

*Children  
of  
Las Vegas*

True stories of growing up in the world's playground



**TIMOTHY O'GRADY**  
with photographs by Steve Pyke

## INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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*for*

*Agata and Aleksandra Tacunska*

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For it is ... a shimmering mirage of riches and mystery and death.

—Richard E. Lingenfelter

# Prologue

I LIVED IN Las Vegas for two years. It was among the last places I expected to be at that stage of my life, but there I was. I was offered a fellowship, and then stayed on to teach. We bought an old gold Mazda that had been bleached and blistered by the sun and rented an apartment beside a golf course in Henderson. From the little balcony I watched the unceasing chain of planes bringing tourists to the Strip. “The jewel box,” a great-grandmother once said of it to a small boy. You will meet them both later in these pages. At night you can see the Strip from anywhere in the valley if you are pointed in the right direction. It’s like a small galaxy throbbing on the desert floor. Las Vegas may like to take away your sense of time and space, but it will always remind you of what you are there for.

I once imagined that I would like to visit Las Vegas more than anywhere else on earth. It was the destination I chose when asked to write a school paper on what would be my favorite vacation. I was fourteen years old and had no idea of what I might do there. But its aura was enough. Perhaps I thought the choice would surprise, that I would gain some position over other boys who would write of the Super Bowl or fishing in Wisconsin or museums in Madrid. I would say that was my aim. It was still a little before the time when a sweaty Elvis was doing karate chops in his rhinestone spacesuits. It was still cool, at least by reputation. It was our version of the Côte d’Azur. The images came down the line to us on television. There were the



long cars with the high fins, the winking doormen, the Sammy Davis Junior suits. Vegas was louche and urban and knowing. People there walked on the edge and seemed at ease with it. They laughed at how extravagantly frivolous they could be with their money or their reputations. Even the women were rakish. You could see it glinting somewhere in their diamantine eyes as they sat around the roulette tables. As I later heard Simone de Beauvoir said of it: “No bourgeoisie, no bourgeois morality.”

It held no allure for me by the time I got there four decades later, but I watched it nevertheless. It asks you to, and it's hard to refuse. I walked and drove and talked and sat on our little balcony trying to figure it out, not only the Strip, but the city itself that spread through the valley in low lines and pale colours out to the horizon. It's a global star. It flashes in the eyes. Mention it anywhere and you will get a response – bedazzlement, envy, a raising of the brow, an avuncular warning. People you know want your report on it if you're right there in the front row.

But I couldn't catch it. Not after a month, not even after a year. It seemed always to be receding, like something slipping away in a tide. Houses are behind walls, their windows opaque. Drivers way above you are screened by tinted glass in SUVs the size of fire trucks. Almost no one walks. Buildings seem to take a step backwards behind gigantic parking lots or entrance halls just as you feel you are getting near them. If you open a door to a bar you meet perpetual night behind blackened windows. The faces looking up from the poker machines are like ramparts. There is no focal point, no main square or central business district with office workers walking around in shirtsleeves on their breaks, no Luxembourg Gardens or Central Park, just this glittering trinket

that can be seen from space, its surface dazzle and electronic colour leading you deeper and deeper into caverns that are only more surface. Who did it belong to? Not the people I saw in the supermarket. In the centre the visitors are the aristocracy, the citizens their vassals.

We didn't meet many visitors, or citizens. There were three pools and a hundred and something units in our development, but little stirred there. In two years we never saw our downstairs neighbours, but there was life there, we could see, for the blue-gray light of their television flickered against their permanently drawn blinds. You'd hear the hum of air conditioners, the killing of engines, see the shadow of someone coming home late thrown hugely onto a wall by a ground light. But faces were rare. The only one I saw with any regularity was a slender, middle-aged man I could see going to work from our bedroom window, his hair oiled, his white shirt gartered high on the sleeves for dealing cards, his expression sour. Around us, we supposed, were the homes, or former homes, of the retired, the repossessed, the winter sojourners, the cocktail shakers, towel haulers and wheel spinners. We just couldn't see them, and didn't understand why. Where was everybody in what had been until recently America's fastest growing city? Why did everything seem so far away?

Sometimes in the day's last light we walked around the golf course, whose eleventh tee was just below our balcony. If you walk the streets, you have for the most part walls for company. Here along the fairways it was all backyards – the backyards of houses small and large, the backyards of mansions built in the style of mausoleums. There wasn't a thing in any of them that

could tell you if anyone lived in them – no towel or toy or tennis racquet. The windows were blank. They seemed screened with a kind of mesh that was the colour of the desert. It was like walking into a room full of people with their eyes and mouths sewn shut. It was like a Twilight Zone episode without a plot.

\*

Steve Wynn opened the Mirage ten years before we arrived. He raised \$604 million in New York, built the largest casino resort in the world and installed luxury fittings throughout, a twenty-thousand-gallon tank with pygmy sharks and stingrays in it, an ecologically precise rainforest on the casino floor and a giant volcano in the forecourt that went off every fifteen minutes. Four thousand service workers were employed to run it.

It was a large bet and it paid out. Two hundred thousand people came to the opening. The city entered a new boom time. The resort itself, rather than the gambling halls and shows, were now the attraction. Old hotels, even the Desert Inn, were blown up, and vast new Disneyesque ones like Excalibur, Treasure Island, the MGM Grand and others alluding to Venice, Paris, New York and ancient Egypt were built. There was soon a higher hotel room count on the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Flamingo than in the whole of San Francisco. There were by then casinos in twenty-three states, but Las Vegas kept growing, for Americans were spending nearly the same cut of the gross national product on gambling as on groceries. Thirty-seven million people came every year, more than to Mecca. You could make \$100,000 parking cars or dealing cards and in one step go from a trailer park to a middle-class home. A great new

migration took place. Among those who came were the parents of some of the people whose stories are in this book.

In our second year I began to teach. The boom was over by then. You could see halted construction projects all over the city, including some in the heart of the Strip. The university was considering deleting Philosophy, and a few other departments. A tent city on the edge of downtown had just been cleared. Las Vegas had become the hardest city of its size to find work in and also led in home foreclosures.

I'd already taught a little, in England, Poland, on the east coast of the United States. The students in Las Vegas were different. I asked a class of twenty-six how many worked and found that all but one did, full time, mostly in casinos. One occasionally missed class because of a conflict with his shift as a stripper. Some worked through the night, or did double shifts at weekends. All had full course loads. When did they read, or write essays? I found too that they carried debts, some up around \$40,000, for being educated in a state university. They lived with their parents, they were legally considered dependents. But it seemed that economically they were on their own. Sometimes good students turned in flimsy work and if I asked them about it they said they knew, they were sorry, they'd do it again if I'd give them the chance. It was just that they were exhausted.

One day they showed up to my class with not a single one having read the story I'd assigned. They couldn't afford the textbook, they said, and it wasn't anywhere online. It was a California story about how a mother's expectations about her daughter drove both of them mad. I told them the plot and asked them what they thought.

“Our parents want us to get good grades so we’ll keep our scholarships and they won’t be asked to pay for anything,” said a young man with an unusual degree of bitterness, especially for him.

“They go through our pockets and steal our money,” said a young woman beside him.

I thought I’d misheard and asked her to repeat what she’d said.

“They’re still drunk when they wake up,” said another. “I have to get them to work and my brothers and sisters fed and to school.”

“My mom stole my sister’s wedding money,” said someone in the front row.

We had an hour and a quarter and I let it run. It seemed to feed on its own momentum, like testimonials of revelation in a church. They spoke of routinely losing their homes, of raising themselves, of having their identities stolen in credit card frauds by their parents. There were overdoses, desert shoot-outs, suicides. I’d never heard anything like that in a single room. Nearly everyone spoke. The pitch was at its highest when the class ended. It was as if a jail door had opened for a time.

Editors send writers out to catch Las Vegas, as if it were a concept. The people that create the identity of the city also think of it that way. It changes often, it reinvents itself because it has to, but this is less a process of development than a succession of images, a new kind of girl popping up out of the cake. The rest of the city, where the citizens live, is out of focus, not quite there. Most of the people who think at all about Las Vegas think of it this way. A student told me that when she went to Philadelphia for a conference as a representative of her high school council she

was asked if she lived in a hotel and if there were any schools in her city. I tried to write about Las Vegas too, but all I could really see when I looked at it were walls and distance and questions I had no answers to.

If anything could get me closer, I thought, it would be my students. This strange celebrity of a city had been happening to them all their lives. They'd watched it in a way that adults or visitors or, of course, writers, could not. I wanted to hear all that they had to say, and thought others should too.

The next time I had a class I asked a few of them if they'd be willing to be interviewed, named and photographed for a piece of journalism about their city. I assumed they'd refuse. How could they not? It would lay bare not only themselves, but their families. However, each one of them said they would do it. They seemed to have a need to do so. I was led by people I'd met to some others – a businessman, a homeless woman, a policeman, a casino child. A few hesitated. A few declined in the end. But the rest, like my students, seemed to have a need to testify and would live with what it might cost them. In the end I had ten, but if I'd kept looking I'd have had hundreds more.

One by one they came to our apartment beside the golf course and talked to me. I called Steve Pyke and he flew in from New York to photograph them. They all grew up in Las Vegas. Theirs are not the only kinds of stories about growing up there, but the things that happened to them happen not only everywhere in the city, as they told me, but also because of it. Anyone who'd like to know need only ask.



*Children  
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Shelby Sullivan  
Student

WE WERE HAPPY, until we weren't. I had the ideal childhood. We had our house, there were kids to play with. It was a good neighbourhood then. My dad was a chef at Treasure Island and my mom was a cashier at the Mirage, where she still is. They met when they were living at the same apartment complex downtown. They loved it here. Then one thing happened, and another, and another. It all just went downhill so fast.

My dad drank. I wasn't aware of that for a long time. I guess I was too young to tell. We had this little wishing well barbecue pit in the backyard. We kept a board over it and when we took it off one day we found all these empty bottles my dad had put in there. He drank an eight-pack of beer before going to work one day and they fired him. That was the start, I think. Then my aunt moved in and all these arguments started. My mom and her would argue over something like towels. "You took my dish rag!" It would start like that and escalate until my mom would say, "Get out of my house!" Then my aunt would say, "Oh yes, this is yours and this and this and this. Everything is yours!" My mom would get mad at my dad if he didn't step in, but then if he did and took her side she'd be mad that he was attacking her sister. My parents also argued about money. She had six different credit cards running up debt at the same time. She bought things, she gambled. She said she deserved it because she supported everyone else when my dad was out of work and she was everybody's slave. My aunt and her daughter would argue about who was a worse mother. It was a fiasco. My family has this thing where if something is wrong you have to outshout the other person and bring up whatever you can from what's happened before to hurt them.

I think I was eleven when my aunt moved in with us. She lived with her daughter for a while, but got kicked out. My grandparents kicked her out too. She filled up their house with the junk she collects. They couldn't cope. My mom took her in then. My aunt was kind of wild when she was young. She used to go to work at a casino and then go out to bars. When my cousin was little she had the numbers of the bars her mom went to and knew all the bartenders' names and their shifts. She had quite a few boyfriends – the alcoholic she had my cousin with and a very controlling and rich Hispanic man, among others. She was engaged to a drug addict who told her he was a pilot. She still wound up paying for his flying lessons later. They got in an argument once and he ran over her with his car. She doesn't go to bars now. She takes meth, works part-time as a dealer at Boulder Station and gambles. She comes home with nothing, just blows her whole paycheque. And she still collects junk. She drives around looking for it and waits outside storage places so she can collect stuff people throw out.

After she moved in she and my mom started to going to Sam's Town casino on Boulder Highway. It was my grandparents' favourite. My mom played bingo and then slots and my aunt played tables and slots. When my grandparents and aunt left, my mom would stay on. She'd say she'd be along soon but she didn't come and when they went back the next day she'd still be sitting there. She'd have taken out all the money she could get on her ATM and credit cards.

Maybe you can't pin everything on one thing, one person especially. Maybe it's not fair. But it's hard not to blame my aunt for all the bad things that happened. I remember my mom's

warmth. She took my aunt in because she was always such a caring, family-oriented type of person. The change was so stark. She snaps, she's defensive, she thinks everyone's out to get her. My dad went to A.A. after she gave him an ultimatum and as he got better she got worse. She gets in these terrible fights with my aunt. My aunt has ripped chunks of her hair out of her head and my mom has hit my aunt so hard her false tooth has fallen out. It happens right in front of us. I've been hit trying to break it up.

I found my mom's straws and razor blades when I was in eighth grade. She snorts meth. I don't know when she started, but it was my aunt who brought it here. She'll go into the bathroom and turn on the faucet for thirty minutes and then deny she was doing it. Or else she'll say she does it to lose weight or because she has to stay up and clean the house. You can hear her at night when she's high, cleaning and doing laundry. One time I came home and she and my aunt were screaming about who'd used the last of it. My mom said, "I wouldn't have to do it if I didn't have to clean up after my lazy children." So it's our fault. She gets nosebleeds. Soon her septum will deviate.

I know she's miserable. She doesn't see anybody, or even want to. She just stays in her room and only comes out to go to work. She views the world in such a skewed way. We drove her all the way back to La Crosse, Wisconsin where she was born for her fiftieth birthday and she stood outside the house, yelling, "All I want for my birthday is a gun so I can shoot myself." Well, now we have one because we had a break-in. She told my grandma that she has a loaded gun and that there's no reason for her to be here because my brother and I are old enough to look

after ourselves now. One day we'll come home and she won't be there, she says. That, or she'll kill my aunt.

Her and me were so close when I was little. I went to her for everything, then she wasn't there. Even if she is there it's not her. It's a different person from the one I knew. It's like living with a stranger. That's what hurts me the most. She's so close, right next to me, and I want it so bad but... she's not there.

When I was in eighth or ninth grade I started self-mutilating. It wasn't even until after I'd stopped for a while that anyone noticed. I think at first I wanted to see if anyone noticed, then I kind of got used to doing it. Everything was changing and I couldn't fix it. When they'd argue I started to scratch, scratch until the skin broke, but then I started to get razor blades. Somehow it made me feel a little better. It was something I could control. I'd cut my legs in places where I could hide it. One time I left the house and was walking along the street. A neighbour had one of those mailboxes with the little red flag sticking up. I broke that off and used it to cut myself. That left a pretty decent scar.

I got out of cutting because of my best friend. If I felt like I was losing it she'd come right over in her car and we'd just drive and drive along the freeway without thinking of where we were going until I felt all right. I basically lived with her family through my senior year in high school. Her mom calls me her middle child. They really saved me. There was just so much poison in the house. When my mom found out about the cutting she said, "You're sick. You're what's wrong with this family. You need help." She just tears me down. She says I'm overweight, unattractive, that I'll never find a boyfriend.

The whole city does that to you. You see those pictures of women and think if you don't fit that mould you're not what people want. Even the family shows have scantily clad women in them. They're the role models. The way men treat us is disgusting. People I hang out with even do it. They call us "skanks", "bitches", "sluts". It's like we're not people, we're just some degraded sub-section.

I started drinking after I stopped cutting. I drank Captain Morgan, or my personal favourite, Southern Comfort. I'd go over to this house belonging to friends of my brother and we'd drink shots around the table. I'd pass out sometimes. Once I fell down and broke two of my teeth. My friend and I figured out that during our first semester at college we were only sober seven days. They dealt weed from that house. Strangers would arrive at all hours. One of them kept a gun under his bed. Everything was very shady there, very negative. Like home. I've slowed down a lot now, though. I like a clear head. I got scared too because I didn't want to be an alcoholic like my dad. "I can't tell you not to, because I was doing the same thing," he said, but I could see that for the first time he was disappointed in me. I've been lucky, though. I've had help. I don't know what would have happened if I didn't. My friend made me realize that just because I couldn't find stability at home didn't mean I couldn't find it somewhere else. I had a wonderful teacher who gave me the compliments my mother wasn't able to. That made school a kind of refuge. I was an honours student. My brother's been very good, too. Maybe he didn't get the full impact of it. He had sports and I kind of protected him a little when he was younger. Now we

look after each other when we can. It's hard to work full time as I do and also go to school and then come home to all that tension, but he and I just got Netflix and we tune out together with that.

I think my aunt was happy once. She was a cocktail waitress. She looked for fun everywhere. She used to clean her bathroom with a toothbrush and now she dives into dumpsters looking for junk. She was just supposed to be with us for a couple of months, but it's been nine years. Nothing seems to be able to stop it. My dad has given up. I think he feels defeated. My grandma has offered to pay all the costs of getting her out. My brother and I beg my mom to do it, but she won't. She chooses her sister over her kids. I think she wants her nearby because that's where she gets the meth from. Sometimes she puts her foot down and throws her out, but then after a couple of weeks she cracks and my aunt's back again. She always has what my mom needs. I once took a bag of chips from my aunt when she was on the couch and there was a little yellow bag of meth inside. She'll drop one of them on the floor sometimes and I'll look at her to let her know that I know what it is. I don't wish anyone any harm, but I like the times they're not talking because at least then my mom will be clear of the drugs for a while.

We haven't been able to have a family meal since my aunt arrived because her make-up and shoes and bits of junk are on the kitchen table. She's filled four sheds with it out in the backyard. You have to keep to the left in the hallway because one side is full of boxes and storage tubs. My mom has to put her stuff in boxes because if she doesn't my aunt will think it's hers. She might take it out to the front to wash it down with a

hose. That's what she keeps doing with that stuff. One side of my bed is blocked by boxes. It's everywhere. It just spreads. It's like a disease. You can't touch her stuff because she gets mad. She throws things.

Before she came I was into art. I used to design cards for my parents. They loved them. I pictured this happy future where I'd own my own design company and make art. Then everything started to happen. Now I just put as much effort as I can into school so I can get out of here and far, far away to some safe, warm environment that makes sense. I want to live somewhere I'm not ashamed of. I feel like my family is the joke of the town, that I've been dealt the worst hand. I can't bring anyone to my house. I have to ask them to pick me up somewhere down the street. My aunt will be out in front with a do-rag and a missing tooth washing grocery bags. No one knows why. She's dark-skinned from all her time in the sun and she doesn't brush her hair for days. She'll dress properly for work but otherwise her clothes are torn and full of bleach stains. She wears bright pink shoes. Many times I've found her passed out on the toilet with a cigarette hanging from her mouth. Once she fell asleep on the couch and spilled a bowl of cereal on herself. She just woke up and brushed it off. The house is a sore thumb. There's just dirt in the front yard and trash cans full of empty soda cans she's supposedly going to cash in one day. They attract bees. You have to run down the path to get away from them. It was a decent house once. Now there's broken junk everywhere, dead plants outside my window. The paint on the house is flaking off because of the chemicals she uses to clean her stuff. There's



always water running out of the hose. She won't clean the house but she'll clean her junk for hours. She'll pick rocks out of the dirt and wash them. It's got to the point where I take all this as normal now until I think of other people seeing it, or if I tell them about it. I once told my boss and he was amazed. "But you're always smiling," he says. "I thought life was easy for you. I took you for a spoiled rich kid."

I'm saving up for a car, and then a place to live. I have to pay for school myself. My dad helped me the first semester with textbooks, but when my mom found out she made me pay her back the \$600 he'd given me. She said it was her money. She keeps a chart of my debts to her.

People come to Vegas to blow off steam and then go. But I'm stuck here. When I see the city lights I think of all the parts they don't shine on. I feel like I'm living there, in those parts. The shadows pull you under. There's so much between me and the lights.

SHELBY SULLIVAN graduated with a degree in English Literature from UNLV in December 2013 and is in the process of becoming a high school English teacher. In the meantime she continues to work at a Sonic fast-food outlet in Las Vegas. Her aunt was finally evicted from the family house. She also lost her job at the casino. Shelby's mother ceased using drugs and their relationship greatly improved. She would like to live in the east of the United States, or perhaps Wisconsin, where her mother is from.



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I'D LIKE to thank the Black Mountain Institute in Las Vegas for giving me the time and the setting to develop this. Tom and Mary Gallagher sponsored my fellowship there and became friends. Our landlady, Sheila Siino, was a warm and generous presence through the whole of our time there. Judith Nies, also a Black Mountain fellow, told me of the links between the lights of Las Vegas and the coal mines on Navajo land. Her book *Unreal City* deals with this. Matthew O'Brien, author of *Beneath the Neon* and *My Week at the Blue Angel*, provided valuable introductions. Steve Pyke immediately came out to Las Vegas when I told him about these stories and, with his now wife Nic Kaczorowski, produced the portraits here. My agent David Godwin has been behind this book since he first read it and has guided its publication. I'm grateful to Fong Hoe Fang and his Ethos Books in Singapore, and to John Mitchison and Rachael Kerr of Unbound, who helped rescue another book of mine twenty years ago, along with everyone else I worked with at Unbound and Ethos. I am especially grateful to all the friends and people unknown to me who made the pledges that have enabled the book's publication. Black Mountain, the Gallaghers and Mark Knopfler made particularly splendid contributions. We may not have got there without them. I won't thank the interview subjects for they are as much the authors of this book as I am.

## ABOUT ETHOS BOOKS

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*“People come to Vegas to blow off steam and then go. But I’m stuck here. When I see the city lights I think of all the parts they don’t shine on. I feel like I’m living there, in those parts. The shadows pull you under. There’s so much between me and the lights.”*

Las Vegas is a much regarded city, a global celebrity for its glitter and splash, and its offer of fulfilling all your desires without any repercussions. But what happens to the people who have to grow up there?

Award-winning author Timothy O’Grady lived and taught in Las Vegas for two years, and near the end, in a class he was teaching, his students began to speak of what it was like to grow up in the world’s playground. They spoke of being robbed by their parents, routinely losing their homes and raising themselves while their parents pursued the addictions serviced by the city. There were overdoses, desert shoot-outs, suicides, all before high school was over. *Children of Las Vegas* is a collection of ten of their stories, interspersed with short essays about the city by Timothy, and portraits by highly acclaimed photographer Steve Pyke.

There are horror stories in every city, but these things were not just happening in Las Vegas, but because of it.



“This is an utterly extraordinary and terrifying work. It gripped me, moved me, appalled me, enlightened and profoundly upset me and drove me to read on and on. It is a city guide like no other to a particular circle of glittering hell in which the fun show mirrors show us the fantastical delusions of our wishes gone wrong, come true. The voices of these remarkable citizens are orchestrated with gentle clarity and moral kindness and it adds up to a vision which shows us how, when and why we are where we are now. It should come to be seen as one of the few ‘travel’ books – like Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* – which are necessary classics.”

—Nick Drake, poet, novelist  
winner of the Forward Prize

