



**MATTHEW O'BRIEN**

**MY WEEK  
AT THE  
BLUE ANGEL**

**AND OTHER STORIES  
FROM THE STORM DRAINS,  
STRIP CLUBS, AND TRAILER  
PARKS OF LAS VEGAS**

**PHOTOS BY BILL HUGHES**

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And Other Stories from the Storm Drains, Strip Clubs,  
and Trailer Parks of Las Vegas

**BY MATTHEW O'BRIEN**

**PHOTOS BY BILL HUGHES**

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My Week at the Blue Angel  
And Other Stories from the Storm Drains, Strip Clubs, and Trailer Parks of Las Vegas  
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To Yolanda Smith and Hunter S. Thompson

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story collection was born in the storm drains of Vegas.

When my first book, *Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas*, was published in 2007, several people asked where they could read the two stories that served as background. The stories, co-written by me and Joshua Ellis and published in *CityLife* in 2002, can be found at the alt-weekly's website ([www.lasvegascitylife.com](http://www.lasvegascitylife.com)), but not easily. The web versions are light on photos and heavy on broken lines. And though the stories are raw, scary, and funny, I wasn't entirely comfortable pointing people toward them.

But, I thought, if I rework the stories, incorporating some of the knowledge gained researching *Beneath the Neon*, they may sit well in a collection.

I thumbed through the archives of *CityLife*, where I'd worked since 2000, searching for other stories to include in the collection. A behind-the-scenes tour of the central sewage plant; after 13 years in prison, a convicted murderer tries to adjust to life in Las Vegas; trailer parks closing at a frightening rate, leaving behind broken bonds, promises, and dreams—these stories were good ... and could be improved. (At *CityLife*, I often wished I had one more week to work on a story. I'd soon get that week and more.) They also shared themes: off-the-beaten-path Vegas, beauty in unlikely places, a voice for the voiceless.

In short, they showed a side of the city rarely seen by visitors or locals.

In early 2008, I left *CityLife* to write more independently and creatively. The collection was one of my projects. When not freelancing, I re-researched and rewrote the stories. Then I researched and wrote two originals: "Another Day on Paradise" and "My Week at the Blue Angel." ("My Week at the Blue Angel" blossomed to 19,000 words and became the centerpiece.)

Finally, I updated the stories in an epilogue and veteran photographer Bill Hughes re-shot some of the *CityLife* stories and shot the originals.

The result is *My Week at the Blue Angel: And Other Stories from the Storm Drains, Strip Clubs, and Trailer Parks of Las Vegas*. I hope the collection adds voices to the Vegas dialogue (which is dominated by casino executives, economic analysts, politicians, and tourists), shows a side of "Sin City" you've never seen, and makes you look at the "fabulous" and "world-famous" tourist destination differently. MATTHEW O'BRIEN | JUNE 24, 2010

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## WHERE'S JESSIE?

**AS THE PLANE TOOK OFF** and banked to the south, the United States spread out before Glendene Grant. The Rocky Mountains of Montana. The Snake River and Yellowstone National Park in Idaho and Wyoming. The Great Salt Lake, the Wasatch Range, and Bryce Canyon in Utah.

From her window seat, Grant looked down on the sheet of darkness and thought one thing: Where's Jessie?

Everyone and everything on the flight reminded her of Jessie. The man sitting next to her, who she handed a card with Jessie's photo on it. The TV screen in the seat back, which aired footage of the recovery of two kidnapped boys in Kirkwood, Missouri. Her carry-on bag, containing a laptop, newspaper clippings, and missing-person posters.

The plane began its descent into Las Vegas—the bed of lights, the Monopoly houses, the neon river of the Strip.

Is Jessie somewhere beneath those lights, Grant wondered? Is she alive? Is she dead?

As the plane taxied to the gate, a flight attendant announced a birthday and the passengers sang “Happy Birthday to You.” Grant cringed. Jessie was missing on her own birthday. And on Mother's Day. And on Christmas.

So many days in a year. So many reminders.

“They come to Las Vegas to drink and gamble and have fun, and it kind of bothered me that they just assumed everybody else on the plane was there

to have fun,” said Grant, who lives in Kamloops, British Columbia. “I felt like standing up and saying, ‘Excuse me, but I’m not really here to have fun.’ I felt like saying, ‘After singing ‘Happy Birthday,’ let’s say a prayer for my daughter.’”

Added Jessie’s father, Dwight Foster, who flew into Las Vegas from Calgary, Alberta, a few days after Grant, “I saw how spread out the city was and how bright it was and the glitz and the glamour. Of course, the passengers flying in are very excited. Everyone on the plane is going there to have fun and make lots of money. I’m sitting there and all I’m feeling is apprehension and dread and hopelessness. Las Vegas represents a totally different head space for me.”

Grant didn’t stand up and say anything to the passengers. She doesn’t want to be too cynical, she said. She’s just sad. Really sad.

She picked up her bag, shuffled off the plane, and made her way through McCarran International Airport.

“I wish I thought that I was coming here to find Jessie,” said Grant, her voice breaking. “But I know I’m not going home with her. I know that. Basically, I’m just here to remind people that she’s missing and to let more people know she’s missing. I just want to bring her picture to light. I just want to try to get some media attention and let the police know we’re not giving up. We’re not going to quit phoning them. We’re not going to quit e-mailing them. We want some answers.”

**JESSICA EDITH LOUISE FOSTER** was born in Calgary on May 27, 1984. She grew up in Kamloops, a city of 90,000 people in south-central British Columbia.

When she was 16, Jessie moved to Calgary to live with her father, who’d separated from her mother when Jessie was one and a half. She graduated from John G. Diefenbaker High School in 2002.

“I missed most of her formative years,” said Foster, an occupational health and safety officer with the government of Alberta. “I missed her elementary school years. I missed her junior high school years. So when she moved to Calgary and I was able to sit down with her and help her with her homework,



COURTESY OF GLENDENE GRANT

that really helped us bond. We were very close.

“She was a fairly typical young girl,” continued Foster, noting that Jessie liked movies, music, and hanging out with friends. “She was a funny and outgoing girl who had her whole life in front of her. I don’t know what else to say. I loved her dearly. She was just a really good kid.”

In February 2005, Jessie moved back to Kamloops. A few months later, she traveled the United States—Miami, New York City, Atlantic City—with a friend. She ended up in Las Vegas in May of that year and decided to stay.

“I didn’t like that she moved here,” said Grant, an Internet technician, after checking into the Tropicana. “I even said to her, ‘You’re not moving to Las Vegas without me having the contact information for somebody else living there.’ I literally said to her, ‘What if something happens to you? What if you go missing and I don’t know who to call?’”

Added Foster, “It was doomed from the beginning. First of all, she was an illegal alien. She was just visiting the United States. Then, shortly after moving here, she met this guy. She was talking about a long-term relationship with him, but she wasn’t an American citizen. She wasn’t going to be able to live down here with him.

“She didn’t think any of this through. How was she expecting this to succeed?”

The guy was North Las Vegas resident Peter Todd, who Jessie moved in with shortly after arriving in Las Vegas.

In November 2005, Jessie flew home to Kamloops to visit. She also visited Calgary. On Christmas Day, the family drove her to the airport and she caught a flight back to Las Vegas.

“If I’d felt I had the right to, I would’ve stopped her from leaving,” said Grant. “But she was twenty-one years old, so I couldn’t tell her: ‘You have to stay home! You can’t go back there!’ She was an adult and had been for three years.”

It was the last time the family saw Jessie.

On March 28, Jessie’s older sister Crystal talked to her on the phone. No one in the family has talked to her since. Her cell phone hasn’t been used. Her credit cards haven’t been used. She hasn’t made any transactions at the bank.

“I knew right away that something was wrong,” said Foster. “There was no doubt in my mind. This was not something Jessie had ever done before.

She always kept in touch with her family. I broke down, because I knew this was serious.”

After several attempts, Grant reached Todd on April 9. He told her Jessie had left him in early April and he hadn't seen or heard from her since. Grant called the North Las Vegas Police Department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and reported Jessie missing.

According to a North Las Vegas Police Department report, an officer went to Todd's house that day and asked him about Jessie. Todd told the officer Jessie moved out April 2. He also allowed the officer to look around the home.

A week later, Todd and his ex-wife were questioned at the police department.

“When you're a detective and you interview people, you oftentimes might have a suspicion about this or that,” said Tim Bedwell, a public information officer with the North Las Vegas Police Department. “The problem is the law doesn't allow you to use mere suspicion to arrest people, to get a search warrant, and things like that. I'm certainly not prepared to sit here and say there aren't things about this case that are suspicious, but we have to be cautious about what we say. The truth is we don't know what happened to Jessie. We can't even develop any sort of estimation.”

In police reports and newspaper stories, Todd has said he had nothing to do with Jessie's disappearance.

In mid-April, Grant and Foster hired private investigator Mike Kirkman of Las Vegas Detectives. Kirkman found out Jessie had been arrested several times for prostitution, under the name Jessie Taylor. He also discovered that Todd's ex-wife had been arrested for prostitution.

“It shocked me,” said Grant. “But then I got over the shock and realized it doesn't really matter what Jessie was doing down here. She was missing and we needed to find her. I don't give a crap what anyone does for a living. They're still human—and I especially wasn't going to judge one of my kids.”

Added Foster, “It sounds to me like there's irrefutable evidence that my daughter sold her body for money. I don't care what you call it. I hate the word ‘prostitute.’ I hate the word ‘hooker.’ Those things disgust me when I think of them, because that's what my daughter was. That, in itself, is so devastating.”

Kirkman also told Grant and Foster he thought their daughter was dead.

Despite shocking revelations and theories, there was little physical evidence in Jessie's disappearance. The North Las Vegas Police Department closed the case pending further information. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Kamloops Police Department, and the Canadian consulate never got involved, said Grant and Foster.

"And that's where the case has been ever since," said Grant. "The only people who have done any further investigation are Mike Kirkman and the family. It's very frustrating."

Said Foster, "The North Las Vegas Police Department doesn't even exist in my mind. They've done absolutely *nothing*. They've done nothing but open a case file. They've disillusioned us and given us great concern about whether any investigation is going to be initiated. They told us right away that they don't have the resources for this kind of case and [Las Vegas] Metro [Police] usually handles these cases and, well, Jessie lived in North Las Vegas. 'Sorry, we have to take the case and we're just not set up for this kind of thing.'

"Basically they said, 'It's our responsibility, but we can't do anything about it.'"

**JESSIE'S DISAPPEARANCE HAS AFFECTED** her family profoundly. Grant said she's a different person. She doesn't recognize herself. Who have I become, she sometimes wonders? What have I become?

She was always the loudest, most boisterous person in the room. The one who made everyone laugh. Very outgoing. Now she doesn't even like to leave the house. She's withdrawn. Nothing is fun anymore, she said, now that Jessie's not around.

At one point, Grant was neglecting her three other children. Crystal told her not to forget about them. We need you, too, she said. And you need us.

"It wasn't a matter of not considering them or forgetting about them," said Grant. "It's just that they were *there*. They were in front of me. They were in my house. They were all taken care of and I knew where they were, so all of my energy was focused on Jessie."

It's tough for Foster to describe what a father feels when his daughter disappears without a trace in a foreign city hundreds of miles from home. He can only say he hasn't worked in 10 months. He doesn't do the things he used

to do, like camping and swimming. When he tries to do them, he just goes through the motions. There's no passion or purpose. He's numb.

"You go through a period of deep, profound despair," said Foster, "and you live with a lump in your throat and you feel like your chest is going to explode and you feel like you're losing grasp of reality. It affected me in ways I never thought possible."

Time passes unnoticed, said Foster. April, May, and June felt like a week. They vanished, along with the good memories—which were replaced by total darkness. Without the e-mails he sent during those months, he wouldn't even have proof that he was alive.

Then time slowed down. To normal. To ... a ... crawl. August, September, and October felt like an eternity. Time. Stood. Still.

"I get anxious and depressed about some of the most insignificant things," he said, "like driving downtown. I work downtown. I used to just cruise through downtown not even thinking about it. Now I'm looking around at the people pulling up behind me and the people on the sidewalks. Everything's just so surreal."

Jessie's disappearance has gutted him, said Foster. It has ripped him open. He has bled.

And he will continue to bleed until she's found.

"All along, I hoped the system would work for us. I had faith that once people realized this is serious, this isn't some runaway taking off for a couple weeks, they would do something about it. But they haven't. I was filled with a sense of desperation. I realized that it was coming up on a year since my daughter disappeared—and regardless of all the attempts I'd made to get the local authorities and my consulate to do something, they weren't taking us seriously. It wasn't changing anything. I felt like I had to be a physical presence down here for something to happen.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I had to give it a shot."

**JANUARY 17. ONE FORTY-FIVE P.M.** Crime Stoppers of Nevada. Grant and Foster sat in a sterile conference room, their reflections showing on the tabletop. Grant's forearm was wedged between the table and her chin. She was looking down. Foster's arms were folded across his chest. He was looking up. Mike



Hope, director of Crime Stoppers of Nevada, stared at them blankly.

The small talk had ended. The details of Jessie's disappearance had, once again, been reviewed and analyzed. (Grant and Foster added that they thought the "friend" Jessie traveled the United States with was actually a pimp.) The role of Crime Stoppers—to generate tips and try to publicize them—had been defined.

The conversation turned to the \$5,000 reward and the possibility of the family increasing it.

"At what stage does a reward start to make a difference?" Foster asked Hope.

"It just depends," said Hope. "We had a homicide a year ago where one hundred thousand dollars brought in a lot of tips. Other times, you get tips for much less than that. There's no magic number. It's just whatever will make someone say, 'That's worth it to me to come forward.' What that number is, I really don't know."

"What do you see as our next move, besides upping the reward?" continued Foster.

"That's about all you can do, as far as Crime Stoppers is concerned. You want to keep the media interested in the story and see if you can entice someone to come forward. There are a couple advertising things I'm going to look into. I can't promise you anything, but I'll talk to some people about billboards and that kind of thing."

I have two daughters myself, Hope said. I know where you're coming from.

"You wake up every single day and you realize another day is starting without her," said Foster. "Where is she? Is she OK? Everything else that seemed important before doesn't even matter. People get so upset about the most trivial things. If nothing else, this has certainly helped put things in perspective."

"Anything that has come up since Jessie's been missing, we just put on hold," added Grant. "We've let a lot of things go by."

Foster leaned forward, placed his elbows on the table, and locked his fingers. His reflection froze.

"If we up the reward to ten thousand dollars, what will Crime Stoppers do?" he asked Hope. "Another press release? TV? Newspapers?"

"What I do is type up the press release. It goes through our public information office. They send it to the newspapers and television stations, but it's up to them whether they broadcast it or not. We don't have any control over that. They may pick it up, they may not. Hopefully it's a slow news day. If there's something big going on, it may get pushed to the bottom of the pile. But we'll certainly do what we can."

"I would really appreciate that," said Foster. "Anything you can do, because it feels like we're spinning our wheels."

Foster told Hope he'd already hit rock bottom. He'd mourned his daughter. In some ways, he'd come to terms with her disappearance. There's only one way for me to go, he said: up. Surprise and happiness if she's found alive. Shock and elation. Love.

Grant told Hope she believes Jessie is alive. That's how I get through the day, she said. That's how I'll get through the rest of my life. That's how I stay strong. I have my whole life to live.

"We may be in different corners on that," said Foster, "but we're together in the search. It doesn't really matter how we feel or what we believe.

We just have to find her.”

After Crime Stoppers, Grant and Foster visited Las Vegas City Hall. They wanted to bring Jessie’s disappearance to the attention of Mayor Oscar Goodman—to appeal to his human side, said Foster. If we’re going to find our daughter, he said, we have to get some help from the government. Without it, we’re dead.

Let’s get some momentum, said Foster entering City Hall. Everybody keeps passing the buck. We want somebody to stand up and take responsibility. We want somebody to say, “You know what? We *do* have a responsibility here! We *do* serve to protect the public! And *this* is what we’re going to do for you, Mr. Foster!”

The last time Grant visited City Hall, she was escorted out of the building by security. “Hopefully,” she said, “this time there will be a little more respect and they won’t treat us like terrorists.”

A receptionist and a public information officer took Grant’s contact information, but she never heard from the mayor’s office.

**THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON**, Grant and Foster visited the North Las Vegas Police Department. They met with Detective Dave Molnar, who was assigned Jessie’s case. Molnar, said Grant and Foster, shared some new information with them, but said there were no solid leads. He also told them the police department has to wait seven years to turn a missing-person case into a murder case.

While Grant and Foster met with Molnar, public information officer Tim Bedwell took questions from Canadian TV newscast “Global National” in a conference room.

*Is there more the department could do in this case?*

“We can’t follow leads that aren’t there,” said Bedwell, a former detective. “We believe we’ve talked to everyone we know of who has any information in this case, and there’s no way for us to develop new leads unless somebody comes forward. There’s really nowhere else to follow up.”

*Grant and Foster said they’ve given the police department leads it hasn’t followed up on.*

“Our investigation is about Jessie’s disappearance. It’s not about what made her decide to come to Las Vegas, although there may be some informa-

tion in there that's helpful. The reality is this is not an investigation of why Jessie became a prostitute. I know her mother would like to have that question answered, but we're never going to be able to answer it for her. The investigation we're conducting is about what happened to Jessie—and we will follow every lead that has a possibility of helping us determine that.”

*Does the department have enough staff to investigate this case properly?*

“This is not an issue of case workload. This is a matter of not having sufficient leads to follow up on. We can only follow up on what exists. We can't create leads. We can develop leads through other leads. We can develop evidence through investigation. But we can't create people to talk to. The fact of the matter is we have talked to the people who needed to be talked to.”

The department has done other things, said Bedwell. Detectives have gone to look at recovered bodies. They fingerprinted a woman in California who matched Jessie's description—blonde hair, hazel eyes, five-foot-six, 125 pounds. They've even followed up on psychic leads.

“I don't want to make us sound desperate,” said Bedwell, “because that's not the case. The point is we want to find Jessie as badly as anybody does.”

*Are there difficulties with the case because she was a prostitute?*

“You can't look up the references at her last job interview. You can't talk to the people she worked with, because they aren't going to come forward. People who would've come into contact with her regularly—taxi drivers, male customers, girlfriends—probably worked in the same trade and are not going to come forward. There are a number of barriers to finding people who had contact with Jessie.

“I've worked at three different police departments. I've worked with a number of federal agencies. I have thirty-two years of public service, and I can tell you this department is pursuing this case as far as it possibly can. It's not my goal to convince anyone in the family of that, because they're not going to be satisfied until we bring them their daughter.”

Grant and Foster entered the room. Grant's eyes were sunken and glazed over. Foster was flushed. Silence.

Then Foster said there are suspects in the case and the police department needs to go after them.

“Whether you think there's enough evidence to indict someone, under U.S. law there's not,” said Bedwell. “We need more.”

"Then get more!" said Foster.

"We have enough resources to investigate cases where we *know* a crime occurred—and that's about it. There are a lot of cases out there where we *think* crimes occurred. But if we commit our resources to those cases, we have to pull people off cases where we know crimes were committed. While that's never going to sit well with you, it's a fact."

"I'm not asking you to arrest anyone," said Foster, exhaling. "Start with a block and then put another block on top of it and another and another. It seems to me you have too many rules to operate under and the criminals have all the rights. Goddammit! Where's the case being built? Where's the net being set? How many other girls are going to disappear? How many have disappeared already?"

After the meeting, Grant and Foster drove to Peter Todd's house. A lock-box hung from the doorknob. The windows were dark. Foster started up the walkway, looking down at the concrete.

"I just watched my daughter walk into the house," he said in disbelief. "I could see her. I could see her walking up to the doors. I could see her pulling out her key and walking in and thinking, I'm home. She felt all this was worth what she did for a living. It makes me wonder, Did I instill some sort of value in her that made her think *this* is what you live for, do whatever it takes to have a nice home? It makes me wonder if I instilled the right values in her.

"Could I have done something to prevent this?"

**ANOTHER SMUT PUBLICATION?** Another nightclub promotion? Another huckster trying to sell show tickets?

That's what tourists seemed to be thinking as they approached Grant and Foster, who were handing out missing-person posters in front of the Tropicana. Their eyes averted. Their heads dropped. They veered out of the way.

"Sometimes they don't really notice me until I'm right there," said Grant, clutching a stack of posters. "Sometimes they just have to hear what I'm saying before they'll stop."

Said Foster, "You get everything from absolute ice-cold rudeness to genuine concern. You see the whole range. But this morning, for the first time, I actually had somebody take my arm and physically move me out of the way. He knew what we were doing, too, that we weren't selling anything or trying



to give him political dogma. It was the coldest thing I could imagine a human being doing.”

During their stay in Las Vegas—Grant was here nine days, Foster five—they gave out 300 posters and 150 cards: “\$5,000 Reward. Have You Seen This Woman? We Need to Bring Our Jessie Home!” They walked up and down the sidewalks of the Strip. They stood on the pedestrian bridges. They dropped by the casino security booths.

They hoped to draw people to their websites ([www.jessiefoster.ca](http://www.jessiefoster.ca) and [www.FindJessieFoster.com](http://www.FindJessieFoster.com)) and get them to contribute to their fund. They also wanted to keep Jessie’s face “out there,” said Grant.

“Our foster child is a runaway and is missing, too,” said Roberta Haight, who lives in the Minneapolis area. “My first reaction to the poster was, oh my God, so many kids in the world are missing and what are we doing to find them? The police don’t do anything. That’s the sad thing. They just say, ‘Well, if they show up, they show up.’”

**THE ENGINES GROWLED.** The plane jerked. Its nose tilted in the air and its

wheels left the runway.

Staring out the window at the kaleidoscope of the Strip, Grant felt hollow. She and Foster had done a lot in Las Vegas—met with Dave Molnar and Tim Bedwell of the North Las Vegas Police Department, visited the house where Jessie lived, passed out hundreds of posters and cards—but she felt she was leaving Jessie behind.

“It’s a really big gap not having her here,” said Grant. “The hole it leaves is amazing—that one little girl can leave such a big gap in so many people’s lives.”

At the same time, Grant was glad she was going home. She needed to see her husband, children, and friends. She needed to see familiar faces. She needed to see familiar places. She needed something *sure*.

Grant put her head back and thought about what else she could do for Jessie: a fundraiser at a neighborhood pub, update the websites, more media interviews. Next thing she knew, the plane was beginning its descent into Calgary.

Sitting next to Grant, Foster was numb. He kept thinking about the meeting at the North Las Vegas Police Department. Bedwell didn’t understand what I wanted, he thought. He thought I wanted a dragnet. He thought I wanted an arrest. He thought I wanted to trample on the Constitution.

All I want, thought Foster, is a calculated approach. One piece of the puzzle. Then another. And another.

“Glendene and I barely said a word to each other the whole trip home,” said Foster. “We looked like two people who had gone through a battle and were sitting back reflecting on it. It’s the feeling you get when you’ve done the best you can and you still don’t come away with a win.”

But the trip wasn’t a total loss, Foster conceded. He got a glimpse into the life of his daughter—maybe the final months of her life. He saw where she lived. He walked in her footsteps. He learned more about what she did for a living. That wasn’t how we raised her, he thought. That wasn’t how we lived. Who is Jessie Taylor?

“But most of my thoughts were about the vultures and wolves that exist in society,” said Foster. “Who don’t like the light. Who don’t like the attention. And how freely they roam. These days, people look to the skies for terrorists. They think evil is going to drop from the heavens.”

But evil walks among us, thought Foster. It’s down there beneath all those lights.