

## The Vegas Story

Mark Wilhelm

I couldn't help but overhear you boys telling stories over here. Telling your big tales, eh? Your great victories, your shining moments? Comparing dicks, are ya—length, girth, looks? Well, I've got a dick to compare with all of yours. It's not as pretty as yours, not all neat and trimmed. It doesn't stand at attention quite as nice as yours, but it's sure to put a bit of wither in 'em.

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Oh, did I interrupt? Is it not my turn to talk? When is it ever anyone's turn anyway? I never got my turn, and you don't hear me complaining. Besides, you've got a lot to learn if you think the world works by turns. Now will you please just let an old man tell you a story? It's not asking much. I just want to tell you my story and then I'll be on my way.

It starts back in '53. I was thirty-one and working as a clerk at the front desk of a hotel and casino in Vegas. It was a nice place—no Fabulous Flamingo, not so ritzy as all that, but definitely a place for upper-class customers. Anyway, this chum comes in one morning and asks if I can tell him what room this other chum's staying in. He says the guy's name is Walter Hopkins. So I check my ledger and tell him I'm sorry but he just checked out this morning. The guy asks if I could give him Hopkins' address so he can write him. He says it's very urgent. I tell him unfortunately I can't give out that information because it's strictly confidential. I suggest that he write his letter to Hopkins now and give it to me so I can forward it for him. This guy pulls his hand out of his pocket, puts two-fifty on the counter, and asks again, real cool, if I could give him Hopkins' address. Now, I was looking at the guy before, but I wasn't really looking at him, you understand?

He was just some chum at the front desk—there's dozens of 'em every day. But now I look at him. Back then two-fifty was worth about what twenty bucks is worth today. It was the size of the bribe that caught me off-guard. If it was much larger, maybe five or ten, then I'd have known something fishy was going on. Any lower and it would've been obvious this chum wasn't really too

desperate to get in touch with old Hopkins. But two-fifty...how do you figure that? It's in the gray area. It's the amount of money you'd be thrilled to find in your trouser pockets but wouldn't be too broken up about if you lost. A two-fifty bribe is unreadable.

So I look the guy over. He's real average looking. Round face, slicked brown hair, clean-shaven, white shirt, navy tie, khaki trousers and black shoes. Nice looking, well dressed, but not over-dressed. No zoot suit and fedora. Totally average, run-of-the-mill. And his face isn't giving anything away, either: he's got his poker face on, playing it real cool, just standing there with his fingers on the bills and his eyebrow cocked, waiting.

So I take the money. I figure: what could it hurt? It's just an address. That's public information; you can get it anywhere. Besides, at that point in my life I was glad to snatch up any extra cash I could get my hands on. The wife had just popped out a fourth kid, and it wasn't exactly cheap living in Vegas. Plus, I had a bit of a gambling problem in those days. Couldn't stop myself. What money I didn't gamble away I spent on liquor to forget about all the money I did gamble away. Talk about a vicious cycle. The wife ended up leaving me because of that. Took the kids with her. But that's an old story. People have told that same story thousands of times.

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What? Christ, son, can't you keep quiet for five minutes? I'm trying to tell ya a story and you're cutting in and trying to get me off track? Why don't you just let me decide what's important and what's not, huh? Don't you worry about my ex-wife; this story isn't about her.

Anyway, like I was saying, I take the money and give the guy the address in L.A. that Hopkins listed. He says thanks and leaves, and that's that. I take my two-fifty and buy a few dozen pulls at the slots and a couple shots of whiskey. Things go back to normal for a while.

Maybe a week later I'm reading the L.A. Times like I do every Sunday, and I'm flipping through the obituaries section, and I see a name that catches my eye. Walter Hopkins of L.A. I can't remember his address anymore, but it matched the one in the hotel register—I even double-checked the ledger when I went back to

work the next day. It was my Hopkins. The obit claimed he was a real family man: outlived by his loving wife and daughter.

I'll tell ya, boys: it's a funny thing when you think you might be responsible for someone's death. Of course the obit didn't say how he died—they don't wanna muck up the pretty sentiments by discussing the nitty-gritties. But there was something rotten about the whole thing. This cool character comes into my hotel and bribes me for information on Hopkins, and then Hopkins turns up dead. You try not getting yourself stuck on that, tell me how it goes.

At first it was kind of like my own personal murder mystery. I ran through that morning dozens of times in my head. Fifty times, a hundred times. Analyzing that bird, that slick son of a bitch—every movement, every gesture, the enunciation of every syllable of every word. Who the fuck was he and what was his beef with Hopkins?

I came up with scenario after scenario: Hopkins had run up a gambling debt with a member of organized crime—ranging from a no-name small-time loan shark to Meyer Lansky himself—and the bird had come to collect. Hopkins owed the guy some money and the guy decided to snuff him out. This guy had known Hopkins for years and always hated his guts and finally decided to end his miserable life. Hopkins met the guy at the casino and somehow pissed him off—beat him in a hand of cards, tried to punch his lights out, spilled his drink on him, stole his lucky machine, talked too loud. The guy wasn't really after Hopkins at all: he killed him to get at his wife. Or someone in his family. The guy was having an affair with Hopkins' wife and decided to take Hopkins out of the picture completely. Hopkins had stolen the guy's wife from him and he was out to settle the score. This bird was a serial killer who'd picked out Hopkins as his next victim. Or he was just completely fuckin' insane and picked a person to murder at random.

I wracked my brain over it for weeks, but I couldn't get any closer to a solution. That fucker was completely unreadable. He could've been anybody—he might as well have been every character I'd imagined up and none of 'em. Whenever I tried to pin him down in my head he'd wriggle away and change shapes. And

that goddamn two-fifty. You tell me, boys: who the fuck bribes with two-fifty? Anybody, that's who. If there was one certain type of person who'd bribe with two-fifty, then I could've made some headway in figuring the whole thing out. But anyone could bribe with two-fifty.

I started to get sick of it. It wasn't fun anymore. It wasn't a game; it was an obsession. I needed to figure it out, and every time I tried I couldn't, and that only made me need to solve it even more.

I'd lie awake at night—couldn't fall asleep, couldn't stay asleep. Of course the new kid was always screaming those days, but I barely noticed it. I practically ignored the family. I was always paranoid at work: for some reason I kept thinking that bird was gonna show up at the casino again. I was eyeballing every other chum that walked into the place, trying to pick that totally average face out of the crowd. I could've sworn I spotted him at least a dozen times.

After a while I started telling myself: hey, maybe Hopkins wasn't murdered. After all, there hadn't been any report of a police investigation. Maybe he got in a wreck, or had a heart attack, or fell and broke his neck, or drowned, or overdosed on sleeping pills, or hung himself, or slit his wrists. Just said fuck it all to his two-story house on beachfront property and his loving wife and daughter. Those were comforting thoughts. But that fuckin' chum and his fuckin' two-fifty. The whole thing had been too fishy for that bird not to be involved. Jesus—old Hopkins could've stayed at any hotel in Vegas, but he just had to bring his dirty laundry to me, didn't he?

I'll tell ya, boys: there's no happy ending to this story. I hit the tables hard and the bottle harder. I just couldn't take it anymore. I was guilty, boys, guilty as sin. I was sure I'd caused old Hopkins' death, but I couldn't quite admit it to myself. If I'd just been able to figure out what had happened, if I just knew why, then maybe I could've gotten some kind of closure. But there wasn't any closure for me—there ain't no closure like that in life. I made my closure with slots and scotch. And that's all there is to tell.

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Yes, that's it. What, you didn't like how things turned out? You think I did? Would you rather I'd tracked down that bird and

figured out what happened? Maybe rub him out like the stain he was? Would you rather I'd told the police what happened so they could investigate Hopkins' death? Would you rather I'd gone to Hopkins' wife and kid and told 'em how sorry I was for accepting that bribe? Yeah, well, I wish I'd done those things, too. But I didn't. I didn't do any of that.

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You wanna know the point, huh? The point is for you to shut up and listen, son. You boys have done more than enough talking, telling your bullshit stories—your grand adventures and your great escapes. I figure it's my turn to talk now. I want to talk, you see? I need to talk and you all need to hear a story about real life—a story that doesn't end with a win. That's a real fuckin' story for ya.

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Don't you analyze me, boy. Yeah, I said I needed to talk. I'll admit it: I never told anybody about all that business with Hopkins until now. You boys are the first people I ever told. But so what? You all needed to hear it just as much as I needed to tell it.

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Because you're young and stupid, that's why. I see what type of people you boys are. You're the kind 'a chums that play the tough guy act, put on a big show and pretend like you're stone-cold, like nothing ever gets under your skin. If you've got problems you play 'em off like they're not as big as they really are. I'll tell ya: you keep playing like that and you'll end up alone and miserable.

You'll start drinking and gambling and throwing your life away, and before you know it your wife'll cut out because she doesn't understand what's wrong with you because you never had the stones to tell her about it. And then you'll be fucked, and you'll stay fucked until you finally learn to drop the act and deal with your life. Trust me: I've been around the block a few times. That's how it always ends for tough guys like you.

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...huh? Did I say...well, sure, I gambled before, and drank. It was Vegas, for Christ's sake. Did I say I was hooked on all that? I guess that's not entirely true; maybe I lied about that. It didn't re-

ally get bad until after the Hopkins thing. But...but what does that matter? That doesn't make any difference. No, that doesn't make a difference at all.

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Well, years of hard work is how. It ain't easy to shake something like that, you know: how are you supposed to give up the one thing that makes life seem bearable? It takes long enough just getting to the point where you want to give it up, believe me. Lots of years spent wallowing, lots of therapy, lots of time spent thinking about what I'd lost because of it.

My first wife, Charlotte—Christ, did I miss her. The kids, too, but I never really knew 'em that well, you know? They were still young when she took 'em back East. But Charlotte...she was always good to me. But she didn't understand because I never told her about old Hopkins and how I couldn't get him out of my head. I didn't want to tell her: I was ashamed and I didn't want her to know about it. I thought I could get through it on my own, but that just pushed us further apart. So she left, and I never spoke to her much again.

And my other wives—I had two more after Charlotte. They came along after I'd gotten over the gambling and drinking, but it didn't make a difference: both those marriages ended the same as the first. I never told 'em about everything...about anything. I kept it all corked up; I thought I could handle it without telling anyone about it. I still didn't want to admit it to myself, you know? But that shit just eats at you and kills everything—kills any kind of relationship you're trying to have. So it turned out I was no good at marriage. No good at all that.

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You don't need to apologize, boys, though I appreciate the thought. In fact, I almost can't believe you'd feel sorry for anything, considering the royal prick I've been acting. But I imagine you've about figured me out by now. I'm a real piece of work, aren't I? I know you know why I'm doing all this, but I'm begging you not to say it; let me keep some of my pride. You boys have done well with that so far.

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No, I guess I never did introduce myself, did I? The name's Roy. And I have to admit, it's damn good to meet you.