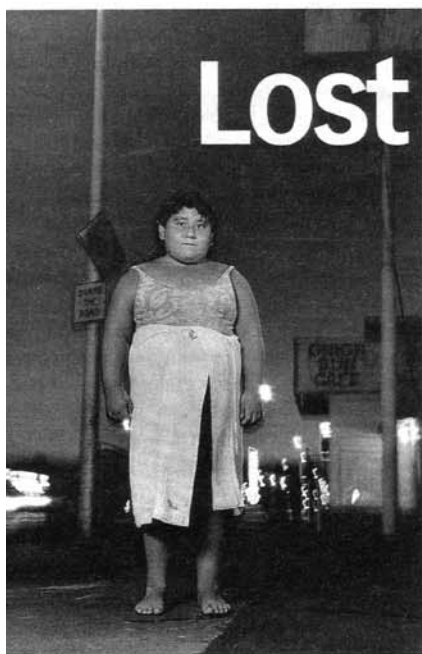
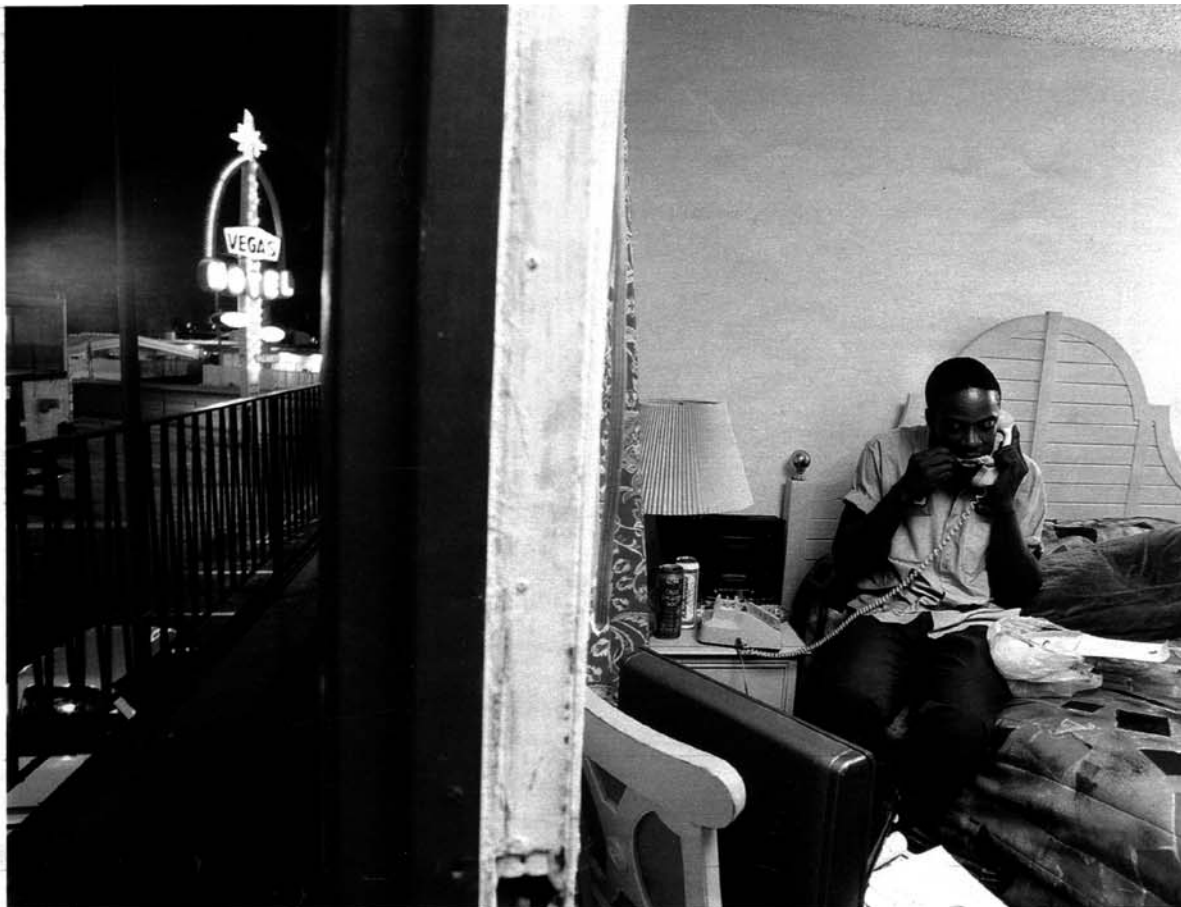


"THIS IS THE FIRST and last time I stay on Fremont Street," says Stanley Alexander, 35, who's been staying at the Vegas Motel for a couple of months. His room is rife with roaches and spiders, the walls are smeared with grease, and drunks hassle him every morning on his way to work at a nearby Big O Tires. "I wouldn't be staying here at all, but I got stuck," says Alexander. "Once you start in paying \$500 a month, it's hard to save up the money to go somewhere else."

ONE OF THE MANY children living in the Vagabond Hotel, fresh from the swimming pool on a hot Nevada night, below.



Lost Vegas

In the Beginning, There Was Fremont Street—the First Incarnation of the American Capital of Sin. Today This Boulevard of Faded Signs Is a Way Station for Hopeful Immigrants and a Last Stop for the Desperate.

Before there was the Strip, there was Fremont Street. Decades ago, as the East Coast mobsters began transforming Las Vegas from a small-time oasis of vice into America's capital city of sin, visiting gamblers and vacationers stayed in Fremont Street motels like the Para-Dice and the Blue Angel. Now, crowded from view by the billion-dollar pleasure domes just a mile away, eastern Fremont Street is an all-but-forgotten fragment of history in a town habitually hostile to the past.

There are no tourists at this end of Fremont. Instead, this weathered string of vintage motels, pawnshops and check-cashing outlets is home to an assortment of people who are as invisible to the city's millions of visitors as is the street itself. Though police have stepped up patrols in the last couple of years, the area is still known as one of the most dangerous in downtown Vegas—a place crawling with feral losers in a city built on the idea that anyone can be a winner.

Amid the criminal types living there are a surprising number of ordinary families, optimistic immigrants and clean-living Christian evangelists. Some people wind up on Fremont Street at the end of their road, having nowhere else to go. For others it's not a terminus but a place of transition: a gateway into America or a place to recover after a bad marriage, a lost job or bad decisions. People with histories of terrible hardship and bad behavior live next door to others whose tales are startlingly normal. Families from India run motels inhabited by prostitutes and job-hunting young couples, blue-collar workers and Bosnian refugees. Crackheads and alcoholics loiter on Sunday mornings in front of an African American church.

City developers have turned a couple of blocks at Fremont's western end into a theme-park caricature of its former self, a frantically overlit string of nickel-slot casinos collectively dubbed "The Fremont Street Experience." But on eastern Fremont, it's dark at night—except for the modest neon signs of the surviving motels.

TEXT BY VINCE BEISER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GREGG SEGAL

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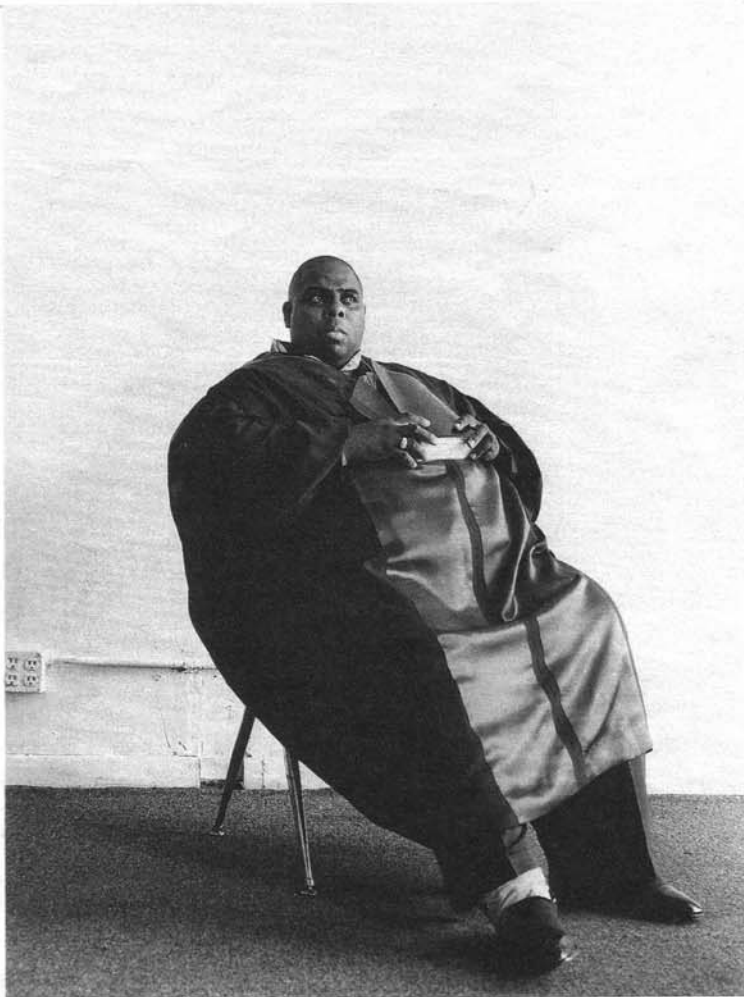
March 10, 2002



ONCE A DRIVE-IN restaurant filled the parking lot of the Blue Angel motel. Nowadays, there's plenty of space. "We take no reservations of any kind," explains the night manager. "It's first come, first served."



THE DISTANT STRIP'S profligate wattage mocks Fremont Street's decrepit neon. There you might walk away with a casino's money; here, you leave with your own, minus a hefty 5% check-cashing commission.



HIS NAME IS RAYMOND McIntosh, but everyone knows him as The Bishop. Every day, in his "Jesus Is the Answer" storefront church on an especially scabrous Fremont block, the former drug dealer goes toe-to-toe with the devil. Most of his flock are former or current denizens of the street: prostitutes, dealers, people addicted to alcohol, drugs or gambling. His pulpit-pounding Sunday morning services leave them weeping, shouting and fainting in the aisles. The Bishop has helped many find what he considers a better path. His wife, for instance, is a woman whom he helped cure of "a 20-year addiction to lesbianism."

SINCE 1996, THE HIALEAH motel has been a business and home for the Mehtas—one of about a dozen Indian immigrant families operating motels along Fremont Street. The Mehtas came here straight from a village of a few thousand people in Gujirat province. "We had seen Las Vegas on TV, but we had no idea," says patriarch Satish Mehta (left). "I had never seen so much light in my life."

