Debbie smiled herself into the hot tub. "I'm gonna meet Mr. Right," she said, tying up her hair.

She had the blonde, bronzed and hooked look you see everywhere in Las Vegas, the look of expensive cosmetic surgery. A high-quality human luminous-man look. A dove landed on the deck palms beside us. I looked up and saw a series of green and orange lights streaking across the night sky.

"What do you think that is?"

"Oh, just some old missile tracing," Debbie said. "It'll blow in the paper tomorrow." She turned her sights. "Did you see the La Hoya flight? I hadn't, though, I knew there had been lots of money riding on it. Debbie had served drinks at the flight. She'd met a number of nice gentlemen and given them her phone number. Evidently, she was hopeful, and I thought it would be mean to remind her that we were in Vegas, the city of a thousand private secrets, toplist bars and nice gentlemen with wives and kids back home.

"I don't think they should let older women be social secretaries," said Debbie, contemplation her future. "Cellulite is an off-patterning," I said. I thought that was one way - a very Las Vegas way - of looking at it and we fell silent. A rush of traffic went by. The air was thick, as though something were burning.

"I'll be a greater by the time I start falling apart," said Debbie. Her orthodontic work made a clicking sound. "It's more dignified - though I'll be married by then, of course.

Las Vegas is full of half-built Debbies. Seven thousand people move into the city every month, drawn by the shiny lights and the non-stop dollar bills. But for ever get what they came for, Las Vegas is a temporary mirage, a city built to fulfill the average dream of the average visitor on their average 3-8 day stay.

It was a hot September night, and I was stuck in line of cars heading out towards the airport. Eight hundred flights take off and touch down at McCarran Airport every day, making it one of the busiest airports in the world. Last year, there were 40 million visitors.

I'd been in Vegas 11 weeks - many times the average stay - researching a novel, and my mind had grown used to blanking out the saw electric billboards, the lines of tigers and the audacities for cheap eats and loose slots. On that September night, I drove into the neon clashing with a feeling of disquiet. Everyone knows Vegas is made-up worlds, a dirt Disneyland, but I had seen things over the weeks, to build a picture of this town beneath the stink and what I had found was troubling me.

If there's a single truth about Las Vegas, it is that nothing on Earth is efficiently caught in its teeth. Is a city where $17 billion is a year.
range had offered me an Usi for $100, saying he could pack it so that customs would never know. He said it was light and woman-friendly. Handy for self-protection.

The cult of individualism that stocks gun ranges encourages Las Vegas to avoid its problems. A population accustomed to being subsidised by the gaming and rooming taxes imposed on out-of-towners, to paying no state income, inheritance or capital-gains tax is suspicious of collective needs.

When the question of failing schools was raised a while ago, Vegas residents suggested that the casinos fork out for improvements.

I drove on south, past the Corinthian plinths, the pyramid, the Ferris wheels, the third-size Statue of Liberty that make up the Strip’s phenomenal skyline. A group of men in suits — most likely conventioners from one of the city’s 3,000 annual conventions — tumbled out of the Riviera Hotel and into a mini-bus, headed perhaps for one of the string of legal roadside brothels that have set up across the Clark County line in Lincoln and Nye.

“One day this will be a great archaeological enigma,” prophesies Myram Borders, head of the Las Vegas News Bureau. “An Egyptian pyramid next to an Arthurian castle next to a Roman villa next to a volcano next to a pirate ship.” By the end of this year, there will be more: the $1.3 billion Bellagio, inspired by the Lake Como resort; the $750m Paris with its replica Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower; the $1.5bn Project Paradise, the $2bn Venetian. In the hunt for profit, Vegas has created an expectation it must now fulfill. Its visitors demand reinvention, so after five years of marketing itself as a family destination, Vegas is growing up. Family Entertainment Vegas is dead and gone. Long live Adult Resort Las Vegas.

Davis Jr is playing to an all-white crowd on weekend furlough from the southern-Californian suburbs. The movie stars are moving in, and before you know it, Las Vegas has become the world’s most famous little town, a desert oasis watered by a silver stream of money.

East Coast banks won’t touch the place. It takes a loose alliance of Mormon bankers and Midwest mobsters to bankroll the city’s swish new resort hotels and carpet-joint casinos, and Vegas becomes a financial frontier, where racketeering, tax evasion and money laundering are the accepted modus operandi. Millions are skimmed off the gaming Drop and despatched to the Chicago and Cincinnati outfitts and, ever so often, someone’s bones turn up in a shallow grave out in the sage. But still, everyone knows everyone; and everyone knows that no one who sticks to the rules gets hurt.

By the mid-Fifties, the Strip is smoking. Sinatra is frontlining at the Sahara, Dean Martin is drunk in the Dunes and Sammy details, the inconvenient facts, the bits in between. Early on in my stay, I rang Robert McCracken, a well-known local historian, and we fixed up a time to meet. The following day his daughter called to say her father had become suddenly indisposed.

"I’m here for a few weeks yet," he offered. The daughter coughed. “I think my father is likely to be too busy,” she said.

"For 12 weeks?"

"Yes," she said. "For 12 weeks.

What kind of town is it, I asked myself, where the local historian won’t talk? Vegas has rewritten its past, cutting out the inconsistencies, the uncomfortable facts. The librarian at the University told me that “researchers have only really just got interested in the city’s history”, and there are few books. What I did find out is that the official line — from Frontier Vegas and Buggy Vegas through Rat Pack Vegas and Mob Vegas to Corporate Vegas — doesn’t allow for the diversifying complexities of the place.

For example: it wasn’t simply the Mob ‘n’ Mormons who built Las Vegas. Buggy Siegel and his boss, the petulant Meyer Lansky, were Jewish. Casino moguls Sheldon Adelson and Steve Wynn are Jewish, too. The town boomed not because gambling was legal but because the railroad ran right through it. And, far from being the centre of licence it likes to think itself, Vegas was racially segregated right into the mid-Seventies. (Twenty years before, Buggy Siegel booked Lena Horne to perform at the Flamingo, but made her sleep elsewhere and instructed the chambermaid to burn her bed-linen.)

The trouble with the schematic history is not so much that it isn’t true, but that no one really cares either way. So long as the narrative fits the present’s purposes, which is to say as long as the past boosts the present’s profits, there are few in Vegas who will bother to question it. History has, in large part, been privatised. Almost every historical “attraction” in and around Vegas is controlled by other companies, designed more push product than to present the past.

In the north-west of the city lie the remains of a cruciform fort built by Mormon settlers in 1855. A tiny, staved-in plaque marks the spot, and on all the occasions that I drove past it, I never once saw anyone there. The News Bureau’s official list of

The Guardian Weekend, June 6, 1998
The Mob swells its profits by expanding its reach, but listed companies are always under pressure to increase their shareholder dividends from existing operations, and casino stocks are both notoriously overvalued and volatile. "They've gotten greedy," observed John L. Smith, meaning that every part of a hotel-casino operation is now expected to turn a profit. In the Mob days, a casino would only report its overall results. Free lounge acts and big-fish stars were often just loss leaders designed to bring in the gamblers. That's all gone. Virtually nothing's for free in Vegas now.

In the Mob days, free lounge acts and big stars were often loss leaders designed to bring in the gamblers. That's all gone.

It was the kind of freedom that, as a woman, is unavailable to me elsewhere.
neurologist Alan Hirsch sprayed a pheromonal scent called Odorant 1 into the slot casinos at the Las Vegas Hilton and increased the house Drop by 45 per cent. The only reality Las Vegas has not yet learned how to cheat is the persistent presence of mortality. But even then it has a go. Up in the north-west of the city lies the sunset-pink pall of Sun City, an "age-restricted community", where southern California's over-55s play golf and screen out the discomforting memento mori that might come from engaging in a world full of folks younger than themselves. I drove up there one day and got shown around. We strolled from golf course to hot tub to pool. Every so often a trophy wife jogged past, making a disconcerting, almost vulgar, show of youth. My companion said that, whatever you might think of age-restricted communities, they were "a clean way to bolster the economy".

Perhaps it's not surprising, with so many retirees moving to Vegas, that it is more profitable to be an undertaker in Nevada than in any other part of the US. I learned this at the Association of Funeral Directors, a group of 6,000 undertakers gathered in Vegas for their annual convention. It was, coincidentally, the anniversary of my father's death and only a week or so after I had personally received a death threat from a Vegas attorney who represents many of the mobster-types in town, and played himself in Martin Scorsese's movie of the Seventies mobster movie, Casino. We were at a fund-raiser for a school and I'd crossed him over something. He leaned toward me and whispered: "There's a four-foot hole waiting out in the desert for you." It was a joke, but all the same, what with that and my dad's death, my mind was rather tied up in mortality.

Though you had to walk through a Star Trek exhibition, a casino and a coffee shop to get to it, I found the display of coffins, hearse and all the vast paraphernalia of death at the convention vaguely comforting. Here, it seemed to me, there was at least a glimpse of reality, albeit rather stark. As luck would have it, the American poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch was at the convention. I'd read and enjoyed his book of memoirs, The Undertaking, and I was curious to know what he thought of Vegas.

"It's a place where people have turned pleasure into sickness," he remarked. "Don't you find it disturbing?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Everywhere has a soul," I was beginning to think that death might actually be the key to understanding the real Las Vegas. The official history touches on Las Vegas's long-time proximity to the Nevada atomic weapons test site, but focuses on the city's attempts to make light of its darkly-heard neighbour. During the Fifties, when mushroom clouds were regular fixtures over the Las Vegas horizon, the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a Miss Atomic Beauty pageant, there was an atomic hairdo (a version of the beehive) and the casinos served "atomic" cocktails. Tourists would be hussled out to vantage points to watch the mushroom clouds.

Never mind that the dawnwind population living to the north-east of Las Vegas began to suffer birth defects, that somewhere between 10,000 and 75,000 children developed thyroid cancer. Vegas celebrated. The Nevada Test Site brought good jobs and better money and, most likely, Vegas didn't feel it had a choice.

Umbrales to shake my new idea, I went up to the Nevada Test Site, 65 miles north of Vegas. It was at the NTS (which, along with the Nellis Airforce Range, occupies an uninhabited area of 5,000 square miles of the Nevada Desert) between 1951 and 1992 that 928 atmospheric and underground atomic and thermonuclear devices were tested, 24 of them jointly with the UK.

LaTanya, a public-relations official for the Department of Energy, took me through security ("Warning: unauthorised personnel present, no classified discussion") and we drove out to Frenchman Flat, where many of the early atmospheric tests were conducted. It was an eerie grey colour. The sage brush and creosote bushes seemed dead to me, but LaTanya said that was just the way the desert looked. Actually, it wasn't the way the rest of the desert, brightened by El Nino's rains, looked at all, but didn't care to argue. Scattered about were the twisted remains of materials experiments and Boom Towns, where mannequins dressed as Fifties (nuclear) families were placed in Fifties homes and blown to shreds. We passed by animal pens, where living pigs and sheep were blasted into clouds of blood. "Remnants, where they exist, are kept frozen here on site," said LaTanya.

We drove 150 miles that morning, passing huge falls in the earth carved out by bombs and huddles of experimental huts and bunkers and razor-wired areas marked: "Hazardous, Do Not Enter. As far as the eye could see, the road was layered where the quakes from bombs had folded it. We passed a sign reading: "Stop For Convoys With Blue Flashing Lights".

"Who needs to be told to stop for an A-bomb convoy?" I asked. "You'd be surprised," said LaTanya. "People overtake. You can even get a parking ticket here. The sheriff comes round." As if that anchored the place and somehow made it normal.

We passed by the grey stump of a mountain melted by the unexpected venting of a bomb three times the size of the one dumped on Hiroshima. "You can't go into Smoky without radiation suits and special clearance," said LaTanya, pointing to the nuke neck.

"I think I'll pass," I said. Some parts of the NTS have been closed off permanently. Plutonium Valley, for example, is a no-go area, and if Congress approves, by 2010, Yucca Mountain in the south-west corner could follow it, becoming a permanent repository for 80,000 metric tons of high-level nuclear waste — as much as all of Plutonium cemetery. I couldn't resist asking about Area 51, where the US Airforce supposedly keeps UFO and alien remains.

"There is no Area 51," said LaTanya. "The area you mean is up by Groom Lake." I supposed I'd have to come over and take a peek.

"We can't do that," she said. "We'd get into trouble." We drove instead to Sedan, a rural village 1,280ft wide and 320ft deep, part of a 900-yard square shrouded in secrecy. We were shown the possibility of using A-bombs to widen the Panama Canal. The blast shifted 12 million tons of soil, but it was months before it was considered safe for scientists in radiation suits to venture into the crater, so they gave up on the idea of widening the canal. Fifty-five years later, nothing grows in Sedan. A hot wind fell over the lip. There were piles of tyres at the crater's base.

"They must be using it as a dump," volunteered LaTanya.

I do not pretend to be objective. Sedan Crater is the nearest place to Hell I have ever been. We sat in the Fifties canteen in Mercury, the Test Site town, and ate school dinner for lunch. After lunch we bartered for the coldest beer, and 1,000 people lived here, but it's a ghost town now, the perfectly preserved bowling alley and movie theatre used as stores. I spread out my official map of the NTS and retraced our day's journey with my finger. The map was quite obviously partial.

"This isn't a true representation is it?" LaTanya looked uncomfortable. "No," she said. That night I found Debbie in the hot tub again. I said: "Aren't you scared about the other day?"

"Oh no," she said. "Things like that don't bother me." Perhaps it isn't so surprising that Vegas thrives on a denial of the facts, when the gates to Hell are only 65 miles up the road.

I came grudgingly to admire Las Vegas. It is America's purpose-built escape from its puritanical traditions. And in a culture where the rich are often confused with the morally righteous, Vegas's lack of hypocrisy is a reminder of the Middle West. You can buy just about everything in Vegas except virtue. Often I was tempted to be offended by the city's amoral beauty, but with hindsight I realise that Vegas doesn't make us what we are. We are, after varying degrees, what Vegas knows us to be: greedy, libidinous, celebratory, scared, infantile, orgiastic, experimental, conforming and conservative.

Towards the end of my trip, my mother came to visit. We drove down Tropicana Avenue and hit the Strip at the New York- New York hotel. It was night and the lights shone like aspers. We drove past the pink porte cochère of Caesar's Palace. We watched the fake volcano going off. "Isn't this just marvellous?" my mum said, giggling with pleasure. We are double-decker ice-creams among the crowds of brilliant neon and below us, invisible to the eye, flowed the thick water of the silver stream. Thomas Lynch, the poet and writer, told me his aunt used to say that life is wonderful if you can resist temptation, and wonderful if you can't. That night, we watched the smugness of traffic and we felt our best selves. Mum didn't notice the vacant lots, the dust of building sites, the shops dumped at bus stops. She saw what Vegas wanted her to see.

"It's so enormous and tacky and beautiful," she said. And she was right. It was.