

# FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF DENNY'S

**JIMMY J. PACK JR.**

Following Route 66 west toward California in July of 2001, my cross-country travel partner, Kyle Borowski, and I are taking a trip back in time on the Mother Road. We stop in Kingman, Arizona, a typical large town along 66 that built itself up from the desert as the railroad was working its way to the Pacific Ocean. We gas up our van and spend very little energy finding a place to eat—the first place we see, Denny's, claims our appetite.

The sun is setting and sharpening the sweet light through the shaded windows of Denny's. All I order is a piece of pecan pie and some milk while Kyle wolfs down a cheeseburger and then opens our map. As he studies the roads, I notice the Denny's has the highest ceilings I've ever seen in a chain restaurant, in any restaurant.

It looks like a Tudor church—high sloping white cathedral ceilings with thick wood beams. The appearance must be responsible for the odd quiet in here—you can't hear the waitresses taking orders, the customers giving them, or the cooks preparing food. There isn't even the familiar clash of porcelain mugs or the jangle of silverware sloshing about in cold creamed coffee in the busboys' bins.

“Want to go to Vegas?” I ask.

Kyle scrunches his face.

“Seriously?”

“Why not? We ever going to be this close to it again?”

“What the hell are you looking at,” Kyle asks me.

“Look at this place. Doesn't it look like a church?”

“Shit, it does. Weird.”

“You shouldn't swear in here, Kyle. Have some reverence for the

Moons Over My-Hammy.”

“I should’ve prayed before I ate this cheeseburger.”

“You should’ve prayed *to* the cheeseburger.”

Kyle laughs and then finishes his drink. I walk to the register and wait fifteen minutes before someone comes to ring me up. A man takes my money and says, “Thank you, sir. Have a good night.”

“God bless you,” I say.

The Denny’s manager ignores my comment and goes back to cutting key lime pie. I hear my sandals scuffing along the carpet as I head toward the exit where Kyle holds the door open for me. As I walk by he says,

“Vegas, baby. Vegas.”

They’ve actually built a highway directly (or as direct as you can get) from Kingman, Arizona, to Las Vegas—Route 93. It’s a nowhere highway leading through the omnipresent mountains and beige desert of the Southwest. It’s nighttime and the horizon is a tight pink line like the last flicker of glowing white protons on an analogue TV screen just turned off. We’re in the Lake Mead area and

Kyle’s forced to slow down around the Hoover Dam. Traffic snakes its way around switchbacks at five miles-per-hour, partially because of the volume, and because there’s so much to rubber-neck. I’m afraid we’re either being lured into an alien spaceship or some type of anti-U. S. Government militia is forcing us to surrender our cars and become slave labor.

The traffic is eerie because it’s quiet—hundreds of headlights look like a tangled pile of Christmas lights thrown on a mountain, untangled by the hands of God and strewn as a trail from the dam to a land of light. As the cars move they seem like mechanical beings on a candlelight vigil, mourning the loss of something sacred. The Hoover Dam looks like a prison palace. Violent yellow lights illuminate Art Deco towers otherwise colored in by an ominous glowing midnight blue. The headlights of cars and tractor-trailers continue to slither along the roads, through the mountains topped with the black wire webs of power lines and electricity pylons stretching in random patterns over the trapped water. We stop for a few minutes to take some photographs. I shoot Kyle with the

reservoir behind him, and then we get back into the van.

We continue to climb around and up. I feel my nerves tangling inside, constricting like mean ropes, and once on the plateau of the mountain, there it is, a giant incandescent tumor taking over dark land. Unlike the balance between man's control over the Colorado River behind the Hoover Dam and the electricity harnessed from metal and concrete forged and poured by hand, the lights of Vegas lack any sign of humanity or of God. Sprawling across the desert like an army of insects banded together, a trillion lights crawl on the sand toward the west with the expectance of no daylight. It's almost as if the city preferred the artificial glow to real sunlight, the natural light showing you how everything actually is. The burning bulbs of Las Vegas stretch into oblivion—a massive General Electric, five-gazillion-watt light bulb blanket covering a cursed portion of American land. We're still twenty miles away.

As we get closer, the lights take on their own shapes and signs. The casinos air-condition the streets where people stagger with half-empty bottles of beer

and mostly-empty wallets.

Advertisements for whores and massages fill street corner honor boxes filled with newspapers boxes completely full of the week's papers.

Our hotel of choice is the cheapest for the price. We park the van in a parking garage and walk down to the casino. From the check-in area the sounds and smell of the casino are a vital tonic. All of a sudden I'm not tired anymore; Kyle's not tired anymore, either. We're given long-ass directions to our room—a roach-infested shack called the "Manor" in one of one of Vegas' oldest hotels, Circus Circus. I prefer to walk the streets like a whore. Isn't that what you're supposed to do here? Isn't this where whore is a genderless word more focused on the verb than the noun? Thank God I have the energy to spend a few hours on the casino floor. There's no way I am sleeping in that room without passing out, not with three roaches on the wall next to my bed watching me unpack, and I think one of them told me to go fuck myself.

Las Vegas is a city to visit, not to live in; and if you're ready to let

the worst come out of you, to see how far you can sink away from yourself, this is where you do it—in the air-conditioned halls where people get drunk, lose their money, families, cars and whatever bit of possessions they can possibly get a buck for. The lights, the free drinks imbibed while impregnating slot machines with metal the price of one, five, twenty-five or a hundred dollars, and the unlimited casino buffets full of the cheapest cuts of beef and leftover lobster are opium.

You don't know what you're doing here after a while. The streets smell of cooling sand and exhaust. Down the strip lined with small cities contained in warehouses covered in lights and decorated with replicas of the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower, cars sit in gridlock while people move in and out of casinos in packs like wolves waiting to bite into video poker machines that bleed silver dollars. Inside the casinos it sounds as if there are game shows warring with one another—beeps, bangs, buzzers, dings—a cacophony of things dying as coins tumble into the casinos' vaults harmonized with the stingers played by slot machines. Old women sit with their oxygen

tanks pressing hoses into their nostrils and Parliament cigarettes in their left hand—the right hand free to push the slot machine's SPIN button. Green felt tables hold cash, dice, chips and cards, glasses of booze where the ice never has time to melt. People sit at these tables for hours, maybe for the game, but sometimes for the company.

After a while, the bings, bleeps, buzzes, and clangs become the theme song for hell. Twenty-something women giggle over the shoulders of men they don't like as middle-aged men sit at Texas Hold'Em tables hoping to make enough money to never work again, but leave with enough to buy a burger and pay for the room and the flight back on credit. This city's lights are powered by the people it eats. It makes you believe you can be a millionaire because as we all know money money money, you've got to have it. Please, have a few more comp drinks and stay in your room, just make sure you lose so you can keep that hope that you'll win *something* alive. One more dollar. One more hand. One more pull...maybe two more.

There's a reason Las Vegas sits alone in the desert—it makes no claim to being anything other than

what it is—a city of vice. There's no harm done to anyone but to the person who believes he can change his life with a few days in lost wages. Vegas is booze money, sex money, and money—no more and a lot less.

Kyle and I spend no time together here, except to meet up in a fake steak house for dinner where we talk about what we've done— Kyle walks the city, stays outside; I'm hermited in the hotel people-watching and occasionally playing the quarter video poker machines. Kyle and I meet up over a buffet at 3 a.m. to recap what we've taken in, and we find we're in complete agreement about this city. It's a whole lot of plastic nothing with the flash of Ronald McDonald's clown suit.

Even the Denny's, McDonald's, and the Arco gas station have the electric glow of the false hope of gaining more than food or gas exploding their logos against the black sky. Sigfried and Roy, Wayne Newton, Danny Gans, and Steve Wyrick all have their name in lights on various casinos, and all except the dynamic duo who play with big cats pray that one day Vegas will build them a monument in the desert as a testament to their

talent, just like the bulbous brown bronze monument of Siggy and Roy hovering angelic over a tiger, like a disturbing 3-D portrait of the new nuclear family.

I don't sleep more than three hours the nights we're here. Around the casino people morph from character to cliché, and sometimes back to character. The old guy with the toupee and the young woman he left his wife for; the waitress who breaks the arches of her feet ten hours a day to make lettuce at the poker table, the old person who can't breathe sitting by a slot machine waiting to die. Kyle and I are California dreaming. We're going to be at the end of our cross-country trip in a couple of days, and if we can see the sun set over the ocean, we'll know there was something more to the world than city after city, and town after town full of people living in quiet desperation with the world burning down around them into void. There have to be more places along and off the Mother Road like the Grand Canyon where reflection and thought are provoked. There's got to be something more waiting for us in California. I know there must be.