

Story 3. The Atavist.

Grandpa was crazy, waking up at five o'clock every morning just to go jogging. At a time when the planet had barely summoned the energy to turn itself around and allow the sun to illuminate the mountaintops out west, this ursine old man had already put on his tan velour suit to do some deep knee bends on the front porch.

He always ran the same route, even in the burgeoning heat of a midsummer morning: a circuitous six-and-a-half mile trip starting at his sprawling, flat-roofed, four-bedroom home all the way to the enormous Golden Lasso Buffet where a two-story cowgirl proclaimed via neon speech bubble that inside were Las Vegas's "sauciest ribs." Upon reaching the entrance of the restaurant's empty parking lot, Grandpa would turn around and jog all the way back without a break or a breather anyplace along the way. Then finally, barely winded, he bolted through the front door, accompanying the creak of the hinges with a baritone growl of his own, and headed straight into the kitchen to run a peculiar combination of fruits and vegetables through his juicer.

This fondness for juicing developed almost overnight. His newest juicer, the third one he had purchased in as many months, was a massive stainless steel industrial model with the pulverizing power of a wood chipper. It whined like a jet engine as it liquefied the flesh of any unsuspecting produce forced down its feeding chute.

Grandpa had seen the appliance on television. Not on some thirty-second spot sandwiched between acts of a courtroom drama, but featured in an entire half-hour-long production extolling the virtues of the wondrous contraption and the therapeutic powers of the fluids secreted forthwith.

These juicer shows fascinated him. It didn't matter which juicer was being demonstrated, or if he had already seen it, or already owned it, Grandpa still sat there, fixated on the screen. Of course to most people, it's obvious that thirty minutes is an inordinate amount of airtime to dedicate to an invention

which really has only one purpose, but Grandpa thought it was real entertainment—notwithstanding the fact that each episode consisted of nothing more than a hundred or so close-up shots of questionably talented actors sipping a viscous gray-green beverage before squeezing out a smile. The lack of content didn't seem odd to Grandpa at all. He leaned close as the frantic announcer shouted the toll-free number that had to be dialed now (now!) before the limited supply of juicers disappeared. And like a boy watching his favorite cartoon, this sixty-something-year-old grandfather of one would sit enraptured until the false urgency coerced him to pick up the phone before the show was over.

The last juicer arrived only a week after the one he had ordered earlier.

"But, Dad, you have two of these things already," his daughter said.

He adjusted his thick-lensed glasses and stared for a moment at the package, a bright green box marked *Juice Monster*.

"Karen, sweetheart, this one's a good one," he said. "It's the only one I'll need."

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His grandson never got up until noon during these summer days, still dressed in the same clothes from the day before. Danny seeped from his bed like a slug and dragged himself directly to the den where he resumed his prone position on the black leather sofa. Thus his routine began. With the television remote in hand, he proceeded to flip through the hundred or so channels without ever watching any one of them for any length of time. At some point either the pressing urge to urinate or the simple necessity to eat forced him to sit upright—a maneuver executed with unusual strain for a youth of sixteen—and shuffle into whichever part of the house he had to be in to fulfill that particular need.

"Is this what you're going to do all summer?" his mother asked. She posed this question a few times a week during the boy's break from school and, in an almost reflexive response, her son usually said

something along the lines of, “I don’t know, Karen, can you think of anything better to do?”

Danny began calling his mother by her first name a few months prior because he thought it might annoy her. One time, in the course of his incessant remote clicking, he caught a random movie scene where the “rebellious teen” character used the same non-familial nomenclature for both parents. The fictional mother was visibly disheartened by the lack of respect. It didn’t seem to bother Karen in the least.

As for Karen, she was on her way out the door to meet with her father’s physician, a detached, encyclopedic, humorless man who always sounded out of breath and in a rush to get to the next appointment even though his waiting room was a desolate space of empty twill chairs, every magazine as crisp as the day it arrived in the mail. This lack of clientele may have been due to his bedside manner. Dr. Choi MD had the reputation of interacting with patients more like a fast food drive-through speaker than a physician. He would focus his eyes somewhere on the examination room wall and crackle out an incomprehensible diagnosis before directing the bewildered patient to pay the receptionist at the window up front. For a family practitioner, one might conclude he had very little practice dealing with families.

But Karen knew better. Dr. Choi's eccentric iciness led her to believe he probably had several children of his own. Perhaps a brood of Mormon proportions, seven or eight little humans scurrying around, crying for no apparent reason, fighting amongst themselves, spilling their juice, and antagonizing the pets. Sometimes, Karen thought, the only way to deal with children is with stone-faced passivity. That way, when they see their behavior is failing to elicit any kind of reaction, they will stop doing whatever it is that, in most cases, would cause a less skilled parent to erupt in frustration.

Karen employed this strategy as she stood in the threshold of the den conversing with her idle teenager. When he replied to her sardonic question regarding his lack of activity with an equally glib “I don’t know, Karen, can you think of anything better,” Karen shrugged her shoulders and announced to no

one in particular—the lamp, perhaps, which listened about as well as her son—that she had an appointment and would be back in a couple hours.

To further emphasize the fact she had no opinion one way or the other on what her son did with his three months off from school, she pointed at the couch and proffered a few parting words: “So you’ll be there when I get home then?” The surround-sound speakers answered her question with canned sit-com laughter.

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On the television was yet another paid program for yet another juicer. This one so powerful it was juicing a brick. The host yelled “Amazing!” before being shoed off-screen with the press of a button. On and on through the channels the boy flicked, creating a nearly indistinguishable stream of strobing images.

“Hey, sport. You wanna take a ride?” Grandpa loomed on the single stair of the sunken den. He had changed out of his jogging suit and put on short sleeves, a tie, and his woven straw hat with the baby blue pin-striped band. To Grandpa, it seemed as though the teenager wasn’t looking at the screen, but through it, as the programs rolled past.

Grandpa spoke again. “You awake? We have to go somewhere.”

At last the kid moved, although all he could muster was a dip of the chin toward the end of the couch.

“Can’t mom take you?” Danny complained, having either not remembered or not paid attention to the fact that his mother just left the house.

“Come on.” The old man prodded his grandson with a slap to the boy’s foot. “We’re taking the Caddy. You want to drive?”

Dad’s vintage Cadillac? The kid wondered what Grandpa said to get his hands on those keys. Whatever

the errand was it had to be important. Dad hardly ever let that beast outside to bake beneath the heat of a searing Las Vegas afternoon, and rarely with anyone else in the driver's seat. Perhaps Grandpa needed to pick up a new pair of glasses. Danny had noticed Grandpa fiddling with his bifocals a lot these past couple weeks. It was the old man's failing eyesight which caused him to lose his driver's license in the first place.

"Just out to the *VisionMakers*?" the kid asked. Grandpa, with a spring in his step, led the way to the garage where the antique automobile whiled away the summer.

The ad copy used to say things like "smooth and effortless" or "feather-light and nimble," but in reality the 1959 Cadillac Coupe de Ville was a hulking, lumbering machine that dragged itself along the road like a paraplegic. The "Hydra-Matic Drive" (that was the term the admen had invented to describe the transmission) propelled the behemoth with neither the fluid grace nor automatic ease suggested by the futuristic-sounding portmanteau. Even under ideal driving conditions, the poor thing struggled to accelerate and shuffled between gears with erratic irregularity. The styling was unique though, one had to give it that. The body was built to specifications more apt for a Spanish galleon than an automobile, and the pair of cetacean fins cresting over the brake lights made it seem all that more aquatic (maybe that's where the marketing team got the Hydra in Hydra-Matic Drive). The interior could comfortably fit a family of four with enough room left over for another family of four. Assorted nieces and nephews could be stored in the trunk. This particular model, painted the color of a fire engine, was upholstered in bright red vinyl with bone-white trim, accented with red carpeting and topped with a fuzzy red roof liner. It looked as if the car had been in some kind of gruesome accident and never hosed out leaving it stained inside. Everything pure red—the same shade as the cape used to taunt an ill-tempered bull, or like what people see in a fit of road rage—and surrounding a driver who was in control of two-and-a-half tons and three hundred twenty five horses. And no seat belts.

Danny crawled through the driver's side door and slid behind the hula hoop of a steering wheel. He

felt so small in the American classic's vast interior. It was cavernous in comparison to his mother's compact hybrid. Grandpa took his place as passenger, leaned back, put one arm out the window, and tipped the brim of his hat back a degree or two. He fit right in, filling the generous space with the heft of his frame and melding perfectly with the sharp angles where the bench seat met the door. Grandpa seemed to be as much a part of the car and its era as the whitewall tires.

Crisp, white sunlight enveloped the garage as the mechanical door rattled upward. The temperature jumped ten degrees, exacerbating the kid's sweating palms. His heart pounded against his chest in an impotent effort to warn him of the possibility that he could crash, scratch or otherwise mar his father's "second child" (as the car was sometimes referred).

This was only the second time the teenager had driven the Caddy. The first time, his father sat uncomfortably close, ready to grab the wheel at any moment lest his son swerve, veer off course, take too sharp a turn or misjudge the width of the driveway. However, the kid managed to steer the unwieldy automobile all the way to the Golden Lasso Buffet and back without his father intervening. Danny reminded himself of that small victory. It was proof that his skills were quite well-honed for someone who barely passed his driver's ed class with a low C and had to take the DMV test three times before earning his license.

"What's wrong, you forget how to turn a key?" Grandpa said. "Let's go, champ."

With the engine started and the gear lever down one notch, Danny eased off the brake and let the car roll to the end of the driveway. Other than a knuckle-tightening near-miss with the neighbor's mailbox, he managed to reverse into the street without incident. He exhaled hard and followed the steps he was taught. Press the left pedal, he thought, and did so with the full force of his leg. Now move the gear lever down one more—no, two more—notches, to which the car responded with a whirr. Then take your foot from the brake and slowly, he reminded himself, slowly push the gas.

At the intersection, the two-story cowgirl greeted the two daytrippers. Danny navigated into the right

turn lane, though not well enough as the considerable width of the Coupe de Ville straddled the white line.

"Take a left here," his grandfather ordered.

"But I'm in the wrong lane." The boy paused as the stoplight changed to green.

"Just go. No one's around."

Grandpa grabbed the wheel and spun it westward. Danny panicked, kicked hard on the gas and sent the car lunging out across the path of oncoming traffic. The honking faded as grandfather and grandson sped down the highway.

"Which eye doctor are we going to?" the kid asked.

"We're not going to the doctor. Not yet." The old man answered.

"So you're feeling okay?"

"Never felt better."

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Karen felt another headache coming. The road ahead sparkled like a shattered mirrorball. Even with her sunglasses on and the visor down, daylight somehow still shone directly into her eyes. She had been back in her hometown for three years now and in that time she still could not readjust. Seattle, Washington—where she lived many years after college, where she met her husband and had her son—still held her affections with its muted, gray-blue skies and diffused afternoon haziness. There, one viewed the world in soft-focus with the brushed-snare sounds of the ocean only minutes away. Here, in the middle of the Nevada desert, a place associated with neon signs and nuclear bomb tests, it seemed as if thousands of suns hovered about, each emitting its own hard, inescapable light.

She remembered the call that brought her down here, how the ringing of the phone was almost

obscured by the gentle tapping rain and the hypnotic state she fell into when she heard her father had driven over a pedestrian. A week later, Karen and her family abandoned their pacific northwestern Eden for the intemperate suburbs of America's Sodom; they tumbled down in a rented truck from the third sphere of paradise to the eighth circle of hell (and other ecclesiastical metaphors).

The ranch-style house no longer felt like her home even though she grew up there. When it was built forty years ago, it could have been considered an estate, a mid-century modern mansion with a postcard-worthy scene of the Spring Mountains hanging in the back yard. Karen's father loved the home and the view. But in the time after his daughter moved away, he watched as the sagebrushed sands around him sprouted cornrows of cloned stucco homes, the influx of humanity spoiling the precious sterile silence.

Everything was getting too big, he would say. To Karen, everything now seemed smaller than when she was a little girl. The tarnished faux gold fixtures in the tiny bathroom reflected little of the dim amber lights surrounding the medicine chest. The mirrored tiles in the narrow entryway each wore a dull, dark halo. The musty plush carpet showed deep, matted ruts from a million footfalls. Through the dingy windows, everything outside looked like an old photograph.

Her father, too, though still an imposing physical presence, did not make the impression he used to. In some ways, he resembled the mountain in the distance, still looming over the household but now shrouded in a stagnant veil of smog.

Interstate 15 took Karen past "the Strip." The iconic row of casino hotels appeared so pale when not ablaze in electric illumination, so two-dimensional under the flattening and unflattering wash of the desert sun. It all looked like a hologram or an illusion. How appropriate, she thought, that a land once only riddled with mirages was now flooded with magic shows.

All along the street lay inaccurate facsimiles of France and Italy, ancient Egypt and medieval Europe. Drove of tourists wandered wide-eyed, not dismissing the sights as the cheap, garish simulacra they

were, but revering them and reveling in the artifice, amazed at how every New York landmark could be squashed into half a city block, stacked on top of each other like a woodcut carving. Outside the city's gambling center, millions of gallons of relocated water was poured into the earth to quench the insatiable thirst of nearby golf courses. Locals cultivated lush, almost lime green, lawns where only dusty silicate clay should be, as if they were living in some temperate New England suburb. It seemed to Karen everyone in Las Vegas, whether visitor or resident, wished they were somewhere else.

Karen pulled her car into the parking lot in front of Dr. Choi's office. After the requisite reassurance that the doctor would see her in a moment, Karen sat in the empty waiting room and skimmed through a two-year-old issue of *People Magazine*, still in mint condition. As she flipped the pages nearer and nearer the end, she wondered what could be taking so long. No one else was there.

"Mrs. Eaden? Dr. Choi is ready for you."

Karen played with the plastic human brain in the examination room, tracing the folds and caressing the lobes with her fingertips. Dr. Choi entered and sat on his short, rolling, padded stool, keeping his gaze on his clipboard the whole time. He glanced up and saw a woman sitting in front of him which didn't make sense because the file he held was for a male patient. With his eyes once again facing downward, he asked, "Name?"

"Karen. Karen Eaden. I'm here about my father."

Things finally clicked.

"Oh, of course." Dr. Choi looked at the wall behind Karen. "Mrs. Eaden, your father is very ill and I'm afraid there aren't many options left available. Do you have any questions?"

Karen still held the brain model in her hand and at that moment mindlessly pulled it apart, splitting it right in half, and she noted to herself that that was what it felt like inside her head.

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Ten miles away, Karen's son and father rolled along in her husband's car. Grandpa muttered something out the window.

"What'd you say, Grandpa?" Danny was concentrating on keeping his father's prized Caddy from fading sideways off the shoulder or into another car.

The old man faced forward. "I said this is not the way it always was, this town."

"I guess," said the boy.

"It's that goddamn Hughes. He bought up everything. The Frontier. The Sands. The goddamn Sands, can you believe it? Roselli tried talking to some of Hughes' guys but they wouldn't budge. Take a right up here."

The kid in the driver's seat was lost in more ways than one. The conversation seemed to go nowhere just like the unfamiliar road spilling in front of him.

"Who's Hughes?" he asked

"Huh?"

"Hughes."

"What about him?" Grandpa began to get testy.

"No, who is Hughes?"

"You know goddamn well who Howard Hughes is. That freak who locked himself in the penthouse of the Desert Inn. The guy who snatched up the Silver Slipper just so he could move the sign. And he bought all our TV stations and made them play bad movies all night."

Danny spent many hours of his life watching second-rate films well into the morning and so it occurred to him that this Howard Hughes had contributed quite a bit to enhancing his television viewing experiences.

"Sounds like kind of a cool guy."

“Of course you would think that,” Grandpa said. “I heard he collects his piss in big glass jars.”

The kid wondered how his grandfather’s brain could hold such an immense amount of trivial knowledge about Las Vegas. Beneath his bald and hatted scalp was a repository of wild stories built up over several decades of living in this strange vacation destination. Many starred some of the most famous and infamous characters in Vegas history. Like when he brought an ice cream cone to Meyer Lansky outside The Flamingo. Grandpa didn’t know the guy was a purported mob boss, he just thought he was an old geezer who looked overheated. Another one Grandpa liked to tell was the time he saved Frank Sinatra from a jealous, pistol-wielding Copa Girl. He just happened to be nearby and subdued the manic woman by pinning her arm behind her back and slamming her face into the bar. And at the end of each anecdote, he threw Danny a wink before Karen said, “Dad, stop being ridiculous.”

How he made his way to Las Vegas seemed just as implausible as his random recollections. According to Grandpa, he ran away from Cincinnati at the age of ten and made it across the country using nothing more than his wits and his thumb. Karen never ascribed much validity to her father’s claim but she couldn’t disprove it as she would not be born for another twenty-one years. There even remained some doubt as to what Grandpa did for a living prior to retiring. Karen told her husband and son that her father worked in the jewelry business. However, that fact never popped up in any of his stories and not once did any of them receive a watch or a necklace or a ring for Christmas.

Despite all the ambiguity in Grandpa’s past, however, his love of Las Vegas was undeniable. He rarely had a bad word to say about his adopted hometown. When Karen and her family first moved down, he greeted them at the door, grabbed his grandson’s hand and said, “Welcome to the greatest fucking city in the world, kid.”

The red Cadillac rambled on. The suburbs receded into the quivering desert and the concentration of subdivided communities began to diminish. Any farther and the pair would be deep into a stretch of desolate highway with no signs of civilization until Reno.

"I think we should turn around," Danny said.

"Nah, we're almost there."

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Dr. Choi wheeled his rolling stool back toward the door. Karen's silence indicated to him that she understood the prognosis leaving the good doctor free to wander off to other parts of the office.

Karen spoke up. "Wait."

Dr. Choi sighed and spun around.

"So what does he have?" Karen prodded the physician for some kind of explanation that wouldn't take six years of medical school to comprehend.

"Your dad's showing symptoms that point to the onset of pre-Parkinson's Lewy body dementia."

"Yeah, I don't know what that is. What's going to happen? What should I look for? What can we do for him?"

"At this stage," he said, "your father may begin to suffer from periods of disorientation in regards to his surroundings and the people in his life. He may not recognize faces or know where he is. He may be confused as to what day it is. Or even the year. There is the possibility of visual hallucinations as the build-up of alpha-synuclein increases in both the cortex and the *crackle crackle crackle*."

The doctor's intelligence began to make the conversation unintelligible and Karen tuned out.

When she was in the fifth grade, a classmate began bullying her. The girl called Karen names, pulled her hair, spread rumors, everything a competent bully should do to make one's adolescence a hell on Earth. One January day, an eleven-year-old Karen huddled outside against a brick wall with a few other students. The frigid, un-desert-like weather made that particular recess one of the least active of the school year. It was also the day Karen's bully decided it would be funny to douse her victim with a trash

can full of water. Soaked and humiliated, Karen remembered something her father had told her. “The most vulnerable place on a person’s body is the throat. Just take the edge of your hand and *pow*.” Her strike was quick and precise. Her bully bent at the knees, gasping for air. A chorus of descending tones rose from the other kids until the teachers whisked Karen away to the principal’s office. That night, the bully’s father stopped by with his malevolent child to show off the bruise on the side of her neck. He demanded Karen apologize. Karen’s father placed his thick arm around the other man’s shoulders like they were old friends and led him through the house. For a few uncomfortable moments, Karen and her tormenter stood together watching as their fathers whispered on the back porch. Then she saw a pause build between them. The bully’s father turned fast and, without a word, led his daughter back to their car and tore off toward the two-story cowgirl.

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“Stop. Stop here.” Grandpa pointed to an empty expanse of rust-tinged sand. Danny pulled the car over and his grandfather hopped out. Other than a maze of twisting streets and the skeletal frames of a few incomplete houses behind them, there was nothing.

“So, where are we?” The boy exited the car, glad to be relieved of his driving duties for a while.

“We’re nowhere. I come here all the time. It’s a great place to chat about things.”

“Like what?”

Grandpa put his arm around Danny’s shoulders. “Can I see those car keys for a second?”

The boy handed them over.

“You know what the key is to making it in Vegas?” Grandpa held the object of his metaphor close to the kid’s face. “Control.”

“What are you talking about?”

The old man walked to the rear of the red Cadillac, unlocked the trunk and lifted it up. "I'm talking about how to open doors in this town. You got to have control. When you control the hotels, you control the games. And when you control the games, well then the Strip is more than your oyster. It's your fucking ocean full of pearls."

The heat hung heavy on the teenager. Growing up in Seattle hadn't prepared him for life in the desert. Spending his childhood in the cold of Washington state had made his blood run thick, like wool in his veins, and left his skin unable to withstand the effects of a withering southwestern summer. His grandfather ducked into the enormous storage space for a second before slamming it shut.

"And you know what closes those doors? Rats." Grandpa stepped from behind the car revealing the crowbar clenched in his hand. "I have to say, kid. I'm disappointed. You locked us out."

The old man took slow, deliberate strides.

"Grandpa. Christ, you're not making any sense." Danny backed away.

"You squealed to the Commission. You locked us out and you let the suits in. Guys like Hughes and all his friends are going to have free reign around here. Mark my words, they're going to turn this place into a theme park. A goddamn Disneyland."

Grandpa got within a few feet of his grandson before it finally dawned on the kid that perhaps he should run. But Grandpa leapt forward and clasped the back of Danny's shirt. He pulled his grandson close and pushed his face into the ground. The old man was strong and the scrawny boy could only snivel and struggle under the weight of Grandpa's oppressive grip. The teenager's shortened breaths blew powdery plumes of dirt into the air. He pled for his life. He cried for his mother.

"Sorry, kid. Your mother ain't here."

Grandpa struck his grandson with the crowbar's bent, blunt end. It crushed the side of the boy's head and split the skin above his eye. His northwestern blood sizzled on the asphalt.

The vacuum of sound settled back over the desert. Even the construction equipment in the distance

sat in blind silence. Grandpa leaned against the hood, pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his pink face.

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Pfefferberg, Cruz, and Associates could have been the name of a law firm, an advertising agency or accountant's office. In this case it was a struggling group of architects who employed one Daniel Eaden, Sr., junior partner, and one of the few remaining "Associates" embodied on the tarnishing sign in the lobby.

For the past few months, the dwindling cadre of designers and draftsmen had been working untenable hours trying to figure out what to do with a stalled luxury housing development called Aztec Estates. So far it was promising to be a huge disaster. But not because of the slumping real estate market and record foreclosures. Nor was it the fact that people couldn't meet the strict requirements to even qualify for the half-a-million-dollar mortgage needed to move in. The problem was that many of the streets had nearly unpronounceable names. Potential homeowners simply didn't want to attempt to tell someone they lived on Tenochtitlan Court or Huitzilopochtli Avenue.

"Karen, honey," Daniel said into the office phone, "I have the contractor on hold. Now what did the doctor say?" He tapped the tip of his pen on his forehead. "Lewy buddy? What is that? Honey, stop crying for a second. Look, at least they caught it early. Let's get him the drugs he needs and get him back to normal. Does that sound good?"

Line one was still blinking.

"Okay, good. See you at home. I love you, too."

He switched back to his first call. The foreman of the Aztec Estates project sounded even more flustered than Karen. Something about having to stop construction. Daniel stated that option was out of

the question. They could have hit a gas main blowing up half the city and that wouldn't be enough to preclude a day's labor. Too much money had already been sunk into this debacle and the company could not afford any more delays. Daniel told the supervisor to keep everything going as planned and he would be at the job site as soon as possible.

The muscles in Daniel's shoulders and arms tightened up as he grappled with the tug-of-war of evening rush hour traffic. His little German sports car darted from one lane to the next the second a slot opened up. The sky glowed a subtle shade of violet as the sun made its retreat to the Pacific. Millions of watts of electricity charged in from Hoover Dam as the hotels turned on their dazzling neon facades. Las Vegas was awakening.

The ad copy used to state "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," the insinuation being that the depravity and debauchery you engaged in would exist as a fleeting half-smile or suggestive glance between friends after returning home. People left their own personas behind to replace them with one which was more adventurous and less virtuous and did things they bet no one would ever find out about.

In each bar and casino, visitors set reality aside. The fact that the odds were stacked against them, or the games were mathematically rigged in favor of the house, didn't dampen the gamblers' enjoyment. When watching any of the magic shows, no one in the audience thought the woman on stage really turned into a tiger, but the show was no less impressive because of it. The paunchy middle-aged guy in the suite at the Bellagio, he knew the escort he hired faked every expression of sexual pleasure, just like the hundreds of other men before him, but he didn't care. He enjoyed the fantasy. He liked pretending that he was a member of the moneyed leisure class who seduced a beautiful young woman with his charm and good looks and not with the stack of hundred dollar bills waiting for her on the nightstand. And that's what made Las Vegas unlike anywhere else. It was an oasis from the outside world, it played by its own rules, and it was the perfect place where everyone could be anyone they wanted.

While sitting in gridlock, Daniel spotted the towering spire of the Stratosphere Hotel. Its resemblance to the Space Needle calmed his nerves, as if a little piece of his hometown had been planted in the middle of the city as a reminder of the tranquil life he once lived. The move had been hard on Karen, he could see that. But he thought now, with a few sacrifices, like looking after her father for the rest of his life, the Eaden family could be content living in Las Vegas.

Finally free of the traffic, Daniel raced toward the future Aztec Estates and wondered how to cover up the situation at the work site. Four or five human skeletons, it was hard to be sure as the bulldozer had jumbled the bones, turned up when the crew broke ground on what would be the ziggurat-inspired clubhouse—the magnificent pyramid-shaped central building of the entire gated community. Some of the skulls showed the distinctive button-sized entry hole of a bullet wound. Others had gaping, irregular openings revealing a violent and traumatic end. A few of the remains were still clad in the tattered remnants of Vietnam-era clothing. There was no sense calling the police. They would suspend the permits, halt construction, excavate and investigate. And above all, Daniel believed no one would want to live on property that had once been littered with dead bodies.

He turned in past the half-finished concrete wall. He imagined the grand entrance he designed and the sculpted jaguar head which would greet people at the security booth. As he drove through the winding streets he kept imagining. Each home would be trimmed with turquoise and crimson and elegant touches of Mesoamerican art. He described it as the primitive made modern. It was going to be the perfect neighborhood, a flawless jewel on the outskirts of a schizophrenic city. When it's all finished, Daniel thought, I'm going to buy one of these places and move us all out here.

At the end of the street, away from the chaos of the work site, Daniel saw what appeared to be a lone car. It shimmered, nearly translucent, and looked like it wasn't even there. As he drew closer, he recognized the make and model. He could tell from the tailfins. It was a fire-engine red 1959 Cadillac Coupe DeVille and it looked like someone was casually leaning on the hood.

“Am I crazy,” Daniel said, “or is that my car?”