

Live Through This

*An Anthology of Unnatural Disasters:
Stories and Essays by Las Vegas Writers*

Edited by Scott Dickensheets
and Geoff Schumacher

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❧ Introduction ❧

Unnatural Disasters

By Geoff Schumacher

When we lived in Iowa for a few years, we had a weather alert radio. Every so often, the thing would go off, an ominous, computer-generated voice warning that tornadoes had been sighted in our area and urging us to take shelter. No matter what we were doing, often sleeping, we would dutifully march down to the basement and flip on the television there to follow the latest weather reports. Fortunately, although a few came close, no tornadoes ever ripped through our town.

Many lifelong Midwesterners, right or wrong, are indifferent to tornado warnings. The frantic exclamations of TV meteorologists don't faze them much. But tornado watches and warnings were unsettling in our household, probably

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because they were a new phenomenon in our lives. As long-time Las Vegas, we knew natural disasters as something that happened elsewhere.

One reason to live in Las Vegas is it's largely immune from natural disasters. No hurricanes. No tornadoes. Although maps of seismic fault lines show Las Vegas to be prone to earthquakes, we've never had a big one in human memory. And while Las Vegas occasionally sees flash floods, they do not equate to, say, the destruction caused when the Mississippi River overflows its banks or mudslides tear through a Southern California neighborhood.

All in all, in terms of naturally occurring risks, Las Vegas is pretty safe.

But what about *unnatural* disasters?

An unnatural disaster, simply enough, is a human-caused calamity. It can be the result of a malevolent act, an accident or mistake, negligence, or incompetence. Las Vegas has seen more than a few of these. One thinks of the MGM Grand fire in 1980 that left eighty-five people dead, and the PEP-CON explosion in 1988 that killed three people and injured hundreds. But if you allow for a loose definition of the word, a disaster also can affect just a few people in a highly personal way.

Unnatural disasters are the theme of this anthology, the ninth in the Las Vegas Writes series. Co-editor Scott Dickensheets and I invited eleven local writers to contribute. They

sent us six short stories and five essays that all touch on this theme in some way.

It is not a coincidence that the theme brings to mind one of the worst unnatural disasters in Las Vegas history — the October 1, 2017, mass shooting at the Mandalay Bay hotel-casino. Although the writers were welcome to tackle this subject head on, most chose not to do so. However, as you read through the book, the Route 91 Harvest Festival tragedy seems ever present.

There is a mix of new and returning bylines in this volume. The seven first-time Las Vegas Writes contributors are Kristy Totten, C. Moon Reid, Kim Foster, Jason Scavone, David Schwartz, John Hay, and F. Andrew Taylor. The four alumni are Megan Edwards, Lissa Townsend Rodgers, Andrew Kiraly, and Jarret Keene. This is a high-powered lineup of talented and insightful writers. They are all busy with jobs and other projects, so we're extremely grateful they dug so deep to create these stories and essays.

The fiction ranges from literary to historical to sci-fi. The nonfiction is eclectic, from the intensely personal to the contemplation of big questions. But what all these pieces have in common is Las Vegas. As always, and by design, the city is the centerpiece of this project, which started in 2009 and will produce its tenth volume next year. The series thrives because Las Vegas is a fascinating and complicated place to write about, and we are fortunate to have so many excellent

writers here, eager to explore the community from every possible perspective.

Las Vegas Writes also thrives because of Nevada Humanities, a great organization that has financially backed this project for many years. It would be impossible to provide a platform like this for local writers were it not for the support of Executive Director Christina Barr and Las Vegas-based Program Manager Bobbie Ann Howell.

Stories 

Lawless Liquor

By F. Andrew Taylor

As Eddie stared down the barrel of the pistol, his mind scrambled to deal with several thoughts. He was trying to figure out how he'd gotten himself in this situation and was coming up deuces. The gravel he was kneeling in hurt like hell. The gun was so close that staring at the muzzle made him cross-eyed, and he realized he was going to die confused, with sore knees and goofy looking. That brought his racing mind to a screeching halt and reduced it to one thought.

He was going to die.

"So this is focus," he thought. "Hell of a time to start that."

When Eddie first moved to Nevada, a guy in a bar told him the story about a young punk who tried to rob Lawless Liquor.

Lawless Liquor was a decaying beer joint on the east side. Like most of the bars in the valley, it was open twen-

ty-four hours, but busy only about four. One afternoon the bartender was pouring another glass of “whatever” on tap for his only customer, an old man playing video blackjack at the end of the bar, when a kid came in and tried to hold up the place.

The kid looked like he’d just gotten off the bus from some crappy Eastern city that cranks out the kind of loser who thinks Las Vegas is easy street. He’d barely gotten his gun out of his pocket and demanded “All the goddamned money” when he heard the old man clear his throat. He had his hand-cannon pointed at the kid’s center mass with a practiced casualness. The bartender never even stopped pouring the beer.

“Kid,” the old man said, “why don’t you put that pea-shooter down before I decide I don’t like you.”

As the cops were hauling the kid away, he shouted, “Wait! Wait! That guy’s got a gun too!”

The cop smiled to the kid and said, “Welcome to Nevada, son.”

Eddie had lived in Las Vegas long enough to realize the details of the story probably weren’t true, but that didn’t matter. What it said about the character of the town was true enough and that was as close as the place got most days.

Eddie found himself at Lawless Liquor every few weeks. The beer was cheap and not too bad most days. It was close enough to his digs that it was convenient, but far enough

away that he wasn't likely to run into anyone he knew. That suited him on the days he needed a few drinks but didn't want to explain how he scraped up the money for them.

A half-dozen red-state, blue-collar types were clustered at one end of the bar glad-handing the hero of the day, Sean, who had the good fortune to be trying out his new drone camera at the right time to capture the neighborhood's latest bad fortune.

"How much did they pay you for that footage?" asked Gatsby, a regular and proud member of the temporarily inconvenienced millionaires club.

"I am not at liberty to discuss that at this time," Sean replied, adjusting his imaginary tie.

"Psssh, right," said Derrick, the dealer. "What he means is he ain't at liberty because he got so excited about the footage he forgot to get paid for it. He just gives that stuff away — like your sister, Gatsby."

That brought a round of cheerless laughter to the crowd, because most of those statements were true enough to strike them as hilarious.

The footage Sean had shot was of the Palms Harbor Disaster, the news of the valley for almost half a day before it was eclipsed by two local political scandals, a dumb celebrity tweet about the president and a dumber presidential tweet about a celebrity. At Lawless Liquor it was a bigger deal, since it had happened just up the street and there was still

a hearty debate going on about how it would affect the bar financially.

Eddie had seen the footage. It was hard to miss. Not only had all the networks picked it up, but Facebook's algorithms guaranteed that it popped up on his feed on a daily basis. He had watched the whole thing, not just the clips that were in heavy rotation.

It started with a worm's-eye view of Sean, operating the controls in the empty parking lot of the long-shuttered Mexican grocery across the street from the Palms Harbor mobile home community. For a minute it wandered the parking lot, buzzing the roof and startling a seagull. It then panned across the street and a trail of thick, black smoke could be seen in the distance. The view shifted rapidly as the drone flitted across the street and toward the back corner of the mobile homes. As the trailer that was the source of the smoke filled the screen, fire suddenly engulfed it. The camera zoomed in on a white object in a window of the trailer, a propane tank not only stupidly placed inside the trailer, but also laying on its side.

The view shifted up, showing the dangerous proximity of the other homes. The propane tank exploded, firing off like a rocket across three rows of the half-century-old trailer homes and struck a sewage truck. A jet of burning liquid erupted from the tanker, dousing several of the nearby homes with fire before exploding. The view from the drone whirled

wildly at that point before stabilizing two hundred feet above the now completely engulfed mobile homes. At this point, battery life or equipment preservation made Sean decide to bring the drone back and the footage ended.

The sewage truck had no business being at Palms Harbor. All the trailers had been hooked up to the city sewage lines since the '70s. The investigation revealed that someone had been using the sewage tanker to illegally transport gasoline, although the who and why of that were still unclear.

"It's a goddamned snuff film, that's what it is," grumbled Old Harry, who had been sitting at the other end of the bar. "It was the last day of the month, so most of the folks who lived there were home, waiting for their checks and hoping they could afford to buy some food after they'd covered the rent. You filmed eighty-two people burning to death inside tin boxes and somehow you're proud of that."

Eddie and the other guy sitting between Sean's crew and Harry became very interested in anything but the ends of the bar.

Sean was nonplussed. "I am a simple tool of the media, buddy," he said. "All I did was capture the terrible moment. It was a one-in-a-million shot. Nobody could have seen that coming. How was I to know there were people living in those crap shacks?"

That might have been enough to calm Harry down, but Peter Wojciechowski, whom the barflies called Petey Alpha-

betski, chose that moment to get up on his favorite soapbox about the declining neighborhood. He went on for a solid five minutes rambling from subject to subject, but the main thrust of his argument was that the neighborhood was better off without the residents of Palms Harbor. He speculated that there hadn't been a single resident who earned an honest paycheck. The fire was probably going to save the government a million dollars a year. The whole place was an accident waiting to happen, what with the illegal storage of flammables in a residential area and the meth lab that had started the fire in the first place. He averred that nobody was going to miss a bunch of wetbacks and geezers sucking off the government teat, although at no point in the diatribe did he use any words as highfalutin' as "diatribe" or "averred."

"There weren't nobody there that nobody is going to miss or isn't better off without," Alphabetski insisted in his closing arguments. "There weren't nobody there who ever did anything except spend my goddamned tax money on crack and steaks."

Eddie was still trying to figure out how to slip out of the bar without drawing attention when the other guy caught in the crossfire spoke.

"James Thompson was a decorated Marine, a Medal of Honor recipient," the stranger said. "He saved twenty men at Hamburger Hill. Maria Rodriguez coordinated the food bank at her church. Tina Griffin was ..."

Alphabetski cut him off. "Where the hell are you getting this from?" he asked.

The stranger lifted up the newspaper that Eddie thought was just being used to keep the stranger's elbows away out of the sticky, half-dried booze on the bar.

"Pffff, right, the paper," Alphabetski said, sneering. "I wouldn't trust the goddamned liberal media if they said it gets dark at night."

The stranger picked up the paper and examined it, as if it was the first time he'd noticed it was there and then held it up, displaying it to the crowd.

"The liberal media that's owned by the billionaire casino mogul and major contributor to the Republican Party?" he said, cocking an eyebrow at Alphabetski. "Hmm ... I must have been using the word 'liberal' wrong all of my life."

Even some members of Sean's fan club had to laugh at that.

"Hell, Maggie," Harry said to the bartender. "Whatever the professor is drinking, give him another one on me."

The wind was out of Alphabetski's sails by that point and he raised his longneck, either as a toast or just a gesture for emphasis.

"It was just a one-in-a-million accident anyway," he said. "What the hell."

The bar was uncomfortably quiet for a minute and then the silence was broken by a question.

“What if it wasn’t an accident?”

Eddie was stunned to realize the question had come from him. So much for keeping his head down and his mouth shut.

“Let me see if I understand what you’re saying,” Derrick said. “You want to know if somehow, someone could have purposely set the meth head trailer on fire, after lining up the propane tank perfectly to launch over three rows of trailer homes and hit a tanker truck of mislabeled gasoline just right so it would explode. Oh yeah, and when the wind was just right so the fire would spread across the whole trailer park before the fire department could get there. I’m going to give that a hard ‘No,’ unless you want to start pointing the finger at Wile E. Coyote. And what would Wile E. have against a trailer park?”

Gibsy had been trying to follow the logic, but he was lost in trying to figure out who this “Coyote” guy was. All he could think to say was, “Who would want to kill a trailer park?”

Gibsy didn’t know what a rhetorical question was and he may have been the only person in the room who didn’t think he’d meant the question rhetorically, but that didn’t stop the stranger from answering.

“Maybe someone who wants to build something on that land,” he said, holding up the increasingly damp paper again. “The land couldn’t be sold until all the people were gone.”

Eddie knew exactly what the stranger was talking about.

He'd read that same article. The land under the trailers had had one owner. The same man who built it lived in Palms Harbor until he died in the mid-'80s. He had no heirs, but he had a lot of friends in the mobile home community, so he put the land in a trust. As long as one of the original trailer owners still lived there, the land had to remain as a trailer park. More than a dozen of them had still lived there, until the fire. There were dozens of similar plots of land in the east valley that had once been mobile home parks, but were now just vacant lots with bits of asphalt weaving through them, so Eddie was at a loss to understand why this one in particular might be worth murdering people over. Still, the idea had haunted him since he'd read the article, because he knew something the people at the paper didn't know.

The Palms Harbor Disaster was no accident.

Eddie believed that in the game of life there are winners and losers. Initially, he had been determined to be among the former, but a combination of bad luck, bad mistakes and bad blood had put him firmly among the latter. He had been losing so hard and for so long that he made the bold decision a few years back to simply avoid the game. He had several thousands of dollars in fines from unpaid tickets near the end of his time in the game. Those, combined with credit card bills from a girlfriend's eventually terminal medical issues, had put him deeply in the hole. There probably had been a right way to handle that, but paperwork was not his strong

suit. There was also the issue of his unpaid income tax for the three years Molly spent dying. He did the math as best as he could and figured that even with bankruptcy, which he didn't think he could afford, he could expect to have his wages garnished until long after the robots conquered the world.

Lately, he'd been hoping for the robot apocalypse over the zombie one. Either way, he knew he was well into the Eddie apocalypse, so he simply dropped out. His old beater of a truck was paid off, so he had that going for him. He knew if he was pulled over he was screwed, so he traveled as cautiously as a mouse in a cobra cage. He knew the alleys of the east side like the back of his stepfather's hand and traveled via them whenever possible. He knew guys who could get him fake registration stickers, so he always kept those current. He was a ghost.

He made money semi-legally working jobs that paid in cash. He hauled scrap, cashed in recyclables, and did day labor. The guys in the lots at the big hardware stores told him his Spanish was getting pretty good. When he had to, he slept in his truck, but that was never ideal. When he could, he'd find a vacant house to curl up in for the night. Sometimes he lucked out and the water was still on.

On the night before the Palm Harbor Disaster, he spent a peaceful night in the mobile home that even the press had taken to calling "the meth head trailer." He left four hours before the disaster. When he left, the home was empty. There

were no chemicals, no meth lab and there sure as hell wasn't any propane tank rocket.

"They're still investigating it, right?" Eddie said. "I mean, there's still a chance they'll turn up some evidence, somebody who saw something. It might not be an accident, right?"

The guy with the paper shrugged.

"Maybe," he said, "Anything possible, but I doubt it. Investigations take time and money, and I can't see them throwing much of either at something they see as an open-and-shut case."

Eddie needed some air, and there hadn't been much of that in Lawless Liquor in a few decades. He was startled when Sean popped out and shouted after him as he looked in the window of the little AA meeting place that shared the strip mall with the bar and a convenience store that mostly sold booze.

"Hey, man," Sean said. "Do you know something you're not talking about?"

Eddie briefly weighed the merits of wrestling with his conscience alone or with a ginger jackass and decided he couldn't have much worse counsel than his own.

"Kinda," Eddie said. "I've got some inside information, but I can't go to the cops for ... reasons."

Eddie outlined what he knew in broad strokes, and Sean, in his newfound position as semi-amateur video journalist, felt he might be able to get word to the right people. He even

thought there might be a little money in it for both of them.

"I could shoot one of those videos with you all blacked out," Sean said. "I watched how to do it on YouTube. My camera's in my car out back."

As soon as Sean went around the corner to get his equipment, Eddie realized his truck was fortunately in the other direction and bolted. He knew there were a million ways he could screw this up and end up in jail, and he figured adding Sean to the equation only made his odds worse.

He drove one of his typically circuitous routes, generally edging northeast, to one of the quiet places he knew where it was too remote for regular police patrols but too public for any real trouble. It was a vacant lot near the rising land that eventually became Frenchman Mountain with enough scrub to obscure his truck. There was even a little bit of a view.

He walked to the edge of the lot and stared at the valley spread before him. He saw the lights of the Strip far in the distance: the great illuminated wheel of the High Roller, the thrusting tower of the Stratosphere, the white streak of the spotlight stabbing into the night sky from the Luxor and the glittering lights of the casinos in between. Once, years ago, those lights had drawn him in, like a moth to the flame, but he wracked his brain and realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd been down to them.

The Eddie who came here two decades ago wouldn't have had any doubt about what to do, but modern Eddie was

frayed at the edges, a rag doll representation of the man he had been when he had hopes and dreams, plans and schemes.

He'd known some of the people in Palms Harbor. Not well, but people you would see around and give a friendly nod to. It didn't seem right that they should have their lives stolen, even if they were just frayed rag dolls like him.

On the other hand, he knew that nothing he did would bring them back. The chances of his story bringing them a little justice were slim to none, but the chances of it exposing him and causing him to lose the little bit of freedom he'd been able to cobble together were mighty high.

"Cripes," he said aloud to the view. "There were a hundred places I could have been that night. Why the hell did it have to be that one?"

"Man, I was just asking myself the same question."

Eddie literally jumped a foot at Sean's voice and instinctively dropped into a defensive crouch. He sheepishly straightened himself up and tried to muster as much dignity as he could, given the circumstances. He could still afford a little dignity, couldn't he?

"Mother pus bucket!" Eddie choked out. "How about giving a guy a little warning before you creep up on him?"

Eddie was more surprised that Sean got the drop on him than he was to actually see him. Years of living on the low-down had honed his instincts. It was a survival skill that had saved his ass more than a few times. He thought maybe he

was lost in thought, or maybe Sean was just a sneaky sum-bitch.

“Sorry,” Sean said, and he genuinely looked sorry about it all.

Sorry about invading Eddie’s personal space. Sorry about sneaking up on him. Even sorry about the gun he was pointing at Eddie.

“That ain’t funny, Sean.”

“No, it sure isn’t,” Sean replied. “I need you to get on your knees.”

Eddie tried to ask questions. He tried to ask why, who and got all the way to what when Sean told him to shut up and get on his knees.

“Come on, man, don’t be an ass,” Sean said. “The bullets are going to go through you. There are kids out there. This way they go into the dirt.”

Eddie weighed his options and didn’t see that he had any.

“For the kids, huh?” Eddie said and dropped to his knees.

“Yeah, the kids,” Sean croaked. “Sorry.”

Eddie rolled it all through his head, because after all, he had focus, and he might as well use it. He remembered something he had heard a long time ago from an old friend. “In the end, you don’t regret the things you did, you regret the things you didn’t do.”

“Yeah,” Eddie said, more to himself than to Sean. “Sorry.”