■

And There Was Evening and There Was Morning

JOHN D'AGATA

The first day

A LITTLE WARMTH, a little light. Afraid of the light, all of us. Armor of light. A-roving by light. Black as if bereaved of light. Carrying you into fields of light. Certain Slant of light. Children of the light. Cold light and hot shade. Come on, baby, light my fire. Common as light is love. Consider how light is spent. Danced by the light of the moon. Darkness and light alike to thee. Dawn's early light. Dear as light and life. Dim religious light. Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. Everlasting light.

The second day

ON MY FIRST DAY in Las Vegas, I looked for the light.

In a digitized photo from its gold-encased press pack, the brightest light in the world beams atop a hotel. The Luxor Hotel is heralded as "The Next Wonder of the World," a $400 million black-glass pyramid perched at the tip of the Las Vegas Strip, and broadcasting nightly this white beam into space. Closest to the airport—"See Our Sphinx From The Air!"—it is a tourist's first landmark, a pilot's sure beacon. At the same size as Egypt's ancient wonder at Giza, the Luxor boasts an atrium with a gift-shop replica of King Tutankhamen's tomb, a lounge called "Nefertiti's," and an all-you-can-eat buffet at the Pyramid Café.

Sega debuts all its video games here; Motion Odyssey Movie Rides bump and grind guests through Egypt's history; at Accents, in the lobby, there is a cologne called Ramses; cartouches gleam eternally from the handrails, carpets, and every slot machine here—hieroglyph, *cherry;* hieroglyph, *lemon;* hieroglyph, *Ra, who gives life to wheat*—while we, upstairs, at 39 degrees, slant in our guest rooms unknowingly toward heaven.

Out of its apex the beam at Luxor soars ten miles into space. Bright, slim, straight. It reaches the clouds, the night, the vanishing point, but still does not disappear. At 40 billion candlepower, the Luxor's beam is the brightest, strongest, most visible light on earth. The FAA claims it can be seen from the air, 250 miles away, in LA. And even NASA recently confirmed that while orbiting the Earth one could read a newspaper easily by its light. Up there, only two human structures on earth are visible: the Great Wall of China and the light at the Luxor.

From where I sit in the back of the cab, the light looks like it's arched over us, a lure. The driver says he's new to the city.

"Still," he says, "I got this job real easy. All you gotta know is where you are in relation to Luxor."

Looking up at it for the first time on this night, my head out the window, the cab at a light, marquees humming on at the first hint of dusk, all I can think of is where the light goes, how far into forever, and if someone on the other side could be looking down it like a slide.

At first, I hardly notice the huge pyramid it issues from nor the rest of the Strip, the traffic, the crick in my neck, the way heat lingers all around us—6 p.m. and still high in the nineties—from lit marquees, from guest-room windows, from headlights, streetlights, and all our hearts, gambling on fire tonight.

"My wife," says the driver, "she says it's like Jesus's eyes, you know? Wherever you go, it follows."

I check in. Take my key. Head to my room in the "inclinator." Below, a sparkling cavern drops, windowless, belowground. According to the layout of ancient pyramids, the hotel's casino is Luxor's tomb. Cocktail waitresses wait by men at card tables, each woman wearing the same black wig, the same sarong, the long, long Hollywood eyes.

A Cleopatra counts out change. Her poker player tips in chips. The dealer rakes in all the bets, calls for bets, counts the bets. The slots chug out more change.

Everything glints accordingly.

Everything's still but chips.

Anything catching the light is gold.

Casino designers have long known what power light has on us. Walk into a casino built within the last decade and you will plunge, several feet, belowground. The natural light snuffed out. What illuminates these 100,000 square-foot spaces is the buzz, blink, and blur of tiny eye-level bulbs. Millions of them. The overhead lighting is indirect. The effect? Try to find your way quickly out of a casino. Try to maneuver over the thick, soft carpeting, the low-hung ceilings, the erratically rowed slot machines, through all these lights—orange, yellow, white—toward a tiny, singular, red *EXIT.*

We are awash in Las Vegas. Right now, through my window, the city drowns out everything in the desert. A few lights far away, from the old North End of town, blink soft echoes back. Ever since the new expansion of the South End of

Vegas with its splashier, brighter, more expensive hotels, the North End's older downtown district has been in sharp decline: 2 million visitors per year, compared to the brighter South End's 29 million.

To compete, the eight largest hotels downtown have recently pooled $79 million to design and build "The Freemont Street Experience," an outdoor, 80-foot-high, glass-and-steel cathedral vault that spans five blocks of sidewalk and street. At night, every hour, two million light bulbs blast on and off as lasers singe images of fighter jets, the Rat Pack, and dollars in the air.

They are fireworks that fall just feet out of reach. Some of us in the audience reach for them and stretch. All around me there are signs of new life downtown: families, couples, busloads of the elderly—all of us watching with our heads cocked up, all of us pointing to things shining up, all of our faces beneath bright stars.

Downtown was in decline, but now there are lights. "Come See What We've Done!" say the ads on the cabs, tempting us back to the new downtown attraction. I have seen its new lights.

I think they are good.

The third day

FLASH OF LIGHT across the sky. Forward the Light Brigade. Freedom's holy light. From grave to light. Garmented in light. Gates of light. God appears and God is light. God is light. Heaven's light forever shines. Hesperus entreats thy light. I am the light of the world. I came into a place void of all light. If light in thee be darkness. If once we lose this light. It giveth light unto all. Law not a light to see by. Lead me from darkness to light. Let the Big light in. Let there be light. Let your light shine. Light at the end of the tunnel. Light of an oncoming train. Light of the setting sun. Light of the body. Light of the world. Light of thy sword. Lift up the light of thy countenance. Live and love in God's light. Live out thy life as light.

The fourth day

AT A MALIBU RESTAURANT beside the sea, Joshua Thomas nods his head. Together we are making a list of light fetishes, and "Spiritual Encounters" tops it.

Josh rattles off all the best-selling book titles from recent years that have dealt with near-death experiences, visions of gods, bright lights, and airiness. *Embraced by the Light, The Light Beyond, Light After Life, Lessons from Light. . . .*

"Why else would religions picture their gods as endless sources of light?" Josh asks. "Everyone knows on some subconscious level that this is what gives us life, this is why we're here."

Josh gestures up toward the Malibu sun. I can almost glimpse his eyes behind shades.

Joshua Thomas is famous for having designed our brightest light, but the beam atop the Luxor is only one of many he's made. Josh and his company—Brite-Nite Worldwide Light-Tech Solutions—have brought to light the Who's Farewell U.S. Tour, the International Pow-Wow, the Hollywood Bowl, the Hollywood sign, the Los Angeles Olympics, and Walt Disney World, lighting up the amusement park on its twentieth anniversary with a seven-banded rainbow that arched a mile over "Main Street."

"But isn't bending light like that impossible?" I ask.

"All an illusion, my friend," Josh says, as he changes the subject to God.

"I figure I'm just reminding people of our roots," he says. "It used to be at night that we'd gather around campfires and worship the sun, praying that it would come back the next day. We did it for warmth, truth, and for protection against animals, but mostly, spiritually, we did it because it's the closest we could get to God. . . . These days, though, all we have are memories of that light, gleaming back at us in the stars."

Think of Prometheus. Zeus, as the story goes, became enraged one night as he looked down on all of us and glimpsed our little fires. They flickered across the world like stars. Yet it is not the fact that Prometheus steals these flames which infuriates Zeus. Rather, it is the sheer sight of all those "suns," private gods kindled by the hands of mere humans, which scares to death the King of Immortals.

I look up. There's a straw in Josh's mouth as he pauses to think. The wriggling of his fingers, gold rings, silver fork, the sun flickering off his hands like witchcraft.

When he grew up, Josh says, southern Indiana was full of "Protestants and wild weather." He'd go flying in a little piston plane through storms, he says, "And these clouds—these huge thunderheads on both sides of us—would leap across the sky and collide. Then there'd be this massive web of lightning all around us. But my dad and I would just go flying right through it!"

Was he scared?

No. The one thing the church taught him as a kid is that the world might end, eventually, but it will never end that way again.

"That's why light for me is so much more than a mere physics problem, or an aesthetic trick," he says. "For me, it's Truth. Light is, I mean. See, if you break light up into its component parts, then what you've really got is a rainbow, the spectrum. The Promise of the Old Testament. It's the symbol God sent Noah to tell him the world was safe again."

Ever since, Joshua Thomas has mastered light. Having majored in business and marketing in college, Josh is a quick wit, but he's remarkably unskillful on technical matters. He relies on a whole team of private electrical engineers to wrestle his sketches into reality.

"See, I'm a producer, man. A do-er," he says. "I get things done. Sometimes you don't have time to hear 'No.' You just gotta say 'Fuck it'"—he looks around, Malibu glances at us for an instant—"and just get on with your vision."

What struck me that day as I was speaking with Josh, and what has stayed with me since, is a vision of a man in love with sky. Meeting him

first at a gas station along the Pacific Coast Highway, I followed his black Chevy Blazer along the coast, into the mountains, and up toward the tiny cliffside restaurant he'd chosen for our lunch. On the way, I lost track of Josh's truck as it blazed up the coast, swerving between tourists and cruising local teens. Finally catching up with him, I wrote this down: *vanity plate, GRAVITY.*

He had stopped his truck in the middle of the highway. A surfer, feet in front of him, had just been struck down by another car.

The cops arrived.

Traffic jammed.

Josh got out of his car and called me over. "You're about to see something amazing," he said.

In moments, dozens of motorists, pedestrians, and golden-sunned bathers were in the middle of the street—heads cocked, shades on, ears alert for the copter that would fly over the mountains, circle the beach, and land smack in the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway.

From a hill on the right, a small, bearded, sunglassed man on a little red bike rode down the hill and stood beside us. It was Steven Spielberg.

Josh pointed and elbowed me. "Look at that," he said, giggling. "Beautiful, isn't it? It's an AL-80. Just look at that lateral descent!"

Yet what is even more striking about Joshua's sky than his almost single-minded obsession with imagining new ways to play with it, frame it, market it, and see it, is his consistent insistence on the necessity of it. At our table beneath the clouds, at the top of a small mountain, Josh dips into bowls of Mexican rice with his fingers, smacks his lips in Spanish, and lectures me about what is not just his *career* in light, but what he calls *the principal metaphor in all of Western thought.*

Dip.

Lick.

Smack.

Sky:

"Whether we're talking about cave art or Christianity, the Renaissance or this Luxor place, everyone's basically doing the same thing," Josh says. "And all of it's been going on since humans first opened their eyes."

Light = emotion, he says.

"We've known this for years. Hell, we've known it for centuries. Like in college, when I got into Zen meditation. You know how in Zen what you're supposedly going after is that so-called state of 'white light'? Well, all that really is is the pineal gland at work. You stimulate this little part of your brain and it secretes a fluid. It creates the sensation of being washed in light. Music does this, too. Architecture. Food. You name it. It's what we might call 'inspiration' in another context. And that's the great thing about all of this: that light literally is inspiration. It's hard-wired into us. Biological. Just think of someone going into a cathedral in Byzantium. Think of the stained glass, the gold furnishings, the thickness of the air! No buildings in the world were more magical at the time. The Church had the money, the technology, and some mysterious other power that allowed it to actually change the color of the air. Think about that! Think about how manipulative that was back then. We humans lived hundreds of thousands of years without artificial light. So we have to imagine someone living in pre-Edison days—living in darkness, living in fear—then suddenly some guy comes along with a burning cross, let's say, to brighten things. Well, in a pitch-black village this is the best thing going! It's warm because it's fire, it's inviting because it's a cross, and hell—it's spectacle! Don't you think people would want to follow that guy?"

Now Josh is excited. He jabs out points in the air with spicy fries.

As he talks, shadowy memories come to new light. All the glares outside my bedrooms, the woodstove at my grandmother's, a first kiss, sunburns, Mother's search for God . . .

Yet, when I try to grab onto Joshua's words, his enthusiasm, or even just his eyes, there are still only adjectives—only *brightest, resplendent, shimmering, bold.* Only *the principal metaphor in all of Western thought.*

There is nothing to touch, to pick apart, to know. Where are the natural philosophers who invented light, that tangible ether? Where, Aristotle, is your visual cone, the lines you sketched out like antennae from eyes, like a snare to catch light and feed it into our brains? Where is the light that spawned the Renaissance? And where does it go after flitting off our screens?

As a child, I remember looking at a photograph pulled out of my grandfather's deep wooden war chest. In this picture was a circle of 360 distinct pillars of white light, each beside a beer barrel, each lined around a field. All of them were buttressing the night up above. Looking down at it beside me in his house, my grandfather said quietly, "This is why I joined the war."

Now I know that the image is of one of Hitler's famous Nuremberg rallies. There are, perhaps, a million people in the photograph, and every one of them is bright with hopeful eyes.

The entire spectacle was designed for Hitler by Albert Speer, the erstwhile set-designer who helped prod a nation, and later a world, into war. His pillars of light have become so famous that no great opera can now be performed without them, no rock concert starts, no Hollywood premiere is premiered without first aiming his lights at the sky, grazing the darkness for an evil that we all hope dare not come. In fact, the searchlights that we use today are the same kind that Speer used at his Nuremberg rallies. And they are the same kind that crown the Luxor.

The impact of such lights is so potent that Speer's style is now known in lighting textbooks as the "Nuremberg Effect." What is its power?

I suggest, "A phallic symbol?"

"No," Josh says. "Think bigger than that. Think of the lighthouse at Pharos firing out to lost ships. Think of the Statue of Liberty first seen from Ellis Island. Think of symbolism, yes, but think, too, about the desperation that's inherent in our actions as humans when

we make these things, let alone when we look at them and cry."

Maybe it's because Las Vegas is the brightest city on earth that we feel at ease tempting ourselves there. There is something about overstimulating light which encourages risk: to spend more money than we really have; to eat more; drink more; party more; fuck more—all in the face of Lucifer. Deep below sea-level, near to his lair. It is this fallen dark spirit—whose name ironically translates into "Angel of Light"—whom we invite onto our laps for good luck as we spin the wheel, hurl the dice, look far up into night stars for advice, our last chip trembling on the table.

Elsewhere, there are other grand plans in the works for casting lights in the sky. Within the first few years of this new century, for example, a company called Space Marketing, Incorporated, plans to launch mile-wide display satellites into space—mylar billboards that will look as big as the sun and bear the logo or slogan or even the face of anyone who will be able to afford the few million dollars each ad will cost.

There's also news of a "new moon," as Russian scientists have called it—650 feet across and hovering above Siberia, designed to reflect light to those who spend months in darkness: to the villagers, the loggers, the miners, the banished.

And even Washington it seems has big plans for light, granting $40 million so far to the University of Alaska in order to test strategies for harnessing "those million amps at waste in the sky," those ghosts of the North called Aurora Borealis.

Meanwhile, outside, on the edge of the sea, the horizon is swallowing the rest of the day. Malibu is riding its last wave in. The cliff face crumbles into night.

I want to ask Josh about all these other lights, about whether he feels guilty for piloting a trend that could end up ruining the very sky he's in love with.

I look up at him through the dimming air as a thick pall of firmament falls over everything, and as he, quietly, looks out and says—to no one in particular, to no one in the world—"Nice blue."

The fifth day

MEN OF INWARD LIGHT. Neither joy nor love nor light. Noose of light. Not light, but darkness visible. People have seen a great light. Power and light. Purple light of love. Put out the light. Rage against the dying of the light. Something of angelic light. Stand in your own light. Strike Sultan's Turret with light. That light that lies in a woman's eyes. Those that rebel against the light. Thousand points of light. Thy light is come. Time's glory brings truth to light. To whom God assigns no light. Truth will come to light. Two thousand light years from home. Unveiled her peerless light. Walk while ye have light. We shall need no other light. What light through yonder window breaks.

The sixth day

LEAVING MY ROOM on the eighteenth floor, I overhear two kids outside in the hall daring each other to spit over the railing and hit something below in the hotel atrium.

Because we're so high up and slanting inward, one of the kids bets the other that a well-aimed spitball would probably fall straight into the Virtualand arcade.

They let one go as I walk past.

It shimmers as it drops—another sparkle among millions—then disappears.

Pthh.

Cheers.

It is time to turn on the light.

The Office of Attractions at the Luxor Hotel is a windowless, one-roomed, attractionless chamber filled with five desks, five women, and a chorus of two-way radios cackling nonstop.

I've got a short at Tut's, sector 1-4-8...

Need a clamp for the barges, over...

Fuck, it's hot...

Hey, Katie, when's that kid coming for the tour?

This last voice is Jed's, my Luxor light guide, and the only technician in the world who is allowed near the hotel's big beam. He was hand-picked for the job by designer Joshua Thomas and wooed away from Universal Studios in Florida. Among Las Vegas lighting technicians—the men and women who flip switches to turn volcanoes on; among those who illuminate fountains that dance to Frank Sinatra; among the programmers of computers that send fireballs into pirate ships, that spotlight roaring lions, that keep Christmas lights twinkling on imported pine trees—Jed wields the most powerful light switch in town.

"Sorry there," he says, wiping his hand before shaking mine. "We're short some men these days so I'm doing a lot of grimy work. You set with the bathroom?"

I look at him.

"There's no place to take a piss up there so you'll have to come all the way back down. And it's a bitch of a climb when you gotta go."

Negotiating a shortcut through the casino in his khaki Luxor jumpsuit, Jed leads the way like a guide through the Sahara.

Getting there is not easy.

Turned down after my first request to see the Luxor's light, I changed my name and tried again with the Public Relations office. I had to send them proof that I was a physics student researching light. I had to fax a prospectus. Had to sign a waiver. Had to pledge not to brag to my school peers that I got to visit the light. The power of the light is secret, they warned. But it is hard to imagine why. Most journals of lighting design have profiled Joshua Thomas, and most have already published diagrams of his lighting techniques. At this point, the light's only remaining secret lies in PR mystique.

I follow Jed. The inclinator takes us up 30 floors, deep into the crotch of Luxor. The highest guest floor angles so tightly toward the apex that there is only enough room for the Presidential Suite.

We go higher.

Through a secure door we scale a stairwell, climb two more floors,

open another door, and enter the bones of the building.

At this height, we could be among the ghosts of pharaohs. I look around. The walls are merely sky, a glass shell of the building only partially covered by insulation and wiring. The floor isn't solid; it's a catwalk of metal grids below which everything I know exists. We are that high now, in the eye of the pyramid, the sealed-off crypt from which even the pharaoh is kept. It is a place that clanks with the steely cold ugliness of how this pharaoh's myth—like any myth—is made.

Yes. There are ghosts in this place.

But Jed points farther up.

A ladder bracketed to the wall soars through the grid above it, and we are climbing. Ninety degrees. One floor, another floor, onto a grid to rest—one more. Finally, Jed grabs my hand, pulling me onto a concrete island suspended below the apex by a matrix of steel and magic.

"This is it," he says.

I take a moment to catch my breath. I lower my head to wait out dizziness. When my eyes clear, what I first see is a plaque.

"Oh, that," Jed says, nodding to the floor where the plaque's embedded in concrete. "It's for two guys who ate it while they were building the place. One of them was crushed by a crane, the other took a nosedive down the air shaft. From here all the way to the ground. Took him away in baggies."

There is glass, steel, plastic, light. Four giant vents in the four corners below the peak are vacuuming heat out of the room. The light, when we turn it on, will be hot enough to melt itself.

"It's not because of the light per se, it's just all these power crates," he says. Jed rests his hand on one of the large black boxes in the room. They're what fuel the fire; they're what light the lights. Plural. *Lights.* It is not one giant light bulb, as I had been trying to imagine it till now. Instead, the brightest light in the world is comprised of 45 separate lamps, each the size of a searchlight, arranged in three concentric circles, and all aimed at the peak.

Xenotech, a lighting company, worked with Joshua Thomas to customize the system. Each bulb costs $1,500. Each reflector is $1,000. Every unit—lamp, generator, bulb, etc.—costs $32,000. To merely outfit the Luxor with its lighting equipment alone cost nearly $2 million.

"When one of these babies bursts, the suits downstairs go shit-crazy," Jed says.

The lights, called Xenotech 7000s, are considered in the industry the finest equipment around. Indeed, impressed by the 7000s' performance at Luxor, the Community Christian parish of Kansas City, Missouri, finally exhumed its church's original 1940 blueprints to complete the dream of its maker, Frank Lloyd Wright, by capping their flat-roofed building with what Wright called "a steeple of light." Fifty years later. It took that long to find a lighting system bright enough to create Wright's effect, church officials say. Now they eagerly point out in a new parish brochure that their church shares a steeple with the world famous Luxor.

The Xenotechs are bright because they're filled with xenon gas, an innovation in light bulbs pioneered by Joshua. The benefits of the gas for lighting are aesthetic. The drawbacks of the gas, however, are deadly. Every lamp of xenon running at full power is under approximately seven atmospheres of pressure. Everyday pressure on earth is three.

"When these things explode, you don't want to be around," Jed says.

He often has been.

"It's not the heat, it's not the cold. They're just unstable fuckers. The older they get the more likely they'll explode. But some of them just go off sitting in the cabinet, in their boxes, not even opened."

Jed points.

DANGER: FLAMMABLE EXPLOSIVE on the red closet door.

"When they first told me they wanted me to wear a bomb suit while I was working up here, I was like, 'What the fuck?'" Jed says. "But then I saw one of them go off, like 30 feet away, and I'm not taking any chances, man, you know?"

Grabbing his dick, Jed sounds sincere.

"You got to watch yourself up here."

How vulnerable is a dick in the desert? Just last night, during dinner at the Pyramid Café, I overheard two waitresses gossiping about one of the dancers in the dinner show.

"Liz said he complained about some safety problem, like having to dance around all that fire and stuff," one of the waitresses confided in another. "Honestly, though? Liz says it's just 'cause he wouldn't wear this little loincloth thing. So they fired him."

A towel boy at the pool: "You didn't hear it from me, but there's this rumor flying around that the place has sank like six inches since they built it. They gave me the choice to work inside for twice the cash, but no way I'm gonna be in there when that thing comes down."

How vulnerable is a pyramid in the desert? Last year, the Luxor's parent company's stock dropped 2 1/2 points on the New York Stock Exchange. And since Luxor's opening in '94, the stock has plummeted a total of 35 points, from 42 1/4 to 7 1/4. Even standard weekly room rates have dropped—from $79 to $40 a night.

"They just can't compete," says Jed. "Sure we've got this light, but people after a while are like, 'Whoopee. Big deal.' They just opened this hotel called New York, New York, right next door. They got replicas of the Brooklyn Bridge, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, all that stuff. At night, I've heard they're planning on having this free show outside where a huge King Kong head will pop up behind the hotel and start reaching out with this huge fist. We're just not going to be able to compete with that. All that fire and smoke and the sound effects? We're just a light, man. I mean, big shit."

The brightest light in the world thrums quietly beside me. A god in its lonely temple, its lonely watchman nearby. I look at one of Jed's

offerings to the light. On a stretch of duct tape stuck to a lamp, Jed has written: "Pillage list: reflector shot, lens cracked, filter needs new top. . . ." Every lamp, I notice, has one.

"It's not easy," he says. "They're running us ragged. We've dropped from fifteen guys in our department down to nine. They've got me working on the fucking talking camels in the lobby."

Jed is thinking seriously about giving up and heading back to Florida. But when he thinks about the good life he has going in Las Vegas, its lights like no others, his $25 an hour, his house in a brand-new patrolled development, it's hard. Since settling into his office just below the desert clouds, Jed has watched five new giant hotels, erected out of dust, slowly dust themselves off, and slowly tower above him. He has since been wooed by the tallest.

The highest building west of the Mississippi, the Stratosphere Hotel, now stands at the far end of the Strip from the Luxor. It is crowned by a roller coaster, a revolving restaurant, a weather station monitoring wind, and lights: lights that seem so close to the clouds they're like the sunrise, the sunset, a storm threatening with awesome colors the tiny valley below. Jed looks up—the air exploding around him like ancient, rotting artifacts.

He's still at the Luxor, the black marker scrawl on one of the steel beams in the peak—"I survived the Luxor light 4/4/94"—mocking him from the shadows.

"What's that date?" I ask.

"Oh," he says. "That's the date they dimmed it."

Citing further budget restraints, the Luxor Hotel's parent company, Circus, Circus Enterprises, Inc., ordered fifteen of the light's forty-five lamps to be permanently cut off. The light's strength was dimmed from 315,000 to 210,000 watts per hour.

"I don't even think it's the brightest light anymore," Jed says. "It's a scam, really. They open with all this brouhaha, 'the brightest light,' la-di-da. And of course they start getting people coming to Vegas who are telling their travel agents, 'We want to stay where the light is! Which one has the light?' Little do they know the light's not half as bright as it should be. I go home and look up and I'm like, 'Where is it?' It sucks, man. You know? 'Cause all they think about is selling those rooms. They don't care about the light. It's just a big dollar sign to them. And Josh? I mean, I'm sure he's a cool guy and all, but he just gets his big fat check, you know? He just gets his check and then that's it—See ya! Nobody really cares about this thing.

"But me? I left my job to come here. My family. I left everything. I wanted to work on the brightest light in the world, you know? *The Brightest Light!* I mean, shit, man, this thing rules! Now I go into a bar . . . and people know. They know, man. They can tell the light's not as bright as it used to be. And the chicks used to love it! I'd say I was the guy that turned the light on and . . . BANG! Now I overhear someone talking about the light and it's like I don't even hear them. I just go around telling people I work on the little amusement rides or something. You know? Just anything."

Hundreds of feet below us, there is still a world that relies on Jed. In the tunnels beneath the Luxor, dozens of people dash past each other in tuxedos and gowns, in capes and loincloths, in jewels, tiaras, and headdresses. A circus awaits its spot. When the beam is turned on, the whole hotel will be cued for the night: younger, beautiful, refreshed staff come on; menus change; dealers raise the minimum bets per table.

A crowd below us outside the Luxor has also probably gathered by now. The daily igniting of Luxor's light is still an attraction for many. Every evening after dusk, for a full fifteen minutes, a laser show precedes the lighting. The giant yellow stucco sphinx that reclines above the hotel carport awakes from its daylight siesta, blinking golden lasers at the crowd. The lagoon beside the sidewalk churns, shirrs, and seethes into a screen of mist. Lasers from a rockbed project images of a pharaoh. He smiles, clears his throat, and greets the guests with a voice that rattles the palms from which it booms. "Welcome to the Luxor Hotel . . . ," he says. And then predicts the coming of a blinding light.

Our cue.

The seventh day

WHY SHOULD WE RISE, because 'tis light? □

PETER SERCHUK

Steel Chin

George Chuvalo was a punching bag;
face full of blood, spitting out teeth.
A tough kid scraped off the Toronto streets,
he sparred with the wind and the cops and the thugs.
He ate in the church with the beggars and nuns
and learned crowds never stay once a man hits the ground.
No matter the punch, no matter the round,
George Chuvalo never went down.
The best fighters in the world reconfigured his face.
Hockey's for punks, he liked to say.