

## **Turkey on the Strip**

by **Susan Eve Haar**

There are many appeals to Las Vegas aside from my brother—my youngest, at a California college, will not come east; we all have a taste for sleaze; a few of us like to gamble; and we have a super discount suite in the best new hotel in town, courtesy of my kids' pal Dan, a dropout from the Cornell School of Hotel Management. The suite is a triumph, glittery and luxurious, and the price is certainly right.

Everything is spanking new. The side-tables are classics designed by Eames. They look like giant chess pieces, flat-topped pawns or de-crenellated castles. The muted greens of rug and fabric suggest an oasis suspended over the strip that unspools outside the gigantic living room window. There's a bar lined with modern Danish glassware and sparkling light fixtures, suspended circles hung with cut-crystal balls that refract and reflect the light. Bits of rainbow ready for the Cinderella's ball. I desire them. I feel the itch to pilfer. I stand on a chair and reach up, de-looping one of the crystal drops that cluster on the fixture, attached only by a delicate wire. It's easy, really. Like so many illicit acts, I slide right into it. Holding the crystal in my palm, I feel the weight of it. I admire its many facets and its secretive translucence that pretends to show all but refracts into abstraction. Listen, it is a beautiful object. I hop down and carry it into the next room to show my kids, who are lolling on majestic beds.

"Look," I say, holding it out for inspection. It is intrinsically beautiful in its solitary state, smooth and rounded, and they admire it, passing it between them. I wonder aloud if it would be possible to pluck just one from every fixture in the suite and make a chandelier for our new house. My sons are delighted.

I try to limit the number of criminal acts I enact before my children. And really, with the exception of the one or two enacted with a vengeful mind, I believe I had God on my side in the commission of each and every one. Perhaps this is not altogether accurate, but it is the story I tell myself, and here is the story I will tell you:

It was a Thursday afternoon in early autumn and branches started crashing outside. There was a crane operator, swinging loads of drywall into the adjacent building, lopping off tree branches. The trees that hung like naiads over Charles Street, that we treasured—our green neighbors. Calls to the company number on the side of the crane reached a machine, as did a call to NYU construction (the crane was working on their job). I even ran to the precinct two blocks away to ask for help. All to no avail and, desperate, I turned to self-help.

My throwing arm is lacking, so I enlisted my agile boys, five and seven. They stood at the top of our stoop, pumped with delight, and pitched old tomatoes and fruit at the windshield of the crane. A soft pear splattered on the windshield, juice dripping down, and they whooped and hooted victory. I was standing at the top of my stoop. The driver was sitting in the cab of the crane; I could see him pretty clearly. We'd already had some pretty harsh words, my manner eroded by his complete disinterest in the damage he was doing. Now he looked interested. A half-rotten banana hit the windshield. He put the crane in park. I kind of thought I had the measure of the guy, an angry man with a big machine. Yet I have to say I was surprised when he opened the door of the crane, hopped down, and started walking fast toward our house.

“Go!” I pushed the boys behind me. They streaked upstairs, yelling, “World war three!” as the driver charged toward me. I stood my ground, albeit briefly.

“You’re trespassing,” I shouted. And as he paused, weighing his options, I slammed the door shut.

There have been other incidents, I won’t deny it. One doesn’t want to model behavior that is too compliant with society’s requirements. It behooves you to leave a little dirt in the vegetables so your kids develop immunities. But this is not the time for a confession of my crimes; it is only to say that my children have borne witness to my bad acts—indeed, they have even been my accomplices.

Now they are twenty and twenty-two. My younger son stands on the bed; stretching up on toes, he balances and deftly removes a crystal from the light fixture. He sits down on the bed cross-legged, weighing it in his hand, absorbed. I know how good it feels, dense and glittering as a promise.

But is it right to really take it? All right, steal it. Them. By now there are three of

them glittering quietly. There is, we reflect, the possibility that the hotel expects to replace them; it's just built into the room price. There might be a vault clogged with crystals waiting their turn to hang in splendor. We consider the possibility that the suite was designed with the expectation of heavy drinking and orgies, so some damage is to be expected. We sit together and ponder. What would Aquinas say? But, in the end, it looks a lot like thieving, and with regret we pull over chairs and hang them back. I do know the difference between right and wrong sometimes, though it is obscured by experience. And there is something about Las Vegas that invites the illegal. And it's not just the hookers who solicit both my sons, though one of them looks like he's barely out of high school.

Criminality must run in the family, I reflect later. Or at least a deep conviction that the rules don't apply. We are in my brother's club having Thanksgiving dinner. He lives in a gated community in Henderson. They take their security and their landscaping seriously. And there is a clubhouse, more for convenience than conviviality. Membership is obligatory, as is a monthly minimum charged. So, begrudgingly, my brother eats there. In fact, he reports to us he has recently escaped the children's section, to which he was relegated after putting a plastic worm into a salad and then pointing it out to the horrified server.

Today they have given us a large, round table. Around us the room is thronged with families of some stripe or another. The ladies have all had their hair colored, blown out, and shellacked with hairspray; the men wear blue blazers with gold buttons. We are all on seconds. My brother's shaggy toupee is a little askew; it looks like a convivial, napping animal. My cousin has slowed down a little, but he's talking to my older son about puts and calls or some such. He is a money guy, a millionaire and a miser. Two adolescent girls, leggy and sweet-faced, scoot around our table on the way to the buffet. They are wearing skirts so short you fear for them when they bend over, heaping sweet potatoes onto their plates. The view is one of the other glories of Thanksgiving, I suppose, along with roast beef dripping with blood and fat, trays of iced shrimp and oysters, and the inevitable turkey.

"Shrimp!" my brother declares. They are definitely the most expensive of the foods offered on a per-ounce basis, and that is a calculation he has done.

“You guys are wimps,” he suggests to my boys; they have faltered after second servings. He’s already on his feet, empty plate in hand. He hands it to a passing server and heads for the buffet unhindered. He’s a big guy, my brother; bulky, not fat. Thick. He kind of lumbers but that’s more an attitude than a physical necessity. I sit and ruminate, watching my kids joking, and contemplate another run at the salad. Maybe a few more hearts of palm. My brother returns, the new plate piled with oysters and shrimp.

“Do you like oysters?” I ask, surprised.

“Not particularly. Did you bring plastic bags?”

“No.”

“Could have fit a lot.” He gestures at the purse slung over my chair.

“What d’you do with them? Feed them to the cats?”

“Eat them eventually.”

“I can take cookies,” I counter. “I can wrap them in napkins.” And then I get a sudden memory of my mother slipping dinner rolls into her purse wrapped in a cloth napkin. Now that was theft. No one ever ate them that I remember, but they were always there, just in case.

What is it to steal, what is it to earn? Have we earned, in any way, the bounty that we possess in this moment of our fleeting lives? Of my fleeting life, this momentary bounty. This is how the meal began:

Jed, my youngest, took his brother’s hand and my brother’s hand—I could see his hesitation, but he let Jed take his paw in his smaller hand. And then he said, “Let’s all say what we are thankful for.” It’s his tradition, not mine, but I wait my turn, listening. There is such a truthfulness and sweetness to what they say, these children of mine. I listen and then I say it—well, most of it, what I am grateful for: my children, my freedom, my health, and great good luck. My brother listens; he doesn’t speak but he holds Jed’s hand and mine. It’s then I realize that I am not a thief after all. I may feel unworthy or undeserving, but there is no way to steal the happiness I feel. It is simply a gift.

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