

# Beyond Designers

By Eric Duran-Valle

It was bizarre, like stepping into some parallel universe where everything was as I remember it, yet painfully unfamiliar. The last time I was in that warehouse I was about ten years old, helping my family evict its inhabitants. My inanimate friends—Frankenstein, Velvet Elvis, and a whole crew of fiberglass and papier-mâché misfit props—were being loaded out to be sold or thrown away.

I didn't fully appreciate the finality of that day. That warehouse was where I wandered around on school nights instead of doing homework. Much like Las Vegas itself, the prop warehouse could be elegant and it could be kitsch. And every once in a while, it would inspire

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fear.<sup>1</sup> The lighting was abysmal and the original builders seemed to have given up halfway through with the staircases.

This warehouse was just one portion of an entire campus. The floral department was in a small building on California Avenue, across an alley from what is now Esther's Kitchen. The linen building, where my mom spent most of her time, was a little further down that alley and now seems to be primarily used as a loading dock. The main office has been replaced by an interior design company called Inside Style. The current site of the bar Jammyland is reanimated from the shell of a mechanic shop that was awkwardly surrounded by Designers, like a stubborn house in the middle of a freeway interchange.

That was Downtown Las Vegas at the time. That alley was claustrophobic and its lack of color was blinding. The windows were shattered, rippled by the strike of a hammer or a bullet. Before the street murals were painted and the new windowpanes were installed, there I was emptying out that warehouse. I picked up a novelty traffic light, one that you would hang up on the wall and plug into an outlet.

"Mom," I said. "can I keep this?"

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<sup>1</sup> There was a fake electric chair that I initially believed to be real, and even after being told it wasn't, the sense of dread when looking at it remained.

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"Sure," she said, making sure to watch for shattered glass or rusty nails on the ground.

I took that traffic light back to the car, not understanding that was the final death throes of Designers Las Vegas, a persistent memory that defies the erosion of time.



An accidental stumble down memory lane, but it wasn't enough. Suddenly this vague childhood memory had become real again, and I wanted to know why. A lot of "whys." Why did this place look so different from the picture I had in my mind? Why did that realization affect me so much? Why did Designers close? And why did it change my family the way it did?

Why did Raymond do what he did?



In the new Downtown Las Vegas, there's a brunch spot called Makers & Finders. If you're like me, enjoying your Hibiscus iced tea on a summer day before you have to go to work, you may get captivated by the big pink building across the street called Retro Vegas. If you were to cross the torn open Main Street and enter the

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antique store like I did, you'll find glass decanters, coffee mugs from imploded casinos, a lead-lined pink refrigerator, the fiberglass camel that scared me as a child, vacuum-tube TVs, the vintage clothing section where the Frankenstein dummy used to be, the metal staircase that replaced the fragile wooden stairs that my aunts risked their lives climbing up every day, and a vinyl copy of *A Hard Day's Night*.

However, I believe this is where our similarities would end. Unlike me I think you won't be overwhelmed by a magnetizing emotion when you realize that this quaint antique shop is built off the corpse of your childhood memories known collectively as Designers Las Vegas.

I asked the old man behind the jewelry counter at Retro Vegas if he knew Raymond Molina.

"Oh yeah," he said, scratching his chin. "Ray sold us the place about five or so years ago."



The old Las Vegas City Hall building opened in 1973 and has a brutish grey exterior. But it's in the heart of Las Vegas. It was a place that was the perfect size and spot for a little company called Zappos.

The Great Recession hit Las Vegas hard. Homes were foreclosed and businesses shuttered. Even casino giants

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had to slow down or outright halt construction of new projects. Downtown was a depressing, drab, even dangerous space where only the tough or crazy survive.

The selling of the old city hall was a symbolic move, foreshadowing the hope for revitalization through the Downtown Project (DTP), a company founded by Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh meant to help direct the revitalization of Downtown Las Vegas. At the City Council meeting where the sale to Zappos was approved, Tony Hsieh said to Mayor Goodman, through tears, "I think you're sitting in my future seat." He was going to fix Downtown Vegas.

The Downtown I remember as a child.



Raymond Molina was born in an old neighborhood of North Las Vegas, the kind where you wonder if it had once been the picture-perfect neighborhood of another time, or if it had always been crummy. The streets were named after the Ivy Leagues. Stanford. Harvard. Princeton. Yale. I briefly lived on Yale Street for a part of my childhood, and I came to associate the name not with green courtyards and higher learning, but instead with chain-link fences and dogs rioting against metal tethers. I wonder if the young Raymond ever went out to his backyard late at night like I did, listening to the sounds of

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front-porch guitar strumming and pretending the light-bulbs on the sign for Jerry's Nugget were stars.

When he was seventeen years old, Raymond got a job working banquet services at Caesars Palace. In an apron and tacky dress pants, he would set tablecloths and silverware for the thousands of guests who came to Las Vegas every day for conventions. Las Vegas, either despite of or because of its reputation for debauchery, is a major convention hub. Every industry, from personal finance to pornography, gathers in the middle of the Mojave Desert to convene. While many casinos have designed themselves to be attractive and hospitable to conventions, outside subcontractors are still a major part of the convention business.

After saving up money, Raymond left his job at Caesars to pursue his venture in event planning. He rented a suite in a business park on Desert Inn Road, a ten-minute drive from the Strip across Interstate 15. With a physical address and employees secured, Beyond Designs was incorporated September 4, 1998.

Beyond Designs provided decorative fixtures, balloon arrangements, and linens for conventions, parties, and weddings. With previous connections from Caesars and his own knowledge of the industry, Raymond had clients all around the Las Vegas Valley, from the

locals-oriented Station Casinos chain to the Tropicana and Stratosphere. But eventually he would have clients and partners who were closer to home.



On the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> Street and Fremont, guarding the entrance of Container Park is a forty-foot-tall praying mantis that breathes fire. It's a souvenir Tony Hsieh brought back from Burning Man. The Downtown Project was designed with the mindset of imitating the spirit of not just Burning Man, but all the festivals on Hsieh's annual circuit. Recapturing and reselling the tone in a slumped urban space, 365 days a year.

In 1999, a young entrepreneur named Nick Swinmurn pitched to Tony Hsieh the idea of an online shoe-retailer. Hsieh invested in the website which later became Zappos.com. Hsieh eventually stepped in as its CEO a couple years before Swinmurn left in 2006. In 2009, Zappos was bought by Amazon for 1.2 billion, but was made a subsidiary instead of a full acquisition, allowing Hsieh to maintain control of the company.

Originally based out of San Francisco, Zappos moved to Henderson, Nevada, and then Downtown Las Vegas. Hsieh's partying lifestyle is not an escape from but a cru-

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cial element to his company's attitude. He applies the principles of PLUR<sup>2</sup> to his ventures and views business as just a means to his ultimate end, Happiness. In Downtown Las Vegas, Hsieh saw an opportunity. Through DTP, Zappos employees wouldn't just be constrained to their own building and conference rooms. Hsieh likened the plan to the campus of NYU, where the surrounding city is as much a part of the school as the campus itself. Coffee shops, bars, and restaurants would be the meeting rooms.

I had known for a while that Zappos was the main economic force renovating Downtown. Looking into DTP and Tony Hsieh's pretensions about being better than other corporations because they put smiley face stickers on their boxes, I was enraged. He was precisely what was I looking for. Hsieh is a 21<sup>st</sup>-century tycoon, but instead of dealing in railroads or oil derricks, he comes bearing nightclubs and fusion restaurants.



In 1998, Carmen Leticia Valle was living in Las Vegas and saw an ad in the newspaper for a job as a seamstress. It was probably just one of many blocks of text cir-

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<sup>2</sup> Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect.



cled in the classifieds while she was looking for work. Why should she know or even think that a simple job would resonate for years with her work and family? Could she have ever imagined the impact Raymond Molina would have on her life?

Raymond. Ray. It feels weird calling him that. I can type Raymond Molina's name on this page. I can picture what Raymond Molina looks like. I can follow Raymond Molina's paper trail. I can only remember Big Man. Big Man could pick me up and twirl me over his head. Big Man lived in a big house, drove a big car, and ran a big business. He was the size of a professional wrestler but had the voice of Tommy Chong.

I remember how on hot summer days my family would go to Big Man's house. It was the closest I've ever been to what might be considered a mansion. He had a tall green hill for a front lawn. In the backyard, a tree-house was nestled up in a sequoia, and beneath it my cousins and I swam in a pool at least ten leagues wide and forty leagues deep. Or so it felt at the time.

The days at Big Man's house were days of exuberance. Burgers and hot dogs were the treats for the kids, while the adults received their treats in denominations of twenty- or fifty-dollar bills.

Talking about Ray with my godmother, she said, "Yo

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*solo tengo buen memoria de Ray. Yo se que no todos son acuerdo.*<sup>3</sup>"



A DJ spins tracks at a wedding as bright lights fly around the room. The bride has a wide smile while the groom looks on with restrained amusement. Some of the guests get up to dance while others remain seated and talk to one another. The tables are all round, so even if a bunch of strangers are sitting together, they eventually have to interact.

I was ten years old and felt relieved to have finished my duty as the ring bearer for my aunt Rosy's wedding. I was sitting with my mom, a few old friends of the bride, Raymond, and Cindy, one of Ray's business partners. After some champagne, Cindy said to the whole table, "These tables are really nice. I wonder who did the decorating?"

My mom laughed. Raymond responded, tongue-in-cheek, "I don't know, but they did a good job!"

The punchline is that Designers decorated the wedding. They did the tablecloths, the nuptial arch, the floral arrangements, everything except build the venue. It

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<sup>3</sup> "I only have good memories of Ray. I know not everybody is the same."

was the biggest, but not the only way, Designers permeated my family's life.

This was June 2007. By then, Beyond Designs Incorporated was defunct on paper, but Designers Las Vegas was thriving. Since 1998, my aunt Carmen had gone from seamstress to supervisor, and she was able to get jobs for my mom, my aunt Rosy, and my godmother. Being at work wasn't a reason for our family to not see each other because work was family. From then on, the business of Designers was intertwined with our family unit. Gossip was spread through the vapor of fabric steamers, and updates from work were passed along at weekend barbeques.

I think part of my admiration for Big Man was an aspiration to be like him. Ray was able to run and staff his business with close friends and family. I come from a family of immigrants, and even what I considered modest means was luxurious to them. But they also wanted to stay close, because the anxiety of separation for them was real. So to be like Big Man, *that* was the dream. He had a business that there would always be demand for, and Big Man had done it starting from nothing.



A desire for genuine family businesses or mom-and-

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pop shops is one factor that pulls the discerning consumer to a Downtown district undergoing revitalization. But these projects often end up actually displacing long-standing small businesses that really are mom-and-pop.

Steve and Manny Yono were the co-owners of the Fremont Family Market & Deli. It was located across the street from the El Cortez Hotel & Casino, popular with casino workers and locals. The market employed eight people by the time it closed on March 24, 2013.

The Yono family started up their shop in 1998, a time when East Fremont was in absolute decay. One of the brothers remarked to the *Review-Journal*, "Talk about pioneers; we were here when no one wanted to be here." Fremont Family Market & Deli closed not because of poor management or declining sales, but because their landlord, Richard Sturman, decided not to renew their lease. Instead, he was going to lease the space to Downtown Project. Sturman said he felt "comfortable with that group," and that he made the deal because he thought it would help the Fremont District.

"We want people to know the other side," Yono says. "We also support our mother, Nazhat. We lost our father, Manny Yono, Sr. Now we are losing our business."

Did the Yonos just not fit the new brand for Downtown Project? Was that what did in Designers as well?



In 2017, while reminiscing with my aunt Rosy, she had a far different memory of her wedding. All she could remember was the stress of planning and making sure nothing went wrong. When I told her that I was writing a paper about Designers, she got up from the couch and dug through her desk. Beneath piles of old documents, she found an old business card for Beyond Designs. Raymond's name was on it in raised green font. The letters B and D are merged together in a swooping red logo.

I held the card like it was a lost piece of history. Much like the moment I walked into Retro Vegas, it was as if I had traveled back in time. A young Ray opened a fresh box of five hundred of these, handing them out to everyone he met. Some ended up in the trash, some were torn up and thrown in the wind, and some just forgotten in a pocket and disintegrated by a laundry machine. But here was this one, despite the odds, testifying to the truth of a memory. It mattered.



Hsieh had a very optimistic plan for DTP. In just four years he wanted to do what many said would take at least ten to fifteen. Years beyond, Hsieh has prob-

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ably succeeded in what he wanted to do, a “city-as-a-startup.” But there is an air of elitism in some places. The term “creative class” identifies the general image of twenty-somethings congregating and communicating with buzzwords and digital jargon. If you don’t know the lingo, then you can’t join the club.

The Downtown Project was not concerned about the people who lost their jobs in the recession. It wasn’t for business anchored in the existing local industries. It was for Tony Hsieh and his friends.



During the financial meltdown of 2008, my mom, like many other Las Vegans and Americans, lost her home. I didn’t know it at the time. I thought moving was just routine. We had to move in with relatives who lived in North Las Vegas. We went from a three-bedroom home to an apartment to a backyard shed.

The car ride to the suburb of Green Valley with my mom and Aunt Lety was the first time I entered a gated community. I pressed my face up against the car window studying these clumped together houses, made of stucco and beige. There were palm trees and small parks, but no front lawns. This was when I was introduced to the word *condo*. We parked in the driveway of one

of these two-story units and aunt Lety told me to ring the doorbell.

“What’s going on, little man!” Big Man was wearing a t-shirt and shorts, like he had been lounging in his recliner before we arrived. The bunched-up socks on the floor made me think this. He gave us a tour of the condo, with its chapel-high ceilings and hanging light fixtures. My mom joked that we could let guests sleep on the nook above the front door.

This house wasn’t as big as the one I remember from the summer pool parties and Thanksgivings before, but it still may as well have been a mansion to me. On the second floor there were two empty bedrooms.

“Which one do you like better, little man?”

I ended up choosing the wrong one, because the one I picked had these giant plants right outside the window that scratched against the glass when it got too windy. This was going to be our new home, at least for a while. Big Man was letting the three of us—Lety, Mom, and I—move into the condo.

During the first week we were living there, Big Man wanted to show me something on his computer. His voice reverberated from the high beige ceiling: “Come here, little man.” A primitive Google Maps was on the screen. Big Man was struggling to zoom in on a rural area that hadn’t been properly mapped yet. It looked

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like a grey field of gloop boiling from the heat. Big Man got close enough to what he was looking for though. He zoomed in on a squarish blob and pointed at the screen. "That's my house, man."

He wasn't talking about the condo we were in, or the mansion that I remembered. It was a cabin in the Blue Diamond wilderness, southwest of Las Vegas.



The culture and mission of Downtown Project was once defined by what was called the three C's: Collisions, Co-Learning, and Community. This was meant to align with the idea of Return on Community, ROC, which is a play on the business term Return on Investment.

But in 2013, Downtown Project dropped the Community from its mission. Instead, the third C would be "connectedness." Tony Hsieh said publicly, "We're not a charity. We're not here to fix the homeless problem."

It's hard for me to comprehend that the same Tony, who tearfully implied he might someday hold public office, turned around and callously brushed off what would seem like a fundamental aspect of civic responsibility.





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My grandma was frying beans on the stove, preparing a plate for me just as she did when I was a little kid. I stopped in for a visit, but it turned out that my aunt Lety had already beat me to it. In 2018, Designers was a thing of the past that she didn't talk much about anymore. But I couldn't get it out of my head.

Between the time of Beyond Designs at Desert Inn and Designers in Downtown, there was a limbo for the company at a location in North Las Vegas. Earlier, when aunt Rosy saw my confusion from the Beyond Designs logo, she mentioned that there was some legal trouble that pushed Ray to rebrand.

"It was almost like we got kicked out of the building, because [Beyond Designs] didn't keep the contract," Lety said. "The main thing was when they bought [Party Company] they were supposed to do some payments." Lety bounced her finger around, as if she were thumbing through an old Rolodex. Beyond Designs bought out Party Company, which included their stock of props. The same props that were in the warehouse.

I asked if there was anything specific I could look up, since it would probably be public record if it went to court. A CEO of Party Company, or maybe a partner.

"Sam Spalding." Lety nodded while looking off to remember. "I think his name was Sam Spalding."

My grandmother set a plate on the table. "A comer."

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Let's eat.



Case Number: 01A439841

*Plaintiffs listed: Spalding, Sam; Party Co; Spalding, Katherine; S and K Partnership*

*Defendants listed: Molina, Raymond; Beyond Designs, Inc.*

I can't find much else about Sam Spalding. I've looked in the Nevada public business records. Nothing. I search for "Party Company" and come up blank. All I know about this man is that he claimed that Raymond breached their contract after Beyond Designs bought Party Company.

In 2004, the case was dismissed with prejudice. Obviously this was something in Ray's favor. He rebranded and reincorporated as Designers Las Vegas that same year.

So then why did Ray apply for a California liquor license in 2005? And then why did he register a business in Ukiah in 2006?



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## **An Open Apology to Tony Hsieh**

Hello, Mr. Hsieh,

I'd like to make amends.

I realized I was using you as a hate sink for various frustrations I've had about the past. So let me say to you what I've truly known for a while: *You, Tony Hsieh, CEO of Zappos and mastermind behind Downtown Project, had no direct involvement in the closing of Designers Las Vegas.*

That feels relieving to write. In fact, Oscar Goodman, who I love for his zany personality and Las Vegas mob ties, probably is closer to the whole story than you are. While your efforts were mostly bounded within that Llama-shaped portion of East Fremont, Goodman pushed for the Arts District renovation which drew the owners of Retro Vegas to that old warehouse on Main Street.

If it weren't for DTP, I and many others probably wouldn't even be frequenting Downtown as often as we do. We wouldn't have The Writer's Block, a place that has fostered a literary community like no other.<sup>4</sup> Zap-

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<sup>4</sup> It's also a place where I spend far too much money.

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pos's sponsorship of the Las Vegas Lights soccer team has probably saved another historic fixture, Cashman Field, from being demolished. The Life Is Beautiful festival has brought the biggest musicians of this generation to a town known more for has-been residencies. And I'm always reminded of Zappos's presence on Adopt-a-Highway signs and during local public-radio pledge drives.

No, my main gripe with you was that your plan of action was to pull in people from outside of Las Vegas instead of looking for people already here. It's the classic idiom of "injecting life into the area." If Downtown Las Vegas was a dying animal you brought it back to life with an adrenaline shot filled with start-ups from New York and Los Angeles. My main thesis was that while DTP was filled with outsiders, Designers was the vision of one man, born and raised in Las Vegas. Upon reflection, this argument was essentially built upon a form of nativism and it's not like people just spontaneously rose from the desert floor in 1905.<sup>5</sup>

But how could I support this argument at all, when the hero of this story I was making, Raymond, left his hometown to open up a tavern in Ukiah, California?

"He just moved with a business somewhere else, and

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<sup>5</sup> The year Las Vegas officially incorporated as a city.

kind of just let this one go," Lety said. "He moved out of having a local business to open a business in some other state, so kind of like what the [Downtown] people are doing here." I was so determined to make Ray out as a tragic hero that I glossed over Aunt Lety's observation and went onto my next question.

The lawsuit was one thing, but the business itself was what wore away at Ray. Beyond Designs/Designers might have been big, but they weren't the only skin in the game. Ray often found himself doing freebies or giving gifts to clients, only to have them hire somebody else for the job. It's probably to be expected in any industry to have to do some pandering, but that compounded with what else was going on in Ray's personal life. Ukiah probably seemed like a good way out.

Anyway, Mr. Hsieh, I tried to pull you into a fight you honestly had nothing to do with. Now I'm letting go.



In 2008, Retro Vegas incorporated and began doing business.

On November 30, 2011<sup>6</sup>, Raymond officially dissolved Designers Las Vegas.

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<sup>6</sup> Also my mom's birthday

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In 2012, Retro Vegas began operating at their new building on Main Street.



Snow fell in Las Vegas on Dec. 17, 2008. That day, my aunt Lety picked me up from school. Instead of taking me home, we connected with Big Man. All three of us climbed into Big Man's truck and he drove onto a dark highway with the snowflakes carrying the only light in the Blue Diamond wilderness.

Big Man pulled up to a wooden cabin. The grey blob he showed me on his computer. Lety and Big Man found me a thick enough sweater and let me loose on the white field of snow outside. I made snow angels and tossed around mounds of snow not packed tightly enough to truly be considered a snowball. The three of us worked together to build a snowman.

There was something preternatural about that night. Being truly outside of the city for the first time, the darkness was isolating. It was like a dream, with the two extremes of the pitch-black sky and the bright white snow. When I woke up back at home the next morning, the snow had already begun to melt.

Ray, at all costs wanted to save that cabin. He put anything he had on the line for it, including Designers.

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Looking back with adult eyes, now fixed with scrutiny and curiosity, what I've learned seems like it might not have really happened. Like Ray didn't really export himself to California in the same way that I'm critical of New York and LA imports to Vegas. Like Retro Vegas isn't actually made from the old Designers warehouse. The new Downtown Las Vegas is not the one I remember. It is the fabrication of Tony Hsieh, Michael Cornthwaite, Oscar Goodman, or some other poli-social-start-up entrepreneur. The old Downtown exists elsewhere. Memory is the only thing that can endure progress.

In doing research and writing this piece, I was asked, by myself and those reading it, why am I writing this? When I started, I wanted to blow open what I saw as a massive injustice having been committed in the guise of public service. Gentrification is most certainly a problem sweeping across our entire country, even the world, and it isn't going to go away any time soon. But many who are aware of that issue are also facing a paradox, as they surely are enjoying the new amenities that it has brought. There are plenty of great authors who have written about the socioeconomic consequences of gentrification, and I was both intrigued and intimidated by what they had to say. Who am I to try adding my voice to that conversation?

The day I walked into Retro Vegas, I wrote in my

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journal, "From the beginning, I am absolutely tied to this place, my home. I am Las Vegas."

Happiness. Nostalgia. Sadness. Dread. Indignation. It was reassuring to me that a piece of my past had not been incinerated by time like many other things, but it was also infuriating to see all the people walking around not realizing how much meaning that place had. Someone's dream finally come true. An entire family's livelihood. A child's playground.

All gone.

That novelty traffic light I kept from Designers doesn't actually work, at least not as it was intended to. I plugged



Raymond Molina and Eric Duran-Valle, 2000



Eric Duran-Valle

it in and got nothing. It stays mounted up on the wall though, next to a framed photo of the Stardust, a legendary Las Vegas casino that was imploded in 2007. Somewhere in the black plastic shell and shorted out wiring, everything is as it once was before Downtown Project saved the day. Big Man is sitting at his computer in the office, ready to say, "What's going on Little Man!"

Am I allowed to miss that?