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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A View from the Top

It is one of those big blue spring days that sun-baked Las Vegans live for. A whispering breeze takes the edge off the warm afternoon and wisps of clouds feather across the limitless desert horizon.

All in all, a good day to die.

I'm strapped into a NASA-goes-to-the-carnival contraption called the Big Shot, which is bolted to the top of the Stratosphere Tower, which stretches 1,149 feet into the glorious April air. As such, it is the tallest freestanding structure west of the Mississippi. That makes me just about the tallest freestanding columnist for as many miles around.

Stratosphere, the casino-resort-tower at the north end of the Las Vegas Strip, is set to open in three days, and I've been invited to test my stomach and fear of heights against a ride that is accurately described as the world's tallest Heimlich maneuver. Riding next to me? Stratosphere's big-idea man himself, Bob Stupak.

Any machine whose operators make you remove your slip-on shoes, eyeglasses, loose jewelry, and wobbly denture plates before experiencing it qualifies as a thrill ride. Anyone who travels anywhere with Bob Stupak qualifies as a thrill seeker. The ride is more like taking a double dose of syrup of ipecac with a mad scientist than taking a spin on the giant teacups with Walt Disney.

The Big Shot launches 16 citizens out of their shoes with the force of four Gs up 160 feet to near the top of the tower in less

time than it takes to beg God for forgiveness.

Then you drop like a dead man at negative one G, only to be caught a few feet from a certain messy demise on the platform below—and propelled upward again. The ride takes 31 seconds from start to finish. There's no telling how much time it takes off your life.

Bob Stupak, still looking frail after nearly killing himself in a motorcycle accident a year earlier, knows something about the precious value of life. He once set speed records on a motorcycle, and was traveling with his son, Nevada, at 60 miles per hour when he rammed his Harley-Davidson into the side of a perfectly good Subaru. Not even Stupak liked his odds of recovering from that accident, which shattered his face and spirit and left him in a month-long coma.

But only in Las Vegas could a guy like Stupak find a Florence Nightingale in the form of McGuire Sisters legend Phyllis McGuire. Perhaps somewhere inside Stupak's cracked skull was what naysayers and hunch players had learned over the previous 25 years—that it never pays to bet against the quintessential Las Vegas huckster.

To go from a heartbeat from the Big Hereafter to riding the Big Shot on a gorgeous spring afternoon is vintage Bob. Sitting next to him as he mugs for the cameras moments before blast-off, the accident's effects are still noticeable. But they don't keep him from smiling and selling his project to anyone willing to listen.

"You look nervous," Stupak says to me. "Loosen up. We haven't lost a rider yet."

Nervous? The tower is a full 1,145 feet taller than the threshold of my acrophobia. I feel like Jerry Lewis doing a remake of "The Right Stuff." Whatever stuff I have is doing the mambo in my stomach. Television camera crews from Los Angeles train their lenses on Stupak as he tosses off one-liners and prepares to take the Big Shot to the top of the tower, where those who manage to keep their eyes open can glimpse Lake Mead and can take in every inch of the Strip before free-falling back toward the concrete launching platform and what would appear to be certain death.

Stupak's hulking personal valet, Brendan, snaps photographs of his boss hamming it up with gawkers, reporters, and construction workers. Then we're ready.

"Every ride starts the same way," Stupak says. "Repeat after me: Hail Mary, full of grace—" and then he cackled like Vincent Price on laughing gas.

Our chairs shoot up the side of the tower.

"Top of the world!" Stupak yells, mocking his anxiety-riddled guest. Who does this guy think he is, James Cagney?

We're at the top in a finger snap, then enter a free fall, then climb, then fall, climb, and fall again before gently returning to the launching pad.

Somewhere between my breathless cry for absolution and the second drop, I begin to enjoy myself. I stop squinting long enough to catch the expansive Las Vegas Valley and the unadulterated glee on Stupak's scarred face.

At this moment, I know I'll write a story about Bob Stupak.

Providing, that is, I don't vomit on his shoes.

If P.T. Barnum had a hedonistic twin, Bob Stupak might be the guy. He is one of the last of the great Las Vegas wild men. In an era in which corporations have placed their publicly traded USDA Grade A stamp on the city, at a time in which gaming's most notorious party animals have begun posturing as elder statesmen of Las Vegas casino society, Bob Stupak is still tearing up the neon-lighted streets with his big ideas, big bets, and big mouth. He is a man bereft of hypocrisy, pretense and, some say, table manners, a guy incapable of passing up an intriguing wager. He is a man capable of betting the price of a four-bedroom house on the most innocuous proposition, a fellow who would lay \$1 million on the Super Bowl and not only win the wager but get ten times that in publicity.

Stupak is a gambling man and a carnival-style promoter of the first order. His "Free Vacation" promotions attracted

thousands of customers, as well as the intense scrutiny of fraud investigators from across the country who just knew there had to be something crooked about the deal. After all, Bob Stupak is the guy who once promised a stuntman \$1 million to jump off the top of his 24-story Vegas World Hotel—propelling the casino operator to international tabloid celebrity—then charged the fearless flier a \$975,000 landing fee. More than once, Stupak's huckster's heart had nearly cost him his coveted Nevada gaming license. If, as Damon Runyon once wrote, life is 6-to-5 against, Stupak has enjoyed the longest run of luck in the history of a city that makes suckers out of even its most savvy players.

And there's the Stupak who was voted Mr. Las Vegas by his ally, Mayor Jan Jones. Following his accident, the huckster emerged as a philanthropist with the fastest checkbook in a place that prides itself on its big-hearted spenders. Stupak gave away more than \$1 million before the last bandage was removed from his battered body. He knew he had enjoyed the greatest good fortune. Maybe he was hedging his spiritual bets.

Stupak is annually voted the Most Embarrassing Las Vegan by newspaper readers. In a pitchman's paradise the caliber of southern Nevada, where candidates for the title proliferate the landscape, it is a mighty statement.

With the improbable construction of the Stratosphere Tower, in spring 1996, Bob Stupak finally was about to make the score of his life in the city that eats dreams like 99-cent breakfasts. The fact his triumph was on the edge of a crime-riddled neighborhood known as Naked City made the emerging success story all the more incredible.

On a clear day from the tower's observation platform, the keen-eyed can see all of Naked City—every dilapidated rooftop, small-time drug deal, and street-corner hustle. Naked City has been a starting point for Las Vegas immigrants for decades. Other Las Vegas neighborhoods have crime rates as high, but no other is as notorious; even changing the neighborhood's name to the kinder, gentler Meadows Village hasn't improved its reputation as a gang-infested shooting gallery.

To the south, the tower offers an incredible view of the Strip and the heart of the city built by Las Vegas' notorious founding fathers. There's the Las Vegas Country Club, the Desert Inn, and the Stardust, built by Moe Dalitz and his associates. There's Caesars Palace and Circus Circus, two of the amazing ideas to take shape from the mind of Jay Sarno. And there are the wildly successful Mirage and Treasure Island resorts, the creations of the gaming industry's premier player, Steve Wynn.

Looking north to downtown, Fremont Street's clog of casinos jut from under a ponderous metal canopy whose two million lights were designed to reinvigorate the area and return Glitter Gulch to its past glory. But the so-called Fremont Street Experience is downright plain compared to Stupak's flashy tower.

If you gaze with a forgiving eye, Las Vegas appears almost handsome from so high above the street. Boomtowns are not by nature attractive places. They are full of the dust and bluster of breakneck progress, and Las Vegas fits the profile. Boomtowns have the thrown-together look of a stripper late for her curtain call: hair mussed, too much rouge, and buttons undone. They are riddled with road construction, exposed water lines, and the kind of energy that attracts Joad families from across the land. As such, Las Vegas perennially ranks among the fastest-growing cities in the nation, with approximately 4,000 newcomers arriving each month.

As the last great American boomtown, Las Vegas suffers from all those infrastructural maladies and offers every ounce of the promise. For the immigrant with no English, the autoworker with no assembly line, the desperate hunch player with a fatally flawed dice system, it is the place for fresh starts, second chances, and last stands. The community is a national leader in job creation, personal-income growth, and suicide.

The Big Shot ride epitomizes Stupak's improbable, even

death-defying rise in Las Vegas. It is as if all the energy he has expended during his extraordinary life and career has been manifested in the nation's tallest freestanding observation tower and a couple of thrill rides to end all thrill rides.

Any city can have the tallest observation tower. Only in Las Vegas would such a structure merely qualify as a piece of mundane architecture unless it had a NASA blast-off simulator and a rooftop roller coaster. But that's Bob Stupak for you.

In the corporate era, where gaming stocks trade on Wall Street and casino bosses carry Ivy League degrees and a bravado that often passes for brilliance, the individual operator is an anomaly. Sadly, the city's personality has changed. It has largely reinvented itself as a sort of Stepford with a casino-based economy: ceaselessly prosperous, but quiet. A little too quiet. Most of the city's genuine characters have gone the way of the Dunes, Sands, and Silver Slipper. The seasoned racketeers who migrated to Las Vegas ahead of the law and settled into a respectability have faded into the landscape. In the corporate company town, there isn't much room for personality—not with billions of dollars at stake. Even Stupak needed to bail out his big idea with eight-figure assistance from Grand Casinos Inc. and its founder, Lyle Berman. True to Stupak's nature, he met Berman across a poker table.

Of all the risky proposition bets Bob Stupak ever placed, by far the most daring was his idea to remake the Las Vegas skyline by constructing the incredible Stratosphere Tower.

Even in a town built on long odds, this venture was a million-to-one shot.

PROLOGUE

The Cruelest Month

The 1989 Harley-Davidson rushed south on Rancho Road past Charleston Boulevard, accelerating its two riders, a father and son, into the warm desert night. The Las Vegas weather in March often is chilled, windy, and wet, but the last night of the month was dry. It was thirty minutes before April Fool's Day, 1995.

The father motored past a convenience store, service station and, just east on Charleston, the University Medical Center. The neighborhood was familiar. So was the tandem ride. The old man had been speeding his three children around on high-performance motorcycles since they were old enough to hang on.

He knew these streets better than those in his hometown. He had been a Las Vegas resident for more than 20 years and had spent much of his adult life within a couple miles of downtown. When you've ridden bikes at speeds topping 120 miles per hour, the act becomes second nature. Accomplished riders have something akin to a sixth sense that enables them almost to feel and avoid dangerous situations.

The driver put the big bike through its paces as he had done with so many motorcycles. Although he hadn't competed in three decades, he had owned motorcycles since he was 15 and had drag-raced them against the best riders in the country. Along the way he had collected a truckload of trophies and more than his share of close calls. Clipping the Harley beyond the posted

35-mile-per-hour limit over dry asphalt was a simple enough feat.

As a token testament to safety and Nevada law, he wore a European-style half helmet strapped to his neck.

He shifted, the bike hit its stride, and in a moment the two men were traveling more than 60.

The young woman in the northbound Subaru had no time to react as she began her left turn from Rancho Road onto Mason Avenue.

Slicing through the night, the Harley rider locked up the brakes a heartbeat before broadsiding the Subaru. The impact knocked the automobile backward and sent the riders glancing off the car, over the top and onto the road. They landed together, the driver taking the brunt of the impact on his face, the passenger's landing cushioned by the driver's body.

It was 11:35 p.m.

Las Vegas Fire Department Station No. 5 stands at Hinson Street and Charleston, approximately one mile west of Rancho Road. When dispatch reported an accident with injuries on Rancho at Mason, the stationhouse came to life. Within seconds, paramedics Bryan Alexis and Ian Adams were dressed, in their rescue unit, and driving eastbound on Charleston.

They arrived at the accident scene within five minutes and were greeted by attendants from Mercy Ambulance, whose offices are in the neighborhood near the medical center.

Mercy paramedic supervisors Bob Kenney and Marla Malone were on duty that night and, hearing the call, rolled onto the accident scene almost out of reflex. They were the first paramedics to arrive and were joined moments later by Mercy paramedic August Corrales and his partner, Tricia Wacker.

Through absolute chance, within 15 minutes of the accident, six veteran paramedics were on hand to give aid to the fallen bikers and the slightly injured automobile driver. The older biker's luck wasn't all bad. He was still alive.

Although their actions sometimes look chaotic to the untrained eye, paramedics follow a set pattern when arriving at an accident scene to optimize efficiency and maximize victims' odds of survival. After the initial triage observation, in which those whose injuries are deemed the most severe are quickly assessed, paramedics set their priorities. In this case, the woman in the Subaru was shaken up and showered with glass when her side window popcorned from the impact of the Harley and its riders. The motorcycle's passenger was next to the sidewalk, moaning. He appeared to have a broken leg. Otherwise, the attention of as many as six paramedics was focused on the fallen rider. Wacker briefly attended to the wounds of the rider's son before returning to the most severely injured victim.

"We had just dropped a patient off at the hospital and were getting ready to go out. We were just down the street," Wacker recalled. "Immediately when we got out of the truck we did a scene survey. Knowing that he was critical, we just moved him to the ambulance and to the hospital as rapidly as we could."

The Harley rider was nearly dead. His neck was cut from ear to ear, and his head was noticeably swollen. The half helmet had kept his brains from spilling onto Rancho Road, but had not saved him from bearing the brunt of the impact with the asphalt. His face was pulverized.

In his six and a half years as a firefighter and five years as a paramedic, Bryan Alexis had viewed dozens of fatalities and figured he had experienced every sort of grisly accident imaginable. But he had never seen a living person with a head so swollen and a face so devastated.

So distorted was the face that Alexis, his partner, and the other paramedics failed to recognize it.

"We pulled up and I quickly went over there, and I started to assess him," Alexis said. "The appearance was just so bad. We tried to block that out. He was probably 10 to 15 feet away from the motorcycle. It appeared that he wasn't going to make it. We immediately tried to immobilize him."

Massive bleeding made the process difficult. The driver was

unconscious. His heartbeat was faint, his breathing shallow. He was a few minutes from being beyond help. The clock was running in what emergency-room physicians and paramedics commonly call the Golden Hour, the precious time from the moment a serious accident occurs until the patient is delivered to the trauma unit. The paramedics set to work, cutting off the rider's clothing and prepping him for the short ride to the emergency room. His arms and left leg appeared to be broken, but that was the least of the paramedics' concerns.

What really startled Alexis was the throat gash.

"The laceration appeared to be from ear to ear, kind of like a Colombian necktie," he said. "It was like someone cut his throat, but when I looked at the helmet he'd been wearing I saw that the strap around his neck is what caused the massive laceration. His teeth were broken. There was so much trauma. It was probably the worst I've ever seen. No, it definitely was the worst."

There was no time to treat him at the scene, so the paramedics slipped a cervical collar around his neck, rolled him to one side, and placed a back board underneath him. Then they loaded him into the ambulance for transport to the trauma unit at University Medical Center with Alexis and Wacker in the back.

Had the accident occurred even a mile farther away from the hospital and Station No. 5, their speed might not have made a difference. En route, Alexis grabbed a large-bore needle and administered a massive infusion of saline solution, which has the same consistency as blood. It not only replaces the fluids that are rapidly being lost, but also helps slow shock in traumatized patients. With his blood pressure dropping, it was the only way to keep him alive until the ambulance reached the hospital.

Keeping him breathing was the other immediate problem. Normally, Alexis would use a laryngoscope to insert a tracheal tube down the throat of the patient. But the patient's face and neck were too far gone. The veteran paramedic couldn't see the precise area between the vocal cords to insert the tube.

But he had to act quickly or he would have a dead man on his hands. He did his best to locate the base of the throat and

slipped in the tracheal breathing tube. With the tracheal tube inserted, the lungs were inflated, oxygen flowed, and blood was prevented from leaking down his throat. The free-hand medical attention kept the patient breathing, but barely.

"It was the first time for me," Alexis said. "We just opened it up and went for it."

"We had him packaged and in the rig in no more than ten minutes. When we arrived at the hospital, we took the patient with us and transferred him into a bed. We did our best, but I really didn't think he was going to make it."

Corrales said, "It was really a shared effort to take care of him. We didn't know he was a celebrity, not that it would have mattered. What happened is just something we typically do. Listening to people talk about what the CATscans were, he did not have a high likelihood of survival."

And all that time, none of the paramedics knew who they were treating. The face was unrecognizable.

When the younger rider arrived at the hospital, his ankle obviously broken, he asked, "How's my dad? How's my dad?"

"Is this your father over here?" he was asked.

"That's my dad," the young man said. "That's Bob Stupak."

Back on the street, as police accident investigators attempted to piece together events, the greater irony loomed large in the background. From where the rider had come to rest on the asphalt, glancing to the east he would have had a splendid view of his life's greatest achievement as it rose more than 1,000 feet into the desert night.

But he could not see, of course. By early April Fool's Day, the fallen rider was headed for a deep coma as trauma specialists worked to save his life.

Lucky Bob Stupak was dying almost as fast as he lived.