

## Wayne Newton's Next: Steve Raap

Marilyn Weidholz down-shifted her '97 Plymouth Voyager into third. The engine whined, causing what was left of the minivan's muffler to rattle in distress. Her two children slept soundly in the back of the vehicle, their dreams undisturbed.

Ahead lay the neon glow of Las Vegas. Behind, a peach-colored sky in the rear-view mirror signaled the coming dawn. "I sure hope that cheater is still employed," she thought. "Either that, or dead."

She had been totally unprepared for the divorce. And it had been ugly. He left her with nothing—not even a single support payment. And a woman with nothing more to lose can do a lot of thinking in five years.

So Marilyn, having coaxed some help from her new best friend at the library, Mr. Google, had tracked down the one Joe Weidholz in America she believed to be her ex-husband. "Vegas. Of course," she had thought. "Where else would he be?"

Her trip to Perko's Pawn & Gun had been a quick one.

"Lucky I didn't ditch this ring," she told old man Perko.

"Yeah, she's a beaut," Perko replied. "Ya think you'll be back for it?"

"Not a chance," Marilyn answered smugly. Then she smiled and asked, "You think I can get a hand gun for it?"

"Well, lemme see...I can probably give you that .22 over there, though it's kinda tiny."

"That'll be perfect. Some shells, too, okay, Mr. P?"

Marilyn eased her minivan into the heart of the Las Vegas Strip, driving as quietly as her now failing manifold allowed. Even before dawn, the streets were alive with nighthawks, hustlers, and show girls—all out to make a buck.

Marilyn wheeled into The Flamingo Hotel parking lot. Wayne Newton smiled at her from a billboard above. "Mr. Las Vegas" was an entertainer she had always despised. But that didn't bother her now. She was entertaining other thoughts at the moment.

Joe Weidholz was the night pit manager at the Flamingo's casino. At least that's what Marilyn's research had revealed. So, leaving her two sleeping treasures, she locked the van and strode into the hotel, hoping to catch her ex at the end of his shift. Her bedraggled clothing announced her financial status to the clerks at the front desk. Their greeting oozed

prejudice.

“Do you have a reservation here, madam,” the first one asked.

“I’m sorry, no,” Marilyn answered. “I’m looking for Joe Weidholz. I understand he works here?”

“Oh, he did work here,” the second clerk explained coolly, “until a few weeks ago. His fingers got a little sticky. *You* might find him at his home on the *other* side of town, if he’s not in jail.”

Marilyn returned to her van to find Anita rousing from slumber.

“Mama, where you been?” she yawned. “Where are we?”

“We’re in Las Vegas, honey,” Marilyn replied warmly. “Now get your brother up and we’ll find us some breakfast!”

The few late-night stragglers finishing their meals at the Waffle House remained oblivious to Marilyn and her sleepy-eyed kids. After a round of “Silver Dollars” topped with chocolate chips, the youngsters were ready for their next adventure. And so was Marilyn. Over breakfast she had thought through her plan.

“Say,” she said to waitress Dotty, whose gum chewing was the only offensive thing about her, “Does this town have a Wal-Mart?”

“Sure does, hon,” Dotty replied, gum cracking, “Just a couple blocks over on McMillan Street. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks a lot. Come on, you knuckleheads.”

On this January Wednesday at 6:30 a.m. in Vegas, the Wal-Mart parking lot looked like a north woods campground—motor homes and RV’s everywhere, each using Wal-Mart’s FREE OVERNIGHT PARKING policy.

Marilyn pulled up to the cart corral. As she’d hoped, one cart remained. She helped her kids out of the van and squatted.

“Look,” Marilyn began, seriously, “There’s a friend I’ve got to visit just a few blocks from here. While I’m doing that, I need you two to take that grocery cart and search around for soda cans, just like we’ve done before, okay?”

“Yes, Mother,” Anita said. Little Joe looked scared.

“Little Joe,” Marilyn asked, “You’re going to be a big boy now, right?”

“Yes, Momma,” Little Joe answered, voice trembling. “But Momma, we’ve never done this without you before. When are you coming back?”

“I’ll only be twenty minutes or so,” Marilyn assured the two. “Try over in those ditches first.” Marilyn pointed to the culverts along the

adjacent four-lane street.

In her minivan, Marilyn got out her MapQuest maps and turned toward the address of one Mr. Joe Weidholz.

For fifteen minutes, the children scoured the ditches. Soon the grocery cart contained all the cans the ditches would render, and they steered the rusty contraption back toward the cart corral. Anita shivered in the cool morning air, and now wrapped her arm around her little brother.

From behind one of the RVs, a man buttoning a Wal-Mart smock walked over to Anita and Little Joe. He took a piece of paper from his pocket and thrust it into Joey's bare fist, then hurried away. The two children looked at each other and then at the piece of paper, which read: *This Coupon good for a FREE NIGHT'S STAY at The Flamingo Hotel! Includes a Family Pass to the Wayne Newton Show. Tuesday through Thursday only. Stay and Play at The Flamingo Hotel.*

When Anita and Little Joe looked up, the man was standing at the side door of Wal-Mart, smiling at them. "Enjoy!" he yelled, then disappeared inside.

Not a minute later, Marilyn drove up. She was driving a Pontiac Sunfire, and yelled out the window, "Forget those cans, guys! Come on, let's go!"

Anita and Little Joe jumped in the car. Little Joe pushed their sleeping bags and clothing over to make room in the back seat. "Mommy, where'd you get this car?" he asked.

"It's a present from my friend, Joey," she answered, smiling at him now. Then she looked at Anita and asked, "What's that paper you've got there?"

"Some Wal-Mart guy just gave it to us," Anita replied. "Look Mother, it says it's good for a free night at the Flamingo. And the Wayne Newton show, too. Can we go?"

Marilyn studied the paper for a moment and then said matter-of-factly, "Well, thank you, Wal-Mart. This couldn't have come at a better time. I do believe we've found a better way to stay and play."

With the rising sun glinting off the rear-view mirror, Marilyn turned the car back toward the Flamingo.

THE END