

RON MACLEAN

LAS VEGAS WEDDING

OR, BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER MEETS
GERTRUDE STEIN AT THE LUXOR

THE WEDDING WAS TO BEGIN AT 11 AM. There was no talk of time zones, of Eastern Standard versus Mountain versus Pacific (viewers on the West Coast will see the wedding at its regularly scheduled time), of the orientation required after a long plane flight.

There were people coming in from Minnesota (Gertrude, as it turns out), North Carolina, Massachusetts, and California. There was one on her way to Russia, and several who wished to breakfast in Paris. There were foot-long hot dogs for 99 cents, announced like movies on giant marquees. There were margaritas available by the yard. And those disposable cameras. There were no clocks, anywhere.

I'm not making excuses. I'm just saying that under these conditions, orientation is not as easy as you might think. The compass insisted that West was down. That North was up.

1. Gertrude said, "People if you like to believe it can be made by their names. Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul."

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Call me Paul. Call her Christine. Place us on a corridor, leaning against a railing and looking down at the Attractions Level of the Luxor Hotel in uncertain light. Two stories below, under glass, couples ambled arm-in-arm. A line formed outside the Imax theater. We'd sought momentary refuge. Fresh air.

The Luxor Hotel is a glass pyramid with more than 4,400 rooms. It is one of eight objects on earth that is identifiable when seen from the space shuttle. It is a confusing place, even if you haven't just missed your brother's wedding.

Sometimes you can see your way to the top, a reverse staircase effect where the sides climb to an eventual convergence. But things cut in at strange angles everywhere. Corridors. Inclinator. Tiny hallways that end in doors marked Staff Only. Sometimes there is a ceiling just inches above your head.

"Feels nice to be outside," Christine said.

I nodded agreement. It was as if we could feel a light wind stir around us, as if we could anticipate a sunset. But when our eyes sought horizon, they found borders. Walls where sky should be. The Attractions Level a false city below us, a world within a world.

"How do you get down there," she said, disheartened.

The hotel brochure suggested that guests may want to bring a small pocket compass. We did. We are not people who take orientation for granted.

I took the compass from my pocket. She looked to me for direction, because it wasn't my brother whose wedding we couldn't find.

"It says West is that way," I said, pointing down.



For access to the Attractions Level, use central elevators located inside the casino.

again.

The wedding was to begin at 11am.

We were to meet in the lobby at 10:30, which does not leave much margin for error; for confusion or disorientation; for those who somehow do not set their watches to local time and have repeatedly to do the math; or for Chip the Surfer from San Diego (he was Best Man) to get his picture taken with the woman the hotel employs to stand at the casino entrance in a toga and share her breasts with all who walk by.

Chip insisted on a Polaroid.

It was 10:40. We had to find the others and drive to the Candlelight Chapel of Love. Only the groom knew where it was.



The thing about a pyramid is that it's difficult to orient yourself inside. Sometimes you find yourself looking up at Ramses, other times you're in the presence of the man with the ferret head as he bets a hundred dollars on red. And you haven't even been drinking yet.

again.

We descended in parallel elevators.

It seemed incredible that we could lose one another. We met up at 10:30, emerged from our rooms and walked down the hall, the whole wedding party in one place.

We descended in parallel elevators. Joked: "We'll race you down."

Christine and I rode with Chip the surfer, and Christine's parents — the groom's parents. We pressed L for Lobby. I can't say what they pressed.

We got off, and they weren't there. We figured they had stopped somewhere, maybe the Attractions Level. Then we thought maybe they'd landed before us. We went looking for the lobby.

On our way, we passed the casino entrance, where Chip had his picture taken with the woman with the amazing breasts. There's no chance her breasts were real. But that's the thing about Las Vegas. As long as you accept it, it can be quite beautiful.

The desert air. The swimming pools.

They weren't in the lobby, either. We looked all over. Went outside to where the valets were. Nothing. 10:45. Chip decided he'd go looking. Maybe they went to get the limo and would meet us out front. Maybe they were having their picture taken with the woman with the amazing breasts. Maybe, inspired by her example, they were having their own breasts enhanced.

2. Gertrude said, "There is no use telling more than you know, even if you do not know it."

again.

We all thought it was a bad idea for Chip to wander off like that.

That was when time became fuzzy. When events turned strange. That was when, after we'd checked the valet area outside (lots of white limos, but none containing a bride, a groom, and a bride's mother) and burned a couple bucks on the nickel slots, Christine's father turned to me and said,

"We're going to miss the wedding."

He was remarkably calm, like someone who had chosen a restaurant in a food court, walked up to the counter, and discovered it was closed. You'd have to go with your second choice. It seemed logical. The Candlelight Chapel of Love books weddings every 15 minutes.

Chip had been the only one in our group with a watch.

Christine's parents went to play the quarter slots. "We'll be right there," her father said, pointing to a row of machines we would never see again.



In Episode 57, just before the carnage begins, before Buffy engages in a few rounds of kick-boxing with Spike and wrests from him the all-powerful Gem of Ankarra, Buffy and Willow have a moment to just be freshmen, for Buffy to tell Willow about her date. Her new boyfriend. For Buffy to glow. Then Willow says: "I love this part. Don't you love this part, where everything's new and mysterious."

again.

I wasn't worried.

It wasn't my Las Vegas wedding. There was nothing we could do but shrug and give ourselves to the moment.



For feelings of abandonment, or issues surrounding the absence of a loved one, use Inclinators #3.

again.

We liked Ramon best. We trusted Ramon.

We liked saying "Put it all on odd." We began drinking vodka tonics. The waitress brought them. We had a stack of lime green chips, and the desire to spend big. We always kept something on number three.

The casino had a burgundy carpet. Ornate wallpaper. Ramon wore a brocade vest, a white shirt. We believed in Ramon.

There were always the same players at Ramon's table. Gertrude. Christine and I. The man with the ferret head. Skinny body, long neck, a maple leaf lapel pin, a head that swerved and leaned slowly and at odd angles. He kept ogling Christine. He had the best view of the wheel. Even so, he would lean in as the ball landed, swivel down and around so that he was at eye level with the wheel, his head flopped to the side.

Christine grabbed a fresh drink from the waitress' tray. "What time is it?" she asked. Without looking, the waitress replied, "Quarter to nine." We believed her.

The number three came up a lot.

Gertrude, all wrinkles and concentration and chain-smoking bemusement. Her hair was shorter than in the pictures I'd seen. She wore jeans, and a thick leather belt with one of those giant belt buckles, a coiled snake.

We put a hundred dollars on twenty-three. Twenty on three. Nothing was real.

"People if you like to believe it can be made by their names," Gertrude said. A halo of cigarette smoke surrounded her. It was not clear to whom she was speaking. "Call anybody Paul and they get to be a Paul." The white ball spun around the wheel. We put a hundred dollars on seventeen, forty on three. "What's your name?" Her eyes found mine. "Paul," I said.

She nodded. Smiled. Smoked.

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Elvis Costello on the Attractions Level. Two shows nightly.

and then:

There were times we needed rest. We spent an afternoon by the pool. Watched the sunset. We had regular sessions with Ramon. Gertrude. The man with the ferret head. Wads of bills made their way into our pockets.

Once, we found the room. The pocket compass was no help.

There was a fake lotus plant in one corner. There were champagne and real fruit, compliments of the hotel. Christine had used the Luxor to entice me. Mostly, though, the need was real.

"Please come," she'd said. "I'm not sure I can get through this wedding alone."

I was happy to go. Las Vegas and all.

"What did I miss?" She emerged from the bathroom, traces of toothpaste at the side of her mouth.

I lay propped in bed, remote in hand, pillows stacked behind me. Buffy on the tube. "Spike found the gem and he's now invincible as long as he's wearing it—you can stab him with a stake and it heals right up."

There were times when she'd forget there was a wedding to attend. Then, all of a sudden, she'd get cranky. "What are we *doing*," she said. "We have bigger fish to fry."

"I'm getting in touch with the beautiful teenage vampire slayer in me."

"Try getting in touch with the Las Vegas wedding in you." She roused me out of bed and reached for the popcorn.



EPISODE 62: BUFFY'S LAS VEGAS WEDDING

In which Buffy interrupts the nuptials of her alleged foster brother just in time when Jean-Claude, the French-Canadian minister at the Candlelight Chapel of Love, pins a boutonniere on the best man, and draws blood. The sight of his best man's blood causes a glow in her *faux* brother's eyes that sets off Buffy's sixth sense. She stops the show in grand fashion, halting the wedding, and punching the big guy's ticket for good.

"I should have known something was wrong," Buffy later confides to Willow. "Foot-long hot dogs? How Wayne Newton."

and then:

The man with the ferret head leaned in for a closer look.

The felt was bright green. We liked the sheen of it. We felt lucky. Felt odd. Christine had managed, for the moment, to forget about the wedding. She held a vodka tonic and a wad of bills.

"Always," Christine said. "Always bet on odd."

The ball stopped on seventeen. Gertrude watched Ramon sweep away a stack of her lavender chips.

"I have had a long and complicated life," said Gertrude. She placed a stack of chips on a rectangle marked First 12. "I am very busy finding out what people mean by what they say," she said. "Say this: There is no use telling more than you know, no not even if you do not know it."

I said it. Gertrude nodded. She liked me. The ball stopped on three.

You could bet individual numbers. You could bet red or black, odd or even. You could bet the columns. You could bracket numbers. We believed in odd. The man with the ferret head kept ogling Christine.

But then she spotted him. Chip. Across the casino. She swore it was him. The mustache. The ineffable grin. We left two sizable stacks of lime green chips on the table and took off after him.

3. Buffy: "That's beautiful or, taken literally, incredibly gross."

and then:

"Time is not one thing following another," said Gertrude.

We had followed Chip and Gertrude had followed us and somehow we found ourselves on the Attractions Level, with no Chips. Gertrude had cashed us out and handed us a wad of bills. It was well over two thousand dollars. She had bet her stack on red and lost.

"Time is being alive really alive in the moment, right now and right now and right now."

Christine glared at Gertrude. Christine wanted to know where Chip was. Christine wanted to know the time.

"Excuse me." She stopped a woman walking past an exhibit called In Search of the Obelisk. "Do you know what time it is?"

We were on the Attractions Level, contained in a magnificent pyramid. We were visible from space.

Christine held the woman's arm. The woman held a large vinyl purse and a cell phone. She consulted her wrist watch without moving her head. "Quarter to nine," she said, and then she was gone.

Gertrude had a cigarette burning in each hand. "Right now and right now and right now," she said.

Christine held the wad of bills in her left hand. "Fuck and fuck and fuck and fuck," she said.

I worried that she and Gertrude were edging toward a stripped-down syntax I would not comprehend. I soothed myself with thoughts of Bavarian creme doughnuts and coffee with real half-and-half.

Christine's gaze had developed an intensity. Half a floor below us, we could see the lobby, a 30-foot-tall Nefertiti and Ramses, a diminutive Sphinx. She searched the crowd.

She slapped my arm with the wad of bills. Pointed with her free hand. "There!" In the lobby. In motion. Chip. She tossed the bills in our general direction, hurdled the rail. I swear she floated toward the lobby floor.

There was nothing to do but follow.

I learned later that Gertrude caught the wad.



EPISODE 73 (REVISED): BUFFY MEETS GERTRUDE STEIN AT THE LUXOR

When the body count begins to pile up at the resort hotel's pool, Buffy and the great modernist literary figure team up to take down a nocturnal aqua killer. "What is a vampire," Gertrude says in the pivotal third act, "and if you know what is a vampire then what is Las Vegas."

what came next:

It all happened fast. There was a white mini-van parked at the entrance to the hotel. There was no longer a watch, but Chip was convinced we had time.

Yes. We found Chip. He refused to get his picture taken with Gertrude, who had twisted her ankle in the leap to the lobby.

"There is a difference," she said, "between what I like and what they like." A tiny stub of cigarette burned from her lip. I hadn't yet told her she was a hero to me. "Welling is changed from William to welcome. In willing."

I stayed between she and Christine. I was afraid Christine might be unwilling. I dreamed of doughnuts.

Chip stared blankly at Gertrude.

I could see the van outside, beyond two sets of automatic doors.

As we emerged, I could also see something else: Buffy and Willow, striding toward us. We nearly knocked them over.

They were filming episode 73, in which they expose and then bludgeon a roulette dealer/vampire who had been living in a crypt in the lobby of the Luxor Las Vegas. At this point in Act 3, Buffy and Willow were supposed to enter the hotel lobby cocky-scared, in that way they do. Cameraman poised before them, his back to the door, bent in a determined half-squat, standing on a wooden cart with a metal handle on one end, which a production assistant wheeled toward the entrance.

Through the glass doors they could see Ramses and Nefertiti, in stone three stories tall.

"Freaksome," said Buffy.

"Power-freaksome," said Willow.

The camera tracked their movement. The cameraman wore a green baseball cap. Chip was transfixed.

Christine apoplectic. "I am quite sure we do not have time for this." A cloud of cigarette smoke followed us.

We could see the van, behind Buffy and Willow. Gertrude hacked up phlegm.

The only way we were going to get Chip into the vehicle was to get a Polaroid.

Somehow, Gertrude arranged it.

4. Gertrude said, "Whenever they are liable to have an emergency they are just as likely to do it slowly."

and then:

We were in a white mini-van, careening north on The Strip. Christine, myself and Chip, Buffy and Willow and Gertrude. Gertrude drove, erratic, cursing, following the limo we believed contained the bride and groom.

"Fuck and fuck and fuck and fuck and fuck," she said. One cigarette dangled from her lips. Another burned in each hand. "I am very busy finding out how to stay with this limo."

She swerved. She weaved. She coughed. She dodged traffic. The van listed, felt as if it would tip.

Gertrude, it turned out, was a Buffy fan. "Among the clothes that just don't look like Buffy are button-front shirts and anything in the color red," she said. She swerved around a black pickup, kept the limo in sight. She was a repository of Buffy trivia. "Total number of Buffy outfits the first three seasons: three hundred twelve."

Willow had placed herself between Chip and Buffy. Had cracked open the back windows. Even so, a haze of smoke lingered. We passed a hotel called Paris.

"The last time I was here, Paris wasn't open yet," Chip said. "They hadn't finished the Eiffel Tower. We were going to go there for breakfast but we couldn't find it."

Gertrude swerved left. Chip's head bounced against the window.

"First time Buffy admits to her Dorothy Hamill obsession," Gertrude said. "Episode twenty-one."

Christine had filled Buffy in on the way. The wedding. The cast of characters.

Buffy was game. "Time to kick some demon ass," she said. Chip stared at her breasts.



For access to an alternate reality featuring nubile television performers, use Inclinator #2.

and then:

We found the chapel. Screeched in a minute or so behind the limo, cutting off a Hilton courtesy van to make the last turn. No one was seriously hurt. It was right next to Circus Circus. And a food stand with a giant marquee, foot-long hot dogs and Fresca, 99 cents each. We were early.

No one seemed surprised to see us, or aware that anything unusual had transpired. Or surprised that we had with us a literary figure from a previous century and two young television stars. We acted casual. We didn't want to be out of step with local culture.

Christine's father called us aside.

"Psst," he said. He was eating a peppermint stick ice cream cone. He motioned to us with his head, the way people do.

Christine hugged him. It was the hug of someone who had given up the idea of ever seeing her father again, but not overtly so. I was proud of her.

The bride and groom sat in a white latticed gazebo, surrounded by roses, having their photographs taken. The foot-long hot dog marquee in the background. I made a mental note to get copies of the wedding pictures.

"Look," Christine's father said. He was an Albanian man wearing a black leisure suit with huge pockets on the jacket. He held open one of the pockets and encouraged us to look inside. It was filled with quarters. So was the pocket on the other side.

Christine's stepmother, who spoke very little English, held up her purse with both hands and shook it. It too was filled with coins.

"We hit the jackpot," Christine's father said.

The wedding went off without a hitch. As much an event as you can have in fifteen minutes. Bride. Groom. Parents. Sister. Sister's strange friend. Buffy. Willow. Gertrude, who kept at least two cigarettes going at all times and continuously snapped pictures with a Kodak disposable. And the man with the ferret head, who of course turned out to be Jean-Claude, the French-Canadian minister.

He did a nice job. He told them they could have every expectation of happiness "because Jesus had bled and died on the cross for their sins, thank God for that."

Gertrude waited patiently to congratulate the happy couple, who greeted her as if she were family, even though she dropped ash on the groom's pants. "They are washable. They are found and able and edible," she said. "Happy New Year."

Buffy and Willow also paid their respects. "I'm sensing major sparkage," said Buffy. "Serious wow potential," Willow echoed.

Christine and I stood arm in arm.

Sunshine beamed down. I couldn't tell if we were really outdoors, or part of some elaborate staging. I didn't care.

"Well," she said. "We did it."

Through the latticework I could see the giant marquee: 99 cents. I felt in my pocket, fingered the wad of bills that rested there. I felt magnanimous. "Come on," I told Christine. I took out the pocket compass and headed for the hot dog stand.

Chip huddled by the chapel entrance in intense conversation with Jean-Claude. At his side, the woman with the amazing breasts. I didn't even *want* to know how that happened.