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What Happened in Vegas

The days, weeks, and months after the worst mass shooting in modern American history

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It is Monday evening, less than 24 hours after Stephen Paddock — an isolated, shadowy 64-year-old retired tax auditor and postal worker from Mesquite, Nevada, a high roller who liked to play video poker on the Las Vegas Strip — installed himself in a 32nd-floor corner suite at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino, smashed the windows with a hammer, and opened fire into a crowd of 22,000 country music festivalgoers below.

Paddock killed 58 people and injured more than 500 others, a figure that would later be revised to 851 to encompass not only victims of gunshot wounds but those injured from shrapnel, trampling, and attempts to scale barbed-wire and chain-link fences while fleeing. It was, as we would hear in the coming days, the worst mass shooting in modern American history.

At a candlelight vigil at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where I've taught journalism for the past two years, hundreds of students, undergraduates in their late teens and early 20s, have crowded into a concrete courtyard. They are holding tiny, flickering white votive candles, the kind sold by the bag at discount stores, and have come to mourn the victims, the injured, and the city they call home. It's a familiar scene, one we have witnessed again and, frustratingly, again, but the emphasis on community has a slightly different valence here. Las Vegas, it is said on this night, "doesn't look like any other community" — a reference to the fact that the city and its larger metro area

have a mere 2 million permanent residents versus the tens of millions of tourists who visit each year. This disparity gets to the heart of why the mass shooting was, for those who live in Las Vegas, at once heartbreaking and strange: A tragedy happens in your city, thousands of people are shot at like trapped animals, and yet most of them don't live there and leave the following day. Everyone has dispersed, but a floating anguish remains.

The students have built a makeshift shrine of flowers, handwritten posters, and more candles: that instantly recognizable expression of collective mourning. The air smells of vanilla and spiced apples, like a Bath & Body Works store. A girl who is introduced as Beatrice gets up and sings Avril Lavigne's "Keep Holding On" in a touchingly off-key falsetto. The students sway and wave their glowing cellphones in response. These young people were toddlers during 9/11 — all their lives, they've known terrorism and mass violence, from Aurora to Sandy Hook to San Bernardino — and when disaster hits, they have a disconcertingly instinctive sense of what to do.

SUNDAY NIGHT, a week after the October 1 massacre: a day that also completes a full cycle of Vegas-ness, as this is the day that tourists tend to return home. It's an eerily gusty night, as it often is in Las Vegas, and I drive to the site of the Route 91 Harvest festival, where the concert banner still flaps wildly in the wind and the stage scaffolding sits untouched. Across Las Vegas Boulevard, you can see the broken 32nd-floor windows marring the smooth gold-lamé surface of the Mandalay Bay; they look like two teeth that have been punched out.

Next door, the Luxor pyramid stands silent and inscrutable, its beam of bright white light piercing the sky, while the red and blue turrets of the Excalibur's medieval castle loom over this blighted end of the Strip like a giant incongruous birthday cake.

The Strip, I find myself thinking, is not the glorious shiny bauble it appears to be — at both ends it degrades quickly. The south end, the more middlebrow end where Mandalay Bay is located, has less margin to weather a downturn than the fancier precincts where the Wynn, the Encore, the Venetian, and the Bellagio are located. (Las Vegas purports to be democratic, but it, too, has a class system.)

Passing the scene of the shooting, I am shocked by the distance between the open-air concert venue and the hotel suite from which Paddock fired. It's 500 yards, roughly five football fields, across multiple lanes of traffic. The most militarized shooting in our country's history was a crime we had not seen — one that hovered between a mass shooting and a terrorist attack.

Paddock wasn't a disaffected young man with a grudge. He didn't appear to be acting for any ideological cause. His motive remains hazy, mysterious, but his methods are clear. Everything he did was plotted, calculated, with the fastidiousness of the accountant he was, to maximize fatalities: from the six trips he made in seven days to cart at least 21 suitcases of weapons and ammunition up to his suite, to the handwritten ballistics calculations found on a piece of paper on a small side table in his room, to the sniper position he took, which allowed him to shoot his victims as they were running away.

On Las Vegas Boulevard, which used to be called U.S. Route 91, people are leaving bouquets of roses in plastic sleeves on the median. This is as close as one can get to the 15-acre venue, which is cordoned off with yellow crime tape and strewn with debris. Where the casinos taper off below Mandalay Bay, another memorial has sprung up around the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign, with its jaunty 1950s lettering. Fifty-eight white wooden crosses — carved and driven cross-country

by a retired carpenter from Illinois — stand elegant and mournful. They feel at once ancient and futuristic, like those alien white windmills in the Palm Springs desert. At the base of the Las Vegas sign, a giant snowdrift of mementos has gathered with smaller mounds accumulating around each cross. The whole scene is tacky and ad hoc yet utterly sincere and affecting. A site where tourists take selfies has become a de facto shrine to the dead.

At 10:05 p.m., the lights on the Strip are dimmed for 11 minutes, the length of Paddock's rampage. It's as if some master power source has been unplugged. The night feels dark and depressing and haunted, and I can't imagine anyone ever having fun here again. It's popular to look down on the Strip, to mock it as déclassé or vulgar — or to elevate those qualities, perversely, to hipsterish camp — but I genuinely love its lack of pretension, its anything-goes ethos, its within-limits hedonism. I love its big, loud, unabashedly ersatz glamour, what the cultural critic (and former resident) Dave Hickey has called "the real fakery of Las Vegas."

Las Vegas is a city nearly half of all Americans have visited, one that looms large in our country's psyche. In books, in movies, as a destination for bachelor parties and boxing matches — there it is, glittering and louche. But because visitors rarely leave the Strip, the city is widely misunderstood. The decadent vacation rhythms of the tourist are not the workaday rhythms of the people who reside and work here full time: the doctors, lawyers, teachers, students, and businesspeople, plus the thousands employed by the Strip's casinos — the invisible human labor that makes this adult playground run.

Like any place with a dominant industry (Washington, D.C., Nashville, a university town), Las Vegas itself is separate from,

but also bound up with, the casino world of hospitality, tourism, and gaming. Even more so than in most places, a single industry has a disproportionate amount of power, political and economic, to shape people's lives. Many of my students work on the Strip: at clothing stores, where they wait on drunk people; at donut shops in casinos, where they arrive for their shift at 4:30 a.m.; at conventions, where they are paid to stand in booths as models. Nearly everyone I know, though they might complain the Strip is pricey, also goes there to eat, to attend concerts, to meet up with visitors from out of town. You can't say the Strip is Las Vegas, but you also can't say Las Vegas is not affected by the Strip.

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Yet unlike most cities, Las Vegas is also a metaphor, an idea. This is a place where the old are made to feel young, the young feel sophisticated, the inhibited relax, and the truly uninhibited know they won't be judged. The country takes pleasure in this fantasy — in participating in it and mocking it, both — and the casino industry sells it, promotes it, depends on it. There has always been a disparity here between the illusion and the often gritty truth behind it, whether that's mobsters skimming casino profits or the mess of your hotel room in the cold, bright, hangover light of the morning after. But the shooting altered the equation: How to live in a city, how to view it, to talk about it, think about it, when the metaphor has not only quite visibly detached itself from reality but is in fact jarringly, painfully at odds with it? What then?

Because the fragile notion on which Las Vegas has always rested is that it is more or less safe — watched over once upon a time by the mafia and now by casino moguls and corporations, its patrons' every move caught on camera. This was the clever trick of Las Vegas: that a rather tightly controlled experience could be made to feel wild and spontaneous. Now, it seems, the city is unsafe in ways no one had anticipated. The attack aimed at the most Vegas situation of all, which also happens to be the most American situation of all: people of all types, all colors and classes and ages and political persuasions, gathering to celebrate together. People were shot while listening to music and getting drunk and enjoying themselves, and it's difficult to fathom how the city will get that uncomplicated innocence back.

A few days after my visit to the Strip, I interview a man whose 27-year-old daughter has been shot in the head, just above her right eye. We are sitting on a bench outside Sunrise Hospital, where he is waiting to hear whether the airlift that will take her home to the East Coast is going to be scheduled for that day. She will need intensive rehab for a year, maybe longer, and a series of surgeries to replace her eye and remove shrapnel from her brain and sinuses. "I don't want to be in Vegas ever again," he tells me, recounting the panic attack he experienced the first time he passed Mandalay Bay by car. "I don't want to be here."

AT 10:17 P.M. on the night of the shooting, minutes after Paddock's rampage ended, the social media strategist at R&R Partners, the agency that handles the messaging for the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, also known by its acronym, LVCVA, alerted the account manager that there had been a "possible incident." Minutes later, incident confirmed, the crisis communication team was contacted. By 10:30 p.m., all paid media — i.e., those infamous "What Happens Here, Stays Here" ads — had been halted. Although the tragedy was still

unfolding, it was clear that the LVCVA's 15-year slogan now had an ominous new resonance.

At 11:15 p.m., while people were still streaming into hospitals, the PR doctors were getting down to business. An internal video I was given lays out the light-speed response on the part of those responsible for protecting the Las Vegas image: the talking points that were written by 1 a.m., the statement that was sent out to the tourism community by sunrise. "We started working immediately," R&R's executive creative director, Arnie DiGeorge, told me. "Most of the agency that works on that account came into the office that night and set up a sort of control room."

By Monday afternoon, the LVCVA had settled on a message, encouraging resorts to "rally behind" the "Vegas Strong" slogan, which had spontaneously cropped up on social media — just as "Boston Strong" had after the Boston Marathon bombing and "Orlando Strong" after the Pulse nightclub shooting. R&R also wrote two lines of copy to be used on billboards and in ads: "We've been there for you during the good times. Thank you for being there for us now." By Tuesday, LVCVA had a logo — "Vegas Strong" superimposed on a gold heart, with lettering that echoed the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign. By Wednesday, it had rolled out a television spot voiced by Andre Agassi, who lives in Las Vegas. "What is strength?… Strength is first responders who tirelessly carry visitors and locals alike to safety until sunrise," he says, his voice cracking with emotion, as the Strip skyline emerges from pure black.

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hipsterish camp — but I genuinely love its lack of pretension.

By the end of that first week, “Vegas Strong” was everywhere. It flashed on digital marquees at the airport and the hotels. It was on the flanks of ambulances and fire trucks. It was on bumper stickers peeled off and stuck on seemingly every car. It was printed on T-shirts and coffee mugs and buttons created and distributed by R&R the day after the shooting. There were, and still are, enormous red #VegasStrong banners in the courtyard on campus. It is on a billboard across from Mandalay Bay, by the cash register at my local sandwich shop, on the letter board outside a florist, on the side of a CVS. Its ubiquity left no doubt that Paddock had not only attacked a city but a brand.

Many of the survivors I’ve interviewed in the past six months found “Vegas Strong” comforting and meaningful, and they adopted it as their own, creating and wearing bracelets that had been stamped with the slogan, tattooing it on their bodies. It was shorthand for everyone who had guided people to safety, driven victims to the hospital, given blood, donated food and money and time, or let strangers into their businesses and homes in the chaotic hours when the Strip was cordoned off and it was believed there were multiple shooters on the loose. “Vegas Strong” was a morale boost, a reminder that people were not alone in their suffering.

But it was also a marketing tactic. R&R partners and the LVCVA understood how easily a city can become synonymous with a crime or tragic incident (Waco, Aurora, Newtown), and Las Vegas, a company town whose product is tourism, didn’t want that. Many people I know cringed at the attempt to reduce a tragedy to a slogan; it felt glib and premature. A week after the

incident, my students told me they felt they hadn't been allowed to grieve. The city, they said, bypassed all the expected emotions to pivot to strength. What about #VegasSad, they joked, or #VegasAngry, or #VegasDepressed?

"THE ONLY THING more tragic than a death is a death that could have been prevented," a soft-spoken registered nurse named Colette Moore says, the intensity of the message at odds with the mildness of her voice, as she clicks through a PowerPoint presentation. I'm at University Medical Center of Southern Nevada attending a Stop the Bleed class, a free one-hour session that teaches civilians how to tie tourniquets as well as how to pack and apply pressure to wounds.

In the months that followed the shooting, many festival survivors would tell me that as the horror unfolded, they witnessed people tying — or that they themselves tied — homemade tourniquets in an attempt to stanch the wounds of fellow concertgoers. The demographics of this country music concert were such that numerous attendees were firemen, policemen, EMTs, or had served in the military and thus were trained in first aid. If so many people had not had this training, I hear it said repeatedly, there would have been far more fatalities. This stays with me; I would not have known what to do.

Stop the Bleed is a national campaign begun after the Sandy Hook shooting "to train laypeople to become rescuers instead of just witnesses to tragedy," says Dr. Douglas Fraser, vice chief of trauma at University Medical Center, the hospital that handled many of the festival's gunshot victims. "This came about because, literally, people were sitting next to co-workers and little kids who are bleeding out," Fraser says. Stop the Bleed strikes me as a kind of grim pragmatism in the absence of

tighter gun laws, an attempt to prepare citizens for the mass shootings that are sure to keep happening.

Fraser learned about Stop the Bleed at a medical conference and brought the program to Las Vegas last spring. When he and his colleagues first offered the course to casinos and nightclubs, they didn't get any takers. "We were basically told, 'Thanks, but no thanks,' " he says. But in the wake of the massacre, there was interest, including from MGM Resorts International, which owns Mandalay Bay. Cassandra Trummel, the registered nurse who runs the program, says that since October 1, they have taught more than 130 classes and trained at least 4,300 people.

On a bright, warm winter afternoon, a group of 16 people have convened in a small conference room with industrial gray carpeting and hospital-gown-green chairs. At my table, there's a bald middle-aged white man with a gentle manner, a grandmotherly Asian woman, and two young Latina women who are nursing students. The first part of the class consists of an instructional slideshow illustrated with graphic images: one of a chewed-up, nearly severed foot and another of a laceration in an arm with a hairy armpit. "Gaping wound," the caption reads.

The latter half of the class is hands-on. We practice twisting the tourniquets as tightly as possible and stuffing gauze into faux wounds on a flesh-colored rubber cylinder. Moore calls the tube a "piece of bologna," and it has that texture, but my table decides it's a thigh. It occupies that creepy uncanny valley between utterly fake and revoltingly real. There are two cavernous holes on it, and we take turns pushing the gauze dressing into them. "When you're packing a wound, don't ball it up like you're going to the bathroom," says Trummel, who has worked as a pediatric trauma nurse and is as right-angled and

no-nonsense as one would have to be to survive in that job. “You want to take small bits at a time, finger over finger.”

Trummel and Moore make their way around the room, observing. A woman at another table asks what to do if you encounter someone who has been shot in the abdomen. We’ve covered wounds of the legs, arms, shoulders, and groin, but not this. “I personally think you should just step over them and help somebody you can help,” says Trummel, in her clipped, direct way. It’s difficult to locate which organs a gunshot wound to the torso might have hit, so the chances of saving that person are nil. “It seems harsh, but you could save someone else,” Moore adds.

If there’s one lesson the clinic drives home, it’s that choosing to aid someone is a momentous decision. When you decide to apply direct pressure to a bleeding wound, you have a responsibility to that person. Once you’re pressing down, you could dislodge the blood clot if you move. This, I think darkly, is an anti-metaphor for Las Vegas, the opposite of a weekend devoid of commitments. “You’re staying with your victim until help arrives,” Moore says. “You are a duo at this point.”

EIGHTEEN MILES out of town at the Clark County Museum, in an old train depot that sits on the grounds, ten volunteers — eight middle-aged women, a woman in her 30s, and one older man — are archiving the mementos left at the “Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas” sign memorial. They have gathered around three tables, where they will catalog, photograph, label, and bag the stuffed animals, flags, fake flowers, rosaries, clothing, candles, hand-painted rocks, and all manner of other trinkets that mourners have left. These are not just offerings to honor the dead, they are also fragments shorn against our impotence, a way of doing something when there is nothing to do.

Such memorials are hardly a new phenomenon, but the problem of how to maintain them and contend with them after they have served their somber purpose is a relatively new challenge, one that archivists and museum curators have been thinking about at least since the Columbine massacre. Candlewax melts and hardens; cards and posters and stuffed animals can molder or go up in flames. “People don’t think those things are going to be rotted and smelly and covered in bugs,” says Pamela Schwartz, chief curator at the Orange County Regional History Center in Orlando where for the past 21 months, she has overseen the archiving of the 6,000 items left at the Pulse nightclub shooting memorial. It was Schwartz who emailed local curators, including Cynthia Sanford, the archivist who is leading the Las Vegas effort, to warn them that they were about to face an onslaught of objects. “Condolences,” her note read, “you’re probably not thinking about this yet but in our experience this is what’s headed your way.”

Long before Parkland, Las Vegas had been pushed off the front pages. By the end of the first week, the news cycle had already begun to move on.

The collection of 58 crosses remained at the Las Vegas sign until mid-November, when public works employees carefully put each cross and its accompanying tchotchkes into boxes — approximately 20,000 items total — then drove them to the museum, where they were displayed for a month before being moved into storage. (Even before the crosses came down, city workers were bringing a 25-foot trailer full of items twice a week.) Many residents felt that the memorial was taken down too hastily, but at the city’s iconic “Welcome to Las Vegas” sign,

concerns about unsightliness were particularly acute. “It was in a huge tourist area,” Sanford tells me, “and people’s livelihoods depend on that, so it could only stay up for so long.”

On the day I visit, volunteers spend the morning and afternoon archiving the items accompanying two of the crosses. The process is not quick; Sanford estimates that the entire project will take two to three years to complete. Today’s crosses belong to Denise Burditus and Kurt Von Tillow — it is sobering to view each memento as meant for a specific person. “It’s a bunny,” a woman with a New York accent announces as her assigned partner, who is dressed in a blue warmup suit, slowly enters a description of the stuffed animal and its dimensions into an Excel spreadsheet. “It says, ‘Rest in Peace Denise Burditus.’ ” Next she looks through a large maroon book called Nomenclature for Museum Cataloguing to determine the code for a wooden sign that reads “God always, always shows up.” Such careful preservation is an unexpected sight in this city known to have a blatant disregard for its own history (its iconic old casinos — the Sands, the Dunes, the Stardust, the Desert Inn — were all imploded).

At a table across the aisle, two women are tackling a bouquet of artificial flowers with a small sign that reads “Fear will not silence the music in our hearts.” Each flower gets measured and described (“single yellow mum”). When they complete the bouquet, they measure the tiny sign and then move on to a new group of flowers, which are white with pearl stamens. “To apply the same standards to a little handmade note cut in the shape of a heart as you would to a Picasso — it’s the same thing,” Sanford says.

From there the items are handed to two women at the next station, who place them in a lightbox and photograph them.

Pink flowers against a black background, white flowers against a white background. Linda, who has short feathered gray hair and talks quickly, arranges each item in the lightbox. “We all know somebody that was there,” says her partner, Lynn, a tan woman who wears a large diamond ring. After a while, the pair starts on painted rocks. There’s one that’s been decorated with a blue fountain and the words “Be a Fountain Not a Drain.” The next one reads “Kurt Von Tillow” in baby-aspirin orange. I look over at Lynn, who is doing the photographing. Her face is wet with tears.

AT THE BEGINNING of January, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority put out its end-of-the-year statistics. In 2017, the city saw a 1.7 percent drop in tourism, to 42.2 million visitors from 42.9 million in 2016. I’d been to Mandalay Bay in mid-October, when restaurant patronage was down and workers were still visibly spooked, but I wonder how it is faring now and decide to see.

“Walking on Sunshine” by Katrina & the Waves is playing as I enter the casino at just before 8 p.m. on a Saturday night. I walk to a bar, order a drink, and watch Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love” video on a television above me. A woman with tattooed arms and a long burgundy dress is saying something about her breasts to a friend, who is wearing a black jumpsuit; she cups her hands around them when she talks. The bar fills up until all the seats are taken. At the House of Blues, whose entrance is nearby on the casino floor, concertgoers are lining up to see Santana. It could be any night before the shooting.

From the casino, which has dark red oriental carpeting and ornate filigree moldings, I take an escalator up to The Shoppes at Mandalay Place, where, at a store called Bay Essentials, a mini-mart of sorts, the clerk tells me what I have already

gathered: The Strip kept on rolling like water through a turbine in a dam. “It was like nothing happened,” the woman says, as I buy a “Vegas Strong” button from her for 25 cents. “I didn’t work that night, and the next day when I came back, it was back to normal.”

I spot a store called America! that sells American-flag-print clothing and cheeky political merchandise. An amiable elderly woman wearing a large silver cross around her neck is the only one working. “You can have your picture taken with the president if you want,” she says, motioning toward life-size cutouts of Donald and Melania in the back of the store. I ask her how business has been. “It’s slow tonight,” she says. Has it been slow since the shooting? “It was for both of these casinos,” she replies and points north toward the Luxor.

I browse the “Make America Great Again” sweatshirts, the “Make America Erect Again” condoms, the “Oprah 2020” buttons, and the “#freemelania” T-shirts. After a bit, the woman begins to share what many thousands of people in America now have: a mass-shooting story. “It was about an hour before closing, and I was looking forward to going home because I have arthritis in both knees,” she tells me. “And then these two Hispanic guys came in the store and said, as calm as if they were ordering a Coke, that they tried to go out the front door and couldn’t because someone was shooting at people with a machine gun.” The two men hid in the back, and the elderly woman began pulling in merchandise while her young female co-worker at the neighboring candy store hauled down the big, gate-like door and used chairs to barricade them in, along with a dozen or so other customers who’d run in and joined them.

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On my way out of the casino, I pass a live band playing Tommy Tutone's "867-5309/Jenny." A bald old man in a gray suit and black loafers, who must have been 80, is dancing in that soft-shoed way old people dance, as though they are wearing slippers. You can tell he feels far away from whatever he does in his daylight hours. I am suddenly overcome by sadness, which happens to me so often in the months after the shooting that it ceases to surprise me. Everything looks the same, but the double consciousness of knowing a massacre was orchestrated in the same building casts a shadow over it all.

A few weeks later, I write to MGM Resorts to see if an executive will speak to me about Mandalay Bay. The wing on the 32nd floor, where Paddock's room was located, is still closed, and, in an obvious attempt to quietly move on, floors 31 through 34 have been renumbered as 56 through 59. After several calls and emails, a publicist writes back to say that MGM Resorts CEO Jim Murren is not available for an interview and that the company doesn't give out occupancy numbers to press. A week passes. A different publicist emails with a quote from another executive: "The recovery has been remarkable. Mandalay Bay is as vibrant, inviting and busy as ever. We continue to host major events and conventions and happily accommodate the influx of guests and visitors that come with them.... Every day is a stunning display of our dedication to sharing joy and happiness with everyone we serve."

ONE SUNDAY EVENING in late winter, I take an Uber, and my driver tells me that he was working the night of the shooting. We talk about how months have passed without the release of any surveillance footage from MGM (only in March did the company finally release six minutes of footage to The New York Times) nor any evidence from the police. My driver, it turns out, is a conspiracy theorist, an avid reader of Reddit who tells me he suspects that the shooting was a false flag — i.e., it was orchestrated by Democrats to push gun control. He also has a more elaborate theory that the shooting was a misbegotten assassination attempt on the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Online, it's speculated that there's an FBI cover-up, that Paddock works for the CIA, and that ISIS was involved. In essence, they all boil down to the idea that this old man would not, could not, have acted alone. Such theories spring up in part because they're comforting to people. It's far less bleak and unsettling to believe that a tragedy happened for a reason, however nefarious, than to think that someone like Paddock might have used all of his intelligence and skill to kill for no reason at all.

Las Vegas, not surprisingly, is a magnet for conspiracy theories. It is a place that exists in proximity to numerous serious, and even truly ghastly, secrets. There's its infamous criminal past. There's the fallout, in the literal and metaphorical sense, from the Nevada Test Site, located 65 miles northwest of the city. From 1951 to 1992, nearly 1,000 nuclear devices were detonated there, 105 of them above ground, and the environmental and health effects of the radiation they produced — including a marked increase in cancers and contaminated groundwater — were covered up by the federal government. There's also Area 51, an hour north of Las Vegas, the nation's most clandestine

military base, the existence of which wasn't even acknowledged by the CIA until 2013. I once had another Uber driver tell me she didn't know where her husband of 15 years worked, only that he went to McCarran International Airport each week and took off for somewhere; she said she didn't know half the guests at her own wedding.

But you don't have to be conspiracy-minded to have lingering questions about the shooting. Why did the security guard Jesus Campos, who was shot by Paddock, vanish moments before a slew of media interviews and then, five days later, appear only on Ellen? Why did unsealed court documents quote an officer saying, in a search warrant request to a judge, that SWAT officers "observed Stephen Paddock place a gun to his head and fire one round," when the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's official story was that Paddock committed suicide before his suite was breached and was found dead on the floor? And where is Paddock's girlfriend, Marilou Danley — why haven't we heard from her?

Early on, Sheriff Joseph Lombardo, who appeared like a lawman in a classic Western movie — handsome, rugged, tough but sensitive, his voice trembling as though he were on the verge of tears, his face twisted with emotion — was remarkably forthcoming with reporters, saying, for example, that he couldn't be sure whether Paddock had worked alone. But as the scrutiny intensified, he all but stopped giving press conferences.

Metro also fought the unsealing of search warrants to the public. The coroner's office fought the release of the autopsy reports for Paddock and the 58 victims. (A court ordered both.) In January, the department put out an 81-page report that contained many bizarre facts about Paddock's comings and

goings in the days leading up to October 1 — he stopped at a Walmart near his home in Mesquite three days before the shooting, for instance, buying "luggage, razor blades, fake flowers, a vase, and a Styrofoam ball" — but didn't reveal much that was new. As one survivor who avidly tracks the news coverage told me: "We basically know not much more than we did the week after it happened."

Six and a half months post-shooting, there are approximately 750 hours of body-cam footage, 2,000 911 calls, plus dispatch logs and interview reports that the public has not seen. In February, a judge ordered the immediate release of the materials, but Metro claimed it would cost nearly $500,000 to produce them. Just before Easter, when I speak to Maggie McLetchie, the First Amendment lawyer representing the Las Vegas Review-Journal in the lawsuit against Metro, she tells me: "They haven't handed over a single document."

Finally, in response to a Nevada Supreme Court order in early May, Metro released 2 hours and 42 minutes of body-cam footage for two of the officers who entered Paddock's suite. Two weeks later, Metro produced not the evidence the media companies had requested but a cache of witness documents. While these are illuminating—witnesses recall the terror and bloodshed of that night; casino hosts describe Paddock, a regular, as odd and introverted; and an employee at a Mandalay Bay restaurant remembers seeing Marilou Danley, or a woman who resembles her, dining with Paddock on September 29—the more than 1,200 pages were heavily redacted, offered without context, and difficult to search.

McLetchie, who has filed a motion to get Metro to comply with the court order, says, "They should be working with us to get us the documents that are most important for the public to

understand the events of 1 October, not randomly producing whatever they feel like." The vacuum has been filled by speculation.

FEBRUARY 17, three days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which killed 17 people, wounded 17 others, and ignited a national wave of gun control activism, The Washington Post publishes an article with the subtitle "Vegas moved on. Sutherland Springs prayed. But Parkland raged after its mass shooting." It does what so many articles written by outsiders do and conflates the city with the Strip. "Dancing showgirls and chapel-wedding newlyweds," it reads, "were back in the streets of Las Vegas soon after a gunman sprayed bullets across a music festival in October, signaling a quick return to normalcy."

Dozens of survivors contact me. Everyone I speak to can't sleep. They have nightmares. Loud noises send them spiraling. They are undone by crowds. But also afraid of being alone.

The truth is, four and a half months after the shooting, Las Vegas, its residents, and the tourists who were at the concert have not returned to normalcy. When I post an interview request on a Route 91 survivors Facebook page with the help of a young man who was at the concert, I am deluged by messages. Dozens of survivors contact me to share their stories. I talk to someone almost every afternoon, by phone and sometimes in person, for several weeks. Everyone I speak to can't sleep — they are up at 1 a.m., and 2, and 3, getting only a few hours a night. They have nightmares. Loud noises send them spiraling. They are undone by crowds. But also afraid of being alone. One

woman in her early 20s tells me she had spent only a handful of nights by herself since the shooting — if her boyfriend can't come over, she goes to her parents' house. An L.A. police officer I speak to, who breaks down and weeps as we talk, is wracked with guilt for not helping more people (once he and his wife escaped, she refused to let him go back in) and is terrified that his colleagues will find out that he's struggling and put him on leave. Cody, a 19-year-old studying flight operations at the College of Southern Nevada, lost her scholarship when her GPA dropped in the months after the shooting; she tells me she's now leery of jogging on the Strip during her ROTC training sessions, her face flushing pink as she talks.

Trina, a 54-year-old woman who was working as an usher the night of the massacre, tells me, "The PTSD, I've never realized how real it is. The balloons popping, the walking into large crowds, and as an usher, that's part of the job." I meet Trina for lunch at a fast food restaurant called Raising Cane's, and she says that many members of the Facebook group she belongs to are angry at all the attention given to the Parkland shooting. "They're furious, and they're livid. They literally feel that we were forgotten because of everything that happened at Parkland. We're like the forgotten people," she said, her voice quavering.

The usual flyover dismissal of Las Vegas ("Let's check in and see how stupid and craven everyone in Las Vegas is," as a colleague of mine puts it) was in play here. But the media response, I begin to think, was not just careless but snobbish. Las Vegas is a working-class town. It's also diverse, roughly 31 percent Latino, 12 percent black, and 6 percent Asian. It has one of the largest populations of undocumented immigrants — about 35 percent of foreign-born Las Vegans are undocumented versus 25 percent nationally — and the eighth-highest rate of

homelessness in the country. Parkland, by contrast, is affluent and mostly white. There are likely cultural and class reasons why the victims of the Las Vegas shooting did not receive as much attention, why they were not asked to appear on talk shows or speak at high-profile rallies.

Long before Parkland, though, Las Vegas had been pushed off the front pages. By the end of that first week, the news cycle had already begun to move on. There was the aftermath of the devastating hurricanes in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. Four days after the shooting, on October 5, the first Harvey Weinstein story broke in The New York Times, with The New Yorker's story right on its heels, and it was all anyone could talk about. On Halloween, a month later, there was the terrorist attack in Lower Manhattan, where eight people were mowed down and another 12 injured by a driver who had pledged allegiance to ISIS. Five days after that, there was yet another mass shooting, this one in Sutherland Springs, Texas; 26 people were murdered, including several children, and 20 more were wounded. And then there was the Trump presidency always in the background, blaring and blaring, like a car alarm that won't stop going off. By early November, a perfect dome of silence had formed around the incident.

THE DAY OF THE nation-wide March for Our Lives protests is yet another sunny, blustery day in Las Vegas. Instead of marching, I drive downtown to the Community Healing Garden to meet four survivors, two couples from California. In the past five and a half months, there has been an ongoing discussion about whether the city should build a permanent memorial to honor the victims and what that should look like. A number of survivors have told me that they struggle with a deep urge to return to the venue; they want a memorial on the site. But it seems unlikely that MGM, which owns the 15-acre parcel, and

the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority would endorse a reminder of bloodshed in the heart of the tourist district. The question is a thorny one: How does a city that bills itself as a place of abandon commemorate a tragedy?

As this debate is waged, there already is a pilgrimage site, one created not by a government entity but by volunteers and donations. The Las Vegas Community Healing Garden is a kind of pop-up memorial that was put together in four days, by the end of that first week in October. It's located on a half-acre lot behind The Love Store, an erotica shop where mannequins in negligees and garter-belt stockings stand in the window. There's a remembrance wall covered in photos of the 58 victims; a massive oak tree donated by Siegfried and Roy that's been planted in a large, red, heart-shaped plot; a grove of 58 trees; and daffodils everywhere.

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The couples I spend the afternoon with — Deborah and Greg, Crystal and Bryan — were watching the concert 200 feet from the stage. "So right in the line of fire," Deborah, who teaches second grade, says, "where Mandalay Bay was." We talk for a bit, and then Deborah lifts her shirt to reveal an intricate set of angel wings tattooed on her back. "Under his wings, you'll find refuge," it reads. I ask her husband, Greg, if he has a tattoo, too. He says he doesn't. "They were in the line of fire. I was in the bathroom," he says, gesturing to Deborah and their two friends, his voice shaky, "so they experienced something much more than I did." Bryan, who shielded Crystal and Deborah by lying

on top of them, looks at me and says, “He was separated from his wife, so he experienced something much more than I did.” They go off to spend time alone and pay their respects to the victims they recognize. “There were three that passed right around us,” Greg says.

I have spent the past couple of weeks reading through all the autopsy reports that have finally been released by the coroner. I don’t know why, but having steeped myself in this material for months, it didn’t feel morbid to read them, but rather like paying my own respects to the victims. The names are redacted, and much of the information is impersonal, but small, humanizing particulars seep through: “The fingernails are unremarkable, painted glitter copper.... The toenails are unremarkable and painted red.”

Here, though, it’s all personal. The mementos hanging from the remembrance wall are heartbreakingly specific. “23 years you were my husband. Forever you are my hero” reads a sign in a wood frame that hangs over a photo of Jack Beaton, who was 54. “To my Hannah Banana: You will always be the daughter of my heart” has been etched on a rectangular piece of wood decorated with a turquoise cowboy boot and glittery pink flowers. With a red marker, in a looping, youthful scrawl, a child has written a note: “I hope in my next life your my mom.”

When you walk through the 58 trees, it hits home how many victims there were. A grove of trees. Of people. Dangling from the branches are heart-shaped ornaments, miniature American flags, bright paper daisies. Someone has hung a single pastel stuffed bunny from each one. Reason, thought, worries about sentimentality or taste — all of it is obliterated by the blunt force of emotion. The wind chimes tinkle in the silence. The trees,

saplings really, are spindly and fragile, with few leaves, and in the wind they bend to the point of breaking. They don't, though.

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