

| Chapter 8

Las Vegas, Las Vegas

When Horace Greeley asked the young men of America to go West and they did, the thought of their striking it rich at the gaming tables of frontier towns was certainly the farthest from his mind. He had dared them to make their fortunes as new frontiersmen with the sweat of their brow. When my wife and I went West as the crow flies from Denver to Las Vegas to savour the variegated attractions of a casino resort - the inevitable sequel to the Frontier having been thrown open to all comers including bounty hunters, fortune seekers and freeloaders - a mild fling at the slot machines with the fruits of 'our sweat' was not strictly a 'no-no'.

'Nothing ventured nothing gained' as my mother would sheepishly say if we, her children that is, ever 'caught' her buying a surreptitious lottery ticket. She may have felt sure we would connive at it, but as for her husband, who had been nurtured as a child on the Pauline prohibitions, she was sure he would not approve. At the Vegas tables, I gamely made three shies and spent all of 75 cents to be precise, not so much hoping to hear the unlikely clatter of coins in the reluctant receptacle below as to indulging my wife Ammu's vicarious fancies of my having better luck than her. This was after she had tried, gamely but unsuccessfully, to coax one grudging machine after another to yield its hidden treasures. Every new shy she had made was one more desperate attempt at interrupting the insensitive machines from tediously gobbling up the optimistic offerings of the unwary. Fortunately, Ammu was not about to throw all caution to the winds. She did not wander to the more costly Roulette, Baccarat or Black Jack tables. The princely sum of thirty-five dollars was the offering she 'burnt' at the altar of the machines, no more, no less. Every now and then a machine would teasingly stick out her tongue with a modest lolly, only to suck it all back and more. And as a sop to her unavailing hopes, she was offered a drink on the house from time to time!

On the morning of Wednesday the fifteenth of April 2002, we -that is, my son Bonny, his American wife Genelle, their daughter Rachel, my wife and I- flew out of Denver International Airport by a Frontier Airlines flight to Las Vegas. We got there by ten. In a quarter of an hour or so we collected our luggage at the carousel, a train ride away from the arrivals lounge. We were to pick up a self-drive car at the Alamo Car Rentals, but since that was some distance away from the airport we had to wait for a few minutes before Alamo's Courtesy Coach pulled up to take us there. The African American driver helped us with the suitcases and herded us all in. He introduced himself as George Washington, in a bellowing tone that was not surprising at all coming as it did from the two-metre and a bit tall giant that he was. Was he being tongue in cheek? I was not sure. I had half a mind to say that if he was who he said he was, I was then Bill Clinton, no less. I did not. Instead I said perhaps he had a son by that name, to which his prompt riposte, keeping the straightest of faces, was that his son's name was George Bush. We all had a hearty laugh and he joined in. Anyway, the man entertained us for the next ten minutes or so with his good-natured banter. It brought back memories of our long years in Africa,

Ammu's and mine, and how the place had a way of growing on us for more reasons than one, not the least because the Africans were, by nature, friendly, fun-loving and carefree.

Having managed to collect our car, a Jeep Cherokee, we made our way to the Luxor Casino Resort, off Las Vegas Boulevard, just a few minutes' walk from the Boulevard. It is an Egyptian theme hotel, complete with sphinxes, sarcophagi and hieroglyphics. We were told it was a replica of the Great Pyramid at Luxor. It boasted of having on its apex the most powerful light on earth, whose beams stabbed the skies at night for as far as eye could see. Such were the numbers of arrivals at Luxor that it took us quite a while before we could check in. Our rooms were 14 and 15 on the eleventh floor, about a third of the way up. All the guest rooms are stacked, floor upon balconied floor facing inwards, thirty floors in all, flush with the four triangular inner walls that tapered to the top of the pyramid. The wall-to-wall, sloping windows of our rooms overlooked one of the newer of the Las Vegas resorts, Mandalay Bay, and its elevated tramway connecting it to Luxor and another resort, the Excalibur, a stereotypical Camelot, towers and all, of Hollywood myth. Stepping out of the room and on to the balcony, one looks down on the cavernous innards of the pyramid with its food court full of fast food joints. Guests go up and down at a 39-degree incline in elevators that are aptly called inclinators. Like all other casino resorts, Luxor is a self-contained entity that offers a multitude of attractions to cater to a variety of tastes. Of course, the main carrot that is dangled is the casino level containing cafes and bars, delis and steakhouses, a nightclub predictably called 'RA' and a gift shop, with the casino itself that offers pride of place to every gullible punter with an itchy palm. Then there is the level above the casino housing the 'Pharaoh's Pavilion', with its theatre, the IMAX, the Tutankhamun Museum and the food court.

By the time we came down for lunch, it was well past two o' clock. After the orders were taken and the lunch arrived, it was three. Far too long a wait for hungry mouths longing to be fed, especially Rachel's. We went back to our rooms some time after four and rested for a while before going out again to locate an Indian restaurant, which we did. My son Bonny professes a fine taste for gourmet food and generally eats well and heartily. Eating with audible relish runs in the family. Some, more fastidious with what they eat than the others; that's all. Any hope he may have entertained that he could satisfy his palate at 'Shalimar' was rudely shaken when he, as was his wont, dug into the dishes we had chosen a la carte. The others were none too pleased, either. Not a very promising beginning to a holiday, we said with one voice!

The next morning, we had our breakfast at 'Pharaoh's Pheast Buffet', at Luxor. An escalator took us up from the casino level to the buffet in the mezzanine offering a variety of food, at breakfast, lunch and dinner, on counter after counter, round the clock. And what a sumptuous spread it was! The disappointment of the previous day slowly vanished as we took in the range and profusion of food on display and savoured the blend of aromas that hung in the air. There was enough and more to satisfy every taste. Fried eggs sunny side up, scrambled eggs, egg benedict or omelettes, of the Spanish variety or whatever, you name it, made to order at an egg-counter. The egg-man would gladly oblige if you 'asked for more' and not rap your knuckles, for he was no Dickensian withholder. You could eat to your heart's content. Sausages and bacon of different kinds aplenty on offer to add to your uncertainties, so you taste them all! Spuds in various

forms and sauces to tickle your taste buds were all there. The freshly baked cookies with a hint of cinnamon were irresistible. And, desserts and fruit of all kinds to top it all up; I confess, I gorged myself. Never was the cliché, ‘Your eyes are bigger than your stomach’ proved more true than on that morning!

In spite of the torpor that came over me, I had to will myself along in order not to disappoint the others. I did not want the family, especially Rachel, to look at me as a wet blanket. As it turned out, it was the most exciting day of our holiday. We went first to the Caesar’s Palace and saw its re-creations of the ancient Greco-Roman world; its classical architecture with its columns, arches and vaults, and the public meeting place of Rome, St. Peter’s Square, with statuary gazing down from their lofty pedestals on the semi-circular enclosure, with the over-arching artificial, blue skies above. Then there was the Pegasus at the Fountain of the Muses and the Wooden Horse of Troy, its quaintness somewhat detracted from by the modern toyshop, and not soldiers, tucked inside the hollow. If all that was a representation of reality, the IMAX show there was virtual reality.

The IMAX, ‘Race to Atlantis’ was a hair-raising experience, to put it mildly. Having been forewarned, Ammu decided not to plunge into its depths of fantasy and fearsomeness. Rachel stayed away, too. Having donned the ‘three-dimensional’ goggles, the rest of us watched, as a prelude to the main feature, a pantomime of sorts, its import totally eluding me I confess. The goggles still in place, we then strapped ourselves each into a mechanically-controlled seat that pitched and rolled and yawed scarily for the next five minutes or so to create an all-encompassing phantasmagoria, something almost palpable but having no substance, of a headlong rush, at break neck speeds, weaving and diving, now dodging promontories and submarine ledges, now fire-breathing monsters and awesome citadels, to reach Atlantis, a fabled island off the Gibraltar said to have sunk beneath the Atlantic Ocean, struck by a tidal wave.

Our next stop was the ‘Venetian’, another casino resort. Its main claim to fame is the replica of St. Mark’s Square of medieval Venice, with its street players, its jugglers, its harlequins, its musicians rendering operatic numbers and all. On that day, there was a mummer on a stilt and ‘a lady in white’ miming a statue; only ‘her’ hands faintly moving ever so daintily to collect dollar bills from the outstretched arms of enthralled onlookers. And, there is even a canal, with gondoliers, each propelling a gondola with a single oar from the stern and at the same time serenading his female fare, and occasionally juggling with his hat; tossing it up from his head to brow to nose-tip and back. If you ignored the unmistakable sartorial casualness of the present day, the people could well have been in medieval Venice raptly taking in the quaint scene, music and all, and its street mummery.

We then went back to Luxor, tired but happy. We rested for an hour or so, changed and then made our way to the in-house theatre, where ‘The Blue Man Group’ had been staging live shows for some days. It is not strictly theatre. It is a show that combines electronic music and mind-bending feats, gimmickry, and just plain slapstick with no particular plot as a focal point. Three men painted in electric blue are the performers of the show who facilitate and elicit audience participation from time to time, which is the main attraction of the show. Two or more from the stalls are led to the stage, one for each number, looking like lambs being led to the slaughter. Soon, we see these very same

‘sacrificial lambs’ bleating excitedly and joining in the caper before coming away looking pleased as punch. At the end of it all, tickertape is blown down over the heads of the audience with a powerful fan at the back and even as they extricate themselves from the tangle of tickertape, they head for the exits having enjoyed an evening of ‘intelligent, engaging and tremendous’ entertainment as it is touted to be in the blurb. It is interesting that the whole show is the brainchild of the son of a straitlaced Pentecostal pastor! I dare say the good Lord would have enjoyed it, too.

The next morning, Ammu, Bonny and I made our way by tramway to Mandalay Bay, Ammu to try her luck at the machines with Bonny looking over her shoulders whenever he was himself not trying to wheedle money out of the cash machines while I myself killed time at the race and sports centre, twiddling my thumbs, occasionally glancing at the big screens showing the races in progress. I could also see the punters, happy or crestfallen in turn as each race ended, making their way to the cashier’s counter to collect their winnings or to hand in their stakes for another despairing flirt with fortune. And, all the while, svelte waitresses, dressed in what looked like body-hugging, many-hued floral bikinis setting off their plunging necklines and tapering crotches, circulated, carrying trays of drinks in their delicately upturned hands. Were they intentionally trying to look inviting and shocking at the same time? A bit of good, old-fashioned titillation, shall we say? Or, was this impression merely something in the eye of the beholder? I did not see anyone doing a double take. Oh yes, their bare shoulders did have a bit of frilly puff gratuitously sewed on as a ‘fig leaf’.

Genelle and Rachel had earlier gone to ‘Circus, Circus’ Resort that boasted of an indoor amusement park. Rachel had a whale of a time there the whole morning as indeed she did every day at the Luxor Oasis pool. They joined us at the Mandalay Bay and all of us together made our way down unending passages of the hotel to queue up for a peek at the ‘Shark Reef’. It was a veritable educational exposure to marine life of all shapes and sizes, especially different kinds of shark. They are kept in what looked like a subterranean aquarium, each part of which recaptured one or the other of the various habitats in which they thrive. The hand-held audio player with an array of buttons, supplied to every visitor, made it easy for us to identify each one of the marine species. Rachel enjoyed that, too.

A seafood meal was what we had not had until then. Having been told of this great buffet joint at the ‘Imperial Palace’, we made a beeline for that place with great expectations. As it turned out, it was a shabby dump with the smell of stale food hanging in the air. We had already joined the queue to be shown to our table. After suffering in silence the long wait and the fleeting sightings of the none-too-solicitous waitresses, we were shown to our table by a particularly churlish Chicano waitress. That was followed by the routine queue past the food counters, each taking his leisurely helping, sometimes by the heaped plateful, of crab legs and what have you. We had entertained great hopes of enjoying the famed seafood delicacies of Las Vegas, but our hopes were irredeemably dashed. Suffice it to say, it was a fall from the ‘imperial’ to the insipid! How we wished we had opted for the ‘Sacred Sea Room’ at the Luxor!

After the disappointment of the evening, we hurried to watch the ‘Pirate Show’ at the ‘Treasure Island’, a throwback to the days of the buccaneers on the high seas. We

reached there even as a pirate was seen against a backdrop of a flame-lit sky taking a high dive into the sea to dodge the main mast that was coming down, Jolly Roger and all, after a broadside, full of sound and smoke, had crashed amidships. Unfortunately, that was the fag end of the show. As we drove back, our disappointment was somewhat softened by the spectacle of the erupting ‘volcano’ complete with acrid fumes rising from it and molten lava flowing down the side of the craggy crater at the ‘Mirage’ and, moments later, the ‘Water Show’ at the ‘Bellagio’, which reminded me of the synchronized water frolic at the Olympics perhaps because the spiralling jets of water shooting up and then falling back limpidly brought to mind the shapely legs of the ‘water nymphs’ that shot up, each pair twirling somewhat like a pirouette turned on its head, keeping perfect time with the tempo of the accompanying music and just as fluidly sliding back to become one with water.

To those who go to Las Vegas, Nevada, to take a peek at the outrageous and the outlandish, the place offers enough to sate their tastes. To the gamblers, it is a tantalizing temptress. To the kinky thrill seeker, there are places of disrepute to go to. To us, it was a welcome change from the inescapable ponderosa pines and the snow-capped mountains of Colorado. There is enough to interest the curious visitor who is immune to the lure of the casino or the bordello. The garish lights and landmarks of Las Vegas may strike one as aggressively exhibitionist and vulgarized, but the people themselves are far from pushy and offensive or smooth and unctuous. I looked around everywhere for the Hollywood prototype of the beefy men in their slouchy hats and dark gray, double-breasted suits with the telltale bulge under their arms. And, I looked around to see if I could spot the ‘ol’ blue eyes’ type. The search was reassuringly fruitless.

I saw, instead, your average American in his T-shirt and baggy pants or Bermuda shorts and to hell with sartorial apartness. What set the place apart, if anything, was the more than usual number of stretch limos streaming along the streets for a small city such as Las Vegas, but their occupants were no corporate moguls or captains of industry as far as I could tell. Just ordinary folk, young and old, uncharacteristically riding those monsters for kicks, like your archetypal gentle old lady in her dowdy dress, who would be seen alighting from it and moving sedately towards the casino cashier for collecting a can of quarters, dimes or nickels before planting herself bravely in front of a temperamental cash machine.

We did not do anything exciting on the last day except for a brief farewell fling at the ‘one-arm bandit’ in the morning. Late that afternoon, we checked in for our return flight. The airport security personnel were certainly more unobtrusive and less invasive than the clumsy kooks of Denver International Airport.

At Denver, they religiously frisk every fifth passenger or so at the gate as the boarding is in progress. And, it is called a random check! I happened to be one of the ‘elect’. Was it the metronomic precision of the pick or was it my Arab looks that prompted their choice? Or, was it my beard that made them stamp my boarding pass with the legend, ‘Quest’? Anyway, they had asked me to empty my pockets and also made me take off my shoes, which they bent double and then twisted end to end to make sure there were no concealed bombs in them. They had also asked me to unbuckle my belt and slide it out of its loops. Somewhat irked, I had asked the middle-aged Amazon in attendance if I should drop my

trousers next. In mock horror, she replied in the negative. Then, she managed a faint smile. Her young partner, a tubby hick, then sat me down and ran his hands along the soles of my feet, socks and all. And, even before he did so, I remember he had smiled sheepishly. Mind you, this whole routine is gone through in the presence of other passengers. What if they were to notice this selective ‘shaming’? Perhaps, it is one’s sense of self-worth that is at risk of being detracted from. Or, should one blank out one’s self-image for the greater good? Without the audience, no doubt, one can suffer such ‘indignities’ with equanimity. I shall speculate no more on such profundities.

We got back to Denver late in the afternoon. The return flight was shorter than the outward journey, but the ride was bumpier as we approached our destination. When we touched down, it was snowing a little. To reach the Isuzu Trooper that had been left behind at the airport parking lot, we had to cross an unroofed stretch braving the cold, but once inside the car we felt warm again.

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