



By Daniel Ari, Mark "Stinky" Sinclair
and Matt Weatherford

Matt's Prologue:

We aren't kids anymore. When we were younger we could leave a trail of strippers and showgirls behind like entrails and bones in the slaughterhouses of our hearts. We could, but we never got around to it. We were too busy giving each other wedgies. Now we're older, with slower reflexes. We don't plan to seduce showgirls. At least, not as often.

Dan, Stinky and I have been friends a long time; long enough to see each other's cute quirks become serious problems. For example, my passion for going to karaoke bars just to make farting noises into the microphone during "Proud Mary." Or how Dan can't resist turning "ools" into "pools." Worst of all, though, has been the way Stinky's gambling habit has gone from a dollar's worth of pennies in the Gold Spike Copper Mine to late night phone calls from Manhattan Western Union offices begging his friends to wire him a loan before a hoodlum pulls his arm from its socket. And we're not talking chicken scratch; we're talking \$20, sometimes \$40, a pop. Big time money, like what a shoemaker for Nike earns in his entire lifetime, or what I can steal from my wife's purse on a good day.

Stinky's cash needs are easy to ignore, but his screams of agony aren't. I've endured too many late night calls that end with the wails and the crunch of his shoulder blade tearing free from connective tissues. They've been enough to keep me awake for a good fifteen minutes. Our friend needed help or else he would keep waking me and ruining perfectly good nights of sleep. I called Dan and suggested we do something. Dan agreed. "But how?"

"An intervention," I said.

"What's that?"

"I don't know exactly, but Oprah talks about them all the time."

Dan hesitated, so I added, "We get to beat the crap out of him and-"

That was all Dan needed to hear and he interrupted "-I'm in. Where, when and can I bring my brass knuckles?"

I have no problem going off half-cocked; what bugs me are people who go off no-cocked. I went on line and did a thorough and comprehensive job of getting half-assed informed. In a half hour I learned just enough about interventions to be dangerous, which is what I really

wanted, anyway: to be dangerous. An intervention is when you confront a friend about a problem, like drinking, sex addiction, watching "Yes, Dear", or even gambling. Usually, the friend is caught unawares by the confrontation. You do everything you can to make him bawl his eyes out and swear he won't ever do it again. From the few articles and blogs I skimmed, the best part comes next; when the addict can't resist temptation you punch, kick, and--my favorite--bite him into submission. That is, unless you're intervening a friend's addiction to masochism. Then you'd just make things worse.

I didn't know where to intervene. We couldn't just show up in New York or Stinky would know something was up, like the night Dan and I got really drunk and wanted to get tattoos, but not on ourselves, so we bought 21-day advance tickets to fly to New York, waited, flew there and showed up on Stinky's doorstep just about the same time we sobered up and realized what a stupid plan it was. We couldn't make him come to Dan's hometown of San Francisco because of an outstanding warrant. And both of my friends are too big of snobs to come to Denver, the Queen City of the Plains. We were, however, planning our annual Soiree in Las Vegas. The Soiree is when our friends gather at the Gold Spike for a weekend, and we invite readers of the Big Empire to join us. It's a way for us to make jackasses out of ourselves in front of a large audience, rather than the mirrors at home.

Was it a good idea? With all that temptation around, I wondered. Las Vegas is good at making addicts, but is it any good at curing them? Dan's impeccable logic settled it for me: "What do you do when a dog craps in your house? You rub his nose in it. All that temptation will only make him stronger. Besides, we can play craps and get so drunk we shit our pants."

Dan's Prologue

The last time I saw the Stinkmeister, he was visiting my neck of the woods, Northern California, to see his folks. We got a chance to spend a morning together and had breakfast at Royal Flush café, one of my favorite morning spots. Stinky ordered the Silver Dollar pancakes, one of my favorite items on the menu, but commented, "How much you wanna bet they're actually bigger than silver dollars? I'll bet you a silver dollar!"

"No because you'll win," I said. After breakfast, we had to truck down to San Mateo, where Stinky was going to pick up a cheap rental car to drive to Monterey. But the

mellow, sunny morning held the whiff of tragedy. As we passed over the Bay Bridge, Stinky started complaining of a bad feeling in his tum-tum, and just as we got to Treasure Island, he unrolled my window and bellowed a pink ribbon of chyme across the exterior of my car.

And that wasn't nearly the end of it. I asked him if he wanted to stop, but he said, no, he felt better now. Which turned out to be a lie because as the hills of South San Francisco rolled by, he unrolled the window again and applied a fresh stripe of barf to my Volkswagen. Then he said, "I'm feeling better now." That made one of us.

Pac Bell Park fell by to starboard and Stinky opened the window again, not for fresh air, but this time only some thin mucus came from the birth-like contractions of his stomach. He dry-heaved the rest of the way to San Mateo, and, as we got off the freeway, he was curled into the passenger bucket, sweaty, spent, and vulnerable.

"You pig!" I commented.

Stinky requested that I stop at a filling station so that he could "freshen up." He again insisted that whatever it was had passed, and he seemed to be correct this time. Taking the water hose from its holster at the edge of the gas station, he proceeded to rinse off my VW with a hasty care. There was no explanation for his illness: the Royal Flush café is excellent and always fresh. Even if his pancakes had been tainted by some fluke, I had sampled three silver-dollar's worth and felt fit as a flapjack on the griddle, which is to say, okay. I wondered if Stinky had been partying the night before and if this afternoon vomit was the result. How well did I really know Stinky? Might he have been out at Casino San Pablo the night before, carousing, gambling, and drinking himself into a stupor?

"How much you wanna bet that by the time we get to the car rental place, they'll be closed?" Mark's mood was sour after soiling my hoopty and during the clean-up phase. But we arrived at the cheap-o rental place in plenty of time, though their computer was having some difficulty and it took a long time to process Mark's order. He said under his breath, but loud enough for the clerk to hear, "How much you wanna bet they tell me I'm not in their system?"

This "How much you wanna bet" thing was starting to worry me. Three times in one morning seemed like a lot to me. As fate would have it, Matt called me that very evening with his plan to stage an intervention. As Matt talked, it all started coming back to me. I recalled Mark at the craps table, his eyes wild with a fire that said, "Geez, I want to win!" Whenever we played blackjack, Mark would often double his bet on a ten or eleven! That's nuts! Sure, I'd do the same thing, but for me it was basic strategy. For Mark, it was obvious that a sinister addiction was at work. He'd been bit by a gambling bug, hard, right on the butt.

"Are you in?" asked Matt.

"I'll beat that gambling bug out of him even if I have to destroy the host body to do it," I replied.

THURSDAY

Matt

I landed in Las Vegas in the afternoon, an hour before Stinky. I waited in a bank of chairs outside baggage claim. A lanky elderly man sat down next to me and struck up a conversation. He was stranded at McCarran Airport because the Veterans Administration screwed up his flight arrangements to Walter Reed Military Hospital where he was having a brain tumor removed. American Airlines was too bureaucratic and greedy to help him. And he was pissed. This old man had already told an unhelpful ticket agent to "kiss his ass." He asked if I were in town to chase young ladies and I told him I was there for the intervention.

"A what? What the fuck is that?"

I explained about beating up Stinky. He snorted, "Doesn't mean you can't chase the ladies, too. Hell. Ladies would like to kick your friend's ass too. He sounds like a pussy." I told him I was married and he practically spit on me. "So what? She's not here. Live a little. A stiff prick has no conscience. You sound like a pussy."

He left to go kick some more American Airlines' ass. While I waited for Stinky I practiced Texas Hold 'Em on my Handspring Visor in anticipation of our Solar System Series of Poker at the Horseshoe on Saturday. I thought about the intervention and how much I hated to see a friend beholden to a demon like gambling. It has always been my belief that one must be free of such vices to live a full and productive life. I was now more committed than ever to help Stinky, provided I could keep myself sober, or at least sober enough.

Stinky

Some people have problems. The world's a tough place, and not everyone can handle the trials of life. In college, I had a roommate who drank so much that it took two and half 40-ounce bottles of malt liquor before he started to feel a buzz. The poor sap would be out six bucks, and only as drunk as the rest of us, sitting around complaining about how no girls ever came over to our place, but we'd left the liquor store with change left over from \$2.

A co-worker at a job I had was fired for pleasuring himself in his office. When they searched his computer after he left, they found enough porn to corrupt the entire student body of all of the city's Catholic schools.

These are problems. Me? I just like to place a wager now and again. Some people think I bet more than I can afford to lose, but that's because they don't know that I'm generally a pretty happy person. I don't need a lot of "material" things, like blankets on my bed and a faucet for my bathroom sink. I prefer the simpler pleasures in life; the brisk jog home on a cool evening after the illegal poker game's been broken up by the cops, the sage advice I get from the toothless

old men at the local off-track betting outpost -- the sorts of things you can't measure with dollars and cents.

So it was with some excitement that I took off from Newark airport for the Big Empire Cocktail Soiree. These yearly trips have become ever more joyous for me as my betting prowess has grown through the years. I used to think of the trip as an ice cream cone's worth of seeing friends from college and meeting readers of our Vegas web sites, but it's become more like a great big, sweet, sticky sundae that leaves me slightly sickened -- but happy! always very happy! -- after the last trace of whipped cream has been licked off the now-grimy spoon.

I met Matt at the airport and we waited for what seemed like seven hours in the line at the car rental counter. I thought about hitting a couple slot machines to get my betting juices flowing, but figured I better not. I love a gamble, but those things are just stupid. It's like giving spare change to homeless people. You never get a damn thing back.



Stinky may be a gambling addict, but at least he doesn't pose nude like Phil.

Matt

As we rode the Spike's stuttering elevator up to the sixth floor, Mark asked, "How much you wanna bet the room's a dump?" I agreed, he was probably right. "No, seriously. How much you wanna bet? Twenty bucks?"

The corner suite was more tattered than we remembered, and the air conditioners belched out lumps of lukewarm air. There was no shampoo, one bar of brittle soap and a pair of undersized, sandpapery towels. Flat surfaces had cigarette burns; some ours, some not. But it was clean enough and cheap enough, and the wide balconies gave us a perfect platform for mooning the bums outside. We dropped our bags and left.

Stinky

We hit downtown to check into the room and meet up with some of the gang. The Southern California contingent had forgone a trip to Arizona to watch a ballgame, and had pulled into town earlier in the day. We caught up with Steve, Mike, Ghizal and Phil in the lobby of the Gold Spike. They had met up earlier with Bill from Texas.

Steve grew up on the Jersey shore, and likes to think of himself as an aficionado of homestyle Italian cooking. He suggested we try the food at Montevani's, home of fried garlic knots and delicious cannolis. At that point, I had been traveling for more than 9 hours, and hadn't eaten a thing. The only thing I wanted more than a pile of clay chips was a plate of decent food.

Unfortunately, I got neither. I'm not going to go so far as to say that Steve wouldn't know a good Italian meal if it came up and slopped red sauce all over his shirt, but Montevani's wasn't quite as advertised. Forty-five minutes after ordering, I dug into the most bland plate of pasta I'd had since the night before, when I'd cooked spaghetti at home. The garlic knots weren't bad, but they were fried dough sprinkled with garlic salt. It's the kind of food they can't even screw up at county fairs. To be fair, I didn't try the cannoli, having eaten far too many garlic knots while waiting for the main course.

The company, on the other hand, was fantastic. The restaurant was almost empty, but between the simultaneous conversations and Mike's famous root beer belches, we created our own raucous din. The waiter, sensing our good time, decided we'd be the perfect audience for his riddles and jokes. His material consisted of "You know you're a redneck if..." jokes, with the word Saskatchewan taking the place of redneck, interspersed with mystifying attempts to impress us with tales of doing the makeup for a 300-pound female impersonator. It's not easy to get a group of eight people to simultaneously stop laughing sympathetically and turn from such horror, but eventually we pulled it off and were able to leave.

Back downtown, Matt and I took some time to update our write-ups of the casinos. I'm always a little saddened to see the stagnation in Downtown Vegas. If their business keeps falling off, there's some chance that maybe one day it won't be there to let us sit in its worn out, smoky lap. But it does make it easy to keep our web site current.

We walked in and out of casinos, to find the same tables in the same configurations with the same dealers, and probably the very same players as the last five times we'd been. Fine by me. I had money in my pocket, and I was looking to increase it, so the quicker it went the happier I was.

Matt

Back in the murky haze of the casino, I was torn about whether or not to let Stinky sit down at a blackjack table. If I did was I only letting him perpetuate his gambling problem? Or was I helping to make the impact of the intervention that much stronger?

If I intervened now, Dan would be pissed that I started without him. Besides, I wanted to play more than I wanted to distract my friend with card tricks and knock-knock jokes, even though I am very good at both.

Mostly, I wanted to drink. I had that fuzzy feeling, like someone shoved cotton balls under my eyelids and tongue. A waitress staggered by, hauntingly calling "cocktaaiillzzz", as though it were the name of her long-lost child.

"Can I get a whiskey?" I asked. "And can you ask the bartender not to put traces of women's lipstick around the rim this time?"

The waitress looked at me bored. "I can only serve well drinks."

"Oh, any whiskey's fine."

"In a clean glass. That's a call drink."

Stinky sat down at first base of one of the Spike's two-dollar tables. Okay, I rationalized, one last night of indulgence. Like a prisoner's last meal before an execution, or the way Jesus gorged himself on Sizzler's all-you-can-eat popcorn shrimp before his 40 days in the desert. I took the seat beside him and put out a whopping \$20. My palms sweated, the way they always do when I'm sober, or I'm gambling more than I can afford. So, I guess they were sweating doubly now.

Prior to the trip, we had 2,500 CheapoVegas matchbooks made. They featured Casino Boy's lovable mug and Lucky Ned's savvy gambling mantra "Go With Guts!" In ordering so many, we overestimated the number of friends we had by, oh, about 2,497. I put a handful of the extras on the felt, and a bearded man with crazy eyes at the other end of the table picked one up. I thought he was going to light his beard on fire. He was too clean to be homeless and too imbalanced to be socially accepted. That's why he was at the Gold Spike. He turned the book over in his hands, "I know this site." This was exactly the sort of recognition I crave like cheap tequila and I felt a flush of pride. Stinky wasn't paying attention; he was too busy splitting a queen and ten. "Really?" I asked, "Do you like it?"

"I love it!" The guy's breath was boozy and rancid, suggesting he was in the middle of a long bender. I was jealous. "I love Stinky." He said this with too much emphasis, as though he meant, "I am obsessed and want to stalk him."

"That's Stinky," I pointed at my friend who was too busy asking the dealer, "How much you wanna bet I beat you this hand?" to notice my conversation.

The dealer said, "That's what the betting circle is for, sir."

Stinky nodded, "I mean you. Wanna a little side action?"
The obsessed guy yelled, "Stinky? I love you!"
"Wanna bet?"



Official judge Mike performs research to determine whether or not the room is a dump. His decision: it is.

I felt sort of left out. I never get obsessed stalkers and Stinky has dozens. Why do only the boring people like me, the ones who like to point out typos and grammatical errors? The crazy man leaned over me to talk to Stinky, and his breath was nauseating. I cashed in my chips before I vomited but after I got my drink.

"I'm going to bed," I told Stinky and he asked why so soon. "I'm tired. Have fun with your new friend."

The bearded guy was already shifting his ass into my seat to be closer to Stinky. Stinky eyed him suspiciously. "How much you wanna bet he stabs me?"

Back in the dim suite, I quickly got drunk on a fifth of cheap bourbon I always carry, cried about something I can't remember and fell asleep.

Stinky

I had planned on winning big this visit, and knew that only the real high rollers had the kind of stake it takes to beat the tar out of the casino's built-in edge. In anticipation of the trip, I had been holding back on my normal sidewalk craps games at home and on living the high life with things like putting butter on my bagels. All of the dry bread and duct taping myself to the couch to keep from rushing to the siren call of the dice paid off handsomely, and I arrived in town with \$57 cash. I was primed for the kind of action that is usually reserved for whales from Hong Kong.

I pulled out the whole wad as I sat down at the Spike's \$2 blackjack table, and I could swear I heard a distinct sharp intake of breath that meant one of two things. Some other player in the casino was either mighty impressed, or there was a problem with his portable oxygen tank.

I lay seven dollars on the table and told the dealer to “give me some red with that.” As he handed over my two silver dollars and worn \$5 chip, I could tell he was impressed by my largesse, which is always a great sign. With the dealer on your side, the cards have a tendency to come up in your favor.

Sure enough, my first two cards were a seven of diamonds and a five of clubs. Twelve! That’s got to be one of the best bad hands you can be dealt. I hit, and the dealer tossed me a five. Seventeen! That’s practically already a winner. That is, until the stupid dealer showed me his 20 and ripped the very heart out of my chest.

I refused to let one bad hand ruin my whole weekend, although it was tempting, and kept playing, up and down for a while. Matt was busy talking to some weird looking guy about Las Vegas web sites or some such nonsense, so without any distractions, I was able to get in a zone. I had a run of cards like I’d never seen before, and must have been up by at least \$15 at one point.

Phil and Mieko Sunbury, Soiree regulars, dropped by the table to say hello. It’s a great feeling when people you actually know, and who aren’t just pretending to be old friends in order to get close enough to pick your pocket, run into you at the Gold Spike. Mieko, it seemed, had started drinking some time early that morning, and being blotto really became her. Normally, Mieko’s a very happy person, but with about 128 ounces of cheap daquiri in her, her smile was so big it seemed it might swallow up her whole face at any moment.

Matt got up and said he was going to bed, and after I got through detailing all of the ways in which he was a spineless pussy, I told him not to wait up, because by the time I was through, I would probably own the bed he was sleeping in, along with the rest of the hotel, and that Jackie Gaughan would be handing over the casino by early the next afternoon.

I’m not sure if it was Matt’s sissified bad vibe that did it, or the guy with the beard who kept asking me more and more detailed questions about the location of my apartment in New York, but something got to the cards, and the dealer kept taking away more and more of my chips. I cashed out, gave a thought to going up to bed, and then decided that what I really needed was some fresh air.

There was plenty of it to be had in the four minute walk between the Gold Spike and El Cortez, whose \$2 blackjack table has slightly more favorable rules and older but friendlier cocktail waitresses. The El Co is a “break-in” joint for dealers, meaning that the people handing you cards are often fresh out of dealer’s school, and I sat down at a table across from a young Asian woman who didn’t even yet have a name tag pinned to her shirt. She dealt slowly, under the watchful eye of a crusty old veteran who had probably been there for all of a week and a half, and I learned that she was auditioning for a job. As a very moral person, I frown on cheating, but I think even Socrates himself

wouldn’t find any ethical dilemma in using any advantage you can get in a game that’s designed to guarantee you lose.

So on every hand I lost, I would say, “Uh, I won that.”

About three quarters of the time the fresh-faced trainee knew I was wrong, and when she didn’t, her goody-two-shoes shadow would correct her and tell me to cut it out. After half an hour or so, the pit boss finally said, “Sir, if you grab for those chips one more time, I’m going to ask you to leave.”

I can tell when I’m not welcome, so after the next time I grabbed for the chips and he had security escort me out, I got the hint. Fine, I don’t need their lousy game anyway. I wanted to keep playing blackjack, but after a quick count of my crumpled bills, I realized I was down a little over \$20. That meant the only other table I could afford would be back at the Spike, and I didn’t want to run into my bearded stalker again. I had no intention of going to bed, though, so I thought I’d sneak into the Copper Mine, the Spike’s penny slot area.

Sure, penny slots are for low rollers, but on most machines, you can play five at once, which is essentially the same as the nickel machines the big boys frequent. I got my pennies and made it to the dusty back corner of the casino without any weirdos recognizing me, and settled in for a little video poker, which I vowed to play until I was tired enough to fall asleep in my chair and bang my head on the fingerprint-covered screen.

FRIDAY Matt

I heard Stinky return to the room, cursing a blue streak, and rifling through the pockets of my shorts. I had prepared for this likelihood by putting my wallet under my pillow. It’s an eel-skin wallet and I could feel its slight magnetic pull on the fillings in my teeth all night. Assuming he had gone to bed, I fell back into a deep slumber.

I woke for good at nine a.m.--the Vegas equivalent of 4 a.m.--and went out to the balcony. The boiling sun had already reduced bums and hookers to puddles on the sidewalk. I pulled back the curtains and saw that Stinky’s bed had not been slept in. I was a little worried: what if something happened to him and I wouldn’t get to intervention him into a bloody pulp? I wandered down to the Spike lobby and a loud snoring sound led me into the back of the Copper Mine where I found Stinky asleep, his face stuck with grime and drool to the flashing screen of a penny slot.

I roused him with a jab to the ribs and sent him upstairs for a change of clothes. He mumbled an objection, but we had work to do. We planned to update our reviews of the North Strip properties: Stratosphere, Sahara, Circus Circus, Westward Ho, Stardust, Riviera and the New Frontier. But first, a free breakfast was waiting for us at the El Cortez.

During the complimentary breakfast (available to anyone who sends a mailing address and when they'll be in Vegas to reservations@elcortez.net), Stinky was in a foul mood. He muttered about marked cards, cheating dealers and ripoff ATM fees. "I bet you can't guess how much I lost last night." I didn't want to bet. "Just guess," he urged. "I'll bet you 43 dollars you won't guess right."

"Was it 43 dollars?"

"God dammit!" He threw down his fork. "I'm not paying you." Stinky looked at his jittery fingers, still dirty from the rolls of coins and filthy tokens that had passed through them. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Sometimes I just feel so sad when I lose. I hate the gambling all night and having nothing to show for it. I feel so empty, so worthless."

This was it, he'd hit rock bottom. There's the remorse and regret, all those things I sort of remember them talking about at that one Alcoholic's Anonymous meeting I attended. Stinky said, "I hate chasing losses with money I don't have."

"Do you think it's time to quit?"

He paused, and I swear I heard him choke back a sob. "I think it's about fucking time I win."

Downtown casinos change little except for ownership and bankruptcy status. The North Strip joints change even less. The carpets are the same as when we first came to Las Vegas, only dirtier. The slots have more bells and whistles, the buffets still suck and the stench of smoke is staler. The mood is drabber and the clientele older.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Strip's armpit, the New Frontier. The hotel is ramshackled, dirty and desolate, but the air conditioning works well. Staff papered the deli with industrial posters for a new food called "The Pipe." The Pipe is hamburger, salmon or chicken reconstituted into a "convenient pipe configuration," said the ads, mainly so you can reheat it on a hot dog roller. Mmmm, now that's good salmon. Other than The Pipe and the dropping of most live entertainment, the Frontier remains the same old dump.

As we left, two employees hand-paid a jackpot to an old man. The change girl counted the hundreds into his

palm and the slot manager's lips moved as he counted along. While the money was being placed in one hand, the man used the other to play max coins on two machines. And once the last of the jackpot hit his palm he pocketed it, smiled at us, said, "Ninety-five-hundred dollars," and added a third machine to his harem.

Stinky was awed and talked the entire way back to the car about what he'd do with that much money. "Gamble. I'd gamble and then I'd gamble some more, and when I was done gambling? I'd get one of those salmon pipes."



Downtown may be dying, but damn if it ain't looking good doing it.

Stinky

When you're being followed around by a guy with a camera, and have expensive microphones clipped to your belts, the eyes of every two-bit performer stuck with jobs as costumed skills to entice gamblers inside of casinos light up like Christmas as they see you approach. They all figure that being in the background on TV, even if it's for a news segment about how the owner of the casino where they work has been arrested for his stash of child pornography, is their big break.

Such was the case the last time we visited the Westward Ho, when we were in town filming for a show on the Travel Channel about Vegas on the cheap. There are two skills at the Ho, one an Elvis impersonator and the other a Carmen Miranda look-alike, you know, to get you in the mood for the Ho's Wild West theme. As long as the camera was on, those two couldn't get close enough, making suggestions to the cameraman about the best light to shoot them in, and hanging on to us like we were their long lost lovers.

As we passed through the casino to make sure nothing had changed this time (it hadn't), with no audio/visual equipment in tow, we spied Elvis and called out to him.

"Hey Elvis! Remember us?"

In his best hunka-hunka voice, he said, "Uh, no I don't," and turned away. So much for our growing celebrity.

We kept heading up the Strip, stopping in at the Sahara to confirm disturbing rumors we'd heard about the new management's drastic reduction in \$1 blackjack, and removal altogether of \$1 craps minimums. I made Matt

promise to take all his clothes off and handcuff himself to a chair if they didn't have any \$1 blackjack, but luckily for the Sahara (and me, since I didn't have any handcuffs and quite frankly, I'm tired of bailing Matt out of jail for public nudity), they had a few dollar tables scattered around. No \$1 craps, though, so Matt took off his shirt in silent, pasty protest, and we left.

The Stratosphere Tower has loomed over the Las Vegas skyline since 1996, but neither Matt nor I had ever been up to the top. The nearly \$8 admission fee for a ride up the elevator had always kept us away. But we had heard that with a reservation to the Top of the World restaurant, they let you ride up for free. Dinner at that gourmet eatery costs more than it would to have Bob Stupak's face tattooed on our arms, but lunch is downright reasonable, especially when you factor in the free ride up the tower.

The elevators are deep inside the casino, and require you to pass through a lame shopping mall and a completely deserted arcade that used to house a Circus Circus-like midway, with carnival games and kiddie rides. We rode up, and were sorely tempted to bail out of our reservation and just soak in the views for a few minutes, but we were worried that they'd catch us, beat us up and toss us off the top of the tower into the bad neighborhood below, where we'd probably be beaten up again.

So we were shown to our seats and scanned the menu for the cheapest items. I went with a steak sandwich and Matt ordered a greasy Monte Carlo, meaning the total bill including tip and drinks would only be about \$28. More than we'd normally pay for six lunches, but we ponied up in the name of research. The floor of the restaurant rotates slowly as you eat, allowing you to see the whole Vegas valley if you dawdle long enough. We quickly realized why the dinner prices are so much higher. At night, Las Vegas twinkles like a beautiful multi-colored galaxy, but during the day, it reveals its true self; a smoggy dustbowl, with bland housing developments pushing all the way to the drab desert mountains. Sure, any time you're 800 feet up and can see for miles, it's impressive, but in the light of day, our eyes tended to fall all too often on the massive air conditioning units on top of squat industrial buildings.

After we finished eating, we walked up the stairs to the observation deck, which was almost as deserted as the arcade at the foot of the towers. We watched the world's slowest roller coaster, the High Roller, and heard people screaming for their very lives on the Big Shot. We thought about hucking some pennies over the side of the tower, gazed into the distance a little more, and finally headed back down, pleased that we'd never bothered to shell out the money just to get to the top of the tower.

With full bellies and a sense of deep satisfaction thanks to the hard work we'd done, we headed back downtown. Matt said it was because we needed to "meet our friends," but I knew that we both wanted to get back to the tables. Or at least I did.

Dan

Man, I busted out of work like an inmate with a wrecking ball. My heart was racing: racing toward Las Vegas. The trek to the airport, with the traffic and the strain of secure processing, couldn't dampen my excitement. Las Vegas, my beacon, was pulling me like a pilgrim toward Mecca. And not just Mecca, but the Mecca Mega-Hotel and Casino with the Loosest Slots in the World. I knew as I boarded the plane that the pace wasn't going to slow one iota until the long, sleepy ride home on Monday.

I was only going to be in town for thirty-six hours, having to fly out bright and early Sunday morning to make it to a wedding in L.A. that afternoon. So I was going to have to do my gambling, drinking, and carousing with vigor and efficiency. I was set to win the sartorial splendor contest (barring any cute girls showing up and stealing the title with their natural splendor). I was set to eat a zillion shrimp cocktails, to win fifty grand on the penny slots, and to stomp every Dance Dance Revolution game into oblivion.

And, of course, I was all set to make sure that Mark held to a puritan regime of NOT gambling. And NOT drinking either, while we were at it. It was for his own good, and it was bound to be very fun for me, as well. Deplaning, my imagination was full of images of Stinky, bleeding and repentant, his knuckles raw and swollen from my repeated rappings every time he reached uncontrollably for the dice. I pictured him hog-tied and ball-gagged. Maybe I'd develop the skills of a dominatrix, a potentially lucrative sideline for a San Francisco resident. So distracted was I by these images, that I walked right past Phil, Jerry, and Robert, who had come to meet me at the airport.

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, holding three little cards that read "D," "A," and "N" respectively. Funny as this might have looked, I didn't spot them until they accosted me from behind and thrust the cards into my face. But they had gotten out of order and I read, "AND."

"And?" I said.

Robert and Phil did a little do-si-do, and I got the joke. But, in dominatrix mode, I began to belittle them for not dressing up like valets in suits and leather hats and chaps, and ball-gags. I mean Phil and Robert in shorts and t-shirts hardly presented the chauffeur image. And Jerry, especially, looked scruffy with a beard and an overall appearance that suggested that the Vegas Virgin of yesteryear was long gone, and now living as a part time pimp, part time prostitute, who you could also buy drugs from or child pornography.

"Let's get to Larry's Villa!" he insisted even before we made it back to the rental car.

Instead, we headed indirectly for the Spike, because, really, where else could the four of us go?

Matt

One of our Las Vegas traditions is to spend Friday afternoons standing around the front desk of the Gold Spike waiting for friends to arrive. Once everyone has, we stand around for a few more hours still waiting. This Friday, seven of us waited for Dan, Robert, Phil and Jerry. I found a half-empty bottle of Magnum malt liquor and drank it fast enough to kill the germs of whomever had put his lips on it before me. I followed that with a handful of mini-airline liquor bottles that I carry in case of emergencies like this. Stinky bet a stranger twenty dollars that he could drink a whole bottle of ketchup in the snack bar and won.



Ghizal, Phil, Robert and Stevie show off their classy El Cortez zipper bags. Phil hadn't yet filled his with pornographic flyers.

With a red crust around his lips, he sat down at the two-dollar blackjack table and bought in. I let him play because, for one thing, I was still waiting for Dan; beating the crap out of Stinky was like Christmas morning, Hanukah and Flag Day all rolled into one for him. For another, I was lit on cheap tobacco and even cheaper vodka and my mouth felt lubricious, gossip aching to spill out. I wanted to talk about Stinky's personal problems. While he played cards, I exaggerated the depths of his gambling depravity to our mutual friends with wild hand gestures. When that didn't pique the gang's interest, I pulled out the sock puppets. Then they literally drooled over the prospect of taking a few cheap shots in the name of intervention. Stevie, our lawyer friend, proposed that we "sue his ass back to the stoneage, and then sue him again for his rocks."

While we waited, a miraculous thing happened; Stinky won. Not smart bets: splitting fives, and re-splitting the fives dealt to them, hitting on fourteen against a dealer's six, doubling down on an ace-king, standing pat on a hand of seven, and in one case, yelling "Hit me!" from the men's room, although he claimed we had misheard him fending off an attack by a Gold Spike regular. Either way, he won the hand. He bumped his two-dollar bets up to three, then

to an astronomical five bucks a hand. Such high stakes were unheard of in our gang, and in the Gold Spike. A pit boss sweated each bet. Said Michael, "That's perfectly good money he should use for something worthwhile. You can buy damaged Beanie Babies off eBay, or used pornos from the Mexican street vendors. And then, you know..."

I probably should have been happy for Stinky's changing fortune. But I wasn't that drunk yet, and besides, that's not the way our friendship works. It works like this: Stinky's misery is my good time. Our bond is strongest when I succeed, he fails, and I am sober enough to remind him of that. Impatient for Dan to arrive, I paced back and forth, from the Copper Mine to the lounge, along a faded path in the carpet.

Stinky

Eager to make up my losses from the night before, I changed a dog-eared twenty for silver chips at the Spike's blackjack table and put out a couple to get started. The night before, I had played conservatively, mostly sticking to basic strategy blackjack, which mathematicians say is the best way to reduce the casino's advantage over the long run. I didn't have a long run, though. I needed cash, and I needed it quick, unless I wanted to spend the rest of the weekend watching my friends have fun gambling while I chewed up straw wrappers and tried to flick little wet pieces of paper into their hair.

I've never taken the time to master the intricacies of Lucky Ned's famous blackjack Incredi-System, but his mantra, "Go With Guts!" was really all I needed. I was determined to shake up that casino, and do whatever stupid stuff my gut, still working hard on that Strat steak sandwich, told me to. I started slow, doubling on 14, hitting on 19, turning my back to the table any time there were three or more clubs face up, the usual stuff. No matter what I seemed to do, that dealer could not beat me.

So I raised the stakes. I upped my bet to \$3 and vowed to hit at least twice on each of the next five hands, no matter what I was dealt. Except for once, when I busted with my first hit card and got into a long argument with the dealer about why he wouldn't give me a second, I won every one. And then I won some more. I was drunk with excitement and only pretended to be the regular kind of drunk when I knocked some lady's cocktail over flailing around after winning both hands on split 10s.

Again I raised the stakes, laying five, eight, ten and even twenty bucks in that perfect little circle. Pit bosses typically only keep their eye on me when I get bored and start trying to sneak sips from other players' drinks, but this time they were watching because they thought there was some chance I was a force to be reckoned with. I could have stayed at that table for the rest of my life. I'd probably still be winning today, with backhoes clearing the piles of chips away for me when I needed to go to the can. Except for one

little thing. My lousy friends, who claimed to be hungry, but were obviously jealous. I would have told them to go on without me, but I had a strong feeling in my gut -- a desire for guacamole -- and followed them out.

Dan

Every time I land in Las Vegas, I get really hungry. Maybe it's the bounty of cheap eats that psychosomatically gets my appetite up, or the fact that Vegas has replaced so many of the quantity-over-quality buffets with decent eatery franchises from around the world. Also, it could be that I like to postpone the strange joy of reuniting with my so-called friends in the so-called hotel named after a metal that is foreign to the place. Though meeting again the angst-ridden grimace of Matt and his barely contained rage is always good for a dark laugh, it's almost more delectable to nurse the mental image rather than spoil it with the reality of Matt, who so often succumbs to his rage. And Stinky: how I hankered to give him the intervention, AKA, the Double-Deuce! But, too, just the mental picture created such anticipation, that I didn't want to rush into the fray. And, also, Stinky is stinky.

So, I told Robert, Phil, and Jerry that I wanted to dine in style, and since I didn't say exactly what style, they took me to the bowling alley where we chowed on fries with cheez and MGD. That put me in a Spike mood all the way, and in a pummeling mood to boot.

The first good omen to greet us was a space in the Gold Spike lot, waiting as if reserved for us. The next was a bitter grin smeared across Matt's face, the kind that was both welcoming and foreboding. Though I could scarcely contain my urge to cure Stinky of his demon addiction, not to mention my own hearty craving to throw some cash on the felt, I executed the pleasantries with Mike, Steve, Matt, Ghizal, and the gang and ironed out the sleeping logistics. Needless to say, I'd need a bed to myself since I like to set up a barbed-wire perimeter around my bower to keep early-morning Matts away from me. You'd think he'd have outgrown his 7 a.m. Wrestlemania shenanigans by now, but it wasn't until he impaled himself on my razor-wire pillow last year that he finally started to relinquish the routine.

At last, I was set up to enjoy exactly thirty-four hours of Las Vegas. I sought out Stinky, who had been conspicuously

absent in all the Friday-night meeting and greeting. He was where I would have expected him: hunkered over a two-dollar Blackjack table. What was more unexpected was the way he had managed to cordon off five out of the seven betting circles for himself, leaving two disgruntled elder tourists grimly manning circles one and seven. And what was downright astonishing was that he looked to be stacking red and sometimes green chips in the circles. I blinked, figuring I'd gone neon blind. But the chips still were red and green.

Matt sidled up to me, "You can see how bad it's gotten."

"Pretty impressive," I agreed.

"You hit him high. I'll hit him low. Count of three. One... Two..."

"Wait a minute, Matt. What would Jesus do?"

Matt was startled by this philosophical poser, and that bought me a minute of time to try to reason with him: "He's way up, Matt. He's winning."

"So?"

"Right now he's free of his gambling problem."

Matt's mouth opened as if he were trying to catch a fly, and in his eyes, I could see his civil-engineering mind trying to grasp the subtleties of psychology.

"Look at this way: if you gamble and you lose a lot of money, that's bad, right? That's a problem--a gambling problem. But if you gamble and you win, that's good. It's not a problem. You're gambling, but you don't have a problem."

"So you're saying..."

"While Stinky is winning, he does not have a gambling problem."

Matt

How do you argue with impeccable logic? You don't; you punch it in the face and knock out its teeth. Dan is my friend, though, and one with access to our litigation-happy lawyer friend Stevie, so decking him was out of the question. I tucked my seething anger into the back pocket of my mind. "As soon as he loses we yank him out of here by the nuts."

"And how," said Dan. He took his Rusty Nail from the cocktail waitress and wiped the rim clean with his T-shirt.

After only another hour or so of milling, we left the Gold Spike for dinner at Garduno's in the Fiesta Rancho. Even Stinky was hungry by this time. It was a Mexican meal so intensely mediocre that I will say no more except that



When your friends clamor for mediocre food like ours do, keep Garduños in mind.

Stinky hit the third leg of a baseball parlay while we ate. From there, we drove to cheaper gaming pastures: Sam Boyd's Joker's Wild.

Joker's Wild is out in the Valley's scrubby eastern suburbs. In the dark, though, it feels like it's on Yucca Mountain, or Witch Mountain, a million miles from Las Vegas' glitter. No matter how many times you've been there, you can't help wondering if you took a wrong turn somewhere along the way. The casino is surrounded by wide vacant lots and gas stations. The casino is a dump: small, smelly and somewhat depressing. There is no theme; no wild joker. A more truthful name would be Drunken Unhappy Locals, and nobody finds them as much fun as us Drunken, Unhappy Tourists. The Joker's Wild has no hotel, but they do have a lousy buffet and coffee shop. We came for one of the cheapest craps game in the western hemisphere: fifty cents with 10x odds. The eight of us bellied up to the lone table's rack and tossed our ten-dollar bills down like big shots.

The action was rocky. One hot shooter followed by a round of seven outs, and then another streak to redeem us. The only guy winning consistently was--you guessed it--Stinky. He put his come bets out at the right time, moved to the dark side just as the shooters turned cold, and propositioned the hard eight with impeccable timing. While the rest of us hovered around even, Stinky's wagers were as lucrative as a Halliburton contract.

At half past midnight the pit boss told us they were closing at one. Apparently, the drunk and degenerate players at the Joker's Wild aren't like my friends and me; they have jobs. Only five minutes later, the boss called out, "Last shooter." We protested because he had promised us another half hour. It was no use, though. We were up against The Man. Same old story; The Man wanted to get rid of us. Actually, it's usually not The Man we have trouble with, but The Woman who throws us out after she discovers that we ate an entire pan of brownies that she asked us not to touch because they were for a co-worker's party, and we hid the pan behind the toilet and later threw up all over her comforter. And that's about when The Woman declares it the worst first date ever. This time it was The Man making our lives miserable.

Our protests grew fainter as Phil quickly sevens out and the crew started counting chips. It didn't help that the table never got hot enough to be exciting, or cold enough to justify beating the hell out of Stinky.

Stinky stewed all the way back to the Gold Spike; it wasn't one o'clock, he wasn't drunk and he still had money. He was mostly mad at those of us ready for bed. The truth was not that I was tired, but that I wanted to sleep off my drunk, dream of being even drunker and be ready for the next day's Solar System Series of Poker. I reminded him that we also had a breakfast meeting with a big time entertainment manager who had some harebrained scheme to turn us into television stars, and this time NOT in Japan

and NOT for urinating on ourselves.

"I'm too rich to sleep."

"What about the \$43 you owe me?" I asked.

"I was going to win that next."

I conferred with Dan, who reminded me that as long as Stinky won, he had no gambling problem.

That night the sleeping conditions got cramped. We shared our suites with friends, and they camped out on the sofa, the floor, Phil slept draped over the lamp. Some fellow with a glass eye nobody knew slept in the corner. We would have kicked him out, except that he told funny jokes. Despite all the bodies strewn about, Stinky's bed stayed empty. He spent about half a minute in the room before declaring, "Sleep is for losers," and headed back out for the big money action on Fremont Street.

Dan

I agreed with Stinky; It was too early to sleep, so I changed into some evening wear: a Zebra-stripe jacket over a black tank-top, several solid-gold medallions, and those fringy leather pants that heavy-metal rock stars wear. Hell, yeah! My main purpose for being in town was running off with the title of Nappiest Dresser for the second year running (officially) or the fifteenth year running (unofficially). Since I knew others might have packed some nappy clothes for Saturday night's contest, I thought I'd put the fear of fashion in them by donning my rock duds on Friday night.

"Nice!" said Jerry.

"What's nice?" I asked, as blasé as could be. "You mean my ensemble? Why, this here is one of my more subdued confections."

So it went all night, until more than one person suspected that I might be gay. Frankly, the only reason most straight guys dress like straight guys is that they are afraid to be taken as being queer. Since I don't particularly care, I have reached that liberated state that, in my opinion, is the birthright of all men: I can dress in color!

I had to get out and about. A small posse of us decided to get some craps at the ElCo. Sure, we'd be back the following night, but I only get so many chances. As we made to leave the Spike for even seedier environs, we spotted Stinky in the blackjack pit.

"You guys going somewhere else?" asked Stinky.

I replied, "Down to the El Co; want to come?"

"Sure. I hate gambling alone. Actually, I don't hate it when I'm losing because the losses are easier to hide, but I'm winning right now." He began to gather his chips from the blackjack felt to cash out and come with us, but then, he'd suddenly thrown out several stacks back into as many empty betting circles as he could. As the dealer dealt another round, Stinky scratched behind his ears and squirmed in his seat.

"It's okay, Stinky," said Jerry. "We'll see you tomorrow at

the poker tournament."

"No!" Several heads turned. "I want to come play craps with you guys!"

"Okay, then let's go," I said, losing patience.

And then the whole routine happened again, with the gathering of chips, and the sudden bets, and the scratching behind the ears.

"Let's go," said Ghizal. So we all headed for the door. Stinky leaped up from the table, then, leaving stacks of five-dollar chips still on the table, while cramming the rest of his considerable winnings into a pouch made from his t-shirt. As the rest of us swaggered and/or trudged down Ogden Street, Stinky finally caught up, screaming, "Wait!"

The ElCo was quiet enough for most of us to squeeze onto a single table. The action, though, was cold. We'd just get to yelling after a roller hit his first point when he would seven out. Rat biscuits were sucked off the table as if by a giant Eureka vacuum cleaner, not even the HEPA filter kind, either, because the air inside ElCo was as bad as ever.

Even Stinky was losing, and the itch behind his ear must have been driving him crazy because blood was gathering under his fingernails. Every time Stinky lost, he'd increase his bet, and lose again. Usually such reckless gambling is reserved for Burt Cohen, but tonight, we were all watching Stinky change black chips to brown chips, and then into no chips. I was itching to intervene in a big, gory way, but Matt was dozing innocently in his own vomit somewhere and I didn't feel like trying to initiate the strangers at the table in the ways of the intervention. Because although it may just look like a lot of beating and crying, there's really more to it than that. You have to be able to hit just the right balance of beating and crying.

Tha Big Empire Playahs started pooping out much sooner than we would have had we been winning. One by one, we cashed out our remaining change and gathered for the trek back to bed. All except Stinky, who seemed to have hit an upswing again. The stack-o-chips in front of him was small, but all high denominations.

"I'll be back in just a few minutes," he assured us, scratching.

Stinky

I was dead tired when everybody wandered off from the El Co craps table. My legs felt like midget wrestlers has been using them as posts for their little tiny ring -- banging each other's heads over and over into my knees -- and my eyes were burning like crazy. These sensations were merely physical, however. I was riding high on a big fat stack of chips, and had no intention of sleeping while bathed in the glow of light reflected off of lady luck's teeth.

The only trouble was, I hate playing craps alone, and a quick glance let me know that the suit who had me kicked out the night before was still patrolling the blackjack pit. I was too scared to go back to the Gold Spike, fearing

that being that close to a bed might be too much of a temptation to settle in for the night, so I did what any other person desperate to keep gambling when they don't fit in anywhere else does. I headed down Fremont Street to the Western.

It was with some trepidation that I began the short but scary walk to the redheaded stepchild of Jackie Gaughan's Empire. Sure, we'd been to the Western many times before, but we usually travel there in a big group. While that has its problems -- 10-12 people, some dressed in shimmering gold sportcoats and others yelping uncontrollably for everyone to look at the chip stuck to their foreheads, can be pretty conspicuous -- at least when I'm with others, there's some chance that one of them will be attacked first, and I'll have time to turn and run like a sissy back from where we had come. And besides, I didn't normally go to the Western with pockets full of milk chocolate \$25 chips and their slightly more bitter but more sophisticated dark black \$100 brethren weighing down my pockets.

My lucky streak continued, and I didn't run into any troublemakers. That is, until I actually got to the casino itself. Its whole clientele is made up of troublemakers. But there you have security watching over you, so it feels at least a little safer.

I was tired of playing blackjack, hate roulette, and saw a scary-looking guy at the one bank of decent video poker machines, so I was at a loss for an activity. I certainly didn't want to waste money on some crummy slot machines, and after the long walk, turning around and going to bed just wasn't an option. I turned my head this way and that, hoping for some sign, and to my surprise, I got one. It was hung over a hopper, in a section of the casino I normally ignore. It read, "Bingo."



Dan looks dashing all weekend, not just Saturday night.

I'd always known that Bingo existed in Las Vegas, but with so many other more interesting games around, I'd never played. This was a desperate time, though. I had nowhere else to turn, so I uncrumpled some bills and told the Bingo lady to give me as many of whatever I needed to play. She handed over a stack of cards with numbers printed on them and a little blue marker. I thought she'd tell me what all of it was for, but just said, "Good luck," and turned away.

I took my cards and marker and turned to find a seat. At that hour, the Bingo room was pretty sparsely populated. There was a drunk guy slumped in a seat in back, snoring, and a few little old ladies clumped together, each hunched over her card, with ink-stained fingers.

Bingo is part of our national consciousness, so I had some vague idea what I needed to do, but if I wanted to win, and I did, I'd need to get some specifics. So I took a seat near the women, and turned on that famous Stinky charm.

"So, ladies, do you Bingo often?"

A sweet-looking lady, probably someone's grandmother turned to me and said, "Young man, you don't 'Bingo' when you play Bingo. Do you crap when you play craps?"

"I don't, but I think Phil did once."

The women tittered more than I thought was appropriate for their age, but turned back to their cards. Apparently, I'd have to be more direct to get any answers from these potty-mouths.

"Well, ladies, I'm a little new to this game. What exactly am I supposed to do?"

The sweet looking lady looked up from her card and told me that I needed to match the numbers on my card with the numbers being called. When I got a match, I was to mark my card with the dauber. I paused, thinking she was having fun at my expense again, but couldn't recall the word "dauber" in any childish, dirty context, so I figured she must mean my blue marker.

Just then, the Bingo lady up front called out, "G-Forty-Eight!"

Hey! I had a 48 on my card! I slopped a big glob of ink on the number and yelled, "Bingo! I got it! I win!"

The ladies looked up and glared at me. They must have been jealous that I had won right out of the gate.

The chatty one rolled her eyes and said, "You have to get five across before you can win. The goal is to get five in a row on your card, either down, across or diagonally."

Who knew the game was so complicated?

They continued to call numbers, and I joined in the hunkering down and inking, marking my card. I couldn't spell Bingo to save my life, though. We played through a few rounds, and the ladies warmed up to me a little bit. Esther, the mouthy one, told me about her grandkids, and helped me keep track of my numbers.

We started a new game, and I hit a couple of spots quick. I took a "B," and an "N" in the same row. I was on my way. I looked over at Esther's card, and she was hot on a

win herself. I saw her eyeing my card as the numbers were called. I filled in my "I" after a few moments, and right after, she pulled another favorable "G." We were neck and neck at three numbers apiece, she working down in one column, me going sideways.

Suddenly, Esther stopped chatting, and the other women must have felt something in the air, because they turned to watch the goings-on. The call was O-64. Mine! I was one number away, and Esther looked steamed. Moments later, though, she filled in another "G"-spot, and nobody even made a dirty joke.

I realized that Bingo wasn't like the other games I normally play. In craps, just about everyone wins at the same time, and in Blackjack, my outcome rarely influences anybody else. Although it's not as direct as poker, you're playing more against the people sitting near you than the house. I felt a little bad about rooting against this little old lady, at least until she turned to me and snarled, "Listen, you little piss-ant. This game is mine, and don't you forget that. We don't look favorably on beginner's luck around these parts." Bingo or not, I was still in the Western.

After that, I just wanted a win, bad. The next number was called, and it meant nothing to either my wrinkled old nemesis or me. Then another, and another, and another. I began to sweat. Each ball pulled out of the cage could spell my misery or my triumph.

The announcer spun the bin, the little balls rattled around and around until he stopped. He pulled open the creaky little door to the cage, pulled out the ball, and called out, "G-52!"

I was dumbstruck. That was it. I'd won! I leapt up, toppling my chair, and screamed at the top of my lungs, "Bingo, motherfuckers!"

Esther looked at me with rage. She pulled her dauber across her neck in a cutting motion. The other ladies grumbled, and I'm pretty sure one of them hissed at me. I ran to the front of the room, handed up my card, which was verified, and I took my winnings. I knew there was no sitting back down after that, so I tossed my remaining cards in the air, yelled out, "In your face, Esther! Looks like you won't be getting that hotpad this week after all!" and bolted from the casino.

I ran all the way down Fremont Street, past the El Co, and turned up Ogden Street. To my surprise, the sun was up, and by the time I made it back to the Spike, I realized how thoroughly exhausted I was.

I stumbled back in the room and fell on the bed, in a state of REM before my body was even fully prone.

Saturday Stinky (cont'd)

What seemed like minutes later, because it was, I felt Matt's hand on my shoulder, shaking me awake.

"Stinky! Wake up. Stinky, come on, we have to go meet

that Hollywood guy.”

In a bleary haze, I mumbled something about how I was about to pull out a knife, but Matt always knows when I’m bluffing.

“Come on, jackass, get up. We’ve got to go meet this guy if we’re ever going to be famous to anybody other than drunk weirdos at the Gold Spike.”

I sat up. “Shit, I can’t believe I forgot. Can’t we just pretend we gave him the wrong date, and that we were actually here last week? We can act all huffy, even, like, ‘Where were you, dude?’”

“Listen, get up, clean that blue crap off your face and comb your hair. We have to meet him in ten minutes at the Horseshoe. We’re having breakfast.”

While waiting outside the ‘Shoe coffee shop for Chris Ryan, the entertainment manager from L.A. who had expressed an interest in trying to help us develop a Cheapo Travel TV show, Matt and I talked about what we should say when we met him. We decided it was best to be firm about our integrity and the integrity of the web site, not agree to anything that made us uncomfortable, and most of all, to treat the breakfast as a meeting between serious, responsible professionals.

Chris showed up, we sat down, and I said, “Okay, before we get started, let me ask you two things. First, is there any kind of movie magic they could do to make it look like I have six-pack abs, and second, what do you think about a sexy female robot co-host?”

Matt added, “And I think we need to talk about action figures. We’ve already got some that we made from Sculpey clay. Can they use those as a model?”

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP EVENT \$10,000 NO LIMIT HOLD'EM	
DATE 5/23/03 ENTRIES 839 PRIZE POOL 7,802,700	
WINNERS	AMOUNT WON
1. LUCKY NED	\$ 2,500,000
2. Sam Farha	\$ 1,300,000
3. Dan Harrington	\$ 650,000
4. Jason Lester	\$ 440,000
5. Tomer Benvenisti	\$ 320,000

We finally figure out why Lucky Ned hasn't been calling us and asking for money every few days.

Chris suggested that we order our food before we got into too many details, so we each got a steak and eggs. I thought we’d already blown our chances with our outbursts, but Chris seemed unfazed. He probably thought

we were kidding. He told us about what he does, and said he thought we might be able to put together a TV show that would fit on some of cable TV’s less prestigious channels. All in all, it was a very productive conversation, and we felt pretty good about the meeting.

As we were leaving the ‘Shoe, we invited Chris and the friends he’d driven out with to join us at the Soiree. As we parted, Matt called out, “So how important is it that the action figures look exactly like us? Do you think anyone will care if we give them huge pecs and really cool mustaches?”

We haven’t heard from him since.

Matt

I wanted to start the Solar System Series of Poker at ten a.m. because I have no patience or compassion for crybabies who can’t get their asses out of bed. I’d just as soon have it at six a.m. so that nobody showed up and I could walk away a forfeit winner. That’s how I won a game in Little League. Plus, I learned that when the other team shows up, there’s a good chance they will not only kick your ass but also make fun of your homemade jock strap.

Why Las Vegas hasn’t collapsed under the weight of its own disorganization is a mystery. We walked over to the Horseshoe at eleven o’clock to confirm a noon start for the Solar System Series of Poker. The poker room manager said, “Huh?”

“The Solar System poker tournament,” said Stinky, bleary eyed from the all-nighter. “The one I called and made reservations for, then called again to confirm.”

I added, “It’s only the most prestigious poker tournament in the world.”

“Solar System,” corrected Stinky. His eyes never left the nearby video poker machines as we talked.

The Horseshoe had no record of anything, not even the winner of World War II. The poker manager with whom we’d arranged the tournament “left the state for 90 days,” apparently unexpectedly because he didn’t tell his coworkers that 23 jackasses would be descending on the poker room. It was nearly noon and the SSSOP entrants started arriving, milling about and frightening the clientele. Some guy in a suit showed up and hustled together two tables, stacks of tournament chips, three dealers and a couple of stopwatches. We gave him almost all the details: a Texas Hold’em freeze-out with bets increasing every fifteen minutes and no re-buys. The only detail we failed to provide was that we were to pay \$100 a table to the casino for the use of their facilities. On that minor aspect we used the same approach that served us so well in the Marines: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.

This was the first time over the weekend that I saw Burt Cohen, director of the Golden Globe-nominated “Presto, P.I.” (it lost to a “Mr. Belvedere” rerun). In 2001, Burt played bridesmaid to me as I won the first ever SSSOP. In 2002,

while I was home teaching my infant son how to count cards, Burt won the tournament. Needless to say, death threats had been sent to his house before this year's event, and I wasn't sure if he would have the guts to show up. I noticed he was still wearing his awful burgundy pants. "Nice pants... again."

Burt tugged the phallic-sized stogie from his maw and said, "I don't have a choice." While security restrained us, he explained that polyester changes phases from solid to liquid at a low temperature. The first time he wore the pants in the Las Vegas sun they melted into his skin. He'd be "wearing" those skintight trousers until the day he died. That's when I first noticed the pubic hair poking through.

By half-past noon, all the entrants and waiting listers received their CheapoVegas T-shirts and drawn cards that determined which table and position they would sit at. Burt was at the other table, I was with the lousy-playing Stinky and Dan. I felt like a dog in a dog food factory; all I needed to do was tear open these bags.

The stakes were high: 50% of the pool plus the coveted SSSOP bracelet to the Ultimate Champion, 30% to the Champion and 20% to the Wheeler. That's the kind of money dreams are built on.

Dan

If you want to be a poker champion, I have two words for you: Palm Pilot. A downloadable Hold 'em can be yours for a pittance, if not free, and on the plane to Vegas, you have some time to bone up on game. I downloaded my particular version three days after losing last year's tournament, and had been playing it in every spare moment for the past year, i.e., every time I used the john. After a year of hard simulated gambling, and with my hand-help opponents wallowing in the negative dollars, I felt certain that my chance of winning this year was about 99.99%. And indeed, it was.

That rush, that thrill of playing poker overtook me as soon as I woke on Saturday morning. The first thing I did was put on my skull rings. There's only one way to lose at poker while wearing skull rings: if your opponent is wearing skull rings that are more bad-ass than yours. I

threw on my pirate pants and a leather tunic, figuring to further startle any sartorial contenders that might appear. Too giddy to eat, I hurried down to the Horseshoe.

After an interminable wait--chalk it up to Matt's and Stinky's incompetence--we finally sat down to play. I looked around the table, thinking that these folks didn't look to be much better players than those on my Palm Pilot. The very first hand I picked up was double aces, Alcoholics Anonymous, pocket rockets! I was off to a good start, and won that hand handily, laying down my high pair at the end and silkily intoning, "American Airlines." Smooth demeanor under pressure is good psychological warfare. Of course, a good hand helps, too.

Stinky

I was excited about the poker tournament. Not because I was going to win -- I wasn't, I'm terrible at poker.

It requires way too much paying attention, which is not my strong suit -- but because as one of the tournament's hosts, I didn't have to pay, which meant at least five-to-ten minutes of completely free gambling.

And besides, the T-shirts I designed were the best yet, so I couldn't wait to receive the accolades I was due. The shirts featured Casino Boy, dressed in a tuxedo and riding astride a rocketship, swirling up from Earth into space, while playing cards trailed behind him. I'm almost never immodest, but seriously, those suckers were beautiful.

The details of the tournament seem to have escaped me, thanks to the fact that I hadn't slept more than a few hours since Thursday morning, but I do know that I won at least one pot before going down in flames,

chasing a straight like I always do.

Matt

For such a prestigious poker tournament, I was amazed at how bad everyone played. You'd think a \$15 entry fee would keep out all but the best. To my left was a fellow who, after being dealt two cards, pulled three more out



Burt Cohen, grinning like a fool over his pile of chips, just before Matt laid a well-timed haymaker.

of his pocket and told the dealer, "I'll use these, thanks." Another player placed a King Charles Spaniel on the felt and asked to play a hand of "Dogs on the Table" for Mitzi. Some people were more competitive but still as clueless. Every time Phil had a hand he disliked he chucked it into the air and shouted, "Misdeal!" He only stopped after the four of spades stuck in a ceiling panel and Binion's refused to give us a new deck.

Last time Lucky Ned found a phone card with credit on it, he called and asked us first for a loan, and second to reserve him a seat at the SSSOP. He claimed to be working on an IncrediSystem for poker that was showing promising results. When I pressed him for details, he acted evasive and said, "I haven't finished yet, but I'll tell you this little rhyme: bet the pocket ladies and you'll drive a Mercedes!" Lucky Ned didn't show up for the tourney, but his words came back to me when I saw the winner board for the Horseshoe's second most important tournament, the World Series of Poker. Right at the top, two-and-a-half-million dollars richer, was Lucky Ned.

Sometimes, because of bad cards or lucky draws, even the best poker players get knocked out early. Sometimes it doesn't matter whether they play correctly. That leaves a lot of wiggle room for a jackass like myself to make it into the money. Unfortunately, it also left room for the other 22 jackasses. I was eliminated early. Sure, I played badly, but so did everyone else. At least I didn't vomit on the table.

When I busted out it felt like hot lead poured down my gut. As the dealer took away the chips I tried to grab back from the pot I remembered that this was my party and I needed to be gracious. No temper tantrums, no accusing the cheaters at the table of cheating, no kicking Stinky, biting Dan or squealing like a pig. Time to show the world what a big man you are. Time to squelch those nasty rumors about being a sore loser that started when I crapped in Burt's Jeep after he got to be the thimble in a game of Monopoly. I rose slowly, doffed my cap to the rest of the table and said "Fuck you very much," sort of mumbly so it sounded like "thank you very much."

After a couple more hands, Stinky busted out and the tables consolidated. Dan was still in the money, along with his brother Phil, Dave "Feldy" Feldman, Phil Sunbury, Canadian Oke Millett, a couple of guys whose names I've already forgotten out of sheer bitterness, Dave Dummmler, Robert Stack and Burt "Cheater" Cohen. Jerks, all of them. Burt, with the biggest stack of chips, was the biggest jerk.

Dan

As the two tables shook out into one winners table, and one mob of losers, I wasn't surprised to see Matt standing skulkily with the latter group. Pretending to put a good face on it, he kept saying, "I'm so glad I get to stand up for a while. My legs were getting cramped under that table."

I had two words for Matt: Palm Pilot. My practice had

definitely paid off. Several non-entities (in terms of poker) quickly dropped out of the game. I laughed to see them go bust, but not nearly as much as Matt.

Then my own brother Phil was cleaned out, and I realized this game was serious. If such a loveable zany as Phil can find himself suddenly bereft of chips, then maybe this wasn't as happy-go-lucky a game as the Palm version led



Only the strong – and the jerks – make it to the final table.

me to believe. I knuckled down with the last six players: Oke from Canada, Feldy the Eldy, The Other Phil, Some Biker-Looking Guy, and Burt Cohen.

I glanced at Burt. He had a formidable stack o' chips in front of him and a wide grin clamped around the soggy end of an unlit stogie. Here was last year's champion--however suspect the circumstances surrounding the win--well supplied for another run at the title. I noticed Karefree Karen, his fiance, lingering within shoulder-rubbing distance. Since Karen and I go way back, I tried to convince her to tell me what Burt was holding.

"Aardvarks," she said, using the rare Mississippi gambler's term for double aces.

"Damn," I said, and folded, retaining a dwindling army of poker chips. My undoing was upon me. To make matters worse, when Burt tipped his hand up to take the pot, I saw that Karen had been totally lying! I guess that's why they call her Karefree: it's because she simply has no Konscience.

The tension was thick enough to cut like a black-jack deck, and I was desperately gunning for Wheezer. I didn't want to be the champion. Heck, I didn't care who took it. I just like the title, "Wheezer." I got dealt a king and a queen, off suit, but I was far from the dealer, so I stayed in along with the Biker and maybe another player. The flop was the kindest one I'd seen yet: king, queen, seven.

"I got this one," I thought. Biker knocked, I bet, everyone called. The turn was nothing special: a deuce, no flush. Biker knocked, I bet, Biker called. I started to wonder what

he might have, but then the words of Lucky Ned occurred to me: "Don't psyche out other players: Instead, say your prayers." Ned always says "pray-ers" as two syllables to better rhyme with "players." For me, it was too late to do anything but ride this out to the bitter end. The river was an unspectacular six. Biker knocked, and I bet.

That's when I noticed that he was wearing skull rings. I had two, plus two scorpions and a lion. But my skull rings were just skulls. As he pushed his chips into the pot and raised me, I noticed that his skull rings were the kind where the skulls have wings sprouting from the zygomatic processes and long, forked tongues snaking from between their grim grins. In a word: badass.

If I called, I'd be all in. But if I didn't call, I had nothing left. Lucky Ned would have said "Go With Guts," and my guts were screaming: "Get out!" My fatal error was ignoring the sage advice of Ned. I called. Biker showed a pair of sevens in the hole: three of a kind beating my high two pair. Sad but true. And it's all Karen's fault. Ned's too, while we're at it. And Matt and Stinky certainly didn't do me any favors.

The rest of the game couldn't go fast enough for me. Disappointment washed over me, and I tried to come down with an asthma attack so at least I could be Wheezer in point of fact if not Wheezer in title. Since I couldn't muster a good lung rattle, I lit up a fat, smelly stoogie and puffed the hell out of it, while watching the game continue.

Mr. Skull Ring was soon to drop out, and the money players remained: Oke, Phil the Other, and Burt. Playing a hunch, I sidled up next to Burt and dropped a napkin on the floor. Bending down to pick it up, I took a good look at his pockets. There was a rectangular object in the left pocket. It wasn't soft like a wallet, but hard, like a metal or plastic casing. Bingo: a Palm Pilot! At that point, there was no doubt in my mind where the big money was going to go: to Karen and Burt's honeymoon fund.

Matt

It sucked losing. They say you get desensitized to that sort of thing after getting beat enough. If that were true, I would have stopped caring in the second grade. I was on the outside, standing at the rail with the tourists. One thing life has taught me, though, is that when life serves you lemons chuck them at somebody else. Naturally, I thought of Stinky, who busted out shortly after me. I probably should have kept an eye on him but self-pity had kept me from looking anywhere but inward. Now I realized losing meant his winning streak was over and the time for intervention was now.

Dan was still playing, though, so I told him to bust out quick. Dan thought Stinky could wait until after he won. I snapped, "How selfish are you? What if he had just been hit by a bus and needed someone to call 911? Would you make him wait?"

Dan thought for a moment, "Why can't the bus driver call?"

"His phone is broken." I said, not wanting to waste time on a frivolous debate.

Dan frowned. "And nobody else on the bus has a phone?"

"No!"

"Not even that weird guy with the scraggly beard sitting in the very back talking to himself?"

"No!" I shouted. "There's no God damn phone."

"In his fannypack?"

I paused. "Yes, okay, there is a phone in his fannypack. I didn't see it before."

Dan grinned. "I thought so. So the answer, then, is yes, if Stinky were hit by a bus I would make him wait."

Once again I couldn't argue with Dan's impeccable logic. I didn't need to, though, because by the time he finished, Stinky had vanished from sight, into the smoky depths of the Horseshoe.

Stinky

By chance, the SSSOP was wrapping up just as the Kentucky Derby was about to start. I don't know anything about horse racing, although that's never kept me from betting on it at the track, so I thought I might try to recapture my lucky streak, which had taken a little break during the tournament, with a small wager on the ponies.

But just like always, I got lost trying to navigate through the patched-together layout of the Horseshoe. I can never remember where I want to go. Is it on the old Mint side, or on the original 'Shoe side? Was that the same snack bar that I just passed, or a new one? By the time I located the race book, they weren't taking any more action on the big race.

I stood, cursing under my breath, and heard a voice off to my left. "Hey, nice shirt," said a guy sitting in front of a video poker machine. "What's the Solar System Series of Poker?"

"Ah, just some stupid tournament that says absolutely nothing about your poker skills if you lose."

"Well, it's a great shirt."

And that's when it hit me. Just because the casino didn't want to take my bet, that didn't mean the race couldn't turn a profit for me.

I turned to the man and made my proposition. "You like my shirt? How about we bet for it? Your cup of quarters against my shirt in the Derby."

He looked at his bucket, which was half full with about \$16 in coin. Then he looked at my shirt, stretched fetchingly across my belly. Then back at the bucket, and back again at the shirt. "Okay, you're on."

Like I said, those were some beautiful shirts.

I remembered Andrew Skier mentioning something about Funny Cide, a horse from New York, being in the race. The horse is from New York, I live in New York. What the hell?

I've bet on horses for stupider reasons, so I asked the guy, "How's this sound? Funny Cide places, I take your money. He doesn't, and the shirt's yours." It was a big risk, and the odds weren't in my favor, but the race was starting, and I really wanted to make a bet. Any bet.

The bell rang up on the TV, and the horses busted out of the gate. Most horse races in Vegas elicit little more than a few casual glances from hardcore bettors, but the Kentucky Derby is a lot like the Super Bowl, an occasion when



Although he smiles on the outside, it's killing Stinky to have to award Burt Cohen his prize.

suddenly the whole world pretends to be interested. People were whooping at the screens, "Come on, Empire Maker!" "Get up, Brancusi!" "Attaboy, Outa Here!" "Honey, which horse is ours?!"

Funny Cide broke out of the pack, but stayed behind the two leaders. I was scared he'd already shot his whole wad, but my new favorite horse stayed steady, and I joined in the cheers. "Come on, you lousy son of a bitch! Don't screw this up, you worthless nag!" After the final turn, the favorite, Empire Maker suddenly turned it on, and started gaining on the leaders. But Funny Cide had been holding back, and he ran his little New York heart right into first place.

I turned to the man, snatched his bucket before he could change his mind, and tried to head back to the poker game and the relative safety of my big group of friends. Naturally, I got lost.

Matt

The final table whittled down to three players: Phil Sunburry, Oke Millett and Cheater Burt Cohen. Burt held the most chips, about twice as many as Oke and Phil, and kept stacking them into vulgar phallic symbols and shouting, "Chip boner!"

I didn't pay much attention to the final three players. My eyes were roaming the tops of the slots and tables, looking

for a cocktail waitress or Stinky. I hoped to see him before he tumbled into the deep abyss of his addiction. Oke busted out first. Phil followed a few minutes later when Burt used his much larger stacks to bully him. Actually, the stacks did part of the bullying. Burt did the rest with a nasty wedgie. He also kicked Phil. As I was about to distribute the monetary prizes and coveted SSSOP bracelet, Stinky returned with his trousers riding ridiculously low. They were at his knees, exposing skin between his briefs and pant waist and causing him to walk funny, like a socialite in a dress two sizes too tight.

"Where've you been?"

He gave me a sly grin and jingled his pockets. They sounded heavy and full of coins. "That's all quarters."

I wasn't in the mood to celebrate his winnings. I didn't care if he won enough money to drag his pants all the way down to his ankles.

"Nah," he shrugged, "I only won sixteen bucks. I pulled the pants down myself."

SSSOP entrants, friends and family members waited impatiently in the smoky poker room for the awards ceremony. So, Stinky and I went out and did what we hated most; we gave away money. Stinky handed out the cash prizes and gave the bracelet (generously provided by Andrew Skier) to Burt's fiancé, Karefree Karen, who secured the solid gold ornament to his wrist. Burt graciously showed everyone the bracelet and how it hung on his arm, whether or not they asked him to.

Dan

When you've lost in a poker tournament, you need something to lift your spirits. I have three words for you this time, and two of them are the same: Dance, Dance, Revolution! The Feldman clan: Dave, Phil, and Michael; Mieko and Phil; and I all trooped up to Las Vegas Club where they have one of the many Revolutions in Las Vegas. This was super mega-mix number nine and had some of my favorite songs that I'd never heard before.

For the squares out there, Dance Dance Revolution is not just a revolution in dance, but in video gaming and in our entire way of life on earth. To play, you put some money in and pick a song. Then, you don't push buttons with your fingers or clutch some joystick. No--you stand right on top of the buttons. They're built into a platform that you dance on. On the screen, your video-game avatar dances while directional arrows scroll upward across the screen. When they reach the top of the screen, you step as directed: forward, back, left, or right.

And then--what do you know?--you're dancing! DDR will always encourage you, even if you're timing is off and you're losing points. It tells you that "Everyone is watching you!" and "I can see the future in your dance!" The discotheque tunes really make you want to move, too! Just one dollar in tokens, and you, too, will know that there's a

revolution going on.

The six of us took our cuts on the dance floor. Phil and Mieko worked up a sweat first. I challenged the winner (Mieko) and we were soon shedding pounds in spite of the hotel air conditioning. While waiting, Michael Feldman tried some of the other video games around. But nothing compared to the revolution.

After about seven hours of dancing, we were too tired to move, so we sat in the arcade and waited for someone to show up with slushies. When slush failed to materialize, we dragged ourselves back to the Spike and sundry other destinations, to spiff up for dinner. And I went to rig up my sartorial coup-de-grace, starting with a tame little leopard-zebra combo as dinner wear that would shock and awe those who were planning to wear leopard and zebra print at the actual event.

Matt

We went to Lotus of Siam for dinner like we do every year. It was, as usual, delicious, even if slightly soured by the bitter pill of defeat. The only differences this year were: we didn't make pigs of ourselves and ended up only feeling like we'd burst instead of actually doing so; and a picture of us has been added to Lotus's wall of fame, right next to Billy Joel and below Pope John Paul, II. I'm sure the photo will be removed as soon as the owners, Bill and Sai Pin Chutima, discover we put it up there.

As usual, the crispy rice and sour sausage was my favorite. The beef jerky was sweet, the pork stew was so good I was hungrier after eating it, and the catfish was so crispy and flaky that our friend Robert scavenged its eye sockets hoping to find a few morsels. By the time the bananas fried in filo dough, sticky rice and coconut ice cream arrived, most of us had already leaned back in our chairs and undid the buttons on our trousers. Phil must have eaten really well because he also tore open his jockeys. Mark seemed agitated, taken away from his precious casino for a good meal. "It's great," he said of the food, "but I'd rather have a raw hot dog and a loose Double Diamond machine."

The Big Empire Cocktail Soiree started in an hour. We finished off the fabulous desserts, squared up the bill and hightailed it back to the Gold Spike. When we got back, the casino was quiet. Dirty, stinky, and dilapidated, yes, but also quiet. Maybe the quiet before the storm. Or maybe nobody would bother showing up. That's what happened with my wedding.

Up in the suites, Dan, Phil, and I made preparations for the Sartorial Splendor portion of the evening. The competition recognizes the man and woman who go to the greatest lengths in the name of fashion. It's always hotly contested, and the trip to Vegas is preceded by weeks of scouring the vintage shops and thrift stores for belts and shirts made from animals that make people say "I didn't

know you could skin that." This year, there was even more incentive to win because Feldy was giving the winners prizes. Since there was no money in it, the contest didn't interest Stinky.

Dan switched out of his relatively subdued faux white tiger coat and cheetah pants, and into a shiny shirt, made of some space-age, fireproof (we tested it) synthetic. After the outfits he'd sported all weekend, it seemed rather tame. I thought that just maybe, I might have a chance to win the competition with my fleece pants with brown leather



There's no time for talking when you have a table full of food at Lotus of Siam.

fringe, suede shirt and Stetson. Although, I didn't look so much sartorial as I looked like I was going to the rodeo to hogtie homosexuals.

Down in the lounge, the Big Empire faithful were amassing. Dozens of folks of different sizes, ages, and shapes wandered in, swizzled watery drinks with a splash of rotgut for color, and eyeballed each other suspiciously. Oke Millet was still in the shirt he wore for the poker tournament. His friend Sherry was now dressed as a pink devil. Our friend Bill Thompson suited up in a tuxedo.

The bartendress poured so many diluted screwdrivers she nearly made a dent in a bottle of Old Mariner. One overly loud partier in a fez made the mistake of thinking he was the party. Fez boy's self congratulations and unfunny jokes boomed out over the casino at a volume that declared "Oh, you're gonna want to hear this." He accosted anyone within walking distance to watch the video he taped earlier in the day of a fat woman sitting in a pool lounge.

Although the evening was supposed to be about socializing, Stinky netted four bucks on a wager that he could chug-a-lug an change cup full of pennies. Later, he said swallowing the pennies wasn't hard, and neither was the feeling of cold metal in his stomach; gagging on the lingering taste of Gold Spike patrons' fingers was.

Stinky

Just before the penny poker tournament was set to begin, Matt was waylaid by a drunken CheapoVegas fan demanding to know why Casino Boy wasn't at the party. Matt's explanation wasn't getting him anywhere, so he handed me the buckets of rolled up pennies he'd purchased for use in the contest, borrowed a pen from someone, and set about drawing diagrams on a cocktail napkin.

It was a heady feeling holding so many copper rounds, each one a ticket to another slot machine-induced thrill. My mind raced furiously, trying to come up with some justification for why it would be fair for me to dump the wad into a penny keno machine and see if I couldn't go for my retirement fund with one push of the button. Michael Ho, a bona fide stickler for details, kept his eagle eyes on me, though, so I grudgingly handed out the coins to soiree attendees.

Just as in years past, the rules of the game were simple.



Cowboy Matt keeps the Gold Spike's livestock in check.

Players start with a roll of fifty pennies each. They must do whatever it takes for twenty minutes to increase their bankroll, and whoever ends up with the most pennies wins a brand new Gold Spike T-shirt. They can pool funds, hold onto their whole roll, slip pennies from other soiree attendees' buckets, whatever the heck they want,

as long as they don't mention our names if they get in trouble with security.

With each new soiree, the Copper Mine seems to shrink just a tiny little bit. Nickel slots encroach further and further into the dim back corner of the casino. The penny machines that remain fall into ever more pitiful states of disrepair. Video poker screens lose focus and occasionally flicker or become so out of balance that players can't see all five cards they're dealt. Touch-screen keno grids have dead spots, limiting the numbers that can be easily selected. I swear I saw a piece of chewed up bubblegum stuck over the word "Bar" on the reel of one ancient slot machine. The Copper Mine's limited machine inventory, combined with ever-greater Soiree crowds, means that the competition for space gets fiercer every year.

Our boisterous group descended on the machines, shoving and squawking like monkeys fighting over hunks of meat tossed into their cages by zookeepers. The security guards perked up their ears, and looked at the scene with befuddlement, wondering what force in the universe caused this odd convergence of noisy people to appear in their normally peaceful casino.

When the dust settled and the arguments about hoarding coins and unsynchronized timekeeping had subsided, our old friend Philip Flanders Fleischmann walked away the winner.

Matt

As the Soiree stumbled out of the Gold Spike en masse and headed to the Golden Gate, where our Shrimp Cocktail Eating Contest is held, Stinky sidled up beside me and asked if he needed to come. "Yeah, you're one of the hosts," I reminded him.

I distracted Stinky with a coin trick on the way down Fremont Street so that he didn't notice the ring of slots and low rumble of gambling spilling out of the open doorways of the gaping casinos along the way.

The Golden Gate is the oldest hotel in Las Vegas, built in 1906. The casino is what passes for old-school charm in Vegas; lots of smoke, black-and-white photos of fat Sicilians, a low ceiling, dark paneled walls and lots of dark reds. They have a disproportionately large number of table games for such a small casino; low-minimum blackjack, craps, and roulette stretched down the long hall. Further back, the deli serves up cheap eats, most famously the 99-cent shrimp cocktail, while a pianist tickles the ivories.

The Golden Gate makes a big to do about not raising the price of the shrimp cocktail, no matter how expensive popcorn shrimp get. What they don't advertise, however, is the declining quality. This year was no exception, with the grayest, saltiest, and mealiest crustaceans yet.

The Shrimp Cocktail Contest's goal is to see who can eat the most. Anticipation was high, the former record of thirteen, or 3.25 pounds, had stood for two years.

This year, three competitors guaranteed to shatter it. The gathered crowd tittered about the prospect of seeing one or more eater pass out from gastrointestinal discomfort. Four-year veteran, Phil "Iron Gut" Feldman took on relative newcomers: his son Michael "Iron Gut, Jr." and Oke "The Canadian" Millet. The crowd settled into the dark back corner of the deli, drinking and smoking, while Dan and I stood in a long line to order 50 shrimp cocktails as a starter. Stinky had been waylaid by the roulette wheel. As we passed, he shouted "Red! Red! How much you want bet it comes up red!... Black! I meant black!" As our Soiree settled in, he ran back and forth to the wheel, wagering five bucks at a time.

Finally, our turn to order came and the veteran behind the Gate's counter stacked mounds of shrimp cocktails onto the flimsy serving trays. We carried them to the center table where the three eaters sat. Phil tugged at his gut, stretching it for maximum volume. The Canadian sat in a Zen trance hands perched like sparrows on the table's edge. Michael just sweated getting busted for only being nineteen.

As our eaters settled in and plowed through the first few of the sure to be dozens of cocktails, the sartorial Splendor judges conferred and awarded the treasured Scintas Cups to the most dressed man and woman.

Dan

I have two words for you: Burning Man. Though common wisdom says that the fashion world happens in New York, in London, in Paris, in Hong Kong, and sometimes in Amarillo, the truth is that the annual bohemian arts festival in the Nevada desert is where fashion HAPPENS. Though I have stopped going to the festival due to the harshness of the climate, I went for enough years to pick up the key elements of truly outrageous costuming.

If you're a woman, the main thing in the Big Empire Sartorial Splendor Competition is to undress for the heat. Such was the tactic taken by Sherry, a Nordic blonde with an athletic body packed into a pink devil costume. Once again, all my painstaking preparations were going to be undermined by the fact that our judges go nuts over hot

chicks.

Still, this year there would be a separate category for men, and I felt that Burning Man had taught me well: Neon Wire. A glowing strand is powered by 9-volt batteries, cleverly hidden in a pocket. With careful sewing, I managed to get a pink line of glowing wire to spell out my name: Fang. A blue line of wire depicted a skull, and some other doodles. The wire was sewn into a black t-shirt and worn under a see-through overshirt. Perfecting the hang of my ensemble in the suite bathroom and making sure the batteries had juice, I went down to the casino unplugged.

I arrived looking pretty normal, maybe a little burgundy. But when the time was right, I hooked in the battery pack and lit up. The one drawback to the outfit was that though it would have shown like the stars at night in the desert, Las Vegas pumps out enough wattage to dim my sign considerably.

The judges recognized the ingenuity of the design, however, and gave me the men's division award, a delightful Scintas cup, which I cannot find to this day.

Because I have competed so hard these past few years and because I have always been shown up by good-looking women who don't have to work so hard to win sartorial splendor awards, I retired as champion with a tear-jerking speech to all the people there at the Golden Gate. They were weeping, but maybe it was the lingering odor of lukewarm shrimp.

Matt

Sitting around one small table and crowded by rows of eager spectators, all three gluttons began with zeal, taking large spoonfuls and even soaking up extra sauce with Saltines. It wasn't until around the third or fourth cocktail that Phil started pissing and moaning about the poor quality. This is a man who will pull a U-turn on the interstate to get to a Country Buffet, and he complained because the shrimp had a bluish, slick coating. After number five, Michael agreed. The crowd didn't want any part of it. They didn't come all the way to Las Vegas to watch crybabies.

Oke soon joined Phil and Michael, moaning about the



The large and mostly well-behaved crowd gathers for a group shot before heading to the Golden Gate for shrimp.

grimy texture of the shrimp. Whether it was peer pressure, psychosomatic, or just typical Canadian bellyaching we'll never know. The only thing louder than Phil, Michael, and Oke's complaints was the increasing rancor from the crowd. Suck it up, you pussies, they seemed to be saying every time they threw crackers and debris at the competitors.

The revolt came after the seventh cocktail. Phil, Michael, and Oke shoved aside the empty glasses and put their heads together. They spoke in low tones as the crowd screamed angry, vicious things at them.



Oke's feeling queasy, from shrimp and the reflection off of his tacky shirt.

Then, just like that, they held up their hands. "We quit," said Phil while Michael and Oke slumped in their chairs.

They can't quit. They aren't allowed to quit. Not after only seven lousy little cocktails. There was a record to be broken. The fans had come to capture the ultimate Vegas souvenir: watching a man's stomach literally split open. People made death threats, cajoled them to keep eating, tried physically forcing more shrimp into Michael, and exposed their breasts to change their minds. "You're a bunch of losers!"

The way Phil, Oke, and Michael saw it, they were all winners. A three-way tie. Like this was some sort of Special Olympics and everyone gets a medal.

"You didn't all win," argued attorney Andrew Skier, "You lost."

Lawyer Stevie leaped in, "I'll sue your ass!"

"Class action! Class action!" screamed Andrew, his mouth frothing.

Stevie and Andrew raced to hand out business cards. The Golden Gate's deli darkened with the swell of anger pressing inward on Oke, Phil, and Michael. Then, as mobs always do, they turned their bloodlust on the organizers. I felt the need to do something to calm the crowd, and quick. I needed to take a bold and strong position on what had transpired.

I ditched, with Dan right behind. We bolted for the

greener pastures of the El Cortez craps table. It promised a less bloody ending, although not by a whole lot. As we ran past the roulette wheel, Stinky looked up. "What's going on?"

"We gotta go."

"The table's hot," he protested, holding up a handful of chips.

"They want to kill us," I said without breaking stride.

Stinky rolled his eyes. "Again?"

Stinky

Dan, Matt, and I bolted down the middle of Fremont Street, sending sprawling the fanny-pack-clad tourists staring up at the canopy of lights overhead made to look like rocket ships and bald eagles. It was like a chase scene out of a Dirty Harry movie, except that no fruit stands were overturned. We galloped past Binion's and the Golden Nugget, stopped at the intersection, looked both ways to be safe, then trotted past Fremont and the Four Queens. By the time we reached Fitzgeralds, the three of us were so completely out of breath that we had been reduced to wheezing and walking. We looked back and didn't see any angry mobs rushing our way, so we figured it was safe to continue on to the El Cortez, for the traditional post-soiree all night craps game. We knew anyone who hunted us down there would be too distracted by the dice to bother mauling us.

Our usual craps table, on the south side of the pit, was almost full, so the three of us each approached the rail, dropped twenties on the table and began loudly talking about boils we'd had lanced and the dead cat we'd seen on the freeway, to try and clear up space for our friends. For the most part, we were ignored, but soon, the bruised and bloodied stragglers from the Golden Gate melee trickled in and squeezed into whatever space was available. As usually happens, the mostly quiet, serious regulars grew fed up with our hi-jinks and headed for the other table or for home. We never took over the entire table with Soiree attendees, as we had in the past, but the majority of it was ours for the rest of the night.

My affection for gambling really began at the El Cortez craps table. Sure, I learned the intricacies of the game at the Plaza, back when they had quarter minimums, but that table never sang to me in my dreams the way the big boat at the El Co does. Gambling in any other casino always felt forbidden and slightly scary. The staff never learned my name, or at least recognized my face, because guys like me and my friends were a dime a dozen elsewhere in town. Not here, though. We've always stuck out like cross-dressing speed freaks at a society luncheon on Park Avenue. Somehow, all the employees, from Patty, the grandmotherly cocktail waitress, to Rusty, the humming dealer who was so inept they made him a pit boss, have welcomed us for it. Sure, they sass us sometimes, and blatantly ignore our

pleas for a comp for just one lousy breakfast, but the place feels like home.

I was thrilled. I had been winning all weekend, and a sense of warm calm at the prospect of continuing my good fortune at this place so dear to my heart washed over me as Burt, Oke, Andrew, two different Phils, Mieko, Mike, Steve, Karen, Jerry, Bill, and others whose names I don't care about enough to commit to memory filled in the empty space at the table



Sartorial champions Daniel and Sherry show off their prized plastic Scintas cups.

Until, that is, those losers actually started throwing the dice. Whatever excitement we all felt, from anticipation, too many cocktails at the Gold Spike, or the adrenaline rush of being part of a crazed mob out for blood at the Golden Gate quickly dissipated as shooter after shooter set a point, tossed enough meaningless numbers to give everyone time to spread some money on come bets, and then rolled a seven. We were set to hoot and holler, but all we could muster were groans, peppered with an occasional pitiful round of applause when we won a measly buck thanks to a yo on the come out.

The mood was dark, and the stupid jokes and childish name-calling that inspire gales of laughter at a hot table

were either ignored or dutifully chuckled at. Into this depressing scene stepped Mary, a short, loud girl whose plastic surgeon seemed to have ordered too many silicone breast implants and felt the need to clear out his storage closet the day she was unfortunate enough to arrive at his office. She claimed to be a stripper, which impressed Phil, although by that time, he'd socked away enough Southern Comfort to be impressed by the amount of dust that had gathered on the Big Mouth Billy Bass plaques since our last visit.

I could see Matt, who has always had nothing but the highest regard for women in the sex industry, wasn't buying it, and his face was turning redder and redder with every lame joke or lewd comment that she screeched in her nasally voice.

He leaned over to me and whispered, "That girl's no stripper. Look at her, trying to get everyone to notice her. A real stripper would comport herself like a lady, with class and dignity. Besides, with her here nobody's listening to me."

The worst part was, we kept losing and couldn't seem to drown her out. My original \$20 was as distant a memory as first grade, I'd lost another \$20 directly after the first, and my third was disappearing as well. Lawyer Stevie was throwing his patented (Seriously, he had them patented. It's US D482,251 S if you want to look it up.) knuckle dice, Matt hung 'em high, and Dan rocketed those bones across the table so hard that he broke one of Karen's dollar chips clean in half. Nothing worked. We just kept losing. My excitement turned to depression and then to despair. The room began to feel more like my real home on the Thanksgiving I announced to my family that I hadn't actually spent the past four months at a medical school in Aruba, but had been down there mopping up after wet T-shirt contests, and not like my sweet, adopted, El Cortez home.

Matt

That fat stripper was driving me nuts. She thought she was sassy and sexy, and she let us know it every 30 seconds with some cheap entendre about how we wanted to have sex with her. I definitely wanted someone to have sex with her, because they don't let people do that right at the table so she'd have to leave us. We'd have some peace and quiet. Well, no, not peace and quiet, but our own brand of obnoxiousness, and that was far more charming than her cat-in-heat impressions.

Her grating mewl, my mounting losses and a head full of Heineken had me so distracted that I was barely paying attention as Stinky pulled twenty after twenty from his wallet. I could see he was losing, but I couldn't even think about intervening because I was so irritated by Mary. Well, that and this barstool that--I swear to God--had really nice breasts.

Dan

What was with Matt? I kept trying to catch his eye, but every time I did, he'd look away under the pretense of reaching for a cocktail, drinking a cocktail, or ordering another cocktail. It was time to intervene Stinky's frail frame into the dust, but I couldn't get back-up from the Matt side of things. His eyes were rolling, his lips were drooling, and he was coming on to a particularly cute bar stool.

"Att-May!" I cried. "It's-way Ime-tay Or-fay E-thay Intervention-way!"

It sucks how long words in Pig Latin sound just like their English counterparts. But I might as well have been talking in Sheep Greek for all Matt cared. Just when I needed him to be here and now the most, he was off on another drinking binge, messing up our chances to stop our friend Stinky's heinous addiction.

While I was itching to slap the gambling out of Stinky, Matt seemed to be totally distracted. But out of nowhere, Phil, at least as drunk as Matt, started laughing maniacally. Although that's not an unusual phenomenon, it seemed to awaken Matt. Suddenly, he seemed to remember himself and our important mission. He looked right at me, mouthed the words "Let's Do It," and started moving toward Stinky with his fist aimed at nose-level.

But just then the dice came to me, so I made a loud show of coughing and clearing my throat: "Harrummp! Ahem! I think I'll just go ahead and take my turn throwing the dice now. I don't really want to do anything else now because I've been waiting for my turn to throw the dice, so I guess I'll do that right now and maybe do something else, such as helping out a friend in need, a little later."

And I had one hell of a long roll. I set the point at ten and rolled about thirty-six times before sevens out.

Stinky

The table stayed cold, and my pocket full of money was rapidly being converted into my normal, everyday pocket, filled only with lint, some empty gum wrappers and a paper clip or two. Jerry, who had been leering at Mary's ample bosoms all night, had mustered the courage to ask her if she wanted to go get some breakfast, and to everyone's surprise and delight, she had said yes. We weren't so much happy for Jerry's good fortune at possibly scoring an anonymous lay, but at least if Mary was off with him, she would no longer be here with us. Anything that could make that table even slightly less painful was welcome.

I took Mary's departure as a sign that my luck was about to change, and bumped up my bets to obscene levels. I dropped \$2 on the table, and with the point set, backed them up with \$20 in odds. I managed to put two \$1 comes with \$10 odds behind those. Except for a few blue chips, I

was all-in. My gambling life had come to this--it was all or nothing. I could feel a difference in the casino's smoky air, and it seemed to have the stench of a big win. Dan held the dice, and he was throwing numbers. None of the numbers I had my wagers on, but not a seven, either. People started to hit come bets, and small murmurs of happiness rumbled around the table. He threw a four, then a nine. He followed those with an eleven, a three, and a six. A couple more yo's, snake eyes, another four, and then I turned around to accept my can of Heineken from Patty and hand her a tip. She asked me how our trip had been, and I started to tell her about how I'd lost, then won, then won some more, went down again, and was about to turn it all around.

Suddenly, a voice out of Hell itself called, "Seven out! Line away, no field, pay the don'ts." The next five seconds felt like a year. Everything happened in slow motion. My muscles went gooey, I dropped the can of beer, which bounced off of the rail and spilled on my pants. I didn't look at my legs, but at the table, where a skinny kid with sandy brown hair and a nametag that read "Alex from Bakersfield" or "James from Ohio" or something scooped up my very lifeblood. I heard my own voice inside my head, but it sounded like it was coming from a deep, jello-filled hole, calling out, "Noooooooooooo!"

Still dazed, I backed away from the table, pants dripping icy beer on the carpet. I bumped into a seated poker player, who turned and glared, but I hardly registered what I'd done. He harrumphed and shifted back to his game, and I kept walking, each step more effort than I'd ever put into any job I'd held.

I heard Dan's voice. "Matt," he called out. "Stinky! Get him! The time is now!"

Then Matt. "Fuck Stinky. I'm not going anywhere until I hit some points."

Their voices snapped me back into reality. I suddenly knew where I was and what had happened. I was standing at the El Cortez, flat busted, the bright oldies pop songs wafting from the overhead speakers cutting into my brain like red-hot needles. I turned and ran.

Dan

I breathed deeply, doing my best to contain my rage and refocus it. Stinky had just hit rock bottom. His addictive agony was at its greatest. Furthermore, he wasn't near any obstructions that would have hindered a clean take-down. The timing had been ideal, as though we'd been Microsoft employees in the early eighties and had held on to our jobs and stock options to this day instead of getting advanced degrees in poetry that left us always going from job to job, never really qualified and never really content with our careers.

Anyway, Stinky must have known something was up because just as Matt refused to act and to selfishly throw the dice instead, Stinky bolted for the door.

Matt

You know what? If Dan got to postpone the intervention for his roll, so did I. Stinky had hit rock bottom. He'd still be there after I finished my roll. I picked up the cubes and hung 'em high. We can take care of him after we take care of ourselves. Besides, Patty was bringing me a boilermaker.

Dan

When I get enraged, I try to keep my body moving in normal ways while I breathe deeply and focus my rage in a constructive way. With robot-like precision, I placed my bet and prepared what I was going to say to Matt, basically a terrible lambasting against his selfishness that everyone could enjoy.

He threw an eleven, and I collected the dollar, while below the table, I clutched a beer bottle and thought it might be a better expression of rage to simply smash the bottle on the edge of the table and slice that smarmy dude from weezand to snotch. But then he threw another yo. And after that, a buckshot eight; then a buckshot six. Even



Burt Cohen, about to seven out again. Thanks a lot, Burt.

playing modest odds, I was starting to come back up. My muscles seemed to loosen as Matt hit another point.

The table had started to yell. Mary, who was betting wrong, took Jerry's offer to get some late night something-something, and left the table to be replaced by not one, but two women. Man, Mary was wide! April and June, the two Mexican girls who came in, were totally pleasant to be around. They laughed at our dumb jokes and smiled politely. And they diced well, each of them hitting a number of points.

In about thirty minutes from Stinky's departure, the table seemed to have gone into another dimension. It was unrecognizable as the glum flat-line that it had been. Now, people were laughing because they were not only breaking even, but starting to rack up some change in the black.

A conservative bettor, I made out with just over \$100.

Burt Cohen, who I watch with a mixture of awe and apprehension, was throwing brown chips, and walked away several hundred dollars over his buy-in. Some guys have all the luck. To counteract this trend, I pilfered his cigar when he wasn't looking, took it into the men's room, put it in a naughty place, and then returned it surreptitiously to his person. Enjoy your good fortune, Burt!

Man, there's nothing like Vegas when you're winning and drunk. It's great when you're so loose, limp, and loony that you're throwing hard-ways, betting the horn, calling hop bets--mainly losing all of these--but still winning money on the good old pass line with odds. Matt called a hop four-six and it hit! I'd never seen that before.

By five a.m., most everyone who was left was finding it very difficult to remain vertical. It was time for the last stop: the Gold Spike Diner for pie. As usual, it was super-sweetened and Phil laughed himself into oblivion in the diner booth.

Sunday Matt' Part

After pie, I walked outside for one last look at the lights of Vegas. The sun wasn't up yet, but it was obviously thinking about it. The sky was graying and a street sweeper rumbled down Ogden. At night, you notice all the brilliance of the displays, but by morning you notice the details: the burnt-out bulbs and grime covering the neon tubing. The lights no longer twinkled and danced; they dutifully followed rote patterns.

I stumbled through the Gold Spike casino to the elevator. A few half-asleep drunks still haunted the blackjack tables and another handful of veterans fed the slots. Security guards placed numbered buckets at the foot of each machine to collect the day's haul. I leaned against the wall of the elevator and felt my bones slump under my skin. I was dog-tired, drunk and richer than I was three hours ago when Stinky left the craps table.

Holy shit! Stinky! What happened to him? I hoped he wasn't in a gutter somewhere, at least not one where he'd get run over by a car before I could get to him. And that would take a while because I needed sleep more than anything.

The suite was dark and I maneuvered as best I could around the bodies of my sleeping friends. As I walked back to the bedroom, I noticed that the sliding glass door was open and a light breeze ruffled the curtains.

Stinky stood on the balcony, looking into the distance with his leg hooked over the wall. What a relief it was to see him, and to know I wouldn't have to waste time searching gutters for him in the morning.

"You airing out your crotch?" I asked as I joined him at the railing and hung my leg to let the breeze up the pantleg. He didn't answer for a while, so I assumed we were

having one of those moments. You know, like a profound coffee commercial moment where two friends silently enjoy each other's company, not saying anything and nobody's even making farting noises. This is what I thought it was, and I was trying really hard to enjoy it. Really, though, I'm glad my friends and I have sports and alcohol to talk about because poignancy is boring as hell.

Finally, Stinky spoke, "I can't go on."

"Go on what? The Stratosphere rollercoaster?"

Stinky sniffled, "Life. I can't stay on this crazy carousel called life."

I immediately recognized Stinky was serious. He talks like a Hallmark Greeting Card when he is. He wanted to kill himself. I had to think fast, before he threw himself over the ledge and broke both his legs on the "d" in the Gold Spike sign 30 feet below.

"You can't kill yourself."

"Why can't I? What have I got to live for?" His hands gripped the railing tightly. "I lost over a hundred dollars tonight. What if our readers and fans found out I was throwing around that kind of money? What about the little kids who look up to us?"

"But you can't kill yourself here."

"Try to stop me." And with that, he swung his other leg up and sat on the railing, teetering drunkenly above the casino roof.

"No, no!" I grabbed hold of him and made my last stab at talking sense into him. "I don't mean you shouldn't. I mean you physically can't. I applaud the dramatic gesture, but you'll only fall 30 feet and break some bones. And, for God's sake, this is the Gold Spike. You'd probably go right through the roof and land on the blackjack table. Then they'd make me clean up the mess."

"Yeah," Stinky said as he pulled his legs back behind the railing.

"Come on," I patted him on the back. "Let's go get a nice 99-cent breakfast, on me."

Stinky brightened, "Really?"

"Yeah, and some coffee and we'll just relax and laugh about the trip."

"That sounds nice."

My friend pulled away from the wall and we walked back into the dark suite. I said, "Then we'll take the city bus down to the Aladdin. That place is pretty tall; a jump off it will kill you for sure."

For the first time in ages, I saw Stinky smile a true and genuine smile. "Thanks. That means a lot to me."

"No problem, man. Can I have your watch?"

Dan

After the pecan pie, I'd stumbled up and fell into bed just as the last of the sugar buzz was deserting me. But the sounds of the conversation on the balcony had awoken me and I was ready. As soon as Matt came in the sliding glass door, my muscles tensed like a leopard's. Then, Stinky walked in and I pounced, knocking him back onto a bed and winding him. Ghizal, who was in the bed at the time, moaned, rolled over, and continued to sleep. But I sat on Stinky's chest and began pounding a hole in it with both hands.

That's when Matt pulled me off, and I figured that he wanted some too. I grabbed Ghizal's pillow from beneath his head, which didn't disturb his sleep in the slightest, and lit into Matt hard. Good thing pillows are soft, because I was swinging it for maximum damage, just like they taught me in the Marines. Rah! Semper Fi! Grrr!

"What the fuck are you doing?" yelled Matt.

"Intervention, baby!" and I turned again upon Stinky, who screamed like a girl. He put up his dukes nonetheless and got into a combative squat. "No more gambling, for you, mister!"

"No!" Matt was trying to stop me, but I didn't know why. It was too late to stop the swing anyway. My fist arced toward Stinky's head. It's a good thing his combative squat was so low because my punch sailed right over his head, throwing me off balance, and landing me hard back in the bed, on top of Ghizal, who moaned again, but continued to sleep.

"Intervention, Nyet!" said Matt. "No, Nein, Uh-uh."

It started to sink in that this wasn't the critical moment that I'd been waiting all weekend for. "But why?" I asked.

"Stinky hit rock bottom just now, right here on top of the Gold Spike. Now, everything's going to be okay. We're going to The Aladdin."

Matt

That bastard never did jump off the Aladdin. After all Dan and I did for him. Next year for sure.

Stinky

On the flight home, I had plenty of time to think about the valuable lessons I'd learned over the weekend. Maybe I was being pigheaded. Maybe my family, my friends, my acquaintances, that brochure I'd picked up in Atlantic City, the employees at the corner deli, and the crazy homeless guy who sleeps on my steps weren't all ridiculously stupid. I guess I did have a gambling problem.

But I was one of the lucky ones. I was beginning to face my addiction, and I was blessed with people in my life who would give me plenty of support. Dan's vicious attack meant the world to me. If he cared enough to bloody his knuckles against my face, we must truly be friends.

After talking me down off of the balcony outside our room, Matt made good on his promise of a free breakfast. He knew I was broke, so he allowed me to pay off the \$43 I owed him in push ups on the sidewalk in front of the casino. Like the true friend he is, he told me watching me strain myself until I collapsed face down on the hot pavement was worth at least fifty bucks, even though I knew it was at best a \$20 show.

Since that trip, I've hardly placed a single wager. It's tough waking up every day knowing that any money I get will have to either be earned or spotted in the gutter. But I'm a better person for it. And now I know, by the next Soiree, I'll have the self control to only play a comfortable amount of craps, never betting more than I can afford to lose. Unless, of course, I just get a couple good rolls going. Then it just makes sense for me to hit up the ATM, right? I mean, you gotta strike while the fire's hot, and I can feel it warming up already.