AUTHOR'S NOTE

It all started in the summer of 2002, when I explored five storm drains with freelance writer Joshua Ellis. It culminated in the summer of 2004, when I took a sabbatical from *Las Vegas CityLife,* a weekly newspaper, and explored the flood-control system in full. It continued through 2006, as I returned to the drains for follow-up notes and to explore virgin tunnels. *Beneath the Neon: Life and Death in the Tunnels of Las Vegas*—which is set in the long, hot, and lonely summer of '04—chronicles my adventures in this uncharted underworld.

Matthew O'Brien
December 31, 2006

[INTRO] THE WEBER DRAIN

Standing in front of the storm drain, a stream of runoff pressing against my boots, I felt as if a double-barreled shotgun was pointed at my head. My chest was tight. My heart beat violently. As I stared into the darkness, which seemed as deep as a midnight sky, chills shot down my spine and shook my soul. The drain's two tunnels were each 12 feet wide and eight feet high, decorated with cobwebs and drooling algae. They exhaled mildewy air, which washed over me like bad breath.

I was at the bottom of a drainage ditch in downtown Las Vegas, just north of the Fremont Street Experience. The ditch was 20 feet deep, lined with concrete and surrounded by a barbwire fence ("No Trespassing!"). Ladder rungs jutted from the banks and flycatchers glided above the stream—and the half-sunken plastic bags, Styrofoam cups, and aluminum cans—swooping in and out of the tunnels. The sun, too, had spread its wings and was high in the sky. Late morning, it was already 90 degrees.

Exhaling, I slipped out of my backpack and unzipped the secondary pouch. It contained a tape recorder, four or five cassette tapes, a wire microphone, and fresh AA batteries. Removing the recorder, I placed it in a holster that hung from my hip and clipped the mike to the collar of my long-sleeve shirt. Then I ran the wire underneath the shirt, plugged it into the recorder, and pressed "Play" and "Record."

"Test one, test one," I said in a monotone voice. "Weber Drain, Weber Drain."

I rewound the tape and pressed "Play."

"Test one, test one. Weber Drain, Weber Drain."

Next, I unzipped the backpack's main pouch. It contained a four-cell Mag-Lite flashlight, a Mini Mag-Lite, an expandable baton, a knit cap, and fresh D and AA batteries. I removed the Mini Mag-Lite and placed it in a pocket of my cargo pants. I stuffed the baton into a sheath in the small of my back and put on the cap. Finally, I clutched the Mag-Lite in my left hand—its hard steel cooling my palm and fingers.

In the late morning of April 14, 2002, Timmy "T.J." Weber found himself in this same drainage ditch. A week and a half earlier, in a house on nearby First Street, Weber raped his girlfriend's 14-year-old daughter and killed his girlfriend and one of her sons. Police discovered the girlfriend's nude and bludgeoned body stuffed upside down in a storage container in a bedroom closet. A plastic bag secured with duct tape covered her head. Her 15-year-old son was found facedown on a mattress, his arms taped behind his back and a T-shirt stuffed in his mouth. He died of asphyxiation.

Following his carnival of crime, Weber left Las Vegas—but he soon returned.

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what he heard, what he *smelled*. How, apparently without
Did clues of his escape route remain? Could he hear

He ambushed his girlfriend's surviving son and an adult companion when they ventured to the family home on First Street to retrieve mementos for the funerals. A riotous melee ensued, in which all three men sustained injuries. Weber fled on foot, bleeding from the forehead. He weaved around crumbling bungalows. He dashed across dirt yards, dogs barking in chorus. He then climbed the barbwire fence surrounding the drainage ditch and disappeared into the storm drain.

A morbid curiosity drew me to the ditch. I wondered what Weber experienced in the storm-drain system. What he saw, what he heard, what he *smelled*. How, apparently without a light source, he'd splashed more than three miles upstream. Did clues of his escape route remain? Could he hear the police dogs barking overhead? The sirens screaming?

I also wondered what lurked beneath Las Vegas. Roman law forced Jews and Christians into a maze of catacombs. When surveyed by Pierre-Emmanuel Bruneseau and his staff in the early 1800s, the sewers of Paris yielded gold, jewels, and relics of the revolution. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a slave trade thrived in underground chambers along Portland, Oregon's, waterfront. And thousands of people lived in the subway and train tunnels of New York City in the 1980s and '90s.

What secrets did the storm drains of Las Vegas keep? What discoveries waited in the dark? What was behind the black curtains?

Shuffling toward the north tunnel of the drain, I imagined Weber slamming into the fence and climbing it frantically. He balanced on the edge of the ditch, feeling for the rungs with a foot. A splash broke the silence. Kicking through

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the stream—and the plastic bags, Styrofoam cups, and aluminum cans—he disappeared into the darkness. I pressed "Play" and "Record," snapped on the flashlight, and followed him.

The temperature dropped at least 25 degrees and the beam of the flashlight died in the semidarkness. I began up a corrugated slope, which was designed to slow the flow of the water, eyes adjusting and goosebumps rising on my neck. The fear was justified, I thought. Crack addicts assault each other on the streets. Armed bandits storm bars, casinos, and convenience stores. Gang members stomp rivals to death in the malls, right in front of the Gap. If such crimes occur in plain sight in Las Vegas, I wondered, what unspeakable atrocities—what unpardonable sins—take place in the city's storm drains? Are there any rules? Is there any hope?

The tunnel turned to the south. The cobwebs fluttered in the wind. And the stream, though only two inches deep, roared like the Colorado River. "I continue up the slope," I narrated nervously into the mike. "The footing is slick and visibility is low, about ten feet tops. I have no idea who or what lurks in the shadows. Another ex-con? A group of meth freaks? A pack of wild dogs? What in the *hell* am I doing in here?"

The tunnel trended to the north and the rectangle of light behind me began to close. The beam of the flashlight finally took form, unveiling graffiti scrawls and official markings on the walls: "12 x 8 x 6 2-17-00 HCC." (This section of the tunnel is 12 feet wide, eight feet high, and six feet long; its construction was completed on Feb. 17, 2000; and it was made by the Hydro Conduit Corporation.)

About 300 feet into the drain, the roar of the stream softened and I could hear the rush of aboveground traffic. I assumed I was under Bonanza Road, just north of U.S. Highway 95, but I was totally disoriented. (Without daylight, the horizon, and depth perception, that can happen.) A faint glow flickered

behind me. Upstream, a drop inlet (commonly called a sewer) cast a rectangle of light on the floor, walls, and ceiling. I started toward the light, boots splashing rhythmically in the stream. The tunnel swung to the west, then straightened into perfect darkness.

In the depths of the drain, yarn-like cobwebs hung from the walls and ceiling. What size spider created *this* dreadful tableau, I wondered? I dramatically decided that it must've been the size of a compact car. Reaching behind my back, I unsheathed the baton and flicked the handle downward. The steel rod snapped into place. I inched upstream timidly, like a kid through a haunted house. A stray web tickled my face, causing me to flinch.

Regaining my composure and curious about what Weber experienced in the drain, I cut off the flashlight. A black curtain fell in front of me. I felt for the wall with my free hand, then continued upstream. The concrete gnawed at my hand. I imagined Weber—six-foot-three and 210 pounds—groping the walls, his bloody hands leaving perfect prints. He slammed into a lateral pipe. His breathing echoed in the tunnel. After slipping on algae, the back of his pants and shirt clung to his skin. He considered turning around—but realized that meant life in prison or the death sentence.

Aboveground, the police established a perimeter. They turned away vehicles attempting to enter it and searched the ones leaving. A helicopter clapped overhead. Patrolmen, police dogs, and SWAT personnel combed every property in the area. Eventually, they noticed the drainage ditch. Judging the barbwire fence secure—its gates locked, its posts sturdy, its chain links unbroken—they didn't immediately search it.

Finally captured after more than three weeks on the run, Weber—who was featured on *America's Most Wanted*—told investigators that his journey through

the storm-drain system reminded him of the movie *The Fugitive*. He spent five hours underground, he said, emerging between Interstate 15 and Palace Station (a hotel-casino three miles outside of the police perimeter). He didn't indicate that he had a flashlight or that he'd previously explored the system.

Weber, however, neglected to note one obvious difference between his escape and the one portrayed in *The Fugitive*: Dr. Richard Kimble, played by Harrison Ford, was innocent. A Clark County jury found Weber guilty of several charges, including two counts of murder, and sentenced him to death.

Disoriented and out of breath—the darkness was suffocating—I cut on the flashlight. The tunnel snaked and tilted like a mineshaft, the north side of the floor cradling a six-inch-deep stream. Cockroaches covered the south side of the floor. The graffiti vanished. And I safely assumed that this was an area of Las Vegas left out of the guidebooks, only accessed in the most extreme situations.

A lateral pipe about four feet in diameter jutted into the tunnel. As I approached the pipe, my chest tightened and the goosebumps returned. I half-expected the poet Virgil, Dante's guide in *The Inferno*, to crawl from the outlet and offer to escort me through this dark and dank hell.

Beyond the pipe, which dead-ended into a drop inlet, the tunnel swung to the west. I steadied the beam of the flashlight on the near wall—hands shaking, arms and back tightening, eyes as big as slot coins. What lurks beyond the bend, I wondered? What bizarre scene will slowly take shape? What next?

As I rounded the bend, a faint light appeared in the distance. I sheathed the baton and surged upstream. The light grew brighter and brighter, like the coming of dawn.

Finally, I splashed out of the drain and into an open-air channel. Bulrush grass shot from the stream, reaching for the sun, and dragonflies levitated above the

stalks like showroom magicians. Ducks drifted in and out of the brush. Mud and algae carpeted the floor. It was a muggy and marshy scene, slightly reminiscent of southern Louisiana—but it seemed a lot like heaven to me.

Anxious to figure out where I was, I climbed a column of rungs in the north wall of the channel. Main Street Station hotel-casino stared down at me and the Plaza squatted to the southeast, bordered by the Union Pacific railroad tracks. I'd walked about a half-mile—under the police perimeter, the highway, and the north end of Main Street Station.

On the other side of the wall, an open-air channel hooked northward. To the west, three 15-by-10 tunnels burrowed under a sand hill and disappeared into the darkness.

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In the summer of 2002, while managing editor of the alternative weekly newspaper *Las Vegas CityLife*, I came up with the idea of exploring the storm-drain system. I was primarily inspired by Weber's escape route and a profile I'd read in Minneapolis-St. Paul's *City Pages* of a man who enjoyed exploring caves and sewers beneath the Twin Cities. But this assignment wasn't designed for a managing editor, I decided while shackled to my desk. Only the most daring and desperate mercenary would even *consider* accepting it. Realizing this, I pitched the story to *CityLife* contributor Joshua Ellis—who'd displayed brass balls in his weekly column and a flair for first-person narratives in his feature stories. To my mild surprise, he accepted it.

Two weeks after pitching the story, I called Josh to see how the assignment was coming along. It was around noon, but I got the impression that I woke him. (Ah, the life of a freelancer!) He groggily explained that, accompanied by freelance photographer Joel Lucas and armed with an 18-inch kukri knife, he'd explored a storm drain that began downtown and emptied into the Las Vegas Wash more

than three miles away. He and Joel didn't encounter anyone, but they did see clothing and sleeping bags hanging in manhole shafts—storage spaces, he assumed, for street people living aboveground.

The drain was devastatingly dark, continued Josh in a morbid tone. He was now officially awake—and so was I. Scummy water that "stank like a corpse" covered the floor, and minnows spawned in the water by the thousands. Six-inch-long crawfish—the biggest he'd ever seen (and he's from Texas, where everything is big)—nested in the crevices.

"And that was all," said Josh. "No mutants, no fugitives, no mazelike catacombs. Just one tunnel, almost perfectly straight, leading on and on and on."

Intrigued, I asked Josh if he'd explored any other drains. He said that he hadn't, but he hoped to over the weekend. However, he added, "I may need a lift."

Anxious to place the story, I agreed to pick Josh up that Saturday morning. But before hanging up the phone, I explained that I would only serve as a chauffeur and that I had *no* intention of exploring the drains. The clothes I was wearing when I arrived at his house—a concert T-shirt, jeans, and casual work boots—further stressed my innocent-bystander role.

"You're not ready, man," said Josh, emerging from the house and looking me up and down.

"I'm not planning to go very far into the tunnels," I said, "if I go in at all. I'm just along for the ride, man."

In his right hand, Josh held the kukri knife and a Mag-Lite flashlight. A leather trench coat hung over his left arm. He was wearing a short-sleeve T-shirt, jeans, and black boots. Climbing back into my 1997 white-boy Camry, I pointed out that his outfit was no more elaborate than mine.

"I'll be fine," said Josh, flashing the kukri and a demented smile.

That Saturday, curious about what lurked beyond the shade line and not wanting to be labeled a punk-ass editor, I followed Josh into a pipe in the southeast valley and two storm drains in the southwest. Over the next few months, we explored three more drains. The research resulted in a two-part co-written series that was published in *CityLife* that summer and seemed to be well-received by our readers.

PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

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While tracking Weber's trail, Josh and I arrived at this same swampy fork in the flood-control system behind Main Street Station. Tired and intimidated, we turned around. I, again, was tempted to flip a bitch—*man*, was I tempted. But an obsessive curiosity about the 400-plus miles of the system that Josh and I didn't explore spurred me on.

Wishing that Josh were with me—or anyone, really—I waded into the southernmost 15-by-10 tunnel. The water was green-brown and shin-high. Glass crunched beneath my boots. I aimed the flashlight into the stream, which was composed mainly of urban runoff and escaped groundwater (even on a dry day, millions of gallons of water flow through the system), illuminating a 22-ounce beer can and an algae-covered loafer.

About a quarter-mile upstream, I splashed into another open-air channel. Bulrush shot from the north side of the floor—perfect cover for Weber—and hummingbirds hovered above the stalks. I waded through the mire, which I assumed hosted a variety of bacterial diseases, then continued upstream in the south tunnel. Rocks, sandbars, and cinderblocks cluttered the floor. A basketball floated by innocently, reminding me of my misspent youth. The moral, kids: If you neglect your schoolwork, you'll end up wandering around in the storm drains of Las Vegas when you're 33 years old. The stream was three inches deep in areas, knee-high in others. Beads of water jumped through the beam of the Mag-Lite. In an attempt to keep the flashlight dry, I held it higher (its butt resting against my shoulder).

Over the next mile or so, which followed the highway west, a pattern developed. I entered a dark tunnel, emerged in an open-air channel, then continued upstream

in the tunnel; ducks shot from the stream and flapped away frantically; and the thunder of trains and the rush of fast-moving vehicles fell through ceiling grates.

Questions haunted me along this stretch. Why did Weber return to the scene of the crime? Did he want to kill the whole family? Was he obsessed with his girlfriend's daughter, whom he'd been sexually abusing since she was nine years old? As he groped the water-stained walls of the storm-drain system, did he feel any remorse?

Random images related to the crime flashed through my mind: Weber locking the front door of the house and forcing his girlfriend's daughter into a bedroom; the surviving son discovering his sister duct-taped to a bed, crying; two highway patrolmen arriving at the scene and stumbling on the 15-year-old son's body; one of the patrolmen, emerging from the home visibly shaken, struggling to explain the situation to the daughter and son; Metro police officers forcing their way into a bedroom and finding the girlfriend's body.

A car rattled a manhole cover, pulling me from my thoughts. Through the inlet of a tunnel, another open-air channel came into focus—a patch of bulrush, braided water, soaring walls. I imagined Weber approaching the channel, one hand tickling the tunnel wall. His feet rose slowly from the stream and landed softly. Ripples warped his reflection. At the edge of the shadows, he stopped and glanced over his shoulder. Then he squatted and surveyed the channel walls, which were bare, 30 feet tall, and topped with a chain-link fence. Five tunnels faced Weber, three straight ahead and two in a distant corner. He noticed an alley between the bulrush and the channel's south wall. Exhaling, he sprinted for it; the rush of the interstate drowned out the splashing. He emerged from the stalks, arms bleeding, and disappeared into the south tunnel.

Over the next mile or so, the pattern broke. The system trended from east-west

to north-south, following I-15. The stream turned into wet gravel, then the gravel into sand. Instead of open-air channels, I emerged in dark and creepy chambers that were supported by concrete columns.

More questions accompanied me along these lonely corridors: Did Weber attempt to exit the system by climbing the walls of the open-air channels? How many manhole covers did he try to lift? Did he consider camping out in the drains? How long could he have survived unnoticed in the dark, exiting at night for food and drinking water? At any point during his escape, did he think that he wouldn't find a way out? Did he experience the same feelings that I was experiencing: anticipation, fear, exhilaration, fatigue, loneliness, and regret over ever setting foot in this concrete labyrinth?

As I entered another chamber, the questions bid me farewell. I slalomed through the columns, which were tangled with cobwebs, and was confronted by four seven-by-seven tunnels. Shaking out of the backpack, I removed a bottle of water from an exterior pouch. Then I reached into a pants pocket and retrieved my cell phone: "No Service." The clock read 3:35 p.m. I'd entered the system at 11:30 a.m., more than two miles downstream. Sweat rioted on my face. My arms and lower back were tight. My knees and ankles ached. I assumed I was under Charleston Boulevard at I-15, a notorious flood hazard that this channel was designed to drain, but the chamber provided few clues.

Lured by a bright light, I entered one of the middle tunnels. A gentle breeze greeted me, drying the sweat on my face. I breathed in the fresh air, crunched across a sandbar, and passed under a grate. The tunnel swung sharply to the west.

Beyond yet another open-air channel, I started up a straightaway. Exhaust fumes fouled the air; my breathing became labored and I felt nauseous. The tunnel—which seemed as long as a rural Nevada highway—allowed no fresh air,

no sound, and no light. It was as still and dark as the inside of a coffin. The flashlight hung limply at my side, illuminating my scuffed and muddy boots. Will I ever reach the end of this storm drain, I wondered? Does it even *have* an end? Did I take a wrong turn? Did I miss a turn? Some drains in the flood-control system are more than five miles long. Had I accidentally entered one of these cruel and abusive beasts? Should I turn around? Should I keep going?

Again I thought of Weber. On April 14, 2002—regardless of what happened in the casinos—*he* was the luckiest person in Las Vegas. He stumbled on the perfect escape route: plenty of cover, just enough light, and no hope of tracking his scent. He couldn't have planned it any better.

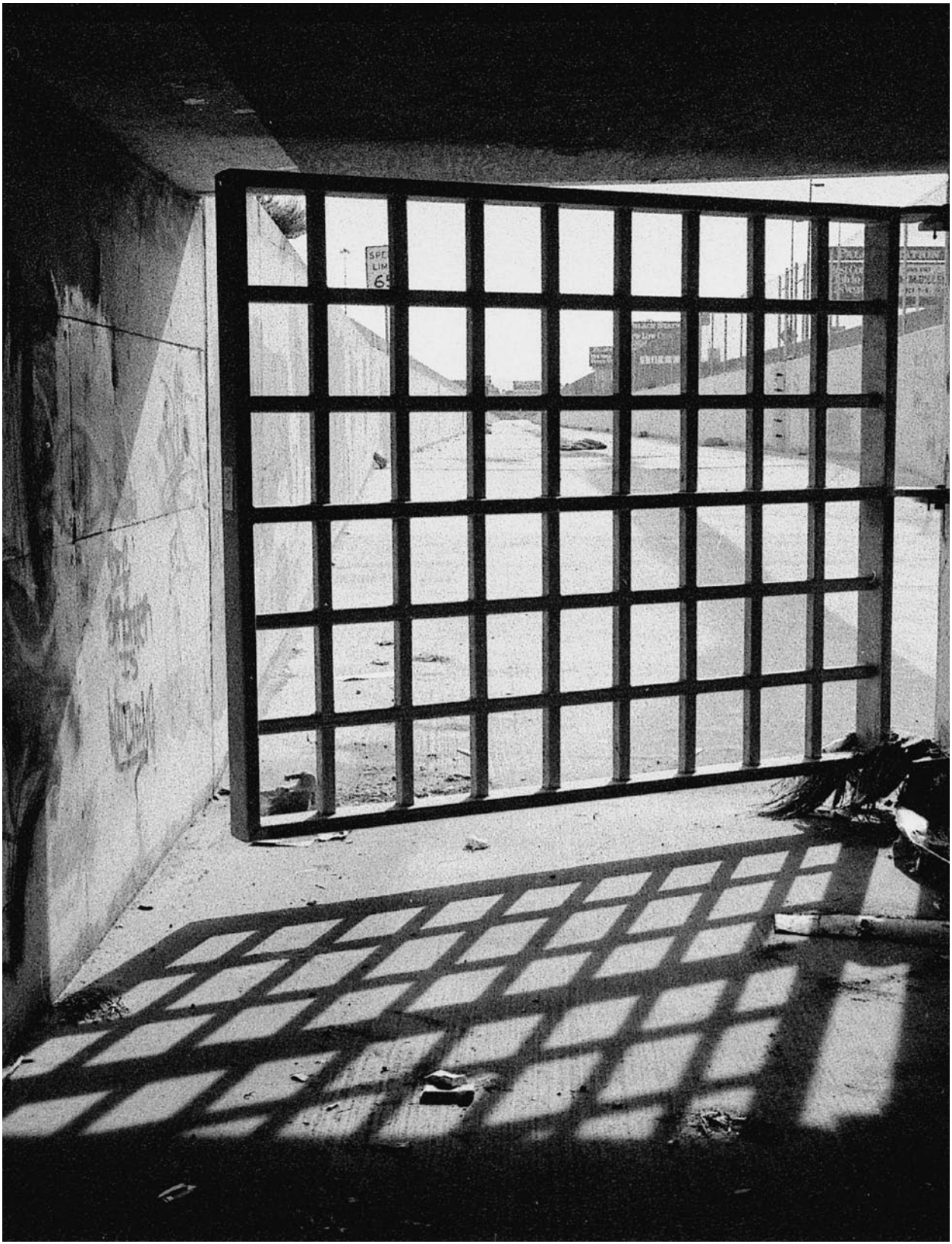
But *this* straightaway must have challenged him. *This* straightaway must have brought the tough guy to his knees.

Suddenly, the tunnel snaked. I felt a soft breeze, heard the rush of the interstate, and saw a faint light in the distance. I surged up a straightaway, toward the light. The breeze stiffened. The rush of the interstate grew louder. And then the light began to fracture. I soon realized that a grate stretched across the inlet. Its bars were thick and tightly spaced. Between them, street signs and Palace Station billboards came into focus. My eyes bulged. My spirit sagged. I wanted to drop to my knees and cry a flood. What a cruel joke, I thought! What an evil, evil world! Strangely, I felt a twinge of sympathy for that bastard Weber. What did he feel at this moment, I wondered? Did he laugh? Did he cry? Did he consider this poetic justice?

As I approached the inlet, hinges took shape on the tunnel's west wall and a slice of light emerged between the east wall and the grate. Gradually, the light expanded … and I realized the grate was ajar. The sky, clouds, and palm trees—all more beautiful than I'd remembered—came into focus. Turning sideways, I slipped out of the drain. My feelings, as Hugo wrote of Jean Valjean's escape from

the Paris sewers in *Les Misérables*, were "those of a damned soul seeing the way out of hell."

Nonetheless, as I staggered up an open-air channel and searched the walls for rungs, I was determined to further explore the storm-drain system. There was mystery and myth to be found, I was convinced, under "fabulous" Las Vegas. There were secrets to be discovered beneath the neon.




WELCOME
TO Fabulous
LAS VEGAS
NEVADA
MANDALAY BAY

[CHAPTER 1] THE "WELCOME" DRAIN

As the Spring Mountains swallowed the sun, the roadside sign flickered to life. Flashing light bulbs framed its diamond-shaped border. Its star, eight-pointed and 25 feet from the desert floor, pulsed in the sky. "Welcome," the lettering began in orange-red neon. "To Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada," it finished in block and cursive text.

Designed by Betty Willis and installed in 1959, the sign originally served as a beacon for tourists traveling from Southern California to Las Vegas on Highway 91 (also known as the Los Angeles Highway). Now, the sign itself is an attraction. Camera crews stake out its gravel median, souvenir shops hawk its likeness, and thousands of tourists a year pose between its steel supports, smiling drunkenly in the neon night.

The sign has stood through many changes. Highway 91, now known as the Strip, is no longer the main road into Las Vegas; the main road is Interstate 15, which was completed in 1963. The annual passenger count at McCarran International Airport, which sits east of the sign, shot from 1 million in 1960 to 46 million in 2006. The sign's backdrop has also blossomed—smaller spread-out hotel-casinos

have been replaced by a seemingly never-ending row of megaresorts.

As I stepped onto the median, carrying my backpack by its top loop, two tourists huddled beneath the sign. One of them stood upright between the supports and swept her fingers through her hair. The other walked a short distance, adjusting a 35mm camera. In the Strip's northbound lanes, vehicles slowed in homage to the sign. The brake lights became lost in a kaleidoscope of colors: fire red, shock pink, sunshine yellow, Prince purple, and lounge-singer-suit blue. The tourist beneath the sign forced a smile. The camera flashed.

Slipping the backpack over my shoulders, I started across the median. Dry mud caked my boots. My thighs were tight, still not fully recovered from following T.J. Weber's trail. I'd spent the past three days in serious chill mode—transcribing the taped notes, writing a rough draft of the Intro, and watching three of the American Film Institute's 100 Greatest Movies. (I highly recommend *From Here to Eternity*, number 52 on the list; Ol' Blue Eyes really rocked it.) And while I felt mentally prepared to explore another drain—even anxious—my body gently protested.

Avoiding a pack of tourists, I crossed the southbound lanes of the Strip and angled into a wash. It ran parallel to the street, then transitioned into a rectangular channel. Cradling a shallow stream that flowed from the Bali Hai golf course, the channel went underground in two 10-feet-wide and six-feet-high tunnels. The sign flashed above the east wall: "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas."

Indeed, I'd found the appropriate place to begin my adventures underneath the Strip.

The stream disappeared into the storm drain's west tunnel. The east tunnel

I surveyed the walls, which were a dull orange in the candlelight.
addiction, desperation, and madness; of loneliness, love, and
Tales that the tourists posing prettily beneath the

was dark and dry. As I approached the drain and squinted into its depths, my chest tightened. I exhaled, then shook out of the backpack. After hooking up the recording equipment, I put on the knit cap. Then I removed the expandable baton from the pouch and stuck it in the sheath, wondering if anyone was watching me from inside the drain. If so, what were they thinking? Did they assume I was an undercover cop? A homeless person infringing on their territory? A wayward tourist? Were they sharpening their tongues—or their shanks?

I clutched the flashlight and entered the east tunnel with the uneasiness of walking into the barrel of a gun.

I was ambushed by darkness. It flowed along the floor, walls, and ceiling like floodwater. The beam of the flashlight fought through it, illuminating cockroaches and cracks between the concrete boxes, which were filled with the black tar used to seal them. The recording light glowed on my hip. Crickets chirped in chorus. Otherwise, it was remarkably quiet.

As I staggered into the darkness, crouching slightly (I'm six-foot-four in my boots), a muffled voice accompanied the crickets. I couldn't tell if it was coming from inside or outside the tunnel—but I certainly hoped the latter. I convinced myself it was just another frat boy frolicking around the famous sign, another Midwesterner turned mad by the betting and booze. The voice became louder and more distinct. Pausing and tilting my head, I finally distinguished: "You looking for something?"

"Excuse me?" I said, squinting into the darkness.

"You looking for something?"

If they could speak, I thought, they would tell startling tales: tales of regret; of triumph, disappointment, and—yeah—maybe even death. "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign would never, ever, believe.

"I'm sorry," I said, continuing into the tunnel. "I'm having trouble hearing you. The crickets are chirping down here."

"Who are you?!"

Finally, about 300 feet into the drain, the beam of the flashlight found a low partition. Behind it, a man in a T-shirt and shorts sat on a chaise lounge. His right hand clutched a dirty sneaker.

"I'm a journalist," I quickly explained, not wanting to be attacked with a thrift-store Nike. "I'm exploring the storm drains for a book I'm working on. A few days ago, I walked a drain that started near the Las Vegas Library and opened up near Palace Station. It was about three and a half miles long. This is the first time I've been in this drain. Hope I'm not interrupting."

"I just got to save some money, so I can get out of here and get out of town," the man said drunkenly, perhaps assuming that I was a cop or county employee.

"Amen," I said. "I've been trying to escape this city for about seven years now."

"I've been here for six," he said, spraying deodorizer into the sneaker, "but not all of them in this tunnel." The man leaned forward and picked up another sneaker. The spray can hissed. I was surprised that someone hanging out in a storm drain would be this concerned about hygiene, but I didn't express it for fear of offending the man. We had a lot to talk about, I hoped.

A Navy-blue blanket draped from a crack in the ceiling, serving as the back wall of the campsite. Cigarette butts and adult-entertainment fliers littered the floor. Spray paint streaked across the tunnel's east side, "Aghast the Devil Stood … and Felt How Awful Goodness Is."

Intrigued by the graffiti, which I later learned was a variation of a line in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, I asked the man: "Did you write that?"

"Nah," said the man, who introduced himself as David. "This other guy

that used to live here did that. I don't even pay attention to it. He got a job as a maintenance man. He moved out of here and into the apartments where he works."

"How long have you lived here?"

"A little over three months. I don't like it down here. The flash floods are really dangerous. It doesn't have to be raining here for it to kill you. It can be raining fifteen miles away in the mountains, and it'll come down in the wash."

"How'd you end up here?"

"It's just the way things worked out. I left my other camp at the same time he left this one. It was the easiest thing to do. I wasn't going to go back to the tunnels behind the Rio [hotel-casino], because I got mugged there. They got me good. I took an ass-beating. If I go back over there, I'll kill the motherfuckers. Basically, I don't want to kill nobody and get arrested. I'm not stupid. I'm just an alcoholic and a drug addict."

I trained the flashlight on the front partition, a door turned on its side and supported by 20-pound rocks. Just outside the camp, ants attacked a sheet of aluminum foil and an empty package of bologna.

"You got some ants over here," I said, slapping them off my boots.

"I know. That's why that garbage is out there: to keep the ants out of here. It's a weird thing. If I put stuff out there, they don't come in here."

"Is it tough to keep the camp clean?"

"Food is the problem," said David, rolling deodorant onto his armpits. What next, I wondered? A splash of French cologne? A pedicurist emerging from behind the blanket? "If you bring any type of food into the tunnels," he continued, "the ants try to get to it. And once you get ants you can't get rid of them. I used a whole can of Raid down here one day."

Still slapping my boots, I asked: "Do you mind if I come around to the far side of the camp?"

"I don't care, man. You don't threaten me. I got a good vibe about you."

I swung around the camp's west border, which was supported by two thin pieces of wood wedged between the floor and ceiling. "Do you get much traffic down here? You know, tourists wandering over from the 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas' sign?"

"Traffic?" he repeated incredulously. "Hell no. You can't see anything in this son of a bitch. It's pitch black. Nobody comes down in here."

I laughed. After all, he had a point. "I thought it was interesting that as you walk into this tunnel you can see the sign, as if you're entering the real Las Vegas."

"It feels very strange walking out there and seeing people making movies and limousines parked. 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas': Yeah, I guess that is kind of funny. Well, I can always tell my grandkids that I lived right next to that sign."

Rounding the camp, I stopped beneath a manhole behind the blanket. Rope wrapped around the rungs, supporting an improvised shelf that hung directly under the shaft. I swept the beam over the shelf, which was empty.

Noticing my curiosity, David rose from the chaise lounge and approached the shelf. "If there's a flash flood," he explained, "I put anything that I don't want to wash away up there. The rest of the stuff I don't care about. It's just trash."

David returned to the chaise lounge. I knelt at the back edge of the camp, between the blanket and the west border, and cut off the flashlight. A candle flickered atop a milk crate, unmasking David's dead eyes and red-brown hair. His skin was pale, freckled.

"It's very dank down here," he continued, "and it gets real dark. Two guys died

It feels very strange walking out there and seeing people making movies and limousines parked. 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas': Yeah, I guess that is kind of funny. Well, I can always tell my grandkids that I lived right next to that sign. ~ David

in this tunnel, and sometimes I hear footsteps at two or three in the morning. I shine my flashlight down there, but nobody's coming."

"What happened?" I asked, peering over my shoulder. I heard exactly what David said, but I wanted more details. During my library research, which began in the summer of 2002, I hadn't come across any drownings in the south-central area of the storm-drain system—but, of course, these kinds of deaths often go unreported. Also, floodwater can carry bodies several miles before they're recovered.

"From what I heard, they got washed away. All I know is that the guy that used to live down here, I said to him, 'How come I hear footsteps at two or three in the morning? Then I look down the tunnel and nobody's coming?' He told me what happened, that two guys got washed away. Another friend of mine who used to live in the other [west] tunnel said he's seen them. It's weird."

"It is weird," I agreed. "These tunnels are creepy enough on their own." I surveyed the walls, which were a dull orange in the candlelight. If they could speak, I thought, they would tell startling tales: tales of addiction, desperation, and madness; of loneliness, love, and regret; of triumph, disappointment, and—yeah—maybe even death. Tales that the tourists posing prettily beneath the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign would never, ever, believe.

"What brought you to Las Vegas, David?"

"An inheritance from my mother, and I was a heavy-equipment operator. But I decided not to work and just drown my sorrows in booze. I knew how to hustle, claiming slot-machine credits and stuff like that, but now all that's about over."

"How long did the inheritance last?"

"Forty-three thousand dollars gone in less than forty days."

"What'd you spend it on?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Video poker and table games."

"What've you been doing since the money ran out?"

"Just hustling. Usually I'd live on the streets for the first ten days of the month, while a friend of mine did his thing with his Vietnam check, his hookers, and his crack. Then he'd be broke, and I'd move in with him for the last twenty days of the month. But he moved back home and died with his family.

"I wanted to get out of town by May, but it's hard to keep plans when you drink and do drugs. Anyhow, I feel kind of lost. I want to go back to Missoula, Montana. I've lived there twice. I could go back there and work for a guy I used to work for and apply at the railroad. I could try there and with the county. I could start getting my life straightened out."

"What were your hopes when you moved to Vegas?"

"My mom had just hung herself. She committed suicide. What were my hopes? I don't know. I guess I didn't have any. I was lost. I didn't know how to deal with it other than to drink. I was divorced. My grandmother died. All the women in my family are gone. And all the prick-head men who put them in early graves are millionaires or multimillionaires."

When I came up with the idea of exploring the storm drains, I didn't
it was simply too remote for a boy from the middle-class South.
(a wallet or a wig—ha, ha, ha), graffiti, and maybe

"Do they ever help you out?" I asked, searching for clues that would set off my bullshit detector.

"My stepfather would, but I don't ask for anything."

"Do they know you live in this tunnel?"

"Nah, man. I'm forty-three years old. They don't care about me anymore."

"When was the last time you talked to your family?"

"Over six years ago, just before I came out here. They don't even know how to get a hold of me—and I don't really care to get in touch with them either. Why? I come out here with forty-three thousand dollars, and I'm going to call them up and ask for money? Jesus, that would be pretty fucking insulting."

I quietly agreed, then changed the subject. "You said you hustle. What do you mean?"

"Just walking into casinos and finding credits left in the slot machines." This is known as "claiming" or "silver-mining." Though illegal—according to state law, all abandoned money becomes possession of the house—it's popular among local street people.

"How much money can you make doing that?"

"The other night I walked into Mandalay Bay and then the Luxor, and there was three hundred quarters in a machine. I made seventy-five dollars in twenty minutes. This morning, I put twenty-two dollars in a video poker machine and ran it up to seventy dollars. But then I gave it all back."

"If you ever hit a jackpot, what would you do with the money?"

"First, I'd hire an attorney. I'm divorced. Then I'd make sure my kid was set for

consider that they might be inhabited. I couldn't make that connection;
I expected to find concrete, darkness, and water—miscellaneous items
a stray animal. But I did *not* expect to find people.

life. And then I'd move out of Las Vegas and live in Montana.

"See, I got one more shot at life," said David, dropping his head. "I talked to a street preacher today down by the Venetian. I asked him to pray for me. I did. I'm ready. He said, 'You probably got one last shot to straighten things out.' And I said, 'You know, I really want to try to.'"

David leaned forward, elbows on knees. He then bent down and began scooping chicken bones from the floor with a paper plate. The conversation lagged. Obviously, it was time for me to move on. It was time for me to go. I stood clumsily, hindered by the weight of the backpack, and stretched my legs.

"Where does this tunnel open up?" I asked him, gazing into the abyss.

Emerging from behind the blanket, David said, "It goes straight, then it turns right and goes underneath the Strip. It opens up somewhere on the other side of the street."

"What's down there?"

"A motherfucking idiot who's lived on the other end of the tunnel for five years. He's arrogant as hell, but he don't mess with me."

"Do you guys communicate?"

"Communicate? He doesn't know how to communicate. All he knows how to do is tell people how to live their lives."

"What's in the other tunnel?"

"Lots of black widows. There ain't nothing else in there. Because of the irrigation from the golf course, there's always water running through it and it's full of chemicals. There's also garbage in there. It smells like shit. But there may be somebody in the other end of it. I've never been all the way through there."

"All right, David," I said, snapping on the flashlight and turning downstream. "Good talking to you, man. Take care."

“

See, I got one more shot at life. I talked to a street preacher today down by the Venetian. I asked him to pray for me. I did. I'm ready. He said, 'You probably got one last shot to straighten things out.' And I said, 'You know, I really want to try to.' ~ David

“Be careful about sneaking up on that bastard,” said David. “He's a weird son of a bitch. He's unpredictable. I'd worry about him pulling a shank or something on me.”

Spooked by David's warning, I swept the beam across the tunnel. The darkness retreated, unveiling a shopping cart angled against the east wall; it contained empty plastic bottles, which were used by David to transport water to his camp, and a cardboard box full of clothes. Faded stenciling on the west wall read, “10 x 6 x 6 1-27-95 HCC.” A mosaic of glass glistened on the floor.

Crunching across the glass and glancing back at David's silhouette, it finally hit me: *This* is his home sweet home. This is where he “hangs his hat.” This is where he “rests his head.” This is where he returns after a long day on the streets. This is where he relaxes. This is where he eats. This is where he sleeps. This is where he dreams. This is where he wakes.

When I came up with the idea of exploring the storm drains, I didn't consider that they might be inhabited. I couldn't make that connection; it was too remote for a boy from the middle-class South. I expected to find concrete, darkness, and water—miscellaneous items (a wallet or a wig—ha, ha, ha), graffiti, and maybe a stray animal. But I did *not* expect to find people. People sleep in houses, condos, and apartments. They sleep in hotels, motels, and—a local favorite—trailers. They sleep in shelters, parks, and under bridges. But they do *not* sleep in dark concrete

boxes that run for miles and miles and miles. They do *not* sleep in concrete boxes that fill with floodwater.

Exploring the storm drains with Josh, I found out that—in fact—they do. And as we interviewed the inhabitants, it *almost* began to make sense. The drains are ready-made reliable shanties—a floor, two walls, and a ceiling. They provide shelter from the intense Mojave heat and wind. (Remember, most desert animals live underground.) Some of the drains are dry for weeks, even months. And cops, security guards, and business owners don't dare roust anyone beyond the shade line.

But ultimately, the drains are deathtraps. They're disorienting and sometimes dangerously long. Many of them run under streets and contain pockets of carbon monoxide. They can be difficult to exit, particularly in a hurry. They're not patrolled. (Who would work *that* beat for $50,000 a year?) They're not monitored. There are no rules. There are no heroes. And, oh yeah, they can fill a foot per minute with floodwater.

Walking into a storm drain is like walking into a casino: You never know what's going to happen, but chances are it isn't going to be good.

As the tunnel trended eastward, two ceiling grates cast grids of light onto the walls and floor. I cut off the flashlight, not wanting to attract the attention of anyone aboveground. The tunnel faded to black and the grids of light came into focus. Underneath the grates, a pile of rocks and aluminum cans rose from the floor. Avoiding it, I crashed into a spider web. I quickly reversed, flicked the handle of the baton, and slashed forward, noticing a streetlight and shrubs through the rusted bars.

The bend intensified. It was now night—I entered the drain at sundown, in hopes of talking to inhabitants who may have been elsewhere during the day—

and the tunnel took on a different demeanor. The shafts of light that signaled ceiling grates, inlets, and outlets had dimmed. Darkness prevailed. Straightening up and squinting downstream, I hit my head on the ceiling. The knit cap softened the blow, but it still stung. I removed the cap and rubbed my head. No blood, no turning around.

For the first time in my life, I wished that I was shorter. Or more conveniently, I wished that the Clark County Regional Flood Control District had made this tunnel taller. What if the six-foot-three Weber had stumbled on this drain? How far could he have traveled slightly hunched over and without light? What would he have said when David asked, "Who are you?!" How would these two strange men have interacted in the dark?

Still clutching the baton, I steadied the beam on the near wall. The components of a camp gradually emerged: jackets hanging from a hook in the ceiling, an Indian-print blanket curled on the floor, a queen-size mattress.

"Knock, knock," I called out nervously. "Anyone home?"

A razor, bottle of suntan lotion, and Walkman radio were nestled in a crack between two of the concrete boxes. On the mattress lay a flattened hat and the fluffy entrails of pillows.

"Anyone home?" I repeated.

A tarpaulin emblazoned with coins and dollar bills hung from the ceiling—ironically, I noted into the mike—forming the front border of the camp. I peeked around the tarp, discovering the outlet, then aimed the flashlight into another crack. It contained an adult-entertainment flier and a toothbrush partially wrapped in a plastic bag. A spider crawled across the bristles.

Returning the baton to the sheath, I exited the tunnel. An open-air channel bordered by a barbwire fence rolled eastward about 150 feet, then swung to the

north. Two hangars squatted above the far embankment. A departing airliner roared into the night.

Mandalay Bay loomed over the north bank and Luxor's beam parted the sky. Admiring the view, I turned into the west tunnel. It swung to the south and straightened, a bulge breaking the square of dim light at its opposite end. A mound of garbage, I soon discovered, created the bulge: Styrofoam containers, a shit-stained carpet, plastic bags full of bottles and cans. The smell of trash and feces made me retch.

Assuming David used this area as a garbage dump and bathroom, I narrowed the beam and returned to the opposite end of the drain. I ducked into the east tunnel, again finding it unoccupied. (I returned to the camp on several occasions, night and day, but never encountered the "weird son of a bitch.") Then I placed the flashlight in the backpack and began down the open-air channel. Around the bend, the channel straightened and ran parallel to the south end of the Strip. The hotel-casinos sparkled like Liberace. The moon punched a hole in the sky.

The Strip, of course, provided a stunning contrast to the storm drain. How could these two worlds so closely co-exist, I wondered? Then again, how could they not? In America, poverty always bows at the feet of corporate wealth.

In the 1980s and '90s, the subway and train tunnels of New York City served as shelter for thousands of people. The book *The Mole People* and the film *Dark Days* documented that desperate existence. The tunnel-dwellers lived alongside the tracks in plywood shanties, rocked by passing trains, or in elevated niches. Some simply spread bedding on the rat-infested floors.

While crude, many of the camps were relatively elaborate: king-sized mattresses, dressers, cabinets, tables, bookshelves, even artwork. The inhabitants cooked on cinderblock grills and plugged into power outlets, allowing for heaters,

lamps, and household appliances. A sense of permanence was established. Some people lived in the tunnels, which were draped with icicles during the winter, for more than 20 years. Niche communities (homosexuals, crack addicts, runaways, eccentrics, and families) formed. Stray cats and dogs were adopted as pets. Babies were born.

But more typically, people *died* in the subway and train tunnels of New York City. Inhabitants, known as moles or mythically as CHUDs (cannibalistic human underground dwellers), were hit by trains or electrocuted, they overdosed on drugs or died of natural causes, they were murdered or they committed murder. According to *The Mole People*, one police officer was beaten to death in the tunnels with his own nightstick. Two other officers were killed with their own guns as they tried to clear out a Bowery burrow.

Eventually, law-enforcement sweeps and tighter security reduced the number of people living in the tunnels. But—no doubt—inhabitants remain, nestled in nooks and shuddering in the darkness.

Behind a boarded-up motel, the channel swung sharply to the east and the lights of the Strip cast a procession of shadows onto the far bank. Around the bend, the channel went dark in two tunnels. I reached for the flashlight, before realizing the tunnels opened up on the other side of a two-lane road.

Again, the channel swung sharply. It then widened, slid under another street, and tore toward the Tropicana hotel-casino.

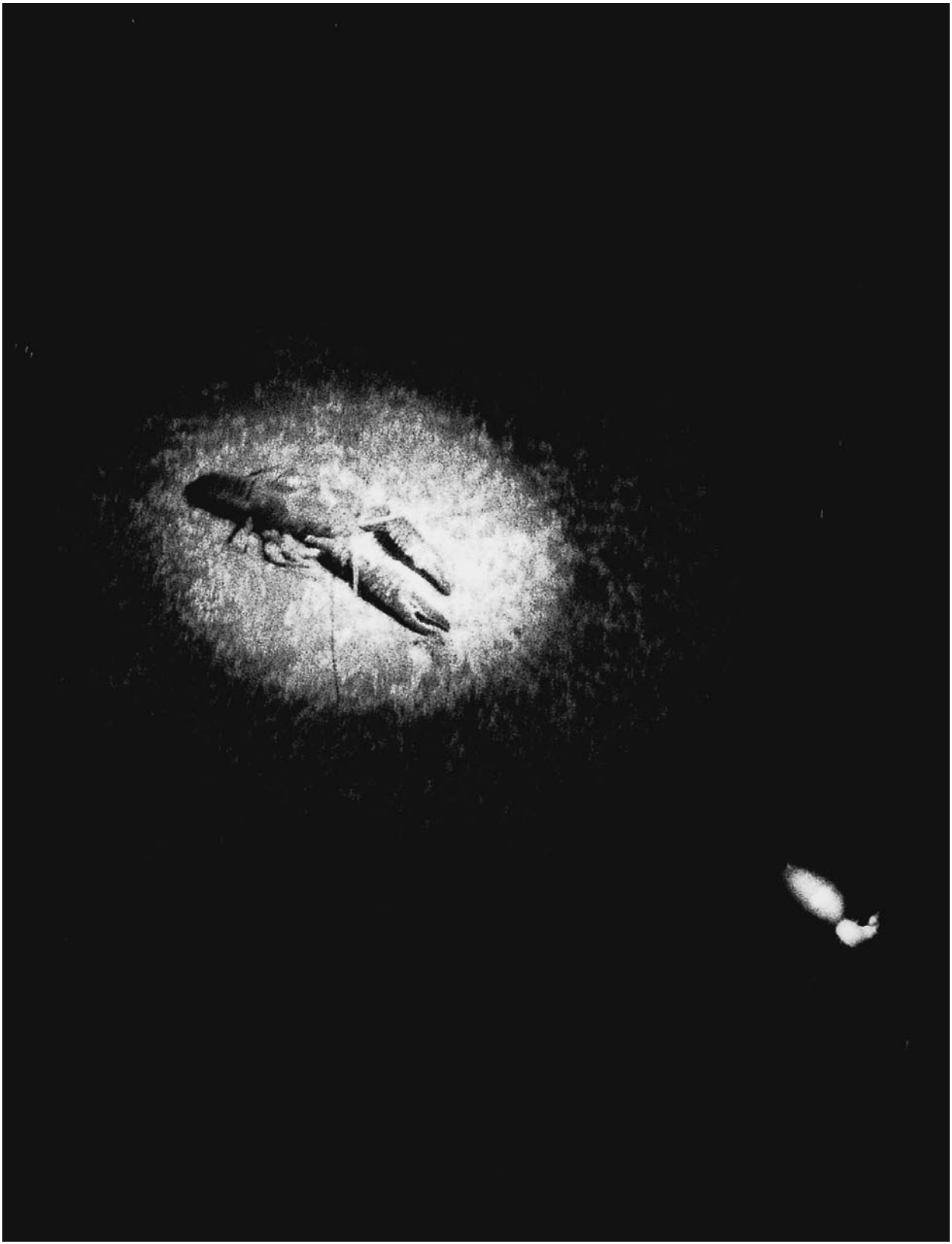
Level with Mandalay Bay, a pipe dumped water—runoff, I assumed, from the property's fountains and sprinklers—into the channel. The water curled on the bank, rolled downstream, and melted into a black void just south of the Tropicana. I pulled up at the edge of the darkness and removed the flashlight, discovering that the stream flowed evenly into a double-barrel storm drain.

Exhaling, I swept the beam of the flashlight over the drain. It was, by far, the most intimidating I'd encountered. Wet, carpeted with algae, and fronted by a towering façade, it was similar to the drain I entered when tracking Weber's trail. But these tunnels were smaller, eight feet wide and six feet high, and shielded by an ominous grate that lay parallel to the channel floor about six feet off the ground. (I had no idea what purpose the grate served.) Shrouded in black mist, the ditch was as ugly as a Fremont Street whore.

I shifted my feet in the stream, feeling like Mallory at the face of Mount Everest. I considered turning around. No, I *seriously* considered turning around. In fact, I convinced myself that it was the logical thing to do. After all, it was 10 o'clock at night—no time to be prancing around a storm drain in one of the cruelest, most desperate cities in the world. Also, I was still within walking distance of my car (which was parked adjacent to the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign at the Klondike hotel-casino); if I explored this drain, which cut under the northwest corner of the airport, I'd have to catch a cab back to the Klondike. And I assumed there was nothing in this drain that would add to my book—no lost tourists, no inhabitants, probably not even a lone graffiti tag.

But I *was* curious about what access—if any—the drain provided to the airport. Post 9/11, everything is super-secure. Right? *Right*? Or was there an outlet adjacent to the runway (like at the North Las Vegas Airport)? Did manholes lead directly to the apron? Were al-Qaeda terrorists huddled in the dark, praying solemnly and devising their own Gunpowder Plot?

After five minutes of debate, I ducked under the grate and splashed into the east tunnel. It reeked of mildew. Sandbars swallowed aluminum cans and diverted the stream, which was ankle-deep in areas. I aimed the beam downward, noticing a crawfish struggling against the current. Fascinated, I stopped and stood over the



creepy little bastard. It raised its head and pincers, as if praying to the God of the Flashlight.

Continuing downstream, I noticed orange-red shells in the cracks between the boxes. It was an unnerving sight, to say the least. There were hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. The crawfish, I recalled from research, migrate from Lake Mead up the Las Vegas Wash and into the storm-drain system. I also remembered that aquariums were occasionally emptied into drop inlets, leading me to speculate about what strange species I might encounter next.

As I rounded the first bend, a red light broke my stride. It hovered in the middle of the tunnel, pulsing like a star. "What the fuck?" I muttered into the mike. Spooked and confused, I took a few steps backward. I then focused the beam and inched forward. A mountain bike with a red reflector took shape. It stood upright on its kickstand and had obviously not washed into the tunnel. Another bike emerged from the darkness, along the east wall. Two white splotches—which I eventually recognized as the bottoms of feet—floated above the bike, just beneath the ceiling.

"Hello?" I said, trying to make sense of the scene. A spectral form rose above the feet. It cowered in the light, shielding its eyes like a vampire. "Sorry to wake you," I stammered. "I'm exploring this storm drain. I was curious. But I didn't want to cut through your camp without permission."

"Go ahead," the form mumbled. "You with the county or what?"

"No," I answered, edging forward and making out a man on some sort of elevated bed. "I'm a journalist. I'm exploring the drains and working on a book."

Apparently, those were the magic words. The man turned on his side and said, "I was planning on writing a book about homelessness myself." Rubbing

the sleep from his eyes, he continued: "Let me give you some background: All this homelessness really began in the 1980s. I'm not blaming Reagan or the Republicans—but if you go back and look at the passage of bills and things like that, this all started with our jobs going overseas and the turning down of low-income housing, the passing of GATT and later NAFTA. We didn't have that many homeless people before the '80s. Now, if you take away the druggies, the Vietnam vets, and the alcoholics, you still have thousands of regular families on the streets. And that don't make sense. These are everyday people who just cannot afford a place to live."

Is this a dream, I wondered? Could this possibly be real? Did I just walk into a wet storm drain in south-central Vegas and discover a man sleeping on an elevated bed? Did he wake up and deliver a well-thought-out lecture on the history of homelessness? Is his book research really that far ahead of mine?

"When did you become homeless?" I asked the man, collecting myself and approaching the bed.

"Around 1994. I had a lot of things on my mind. See, I have a really bad gambling problem. I'm working on it. I've been doing pretty good about backing off, but I still got a habit."

"Were you living in Las Vegas when you became homeless?" I said, standing beside the bed.

"No. I moved here from Kansas City a long time ago."

"What brought you here?"

"Personal reasons. I don't want to get into that." He paused, as if recalling the bad old days, then continued. "But at least here I can find work. I work through Labor Ready [temp agency]. I got a repeat ticket tomorrow. I've got to get back to sleep soon. It's a four-hour gig, janitorial work."

"What time do you have to wake up?"

"Four o'clock. I got to ride my bike to work. And I want to eat and get there early."

"How do you make sure you're up?"

A manhole rose above the bed. Jeans, workpants, and a backpack hung from the upper rungs. The man pointed at a lower rung, which supported a stack of books and a battery-operated alarm clock. It read 10:10 p.m.

"If you do your research," he continued, returning to his original point, "you'll find that everything started building up during the '80s. It was cause and effect. When you start outsourcing jobs, something's going to happen.

"Politicians, I love them. They said outsourcing wasn't going to hurt us. They said it was a blessing. They said these jobs are low-income and that our high-tech will stay. Yeah, right. All those jobs went overseas. Tell me how it's a blessing to a family whose father just got laid off. Try telling them that new jobs will come. They got car payments. They got a mortgage. That's how many people become homeless."

Leaning against the bed and setting the flashlight on the sheets, I asked the man, "How do you think local politicians are doing with homelessness?"

"Las Vegas is like a bubble," he lisped. "Las Vegas is unique. We have casinos. We have millions of tourists. You're always going to have homelessness here, because of the gambling and alcohol. Homelessness is unique here. You can't look at other cities and see how they're handling it. It's just different.

"The government can only do so much. But they're going to have to build more low-income housing. They should buy some land and build cheap steel houses on it, so a low-income family can get a place for $400 or $500 a month."

"That's an interesting idea," I said, "but the real-estate prices are working

against it. There's no cheap land left in Vegas. Prices have gotten ridiculous. They want $350,000 for a stucco box in the suburbs."

"That's true. It would cost some money, and politicians can only do so much. They try to do their best. But they're frustrated, because they think we woke up one day and decided to become homeless. Please, get a grip. A person or a family doesn't just wake up one day and decide that they want to be homeless. They don't decide that they really like it on the streets and they want their children to starve. That's illogical—and I'm talking about everyday low-income people. I'm talking about people who don't have drug problems, mental problems, and Vietnam vet problems. I'm talking about low-income people who did the best they could to find a job and a home, then come to find out they have to work cheap labor. They come to find out they can't afford to pay the rent, because landlords have pumped up the prices. That's part of the reason why people are struggling to survive. That's part of the reason there's homelessness.

"It's a complicated issue," he continued. "There are a lot of reasons for homelessness, a lot of causes and effects. But one of them is not that someone woke up one day and decided they wanted to be homeless. Let's be realistic. Basically, it comes down to affordable housing and well-paying jobs."

"What happened in your situation?"

Raking his matted hair, he explained: "It has to do with depression and not understanding my gambling problem—but it's getting better. I've cut back on the gambling quite a bit. Yesterday, I decided to just play one quarter at a time. I won twenty-three dollars, and said that's it. Usually, I blow it all before I quit."

"What's your game?"

"Video slots. I don't drink liquor. I don't do drugs. A gambling habit brought me down. I'm trying to break the habit, to control it. I'm doing the best I can. I

really want to get off the streets. I've done it before, but sometimes my depression gets in the way."

"I'm Matt," I said, extending my hand.

"I'm Lawrence," said the man, shaking it.

"I'm thirty-three, Lawrence. How old are you?"

"I'm fifty-four."

"I'm from Atlanta. Where you from?"

"I was raised in Omaha, Nebraska."

"Do you have a trade?"

"I cook. I write poetry and short stories."

"Have you published anything?"

"I've come close," he laughed.

"I know how that goes."

"Yeah, I do some writing," he continued. "I do research. I go on the Internet at public libraries and study. I can research and tell stories."

"You got any poetry you could share with me?"

"I just sit here and think of stuff as it comes. Give me a word."

"Um, sticking with the theme, let's go with 'tunnel.'"

Lawrence set his head on a pillow and stared at the ceiling. His nose was boxer-flat. Scars ran across his forehead and a goatee partially concealed his harelip. After a dramatic pause, he began:

"I look upon the night
and sometimes wonder
what kind of tunnel
I dug for myself:
dark, lonely, cold, and damp.

“

It has to do with depression and not understanding my gambling problem—but it’s getting better. I’ve cut back on the gambling quite a bit. Yesterday, I decided to just play one quarter at a time. I won twenty-three dollars, and said that’s it. Usually, I blow it all before I quit. ~ Lawrence

I long for the warmth.

Sometimes I see the light

far, far away,

at the tunnel’s end—

but it’s only an illusion.

My mind is dreaming.

Where does it begin

and where does it end?”

“That was cool,” I said. “I liked it, particularly that you were able to do it impromptu.”

“What I do is go through the alphabet and take a word that begins with each letter. Then I practice rhyming with the word, like ‘hate’: ‘Hate is a gate for the late. It’s fate. I once loved. I once understood God. But the gate closed. And my heart feels hate. It’s gone cold. I’m getting old.’”

I laughed. “Damn, your stuff’s pretty dark.”

“I do some lighter stuff, too. But yeah, basically it’s really dark.”

“That’s probably because of how you’re living right now.”

“I agree.”

“So who are your influences?”

“Edgar Allan Poe. I like his poetry. He’s really dark.”

"Yeah, very Gothic," I agreed. "This tunnel would make the perfect setting for one of his short stories. In fact, I think 'The Cask of Amontillado' was set in some catacombs. That's a crazy-ass story."

In the story, a man named Montresor seeks revenge against his friend Fortunato for an unspecified grievance. Encountering Fortunato at a carnival and aware of his passion for wine, Montresor explains that he recently bought a pipe of Amontillado—but now doubts its authenticity. The proud Fortunato offers to sample the wine for his friend, and the two men venture into the Montresor family catacombs (which serve as vaults). Drunk and blinded by the darkness, Fortunato is lured into a remote recess, shackled, and walled in with stone and mortar.

"I also like Joseph Conrad," Lawrence continued. "There's a black author named Baldwin I like."

"James Baldwin?"

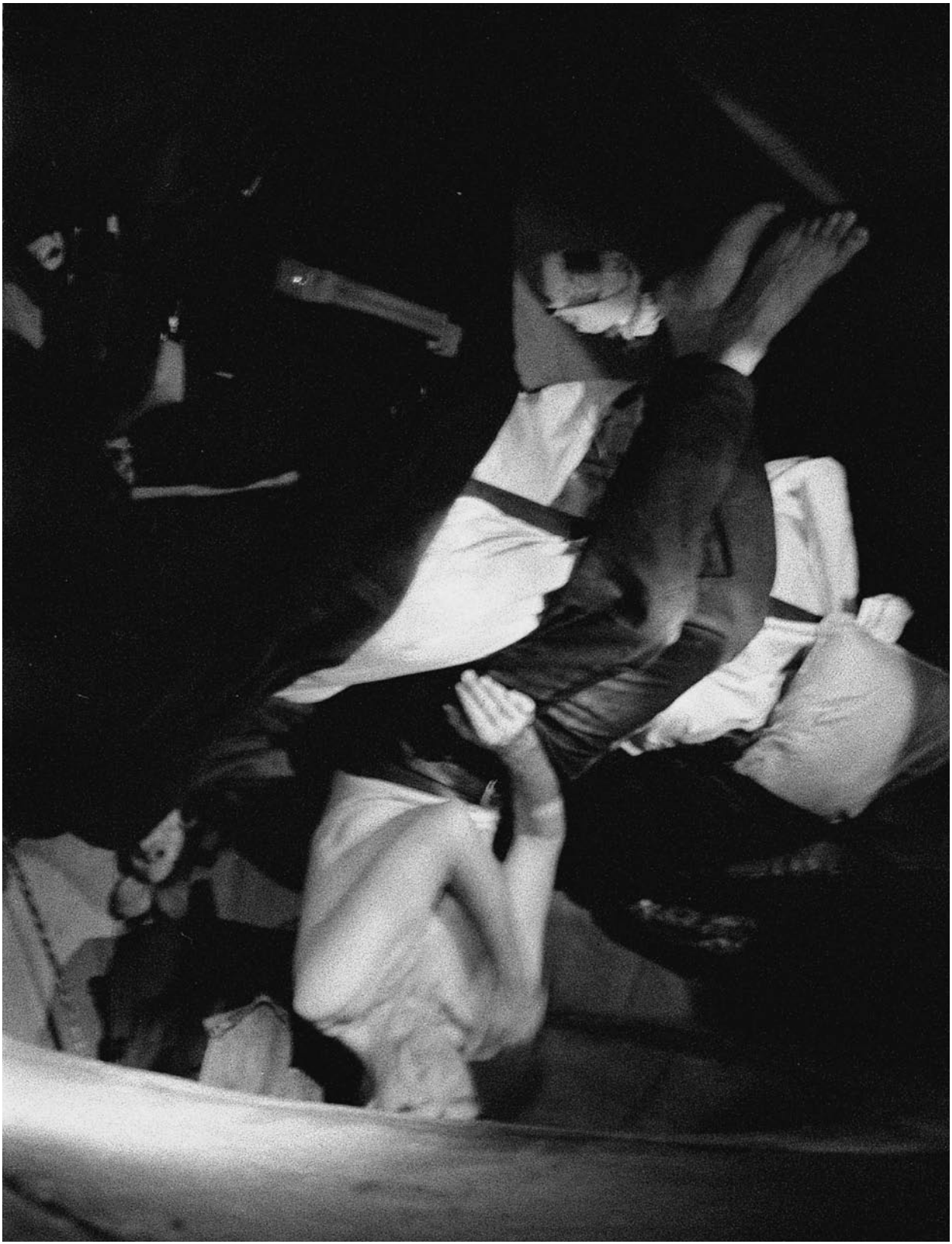
"Yeah, something like that. And I like the guy who wrote *The Hunt for Red October*, Clancy. I really like that book."

"All right," I said, still thinking about "The Cask of Amontillado." I couldn't ignore the similarities between the story and my circumstance: two men, bone-colored walls, and the "supreme madness of the carnival season" (i.e., the Strip) overhead. I could only hope that my fate would prove better than the unfortunate Fortunato's.

"Those are some of my influences," said Lawrence. "I learned their style from reading their works. I like to keep my stories short, my descriptions short and realistic. That's my style."

"Have you been productive lately?"

"No, I haven't," he answered ashamedly. "I have a lot of things I want to write about, but this year I'm mainly doing research. As I said, I want to write a book



about the causes and effects of homelessness. I'm just trying to decide if I want to do it as history, sociology, or what."

I glanced at the books on the rung, which included *The Jewish New Testament* and *Receiving the Holy Spirit Today*. "Is that your whole collection?"

"Nah. I got more than that. I read a lot."

"Do you ever write about living in this tunnel?"

"Nah. Basically, I don't even think about it. I don't even worry about it. This is a temporary situation." Patting the bed proudly, he continued: "I designed this. I built it after reading about mountain climbers. This is how they sleep when they stop and rest in the middle of a climb. It's the same idea."

I played the beam over the bed, which was about four and a half feet from the floor. It was made of couch cushions, a steel frame, and a door that provided additional support. Baling wire looped around the head and foot of the bed, angled tightly through the manhole, and wrapped around the rungs. Backpacks hung from the side on hooks.

I squatted and swept the beam under the bed. It was legless. No steel poles, no wooden beams, no milk crates—nothing. A square-shaped wire dangled from the side, serving as a stepladder. Except for the bikes, the whole camp was at least three feet above the stream.

"This is brilliant," I said. "This is *absolutely* brilliant. It would take a hundred-year flood to reach up there."

"Not even a hundred-year flood would do it," corrected Lawrence. "The water never gets this high in this tunnel. It gets up to your kneecap and that's about it. I just listen to the sound. If I hear a high-pitched sound, I don't even try to get out. I don't even worry about it."

"Have you waited out floods in here?"

“

The drawback of living here is that I can get depressed, and I'll sit here for a week and not leave. I fight mental depression sometimes. I'm a Vietnam vet. I won't go into it any further than that, but sometimes I just get tired of it all. Then I tell myself, 'OK, either put up or shut up. Let's get going.' ~ Lawrence

“No, not in here. But I have in the other tunnels.”

“The tunnels I just walked through, the ones near the ‘Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas’ sign?”

“Yeah, I used to live up there. A bunch of drug addicts starting moving in, so I moved out. I brought everything down here.”

“I only saw two camps up there.”

“This was a long time ago. They built a police station right above the tunnel and everyone moved out.” He laughed at the recollection.

“How long did you live in that drain?”

“About five years.”

“How long have you lived in here?”

“I was staying here when I moved to Denver about two years ago. I didn't come back to Vegas for a while. Now I've been down here about five months.”

“Why do you live in here and not aboveground?”

“I'm safe down here. It's peaceful. It's quiet and cool. When you go underground, the temperature becomes constant: about seventy degrees. And in the wintertime, it's bearable.

“The drawback of living here is that I can get depressed, and I'll sit here for a week and not leave. I fight mental depression sometimes. I'm a Vietnam vet. I won't go into it any further than that, but sometimes I just get tired of it all. Then

I tell myself, 'OK, either put up or shut up. Let's get going.'"

"Why'd you pick this drain? It's wet and has crawfish in it."

"Think about it."

I paused. "Because nobody will come in here and disturb you—except nosy insensitive journalists?"

"Exactly," he laughed. "Rarely will people walk where it's wet. They don't want to mess up their shoes. It's a psychological thing."

"How do you get in and out without getting wet?"

"I ride my bike. I ride it right out and I ride it right back in. My feet never touch the ground.

"But really, I got to get myself out of here," continued Lawrence, head reuniting with the pillow. "I've done it before and I can do it again, if I really set my mind to it. I'm working on it. I'm dealing with it. I'm tired of gambling to the point where I end up starving and have to go dumpster diving. I'm tired of that shit. I've just got to say: 'Enough is enough. Get a grip.'"

I glanced downstream. A mound of wet newspapers rose from the floor and cobwebs decorated the walls and ceiling. The tunnel trended to the east, then disappeared into a heavy black mist. The Montresor family catacombs couldn't have been any creepier.

"What's down there?" I asked.

"Negative. Nothing," Lawrence answered. "You don't even want to go back there. It's all mud and water. It bends all the way around there, gets low, and ends on the other side of the airport. You can't get out. It's covered with a big iron gate that's chained to the wall."

That was all I needed to hear. In fact, it was exactly what I wanted to hear. I'd experienced enough weirdness, enough surrealism, for one night in the storm

drains. It was time for me to walk back to my car. It was time for me to pop the trunk and strip out of my gear. It was time to call my friend Adam, tell him I made it out alive, and share the stories. It was time to shower, eat, and set *my* head down on a pillow. It was time to dream the most bizarre dreams imaginable.

"I should let you sleep, Lawrence," I said, pushing off the bed. "Sorry about waking you up."

"No problem. Take care."

"You too," I said, splashing back toward the inlet and marveling at life. Through cold, heat, drought, deluge, addiction, loneliness, love, and war, it somehow endures—one heart beating, like a neon sign, beneath the back lots of the Las Vegas Strip.

"Good night," I said.

"Good night," said Lawrence.

[CHAPTER 2] THE CAPPADOCIA DRAIN

Cappadocia is a *National Geographic* photographer's wet dream. It's a Roman centurion's worst nightmare. It's a museum, an art gallery. It's a church, a time capsule, an archeological dig. It's a sculpture, an earthwork, and a painting. It's a masterpiece—and a disaster. It's beautiful. It's ugly. It's the ultimate geologic freak show.

Millions of years ago, volcanoes in what is now central Turkey spewed lava across the land. It hardened into tuff, overlaid in areas with stubborn basalt. The canvas set, nature went to work. Intense heat and cold ate away at the earth. Rivers carved into the tuff, creating profound canyons and basalt-topped plateaus. Wind and floodwater sculpted dome-shaped hills and freakish cones and columns, now known as "fairy chimneys."

The region resembles the Southwest United States in areas, the moon in others.

Humans also cut into the rock. Fearing religious persecution by the Romans, early Christians migrated to the region and dug chapels, churches, and monasteries. Later, the rise of Islam forced Christians back into this underworld. Generations of townspeople expanded the network, digging cities of several levels connected

by miles and miles of tunnels. The cities featured air shafts, stables, wineries, and wells. A typical dwelling included a communication shaft (which allowed people on different levels to talk to each other), a kitchen, and a toilet. A wheel-shaped rock served as a rolling door.

Today, Cappadocia has more than 400 underground cities and 3,000 churches. Some locals still live in the underworld, which is cool in the summer and relatively warm in the winter. Abandoned dwellings serve as storerooms, tourist attractions, and hideouts for adventurous children, who crawl into the entranceways in the cliffs and discover the ultimate playground.

"The result is a fairytale landscape," one guidebook gushes, "a child's delight, where dwarves, elves, fairies, and other supernatural beings seem to have just stepped round the corner, or perhaps vanished through a little doorway in the rock."

Las Vegas has its own Cappadocia. No, it's not the latest themed resort on the Strip—fake fairy chimneys, bellhops in traditional Turkish garb, and underground high-roller suites would be blasphemous (of course, that's never stopped the casino syndicate before). It's a flood plain in the southwest valley along the Flamingo Wash. Sand hills camel-back across the plain, cliffs stare down at the wash—a swath of gravel, sand, and shrub—and mesas back up against trailer parks.

But this is no "fairytale landscape." As I crossed the flood plain one hellish afternoon, about a week after exploring the "Welcome" Drain, it read more like a horror story. Creosote bushes clawed at blankets. Couches, cushions, and mattresses were camouflaged amid the shrub. Clothes dried on skeletal branches. Walking down the wash, the backpack slung over my shoulder, I sensed that I was being watched not by dwarves, elves, and fairies—but by street people with nowhere better to sleep.

At the east end of the plain, the wash goes under Decatur Boulevard in a triple-barrel storm drain. I pulled up in front of the drain and removed the bottle of water from the backpack. It was 108 degrees … in the shade. Sweat stung my eyes. My throat was as dry as the Ancient Mariner's. Sipping from the bottle, I flashed back to the summer of 2002.

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"Come on, man," I said. "One more stop and we're done."

Hunched in the passenger seat, drenched in sweat, Josh glared at me menacingly. In three hours on that Saturday, I'd gone from a chauffeur to a storm-drain-seeking madman. Josh and I had a story; I could smell it. Now was not the time to go home, stretch out on the couch, and watch another art-house movie.

Strip malls and fast-food joints blurred by the windows. The car went dark under the Union Pacific railroad tracks. Budget Suites … Arville Street … the Orleans hotel-casino. After exploring the pipe in the southeast valley, Josh and I'd just emerged from a storm drain near Tropicana Avenue and Valley View Boulevard. We were blazing west on Tropicana.

"All right," Josh finally said. "But we have to go to Café Espresso Roma after this. I need a fucking iced mocha."

I pulled into a Home Depot at Trop and Decatur, opposite the flood plain. Josh scooped the flashlight and kukri knife from the floorboard. Then we stepped out into the heat, cursing it as we crossed Decatur and angled into the wash.

Standing in front of the storm drain, a concrete slot machine with 10-by-10 reels, Josh and I were in awe. It was the biggest drain we'd seen and, in contrast to the plain, seemed ridiculously dark. Garbage bags and shopping carts cluttered the inlets. We thought we heard voices coming from the dark. Wait, we *did* hear voices coming from the dark.

"Come on in, boys. We'll be waiting for you."

There was a whole new world behind the black curtains, Josh and I realized, a world that neither one of us could ever really understand. We shifted our feet in the gravel. Jeers from inside a storm drain, rustling in the dark—for two reporters used to covering politics and pop culture from behind their desks, it didn't get any creepier than this.

"There is a valley in central Turkey called Cappadocia," wrote Josh in the first *CityLife* story, "where ancient Christians dug hundreds of miles of catacombs to hide from the Romans, who were quite intent on nailing them to trees. Some of these catacombs run for thirty miles or more. As you crawl through them, you find friezes of the Virgin Mary and the occasional coin with the face of Augustus—strange reminders that some poor bastard actually lived here, hiding from the Man (personified in the third century by the local Roman legion).

"Looking into the tunnels, it wasn't hard to imagine what it might have been like to be the poor son-of-a-bitch centurion who had to go into the catacombs and roust the Christians. Standing at the mouth of a cave, listening to the inhabitants move about. Christ. It doesn't matter how old you are or how well-adjusted you may be. You *will* be afraid of the dark."

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Shaking free of the memory, I returned the bottle of water to the backpack and stared into the storm drain. It was bigger and darker than I'd remembered. Weeds and plastic bags were wrapped around the dividers, as if the last flood had never subsided. There were no cruel taunts, no strange rustling—but I was still creeped out. I just couldn't stop thinking about the bad craziness that Josh and I'd experienced in the drain.

I removed the flashlight from the backpack and approached the south tunnel, the same one that Josh and I'd entered. Two men sat in the shade of the inlet.

Beyond the men, deeper into the shadows, a woman was sprawled across the floor.

"How's it going?" I said, stepping into the shade.

"You going all the way through?" immediately asked one of the men. He was sitting in the middle of the tunnel, wearing a baseball cap, T-shirt, and jeans. His face was sunburned and dirty.

"Yeah, I'm going to try to."

"Why?"

It was a legitimate question, one I'd asked myself several times while crossing the flood plain—one I'd asked myself a thousand times already this summer. "Mainly out of curiosity. I explored a few drains in the summer of 2002, and I've always wondered what else is down there. I finally worked up the nerve to find out. A few weeks ago, I explored a drain that started downtown and opened up near Palace Station. Last week, I explored one that cut under the south Strip."

"You made it out?" asked the man rhetorically.

I smiled. "Yeah, I made it out."

Squinting in the half-light, I surveyed the inlet. A purple-and-silver graffiti tag, which I couldn't decipher, burned across the north wall. Beneath the lettering, empty beer bottles stood like sentries.

"What are you guys up to?" I asked, hoping to strike up a conversation. I wanted details about the drain, updated info that would give me some idea of what lurked in the dark.

"Drinking," said the man.

"Living, bro, living," slurred his companion, reclining against a wall. He was dressed in an unbuttoned shirt, cargo pants, and black boots. Sweat and grease dripped from his shoulder-length hair.

"We don't actually *live* in here," clarified the man in the cap. "We live over there." He pointed toward the flood plain, which shimmered in the heat waves.

I glanced at the woman. She lay facedown on faded newspaper pages, the wall twisting her body violently. She was barefoot, still. It was as if she'd been swept away by a flood and came to rest, lifeless, on this very spot. "Is she OK?" I asked the men.

"Yeah, she's all right," said the man in the cap. "She's just passed out."

"Do you all ever sleep in here?"

"Every once in a while during the day, because it's cooler."

The man's response reminded me of the insulated underworld of Cappadocia, but the thought was short-lived. I was much more concerned with the Las Vegas underworld. What's in *this* tunnel, I wondered? What's in *this* drain? What's waiting for *this* poor son-of-a-bitch centurion?

"What's down there?" I asked, peering into the abyss.

"I have *no* idea," said the man. "I've never gone back there. I just stay *right* here." He patted the floor in a manner that seemed to comfort him, but did little for my composure. I *wasn't* going to stay *right* here—and I was getting some really bad vibes about this drain.

"Back where?" asked his companion, shaking from his stupor.

"Back there," I said.

"Dude, it's a drainage ditch. What do you think's down there?"

In retrospect, I should've answered: "I don't know. Maybe a double-murderer on the lam, a spider the size of a compact car, a hygienic man with multimillionaire relatives, a Vietnam vet who recites poetry—pretty good poetry, in fact—upon request. Dude, the possibilities are endless." But I simply said, "I'm just curious if anybody's back there. I don't want to sneak up on anyone."

The man cupped his hand around his mouth and turned toward the darkness. "Hey!" he yelled. His voice echoed in the depths of the drain. "Hey! Hey! Hey!"

What a prick, I thought. What a certified jackass. Has he not learned any manners in the gutters of Las Vegas? Great. Now every fugitive, junkie, and madman in the drain is awake and on edge. They're stashing their drugs. They're sharpening their shanks. They'll be waiting in the shadows and lateral pipes, anxious to pounce on the inconsiderate bastard who interrupted their first sleep in three days.

"I don't think anyone's back there," said the man in the cap.

"Well, I guess I'll find out," I said, giving up on the men and starting downstream.

"Be careful in there. Be *real* careful in there."

As I melted into the semidarkness, the two men watched quietly and intently. It was as if they expected a great tragedy to befall me right there, 20 feet into the tunnel—a savage beast to suddenly emerge, kill me for food, and drag me into its lair. But they had no such luck. There was no free freak show that afternoon, no cheap thrills. I walked down a straightaway, hit a bend, and disappeared into the sunlight-orange mist.

Around the bend, I cut on the flashlight. Visibility was low—real low. In fact, I couldn't see a goddamn thing. I closed and opened my eyes, hoping it would help them adjust. It didn't. Continuing downstream, right arm extended, I felt as if I were wading through a London fog.

Finally, the backlight faded and the beam of the flashlight came to life. A stream of runoff trickled down the north side of the floor. The walls were gray and grimy. The ceiling, originally flat, now arched in a Gothic style.

The tunnel swerved, then straightened. An intense darkness crashed down on

me, like a wave of ink. My eyes were still screwed up, but my ears were working just fine (thank you). Five hundred feet into the tunnel, I could hear the men at the inlet.

"Metro undercover," said one of them, obviously referring to me.

Sweeping the beam across the tunnel, I noticed a hole in the base of the north wall … and then another … and another. These holes, known as equalizers, are designed to evenly distribute floodwater in each tunnel of the drain—and apparently to scare the shit out of alt-weekly editors. Man, were they creepy! I aimed the flashlight into the first one, illuminating the middle tunnel and a matching set of equalizers in its north wall.

The holes looked like the doorways of Cappadocia's rock dwellings—and I was feeling more and more like a sucker centurion.

Beyond the equalizers, the south tunnel connected with a 25-foot-wide arching tunnel that would not have looked out of place in the bowels of Hoover Dam. The tunnel was massive, super-dimensional, much bigger than any I'd encountered in the first two drains. I cast the beam down it, futilely.

"Hello?" I said, startling myself.

"Hello? Hello? Hello?"

I ducked through one of the equalizers and began back toward the inlet in the middle tunnel. Rounding a bend, I splashed through a pool of sludge. Sunlight colored the walls gray, revealing Jackson Pollock-style piss and shit stains. The stench was overwhelming. I gagged, then buried my nose in the sleeve of my shirt.

Exiting the drain, past a 20-foot-tall rain gauge, I took in some fresh air and looped into the north tunnel. Slabs of carpet cluttered the floor. As I stepped over a mound of clothing, a grocery cart materialized along the south wall; the cart contained cardboard boxes stuffed with newspaper. Another cart materialized along the wall; empty plastic bottles and a shopping bag full of broken glass

occupied its well. The scene didn't strike me as a permanent campsite, but as a refuge or the scattered ruins of a camp.

The ceiling went from concrete gray to soot black. Eerie graffiti—"The Eyes Are the Window to the Soul"—covered the walls and tumbleweeds were scattered across the floor. An image of Jesus and the Virgin Mary was plastered to the wall. The image triggered another flashback.

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After being spooked by the equalizers, Josh and I began down the wide arching tunnel. The flashlight flickered like a candle and offered about as much light—but it was our only hope. If the batteries

had died or if Josh had dropped it, all hell would've broken loose. Panic, groping, screaming—we'd probably still be in the storm drain, eating raw crawfish and drinking runoff with cupped hands.

Wide-eyed and arms locked, Josh and I inched down the tunnel. Our hands trembled. Our heads were on a swivel. Soon, the ceiling began to drop. When it got down to four and a half feet, we turned around. As we did, we heard a splash in the depths of the drain.

"There's somebody down there," Josh whispered. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I didn't protest. In fact, it sounded like a brilliant idea. Josh and I picked up our pace. We weren't running, but we weren't lounging around the place either. We ducked through both sets of equalizers and began back toward the inlet in the north tunnel. Suddenly, I smelled smoke.

"Do you smell that?" I asked Josh.

"Yeah," he said.

As we continued toward the inlet, the smell got stronger.

"This is strange," I said.

And Josh had to agree.

The tunnel swung to the south and a long row of shopping carts appeared around the bend. The carts were placed along the wall in perfect order, as if still in front of the supermarket.

"Holy shit," said one of us—or maybe it was both of us.

"Ellis, what *is* this?"

"It's the Blair Witch, man. I have *no* idea."

Josh slowed down and played the flashlight over the carts. We couldn't make out much of what was in them. One contained a leather satchel, another faded T-shirts. There were shoes, household appliances, and God knows what else. We certainly didn't take inventory.

Beyond the carts was a hut—I repeat, a hut. Made of rotting plywood, it had three walls and

Beyond the carts was a hut—I repeat, a hut. Made of rotting
as a curtain. Bicycles, Coleman lamps, and a cinderblock
soot black. On the south wall, the image of Jesus

a ceiling. An Army blanket served as a curtain. Bicycles, Coleman lamps, and a cinderblock grill surrounded the hut and the ceiling of the tunnel was soot black. On the south wall, the image of Jesus and the Virgin Mary blended into the graffiti.

As Josh and I tiptoed past the hut, he angled the beam through the curtain. Two men lay on a futon mattress, wearing only boxer shorts. Josh and I jumped, then began to run as fast as the flashlight would allow. At the front of the camp, we encountered another improvised curtain. As Josh ducked under the curtain, its steel rod caught on his trench coat and scraped loudly across the walls.

"Who's there?" shot a voice from the darkness.

"Sorry," said Josh.

"We're reporters," I said. "We were just passing through."

A man emerged from the hut, like a ghost from a grave. "You see how clean it is here?" he said. "If you want us to leave, we will."

"Oh, no," said Josh quickly. "We're journalists. We're doing a story on the storm drains."

The man approached the front of the camp, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He was short and thin and his hair was ruffled. "We keep everything very clean," he continued.

"We're with *CityLife*," I said. "I'm Matt. This is Josh."

"I'm Ron," said the man, extending his hand over the curtain.

I shook it and asked, "How long have you lived down here?"

"About a year," answered another sleepy voice.

"That's John," explained Ron, as another short and thin and ruffled man emerged from the hut. The man sat on the edge of the mattress and lit a cigarette.

It turned out that Ron and John had lived in the storm drain for 15 months. They worked odd jobs during the day and returned to the drain at night. They cooked on the grill. They pissed in plastic cups,

plywood, it had three walls and a ceiling. An Army blanket served
grill surrounded the hut and the ceiling of the tunnel was
and the Virgin Mary blended into the graffiti.

which they emptied outside. They kept their tunnel as clean and organized as a suburban tract home, as far as Josh and I could tell.

"Does Metro ever mess with you?" asked Josh.

"No," said Ron. "They know we're in here. They come and check on us, make sure we're OK every so often."

"What about flooding?" continued Josh. "This tunnel must fill up quickly when it rains."

"Metro comes and warns us."

"Sorry to sneak up on you guys," I said. "We didn't know anybody was in here. We were farther back in the drain, just looking around."

"Did you see the troll?" asked Ron matter-of-factly.

"The *troll*?" I repeated, hoping I'd misunderstood him.

"Yeah, there's a troll who lives back there," he continued. "He's been back there forever. But he doesn't mess with us and we don't mess with him."

"And he can see in the dark!" John added, with great effect.

Josh and I fell silent. We looked at each other, then back at Ron and John.

"He has a real long beard," continued Ron. "You don't want to run into him. He can see in the dark. He hides from people. We were walking down there one time and we thought we heard something. I looked into one of those holes in the wall and there he was, looking right at me."

"You're shitting me," said Josh.

"Nope. He was carrying a crowbar and he swung it at me."

"A *crowbar*?" I asked, cringing at the thought.

"Yeah. You don't want to surprise him. He'll bash you with it."

"I *knew* it," said Josh. "I *knew* I heard someone back there."

"He's fucking crazy," said John. "Hey, does one of you have a cigarette?"

After talking to Ron and John for 10 or 15 minutes, Josh and I hustled out of the drain and hurried to the car. We were horrified, exhilarated, and—most of all—curious. A "troll" who lives in the depths

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Did you see the troll? ~ Ron

of a drain? A long beard? A crowbar? Could any of this possibly be true? Or were Ron and John just trying to scare us, so we'd stay away from their home? Either way, it didn't matter. Josh and I had a dramatic conclusion to our first story: We'd return to the drain and search for the troll.

• • •

Following a night of fragmented sleep, I woke early the next morning. I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. For more than 18 hours, I'd been unable to shake the image of the troll—stringy hair, scraggly beard, hairy chest, bent back, and pale skin. I imagined Charles Manson after 15 years of hard storm-drain living.

After showering, I drove to the Home Depot. I roamed its marathon aisles for more than an hour, finally emerging with an armful of items that included a hard hat, a headlight, a Mag-Lite, a Mini Mag-Lite, a clothesline, a snap hook, a four-pack of AA batteries, and a four-pack of D batteries. The cashier eyed the items suspiciously.

“I'm doing some underground work today,” I explained, as I handed her my debit card. “Just want to make sure I'm prepared.”

Next, I drove to an EZ Pawn. I'd put considerable thought into what weapon to take back into the drain, but had yet to be inspired. A stroll through a Vegas pawnshop, I figured, would spark my imagination. Since Josh and I'd ruled out a gun, noting the ricochet factor and the amplified acoustics, I headed straight to the knives section. It was woefully depleted.

“Do you carry any swords?” I asked a salesman in a professional tone.

“Nah,” he answered, as if ashamed. “I'm sorry. We don't.”

On my way out of the pawnshop, I cut through the sports section. There, amid scuffed-up fishing

poles and pool sticks, I came across a bag of golf clubs. An iron, I immediately realized, was the perfect weapon to take into the drain. It could be used as a walking stick, to flip debris out of my way, to knock down spider webs, and to test the depth of the water. It wasn't as intimidating as, say, a chainsaw and it had at least a foot on any crowbar I'd seen.

When I picked up Josh at 7 p.m.—we'd decided to enter the drain at nightfall to add to the drama—I was wearing a long-sleeve T-shirt, cargo pants, and combat boots. He was dressed in the trench coat, a black tee, black jeans, and black boots—storm-drain Gothic. As he climbed into the white-boy Camry, I handed him a sheet of paper.

"Sign this," I said, cranking up the Stones and backing out of the driveway. It was a disclaimer, hastily written after a conversation with the company attorney. It read: "I, Joshua Ellis, enter this dark and mazelike storm drain on my own accord. I am researching this story without editorial direction or pressure from *Las Vegas CityLife* or its parent company. The publication is not responsible for any foul or evil misfortune that may befall me during the research. Right hand raised, Joshua Ellis."

I'd written the disclaimer mainly for effect, to fuck with Josh, to get a reaction. And, indeed, it did. He smiled uncomfortably as he read it, as if reviewing his own will, and a bead of sweat splashed down on the sheet. After attempting and failing to secure a higher word rate, he signed it reluctantly.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled into the Home Depot. *CityLife* Photo Editor Bill Hughes—who'd agreed to follow us into the drain after two freelancers backed out of the assignment—was waiting in his truck, sucking on a cigarette. I jumped out of the car and opened the back door. A waterfall of gear spilled to the asphalt. I picked up the Mag-Lite and put it in a top pocket of my pants. I dropped the Mini Mag-Lite into a side pocket, then picked up a piece of clothesline, threaded it through the eye of the snap hook, and tied it loosely around my neck. I looped the string handle of my tape recorder over the hook. The hard hat found my head. Finally, I gripped the iron and took a few wild practice swings.

"Fore, motherfuckers!" I yelled, prepared to go Tiger Woods on anyone and anything in the drain.

Following a photo session at the inlet, Josh and I entered the north tunnel. Bill, weighed down

with gear, followed closely. We immediately encountered two men and a woman sharing a 32-ounce bottle of beer.

"Do you think we'll find anything back there?" I asked them.

"If you're talking about dead people, no," said one of the men.

"We're talking about people *living* back there."

"Just the two guys who live up the way, but they're not home. I don't know where they're at."

"Ron and John?"

"Yeah. You know them?"

"We talked to them yesterday." I paused. Then risking ridicule, I asked: "Do you know anything about a 'troll' who lives in the drain?"

"A troll?" said the man. "Nah, that's bullshit."

"There aren't any weird fuckers living back there?" asked Josh.

"Fuck no."

"That's what Ron and John told us," Josh said.

"You can't believe anything those guys say. There ain't nobody back there."

Josh and I started off into the darkness. Reaching the front of Ron and John's camp, we called out their names. There was no response. Cautiously, we ducked under the curtain and approached the hut. The bikes were gone, the hut was empty, and the ashes of the grill were dead and dusty. I suggested that we wait for Ron and John to return, so we could question them further about the drain and the troll, but Josh surged downstream. Bill and I followed him. Approaching the equalizers, Josh finally slowed down.

"Anyone home?" I asked, kneeling in front of one of the holes.

"Anyone home? Anyone home? Anyone home?"

"We're journalists exploring the storm drains. We're not looking for any trouble."

"We're journalists exploring the storm drains. We're not looking for any trouble."

Josh squeezed through one of the equalizers. It didn't sound as if he got crowbarred to death by

a vicious troll, so Bill and I followed. The three of us then looped into a wide arching tunnel that ran parallel to the other arching tunnel. Josh cut off his flashlight.

"Matt," he said, "cut your flashlight off." I did, and the tunnel went dark. "Do you hear that?"

A faint ticking sound echoed in the tunnel. It sounded like a drip or maybe even a clock. I cut on my flashlight and inched downstream. The ticking got louder, but I couldn't place it. It seemed to be coming from all directions.

Bill bailed out, explaining that he wanted to check if Ron and John had returned. Josh and I continued downstream. The ticking got louder and louder. Finally, the beams of our flashlights met on a wind-up clock that was wedged between a rock and a wet piece of cloth. I picked up the clock and wiped off its face. It read 9:35 p.m. I removed my cell phone from a pocket: 9:35 p.m.

"Tick, tick, tick."

• • •

Josh and I pushed deeper into the drain, deeper into this mysterious new world. The ceiling rose and sank like a rollercoaster. We smelled smoke—but it wasn't coming from Ron and John's camp. It was nearby, somewhere in the depths of the drain, somewhere in the dark. I ducked through an equalizer and turned upstream in a rectangular tunnel. The smell of smoke grew stronger.

A bowling ball splattered with mud sat in the middle of the floor. Josh and I froze and stared at the ball, as if it were the head of a witch. Honestly, we didn't know *what* to make of this. Perhaps someone had accidentally rolled the ball down a drop inlet, thrown a *gutter* ball—literally. Or maybe a flood had washed it into the drain. Those, of course, were the logical explanations. But why had the ball stopped there, in the middle of the tunnel, unimpeded? And was it a coincidence that the finger holes were facing up?

Questions without answers—that, it seems, was what Josh and I found in the storm drains of Las Vegas.

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The sun had fallen behind the mountains and the eastern sky was getting darker. In front of us, across Industrial Road and Interstate 15, stood Bellagio and Caesars Palace, awash in neon. The fabulous Las Vegas Strip, where so many dreams are found and lost. The Strip, where it’s never really nighttime at all. ~ Josh

“A souvenir,” said Josh, picking up the ball.

“You’re going to carry that thing all the way through the drain?”

“Yeah. Why not? I could always take up bowling.”

Continuing upstream in the tunnel, Josh and I discovered the ashes of a campfire. A tombstone-shaped piece of plywood, which apparently served as a bed, lay next to the ashes. A piece of rebar stretched across the wood.

“That looks a hell of a lot like a crowbar,” I stammered, flashlight fixed on the rebar. Then I announced, “We’re journalists. We’re not here to mess with anyone. We’re just looking around.”

“We’re average American citizens, just like yourself,” Josh muttered.

Kukri knife and golf club poised, we entered a low and wide chamber. Ghoulish graffiti covered the walls. Through square equalizers, we could see into dark and spacious side rooms.

“I’m going to have a cigarette,” said Josh, collapsing against a wall. He set the trench coat, kukri, and bowling ball in a pile and lit up.

“This area is creepy, man,” I said, sitting next to him and angling the beam through an equalizer. The interior of the drain was a concrete labyrinth, with pipes and tunnels and chambers leading in all directions. Its Minotaur was nearby. Josh and I could sense the beast just beyond the range of our flashlights.

“Hey, listen,” said Josh. “We know you’re in here. We’re not going to bother you. We’re just doing a story for a newspaper. If you want to talk, cool. We’ll get your story out to the public. If you don’t want

to talk, that's all right. We won't bother you."

Silence ensued. Apparently, whoever or whatever lived in this area of the drain wasn't interested in publicity. He, she, or it probably had enough problems without the press snooping around.

After hanging out in the chamber for 10 minutes, Josh and I continued downstream. We ducked through an equalizer and found ourselves in a long, long tunnel. Finally, as we turned a corner, we saw a dim light in the distance. The silhouette of a man sitting on a milk crate broke the light. As we approached, he looked at us with a remarkable lack of surprise.

"We're reporters with *CityLife*," I said. "How's it going?"

"Fair," replied the man.

"Sorry to bother you. We walked all the way from the other end of the drain." I extended my hand and introduced myself.

"I'm Eddie," said the man. Josh introduced himself and offered Eddie a cigarette. He politely declined.

"When's the last time you had traffic coming from the direction we just came from?" I asked Eddie.

"About four days ago."

"The guys at the other end of the drain said they hadn't had any traffic in more than three months," said Josh.

"I'm surprised to hear that. A lot more people enter the tunnel from that end than this end. That wash is like a recreation area."

"The guys at the other end said—and I quote—there's a 'troll' living in there," continued Josh, "a guy who hasn't left the tunnel for years and can see in the dark."

"That's possible, but I've never seen him."

Understandably, Eddie was nervous. Josh is six-foot-four in boots and weighs about 300 pounds. I weigh about 200 pounds. Josh was carrying a bowling ball and a knife that could gut a shark. I was clutching a golf club. We appeared at Eddie's back door, as it were, breathing heavily and sweating

like galley slaves. He had every right to assume we were madmen, assassins hired by the casino industry to get rid of the riffraff.

But Eddie eventually relaxed. He told us that he was a "gambling degenerate" who'd lived in the drain for about a year and a half. He even gave us a tour of his camp.

After talking to Eddie for a few more minutes, Josh and I mumbled our goodbyes. We'd had enough. We just couldn't take any more darkness, drama, and confusion. We began down a tunnel, toward the light. Finally, we ducked out of the drain.

"The sun had fallen behind the mountains and the eastern sky was getting darker," wrote Josh. "In front of us, across Industrial Road and Interstate 15, stood Bellagio and Caesars Palace, awash in neon. The fabulous Las Vegas Strip, where so many dreams are found and lost. The Strip, where it's never really nighttime at all."

• • •

Recalling the whole ridiculous adventure—the conversation with Ron and John, the search for the troll, the tombstone-shaped piece of plywood—I washed the beam of the flashlight over the tunnel. The image of Jesus and the Virgin Mary was all that remained of Ron and John's camp. It had been burned out, dismantled, or simply washed away.

Exhaling, I continued into the north tunnel. The walls and ceiling returned to their natural color and, beyond a manhole, the tunnel trended to the east. A row of burned and rusted shopping carts—the same row that Josh and I'd encountered, I assumed—ran along the wall. Glass crunched beneath my boots. The darkness closed around me. The beam cut through it, unveiling the equalizers. I thought I heard footsteps. Wait, I *did* hear footsteps—the crunching of gravel, sand, and newspaper. I cast the beam down the wide arching tunnel. The next few minutes

possessed a dreamlike quality: A spectral form stepped into the light. … It took shape as a shirtless, pale, and haggard man. … Head down and arms flailing, he progressed toward me.

"Are you OK?" I asked the man, actually concerned about my own well-being. Was he Ron or John, I wondered? An early Christian? The "troll"?

Mumbling, the man kicked a rock across the floor. It slammed into a pile of aluminum cans, creating a metallic boom.

"Are you OK?" I repeated, reaching for the baton.

While exploring the storm drains—and while lying in bed late at night—I was haunted by my fears. Naturally, I worried about being trapped in a tunnel and a rainstorm sneaking over the mountains. I worried that I'd catch a waterborne or mosquito-transmitted disease, like West Nile Virus or something even deadlier. And I worried—really, really worried—about encountering a madman in the middle of a drain. I was so consumed by this fear that I'd practiced holding the flashlight in my left hand and swinging the baton with my right, in my living room and to the detriment of more than one lamp. Now, it appeared, I was going to put that practice to use. Now, it appeared, my worst fear was being realized.

Drawing near, the man looked up. "What?" he grumbled.

"Are you *OK*?"

"Yeah. It's hot outside."

I paused, interpreting the random statement. "Yeah, it feels pretty good in here."

The man pulled up beside me. He was about six feet tall—all bones and muscle—and wore jeans, a belt, and dirty white sneakers. His sharp nose supported square-framed glasses.

"Do you need some water?" I asked the man.

"I have water," he said.

"Do you live down here?"

"Why? You the police?"

"No. I'm just curious."

"About homeless people?"

"About what's underneath the city."

"It's about a fifteen- to twenty-degree difference," said the man. I couldn't tell if he was drunk, high, mentally ill, or some combination of the three. "Heat rises."

"Yeah, you can really feel the difference."

"At Christmas, I was stupid," he continued. "I stayed down here and the floodwater pushed even the bricks. There was about this much water in here." He motioned toward his hairy chest.

"On Christmas?" I asked, stunned by the cruel irony.

"Remember Christmas? It rained all day long. The water pushed me from here to about fifty yards down there. I hit a sandbar and went to Arville on my knees. I had quarter-inch lacerations."

"Where were you camping?"

"In the middle tunnel."

"You didn't know the rain was coming?"

"I did, but I messed around. It took both my carts away. I was doing about twenty-five miles per hour. Every time I tried to stand up, it knocked me down."

"You rode the flood all the way to the other end of the drain?" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah. I got down to the end and pushed off one of the walls. When I got about seventy-five feet out of the tunnel, I was grabbing bottles, sand, and rocks. I finally made it over to the embankment."

"And you still live in here?"

"As soon as I see clouds and it starts raining, I get out."

"What do you do at night, when you can't see the clouds?"

"I listen. I can hear the rain. I'm not saying I wait till the wall of water comes, but I can hear it when it goes through the manholes and the pipes. You can hear it dripping."

I aimed the flashlight down the wide arching tunnel. Water stained the walls, creating a procession of ghastly shapes and figures. A stream of runoff parted the floor, which was otherwise dusty and dry, then disappeared into the darkness.

"Another tunnel runs on the opposite side, right?" I asked the man, explaining that I'd explored the drain a few years back.

"Yeah, look," he said, accessing an alley between the three 10-by-10 tunnels and the two wide arching tunnels. He removed a flashlight from a pocket and aimed it down the south tunnel. "Even the Mormons have been in here."

"Missionaries? When?"

"Last year."

"Were they trying to convert people?"

"No, no, no," said the man, walking back to the north tunnel. "They just wanted to see what was down here. They can't convert me. They can't get past Revelations Nineteen and Twenty. Revelations Nineteen and Twenty say that anything added to or taken away from the book of life is a lie. It's the synagogue of Satan. Well, their book has been added to."

As I tried to make sense of what he'd said, the man began walking down the tunnel. I followed him. Sure, he seemed a bit odd and perhaps even psychotic—but any company, even a mumbling madman, was welcome in *this* storm drain.

"Does anyone else live in here?" I asked, still wondering about the troll.

"This one guy who babbles to himself. He's got a beard and his name is Moses. He's a paranoid schizophrenic."

"Sounds dangerous."

"The only dangerous people down here are the cops."

"How often do they come down here?"

"Only when they're looking for somebody, a dangerous criminal or a rapist. They came down here once looking for this black dude named Donte. They took a sample of his DNA with them."

Before I had a chance to ask about Moses and Donte, and their concrete inferno, the tunnel swung to the north. Three shopping carts, one of which was covered with a blanket, appeared around the bend.

"Is this your stuff?" I asked the man.

"Yeah."

"What's in the covered cart?"

"A dead body," he snarled. I laughed uneasily.

The man approached the cart and pulled back the blanket. The well contained canned goods, bottles of water, and a stack of adult handbills. A silver baton sat in the seat.

"Is that an expandable baton?" I asked. "For protection?"

"No," said the man, stepping between two of the carts and rounding a futon mattress. "But check this out." He reached behind the mattress and removed a steel staff that was six feet long, three inches thick, and very medieval. "I'm going to kill that motherfucker up there."

"Who?" I asked, backing away.

The man didn't respond and I didn't pursue the subject. I didn't want to get too nosy. I didn't want to know too much. That, it seemed, is a good way to go

missing in the storm drains of Vegas.

"So this is where you sleep?"

"I got to watch people," he said, alluding to the camp's strategic location on the bend. "I don't trust these fuckers in here."

As my flashlight followed him, casting grotesque shadows on the wall, the man placed one of the carts parallel to the foot of the mattress. He angled another cart at the head. Finally, he set the last one along the side. This created a bunker of sorts, depicting how he sleeps.

"You must get spooked in here," I said, looking up and down the tunnel. There wasn't a beam of sunlight within a quarter-mile.

"Why? I can hear every noise in every direction. The only thing I worry about are the drunks and the idiots who come down here to see if they can victimize somebody. That's the only reason someone would be down here: alcohol, drug addiction, or mental illness."

"What's your name?" I asked the man.

"Jim," he said, extending his hand.

"I'm Matt." I shook his hand and finally felt somewhat at ease with the man. He wasn't a madman, a Christian, or a troll. He was just some dude named Jim.

After putting the carts back in their original position, Jim offered to escort me to the other end of the drain. I gladly accepted, suggesting that we follow the route he washed along on Christmas Day. He set off immediately. As we approached a foot-high sandbar, he slowed down.

"Here's the sand dune I hit," he said. He pointed at a divider that split the tunnel. "My bed hit there and I pushed off the wall."

"The flood swept you *and* your bed away?" Visions of Tom Sawyer danced in my head.

Jim nodded, then entered the south tunnel. The ceiling dropped to five feet, forcing us into a crouched position.

"It must've been hell coming through here," I said, breathing heavily.

"I tried to stand up and stop—but the water pushed me over, even with all my experience in here."

"How long have you lived in this drain?"

"About two years. Drugs and alcohol have kept me down here."

Another divider split the tunnel and the ceiling dropped even lower. Sunlight angled through a grate, illuminating a low and wide chamber. I recognized it as the chamber that Josh and I sat in while searching for the troll.

"What happened to Ron and John?" I asked Jim, passing an equalizer. While less than five feet high, the drain was at least 50 feet wide. It was a stark contrast to the first two drains I'd explored, which were relatively tall and narrow.

"They moved out," said Jim.

"Do they still live underground?"

"No. They moved to Green Valley or somewhere like that. Then John died. I think Ron moved back East."

"How'd John die?"

"I think his heart just stopped. He just slowly deteriorated and died."

The ceiling began to rise and the chamber tapered into a 10-by-8 tunnel. "Why'd they move out?" I asked Jim, following him into the tunnel.

"They ripped off a bunch of people in here. I don't care if you are a cop. That's what happened." He stopped under a vaulted section of the ceiling. "Here's the Orleans," he said, looking up.

Somewhere overhead, sunburned tourists lounged by the pool and sipped margaritas from oddly shaped cups; silver-haired women tugged on slot-machine

handles, while smoking cigarettes and sucking oxygen from wheeled tanks; and baggy-eyed men beneath big hats consoled each other in the sports book. Millions of dollars a day were being exchanged above Jim's $2 camp.

"How'd you discover this drain?" I leaned against a wall and reached for the bottle of water.

"I was coming up here to go to Tropicana, because I usually go down Trop to hit the Strip. I look for [slot-machine] credits. Anyway, where I was living at the time, I kept getting messed with by the police. I just got tired of it. So when I saw this tunnel, I decided to give it a try. I found it by accident, really."

"You've obviously become acclimated to it," I said, noting that his flashlight was off when we met.

"That's because I could hear you. I don't have infrared eyes or anything."

"Who did you think I was?"

"You sounded like a cop. 'Are you *OK*?'" he mocked, continuing downstream.

As Jim and I rounded a bend and began down a straightaway, a faint light appeared in the distance. Jim disappeared through an equalizer in the south wall. I followed him, entering another 10-by-8 tunnel.

"So how'd you end up living down here?"

"I abused drugs and I didn't do anything with my life. I kept doing dope. I didn't make a decision to stop. I finally quit smoking crack, because I almost died. Now I got to get off the meth.

"I'm not a derelict," he continued, pulling a T-shirt from his back pocket and slipping it over his shoulders. "I'm not an ax murderer or anything like that. I don't hurt anyone. I just didn't make a decision to quit all the drugs and move on with my life. I'm not ignorant. I'm not stupid. All this is common sense: If I quit the drugs and alcohol, I get out of the tunnel.

"I've worked. I worked for Valley Bank. I worked for Steve Wynn's Golden Nugget, Caesars Palace, Holiday Inn. I serviced fire extinguishers. It's not like all of a sudden I wound up in the tunnel and I've never worked a day in my life. That's what some of these other idiots in here will tell you about themselves.

"It's all about motivation, about going to school. I want to be a veterinarian, but I have to get off my lazy ass and make a decision to do it. I have to say, 'Hey, enough is enough. Fuck the drugs. I don't need this shit.'"

A divider split the tunnel, creating two smaller tunnels. The sunlight silhouetted grocery carts, cardboard boxes, bicycles, headboards, and dressers—a storm-drain skyline. Jim veered into the south tunnel.

"Hey there," he said, approaching a headboard. A man in boxer shorts was stretched across a queen-sized bed, eyes closed. "Don't bother him. Let him sleep." The bed was complete: frame, box spring, fitted sheets. It looked like it had been wheeled out of a five-star resort and straight into the storm drain.

The ceiling of the tunnel began to drop. I heard the rush of traffic overhead on Arville Street. Then tall weeds and a rock embankment came into focus through the outlet. Finally, Jim and I exited the drain.

The sun was psychedelic, an intense shade of yellow. The sky was an exaggerated blue. I shielded my eyes with my right hand, cowering like a vampire out of the coffin, and squinted to the east. The wash straightened toward the Rio hotel-casino, then disappeared around a bend. To the west, on the other side of Arville, stood the Orleans.

"The water came through the wash all at once," said Jim, continuing his tale. "It carried me about seventy-five feet out of the tunnel."

"Which tunnel did you come out of?" I asked, scanning the drain's seven outlets.

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Jim walked over to one of the middle tunnels. "This one right here. I had my bag over my shoulder. I had my flashlight. I had to let go of two other bags. I was grabbing boxes, beer bottles, anything—on my hands and knees in the water—just trying to get over to the bank. The water was coming through here real strong." He ducked into the tunnel and started back into the drain. "Anything else you want to know?"

"Do you think any of the other guys would talk to me?"

"Maybe those guys over there." He pointed at the north wall. "Some of the people down here are cool. Just don't shine the flashlight on them."

Jim and I walked deeper into the drain, deeper into the shadows. We entered a 10-by-8 tunnel, then ducked through another equalizer. He pulled up at the edge of the darkness.

"It's pretty neat down here," he concluded, in true tour-guide fashion. "It's cooler than outside. It gets too hot out there. And you're not in anybody's business, hanging out or loitering. I'm not saying that I woke up one day and decided, 'Hey, I think I'll live in a tunnel for the rest of my life.' I'm here by choice. I just have to make the best of it."

With those words, Jim disappeared into the darkness. I cracked a smile. I couldn't help it. An hour ago, I was convinced he was a madman, a lunatic, some kind of feral beast. But as he cut on his flashlight and began back toward his camp, I realized he was just another person trying to make it in the world—just another

Vegas gold miner who'd only found dust. Just another person who eats and sleeps, who thinks and feels, who dreams and doubts. Just another person who laughs and cries, who loves and hates, who lives and dies.

Turning toward the light, I noticed the silhouette of a man standing in one of the tunnels. He was short and thin. A piece of wood supported by rocks—apparently some kind of makeshift dam—obscured his legs. He appeared to be looking in my direction.

"How's it going?" I said, approaching the man.

"All right."

"I'm Matt. I'm a journalist exploring the drain. Jim showed me around a little bit."

"I'm Eddie." Eddie was dressed in a T-shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers. He had a beard and was balding. I recognized him as the "gambling degenerate" Josh and I'd talked to before exiting the drain. He also remembered me.

"How you been, man?" I asked him.

Glancing toward the light, Eddie stepped over the makeshift dam and escorted me into the shadows. "The past two Saturdays," he whispered, "the cops came down into the wash around four-thirty in the afternoon. The first time it didn't seem like much. But yesterday they seemed mad and I think they pinched somebody—you know, shook them down and made an arrest. First, they put up standing 'No Trespassing' signs on each side of the wash. Then, about a week ago, they stenciled 'No Trespassing' on the front of the tunnel. They're really starting to put the pressure on us."

"Why?"

Eddie paused. "I'll get to that later."

"Did they actually come into the drain?"

"No. They just walked along the front, but they were yelling threats." Again,

Eddie glanced toward the light. "I think it's OK," he said, starting back downstream. "I just don't want the cops to hear us." He stepped over the dam and entered the camp. I followed him, sweeping the beam of the flashlight over a row of shopping carts along the wall.

"There's nothing illegal here," said Eddie, rummaging through one of the carts. "I don't even remember what half of this stuff is. I got food and clothing and stuff like that. Nothing of real value."

A mattress sprawled across the north side of the floor. A pillow, which partially concealed a wooden club, sat atop the mattress. Noticing the beam fixed on the club, Eddie explained: "Every hobo and his grandmother has some form of self-defense, just in case someone creeps up on them in the middle of the night. I usually don't keep it near me, though. If Metro comes in here, I'm hiding it."

A cardboard partition stood at the head of the mattress. "I'm nocturnal," said Eddie. "I go to bed around sunrise and I just got up about ten minutes ago. That keeps the light off me when the sun comes up."

Beyond the partition, along the front border of the camp, was a wooden pallet. "If it rains hard enough, the water will come over the dam and I can throw the mattress on top of the pallet. The relatively small amount of water that comes over won't be higher than the pallet and the bed won't get wet."

"This is interesting," I said, surveying the camp. "This is *really* interesting. Do you mind if I hang out for a while?"

Eddie leaned closer. "Here's what we're up against. If Metro does what they've done the past couple of weeks, they'll be here around four-thirty. I don't want to be sitting here chatting when they start yelling into the tunnel." He removed two milk crates from the well of a cart. Handing me one of them, he stepped over the dam and shuffled off into the shadows. Finally, about 150 feet upstream, he set

the crate on the floor of a tunnel and sat down. I sat across from him, holding the flashlight between us.

"At the tail end of 1992, I overextended my gambling problem," began Eddie in a baritone voice. "It's just that simple. I actually lived in a cave at Charleston and Hualapai. I lived in a little cave in a wash for several years where a school is now located. I went back to L.A. when they bulldozed that area and stayed there for a couple of years.

"I came back to Vegas in July of 2000. I lived behind a store at Jones and Trop for several months, until I started having problems with people vandalizing my camp. Then I moved into this tunnel, but toward the other end. I had a camp on this side of Cameron [Street] for a while. There was a drainage grate overhead for the water to come in from the street. Light would come in through there in the daytime—but at night it was pitch black, except for a little street light.

"We had a heavy storm at the end of February of 2001. It came through so heavy that it washed everything out, including the sandbar I was living on. It was the biggest rain we'd had in a while. I was in my camp, figuring I'd be safe up on the island. It was about a foot high. I had my bed and other stuff on it, a whole bunch of milk crates filled with everything I owned. But the water kept rising and rising. It got real bad. The entire island and everything I owned—including my eyeglasses, which I had in a crate—washed away. It got so heavy I was trapped in there for about two and a half hours. I was thinking about climbing up to the grating and screaming for help, because the water was getting deeper and deeper.

"There's a law of physics that says the faster water moves the more buoyant it makes you. I'm not sure what the name of that law is, but it's true. That's why cars wash away when they try to cross flash floods that don't look that deep: the swift

horizontal movement adds lift. Well, every time I tried to walk out of the tunnel, I found myself going buoyant. I didn't want to get horizontal and get washed out. So I ended up standing against the wall for two and a half hours, holding onto these metal loops."

"How high did the water get?" I asked.

"The water was never more than knee-deep. But when it hits you at that velocity, it splashes way up and it has the effect of being waist-deep. Plus, it adds buoyancy and makes you feel like you're lifting right off your feet—which you are if you're trying to walk in it."

"So what happened?"

"I waited until the water went down, then walked out of the tunnel."

"Was it tough starting over after losing all your stuff?"

"Like everything in the grocery carts, about ninety-nine percent of the stuff that washed away I found in dumpsters. You'd be amazed at what they throw away. There's more stuff in our dumpsters than there is in all the houses and closets of Third World countries.

"Anyway, I got out of the tunnel and walked around to its east end. Then I spent the rest of that night curled up in front of a building. When the sun came up, I figured the business was open. I got up and moved somewhere else, just waiting for the rain to stop so I could start setting up a camp. When the rain finally stopped, I came back to the tunnel.

"Where my dam is now, there was originally a different dam. It was two four-by-fours with a bunch of rocks and gravel behind it. Those rocks and gravel were what was left of my island and the four-by-fours came from construction they were doing on the tunnel near my camp. It all washed eastward, making a nice natural damn there.

"Well, I walked to the front [of the drain]. It wasn't raining, but there was still water running through it. There are seven tunnels up front and six of them still had water trickling through—but I noticed one of them hardly had any at all. I walked in it and discovered it was the one with the dam. I settled there with a cardboard box that I got out of a dumpster and some plastic to use as a blanket. Then I just went from there."

"How long have you lived in that spot?"

Eddie paused. "About three and a half years. I've lived in this drain for almost four years total."

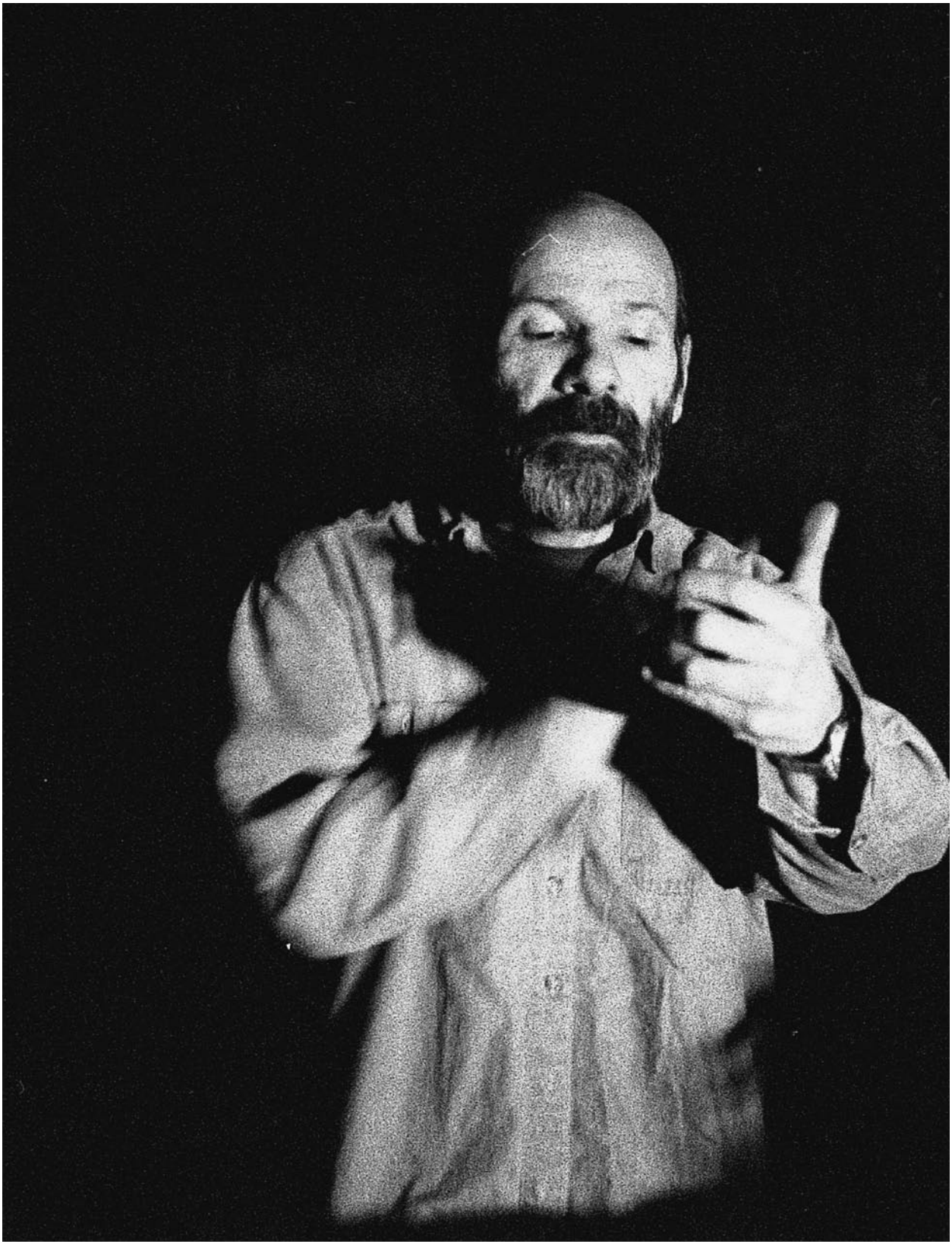
Noticing the beam beginning to fade, I cut off the flashlight. The tunnel went dark. As my eyes adjusted, the walls gradually turned gray and Eddie's small silhouette reappeared.

"How'd you discover this drain?" I asked him.

"I started sleeping behind an antique store at Jones and Trop. I had a camp set up right outside the back door. Luckily, they didn't open until around ten a.m., so I didn't have to get up that early. But once I did get up, I'd have to leave because they would see me as soon as they opened the door. I simply had to be gone before they opened and I wouldn't have a problem with them. I had to have someplace else to go.

"OK, let me say this now," he digressed. "I'm prone to skin cancer, so I can't be out in the sunlight. I should be out in it as little as possible.

"So I was living behind an antique store and needed someplace to go that was in the shade. I would just come and hang out at the other end of this tunnel during the day. Then I would go out and hit the dumpsters and do whatever else I needed to do. Finally, I'd crash behind the store. That was my oddball routine. That's how I knew the tunnel was here."



"How'd you end up on the streets?"

"Mainly by chasing gambling losses, going broke, and just not having the common sense to plan for the inevitable. I could see it coming. Thousands of dollars in advance, I could see it coming. But I was too dense to do anything about it."

"Why live in here and not behind a business or in a homeless shelter?"

"My main concern right now is staying out of the sun. If I were to go out there right now and take a forty-five-minute walk around the neighborhood, I'd have some scary stuff flaring up on me. I got melanomas and stuff. I don't know if it's in remission or what, but you can hardly see them now—especially in the dark. But if I go out in the sunlight, they really flare up.

"I've had health problems for the better part of ten years, but just recently they've elevated and I'm getting concerned about it—concerned to the point that I don't want to go find out what's wrong. As long ago as '97, I was having symptoms of pancreatic cancer. I'd look at a medical book—it gives you a whole list of symptoms—and I'd have like five out of seven of them at a time. It was scary.

"But in the past two months, the bottom has really fallen out. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm dragging at half-speed. But since there's no serious pain, I don't even want to know what's wrong. If I ever start really hurting or my ass is dragging so bad that I can't get around, I'll go to UMC [University Medical Center] and see what's up."

Eddie's arms, which had moved to the rhythm of his words, fell still. His head dropped. "What was your original question?" he asked, looking up.

"Why in here and not aboveground?"

"What makes the tunnel different from most places that homeless people live is there's a certain amount of security here. It's a place you can go every night and know it's going to be there. Any place else you go, you're always subject to being

> What makes the tunnel different from most places that homeless people live is there's a certain amount of security here. It's a place you can go every night and know it's going to be there. Any place else you go, you're always subject to being booted by the owner or a security guard or having kids wander by and tear your camp apart. ~ Eddie

booted by the owner or a security guard or having kids wander by and tear your camp apart. [Aboveground] I've been ripped off. I found a bullet in my pillow at one camp. I've been burned out or have had my camp torn up numerous times. Even in here, I've been ripped off a couple times. But in three-years-plus, that's not bad.

"In other places we try to sleep, almost any other place you can imagine, somebody's going to mess with you in one way or another—whether it's a business owner, a security guard, or kids. Kids just have to mess with you. The few kids who've gone by the front of this tunnel and have seen us, they automatically started throwing rocks. It's strange. It's just an instinct sort of thing, I guess."

Eddie's answer reminded me of a *National Geographic Adventure* article I'd read during my research. Headlined "Off the Face of the Earth," the article detailed the desperate existence of Ukrainian Jewish families who found refuge from the Nazis in a system of caves.

For more than a year and a half beginning in 1942, the families—which included toddlers and grandmothers—survived in the gypsum grottos of western Ukraine. They slept on wooden-plank beds. Underground pools supplied water, until becoming contaminated or depleted. At night, risking execution, the men crawled from the caves and scavenged the fields for potatoes.

In the spring of 1944, after discovering a message in a bottle that read "The Germans Are Already Gone," the families finally emerged from the underworld. Some of them had not seen the sky in almost a year.

"Long ago, people believed that spirits and ghosts lived in ruins and in caves," wrote one family member of the refuge. "Now we could see that there were none here. The devils and the evil spirits were on the outside, not in the grotto."

Jews in Warsaw, Poland, suffered through a similar experience.

In April 1943, the Germans began liquidating the Warsaw Ghetto. They planned to do so in only three days, using machine guns and cannons and tanks—intimidation and brutishness and savagery. But the Jewish Fighting Organization (also known by its Polish initials ZOB) was having none of it. Mostly men and women between the ages 18 and 21, with crude weapons and little fighting experience, the ZOB held out for almost a month. Finally, the frustrated Nazis began bombing the ghetto. The battle lost, the buildings reduced to rubble, Jewish survivors took refuge in the sewers.

The sewers of Warsaw were, of course, dark and wretched and miserable. Sewage was waist-deep in areas. While the main line was about six feet high, the tributaries were much smaller and had to be crawled through. Clogs and dead ends were common. Footsteps and splashes drew grenades and gunfire from Germans guards, who were stationed atop the manholes.

Nonetheless, the sewers of Warsaw were safer than the streets. At least they offered *some* protection. At least they offered *some* hope of escaping to the countryside. At least they offered *some* semblance of shelter, as the Allies marched toward the city.

This storm drain is Eddie's rock dwelling, I thought. It's his grotto. It's his sewer.

"When your camp was washed away and you moved to this end of the drain," I continued, "did you have the place to yourself?"

"When I first moved down here, I was the only person on this end. A few days later, somebody showed up in the north tunnel. He was only there a couple days. Then about a month later, a guy moved into the tunnel next to mine. After a few weeks of ignoring each other, he finally came in and introduced himself. His name was John. He claimed he was a chef who worked in some of the bigger hotels making good money. He ended up on the streets because he had a drinking problem. He was living in here, but he had no trouble walking out and going to any bar or restaurant and getting a job. He was qualified for that sort of work. But he kept getting fired, because he'd get drunk and wouldn't show up a week or two into a new job."

"What are the current living arrangements? It looks pretty crowded down there, no vacancies in any of the tunnels."

"It's getting odd. I don't know what's up with that." Eddie glanced toward the light. "I'm the senior guy in here. My friend Charlie, who lives in the far south tunnel, has been in here for two years. Then there's Frank, who lives in the far north tunnel. He's a horseplayer. He only sleeps in here. He gets up in the morning and goes to the casino, plays the ponies, then comes back here at night.

"That was the living arrangement before these other guys started moving in. You had Frank in the north tunnel, Charlie in the south, and me in the third one from the north. We've survived in this tunnel for so long by keeping an extremely low profile. In other words, we'd never leave the tunnel unless we had to. Our main concern was to not get in bad with the people who work at the businesses right outside. It wouldn't be good for us to get in bad with them, because all it takes is one phone call to get us kicked out of here.

"But recently, the other people who've moved in, they hang out all the time. They go back and forth between each other's tunnel, keeping a real high profile. They leave the tunnel and the wash all the time—and I think the people working at the businesses are getting sick of it. I think that's why the cops are putting pressure on us."

"Who else lives down here?"

"Two tunnels to the south of me is a guy named Phil, who I know fairly well. I knew him before he moved into the tunnel. We used to run into each other at the same dumpster, looking for food. He claims he's been shot twice, under what circumstances I have no idea. In the tunnel just north of me, there are anywhere between one to five people on any given day or night. And Phil rotates friends who spend the night with him."

"Have you approached the new guys and explained the situation?"

"Me and Charlie told Phil when he first moved in several months ago that we've managed to last so long by keeping a low profile. We asked him to tell that to the other guys. Finally, Phil asked the new people—nicely, I imagine—to tone it down and to stop going in and out so much. And, basically, they've been doing that. It's really quieted down the last few days."

"What's Jim's deal?" I asked, still unsure of what to make of the strange man I met in the dark.

"Is that his name? The guy in the glasses? We call him Elvis, because he reminds us of Elvis Costello when he was a skinny nerd."

I laughed. "What's his reputation in the drain?"

"He's very odd. He's a wacko—and he knows it. As far as his reputation: a total pain in the ass. When they put up those 'No Trespassing' signs, we got concerned that the more people they saw coming in and out of the tunnel, the

worse it'd be for us. Well, he has this thing. Even though he lives way on the other end of the tunnel, he just has to come in and out of our end. He comes in and out more than me, Charlie, and Frank combined. Plus, he's noisy. He thinks nothing of pushing a shopping cart full of stuff through our tunnels.

"The first time I saw him, he was walking from his end of the tunnel in this direction and he went right through my camp and started shining his flashlight on my carts. That didn't go over real well. That's how we got acquainted. I chased him down and asked him not to walk through my camp anymore."

"Stuff like that must get old. Are you anxious to get out of here?"

"Why this routine? Why aren't I screaming and scratching and clawing and biting, trying to get back into everyday life? Why am I in this mess?"

"I mean, aren't there things you *don't* like about living in this storm drain? Aren't there things that bother you or scare you?"

"The weird people," said Eddie. "There was this one guy who would come from the other end of the tunnel late at night, whooping it up and making oddball noises. He was totally whacked-out—a combination of stoned and mentally ill. I would see him with his little wimpy flashlight. He would put it on the ground and start dancing around and making strange noises. I have a four-cell Mag-Lite. I'd pop it on and shine it into the tunnel, and he'd cut loose with this bloodcurdling Indian war whoop.

"There've been similar instances," he continued. "When you hear something coming from the other end of the tunnel, you can hear it when it's a long way off. The one thing that gets me is when I hear rowdy-sounding stuff coming and it takes forever to get here and you just don't know what to expect.

"One night, before I was living on this end, I had a camp set up in the middle tunnel. Before I lived on that sandbar, I lived a couple hundred feet on this side of

Cameron on a mattress. Well, three or four rowdy-sounding black guys came into the tunnel. I'm lying in bed. It's about two in the morning. I hear loud voices coming from this direction, the east end of the tunnel. It sounded like three or four guys, and at least two of them had flashlights. I'm thinking my ass is grass if they stumble on me: rowdy black guys and I'm a little honky all by myself in the dark.

"But nothing came of it. Apparently, they went all the way up to Cameron, just past me, then cut across to the far tunnel and headed back east."

"They never came into the middle tunnel?"

"Nope. They never did."

"What do you think they were doing down here?"

"I couldn't say. I'm just glad it didn't involve mugging little white guys."

Eddie and I laughed, then stood. He stretched his arms high in the air. I stretched my back and legs. Then we scooped the milk crates from the floor and began walking back toward his camp.

"You seem comfortable in here, established," I said. "Where would you go if the cops flushed you guys out?"

"Charlie and I have told each other over and over again that this is the end of the road for us. Each of us has lived in several other places. We have nowhere else to go. If the cops kicked us out of here, I would tell them to take me to UMC or stick me in the jail infirmary. I'd probably die in jail, but I'd have no place else to go."

Squinting toward the light, Eddie stepped over the dam and entered the camp. I followed him, taking one last look at his home—a mattress, a sunshade, and a row of shopping carts full of "nothing of real value." One flash flood could take it all away.

"So how much longer do you think you'll live in here?" I asked him, as I placed the crate into a cart.

"I'm turning into such a zombie," he said, escorting me toward the light. "The barebones nature of this routine is getting to be too much of too little, if you know what I mean. And the truth is I'd love to get out of this tunnel, but I don't know *how* to get out.

"See, what we need instead of stupid stuff like St. Vincent and other shelters is a work program you can get into with some dignity and work your way out of the situation. Picture, for example, a cheap motel that a guy can stay in and also have a job. You could subtract the cost of his room from his paycheck and then just work the other things out from there. What screws people up is when they don't have a permanent address, a place to bathe, or a phone. When they don't have those things, they don't have a place to start."

According to county officials, the homeless population in the Las Vegas Valley is about 12,000. That number, courtesy of a one-night census conducted in January 2005, is low—*way* low. See, the census only counted people who were *visible*. Street people, of course, are largely *invisible*. Some are embarrassed by their situation. Others fear their children will be taken away from them. Most, however, simply hope for some sense of permanence and don't want to be pushed along from place to place.

But they are there … on park lawns in Henderson, in parked cars in Boulder City, under railroad culverts in North Las Vegas, along natural washes in Las Vegas, and in the Cappadocia-like storm drains of unincorporated Clark County.