

Author's Note: This is both a standalone short story and--in a slightly different form--the first chapter of a novel by the same title, which will eventually be published as Promethean Age 5, God willin' and the crick don't rise.

One-eyed Jack and the Suicide King

Elizabeth Bear

It's not a straight drop. Rather, the Dam is a long sweeping plunge of winter-white concrete: a dress for a three-time Las Vegas bride without *quite* the gall to show up in French lace and seed pearls. If you face Arizona, Lake Mead spreads out blue and alien on your left hand, inside a bathtub ring of Colorado River limestone and perchlorate drainage from wartime titanium plants. Unlikely as canals on Mars, all that azure water rimmed in massive red and black rock; the likeness to an alien landscape is redoubled by the Dam's louvered concrete intake towers. At your back is the Hoover Dam visitor's center, and on the lake side sit two art-deco angels, swordcut wings thirty feet tall piercing the desert sky, their big toes shiny from touches for luck.

That angled drop is on your right. *À main droite*. Downriver. To California. The same way all those phalanxes and legions of electrical towers march.

It's not a straight drop. Hoover's much wider at the base than at the apex, where a two-lane road runs, flanked by sidewalks. The cement in the Dam's tunnel-riddled bowels won't be cured for another hundred years, and they say it'll take a glacier or a nuke to shift the structure. Its face is ragged with protruding rebar and unsmoothed edges, for all it looks fondant-frosted and insubstantial in the asphyxiating light of a Mojave summer.

Stewart had gotten hung up on an upright pipe about forty feet down the rock face beside the dam proper, and it hadn't killed him. I could hear him screaming from where I stood, beside those New Deal angels. I winced, hoping he died before the rescue crews got to him.

Plexiglas along a portion of the walkway wall discourages jumpers and incautious children: a laughable barrier. But then, so is Hoover itself—a fragile slice of mortal engineering between the oppressive rocks, more a symbol interrupting the flow of the sacred Colorado than any real, solid object.

Still. It holds the river back, don't it?

Stewart screamed again—a high, twisting cry like a gutted dog. I leaned against the black diorite base of the lefthand angel, my feet inches from this inscription: 2,700 BC IN THE REIGN OF THE PHARAOH MENKAURE THE LAST GREAT PYRAMID WAS BROUGHT TO COMPLETION. I bathed in the stare of a teenaged girl too cool to walk over and check out the carnage. She checked me out instead; I ignored her with all the cat-coolness I could muster, my right hand hooked on the tool loop of my leather cargo pants.

With my left one, I reached up to grasp the toe of the angel. Desert-cooked metal seared my fingers; I held on for as long as I could before sticking them in my mouth, and then reached up to grab on again, making my biceps ridge through my skin. *Eeny, Meeny, Miney, Moe*. Eyepatch and Doc Martens, diamond in my ear or not, the girl eventually got tired of me. I saw her turn away from the corner of my regular eye.

They were moving cars off the Dam to let emergency vehicles through, but the rescue chopper would

have to come from Las Vegas. There wasn't one closer. I checked my watch. Nobody was looking at me anymore, despite dyed matte-black hair, trendy goatee and the sunburned skin showing through my torn sleeveless shirt.

Which was the plan, after all.

I released the angel and strolled across the mosaic commemorating the dedication of the Dam. Brass and steel inlaid in terrazzo express moons and stars: Alcyone, B Tauri and Mizar. Marked out among them are lines of inclination and paths of arc. The star map was left for future archaeologists to find if they wondered at the Dam's provenance: a sort of "we were here, and this is what we made you" signature scrawled on the bottom of a glue-and-glitter card. A hundred and twenty miles north of here, we're leaving them another gift: a mountain full of spent nuclear fuel rods, and scribed on its surface a similar message, but that one's meant to say "Don't Touch."

Some card.

The steel lines describe the precession of equinoxes and define orbital periods. They mark out a series of curves and angles superimposed across the whole night sky and the entire history of civilized mankind, cutting and containing them as the Dam cuts and contains the river.

It creeps me out. What can I say?

THEY DIED TO MAKE THE DESERT BLOOM, an inscription reads across the compass rose and signs of the zodiac on my left, and near my feet CAPELLA. And ON THIS 30TH DAY OF THE MONTH OF SEPTEMBER IN THE YEAR (INCARNATIONIS DOMINICAE ANNO MCMXXXV) 1935, FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, 32ND PRESIDENT OF THESE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DEDICATED TO THE SERVICE OF OUR PEOPLE THIS DAM, POWER PLANT, AND RESERVOIR. A little more than ten years before Bugsy Siegel gave us the Flamingo Hotel and the Las Vegas we know and love today, but an inextricable link in the same unholy chain none the less. I try to be suitably grateful.

But Bugsy was from California .

I passed over or beside the words, never stopping, my ears full of Stewart's screaming and the babble of conversation, the shouts of officers, the wail of sirens. And soon, very soon, the rattle of a helicopter's rotors.

The area of terrazzo closest to the angels' feet is called the Wheel of Time. It mentions the pyramids, and the birth of Christ, and the Dam. It ends in the year A.D. 14,000. The official Dam tour recommends you stay home that day.

Alongside these dates is another:

EARLY PART OF A.D. 2,100

Slipped in among all the ancient significances, with a blank space before it and the obvious and precise intention that it someday be filled to match the rest.

Stewart screamed again. I glanced over my shoulder; security was still distracted. Pulling a chisel from my spacious pocket, I crouched on the stones and rested it against the top of the inscription. I produced a steel-headed mallet into my other hand. When I lifted the eyepatch off my *otherwise* eye, I saw the light saturating the stone shiver back from the point of my chisel like a prodded jellyfish. There was some power worked into it. A power I recognized, because I also saw its potential shimmer through my eye

where my left one saw only the skin of my own hand. The Dam, and me. Something meant to look like something else.

Card tricks.

The lovely whistle-stop oasis called Las Vegas became a minor metropolis—by Nevada standards—in large part by serving gambling, whiskey and whores to the New Deal workers who poured these concrete blocks. Workers housed in Boulder City weren't permitted such things within town limits. On Friday nights they went looking for a place to spend some of the money they risked their lives earning all week. Then after a weekend in Sin City, they were back in harness seven hundred feet above the bottom of Black Canyon come Monday morning, nine a.m.

Ninety-six of them died on the Dam site. Close to three hundred more succumbed to black lung and other diseases. There's a legend some of them were entombed within the Dam.

It would never have been permitted. A body in the concrete means a weakness in the structure, and Hoover was made to last well past the date I was about to obliterate with a few well-placed blows. "Viva Las Vegas," I muttered under my breath, and raised the hammer. And then Stewart stopped screaming, and a velvety female purr sounded in my ear. "Jack, Jack, Jackie."

"Goddess." I put the tools down and stood up, face inches from the face of the most beautiful woman in the world. "How did you know where to find me?"

She lowered tar-black lashes across a cheek like cream and thrust a narrow swell of hip out, pouting through her hair. The collar of her sleeveless blouse stood crisp-pressed, framing her face; I wondered how she managed it in a hundred-twenty. "I heard a rumor you meant to deface my Dam," she said with a smile that bent lacquered lips in a mockery of Cupid's little red bow. The too-cool teenager was staring at Goddess now, brow wrinkled as if she thought Goddess must be somebody famous and couldn't quite place who. Goddess gets that reaction a lot.

I sighed. Contrived as she was, she was still lovelier than anything real life could manage. "You're looking a little peaked these days, Goddess. Producers got you on a diet again? And it's my Dam, honey. I'm Las Vegas. Your turf is down the river."

Her eyes flashed. Literally. I cocked an ear over my shoulder, but still no screaming. Which—dammit—meant that Stewart was probably dead, and I was out of time. Otherwise I would have bent down in front of her and done it anyway.

"It's not polite to ask a lady what she does to maintain her looks, darling. And I say Hoover belongs to L.A. You claim, what—ten percent of the power and water?" She took a couple of steps to the brass Great Seal of California there at the bottom of the terrazzo, front and center among the plaques to the seven states that could not live without the Colorado, and twice as big as the others. Immediately under the sheltering wings of a four-foot bas-relief eagle. She tapped it with a toe. The message was clear.

I contented myself with admiring the way her throat tightened under a Tiffany collar as I shrugged and booted my hammer aside. Out of my left eye, I saw her *otherwise*—a swirl of images and expectations, a casting-couch stain and a shattered dream streetwalking on Sunset Boulevard. "You still working by yourself, Goddess? Imagine it's been lonely since your boyfriend died."

Usually there are two or three of us to a city. And we can be killed, although something new comes along eventually to replace us. Unless the city dies too: then it's all over. Her partner had gotten himself shot up in an alleyway. Appropriate.

"I get by," she answered with a Bette Davis sigh.

I was supposed to go over and comfort her. Instead, I flipped my eyepatch down. Goddess makes me happy I don't like girls. She's a hazard to navigation for those who do. "I was just leaving. We could stop at that little ice cream place in Boulder City for an avocado-baconburger."

A surprised ripple of rutabaga-rutabagas ran through the crowd on the other sidewalk, and I heard officers shouting to each other. Stewart's body must have vanished.

"Ugh," Goddess said expressively, the corners of her mouth turning down under her makeup.

"True. You shouldn't eat too much in a sitting; all that puking will ruin your teeth." I managed to beat my retreat while she was still hacking around a suitably acid response.

Traffic wasn't moving across the dam yet, but I'd had the foresight to park the dusty-but-new F150 in the lot in Arizona, so all I had to do was walk across the Dam—on the lake side: there was still a crowd on the drop side—and haul Stewart (by the elbow) away from the KLAS reporter to whom he was providing an incoherently homosexual man-on-the-spot reaction. He did that sort of thing a lot. Stewart was the Suicide King. I kissed him as I shoved him into the truck.

He pulled back and caught my eye. "Did it work?"

"Fuck, Stewart. I'm sorry."

"Sure," he said, leaning across to open the driver's-side door. "You spend fifteen minutes impaled on a rusty chunk of steel and then I'll tell you, 'Sorry.' What happened?"

"Goddess."

He didn't say anything after that: just blew silky blond hair out of eyes bluer than the desert sky and put his hand on my knee as we drove south through Arizona, down to Laughlin, and came over the river and back up through the desert wastes of Searchlight and CalNevAri. In silence. Going home.

#

We parked the truck in the Four Queens garage and went strolling past the courthouse. The childhood-summer drone of cicadas surrounded us as we walked past the drunks and the itinerant ministers. We strolled downtown arm in arm, toward the Fremont Street Experience, daring somebody to say something.

The Suicide King and me. Wildcards, but only sometimes. In a city with streets named for Darth Vader and for Seattle Slew, we are the unseen princes. I said as much to Stewart.

"Or unseen queens," he joked, tugging me under the arch of lights roofing Fremont Street. "What happened back there?"

Music and cool air drifted out the open doorways of casinos, along with the irresistible chime of the slot machines that are driving out the table games. I saw the lure of their siren song in the glassy eyes of the gamblers shuffling past us. "Something must have called her. I was just going to deface a national landmark. Nothing special."

Someone jostled my arm on my *otherwise* side, blind with the eyepatch down. I turned my head, expecting a sneering curse. But he smiled from under a floppy moustache and a floppier hat, and disappeared into Binion's Horseshoe. I could pick the poker players out of the herd: they didn't look

anaesthetized. *That* one wasn't a slot zombie. There might be life in my city yet.

Stewart grunted, cleaning his fingernails with a pocketknife that wasn't street-legal by anyone's standards. Sweat marked half-moons on his red-striped shirt, armholes and collar. "And Goddess showed up. All the way from the City of Angels."

"Hollywood and Vine."

"What did she want?"

"The bitch said it was her fucking Dam." I turned my head to watch another zombie pass. A local. Tourists mostly stay down on the Strip these days, with its Hollywood assortment of two-dimensional mockeries of exotic places. Go to Las Vegas and never see it.

I'm waiting for the Las-Vegas themed casino: somewhere between Paris, Egypt, Venice, and the African coast. Right in the middle of the Strip. This isn't the city that gave Stewart and me birth. But this is the city I now am.

"Is it?"

"I don't know. Hoover should be ours by rights. But it called her: that's the only thing that makes sense. And I'm convinced that empty date forges a link between Vegas and L.A. It's as creepy as the damned Mayan calendar *ending* in 2012."

He let go of my arm and wandered over to one of the antique neon signs. Antique by Vegas standards, anyway. "You ever think of all those old towns under the lake, Jack? The ones they evacuated when the reservoir started to fill?"

I nodded, although he wasn't looking and I knew he couldn't hear my head rattle, and I followed him through the neon museum. I think a lot about those towns, actually. Them, and the Anasazi, who carved their names and legends on every wind-etched red rock within the glow of my lights and then vanished without a whisper, as if blown off the world by that selfsame wind. And Rhyolite, near Beatty, where they're building the nuke dump: it was the biggest city in Nevada in 1900 and in 1907 it was gone. I think about the Upshot Knothole Project: these downtown hotels are the older ones, built to withstand the tremors from the above-ground nuclear blasts that comprised it. And I think too of all the casinos that thrived in their day, and then accorded into dust and tidy rubble when the men with the dynamite came.

Nevada has a way of eating things up. Swallowing them without a trace.

Except the Dam, with that cry etched on its surface. And a date that hasn't happened yet. Remember. Remember. Remember me.

Stewart gazed upward, his eyes trained on Vegas Vic: the famous neon cowboy who used to wave a greeting to visitors cruising into town in fin-tailed Cadillacs--relegated now to headliner status in the Neon Museum. He doesn't wave anymore: his hand stays upraised stiffly. I lifted mine in a like salute. "Howdy," I replied.

Stewart giggled. "At least they didn't blow him up."

"No," I said, looking down. "They blew the fuck out of Bugsy, though."

Bugsy was a California gangster who thought maybe halfway up the Los Angeles highway, where it crossed the Phoenix road, might be a good place for a joint designed to convert dirty money into clean. It

so happened that there was already a little town with a light-skirt history huddled there, under the shade of tree-lined streets. A town with mild winters and abundant water. *Las Vegas* means *the meadows* in Spanish. In the middle of the harsh Mojave, the desert bloomed. And there's always been magic at a crossroads. It's where you go to sell your soul.

I shifted my eyepatch to get a look *otherwise*. Vic shimmered, a twist of expectation, disappointment, conditioned response. My right eye showed me the slot-machine zombies as a shuffling darkness, Stewart a blinding white light, a sword-wielding spectre. A demon of chance. The Suicide King, avatar of take-your-own-life Las Vegas with its record-holding rates of depression, violence, failure, homelessness, DUI. The Suicide King, who cannot ever die by his own hand.

"I can see why she feels at home here," Stewart said to Vic's neon feet.

"Vic's a he, Stewart. Unless that was a faggot 'she,' in which case I will send the ghosts of campiness—past present and future—to haunt your bed."

"She. Goddess. She seems at home here."

"I don't want her at home in my city," I snapped as if it cramped my tongue. It felt petty. And good. "The bitch has her own city. And sucks enough fucking water out of my river."

He looked at me shyly through a fall of blond bangs. I thought about kissing him, and snorted instead. He grinned. "Vegas is nothing but a big fucking stage set wrapped around a series of strip malls, anymore. What could be more Hollywood?"

I lit a cigarette, because everybody still smokes in Vegas—as if to make up for California—and took a deep, acrid drag. When I blew smoke back out it tickled my nostrils. "I think that empty inscription is what locks us to L.A. "

Stewart laced his arm through mine again. "Maybe we'll get lucky and it will turn out to be the schedule for The Big One."

I pictured L.A. tumbling into the ocean, Goddess and all, and grinned back. "I was hoping to get that a little sooner. So what say we go back to the Dam tonight and give it another try?"

"What the hell do we have to lose?"

#

The trooper shone his light around the cab and the bed of the truck, but didn't make us get out despite three A.M. and no excuse to be out but stargazing at Willow Beach . Right after the terrorist attacks, it was soldiers armed with automatic weapons. I'm not sure if the Nevada State Police are an improvement, but this is the world we have to live in, even if it is under siege. Stewart, driving, smiled and showed ID, and then we passed through winding gullies and out onto the Dam.

It was uncrowded in the breathless summer night. The massive lights painting its facade washed the stars out of the desert sky. Las Vegas glowed in the passenger-side mirror from behind the mountains as Stewart parked the truck on the Arizona side. On an overcast night, the glow is greenish—the reflected lights of the MGM Grand. That night, clear skies, and it was the familiar city-glow pink, only brighter and split neatly by the ascending Luxor light like a beacon calling someone home.

I'd been chewing my thumb all evening. Stewart rattled my shoulder to get me to look up. "We're here. Bring your chisel?"

"Better," I said, and reached behind the seat to bring out the tire iron and a little eight-pound hammer. The sledge dropped neatly into the tool loop of my cargo pants. I tugged a black denim jacket on over the torn shirt and slid the iron into the left-hand sleeve. "Now I'm ready."

He disarmed the doors and struggled out of the leather jacket I'd told him was too hot to wear. "Why you always gotta break things you don't understand?"

"Because they scare me." I didn't think he'd get it, but he was still sitting behind the wheel thinking when I walked around and opened his door. The alarm had rearmed; it wailed momentarily but he keyed it off in irritation and hopped down, tossing the jacket inside. "It's got to relate to how bad things have gotten. It's a shadow war, man. This Dam is *for* something."

"Of course it's for something." Walking beside me, he shot me that blue-eyed look that made me want to smack him and kiss him all at once. "You know what they used to say about the Colorado before they built it—too thick to drink, and too thin to plow. The Dam is there to screw up the breeding cycles of fish, make it possible for men to live where men shouldn't be living. Make a reservoir. Hydroelectric power. Let the mud settle out. It's there to hold the river back."

It's there to hold the river back. "I was thinking just that earlier," I said as we walked across the floodlit Dam. The same young girl from that afternoon leaned out over the railing, looking down into the yawning, floodlit chasm. I wondered if she was homeless and how she'd gotten all the way out here—and how she planned to get back.

She looked up as we walked past arm in arm, something reflected like city glow in her eyes.

The lure of innocence to decadence cuts both ways: cities and angels, vampires and victims. Sweet-eyed street kid with a heart like a knife. I didn't even need to flip up my eyepatch to know for sure. "What's your name?" I let the tire iron slip down in my sleeve where I could grab it. "Goddess leave you behind?"

"Goddess works for me," she said, and raised her right fist. A shiny little automatic glittered in it, all blued steel with a viper nose. It made a 40's movie tableau, even to the silhouetting spill of floodlights and the way the wind pinned the dress to her body. She smiled. Sweet, venomous. "And you can call me Angel. Drop the crowbar, kid."

"It's a tire iron," I answered, but I let it fall to the cement. It rang like the bell going off in my head, telling me everything made perfect sense. "What the hell do you want with Las Vegas, Angel?" I thought I knew all the West-coast animae. *She must be new.*

She giggled prettily. "Look at you, cutie. Just as proud of your little shadow city as if it really existed."

I wished I still had the tire iron in my hand. I would have broken it across her face.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Stewart. Bless him. He jerked his thumb up at the light smirching the sky. "What do you call that?"

She shrugged. "A mirage shines too, but you can't touch it. All you need to know is quit trying to break my Dam. You must be Jack, right? And this charming fellow here—" she took a step back so the pistol still covered both of us, even as Stewart dropped my hand and edged away. *Stewart.* "This must be the Suicide King. I'd like you both to work for me too."

The gun oscillated from Stewart's midsection to mine. Angel's hand wasn't shaking. Behind her, I saw Goddess striding up the sidewalk, imperious in five-hundred dollar high-heeled shoes.

"I know what happens," I said. "All that darkness has to go somewhere, doesn't it? Everything trapped

behind the Dam. All the little ways my city echoes yours, and the big ones too. And Nevada has a way of sucking things up without a trace.

"The Dam is a way to control it. It's a way to hold back that gummy river of blackness. And Las Vegas is the reservoir that lets you meter it out and use when you want it.

"Let me guess. You need somebody to watch over Hoover . And the magic built into it, which will be complete sometime after the concrete cures."

Stewart picked up the thread as Goddess pulled a little pearl-handled gun out of her pocketbook as well. He didn't step forward, but I felt him interpose himself. *Don't! Don't.* "Let me guess," he said. "*The early part of 2100?* What happens then?"

"Only movie villains tell all in the final reel." Goddess had arrived.

Angel cut her off. "Gloating is passé." She smiled. "L.A. is built on failure, baby. I'm a carnivore. All that pain has to go somewhere. Can't keep it inside: it would eat me up sure as I eat up dreams. Gotta have it for when I need it, to share with the world."

"The picture of Dorian Gray," Stewart said.

"Call it the picture of L.A." She studied my face for a long time before she smiled. All that innocence, and all that cool calculated savagery just under the surface of her eyes. "Smart boys. Imagine how much worse I would be without it. And it doesn't affect the local ecology all that much. As you noted, Jackie, Nevada 's got a way of making things be gone."

"That doesn't give you the right."

Angel shrugged, as if to say, *What are rights?* "All chiseling that date off would do is remove the reason for Las Vegas to exist. It would vanish like the corpse of a twenty-dollar streetwalker dumped in the high desert, and no one would mark its passing. Boys, you're not *real.*"

I felt Stewart swelling beside me, soul-deep offended. It was my city. His city. And not some vassal state of Los Angeles . "You still haven't said what happens in a hundred years."

Goddess started to say something, and Angel hushed her with the flat of her outstretched hand. "L.A.," she said, that gesture taking in everything behind her: Paris, New York, Venice, shadows of the world's great cities in a shadow city of its own— "Wins. The spell is set, and can't be broken. Work for me. You win too. What do you say to that, Jack?"

"Angel, honey. Nobody really talks like that." I started to turn away, laying a hand on Stewart's arm to bring him with me. The sledgehammer nudged my leg.

"Boys," Goddess said. Her tone was harsh with finality.

Stewart fumbled in his pocket. I knew he was reaching for his knife. "What are you going to do," he asked, tugging my hand, almost dragging me away. "Shoot me in the back?"

I took a step away from Goddess, and from Angel. And the Stewart caught my eye with a wink, and— *Stewart!*—kept turning, and he dropped my hand....

The flat clap of a gunshot killed the last word he said. He pitched forward as if kicked, blood like burst berries across his midsection, front and back. I spun around as another bullet rang between my Docs. Goddess skipped away as I lunged, shredding the seam of my pants as I yanked the sledgehammer out.

It was up like a baseball bat before Stewart hit the ground. I hoped he had his knife in his hand. I hoped he had the strength to open a vein before the wound in his back killed him.

I didn't have time to hope anything else.

They shot like L.A. cops—police stance, wide-legged, braced and aiming to kill. I don't know how I got between the slugs. I felt them tug my clothing; one burned my face. But I'm One-Eyed Jack, and my luck was running. Cement chips stung my face as a bullet ricocheted off the wall and out over Lake Mead. Behind Angel and Goddess, a light pulsed like Stewart's blood and a siren screamed.

Stewart wasn't making any sound now and I forced myself not turn and look back at him. Instead, I closed the distance, shouting something I don't recall. I think I split Goddess' lovely skull open on the very first swing. I know I smashed Angel's arm, because her gun went flying before she ran. Ran like all that practice in the sands of Southern California came in handy, fit—no doubt—from rollerblading along the board walk. My lungs burned after three steps. The lights were coming.

Almost nobody *runs* in Las Vegas, except on a treadmill. It's too fucking hot. I staggered to a stop, dropped the hammer clanging as I stepped over Goddess' shimmering body, and went back for Stewart.

His blood was a sticky puddle I had to walk through to get to him. He'd pushed himself over on his side, and I could hear the whimper in his breath, but the knife had fallen out of his hand. "Jack," he said. "Can't move my fingers."

I picked it up and opened it. "Love. Show me where."

"Sorry," he said. "Who the hell knew they could shoot so fucking well?" It came up on his lips in a bubble of blood, and it had to be *his* hand. So I folded his fingers around the handle and guided the blade to his throat.

The sirens and lights throbbed in my head like a Monday-morning migraine. "Does it count if I'm pushing?"

He giggled. It came out a kicked whimper. "I don't know," he said through the bubbles. "Try it and see."

I pushed. Distorted by a loudspeaker, the command to stop and drop might have made me jump another day, but Stewart's blood was sudden, hot and sticky-slick as tears across my hands. I let the knife fall and turned my back to the road. Down by my boots, Stewart started to shimmer. We were near where Angel had been leaning out to look down the face of the Dam. The Plexiglas barriers and the decorated tops of the elevator shafts started five feet on my right.

"One-Eyed Jacks and Suicide Kings are wild," I muttered, and in two running steps I threw myself over the wall. Hell, you never know until you try it. A bullet gouged the walltop alongside the black streaks from the sole of my Doc.

The lights on the Dam face silvered it like a wedding cake. It didn't seem like such a long way to fall, and the river was down there somewhere. A gust of wind just might blow me wide enough to miss the blockhouse at the bottom.

If I got lucky.

#

From the outside northbound lane on the 95, I spotted the road: more of a track, by any reasonable standard. The white Ford pickup dragged across the rumble strip and halted amid scattering gravel. It

had still had Stewart's jacket thrown across the front seat after I bribed impound. Sometimes corruption cuts in our favor. A flat hard shape patted my chest from inside the coat's checkbook pocket, and the alarm armed itself a moment after I got out.

Two tracks, wagon wheel wide, stretched through a forest of Joshua trees like prickly old men hunched over in porcupine hats, abutted by sage and agave. The desert sky almost never gets so blue. It's usually a washed out-color: Mojave landscapes are best represented in turquoise and picture jasper.

A lot of people came through here—enough people to wear a road—and they must have thought they were going someplace better. California, probably. I pitched a rock at a toxic, endangered Gila monster painted in the animal gang colors of don't-mess-with-me and then I sat down on a dusty rock and waited. And waited. And waited, while the sun skipped down the flat horizon and the sky greyed periwinkle and then indigo. Lights rippled on across the valley floor, chasing the shadow of the mountain. From my vantage in the pass between the mountains, I made out the radioactive green shimmer of the MGM Grand, the laser-white beacon off the top of the Luxor, the lofted red-green-lavender Stratosphere. The Aladdin, the Venetian, the Paris. The amethyst and ruby arch of the Rio . New York , New York . And the Mirage. Worth a dry laugh, that.

Symbols of every land, drawing the black energy to Vegas. A darkness sink. Like a postcard. Like the skyline of a city on the back of a one-eyed jack in a poker deck with the knaves pulled out.

It glittered a lot, for a city in thrall.

There was a fifth of tequila in Stewart's coat. I poured a little libation on an agave, lifted up my eyepatch and splashed some in my *otherwise* eye. I took a deep breath and stared down on the valley. "Stewart," I said to my city. "I don't know if you're coming back. If anybody squeaks through on a technicality, man, it should be you. And I haven't seen your replacement yet. So I keep hoping." I hadn't seen Angel either. But I hadn't been down to the Dam.

Another slug of liquor. "Bugsy, you son of a bitch. You brought me here, didn't you? Me and Stew. You fixed the chains tight, the ones the Dam forged. And it didn't turn out quite the way you anticipated. Because sometimes we're wild cards, and sometimes we're not, and what matters is how you call the game."

I drank a little tequila, poured a little on the ground. If you're going to talk to ghosts, it doesn't hurt to get them drunk. Ask a vodun if you don't believe me.

My glittering shadow city—all cheap whore in gaudy paint that makes her look older, much older, and much, much tider than she is—she'll suck up all the darkness that bitch Angel can throw at her, and I swear someday the dam will burst and the desert will suck the City of Angels up too. Nevada has a way of eating things whole. Swallowing them without a trace. Civilizations, loved ones, fusion products.

There's a place to carve one more Great Event on the memoried surface of the Dam. And I mean to own that sucker, before Angel carves her city's black conquest in it. I've still got a hundred years or so to figure out how to do it.

Meanwhile, my city glitters like a mirage in the valley. Sin City . Just a shadow of something bigger. But a shadow can grow strangely real if you squint at it right, and sometimes a mirage hides real water.

This is my city, and I'm her Jack. I'm not going anywhere.