

ROAD NOTES: JEAN, NEVADA

By Michael Ventura

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Two gaudy, cheap-looking, neon-lit structures constitute most of what there is of Jean, Nevada, one on each side of I-15. They call themselves "gambling halls." "Casino" would be a little high-toned for Jean, Nevada, and Jean, Nevada, knows it -- and lets you know it. Anyone looking for chic or for edible food can drive 22 miles to Vegas, where the word "gambling" has been banned in favor of "gaming." People who come to Jean don't pretend they're playing games. They're gambling, and they don't pretend to like it. Nothing is more rare here than a smile. At 57 years old, I am one of the youngest "guests" -- which is how the place designates its paying customers, forgetting, as most of us have forgotten, that the hospitality one offers a guest is precisely what cannot be purchased. "Guest" is now just another word that once meant something significant and now means little. Most who come to Jean, Nevada, are in their 70s, and they come because they're still mobile enough to do something, but have nothing else to do.

They mostly come in buses that pull into the parking lot in the late afternoon and leave in one or two days. On the weekends there are 30, 50, and more of such buses. On weeknights like tonight ... I just went to my window overlooking the south parking lot: four buses ... probably a few more in the north parking lot. It isn't pleasant to imagine those bus rides. Twenty to 40 people, couples or groups of acquaintances, each unit a stranger to the other, everyone more or less infirm, many wearing diapers that fill beyond their control. They pretend (with the disciplined politeness of their generation, born just before or during the Depression) that they don't notice the odors, the squishing sounds, the indignities. If you come from the south you go through 250 miles of desert to get to Jean, but the buses' tinted windows are too dark to view the vast desert-scape (its beauty is a subtlety of shifting light, perspective, and line). Illumination in the buses is too dim for most aged eyes to read in. Such buses are usually equipped with several TV screens. If Sartre were writing *No Exit* today he might set it in such a bus, where strangers ride dimly through a vast and wild landscape they can't see, smelling each other, forcing conversation, and watching television. When they finally debark, it's at a gambling hall in Jean.

We call them "retirees," but that's a fairly new term, in use for only the last half-century. In other cultures and eras they would be *elders*, respected, consulted, pampered. Their words would carry weight in family, clan, and community councils. But our popular tongue is so debased that most have no, or few, words, and the words they have are ignored. In a consumer society their function is to buy medicines and medical procedures. And our world changes so fast that much of what they know no longer applies. So they board buses to Jean, Nevada, their lifetimes of experience unsought and perhaps unusable by their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren. If they had anything real to do they wouldn't be coming here.

If they could afford better they'd go elsewhere. These are people who've worked hard all their lives at jobs they forced themselves to tolerate, living on daydreams of what their children would become and of a secure, pleasant retirement. From the pastiness of their skin and the cut of their clothes, you see that most have just enough to get by and to

occasionally vacation in Jean, playing the nickel slots and sneezing all over the buffet. This wasn't what anybody dreamed of.

We don't educate our young anymore, not really, not most of them; and we have no use for our aged. Who and what have we become? And what do we expect to come forth from such a state?

If you're pushing 60, as I am, and you still command most of your faculties, you look at them and vow, "*Not me, not ever.*" But who knows? In 15 years anything, even a bus to Jean, might be better than sitting uselessly in a room, unable to be what you've been and unvalued for anything else, no longer expecting the phone to ring, surrounded by a high-speed America you can't keep up with, and not quite ready or able to die. You might do anything to get out of that room. Even go to Jean. I'm old enough to know that what can happen to others can happen to you. Like that poker maxim in David Mamet's *House of Games*, incanted when somebody loses: "It happens to the best, it happens to the rest."

But not everybody arrives at Jean that way. For some, this is as far as they can go. There's a battered gray Toyota pickup in the parking lot. It's got a crack in the windshield and old Burger King wrappers on the seat. In the bed of the pickup are two soggy cardboard boxes, a rusted muffler, and two spare tires. Under the pickup, when I got here 11 days ago, was a huge puddle of oil. By now the desert winds have dried up what the spring rains haven't washed away. That pickup hasn't moved these 11 days. Given the size of that oil slick, it probably can't; sooner or later the management will notice and have it towed -- or not. The driver may have cursed it hotly for its final breakdown or patted it affectionately -- *Goodbye, Old Paint, I'm leavin' Cheyenne* -- for not breaking down for keeps in the middle of the Mojave. Two things about the owner: He or she is from Alabama (the license plate), and he or she is, as the bumper sticker announces, the *Proud Parent of a U.S. Marine*. One of those kids who trained hard, risked his life, entered Baghdad thinking he was a liberator, and is now faced with hundreds of thousands of Shiites demonstrating against Bush and against American occupation? One of those barely educated kids whose Alabama offered two choices: dead-end poverty or the military? Obviously, the parent couldn't stand Alabama anymore either and got as far as Jean and maybe hitched to Vegas -- a person, say, in their 40s, staying in a shelter and riding Vegas buses to interview for any job at all?

He or she is going to have a tough time finding anything. The housekeeping crew in this gambling hall (small Mexican Indians who know one English phrase -- "You need service?" is their answer to any question), some of them are men. I've been coming to Nevada for 25 years and I've never seen that before. Latin and tribal men don't endure the indignity of "woman's work" unless they're very, very desperate. Jobs must be mighty scarce. Imagine the guts required to make your way in an Anglo world with just those three words. (Imagine, too, the repetitive humiliations of the tall waitress at the lunch counter who speaks in a flat exhausted voice and tries not to smile, not even to speak, because all her front teeth are rotten. Dental insurance is not one of her benefits.)

Me, I've been here nearly two weeks because I had a lot of writing to do in a short time and there's *nothing* else for me to do in Jean. (I get no fun out of gambling when I can't afford to lose.) A spacious well-tended smoking room on the 12th floor for \$25 a night, a desert view of maybe a hundred miles, the moon getting full and waning right outside my window, a constantly changing sweep of the clouds of spring storms, and, for about five minutes in the wee hours one night, snow; a little airfield near the gambling hall where I watch the small planes take off and land, wondering who would *fly* here?!

And I-15 stretching 30 miles to the south, as busy at three in the morning as it is at three in the afternoon -- we're that kind of country now. Once a day, I drive into Vegas for a decent meal (my stomach rebelled in Jean after two days of something like dysentery), bringing back sandwich and breakfast fixings to the room, replenishing my cigarettes and whiskey. And going out into the cold night to sit on the back steps of the "South Tower" (tower!), wake myself up with the chill of the desert, and gaze a mile or so east at the Sandy Hill Correctional Center at the foot of the mountains. It's a big prison. Must house hundreds. Knife fights, beatings, rapes. You feel all that throbbing into the night. And you walk through the gambling hall and there are banks of slots topped by bright circular neon where, every 20 seconds or so, a canned chorus yells *Wheel ... of ... FORTUNE!*

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