

Las Vegas Blvd

NOBODY

A NOVEL

CRESTON MAPES

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MULTNOMAH
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the last winter of his beautiful life, my father, Bernie Mapes, nudged me and pointed to a homeless man sitting on a park bench in St. Augustine, Florida. The man tore pieces of bread from a stale loaf he clutched in his arms, eating some and tossing others to the dozens of blackbirds pecking at the ground. "There's an idea for a book, Cres," Dad whispered. Thank you, Dad...for everything.

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I STAND BY THE DOOR

I stand by the door

I neither go too far in nor stay too far out

The door is the most important door in the world.

It is the door through which men walk when they find God.

There's no use in my going way inside and staying there

When so many are still outside and they, as much as I, crave to
know where the door is

And all that so many ever find is only the wall where a door
ought to be.

They creep along the wall like blind men with outstretched, grop-
ing hands

Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door, yet they never
find it.

So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world is for men to find that
door—

The door to God.

The most important thing any man can do

Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands and put it on
the latch—

The latch that only clicks and opens to the man's own touch.

Men die outside that door

As starving beggars die on cold nights in cruel cities in the dead
of winter

Die for want of what is within their grasp

They live on the other side of it, live because they have found it

Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it

And open it and walk in and find Him.

So I stand by the door.

Go in great saints, go all the way in
Go way down in the cavernous cellars and way into the spacious
attics

It is a vast roomy house, this house where God is.
Go into the deepest of hidden casements of withdrawal, of
silence, of sainthood

Some must inhabit those inner rooms,
And know the depths and heights of God
And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is
Sometimes I take a deeper look in, sometimes venture in a little
farther

But my place seems close to the opening
So I stand by the door...

I admire the people who go way in,
But I wish they would not forget how it was before they got in
Then they would be able to help the people who have not yet
even found the door

Or the people who want to run away from God again
You can go in too deeply and stay in too long and forget the
people outside the door

As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place
Near enough to God to hear Him and know He is there
But not far from men as to not hear them and remember that
they are there too.

Where? Outside the door.

Thousands of them, millions of them
But more important for me, one of them, two of them, ten of
them

Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch
So I shall stand by the door and wait for those who seek it.
I had rather be a doorkeeper, so I stand by the door.

—SAMUEL SHOEMAKER

I'd seen stiffs at crime scenes before, one flat on his back in the middle of his garage with a twelve-inch meat cleaver sticking straight up out of his rib cage like a Halloween prank; self-inflicted, to boot.

But this one beat all.

I got there before the cops. Saw the guy from my Mustang GT. It was 5:54 a.m.

He was positioned upright at one of the dozens of covered bus stops along the Strip. Beneath flickering fluorescents, it looked as if he was just sleeping, like a thousand other bums scattered like garbage across the sand-blown outskirts of "fabulous Las Vegas." I rolled down my passenger window and leaned closer. Blood, dark like burgundy wine, but thicker—a pool of it, absorbed into the seat of his pants and ran shiny down the concrete block he was perched on, forming another smaller puddle beneath his black Converse high tops.

I shivered, remembering the call I'd heard on the scanner in the

newsroom at the *Review-Journal*. Las Vegas Metro Police got an anonymous call about a potential shooting at the Civic Center North bus stop. I was wrapping up the obits and crime beat from the night shift and had some time to blow, so I headed out.

Leaving my car parked in a vacant lot along Las Vegas Boulevard, I did a three-sixty as I approached the body but saw no one. There was plenty of traffic, because Las Vegas was always pulsating with life, but this was not an obvious crime scene yet.

For more than eight minutes I waited, finally sitting right next to that dead man, with the cops nowhere to be found. That's the way they were in Vegas, slow as sludge, especially if it had anything to do with the homeless. For all I knew, it might have been another hour before they showed.

That's when I thought about searching him. Nothing bad, just find the wound, maybe get an ID, see if he had anything else on him. It was a fleeting thought. But as another minute, two, then three crept by, the vapor of the idea began to crystallize. I pictured how everything would come to a painful standstill once the cops finally arrived. They would boot me, tape off the area, and withhold the bum's identity and cause of death until it was old news.

My heart rate kicked up a notch. I had no gloves. Would I leave prints? On what, clothes? It's not like they're going to go over this nobody with a fine-tooth comb. At first glance I wasn't sure where the wound was. Blood covered the upper quarter of his torso. Ignoring my own sick disregard for the human being next to me, I scoped the area again, saw no one near, and gently leaned his 150-or-so-pound frame forward six inches.

To the touch, his body felt normal, as if he were still alive. There was no exit wound on his back. Dropping to one knee, I examined the bloody mess at the upper left portion of his chest. His coat was

torn there, and yes, there was a bloody hole. Whether it was a messy knife wound or a bullet hole, I wasn't sure.

That was as far as I should have gone. In fact, knowing myself—that I would dare to do more if the fuzz didn't show up soon—I passed the time by jotting notes on the pad I always kept in my back pocket.

He had a thatch of red hair, bleached the color of sand by the scorching Nevada sun. The city had felt like Hades lately, going on seven consecutive days of 109 degrees or better. His peaceful, middle-aged face, the side part in his hair, and the back of his hands and neck were a burnt brownish red; not raw sunburn, mind you—he was way beyond sunburn.

The stubble on his face was speckled blond and gray. He wore a gold T-shirt with dirty creases and a black, lightweight overcoat unbuttoned. Funny thing is, he didn't smell bad. In fact, he smelled clean, like laundry soap. The pants were navy Dickies, and each sneaker had a hole just above the big toe. He wore two pair of thick gray socks on each foot. Perhaps most odd were his left ear and wrist. The skin on each looked melted, as if it had been surgically repaired with some sort of skin graft.

I was still within the bounds of the law. I'd taken my time with the notes, describing the scene, the wound, and the slumping corpse next to me—and hoping the LVMPD would hurry up and get here before I did something both stupid and illegal.

A steady flow of cars darted north and south, their drivers oblivious to the dead man twenty feet away. As always in Las Vegas, nightlife rolled seamlessly into morning within the mammoth hotels up and down the Strip.

My time limit had expired. The cops didn't care. Likely, no one cared about this destitute beggar. A few hours ago he'd probably been

as nasty and senile as the rest of the riffraff who shake their fists and wag their heads at me when I drive past them on Owens or D Loop.

Who would know if I searched the guy? My editor didn't know I was here, no one did. My eyes darted about. My heart stormed high in my chest. And then I just did it—reached into his shallow outside coat pockets. Nothing there. Easing back his thin coat, I found an inside pocket—empty. I scanned again for onlookers and saw none. I was doing him and his family a favor by trying to identify him. As I braced him at the shoulder with my left hand, I jammed my right into his pants pocket. Again, nothing.

Convinced the Las Vegas breezing up and down the Strip were both oblivious to the crime scene and in a colossal hurry, I filled my lungs with morning air and took another plunge. Being careful to swing around the puddle of blood in front of him, I changed sides, leaned him forward, and slid my hand beneath his coat and into one back pocket, then the next. No wallet. The guy had nothing. Or so I thought, until I propped him up firmly by the opposite shoulder and stuffed my hand into that last front pocket of his navy Dickies.

Bingo.

He had something. Not much, but something.

Getting my fingers around what felt like some folded papers, I pulled, but my fist caught. My prints were on whatever was in that pocket. The sound of sirens arose far off from the south. My head jumped, and sweat started to bead on my forehead. Seeing no police lights, I braced him again and twisted my wrist back and forth, yanking hard. My heart almost catapulted from my throat as the man's stomach gurgled and his head dropped and swung toward me, as if he'd decided to watch.

Trying awkwardly, desperately, to square the man's hunching

shoulders and swivel his jaw back to where it had been, I panicked, as his entire upper body started to collapse, quite unlike I'd found it.

Blue police lights canvassed the neon skyline.

I rehearsed excuses, lies, the truth—any way out of the developing mess.

Then I realized the only way out was to get out.

But the object I'd ripped from the man was still in my hand. I looked down. It was a tattered bankbook with a worn maroon cover. As the screams from the sirens grew louder, my trembling fingers found the last page and the handwritten balance: \$689,800.

The bus stop spun.

I felt my fingers press firmly into my forehead, as if trying to steady the ship.

He was rich.

It didn't compute.

Figure it out later. Get out!

I stood to run, but something fell from the book, splattering into the puddle at the man's feet.

A key, now three-fourths covered in blood.

I froze.

The sirens beckoned me to look up.

A squad car was in view, maybe a mile down the Strip.

Something inside told me to give up, wait for them, explain what happened.

Something else jolted me to the ground where I plucked the blood-drenched key from the crimson puddle and bolted toward my car.

Sprinting faster than I had since I was a boy, my mind wound down to slow motion, and I became disgusted by the cool, thick liquid making my fingers stick grotesquely to the palm of my clenched

hand. But I was even more repulsed by the type of man I'd become—stealing from a bum.

After scrubbing hard at my hands and the key in a long, hot shower back at my place—a stucco two-story in a cluster neighborhood west of the Center Strip—I put on some old cutoffs, went downstairs, popped a can of Dr Pepper, and examined the tattered bankbook at my kitchen table. It contained no name and little writing but was stamped with the address of a First Federal Bank of Nevada branch near Arville and Flamingo, not too far from my house.

Periodic deposits had been made in amounts ranging from \$155 to \$12,650 with no indicator of where the funds had come from. A number of withdrawals had also been made, mostly in the three- and four-digit range; on those occasions, the only word ever written in the memo area was “cash.”

One transaction stood out, dated the day before I found the body. The word “cash” was scribbled in the ledger. The amount withdrawn: \$425,000.

“Hmm.”

I took the flat, gold key that had fallen from the bankbook over to a lamp in the living room and studied it closely. Although it was shaped like an old-fashioned key, it appeared to be brand-new, imprinted with the name of a well-known security company.

Tossing the key on the table, I studied the bankbook once more, this time searching specifically for any information about a safe-deposit box. When I was almost through, I spotted the number “1510” penned neatly in black ink on the bottom corner of the inside back cover.

Did I want money? Was that what this was about? Was I following the footsteps of my old man? At least he had a reason to steal; I

had none. My life was okay. I'd done well as a journalist. I was planning to get away, write novels at a cottage on the beach, perhaps marry someday. One way or another, I would show the old man I was somebody, that I could make something out of this life, on my own, with or without him.

Wandering into the garage, I flipped on the overhead light then drilled the black Everlast heavy bag with a firm right. It swayed. I pummeled it with both fists, six or seven quick, hard jabs. The bag's metal chains squeaked as it swung from the ceiling, and I watched it in a daze.

What if there was easy money to be had? Could I get away with it? No, I wouldn't do that. I just wanted to get the scoop on a dead homeless guy with almost three-quarters of a million bucks in the bank. It was a blockbuster story. That's what I was after. At least, that's what I kept telling myself as I went back into the house, threw on a T-shirt, stepped into my army green flip-flops, and headed for the First Federal Bank of Nevada at Arville and Flamingo.

As I devoured a second biscuit from Jack in the Box while waiting in my car for the bank to open at 9 a.m., I was faced with a number of tricky questions. What if the key in my pocket wasn't to a safe-deposit box at all? Or what if it didn't go to a box at this bank? What would I say? If the box was there, would I be required to sign in? What excuse would I give if they requested my name or ID?

Next thing I knew I was standing in the sterile lobby, grasping the key in my fist similar to the way I had only hours ago when it was covered in the bum's blood. Three tellers faced me, and there was no sign of any safe-deposit boxes. Then I spotted a thin black woman on the phone at the customer-service desk to my right.

"May I help you, sir?" one of the tellers called out in a high-pitched voice.

Pretending not to hear her, I headed for the black woman on the phone. She smiled and made eye contact. I waved the key at her between two fingers, lifted both hands, and looked around the room, as if to ask where the boxes were. I didn't want to talk, just wanted her to point.

She spoke into the phone, "Just one moment," then looked up at me. "Do you need help with your box?"

Uh-oh. "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. Where are they?" I glanced around the room. "This is the first time I've—"

"The self-entry boxes are right through that door," she pointed, "and to your right. You'll see them. There's a room beyond, where you can have some privacy."

Whew.

I sauntered around the corner, relieved to be out of sight. The small room—with its wall of boxes—was actually a walk-in safe, the enormous, foot-thick door of which stood wide open.

No sign-in?

The silver box fronts that covered the wall ranged in size from that of a postcard to that of a large folder. Looking around, I saw a telephone and a security camera. That was it. Clean, simple, secure and—at the moment—vacant.

Unbelievable.

Scanning the numbers—1300s, 1400s, 1500s—I knew I was in luck; my soul soared. The gold key slid in like a gem and turned easily. I couldn't believe where this was going. Swinging the little door open, I bent over, reached in, and pulled out a long, black box, only about three inches top to bottom, but ten inches wide and two feet long. It was fairly light, but several items shifted as I slid it out of its slot.

Gulping back my trepidation, I headed for the tiny adjacent

room, my eyes glued to the hallway, my heart thundering, and my mind convulsing with fantasies of taking the contents of the box and heading for the airport. I could be in Hawaii or even overseas, in Italy or France, by the next day. I had no ties in Vegas or in the States. All bridges had been burned between me and the old man.

Once inside the small room, I pushed the button lock on the doorknob, set the box on the wall-mounted desk, and took a seat in the leather chair. After pressing a release button at one end of the box, I lifted the lid. The cash caught my eye first, prompting me back to my feet. Hundreds, twenties, fifties, tens—scores of bills scattered throughout. I sifted through with both hands, snapping them up in a mad, rushed state of euphoria, stopping every ten seconds or so to look out the narrow window in the door.

My mind reeled. *What next?* I was giddy. No matter what else was in the box, there was cash—lots of it. If I played this thing smart, I could be set for a long time. Somehow, find out his name, withdraw the rest of the money, maybe a little at a time. Before I knew it, I could be writing books at a beach pad on stilts overlooking the Mediterranean.

Take it slow, be smart, breathe. I could easily go to jail for this. My mind rewound to the trail of blood drops I'd left at the bus stop when I took the key. I was whisked back to the last visit I'd made to the penitentiary in Victoria to see the old man. Hotter than Hades. No AC. Putrid, overpowering smell of urine and body odor. Screaming, yelling, betting, and brawls. Wacko ward.

I could never do time.

Perched upright on the edge of the chair like a kid who was just served a double helping of chocolate cake, I put the money down on the desk and sorted through the items remaining in the box. Most intriguing were two rings that had wound up together in the same