

Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas

A Savage Journey To The Heart Of The American Dream

Hunter S. Thompson

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**To Bob Geiger, for reasons that need not be explained here
and to Bob Dylan, for Mister Tambourine Man**

“He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.” - Dr. Johnson

PART ONE

We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like "I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive. . . ." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"

Then it was quiet again. My attorney had taken his shirt off and was pouring beer on his chest, to facilitate the tanning process. "What the hell are you yelling about?" he muttered, staring up at the sun with his eyes closed and covered with wraparound Spanish sunglasses. "Never mind," I said. "It's your turn to drive." I hit the brakes and aimed the Great Red Shark toward the shoulder of the highway. No point mentioning those bats, I thought. The poor bastard will see them soon enough.

It was almost noon, and we still had more than a hundred miles to go. They would be tough miles. Very soon, I knew, we would both be completely twisted. But there was no going back, and no time to rest. We would have to ride it out. Press registration for the fabulous Mint 400 was already underway, and we had to get there by four to claim our sound - proof suite. A fashionable sporting magazine in New York had taken care of the reservations, along with this huge red Chevy convertible we'd just rented off a lot on the Sunset Strip . . . and I was, after all, a professional journalist; so I had an obligation to cover the story, for good or ill.

The sporting editors had also given me \$300 in cash, most of which was already spent on extremely dangerous drugs. The trunk of the car looked like a mobile police narcotics lab. We had two bags of grass, seventy - five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high - powered blotter acid, a salt shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi - colored uppers, downers, screamers, laughers and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls. All this had been rounded up the night before, in a frenzy of high - speed driving all over Los Angeles County - from Topanga to Watts, we picked up everything we could get our hands on. Not that we needed all that for the trip, but once you get locked into a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can.

The only thing that really worried me was the ether. There is nothing in the world more helpless and irresponsible and depraved than a man in the depths of an ether binge. And I knew we'd get into that rotten stuff pretty soon. Probably at the next gas station. We had sampled almost everything else, and now - yes, it was time for a long snort of ether. And then do the next hundred miles in a horrible, slobbering sort of spastic stupor. The only way to keep alert on ether is to do up a lot of amyls - not all at once, but steadily, just enough to maintain the focus at ninety miles an hour through Barstow.

"Man, this is the way to travel," said my attorney. He leaned over to turn the volume up on the radio, humming along with the rhythm section and kind of moaning the words: "One toke over the line, Sweet Jesus . . . One toke over the line . . ."

One toke? You poor fool! Wait till you see those goddamn bats. I could barely hear the radio . . . slumped over on the far side of the seat, grappling with a tape recorder turned all the way up on "Sympathy for the Devil." That was the only tape we had, so we played it constantly, over and over, as a kind of demented counterpoint to the radio. And also to maintain our rhythm on the road. A constant speed is good for gas mileage - and for some reason that seemed important at the time. Indeed. On a trip like this one must be careful about gas consumption. Avoid those quick bursts of acceleration that drag blood to the back of the brain.

My attorney saw the hitchhiker long before I did. "Let's give this boy a lift," he said, and before I could mount any argument he was stopped and this poor Okie kid was running up to the car with a big grin on his face, saying, "Hot damn! I never rode in a convertible before!"

"Is that right?" I said. "Well, I guess you're about ready, eh?"

The kid nodded eagerly as we roared off.

"We're your friends," said my attorney. "We're not like the others."

"O Christ, I thought, he's gone around the bend. "No more of that talk," I said sharply. "Or I'll put the leeches on you." He grinned, seeming to understand. Luckily, the noise in the car was so awful - between the wind and the radio and the tape machine - that the kid in the back seat couldn't hear a word we were saying. Or could he?

How long can we *maintain*? I wondered. How long before one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy? What will he think then? This same lonely desert was the last known home of the Manson family. Will he make that grim connection when my attorney starts screaming about bats and huge manta rays coming down on the car? If so - well, we'll just have to cut his head off and bury him somewhere. Because it goes without saying that we can't turn him loose. He'll report us at once to some kind of outback nazi law enforcement agency, and they'll run us down like dogs.

Jesus! Did I say that? Or just think it? Was I talking? Did they hear me? I glanced over at my attorney, but he seemed oblivious - watching the road, driving our Great Red Shark along at a hundred and ten or so. There was no sound from the back seat. Maybe I'd better have a chat with this boy, I thought. Perhaps if I explain things, he'll rest easy.

Of course. I leaned around in the seat and gave him a fine big smile . . . admiring the shape of his skull. "By the way," I said. "There's one thing you should probably understand."

He stared at me, not blinking. Was he gritting his teeth?

"Can you hear me?" I yelled.

He nodded.

"That's good," I said. "Because I want you to know that we're on our way to Las Vegas to find the American Dream." I smiled. "That's why we rented this car. It was the only way to do it. Can you grasp that?"

He nodded again, but his eyes were nervous.

"I want you to have all the background," I said. "Because this is a very ominous assignment - with overtones of extreme personal danger. . . . Hell, I forgot all about this beer; you want one?"

He shook his head.

"How about some ether?" I said.

"What?"

"Never mind. Let's get right to the heart of this thing. You see, about twenty - four hours ago we were sitting in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel - in the patio section, of course - and we were just sitting there under a palm tree when this uniformed dwarf came up to me with a pink telephone and said, 'This must be the call you've been waiting for all this time, sir.'"

I laughed and ripped open a beer can that foamed all over the back seat while I kept talking. "And you know? He was right! I'd been expecting that call, but I didn't know who it would come from. Do you follow me?"

The boy's face was a mask of pure fear and bewilderment. I blundered on: "I want you to

understand that this man at the wheel is my attorney! He's not just some dingbat I found on the Strip. Shit, look at him! He doesn't look like you or me, right? That's because he's a foreigner. I think he's probably Samoan. But it doesn't matter, does it? Are you prejudiced?"

"Oh, hell no!" he blurted.

"I didn't think so," I said. "Because in spite of his race, this man is extremely valuable to me." I glanced over at my attorney, but his mind was somewhere else.

I whacked the back of the driver's seat with my fist. "This is important, goddamnit! This is a true story!" The car swerved sickeningly, then straightened out. "Keep your hands off my fucking neck!" my attorney screamed. The kid in the back looked like he was ready to jump right out of the car and take his chances. Our vibrations were getting nasty - but why? I was puzzled, frustrated. Was there no communication in this car? Had we deteriorated to the level of dumb beasts?

Because my story was true. I was certain of that. And it was extremely important, I felt, for the meaning of our journey to be made absolutely clear. We had actually been sitting there in the Polo Lounge - for many hours - drinking Singapore Slings with mescal on the side and beer chasers. And when the call came, I was ready.

The Dwark approached our table cautiously, as I recall, and when he handed me the pink telephone I said nothing, merely listened. And then I hung up, turning to face my attorney.

"That was headquarters," I said. "They want me to go to Las

Vegas at once, and make contact with a Portuguese photographer named Lacerda. He'll have the details. All I have to do is check into my suite and he'll seek me out."

My attorney said nothing for a moment, then he suddenly came alive in his chair. "God hell!" he exclaimed. "I think I see the pattern. This one sounds like real trouble!" He tucked his khaki undershirt into his white rayon bellbottoms and called for more drink. "You're going to need plenty of legal advice before this thing is over," he said. "And my first advice is that you should rent a very fast car with no top and get the hell out of L.A. for at least forty - eight hours." He shook his head sadly. "This blows my weekend, because naturally I'll have to go with you - and we'll have to ann ourselves."

"Why not?" I said. "If a thing like this is worth doing at all, it's worth doing right. We'll need some decent equipment and plenty of cash on the line - if only for drugs and a super - sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record."

"What kind of a story is this?" he asked.

"The Mint 400," I said. "It's the richest off - the - road race for motorcycles and dune - buggies in the history of organized sport - a fantastic spectacle in honor of some fatback grossero named Del Webb, who owns the luxurious Mint Hotel in the heart of downtown Las Vegas . . . at least that's what the press release says; my man in New York just read it to me."

"Well," he said, "as your attorney I advise you to buy a motorcycle. How else can you cover a thing like this righteously?"

"No way," I said. "Where can we get hold of a Vincent Black Shadow?"

"What's that?"

"A fantastic bike," I said. "The new model is something like two thousand cubic inches, developing two hundred brake - horsepower at four thousand revolutions per minute on a magnesium frame with two styrofoam seats and a total curb weight of exactly two hundred

pounds.”

“That sounds about right for this gig,” he said.

“It is” I assured him. “The fucker’s not much for turning, but it’s pure hell on the straightaway. It’ll outrun the F - ill until takeoff.”

“Takeoff?” he said. “Can we handle that much torque?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “I’ll call New York for some cash.”

2. The Seizure of \$300 from a Pig Woman In Beverly Hills

The New York office was not familiar with the Vincent Black Shadow: they referred me to the Los Angeles bureau - which is actually in Beverly Hills just a few long blocks from the Polo Lounge - but when I got there, the money - woman refused to give me more than \$300 in cash. She had no idea who I was, she said, and by that time I was pouring sweat. My blood is too thick for California: I have never been able to properly explain myself in this climate. Not with the soaking sweats . . . wild red eyeballs and trembling hands.

So I took the \$300 and left. My attorney was waiting in a bar around the corner. “This won’t make the nut,” he said, “unless we have unlimited credit.”

I assured him we would. “You Samoans are all the same,” I told him. “You have no faith in the essential decency of the white man’s culture. Jesus, just one hour ago we were sitting over there in that stinking baiginio, stone broke and paralyzed for the weekend, when a call comes through from some total stranger in New York, telling me to go to Las Vegas and expenses be damned - and then he sends me over to some office in Beverly Hills where another total stranger gives me \$300 raw cash for no reason at all . . . I tell you, my man, this is the American Dream in action! We’d be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end.”

“Indeed,” he said. “We must do it.”

“Right,” I said. “But first we need the car. And after that, the cocaine. And then the tape recorder, for special music, and some Acapulco shirts.” The only way to prepare for a trip like this, I felt, was to dress up like human peacocks and get crazy, then screech off across the desert and cover the story.

Never lose sight of the primary responsibility. But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it now: pure Gonzo journalism.

There was also the socio - psychic factor. Every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas. To relax, as it were, in the womb of the desert sun. Just roll the roof back and screw it on, grease the face with white tanning butter and move out with the music at top volume, and at least a pint of ether.

Getting hold of the drugs had been no problem, but the car and the tape recorder were not easy things to round up at 6:30 on a Friday afternoon in Hollywood. I already had one car, but it was far too small and slow for desert work. We went to a Polynesian bar, where my attorney made seventeen calls before locating a convertible with adequate horsepower and proper coloring.

“Hang onto it,” I heard him say into the phone. “We’ll be over to make the trade in thirty minutes.” Then after a pause, he began shouting: “What? Of course the gentleman has a major credit card! Do you realize who the fuck you’re talking to?”

“Don’t take any guff from these swine,” I said as he slammed the phone down. “Now we need a

sound store with the finest equipment. Nothing dinky. We want one of those new Belgian Heliowatts with a voice - activated shotgun mike, for picking up conversations in oncoming cars.”

We made several more calls and finally located our equip - ment in a store about five miles away. It was closed, but the salesman said he would wait, if we hurried. But we were de - layed en route when a Stingray in front of us killed a pedestrian on Sunset Boulevard. The store was closed by the time we got there. There were people inside, but they refused to come to the double - glass door until we gave it a few belts and made ourselves clear.

Finally two salesmen brandishing tire irons came to the door and we managed to negotiate the sale through a tiny slit. Then they opened the door just wide enough to shove the equipment out, before slamming and locking it again. “Now take that stuff and get the hell away from here,” one of them shouted through the slit.

My attorney shook his fist at them. “We’ll be back,” he yelled. “One of these days I’ll toss a fucking bomb into this place! I have your name on this sales slip! I’ll find out where you live and burn your house down!”

“That’ll give him something to think about,” he muttered as we drove off. “That guy is a paranoid psychotic, anyway. They’re easy to spot.”

We had trouble, again, at the car rental agency. After signing all the papers, I got in the car and almost lost control of it while backing across the lot to the gas pump. The rental - man was obviously shaken.

“Say there . . . uh . . . you fellas are going to be careful with this car, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, good god!” he said. “You just backed over that two - foot concrete abutment and you didn’t even slow down! Forty - five in reverse! And you barely missed the pump!”

“No harm done,” I said. “I always test a transmission that way. The rear end. For stress factors.”

Meanwhile, my attorney was busy transferring rum and ice from the Pinto ~ the back seat of the convertible. The rental - man watched him nervously.

“Say,” he said. “Are you fellas drinking?”

“Not me,” I said.

“Just fill the goddamn tank,” my attorney snapped. “We’re in a hell of a hurry. We’re on our way to Las Vegas for a desert race.

“What?”

“Never mind,” I said. “We’re responsible people.” I watched him put the gas cap on, then I jammed the thing into low gear and we lurched into traffic.

“There’s another worrier,” said my attorney. “He’s prob - ably all cranked up on speed.”

“Yeah, you should have given him some reds.”

“Reds wouldn’t help a pig like that,” he said. “To hell with him. We have a lot of business to take care of, before we can get on the road.”

“I’d like to get hold of some priests’ robes,” I said. “They might come in handy in Las Vegas.”

But there were no costume stores open, and we weren’t up to burglarizing a church. “Why bother?” said my attorney.

“And you have to remember that a lot of cops are good vicious Catholics. Can you imagine what those bastards would do to us if we got busted all drugged - up and drunk in stolen investments? Jesus, they’d castrate us!”

“You’re right,” I said. “And for christ’s sake don’t smoke that pipe at stoplights. Keep in mind that we’re exposed.”

He nodded. “We need a big hookah. Keep it down here on the seat, out of sight. If anybody sees us, they’ll think we’re using oxygen.”

We spent the rest of that night rounding up materials and packing the car. Then we ate the mescaline and went swimming in the ocean. Somewhere around dawn we had breakfast in a Malibu coffee shop, then drove very carefully across town and plunged onto the smog - shrouded Pasadena Freeway, heading East.

3. Strange Medicine On The Desert . . . A Crisis Of Confidence

I am still vaguely haunted by our hitchhiker’s remark about how he’d “never rode in a convertible before.” Here’s this poor geek living in a world of convertibles zipping past him on the highways all the time, and he’s never even ridden in one. It made me feel like King Farouk. I was tempted to have my attorney pull into the next airport and arrange some kind of simple, common - law contract whereby we could just give the car to this unfortunate bastard. Just say: “Here, sign this and the car’s yours.” Give him the keys and then use the credit card to zap off on a jet to some place like Miami and rent another huge fireapple - red convertible for a drug - addled, top - speed run across the water all the way out to the last stop in Key West . . . and then trade the car off for a boat. Keep moving.

But this manic notion passed quickly. There was no point in getting this harmless kid locked up - and, besides, I had plans for this car. I was looking forward to flashing around Las Vegas in the bugger. Maybe do a bit of serious drag - racing on the Strip: Pull up to that big stoplight in front of the Flamingo and start screaming at the traffic:

“Alright, you chickenshit wimps! You pansies! When this goddamn light flips green, I’m gonna stomp down on this thing and blow every one of you gutless punks off the road!”

Right. Challenge the bastards on their own turf. Come Screeching up to the crosswalk, bucking and skidding with a bottle of rum in one hand and jamming the horn to drown out the music . . . glazed eyes insanely dilated behind tiny black, gold - rimmed greaser shades, screaming gibberish.., a genuinely dangerous drunk, reeking of ether and terminal psychosis.

Revvng the engine up to a terrible high - pitched chattering whine, waiting for the light to change . . .

How often does a chance like that come around? To jangle the bastards right down to the core of their spleens. Old elephants limp off to the hills to die; old Americans go out to the highway and drive themselves to death with huge cars.

But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country - but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that.

My attorney understood this concept, despite his racial handicap, but our hitchhiker was not an easy person to reach. He said he understood, but I could see in his eyes that he didn’t. He was lying to me.

The car suddenly veered off the road and we came to a sliding halt in the gravel. I was hurled against the dashboard. My attorney was slumped over the wheel. "What's wrong?" I yelled. "We can't stop here. This is bat country!"

"My heart," he groaned. "Where's the medicine?"

"Oh," I said. "The medicine, yes, it's right here." I reached into the kit - bag for the amyls. The kid seemed petrified. "Don't worry," I said. "This man has a bad heart - Angina Pectoris.

But we have the cure for it. Yes, here they are." I picked four amyls out of the tin box and handed two of them to my attorney. He immediately cracked one under his nose, and I did likewise.

He took a long snort and fell back on the seat, staring straight up at the sun. "Turn up the fucking music!" he screamed. "My heart feels like an alligator!

"Volume! Clarity! Bass! We must have bass!" He flailed his naked arms at the sky. "What's wrong with us? Are we god - damn old ladies?"

I turned both the radio and the tape machine up full bore. "You scurvy shyster bastard," I said. "Watch your language! You're talking to a doctor of journalism!"

He was laughing out of control. "What the fuck are we doing out here on this desert?" he shouted. "Somebody call the police! We need help!"

"Pay no attention to this swine," I said to the hitchhiker. "He can't handle the medicine. Actually, we're both doctors of journalism, and we're on our way to Las Vegas to cover the main story of our generation." And then I began laughing

My attorney hunched around to face the hitchhiker. "The truth is," he said, "we're going to Vegas to croak a scag baron named Savage Henry. I've known him for years, but he ripped us off - and you know what that means, right?"

I wanted to shut him off, but we were both helpless with laughter. What the fuck were we doing out here on this desert, when we both had bad hearts?

"Savage Henry has cashed his check!" My attorney snarled at the kid in the back seat. "We're going to rip his lungs out!"

"And eat them!" I blurted. "That bastard won't get away with this! What's going on in this country when a scumsucker like that can get away with sandbagging a doctor of journalism?"

Nobody answered. My attorney was cracking another amyl and the kid was climbing out of the back seat, scrambling down the trunk lid. "Thanks for the ride," he yelled. "Thanks a lot. I like you guys. Don't worry about me." His feet hit the asphalt and he started running back towards Baker. Out in the middle of the desert, not a tree in sight.

Wait a minute," I yelled. "Come back and get a beer." But apparently he couldn't hear me. The music was very loud, and he was moving away from us at good speed.

"Good riddance," said my attorney. "We had a real freak on our hands. That boy made me nervous. Did you see his eyes?" He was still laughing. "Jesus," he said. "This is good medicine!"

I opened the door and reeled around to the driver's side. "Move over," I said. "I'll drive. We have to get out of Califor - nia before that kid finds a cop."

"Shit, that'll be hours," said my attorney. "He's a hundred miles from anywhere."

"So are we," I said.

"Let's turn around and drive back to the Polo Lounge," he said. "They'll never look for us there."

I ignored him. "Open the tequila," I yelled as the wind - scream took over again; I stomped on the