip at night, in the back of a limousine, holding your hand, drunk from Las Vegas, drunk from the effects, I swallow the light. The lights as they swirl and flash at seventy miles per hour reflecting on everything, the car, the glass, the mirrors, your face. My face hanging out the window for air, head facing up at the sky, the lights relentless. My skin drinking in the light, the dust and the roar of engines, the wind in my face carrying me and the sharp desert air. The pictures so rapid you take photos that never turn out. The neon fantasies, the words, the signs rolling over my chest. At high speed the casinos roll past us, immense and merging. The black screen of sky is pierced with multi-coloured mansards and minarets; sky needles and laser light. The world is full of edges, of vertical flashes, and we trip through it on a wiggled out horizontal passage. The Strip is the live feed. This cab the current. The city electric.

Las Vegas is not the kind of town I associate with “getting real” or “growing up.” It is not a place where I am supposed to have a composed meaningful moment, a significant epiphany. It is not the kind of town where I suspect I might find out what is true to me, what really moves me, what I care about. Las Vegas, it seems, is a place I’ve come to escape the tide of these things. But like most cities you make presumptions about, the promises of escapism and wish fulfilment are often reversed. This is a city

which markets distraction, which promises a liberation from reflection and analysis, but often instigates such introspection by default.

It happens late at night when I'm near tears in the Romanesque bath tub searching for reasons why this emptiness has opened up between us. I wrap myself in a towel; bypass the bed. You're sleeping quietly now, naked body snuggled under a wash of gold embossed brocade. I can hardly see you. Moving to stand by the window in the dark looking out at all the lights of Las Vegas, I wish I could blame the vacuous desert, this crazy place for the emotional chasm I'm experiencing. Watching faces the size of houses ripple up giant screens I realise the emptiness I feel is not an effect of this city, rather, it is something I have brought with me. That's the thing no one gets about simulations—they can teach you about your own; they can highlight the distance between your dreams and the lies you tell yourself to make them happen. That's why, not long after our feet touch down in Australia you let go of my hand.

Because I left you, in Las Vegas.

¹ Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (London: Flamingo, 1972), 193.

² Bill Roorbach, *The Smallest Colour* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2003), 262.

³ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁴ David Spanier, *Welcome to the Pleasuredome: Inside Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992), 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.