

The Emerald City

# The Emerald City

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A young couple goes on vacation in a large city out west and get more experiences than they thought they would.

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The wheel caught my eye as I walked into the airport lobby. It sparkled green, flashing vividly into my tired eyes. I knew I was in a city that liked its gambling; still, the sight of a roulette wheel in an airport was quite jarring. It was surrounded by several loud, busy slot machines. I couldn't be sure if I wasn't hallucinating after the long flight from Hartford, Connecticut; still, it all seemed to be real. They got people coming in and going out. As my girlfriend struggled to carry our bags, I viewed the roulette wheel one more time. It spun around in a vicious circle as I staggered out of the lobby, vainly attempting to keep up with my girlfriend.

It was night as we stepped outside of the airport to flag a taxi cab. The glare of the artificial lights blinded me; I became disoriented for a bad moment. This city had a million lights, and every one of them seemed to be shining in my face. My girlfriend dragged me into a faded, yellow cab. The filthy seat cushions were torn, and the crushing stench of cigarette smoke overcame me. The driver wore a straw cowboy hat and sported a shabby jean jacket. His walrus mustache bore streaks of gray, and as he spoke his tobacco-stained teeth showed through a smile without warmth.

"Where y'all going?" he inquired.

"The Leprechaun Hotel, please," answered my girlfriend with her distinctive British accent. "And please take the quickest route," she added with meaning.

Our driver didn't seem to have heard the last part. "Nice old Irish hotel," he commented. "Hear tell it was built by some Japanese firm," he casually informed us.

The driver had his radio turned up rather high. The Steely Dan song "Do it Again" blared from decrepit loudspeakers. I sat transfixed by the sight of the turning of the meter. It seemed like the longer I stared at it, the faster it turned. I had never been in either this cab or this city; yet I knew that this had all happened in the past. It had been another time, another life. I knew that I would pay the fare; there was no escaping my karma.

We arrived at the hotel. It glittered green, with a small leprechaun adorning the top of the building. This was the end of the rainbow. This was where I would find my pot of gold. My girlfriend attempted to argue with the cab driver about the high fare.; I paid the driver all he wanted plus the tip he had not earned. My girlfriend was British and didn't understand; it was always known that I would be robbed by this hick, and he knew it as well as I did. We had agreed upon it in that other time.

Our room was enormous, frigidly cold with air-conditioning blasting a welcome to us. The room's mini-fridge contained mini-bottles of Bailey's Irish Cream. Just enough of a taste so that we would buy more. We showered and dressed; the night was young and we were hungry. As we strolled outside the sheer size of the adjoining hotels astounded me; mind you, I am easily astounded. They towered over us, each one boasting its own casino. Each one of these seemed to carry a theme, one had a circus complete with clowns, another had a Roman emperor complete with a circus. I suddenly spotted the Old Wrangler fixture that I recognized from a U2 video. I got the impression that he was older than the other light fixtures; he had watched the dreamers come and go forever. Only he knew that the city only existed in a dream.

We turned a corner; the endless wave of casinos ended abruptly in a square of brightly-lit restaurants. Green-illuminated neon Chinese characters captured our attention. We walked into an odd Chinese eatery; the customers were all Asian and the people serving them were all white. My girlfriend sat at a glossy table while I searched for the Men's Room. I soon found it and entered. It was dark, though tiny red candles perched on the ceramic ledge cast an eerie glow upon the toilet. I aimed for the circle of water, trusting to my luck. A

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Mandarin ditty sung by a wailing woman heightened my sense of isolation and despair. With a final flush, I went back into the light.

The smiling, happy faces of the Asians infected me with their merriment. I grinned like a fool as I made my way back to my girlfriend. She informed me that I was grinning like a fool. We ate a quiet dinner of ribs and french fries, then retreated back to the shelter of our hotel.

On the second day of our trip we went shopping for souvenirs. I bought an authentically cheap Indian drum. It had the name of an Indian chief on its surface, where one was supposed to play a tom-tom. It had genuine imitation leather wrapped around a coffee-can. It had been authentically made in China, as had the middle-aged lady wearing feathers and a headress who sold it to me. I overpaid her, as we both knew I must. I filled my plastic bags with other, even tackier items. I somehow felt that I had come closer to buying the dream.

We ambled down a dreary, dusty street. I was soon accosted by a rough-looking man who forced an advertisement into my hand. It would appear that just outside the limits of the city, prostitution was legal. A naked woman beckoned to me from the crumpled paper, imploring me to buy her wares. Her eyes seemed sad, and I was tempted. But my girlfriend quickly snatched the paper from my hands, tossing it back at the rough-looking man. "Do you mind?" she scolded him. I don't think he actually did.

We strolled past a war store, where Nazi helmets and swastikas rested peacefully in a glass window display. An elderly man in a skull cap was carefully arranging the merchandise for maximum exposure. Next door to this store, an Elvis suit hung listlessly upon an aging mannequin. I briefly wondered where the magic was that the King had found in this city. I turned and spotted a homeless woman staring at me. Our eyes met, and in that fraction of a second we dated, made love and broke up. She tuned away, limping as she dragged her plastic garbage bags down the street of gold. I knew that this was the land of milk and honey.

I chanced to view a gift shop that offered old gold coins and other such treasures. I wanted to add to my collection, so I went in. An enormously fat woman behind a glass display case seemed to be the owner of the establishment. I had to wait for her equally-corpulent husband to push her wheel-chaired frame through a narrow door. This set off an alarm. Five minutes later, as I was walking through the two dollar t-shirts two hulking men in spandex bicycle suits stopped me, pointing their pistols at my head. So this is a hold-up, I thought.

"Who are you?!" the first oaf demanded. It was a good question, but I didn't understand why he was asking it of me. He repeated the question, sticking his pistol in my chest for emphasis.

"He's a customer," the fat woman in the wheelchair quickly told the man. "It was an accident. I set off the alarm" she informed him.

I began to walk to the front entrance. So, they were police officers. Wearing spandex suits. And not identifying themselves as police officers. I probably should have been shot down as I fingered the two dollar t-shirts. It would have made a better story.

We got into a rental car and drove to Death Valley. There was miles of sand and rock. The heat was the attraction for me. And the silence. I felt the thirst of death. We stopped for a moment to examine our mao. A snake slithered past us, crawling its way through the dust that God had condemned him to eat. He had already slithered through the streets of the city. I would overpay him as well. This was also understood.

On the last day we climbed onto an old city bus to take one last look at the city. I stared at the sad, tired faces of the passengers. I wondered if any of them had ever visited the casinos. I suddenly realized that this was th

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ereal face of the city. I once more felt the thirst and silence of the desert. And then I realized that I was the snake. I was the one who had slithered blindly through the cit's dusty streets.

After waiting for a few uncomfortable hours at the hotel, our taxi came an d picked us up. It would have made a great ending to the trip if it had been the hick again, but sadly it wasn't. A young Spanish woman with back, flowing curls drove us back to the airport. She smiled with sorrow at me as I picked up my bag and turned to exit her cab. In her eyes I found the magic that I had failed to find anywhere else in the city. This wild one's bittersweet grin fashed at me too briefly, then she was gone into the twilight of the desert.

We hurried to check in our luggage for our time was slipping away. I took one last look around the lobby; I wanted an impression, a snapshot memory tp butn into my memory for eternity. But all I saw were some old tourists huddled around the roulette table, as the wheel kept spinning around and around. I would be born, live, and die many times as that wheel spun around, the cycle never ending.

It had been a good trip. My girlfriend and I had bought an experience in this city. It had been my first time to Las Vegas, Nevada.

And I knew I would never return.

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