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## CASINO LOVE

You look for it by the nickel slots and the black-jack tables, in video screens and lounges with plastic palm trees, behind two-way mirrors and elegant stone ashtrays that rise to your hips like obelisks of moon coming out of the ground. You look for it the moment you walk through the polished glass doors and see the shining rails and miles of symmetrical carpeting with patterns like geometric dreams or an Impressionist's fruit, Christmas lights falling everywhere like barely contained sparks, racing around porticoes and down carpeted steps to the hypnotic drone of the slot machines which sing of slow attrition and seepage and the occasional *ding-ding-ding* of quarter jackpots, like doom tumbling down rungs of imitation gold. You look for it in a winning combination and lucky streak, to get away from something else – overdue bills or a bad relationship or boredom – but your life is still leaking away as the slot machines chant their monotone dirge that never varies from its canned and soulless song.

Where is the casino love you've heard about like a distant rumor, the love that whispers into your ear that today your luck will change and fortune will shine upon you? In the Soaring Eagle Casino in Mt. Pleasant, Michigan, no one looks especially happy, almost no one smiles, and no one seems to know why she or he is there, except to win or lose. You drive into the entrance under the gigantic aspect of two screaming eagles as big as garages, with wingspans that could take in and devour a family of four. The eagles are identical in their fierceness as they face each other, their talons curved for the kill and lit up by spotlights that illuminate every inch of their swooping bodies. They're inches away

from the quarry, and you see their fury streamlined into taut features, as they swoop down in balls of muscle, talon, and iron feather.

They have come from another epoch to claim their prey with silent screams, like the gatekeepers of purgatory or hell. You'd think their hair-raising descent would keep people out like a primordial warning, but it's just the opposite, as car after car drives under them on the day after New Year's. The eagles stand guard over those who go in and those who come out, but it's more than mere sentry duty that they enact, more like frozen, ongoing plunder. Who made and fashioned these horrendous birds, and what do they suggest? Is the Saginaw Chippewa Indian tribe of middle Michigan laughing at the white world by using these gigantic bald eagles as the emblems of their economic prosperity? Who melted down the nails, the bullets, the fishhooks, and fenders to make these terrifying birds that look as though they're a heartbeat away from clutching your hair? How can anyone pass under them without a slight shiver of trepidation, a bit of awe?

The people who come here are the same who frequent any casino: workers with dirt under their nails wearing American legion hats, women with buckskin jackets and cowboy hats, people down on their luck chain-smoking Pall Malls, aging lounge players, bored and cadaverous dealers who look like standing knives and ersatz high-rollers with Ray Ban sunglasses. There are the countless white-haired ladies who sit hour after hour at the slot machines with buckets of quarters, whose feet dangle off the stool like little kids at the drugstore counter, grim at their task, intractable, the turkey skin of their arms wobbling as they pull the lever again and again. I look into their faces and see only the

eerie green reflection bouncing off their glasses like the afterglow of meteorites fallen to earth.

I'm looking for casino love in the half-filled drinks on the counters and the limes turning a wrinkled brown, in the hair-sprayed bouffants of aging cocktail waitresses and their sad nylon stockings, in the roly poly man at the craps table smoking a cigar the size of a chair leg, in the security people with their newscaster wires running up the back of their necks, in the two-way mirrors and the lonely dealer with the sludge of sleepless nights under his eyes. I'm looking for it in the middle-aged rock band singing cover songs and their lead singer who's probably a mother of four. I'm looking for it in the blue, opaque globes hanging from the rafters which monitor the movement of everyone on the floor like alien eyes that never blink, never tire. I look for it in the old, retired couples with waist-bands rising over their bellies like creeping tides who look like they have stepped out of a time machine, in the carpet sweepers who scan the floor for cigarette butts, in anyone or anything that can shed a ray of light or hope on the spanning yawn of this enterprise.

I'm looking for the love that would make this casino new, make it surprising, wash over it like a new day, but I've never seen it and I don't think I ever will. All I see is lung cancer and distraction, boredom and frailty, and people with lines so deeply etched into their faces it's like they're human maps of desert canyons. All I see is the other side of America wallowing in itself hour after hour, day after day, all in the name of fun and the possibility of winning an extra hundred dollars, prime ribs for four bucks, and special deals for newly weds. All I see is a guy lugging around his oxygen tank while smoking with his free hand and the worst kind of patriotism that connects Elvis and shopping to

Desert Storm, to video games where you can kill Saddam Hussein and then go buy a yogurt cone.

Why do I continue to look for love in places like this? Is it possible that someone in some other casino is discovering what I have never seen or witnessed, not even the least shred? How many others come here to get away from the emptiness of their lives in the neon strobes of distraction? Where are the doves or sparrows to go with the screaming eagles? If only it were different, if only once you could see some grain of hope in the faces of people who come here. The exceptions are locked away in the casino vault, whisked away like gnomes or legends and doled out at intervals to keep us coming back and thus prevent the whole thing from imploding, the glitter of their stories sprinkled like stardust on the ballroom floor. Just once I'd like to see someone break out of this spiraling pattern, get on his hands and knees and weep for his sins, rent his clothes like Job, and disclaim the whole fraudulent thing, but this is just a dramatic fantasy bent to my own needs for justice, tenderness, and revenge. The truth is far more restrained and disturbing.

You look for love in the casino and sometimes think you can almost see a pale glimmer of it in something close by, the dull reflection of light off a poker chip, a man or woman sipping her cocktail who returns your glances, the way a ray of natural light filters through a window and falls on a scrap of napkin like an open palm. You see the hard-lived faces around you, faces that look kneaded out of a sorrowful dough. You see the man with the sunken-in face who is tethered to a slot machine by a string that plugs in his credit card who knows the jig is up; you watch him on the sly from a chair twelve feet away, and see that his shirt is covered with engine oil. He's tied to a slot machine like a

leashed human hound, pulling the arm again and again as the string bows out from his hat. What happened to him that he is moving even now to another machine to connect his rope of debt and hope to a machine that will never save him?

You wander through the endless rows of 4, 300 slot machines lit up like electronic tombstones, looking and waiting for love in the land without clocks. Where is it, where did it go? What would it look like if you found it? You want to see the love behind this slow-burning waste, want to feel that some sort of happiness can be found, even if it's fleeting and transitory, even if it costs you next month's rent. You want to see some example of casino love, of God himself showing favor on the brow of the downtrodden, anything to confirm that this could be the place for someone in distress or bored out of his wits – that here he or she really could turn around her life, find a mate, get out of debt, buoy up out of himself some shard of joy or praise to blow out of his hands in a gesture of sheer magnanimity. But try as you might, you can't find this love anywhere in the casino, any casino, no matter what the hour or the day or the quality of the crab legs in the buffet line. You're like the rest of them who come here, praying without words for one moment, one hour of good fortune, acceptance, escape, riches. You're like anyone who walks through those glass doors, believing in your heart that you're a little different from the rest, and that maybe, just maybe, today you will hit the jackpot or pick the one horse with syllables from your mother's maiden name that can run down the elusive love you've never found and will never stop chasing.