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“On the same day in Las Vegas when sixteen-year-old Levi Presley . . .” The age and name of the deceased can be confirmed by the county’s official Coroner’s Report, dated July 13, 2002.

“. . . jumped from the observation deck . . .” Confirmed by the same Coroner’s Report, explaining that Presley descended from an “observation deck” at the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino.

“. . . 1,149-foot-high tower of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino . . .” Name and height of the tower confirmed on the Stratosphere’s website.

“. . . lap dancing was temporarily banned by the city . . .” Factual Dispute: *The Las Vegas Sun* published an article on July 12, the day preceding Levi Presley’s death, which referred to a *possible* ban against touching strippers enforced throughout the city, although at that point the ban hadn’t taken effect, as reported by Erin Neff in “Political Notebook,” *Las Vegas Sun*, July 12, 2002. So John’s claim here isn’t technically accurate.

“. . . in thirty-four licensed strip clubs in Vegas . . .” Factual Dispute: Not sure where John got this number from. The only reference I can find in his notes to the number of strip clubs that exist in Las Vegas is from a photocopy of an article he provided from a publication entitled *Adult Industry News*, which is a newsletter for the porn industry. So the source of his information is a little suspicious to begin with. Nevertheless, the article mentions that since 1995 “the number of strip clubs [in Las Vegas] has skyrocketed from three to sixteen.” But then it goes on to also claim that there are “thirty-one topless or all-nude clubs” (“Vegas Sex Industry Fights Gov’t Crackdown on Lap Dances” by Angie Wagner, *Adult Industry News*, January 3, 2003). So even if we trusted the source and its self-contradiction, John’s claim of thirty-four strip clubs still isn’t supported by this article. And even if that number were supported by the article, there’s still the issue of the article’s authority, given that it itself offers two contradictory numbers. So, should I ask him to clarify this number?

Editor: Sure, go ahead and ask him for a little more help in tracking the number down.

...

Jim: Hi, John. I’m Jim Fingal, I’m the intern who’s been assigned to fact-check your article about Las Vegas, and I’ve discovered a small discrepancy between the number of strip clubs you’re claiming there are in Las Vegas and the number that’s given in your supporting documents. I’m new at this, so bear with me. I was hoping that you could clarify how you determined that there are thirty-four strip clubs in the city while the source you’re using says thirty-one.

John: Hi, Jim. I think maybe there’s some sort of miscommunication, because the “article,” as you call it, is fine. It shouldn’t need a fact-checker; at least that was my understanding with the editor I’ve been working with. I have taken some liberties in the essay here and there, but none of them are harmful. And I’ve actually been assuming that everyone was cool with what I turned in. But I’ve also given the magazine all of my research so that people there could see for themselves what I was up to when I took these liberties. So I’m not sure it’s going to be worth your time to fact-check this. I’ve been open about all such “discrepancies.”

Jim: I hear you. But I think it’s just policy to fact-check all the nonfiction pieces the magazine publishes. Plus it’s the job I was assigned to do, so I have to do it. I’ve also already made a trip out there to check up on a few things in the essay because my friend was getting married and I knew this assignment was coming up. (Penn and Teller say hi BTW!) So I’ve made a bit of an investment in this myself. But really I think they just want to make sure that all the facts in the piece add up, especially since there are a lot of them and your claims sometimes get a little inflammatory. (In a good way of course . . . =)) So could you help me out with that number?

John: Inflammatory?

Jim: I mean in a hard-hitting and intriguing way. Wrong choice of words, sorry!

John: All right. Well, from what I can remember, I

got that number by counting up the number of strip clubs that were listed in the local yellow pages at the time of Levi's death. However, since that issue of the phone book was long gone by the time I started writing this, I found that porn article that I gave the magazine so that they could check up on my estimate.

Jim: Thanks, John. Very helpful. Now, I guess that's where the discrepancy is, because the number that's mentioned in the article is different from the number you're using in your piece.

John: Well, I guess that's because the rhythm of "thirty-four" works better in that sentence than the rhythm of "thirty-one," so I changed it.

Jim: Ah. OK. Well thanks for your time, John, I'll probably be checking back with you later on.

...

So, do we accept that?

Editor: Not his "rhythm" explanation, but his procedure for estimating that number is fine. Just try to confirm in the yellow pages that thirty-four was accurate in 2002.

Jim: Well, unless you want me to fly back to Las Vegas in order to track down a 2002 copy of the yellow pages, all I can use is the current online directory, which can't really indicate one way or the other the status of strip clubs in 2002. The current edition says that there are now twenty-nine strip clubs in town, so unless the number rose and then dropped again, there's likely a factual discrepancy here.

Editor: OK, Jim. Then just note the discrepancy and move on.

“. . . archaeologists unearthed parts of the world's oldest bottle of Tabasco-brand sauce from underneath a bar called Buckets of Blood . . .”

Factual Dispute: This happened on June 28, 2002, fifteen days before Levi Presley killed himself, so it wasn't discovered the same day he died. In addition, the bottle was discovered in Virginia City, which is 20 miles southeast of Reno—about 450 miles away from Las Vegas. So the relevance of this bottle's discovery to Las Vegas is a little specious. Also, the bar it was found under is called the "Boston Saloon," which, as the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported, is "behind the

Bucket of Blood Saloon." The point being that none of this corresponds in any way with Levi Presley's death. ("Hot Sauce Bottle Used in 1870s Found" by Scott Sonner, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 28, 2002.) What should I do here?

Editor: Go ahead and ask him about this, too.

...

Jim: John, I discovered that the bar you mention in the beginning of your piece where they found that Tabasco sauce bottle is actually called the "Boston Saloon." Do you want to change it?

John: No, why would I change it? "Bucket of Blood" is more interesting than the "Boston Saloon," and since they found it near the Bucket of Blood, I think the claim is OK as it stands. From what I understand, you are fact-checking this, right, not editing it?

...

Jim: Any suggestion on what to do here?

Editor: Just note it and move on, Jim. We'll deal with the discrepancies later.

“. . . and a woman from Mississippi beat a chicken named Ginger in a thirty-five-minute-long game

of tic-tac-toe.” Factual Dispute: According to the press release John provided from the hotel where this took place, this tic-tac-toe game actually happened on August 13, 2002, a full month after Levi Presley's death. Plus, while the woman who won the match was originally from Mississippi, she was actually a resident of Las Vegas when the game happened. So . . . ?

Editor: All right, ask him.

...

Jim: Hey, John . . . again =). I was wondering if you could weigh in on this tic-tac-toe game with the chicken. It looks like it happened quite a bit after Levi Presley died, but also that the woman who won it wasn't really from Mississippi. I think she was a local resident. Does this matter?

John: I realize that, but I need her to be from a place other than Las Vegas in order to underscore the transient nature of the city—that nearly everyone in Vegas is from someplace else. And since she did in fact

originally come from Mississippi, I think the claim is fine as it is.

Jim: What about that fact that this didn't occur on the day Presley died? It's not accurate to say that it did.

John: It was part of the atmosphere of that particular summer.

Jim: Then isn't that how it should be framed so that it is more accurate?

John: No, because being more precise would be less dramatic and would sound a lot clunkier. I don't think readers will care whether the events that I'm discussing happened on the same day, a few days apart, or a few months apart. What most readers will care about, I think, is the meaning that's suggested in the confluence of these events—no matter how far apart they occurred. The facts that are being employed here aren't meant to function baldly as "facts." The work that they're doing is more image-based than informational. Nobody is going to read this, in other words, in order to get a survey of the demographics of Las Vegas or what's scheduled on the community calendar. Readers can get that kind of information elsewhere.

...

Jim: For a piece that seems to rest on the weight of a lot of details, it seems a little problematic for John to be washing his hands of their accuracy, no?

Editor: Just stay on track with the fact-checking, Jim. I'll figure out in the end which inaccuracies are acceptable.

Jim: We're only one sentence into his piece, though, and I don't think this is the worst of it.

Editor: Don't worry. How 'bout you just work with John directly from now on? It'll save time if you don't have to check back with me on every problem you encounter. I'm here if any questions come up, though. Just be thorough, and question whatever you think is problematic, respectfully.

Jim: Alrighty.

“. . . five others died from two types of cancer . . .”

I can confirm this based on an email John received from a secretary at the Coroner's Office, dated August 12, 2002.

“. . . four from heart attacks . . .” Factual Dispute: According to the Coroner's Office, there were two

heart attacks that day. But besides these two particular coronary cases handled by the Coroner's Office, there were an additional five cardiorespiratory arrests and one additional myocardial infarction which were never investigated by the Coroner's Office, presumably because they took place in hospitals. So there were actually eight "heart attacks" that day, not four.

John, should we change this "four heart attacks" to "eight"?

John: I like the effect of these numbers scaling down in the sentence from five to four to three, etc. So I'd like to leave it as is.

Jim: But that would be intentionally inaccurate.

John: Probably, yeah.

Jim: Aren't you worried about your credibility with the reader?

John: Not really, Jim, no. I'm not running for public office. I'm trying to write something that's interesting to read.

Jim: But what's the point if the reader stops trusting you?

John: The readers who care about the difference between "four" and "eight" might stop trusting me. But the readers who care about interesting sentences and the metaphorical effect that the

accumulation of those sentences achieve will probably forgive me.

Jim: I guess I'm confused: what exactly are the benefits of using "four" versus "eight" in this sentence?

John: I'm done talking about this.

“. . . three because of strokes.” Confirmed: email from Coroner's Office, August 12, 2002.

“It was a day of two suicides by gunshot as well.” According to Sheri Renaud at the Clark County Coroner's Office, there were indeed two suicides that were the result of self-inflicted gunshots.

“The day of yet another suicide from hanging.”

Factual Dispute: But according to Ms. Renaud, the third additional suicide that occurred that day was also the result of someone jumping off a building, not from hanging.

John, can you clarify?

John: Yeah, I think I remember changing this because I wanted Levi's death to be the only one from falling that day. I wanted his death to be more unique.

...

Jim: OK, I know I'm just an intern here, but "I wanted his death to be more unique"?

Editor: Jim, just note it. Move on. We'll deal with it. I can't referee every problem you have with the piece. John's a different kind of writer, so you are going to encounter some irregularities in the project. Just keep your report as thorough as possible and we'll comb through it all later.

Jim: But every writer is "different"—does this mean that he's getting a special dispensation from the magazine's fact-checking policies, which you guys so thoroughly drilled into us?

Editor: Not necessarily, no. But it means that we're going to have to deal with the irregularities of this piece with an open mind.

"At a record 118 degrees, it also happened to be one of that summer's hottest days . . ." Factual Dispute: According to *Vegas.com*, the "Official Las Vegas Travel Site," the hottest day ever recorded in Las Vegas was on July 24, 1942, which registered at only at

117 degrees F. The temperature for the day Levi died was 113 degrees F, according to the statistics of the website *Weather Underground*. However, according to that same website, 113 degrees was still the hottest day of the year, so it was "a record" of sorts.

". . . a day that caused the World's Tallest Thermometer to break . . ." Factual Dispute: The World's Tallest Thermometer is located in Baker, California, on the road between Barstow and Vegas. It's actually officially known as the World's Largest Thermometer to be precise, so while it technically is also the "tallest," the name John is giving the thermometer is a little misleading. It's a 134-foot electric sign erected to memorialize the temperature

on July 10, 1913, which was a record 134 degrees F in Death Valley, 150 miles from Vegas. All I can find regarding its breaking is a report that states that at one point early in its existence the thermometer fell down due to strong winds. I can't find anything to confirm that it was broken the day Presley died, however. Also, it seems unlikely that an electric sign would break due to a high temperature—it's not like its electrons would overboil or something. Therefore, even if for some reason it was broken that day, the statement of causation seems bogus.

". . . raised the price of bottled water to five dollars

for eight ounces . . ." Factual Dispute: This level of granularity about something as ephemeral as what a street vendor would charge for a bottle of water is pretty hard to check, so I'm not sure what I can say about this. I can't find any news articles that mention this fact, and John doesn't have any notes to confirm it. However, I can say that I'm pretty sure that most major water producers stick to 12, 16.9, or 20 ounce sizes. I'm a little suspicious therefore of this "eight ounce" claim.

". . . and caused a traffic jam on the north end of the Las Vegas Strip as a tourist family traveled

toward downtown Las Vegas, rolled over a broken bottle from a homeless woman's cart, blew out a back tire, hit a parked car, and stalled outside the entrance of the Stratosphere Hotel when the jack inside the back of their rented Dodge Stratus sank into the heat-softened asphalt of the street." Factual Dispute:

There's no mention of this accident in the archives of either the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* or the *Las Vegas Sun*, the two major papers in the city.

John, do you have a source for this?

John: I heard about this from a woman I interviewed at the Aztec Inn, which is across the street from the Stratosphere. The day after Levi's death, I began some casual research in the neighborhood surrounding the Stratosphere. The woman claimed that she wit-

nessed not only Levi's fall but also the traffic jam that preceded it.

Jim: Can you send me a copy of your notes from this interview?

John: I didn't keep notes from the interview. I probably noted what this woman said by jotting down something like "homeless lady" and "traffic accident," but beyond that I just relied on my memory of what she told me. Besides, this wasn't a formal interview. At this point I was just wandering around the Stratosphere trying to gather information. I didn't even know if I was going to write about Levi.

Jim: To be honest, I suspect your "casual" interviewing strategy is going to be a problem, because it means that we're not going to have anything that can remotely come close to proving what you've written.

John: Well it might be a problem, but with all due respect, it's your problem, Jim, not mine. I'm not a reporter, and I have never claimed to be a reporter, and the magazine took on this project with the understanding that I have no interest in pretending to be a reporter or in producing journalism. Also, even if this had been a formal interview, I still wouldn't have taken extensive notes, because I tend to be casual whenever I'm interviewing people so that they feel more comfortable with me. The minute you take out a tape recorder or a notebook during an interview people get self-conscious and start "performing" for you, watching what they say and how they say it. So when I interview someone it's usually over lunch or a drink or during a walk or something. When people think they're in a conversation as opposed to an interview they are much more relaxed and thus more forthcoming.

Jim: Well, OK . . . I guess . . . but this still seems to violate about ten different rules of journalistic integrity.

John: I'm not sure that matters, Jim. This is an essay, so journalistic rules don't belong here.

Jim: I'm not sure it's going to be quite that easy.

"We therefore know that when Levi Presley jumped from the tower of the Stratosphere Hotel at 6:01:43 p.m.—eventually hitting the ground at 6:01:52 p.m. . . ." Factual Dispute: Although the incident did happen at "18:01," according to the Coroner's Report, Levi Presley's fall supposedly only took eight seconds,

not nine. So the actual time frame would be more like "6:01:43–6:01:51."

John?

John: Yeah, I fudged that. It doesn't seem like it should be that big a deal, though. It's only a second. And I needed him to fall for nine seconds rather than eight in order to help make some of the later themes in the essay work.

Jim: John, changing details about stuff like Tabasco sauce bottles and thermometers is one thing, but it seems a tad unethical to fiddle with details that relate directly to this kid's death. In my book, it just seems wrong, especially since the coroner clearly states that Presley's fall only took eight seconds.

John: I don't think it's unethical, particularly because I wasn't alone in assuming that his fall took nine seconds. For a while his parents also assumed that he had fallen for nine seconds. In fact, that's where I initially got the number from. Do you think I'd just

change this willy-nilly to suit some sort of literary trick I wanted to pull off? His parents and I had a fairly explicit conversation about these nine seconds with Levi's old Tae Kwon Do coach. So with that little bit of information, I began thinking about some of the ways that the

number nine could play a thematic role in the essay.

Jim: OK, I'll grant you that at one point you didn't know the correct number, but now you do know better, so shouldn't it change?

John: "Nine" is too integral a part of the essay at this point. And I admit that I'm wrong about "nine" later on anyway. So the essay's not changing. It would ruin the essay.

Jim: It would "ruin" it to make it more accurate?

John: Yup.

". . . there were over a hundred tourists in five dozen cars that were honking and bumping and idling and yelling . . ." Epistemological Problem: This assertion must be rampant speculation, unless someone was actually at the scene of this accident counting the number of people who were in these cars. In any case, there were probably a lot more than a hundred people at this scene if this was an actual "traffic jam." At that intersection, which is a T intersection (Baltimore Avenue comes in from the west and dead-ends into Las Vegas Boulevard), there are six lanes on Las Vegas,

and four on Baltimore. So the “five dozen cars” that John notes only comes out to about sixty cars. If we spread that number out across each segment of road that feeds into this intersection—with about a third of the cars on each of the three segments of the T—this comes to only about five cars in each lane going to or from the intersection on Baltimore Avenue and three cars in each lane going to or from the intersection on Las Vegas Boulevard. Now, even if all sixty of these cars were on Las Vegas Boulevard at the exact same spot where Levi hit the ground, that would still only be ten cars in each lane of the street (an average of twelve feet per car would equal less than 150 feet of congestion). When I was there at 6 p.m. on a Saturday night, there were probably at least this many cars in the immediate area, with no accident in sight. So I very much doubt John’s estimate. In fact, there’s a constant level of baseline traffic nearly everywhere in Las Vegas. According to the website *Guide to Vegas*, heavy traffic is a given there. That website’s advice to tourists, in fact, is to “avoid driving on Las Vegas Boulevard (the Strip). Instead, use Paradise to the east and Industrial to the west as much as possible. Personally speaking, 26 miles of the 405 in Southern California every day for a year was never as bad as Strip traffic on an early Friday night.” So, in my estimation, there would probably be upwards of two hundred vehicles in that intersection at the time, which would actually be—if we allowed an average of 1.6 people per car—six hundred people in the kind of massive traffic jam John’s purporting, although I freely admit that that’s something of a wild guess. John, could you clarify?

John: The woman at the Aztec Inn said that there were about five dozen cars there. That should be enough for us.

“ . . . at the base of the Stratosphere tower.” Possible Dispute: I guess this depends on how you define “at the base of” the tower. The base of the tower itself is several yards away from this intersection. The tower is not, in other words, right at the intersection. The main driveway to the casino is immediately to your left as you’re traveling north up Las Vegas Boulevard; only

if you keep going fifty feet or so—onto the sidewalk and a small pavilion in front of the hotel—will you get to what is actually the “base” of the tower. So “near the base” of the tower is probably more accurate. John, do you want to change this?

John: Nope. “At the base” is sharper-sounding and more precise.

Jim: But it’s inaccurate. How could it be more precise?

John: It sounds more pointed, and thus more accurate, and that therefore gives the sentence a feeling of greater precision and authority. “Near the base” sounds wishy-washy, just as if I rewrote the opening sentence of the essay to read “Within the same basic time frame as Levi Presley’s death . . .”

“Some of them looked up from the traffic jam that night and briefly saw in the sky something fall from the dark, and then through the palms, and then to the city’s pavement. Some of them left their cars to look down at what had fallen.”

Epistemological Problem: “tourists.” Since the official witness statements about this incident haven’t been released (see below), and considering that John wasn’t actually there to hear people talking about the incident, this seems like speculation. Also, as is later stated in the essay and confirmed in the Coroner’s Report, Levi landed on the hotel’s driveway, not “the sidewalk.” And besides, the sidewalk surrounding the Stratosphere is brick, not “pavement.” So really none of this is accurate. Another issue: the Stratosphere is surrounded by many palm trees—they line the sidewalk and surround the street—so someone watching from across the street might indeed have had their vision of Presley’s fall obstructed by the palm trees, but they certainly didn’t see his fall partially broken by said trees. In other words, they would have “seen him fall, through the palm trees” vs. “seen him ‘fall through the palm trees.’” John’s garden-pathy sentence is confusing, and should probably be amended.

John: I’m sorry, I don’t know what any of that means. Just leave it as is.

and bumping and idling and yelling at the base of the Stratosphere tower.

Some of them looked up from the traffic jam that night and briefly saw in the sky something fall from the dark, and then through the palms, and then to the city’s pavement. Some of them left their cars to look down at what had

“And ten of them gave statements . . .” The Coroner’s Report lists a total of only six witness statements, although only two of those six are noted as actual “bystanders.” John’s own notes from his conversation with the police officer also reference that the “report has six witness statements.” John himself interviewed another four people who claimed to have witnessed the incident, but their statements aren’t “official” because they weren’t introduced into the police record or the Coroner’s Report. So I think John’s a little confused here.

“You don’t want to read any of that, man. That stuff is just facts. None of this is gonna sound like a Mickey Spillane novel. You know?”

Possible Alteration: The actual quote that appears in John’s notes from this guy is “All I can tell you is what’s public—it’ll be sanitized—it’s not going to sound like a Mickey Spillane novel.” The “facts” part of that sentence seems to be an insertion by John. Also, it looks like he changed this officer’s name (is that allowed?), since I can’t find a “Steve Barela” listed with the Las Vegas Police Department. There is a Rick Barela, however, according to a search of the local papers (“Las Vegas Police Officer Arrested after Scuffle,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, June 30, 2004).

John: I punched up his statement, but I think the basic gist is the same.

Jim: “Punched up”?

“When I asked a woman at Las Vegas Teen Crisis whether suicide is a problem for teenagers in the city, she told me that she preferred I ‘not write any of that down.’” Factual Dispute: I can’t find this quote anywhere in John’s notes. Even then, if this is the same

fallen. And ten of them gave statements of what they saw to the police.

When I asked the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department whether I could read some of those statements that the witnesses had given, Police Sergeant Steve Barela explained, “You don’t want to read any of that, man. That stuff is just facts. None of this is gonna sound like a Mickey Spillane novel. You know?”

When I asked a woman at Las Vegas Teen Crisis whether suicide is a problem for teenagers in the city, she told me that she preferred I “not write any of that down.”

When I asked Michael Gilmartin, the public relations manager at the Stratosphere Hotel, whether his hotel has a system in place for discouraging people from jumping off his tall tower, first he asked me if I was kidding, and then he said, “Listen, I don’t want to be associated with some piece about a kid who

woman who appears in John’s notes elsewhere, what she’s saying seems to contradict what she stated about the importance of being forthcoming about suicide in a *Las Vegas Review-Journal* article: “People don’t talk about suicide. There’s this stigma attached to it,” she said. “But we have a serious problem in Nevada. We lead the nation in suicides every year. We’re not going to eradicate it, but with better awareness,

maybe we can help slow it down” (“Suicide of Son Gives Mom’s Life a New Meaning” by Richard Lake, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, December 1, 2002). So that sentiment is quite clearly the exact opposite of what John’s attributing to her here.

John: How would you know if this is the same woman as the one I’m talking about? I changed this woman’s identity. As far as I know, “Las Vegas Teen Crisis” doesn’t even exist.

Jim: Because I’m very good at my job.

John: So good that you know the employees of nonexistent organizations?

Jim: Good enough to be able to figure out what you’re up to.

“. . . first he asked if I was kidding, and then he said, ‘Listen, I don’t want to be associated with some piece about a kid who killed himself here, OK? I

mean, really, what’s the upside to that? All I can see is a downside. If you can tell me how this story could benefit the hotel, then maybe we could discuss it, but right now I don’t want to be a part of it.’” Alteration of Quote: In John’s notes, the actual quote from Gilmartin reads: “I just don’t want to be associated in any way, shape, or form with a piece about someone killing themselves. I mean, what’s the upside to that? All I see is a downside.” Another Alteration: Gilmartin’s official title at the Stratosphere is the “vice president of public relations,” according to a press

release I found, although his title could have changed since 2002. Also, this part of the essay seems to be told from the point of view of the present looking back, so maybe we should refer to him as the “public relations manager at the time”?

John: No, that’s ridiculously clunky. Leave it alone. And please don’t offer to do any more writing for me, thank you.

“What I know for certain about Levi Presley is what he looked like, how old he was, what kind of car he drove, what school he attended, what girl he liked and what girl liked him, his favorite outfit, favorite movie, favorite restaurant, favorite band, what level belt he held in Tae Kwon Do, what design he had sketched onto the wall of his bedroom—very lightly, in pencil—and later planned to fill in, which drawings of his from art school he is thought to have been particularly proud of and whether their themes could be said to provide an indication of suicidal ‘ideation,’ the nickname of his car, the two different nicknames his parents had each given him . . .” Query

to John: I know you’re not a journalist, but are your notes from these interviews with Levi’s parents in a different notebook other than the ones you gave me? In the notebooks you gave me there appears to be one short phone conversation with Levi’s mom, and then a couple of one-liners from his dad. Can the rest of this be found elsewhere? Information from the Presleys is a big chunk of the factual material in this piece, so I would like to be able to verify as much of it as possible.

John: As I’ve told you, Jim, I don’t take notes when

killed himself here, OK? I mean, really, what’s the upside to that? All I can see is a downside. If you can tell me how this story could benefit the hotel, then maybe we could discuss it, but right now I don’t want to be a part of it.”

What I know for certain about Levi Presley is what he looked like, how old he was, what kind of car he drove, what school he attended, what girl he liked and what girl liked him, his favorite outfit, favorite movie, favorite restaurant, favorite band, what level belt he held in Tae Kwon Do, what design he had sketched onto the wall of his bedroom—very lightly, in pencil—and later planned to fill in, which drawings of his from art school he is thought to have been particularly proud of and whether their themes could be said to provide an indication of suicidal “ideation,” the nickname of his car, the two different nicknames his parents had each given

I’m doing these kinds of interviews. That’s probably nontraditional or even unprofessional, but since it took me about three months to get Levi’s parents to agree to meet with me, I wasn’t willing to jeopardize that by bringing in a tape recorder or a notebook and intimidating them. So, except for the interviews I did for “fact-gathering” with the police or the coroner, the interviews that were conducted with real people

tended to be unrecorded. Again, this is because I think that most people aren’t used to being interviewed and so they don’t know how to relax during the process—the result being that everything they say sounds canned. Therefore, with Levi’s parents I gathered information slowly over a period of about two weeks, driving around with them in their car, hanging out with them in their home, eating dinner with them, watching TV with them, visiting Levi’s old dojo, looking over his art, chatting with his friends, etc. I doubt that most “nonfiction” writers and readers would approve of this way of gathering information because it isn’t “nonfictionally” verifiable, but I don’t care. I’m tired of this genre being terrorized by an unsophisticated reading public that’s afraid of accidentally venturing into terrain that can’t be

footnoted and verified by seventeen different sources. My job is not to re-create a world that already exists, holding up a mirror to the reader’s experience in hopes that it rings true. If a mirror were a sufficient means of handling human experience, I doubt that our species would have invented literature.

Jim: Note to self: John is not a journalist. Also not a nonfiction writer. He is, however, a writer of journalistic-ish texts that are not necessarily fiction. Got it.

“. . . his answers to the questions on the last pop quiz he took in school—*What is good? What is bad? What does “art” mean to you? Now look at the chair on the table in front of you and describe it in literal terms . . .*” Confirmed: “What is bad” and “What is good” are indeed sections in the test that John’s describing, as is “What does ‘art’ mean to you.” But there’s an inconsistency in a part of the quote. The exact question on the test is “Look at the chair placed on the table in front of you. Describe this chair, literally (what does it look like?).” Another dispute: These questions are taken from an “Art Pretest,” rather than what John is calling a “pop quiz.” If my memory of high school serves me correctly, pretests are worksheets you do before a test in order to help you study for it, and this is corroborated by the fact that there is no grade on this pretest. So it would be inaccurate to call this a “pop quiz.” And finally: The test is dated August 25, 1999, and Levi’s death was on July 12, 2002, so even if this were a “pop quiz,” it’s very unlikely that it was “the last pop quiz he took in school,” unless he was one lucky kid.

John: OK, you’re probably right that this wasn’t his “last” quiz. But it’s more dramatic to say that it was, and I don’t think it’s harming anyone to do that. It’s not like there’s a quiz out there that’ll get jealous if we claim that this was Levi’s last quiz. Really, Jim, respectfully, you’re worrying about very stupid shit. (By the way, also very stupid would be calling this quiz a “pretest,” because I kind of suspect that half the readers out there wouldn’t even know what the fuck that was.)

Jim: Unfortunately I don’t get to decide which facts

are stupid; I have to check all of them. Although I admit that it would certainly save me a lot of time with this essay if I were allowed to make that distinction.

“. . . and of which bottle of cologne among the five Levi kept in the medicine cabinet down the hall his small bedroom still smelled, even after his parents had ripped up its carpeting, thrown out its bed,

and emptied its closet of everything but his art, by the time I first visited them, three months after his death.” I have no means of verifying this odor. I’m just going to have to take John’s word for it.

“What I know for certain about Levi Presley, in other words, is whatever Gail, his mom, and Levi Senior . . .” The names of Levi’s parents are confirmed in the Coroner’s Report.

“. . . his dad . . .” Technically, Levi’s father’s name is “Levi III,” since on the Coroner’s Report Levi is named “Levi IV.”

“‘Whatever you want,’ they said. ‘We’ll go on the record about anything.’” I’m going to have to take him at his word on this, too. But for the record, I’m a little suspicious of this. John says that it took him “months” to get the

Presleys to agree to talk with him. And yet in the essay, immediately upon meeting John, the Presleys decide to throw open their lives to this total stranger? I’ve never met John in person so I can’t speak to his animal magnetism, but it sounds like he’s tooting his look-at-me-I-have-kind-eyes-and-am-so-empathetic-that-people-just-want-to-tell-me-their-stories horn.

him, his answers to the questions on the last pop quiz he took in school—

What is good? What is bad? What does “art” mean to you? Now look at the chair on the table in front of you and describe it in literal terms

—and of which bottle of cologne among the five Levi kept in the medicine cabinet down the hall his small bedroom still smelled, even after his parents had ripped up its carpeting, thrown out its bed, and emptied its closet of everything but his art, by the time I first visited them, three months after his death.

What I know for certain about Levi Presley, in other words, is whatever Gail, his mom, and Levi Senior, his dad, were willing to say to a person they’d never met before about their sixteen-year-old son, which was, I quickly realized upon meeting them, anything.

“Whatever you want,” they said. “We’ll go on the record about anything.”

“There was the one that happened on a Saturday, July 13, at approximately 6:01 p.m. . . .” Temporal Inaccuracy: The rounding here of the time to “6:01 p.m.” is inaccurate, since it happened at 6:01:43 p.m., which is closer to 6:02 than it is to 6:01.

“. . . on the herringboned brickwork . . .” Brick pattern confirmed. The driveway is paved with bricks that are laid in 90 degree herringbones. This eventually fades into a design of overlapping arcs once you approach the entrance to the casino.

“. . . of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino’s north entrance driveway . . .”

The Coroner’s Report confirms the directionality of this as “north.” But there’s a contradiction among the sources themselves. The Coroner’s Report says: “The area where the decedent was found is the north asphalt driveway that leads into the main entrance of the hotel/casino.” This is confusing, because when I went to investigate the “north asphalt driveway” (as the Coroner’s Report calls it) or the “north entrance driveway” (as John calls it) I found an area that was paved with brick, not asphalt. And in addition, while there is an entrance to the casino on this side

of the building, it really couldn’t be called the “main entrance,” as there are several entrances all around the building, and each seems to be equally well-used. So in this case, oddly enough, the Coroner’s Report seems to be incorrect. In addition, the entrance isn’t actually called the “north entrance driveway”; the door this driveway leads to is labeled “Door 5S.” And for that matter, this “driveway,” while technically reserved for cars, doesn’t actually seem to be accessi-

ble from the street. It looks like it’s a lot for valet parking only. So can it even be called a “driveway”?

“. . . a hot night . . .” The warmth of the night is confirmed by local weather records. The temperature didn’t drop below 99 degrees all night, and was above 111 degrees from about two o’clock in the afternoon until well after 7:00 p.m.

“. . . the winds from the east . . .”

Factual Dispute: The online *Weather Underground* report for that day says that for most of the night the wind was blowing SW/S/SSW, meaning it was blowing from the northeast, not the east. I think John just misread the wind directions. It’s a common mistake.

“. . . blowing white palls of dust . . .”

Factual Dispute: At the time of Levi’s death, the wind was blowing about 11.5 mph, which on the Beaufort Scale is considered a “gentle breeze.” True, the maximum wind speed for the day was 28 mph—or what is considered a “strong breeze”—and there were wind gusts of a maximum of 38 mph—which is considered “near gale” force. However, the text in question is describing the condition at 6:01 p.m., and the maxi-

mum wind speeds for the day didn’t hit until around 10:00 p.m. that night. So it’s unlikely that the wind was sufficient enough to blow “white palls of dust.”

John: It’s adding drama, Jim. Plus, I don’t think it takes much wind to blow dust. I’m sure that there was a little handful of dust somewhere in the city at that time that was being kicked up by the wind. You can let it go.

“ . . . the stock market low, unemployment rates high . . . ” Confirmed: In the second to third quarter of 2002, which is when Levi Presley died, economic times were tough—the Dow Jones was at a low of about 8600. The high for that year was 10600, in March, and the lowest for the year was 7530, in October. The NASDAQ, which peaked in January at 2022, was at 1300 in mid-July when Levi died, while the S&P and NYSE were also both low for the year.

“ . . . the moon only showing half of itself . . . ” Factual Dispute: The moon was showing significantly less than “half of itself.” At the time during the month when Levi Presley died, the moon was in a “waxing crescent” phase, which means that only 12 percent of the moon was illuminated, according to the *Weather Underground*.

“ . . . and Mars and Jupiter aligned . . . ” This “alignment” is accurate for the most part, although the terminology John’s using is not really precise. Mars and Jupiter were within 9 degrees longitude of each other, according to the website *Astro.com*. This, however, according to *Astrology.com*, is considered a “conjunction,” not an “alignment.”

“ . . . which isn’t particularly rare . . . ” Confirmed: It’s not rare. In fact, celestially speaking, it’s actually quite common, occurring about every two or three years. According to the website of the Geophysical Institute of the University of Alaska, “The frequency of planet-to-planet conjunctions is a function of the degree of the planets’ separation, the time period under consideration, and the number of planets involved. Conjunctions can be quite unspectacular since planets can be more than 10 degrees apart while quasi-conjunctions can be less than 0.5 degree apart for many days.” Also, in the “Mars-Jupiter Conjunctions” section of that website: “Conjunction pair is visible 26% of the time based on the period 1900–2078. Conjunction

interval is: 794–832 days (91%). Five other interval periods between 68–74 days and 976–981 days occur. The shortest period interval involves multiple conjunction sets and the longest skipped sets. Generally, after every 21st event, the series is broken by the longer interval period (2026–2029 and 2073–2076).” Or in lay terms: It wasn’t rare.

“ . . . that Levi Presley’s body had been found ‘supine’ and ‘damaged’ but ‘relatively intact’ on the driveway of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, according to the coroner of Clark County, Nevada . . . ” Factual Dispute: The Coroner’s Report does indeed use the word “supine,” but “damaged” and “intact” are from John’s notes during his interview with the coroner. So it’s inaccurate to attribute the “Coroner’s Report” as the source for these words, which the quotation marks imply.

John: But it’s more efficient to attribute all of this to the official report, so leave it.

John: But it’s more efficient to attribute all of this to the official report, so leave it.

“ . . . or that Levi Presley’s body had been found ‘splattered to a million pieces’ on the driveway of the Stratosphere Hotel and Casino, according to a police report . . . ” Again, this isn’t technically accurate. This statement comes

from an interview John conducted with Sergeant Tirso Dominguez of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police. It doesn’t appear in the police report itself.

John: Police statement vs. police report—they’re basically the same thing. And since “report” sounds more precise, I’m leaving it.

“ . . . or that parts of Levi Presley had been found a day later, sixty feet away and across the street, according to a witness at a nearby motel.” I can’t find any mention of this in the local papers, nor in an extensive Google search, nor even in John’s own notes. And to be honest, this seems pretty improbable, given that the Las Vegas Boulevard median is lined with

bushes and trees. There's a fast-food restaurant across the street, and even if they aren't the most fastidious germophobes I'd still think they would take it upon themselves to clean up this sort of thing in the unlikely event that the proper authorities hadn't. John?

John: Once again, Jim, this is from casually interviewing people in the neighborhood around the hotel in the days after Levi's death. The neighborhood that the Stratosphere is in is called the "Naked City," and it's not a particularly pleasant place. It's icky and depressed and many of the people I spoke with were either drunk or stoned

sixty feet away and across the street, according to a witness at a nearby motel.

And then there was the death, according to some in Las Vegas, that simply did not seem to have occurred.

or both, so these claims can't at all be taken seriously. (And I, too, doubt that the city would let body parts lie around for days.) However, this claim is here to add

to the hearsay surrounding Levi's death, and also to contribute to the many discrepancies I found while researching Levi's case. For example: preceding this claim are the apparent contradictions from the Coroner's Office and the police about the

condition of Levi's body after he fell. So, as unreliable as this claim about "body parts" is, I include it in order to emphasize the looseness of the facts that seemed to surround Levi's death.