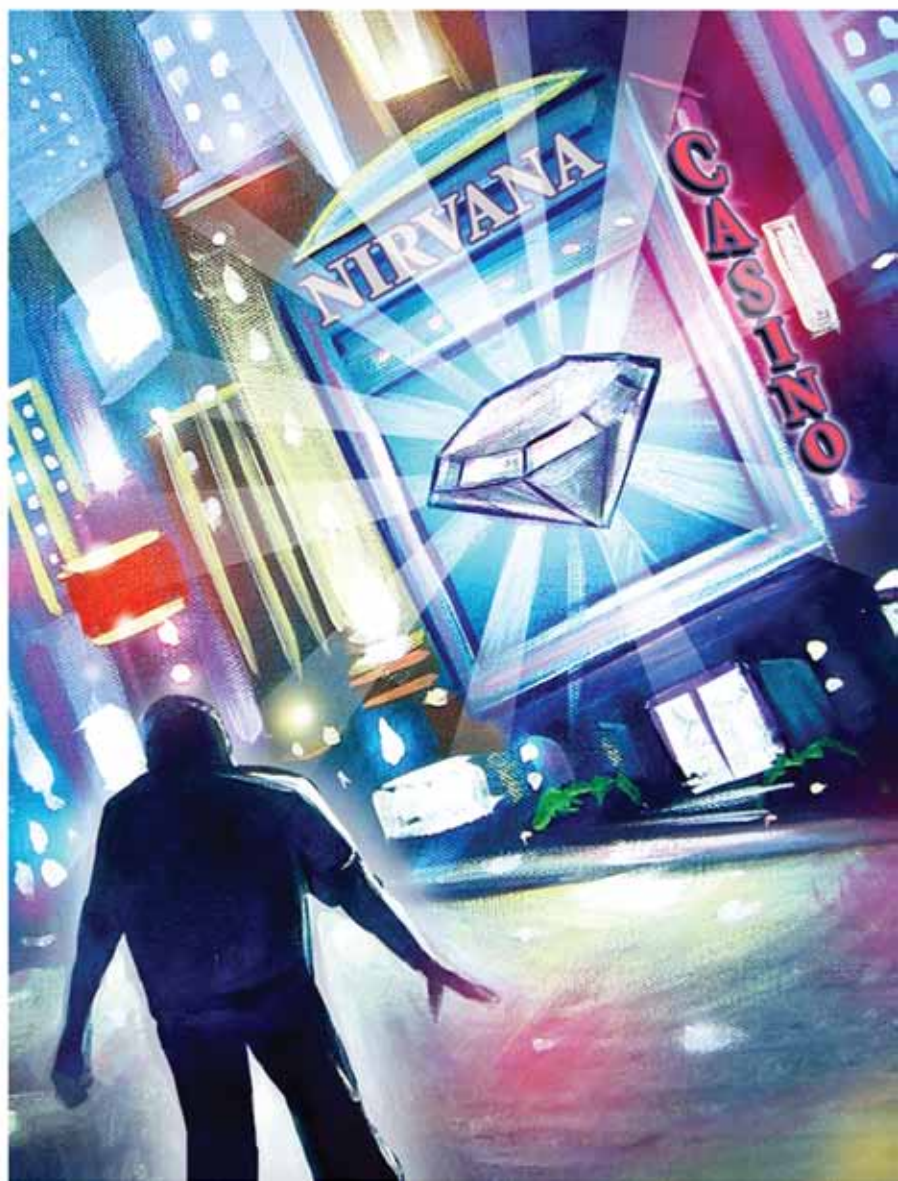


# becoming bobby

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*A Vegas Lit Novel*



“It is never too late to be what you might have been.”

—George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans)

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# **BECOMING BOBBY**

**MICHAEL KONIK**

VEGAS LIT • LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

# Becoming Bobby

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## **DEDICATION**

In memory of Eugene Konik—and for all of us  
becoming what we might have been.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You've got to be slightly crazy to publish literary fiction. So I'm luckier than a winning slot player to have found an asylum full of visionaries who think holding a prism up to life isn't such a bad idea. Anthony Curtis and his team at Vegas Lit, including Jessica Roe and Laurie Cabot, are responsible for my latest outrage, and I'm grateful that such folks still exist.

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# ONE

**EVERYONE NEEDS A** plan. Otherwise, what have you got? I mean, what else am I going to do? Wait? Hope to get lucky? If I've learned anything over the last 58 years—and sometimes I think maybe I haven't—it's that you can't sit around waiting to be blessed by unseen forces bigger than any of us.

No.

Waiting to be anointed, that accomplishes nothing.

So I'm making plans. Big and wonderful and inspiring plans—and if I can be poetic (and why the hell not for once?) I'd like to say that I foresee changing everything around me from a monochrome dirge into a rainbow celebration. Very colorful. Not drab.

Truly. I'm serious. Soon everyone, even the ones who didn't believe—they of little faith, as the psalm goes—even they will see that I was right, that all along I knew. Upon careful consideration and relatively objective review—I mean, as objective as a creator can be when he gazes upon what he has wrought—I can say that it's good, or Good, with a capital. My plan is Good. And everything will be fine and right, the way it's supposed to be. I have the vision to see this.

The trouble with my scenario, how I'd like everything to work out and how I know it will—I mean I *know* it, quite certainly—is that I'm married, and I've got to think about my wife. She's very nice in some ways, moderately understanding and all that. But I think she would find it troublesome if I started being Bobby all the time.



My wife is used to me being me, and I don't think she would be comfortable to climb into bed expecting to find me and instead find Bobby.

Well, actually she might not mind it at all. That Bobby!

Even my wife, my wife who said she would spend all the rest of her living days with me, who promised herself to me, even *my wife*, I suspect, fantasizes about Bobby.

My wife and me, we've got a long-term whatever you call it. A bond, more or less, a binding contract recognized by the law, and we've got a history together that's supposed to amount to something, and yet I wouldn't be surprised at all ... she's probably thinking about running her fingernails along Bobby's back as he breathes in her ear.

She doesn't think about this all the time, but just enough that I would be upset if I found out. I know her, she would deny it. She's a pro at that. But I know the truth. I know the truth about a lot of things, and this is one of them.

My wife's never actually been formally introduced to Bobby, but, I mean, it's obvious she knows about him. She occasionally asks questions—well, not questions, but statements that are supposed to be declaring something but actually, when you analyze them, turn out to be cleverly effective interrogations, probing just enough to prick the conversational surface, like smooth little needles on a cactus. You know: “Work must have been tough today ...” Always leading somewhere, never following.

I suspect her curiosity about Bobby is not altogether motiveless. And you know what? I don't blame her. I don't. How could I? But she is my wife. And when I'm lying on top of her, trying to rub just the right way before I can't wait anymore, I'd like to think I've got all of her attention, if nothing else.

That's not the case, of course. I'm not stupid. I realize this. But I'd like to imagine it anyway.

The first girl I tried to kiss, at my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday party, made a face and avoided me for the next five years. When I was older, the first girl I was ever really in love with asked me to give her money before she would sleep with me. I told her I loved her and she rolled her eyes.

"Then you'll pay me something," she said.

One time last summer my wife said somebody else's name as I did it to her. I stopped and looked right into her eyes, because I wanted her to know how hurt I was. (I really wasn't, but hey.)

"What?" she says.

"What did you say?" Picture like I'm trying to make this a sort of big moment, even though I suddenly get preoccupied thinking about how many hours of sleep I'm going to get before I have to leave for work in the morning. If this becomes too dramatic of a crisis, I'm looking at five hours tops, which isn't sufficient when you've got a quasi-serious position such as mine. I need plenty of rest and strength to make it through each day at the office. So I say, "What was that you said?" like I'm making an effort to remain calm.

My wife replies, "Josh. The elephant. I said 'Josh,' because he's poking my back." She says this with a little bit of a whine in her voice that some people might find very attractive. (Bobby would hate it!) "Wait," she says, twisting around, pulling a miniature stuffed elephant from under her shoulder. We've got all these plush toys on our bed, a menagerie of cuddly creatures to keep my wife company after I fall asleep.

"You said 'Josh'?" I say, acting semi-skeptical, even though I know that "Josh" is exactly what she said. I just want to see if she's going to make any mistakes trying to explain herself. Maybe she sometimes *does* say other names while I'm doing it to her. Maybe I just never heard it before. Maybe I'm just a big semi-soft vibrator to her.

Lots of things about my wife and our marriage could conceivably be discovered in this situation, truths that usually stay hidden until someone dies. Profound things. But, really, I just want to escape to sleep, where I tend not to have perpetual discontentment. So I say, "Oh, Josh the elephant." Then I giggle a little, like, "silly me," and then I finish and promptly fall asleep.

My wife hates this—the falling right to sleep part. Like most women, she wants cuddling and caressing afterward, like it's some kind of medicine that will make what just happened somehow less sickening. Sometimes I do it to avoid big philosophical discussions that don't

really interest me during the day, let alone right before dream-time, when the strains of Big Larry's *Late at Night* orchestra strike up the familiar theme song that's been serenading me to sleep for more than 20 years now, like a reliable lullaby.

After the elephant incident, I never heard her say anybody else's name again. If any of the stuffed animals on our bed poke her in the back while I'm pumping, she says, "the stork," or "the pig," not "Maxwell" or "Nathaniel." My wife can be very sensitive when she wants to be.

I had a sister once, back when I was very little, maybe three years old. I can hardly remember what she looked like, except for two pink ribbons that my mom tied in her black braids. She died of a genetically passed blood disease before I understood what that meant. I never saw my parents kiss or hug after they lost her.

My wife and I have what most people would call a "good relationship." I love that.

It is good, though, in all the conventional ways. I don't beat her up and she doesn't spend all our money on shoes and I do the dishes sometimes. She lets me go out at night without too many questions and I don't make her stop watching certain television shows because they might give her bad ideas. It's give and take.

We don't fight very much. And when we do it doesn't last long. I lose interest on most of the issues very quickly, so it's easy for me to say I'm wrong and not really care. This is one of the reasons she thinks I'm in favor of things like congressional term limitations and the prohibition of pheasant hunting. I'm not very confrontational because, basically, the things she cares about are not things that matter in the long run. She's obsessed with little things, and I'm always looking at the big picture—or Big Picture, if you want to get ironic about it. So we get along nicely.

Also, we don't see each other too much, which is a very underrated way of keeping a marriage "fresh," as all the smart magazines say. You might be surprised how much better it is to live with someone when you don't have to talk to her more than 20 minutes every four or five days. I saw where *Lifestyle* magazine recommended this once in

one of their famous “Top Ten Tips” columns. Practically speaking, it’s cheaper than buying flowers all the time.

I think I was molested by my grandfather in the shower one afternoon, when I was eight or nine. There was an inordinate amount of “inappropriate touching”—but my little balls certainly emerged well-cleaned.

My other grandfather once swore at me in a foreign language because I knocked over a vase of flowers in his living room, pretending I was Superman, flying to a crime scene. Everyone started yelling at each other, and my mom told me later she was sorry she ever had me. She said that if my sister were alive she would never do something so stupid. That was also the first time I ever heard my dad calling my mom a cunt.

Even though she’s put on some weight over the years, I find my wife somewhat attractive. She has nice teeth. If you asked her what she likes about me, I’m not certain what my wife would say. If I had to guess, I think it would be something along the lines of, “He’s very kind with animals.”

Honestly—and that’s supposedly my best quality, honesty—I wish her reply would be more along the lines of “He’s very handsome,” or “I love his intelligence” or “Never have I met anyone quite like him.”

But reality is a cruel mistress, or whatever they say. I am *not* Bobby, no matter how much I may want to be. But then who is, besides Bobby? And because I’m not, I know my wife doesn’t look at me as though I were a wonderful, compelling presence like him. I’ll admit, it’s sort of disappointing—OK, it’s hugely disappointing—but you can only do so much. I mean, if I had the same parents as Bobby, or the same chromosomes as him, I would have a decent shot at being just like him. Let’s be realistic: That’s not the case.

So when my wife looks at me she probably thinks nothing more provocative than, “There’s my husband.” Fact. Not very inspiring.

I assume that’s what she thinks. Sometimes she looks at me funny, with confusion in her eyes, as if she might be asking herself, “Did I really marry this guy?” But it usually turns out I’ve got lint on my shoulder.

My mom left me in the car one summer day with the windows

rolled up. After what seemed like three hours she came back and yelled at me because I had peed in my pants and stained the back seat. "Just for that, you're not getting any," she said, taking a long slurp from a bottle of soda pop.

My wife and I don't share too many interests, although we occasionally watch television together, she thinking about I don't know what and me thinking about deep concepts.

My wife likes comedies, which is odd in a way, because she never laughs. She'll watch them for three hours and not laugh once, and I'll look at her, wondering if she wants to change the channel to something else, like sports, and she'll say, "This is good. Very clever." I don't know if she says this because she believes it or simply as a defensive maneuver. She has a highly developed sense for when I'm about to put on a baseball game, or midget wrestling on the Spanish station.

I've never come right out and asked her, but I think she's somehow *moved* by these laughless comedies. They speak to her in a language or a code that I can't decipher. She's never said as much, but it looks to me like these programs transport her to—well, I don't know where. Not someplace magical or fantastical, or anything like that. Just out of our living room, I guess. Her stout body is planted staunchly upon our sofa; her mind is elsewhere, thinking about who knows what.

I wouldn't be surprised if half the time she was staring vacantly at the comedies on television her mind was on Bobby. I know mine is.

Wouldn't it be funny if we were both watching something like, I don't know, *That Crazy Family*, looking at all the zany things happening to the intrinsically funny people on the screen, and simultaneously we were dreaming about Bobby? I bet it happens all the time: I'm thinking about Bobby; she's thinking about Bobby.

Of course, if you tried to ask her about this, if you said to my wife, "Hey, are you thinking about Bobby right now, this very moment?" she would probably look at you funny, like you had lint on your shoulder. So I never bring it up.

One day I opened a drawer in the kitchen, looking for matches for my mom. Inside, tucked beneath some household detritus, I found a deck of cards with odd pictures on them where the eight of clubs or

jack of hearts should have been. I took them to my mom and asked her what did these pictures of undressed women tied up with rope mean? She said it meant my father was a loser.

I'm out of the house a lot at night. I go places. Little expeditions, fact-finding missions. Adventures, you might say. My wife and I can only watch so much television together, and besides, I don't want her to get more tired of me than she already is. After dinner, I tell her I'm going out and she says have a nice time, and I say you too, and she says 'bye, and I leave. She assumes I'm going bowling, or to the bar to have a beer with the boys while we talk about football and cars, so she doesn't even ask me where I'm going most of the time. Which is good because then I would have to lie, and if it were a perfect world, I wouldn't have to lie to my wife.

Sometimes I have to, and it makes me very unhappy, since honesty is supposedly my best quality. Why should I have to lie to my wife about where I'm going? This is a perverted world that forces a man into such situations, and I feel bad at those moments that I'm part of it.

If I weren't me, it would be different. If I were, for example, Bobby, I would just come right out and tell my wife where I was going, because I wouldn't care what anyone thought. But that's Bobby for you. He doesn't care what people think. He's his own man.

At this point, I'm still working on it. I've been working on it for a long time, and I'm getting to realize that maybe it's a lifelong project that you're never really supposed to complete, because if you ever do you've got nothing else with which to occupy your days and nights. So, in a way, my failure, my quest you might call it, is a sign that I'm on the right path, even though most people probably don't realize this about me upon casual observation. They think I'm content to accept things just the way they are and never be one of those brilliant souls who found another way of being. An exalted way, you might call it.

For my dad's birthday one year, I wrote him a rhyming poem about what a great dad he was. He was watching a football game and it was hard to get his attention, but once I did he seemed to genuinely like my work ("*You're big and strong and smart / You're nice and sweet and sharp as a dart!*"). Before he finished the last stanza, though, his

team fumbled the ball and lost the game, and he got involved in swearing at the television. Later, I found my poem crumpled on the sofa, under an empty bag of potato chips.

This whole concept of being your own man is something most people take for granted. It's not easy. I mean, it *is* easy, if you know how to do it. But if you don't, it's difficult. Like riding a unicycle or something.

I'm working on it. I have a plan.

In high school, I fell in love with Jennifer, a girl with a disease that makes you walk funny. She was normal in every way, except her knees splayed inward and her heels outward, and when she moved it looked as though she were about to fall over. I liked her anyway. And when she told me she thought I was the most special guy she had ever met, which was about the greatest thing anyone had ever said to me at that point, I knew I was going to marry her. She was the first girl to let me touch her down below. And she had a crazy way of licking the inside of my ear, which I never knew was something a girl could do to you. When I introduced her to my parents, my dad told me she looked like a monkey, some sort of crippled ape, and I could probably do better. "Or maybe not," he said.

If you're a person who blends in well, everything is great. Blenders do very well for themselves. They get by. Blending works. It's a proven strategy: Blend.

I'm not a big fan of the blend method. People who are natural blenders aren't their own man. Bobby would never blend. How could he? He's Bobby, for goodness sake!

I'm not just talking abstract theory here. I'm talking applied proven stuff. This is something I know about, empirically. Because in fact I'm a failed blender.

I tried. Believe me, I tried to blend. But, hey, some people aren't meant to be part of the flock, no matter how much others try to herd them. I'm not referring to rebels or heroes, either. This has nothing to do with being extraordinary. This has to do with simply being ordinary and not capable of blending. Everyone is potentially a non-blender; everyone is basically a candidate for this category. But only a few people,

like Bobby, ever make it. And I guess that's why we love them, right?

Everyone likes to think there's something so absolutely amazingly wonderful about them that they can't possibly be just another nobody in the herd of nobodies. These people usually become macrobiotic vegetarians, or Maoist insurgents, or something their parents would hate. They latch on to a symbol to set themselves apart. Maybe they join a group that has meetings, where everybody frets and makes proposals and forms committees. But in the end they go about their business like everybody else does. They go to work and have relationships and get older and buy things and complain and go places and execute the familiar motions and then, eventually, die. Along the way some remarkable things might happen—they visit Antarctica or get elected to the school board, or something. But whatever it is they wanted to prove, whatever they thought their life was supposed to *say*—somehow that got lost somewhere.

They blended.

Bobby? Not a blender.

My attempts at blending have always been half-hearted and, I realize now, futile. Some people, you eventually have to realize, are not natural blenders. Where I work, at the office, you see lots of naturals, people who were born to blend. You can see that they so desperately want to be a tremendously astonishing person like Bobby, who doesn't quite fit into any of the slots life has tried to force him in, no matter how much he squeezes.

I see millions of them. Like this guy Frank, who's more or less exactly like everyone else at the office. Of course he *looks* different from Stan across the hall or Wendy from marketing, and he probably has different hobbies and prefers different snack foods, and I'm sure his sexual proclivities are slightly different, too. But when you get right down to it Frank may as well be Stan, who might as well be Wendy. They all blend.

They're the kind of person you would walk past on the street and think nothing, as though you were looking at a pool of water dressed in a suit and tie—colorless, odorless, very much like the water you showered with or used to rinse your coffee cup. You probably *have* walked



past them at one time or another in your life, but you just don't remember doing it. Which would be about the normal response: no recollection of the experience. The funny thing is a guy like Frank wants to encounter you on the street—at the copy machine, in the elevator, wherever—and inspire memories. Frank wants to stride past a small group of colleagues and imagine that once he's gotten out of hearing range, everyone's saying things like "Wow, that Frank is really something," in slightly hushed awestruck tones.

Nobody ever does anything remotely like that when Frank walks past. They say things like, "Hi, Frank. How's it going?" and Frank says, "Pretty good," and that's that. But I can see that doesn't bring satisfaction to Frank. I can see him thinking things like, "Maybe I should grow a little ponytail and tuck it into the back of my collar."

He probably will, too. And people will talk about it for a few days over lunch—"How 'bout that Frank with his ponytail?"—and then forget about it. And then Frank will go on blending just like before.

I don't grow ponytails. I look unremarkably unexceptionally regular. I *try* to be like Frank and Stan and Wendy, but I can't.

That's the thing. No matter how much I try, I can't blend.

I guess in a way that makes me like Bobby!