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The End Is Near

When you're alone, and life is making you lonely you can always go to Vegas

by Barry Friedman

A man in a white coat is cutting hair inside the Style-Rite barbershop. There is a bus stop 10 steps from its door, where white men in casino-affiliated hats and African American women with shopping bags wait. Style-Rite has no receptionist, no price list, no hairdryers; instead, it has torn red vinyl barber chairs on a linoleum floor and a restroom that's out of order.

On the Formica counter that runs the length of one side of the shop are scissors and straight razors and bottles of blue Barbicide water with combs swimming inside. The two wood cabinets under the Formica have broken doors, so the towels and shaving creams and tonics on their shelves are visible. On the opposite side of the shop, there is a television with a hanger wrapped in aluminum foil that serves as its antenna; there are 1950's ads for grooming products on the wall over the mirror; and there is a lopsided table and two chairs—that's where you wait.

There is nothing quaint about this barbershop, except maybe the barber pole, whose red and blue stripes spin above those waiting for the bus; there are no Sheriff Taylor and Opie-types reading fishing and *Highlights* magazines while good-natured Floyd drones on about Gomer or Aunt Bea's pies. There is a man, half asleep, with thinning hair, in one of the chairs. The man cutting his hair, the man in the white coat, Dick, is the owner.

There is another barber, a small man—he appears to be Peruvian—sweeping up around a chair next to them, because this being a barbershop, there is hair, lots of hair. The piles look like stains against the white squares of the floor.

Dick is not friendly. I tell him what I want, he does it; I ask for his advice on my thinning hair, he says there's nothing to do; I give him a generous tip, he unceremoniously shoves it in a jar near the register. Thing is, the haircut is perfect, which is all that matters. Dick is not a guy who looks you in the eye. Were he a

physician, he'd be brilliant but patients would complain about his bedside manner.

Slice of Life

Style-Rite is in downtown Las Vegas on 6th, off Fremont Street, which is to Las Vegas Boulevard what boxing is to sports. A few years ago, Vegas tried promoting itself as a family destination; as such, a movie theatre and trendy restaurants and arcades were built on Fremont, across the street from Bodegas that sell X-rated DVDs and pre-paid phone cards to Central and South America.

A steel awning was also built and placed between the hotels on Fremont, called *The Fremont Street Experience*. It keeps out some of the rain and, at night, giant animation is featured across the awning in various musical and cartoon tributes. People from the Strip come down to see it, but they don't stay long, which was really the point in building it.

Those who are here—the ones who stay downtown—are those who frequently smell of too much cologne and alcohol and cigarettes and have no interest in Sigfried and Roy and erupting volcanoes. Downtown is where people pawn Rolexes and get thrown down parking ramps and get arrested for soliciting under cover policewomen who are posing as hookers. You can still find penny slots down here, nude dancing at 10am, and \$2.99 steak and egg specials. You can buy Mexican punch from *7-11*, Indian art from outdoor kiosks, and Caribbean frozen drinks by the yard. Downtown is where you come for Medicaid and unemployment benefits; downtown is where you stay when Orbitz or Expedia screw up your vacation package.

Years ago, I worked at the Four Queens, which is in the middle of Fremont Street and across from the much swankier, Golden Nugget, during Christmas week. The showroom was empty much of the week, so management offered free admission on Christmas Eve. Fourteen people showed up, including a woman in her 70s, who sat by herself in the front row.

On stage, I mused about how pathetic we should all feel about being in downtown Vegas on Christmas Eve at a free show.

"Young man," the woman in the front row said after the show—and you know you're in trouble when *that* begins the sentence—"many of the people you see in Vegas over the holidays are here because they have lost loved-ones during the year. They come to

Vegas, where there are no memories for them, because staying at home has too many of them.”

One of the Locals

This time, I am staying at the Plaza, which shares property with The Greyhound Station and where coin-operated washers and dryers are offered on the 7th floor in case you stay long enough and need to do a load. The employee cafeteria, where we comedians eat, had some kind of red meat today. The milk dispenser was broken, so two half gallons of milk were placed inside and ice was placed around them. I ate crackers and cereal and watched a little of a Spanish soap opera and a commercial for dental insurance before security asked me for my employee pass.

Unlike tropical climates, Las Vegas is an awful backdrop. It fights you for attention—and usually wins. Get married in one of the chapels on the Strip, and you’ll have more memories of the Elvis impersonator or Robert Altman-inspired characters who married you than your nubile bride in white—not that you’ll find many brides in Vegas in that hue; take a leak in the Caesars’ fountains, and you’ve got those damn nude statues looking down at you; go to a karaoke bar to sing *Piano Man* and you may have to follow a man in underwear and a cowboy hat doing *YMCA*.

But down here, down near Binion’s Horseshoe, Fitzgerald’s, Lady Luck, The Golden Gate, and the Plaza what gets to you is the Nathanael West-quality of the place. It’s *The Day of the Locust*, complete with men, chain smoking in walkers and oxygen tanks at nickel slot machines and large women in small cars with too many kids at McDonald’s drive-thrus. It’s beyond depression; it’s beyond pathos. It looks like The End. They keep trying comedy down here, but it never works. The people from the Strip, the ones who like to laugh, find it too depressing to come; the ones already here are too depressed for it to help.

But there is a Starbucks.

The first time my mother and father came to Vegas, I took them to Stage Deli, a New York-based delicatessen that had opened a place in the Forum Shops at Caesars. Later that night, cousin Manny, who lived here and was as insufferable as any man had a right to be, asked where and what my parents had eaten.

“Stage Deli,” my father said, “Had chicken soup.”

“Chicken soup at Stage!?” Manny shrieked. “Dish water.”

“Go to a place in back of the Californian Hotel,” he continued, “there’s a deli there. Ask for Jerry. Tell him you know me.”

That’s another thing about Vegas—everyone knows someone who knows someone who can get it for you better, faster, or cheaper—even if it’s just a haircut or some soup, which damn that Manny, *was* better—and it was downtown.