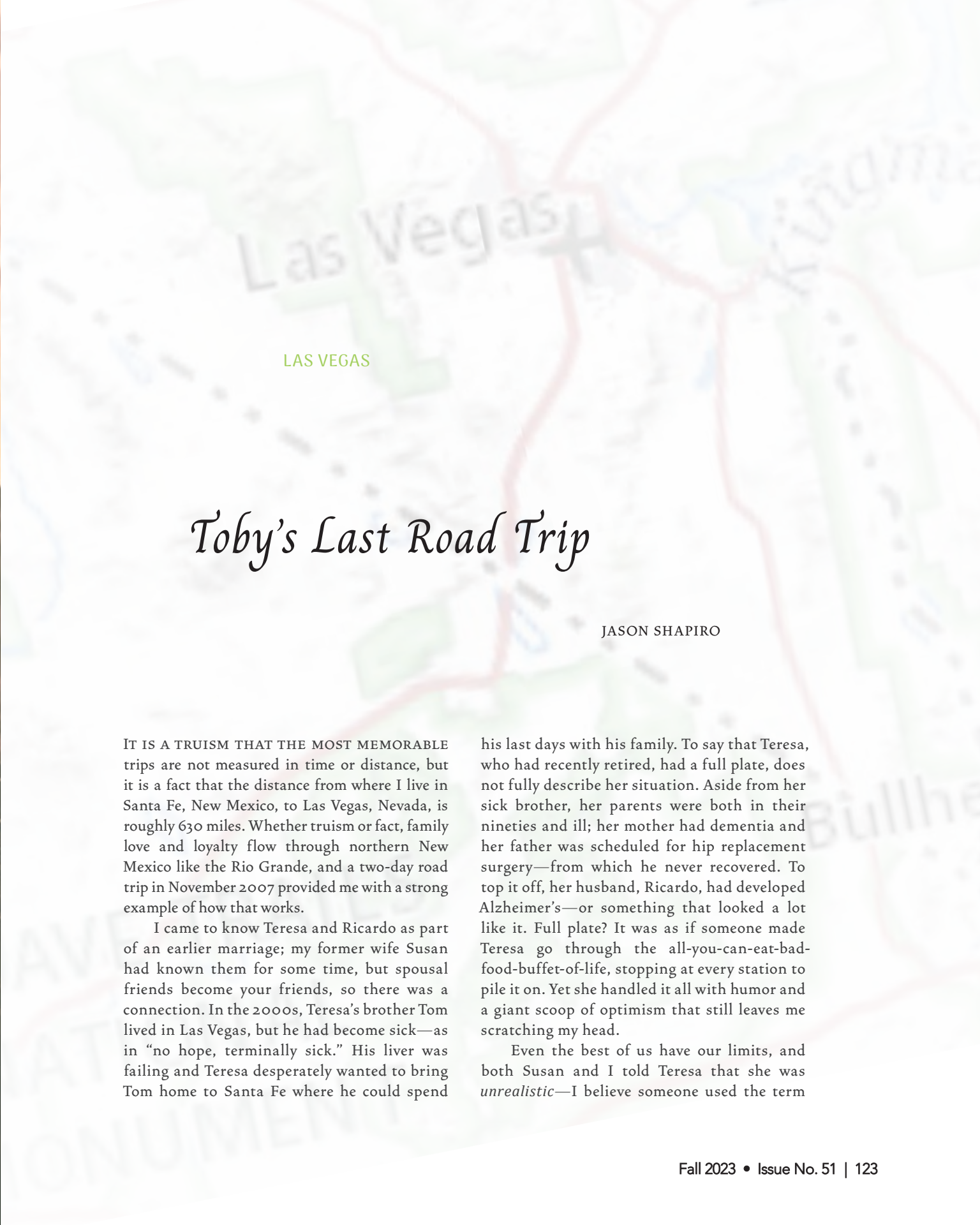




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LAS VEGAS

## Toby's Last Road Trip

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IT IS A TRUISM THAT THE MOST MEMORABLE trips are not measured in time or distance, but it is a fact that the distance from where I live in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Las Vegas, Nevada, is roughly 630 miles. Whether truism or fact, family love and loyalty flow through northern New Mexico like the Rio Grande, and a two-day road trip in November 2007 provided me with a strong example of how that works.

I came to know Teresa and Ricardo as part of an earlier marriage; my former wife Susan had known them for some time, but spousal friends become your friends, so there was a connection. In the 2000s, Teresa's brother Tom lived in Las Vegas, but he had become sick—as in “no hope, terminally sick.” His liver was failing and Teresa desperately wanted to bring Tom home to Santa Fe where he could spend

his last days with his family. To say that Teresa, who had recently retired, had a full plate, does not fully describe her situation. Aside from her sick brother, her parents were both in their nineties and ill; her mother had dementia and her father was scheduled for hip replacement surgery—from which he never recovered. To top it off, her husband, Ricardo, had developed Alzheimer's—or something that looked a lot like it. Full plate? It was as if someone made Teresa go through the all-you-can-eat-bad-food-buffet-of-life, stopping at every station to pile it on. Yet she handled it all with humor and a giant scoop of optimism that still leaves me scratching my head.

Even the best of us have our limits, and both Susan and I told Teresa that she was *unrealistic*—I believe someone used the term



nuts—to think she could care for both her brother and her husband, pack a minivan, and drive by herself from Las Vegas to Santa Fe. It seemed natural for me to fly out to Vegas and drive everyone back to Santa Fe, so I volunteered. The flight from Albuquerque to Las Vegas takes about an hour and a half and basically follows the same route that I would soon be driving, although it was to be a very different trip.

Teresa picked me up at the airport, but I was in for a shock. I had met Tom before and remembered him as a nice-looking man, moderately tall and slim, but I was not prepared to see what ninety pounds looked like when stretched over a 6' 2" frame. I do not know if I have been fortunate or unfortunate, but I have not had much experience with terminal illness. Tom's eyes were still bright and aware, but he was neither moving much nor talking at all, and he looked frail enough to crumble if we moved him the wrong way.

The first order of business was getting everything and everyone, especially Tom, into the minivan. Now, I was in reasonably good shape, but even a frail ninety-pound person is surprisingly heavy, awkward, and not all that easy to move around. Fortunately, fire departments do more than put out fires, and the Las Vegas fire department sent over four firemen who helped us carefully secure Tom in the van. After Tom was settled, loading the van got a little complicated because every time I turned around, Teresa had more bags and boxes than I thought could possibly fit and still leave room for the four of us plus an extra passenger named Toby, Tom's devoted twelve-year-old, arthritic mixed-breed dog. Too much good food plus steroids for his ailments had bulked up Toby to the point where he looked like a large, fuzzy, dark-gray loaf of bread. Toby also needed help getting in and out of cars, but I was able to handle that job without the fire department. He was a good traveler who had taken any number of road trips with Tom,

but I don't know if he sensed that this would be the last one.

As we were about to leave, one of Tom's friends who was helping us took me aside and quietly said, "Look, if anything happens"—I immediately grasped the euphemism—"just keep driving. Don't stop. Don't call the local authorities. Just keep driving, or you might be spending several days somewhere other than Santa Fe." Okay, things were definitely getting stranger, and I was starting to feel as if I had stepped into *The Twilight Zone*. I half expected to see Rod Serling standing in the parking lot in his trademark black suit and skinny tie with his thumb out. It would not have mattered because we had no more room.

The route from Las Vegas to Santa Fe is not complicated, and with the sun sinking behind us, we headed east. At least we tried to head east. Teresa will readily admit to being directionally challenged, and Ricardo had already begun to get more than a little confused. Neither circumstance would have been a major problem except that I was not familiar with Las Vegas. On the other hand, I learned to drive in Boston, so how hard could it be to muscle through rush hour traffic and find the interstate? Teresa was in the back seat with Tom, trying her best to direct me, and Ricardo was sitting next to me trying to do the same thing. Ultimately, I split the difference of their suggestions, followed my instincts, and was soon rewarded with the familiar green interstate highway sign telling me *I-15, Next Left*. In my head I heard the immortal voice of the renowned basketball announcer Marv Albert: "Yesssss!"

We drove into the deepening darkness, and the fungus-like developments and malls oozing out of Vegas soon gave way to the real desert that I love. I was looking forward to this part of the drive. The landforms are raw and unencumbered by much vegetation, and I thought of a line from the 1939 movie *Gunga Din* in which two British soldiers marching through the Khyber Pass in what is now Pakistan describe their route as a huge "rock garden that just got away from someone." Within an hour it was dark and the reality was that there was very little to see, at

least until we drove around a curve, dropped through a series of switchbacks, and came face to face with Hoover Dam. I am much more of a lover of wild places than of built things, and I have strongly negative feelings about what dams and water projects have done to the American West, but there in the desert darkness, lit by enormous floodlights, Hoover Dam was as beautiful as it was unexpected. Is that what this trip was about—following the expected only to be surprised by the unexpected?

The trip changed for me early on Saturday morning. I was driving through some of the most dramatic scenery in the Southwest and something shifted. Even at eighty miles per hour, the desert landscape leads to contemplation, and thinking about the impermanence of life while cruising through a land of impossibly old and rugged geology was a mind-bender. As an atheist, I am neither religious in any conventional sense nor am I spiritual in any unconventional sense, but I definitely felt an acute awareness of the moment. My moment was that I was responsible for the safe transport of an eclectic group: a wonderful man whose mind had failed, a lovely woman who was watching her younger brother die, a kind and gentle man whose body had failed, and one fuzzy gray dog. Every once in a while I reached behind my seat to scratch Toby, who raised his head but said nothing.

Closer to Albuquerque the scenery changed. There were more houses, people, casinos, truck stops, and just plain stuff. The landscape filled, the traffic thickened, and contemplative moments passed. We got Tom back to Santa Fe by mid-afternoon. Four firemen from the Santa Fe Fire Department lifted Tom from the back of the minivan and gently placed him on the bed in the guest room of Teresa and Ricardo's house. Toby padded into the room, checked out Tom, and then checked out the yard. The van was unloaded, friends and relatives began clustering, and it was time for me to go home. Teresa thanked and hugged me with tears in her eyes. A few hours later, after Tom had been put to bed, after the family had seen him, and after I mentally revisited my surreal drive through the desert, Teresa called. Tom had just died and she wanted us to know. ❁