

## "A Sure Thing"

"Coffee? Soda? Juice?" hawks a young blond, dressed as if she just materialized from Aladdin's lamp. No one looks her way. Food and drink hold no interest for the people in this windowless room in Trump's Taj Mahal on the boardwalk of Atlantic City.

I marvel at the hundreds of men and women in the room. Nothing distracts them from their self-assigned stations. I glance at my watch. Is it really 10:30 on a Wednesday morning? Why aren't all these people at work? Suddenly, I realize that they are at work, in one of America's most consumer-oriented shopping malls. This Las Vegas-of-the-east sells the most popular of all commodities - money. And everybody here hopes to take home more than they brought with them.

My husband, a design consultant, has come to Atlantic City to do a building survey for the owner of a nearby hotel/condominium. "Bring your wife," the owner had urged. "Make it a mini-vacation." Having last visited Atlantic City when I was a child, I agreed, thinking it would be nice to get a look-see at the new gambling capital at the ocean's edge.

The dazzling Jacuzzi in our hotel suite almost entices me to skip my planned excursion along the boardwalk while my husband performs his survey. But I'm anxious to see the ocean, and the much-advertised casinos. I don a jacket, place two rolls of quarters in my pocket and exit the hotel. The sun shines brightly, but a brisk March wind stings my face and swirls bits of trash about.

The boardwalk seems to stretch for miles in both directions. I walk fast, alternating glances at the surf rippling against the shore and waves cresting in the distance with glimpses inside souvenir shops with "closed" signs on their doors. Were it a few degrees warmer, I might be inclined to venture closer to the water's edge, but the idea of cold, wet sand in my shoes keeps my feet on the boardwalk. A young couple riding in a two-wheeled carriage pulled by a livery driver wearing a top hat snuggle under a fringed, red-plaid blanket. They smile and wave as they pass me. I wave back.

Newspaper vending machines scattered along the boardwalk identify where most of these Atlantic City visitors slept last night - and where they'll probably return tonight - The Philadelphia Inquirer, The New York Times, The Jersey Statesman. . . the Trentonian. The vending machines are all empty. Do gamblers try to keep an eye on the home front while they seek to improve their finances?

Suddenly, an undulating, oversized, desert sheik's tent rises from the boardwalk - Donald Trump's Taj Mahal. I push through one of the revolving glass doors and step into a room awash in rich shades of purple, magenta and fuchsia. Golden chandeliers hang from vaulted ceilings and the carpet is deep magenta. Nothing in the triple-football-field-sized room is reminiscent of the desert. Wide aisles are banked with back-to-back shiny slot machines - each emblazoned with a colorful name like Double Jackpot, Mountain of Money or Midas Touch. They seem like alluring sirens, beckoning sailors lost at sea. But which one is the one, the one ripe for a windfall hit? I browse, eying machines and players alike. Finally, I step up to one labeled Double Diamond, and take my position. Slowly, I feed an entire roll of quarters into it. No identical icons line up in its windows. I wonder whether I should try another machine.

I am disoriented by all the noise in the room. The ding of quarters registering in metal slots, or spilling from narrow, mouth-like openings into shallow trays, echoes, forms the verses of the casino's dirge. The chorus is the electronic warble of spinning drums that whirl fruit icons before the eye-level display windows. The warble from the machine next to me stops and triple bunches of cherries line up in the window. The grey-haired grandmother standing there whoops as a signal atop the machine suddenly beams a flashing light around the casino. Momentarily, people stop playing and look toward her; then, they quickly turn back to their machines - with renewed vigor. I lean over and ask the winner, "How much did you win?"

"I don't know," she answers breathlessly, pausing as if sizing up whether my inquiry is an opening for some kind of scam. "It'll give me more to play with," she says. "That was my last quarter."

I put my hand into my jacket pocket and fondle my last roll of quarters. Twenty dollars hadn't seemed like a lot of money to spend on a day's excursion; but after losing ten dollars, I rethink the wisdom of continuing to feed the slot machines. If I were that woman, I'd take my winnings and leave immediately. But these gamblers seem prepared to leave behind every quarter they've brought with them. Are they addicted to the act of feeding these ever-hungry machines? Don't they know the odds are against them ever winning? Can't they stop themselves?

I feel out-of-place with the rest of the people in the room. Most of them look as if they cashed social security checks to finance their day's excursion. If they came here for fun, why doesn't anyone seem to be having any? Did they gamble when they were young and waste their fortunes? Or, are they just poor folks, who worked hard, amassed little, and are now lured to the casino by dreams of a lucky strike, like the California gold miners? The room's persistent din, bright lights and the depressing appearance of the hard-core slot machine players propel me into the casino's inner core. Here, dark suited dealers supervise felt-covered gaming tables where dice roll, and droning voices announce the winning combinations. I have no idea how to play any of the games, so I wander from table to table and watch the action. In this room, the gamblers, mostly middle-aged men, seem like soldiers on a mission -- one they've trained for and intend to accomplish. The players seem to stake claim to a spot and stay there, playing again and again. Time and again, the house wins. A young woman wins at "21" and her excitement draws me over to the table. I watch another round, then lay down a stack of quarters. I do this several times. Each time, the dealer rakes in my money along with everyone else's. Disappointed, I call it quits -- I've given the house 25 dollars and gotten nothing in return except a headache. I leave the Taj Mahal and return to our suite where the jacuzzi awaits me. Unlike games of chance, the Jacuzzi is a sure thing. It will demand nothing of me but is guaranteed to bring me pleasure.