

Cripple Creek, Colorado
Inn room

4 October 2019
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© I did get a break from the heat. I chose Cripple Creek. A teacher at work suggested it, lovely Ms. P. She's from Colorado. I should've chosen Colorado Springs though.

First, the drive here from the Denver airport was arduous (construction) and took nearly 3 hours. My return flight to San Antonio departs at 08:00. I'd have to leave here before 4 (return rental car). Instead, I'll check-out a day earlier (Monday) and get a hotel closer to the airport. Then I can get up at 04:45 (big deal, huh?). Second reason; Cripple Creek has a sad vibe to it. It's a casino town. It was once a thriving goldmine town. It still has a lone active mine that tourists can descend into over 1,000 feet down. Not me.

I arrived here Thursday night. I'm staying at the Gold King Mountain Inn. It is also owned by the Wildwood Casino. It was only natural that the front desk clerks recommended its restaurant. They even have shuttle service. I lifted the red phone in the outer lobby and the shuttle came in five minutes. The driver was thin, about mid-to-late 50s in age, balding (mostly) with long and oily scraggles of white hair hanging from the sides and back. For some reason it reminded me of a shower curtain.

We drove down the hill, a little over a block. He pointed out Joe's Restaurant – an oval shaped brick structure. "I have to take you to the front door of the casino." I responded, "I just want dinner. I don't plan to gamble." He said, "I'm required to take you. Besides, you might change your mind."

I looked around, "I've never gambled. Heck, I've never been in a casino before." He glanced back at me. "Man, I started gambling at 21, just could not wait." I asked, "Are you on top?" He sighed and wistfully uttered, "Ain't never been on top." At that, I entered my first casino. I've never even played a video game or seen a porn-video: these things never interested me.

The first thing I noted was the flashing colorful lights on all the machines (to stimulate), along with all the whistles and bells (to stimulate). The imagery was quite powerful on the tall slots – some at least 10 feet tall, reminded me of the tall carved figures on Easter Island. The images were mostly of women in skimpy clothing, much cleavage, and suggestive poses, all to stimulate. These machines

are sexuality personified along with the allure of mathematical odds. I continued on to the restaurant.

A bouncy young girl, from Nevada she said, escorted me to my table. There were four couples in four booths. A lone man sat watching a football game on the large screen TV. Across from me, an aged man alone in a booth.

He had a long grayish-white beard, scraggly hair of the same color hung from beneath a baseball cap that was so soiled, I couldn't make out what the insignia was or if one had ever lingered beneath that patina of grime. He wore a blue flannel shirt, checkered, over which he wore a denim vest. His blue jeans had seen better days. Gray sneakers revealed sockless scaly ankles.

The reason I reveal this about him, when he wasn't counting and recounting his quarters on the table, with a long, crooked finger, or staring at the drink he was nursing, his bearded chin resting on his chest – he was staring at me. As I tried to eat the absolute worst chicken Caesar salad I ever had - I could feel his stare upon me. My waitress was a redhead with no name tag.

She was terribly thin and missing several teeth. It was hard to assess her age – she just looked so worn out, like that old man's hat. When she took my order she was pleasant in a plastic kind of way – not Stepford, but burnt out. It was her eyes that trembled me deep within; they were dark, deep, and soulless. I'd seen such before and tried to remember when and where.

In the booth next to the old man sat two women. They were having steaks, potatoes, and beer. One woman had mostly white hair and was slightly bent forward as she ate. The other, whose back was to the old man, was in her early 60s and quite thin. Her hair was dyed jet black. Her skin was brown (bronzer?) and she wore bright red lipstick, but her skin was moist, clammy.

Her eyes were as black as her hair, beneath which puffy bags defied layers of powder. She looked at me as much as the old man had. So when I looked up, one or the other, or both, were looking at me.

God knows I hate to be stared at when I'm eating (echoes of the system), even a meal I'm not enjoying. So I gazed to the large screen TV to avoid their gazes. A college football game was on – which I find so damn boring. But even as I looked away, I could feel their gaze upon me. Of course, it set me to wondering (as is my way); I know what I am seeing, what are they, the dark-haired older woman and the worn old man, seeing about me. Do they, could they,

sense the unease I felt from their gaze, in that place? Am I revealing something in my reaction to them? For me, as I looked around – these were lives worn down, worn away by some mysterious life-taking force.

As I ate my salad, the chicken ice cold and stiff, the sounds of those alluring machines like an ancient siren, hovered over everything. The worn man had counted his change several times, laying the quarters in neat stacks – assessing if he had enough for one more game or one more drink. That older woman, she unsettled me in a different way.

Her dark hair and red lips, over rouged cheeks on her bronze face – her eyes revealed that old passion of want, of lust. She'd probably had her way – when long ago younger. There were still traces of a lingering beauty in her face, but that blackness in her eyes; I felt pulled in as if to a bottomless pit. Maybe she saw in me a lingering male handsomeness. Maybe it is my presentation of overall health. But I know it was more.

For the worn-out man, whose eyes were similar, I can only guess why he was staring at me. Surely his eyes didn't reveal that old passion. Could he have been seeing himself from many years past? Maybe. But as he counted his quarters and then gazed over at me I wondered if he didn't see me as an easy mark. Someone to get a few bucks from.

Though I felt their looks were different, I realized in some way – they were the same. This I pondered, trying not to look back at them as I sifted for clarity. Then, I thought about what had brought us together – we were in the same place, a Casino, a space to gamble, to lose. Maybe to win. Besides, if one goes to a place where odds are highly likely you will lose, it's worse than gambling. For one is accepting loss in return for chance gain. Why not chance something for sure gain? Or so I think.

Well, I was there for that terrible meal and to see what I could learn. They were there, drawn by the odds, the probabilities of walking away on top. But I realized there must be more going on in that visual exchange, something deeper. I wonder, if beyond appearance, can souls see each other? Recognize other states-of-being by their passage through time? Of course I can't posit an absolute affirmative. I can only intuit what inside me, core deep, had been moved by.

I felt a great unease, unsettledness, if not trepidation. A fear, a feeling, that they wanted something. To take something from me that they no longer had.

Though once they may have. Are they seeing, perchance, what's left them, what was gambled away, summoned out by promising lights and sirens? Do they upon seeing themselves recognize the vacuity in their gaze?

I was glad I felt fear. Fear is a thing of wisdom. For long years past, as a very young man, I lost my way in the dark consuming jungles of substance-abuse; a life of making frayed ends meet. Perhaps I was recognizing a former state-of-being in them. A state that nearly claimed my sanity, if not my life.

Maybe we all in looking upon each other were seeing something we each once were. I, in them, saw anew my troubled lostness and dances with Mr. Death. They saw in me, who knows? Maybe better health or a deeper goodness. I cannot speak to it. I'm not one to elevate myself to some special state reserved for the select, elect, or the intellecti. We are all just humans. I'm a pen.

My reveries and siftings were interrupted when the worn man stood to depart. I hadn't noticed the metal walker from which hung a black metal cane. As he steadied himself on the table and reached for the walker, the woman turned in her booth and saw his struggle – surely a ritual that he has enacted for many seasons.

She smiled at me, as if to share a sympathetic 'how sad' moment. I smiled back and wished I had not. She quickly sat up, fluffed her hair, took out a compact and checked her make-up. 'Oh, brother.'

I watched the worn man situate himself on the walker, his shoulders hunched forward, his thin arms braced for that first step. "See ya, Joey," said my redheaded, nameless, waitress. He looked over his shoulder, his dark eyes searching. His gaze again fell upon me. 'Surely he knows a female voice from a male's...'

"Better luck at the slots next time," she finished. Then his gaze found hers. "Yep," he mumbled and moved slowly forward, step, walker, step, his oversized sneakers slapping his heels.

"Better luck," that's what stayed with me from that moment. Luck, the Roman's called her Fortuna, a goddess. I can't recall all that Aristotle had written in his examination of luck. But here in this Casino – it plays out differently.

As I finished my terrible meal, I was vaguely aware the two women, the dark and the white, were waiting for me to finish. They were. I left a 5\$ tip for a 9\$ meal and went to pay the check at the 'Courtesy Kiosk.'

I was met by the same young woman from Nevada. But I could feel the dark-haired woman beside me. I turned. “Hi,” she whispered, her yellowed teeth bordered by reddened lips. “Hi,” I replied as I eyed a display of fresh chocolate chip cookies. They were still steaming. “Are you playing?” I looked down at her, about 5’4 or so, “Playing?” “I’m guessing you’re a slots person. You look slotty.” I was wondering if she’d said slutty: I thought I’d refined myself over the years.

I got my change. “I’ve never played them.” Her eyebrows curled and then narrowed. The silent white-haired lady nearby looked on with an amused smile. The dark-haired lady laid her check on the counter, \$13.69. I thought of turning away and moving on, but didn’t want to be rude. “So you play the tables, blackjack?” she asked as she stared into me, her best flirtatious smile.

“Ma’am, I’ve never gambled.” Her look was priceless. “But this is a Casino.” I looked about and replied, “Yes, and they said this was a restaurant.” She looked toward white-hair who simply shrugged and looked toward the slots like, ‘Let’s go. He’s weird.’ Her face said she didn’t believe a word I’d said.

“Well, gotta go. Good luck in there.” As I walked away, I wondered why I’d said that. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d ever said it, maybe to the Yankees in general. I decided to walk through the Casino just to see and sift.

First, I came upon long rows of slots and more slots. I walked down each row, these rising flashing beacon-like machines stood on each side. Before each, a patron – face bathed in a warm and dazzling glow of purples, blues and greens that emanate from HD-screens, their hand on a blue button, pressed for the game to begin.

I guess slots no longer have the arm pull levers I’d always seen in movies. Now modern tech has merged with age-old addictions, and to make it ever more stimulating. It was the size of these towering monoliths that puzzled me most. Surely, these are the products of someone’s design – with a keen eye to stimulating psychological want while fostering a belief, or is it instinct, that the patron will eventually win.

But what would be the effect of that affect if those towering monoliths were only 5 instead of 10 feet in height? What would be lost besides height? Surely something. Perhaps they would lose that aura of something one, the patron, could master. That in their smallness, perched upon those short stools, bathed in that glow, that they can rise, feel equal by winning. But also, those machines would

lose a sense of their awe, their nearly unworldly presence as Goddess of Fortuna. Their shortness on those stools is equal in difference to one genuflecting before a religious figure.

I do see a sad and lost sense of worship in this interaction between human and machine, but it's all imbalanced; they are joined simply by probability. Is this really any different than Pascal's wager? That the probability of God shaping how one lives; either with a moral acuity that weighs all action, or to live in wild abandonment that this is all there is, and the marrow of existence must be wrung for every drop of sustaining probability that fortifies one against the reality of painful loss, one after the other. Because one chose it, it is more bearable.

I moved between aisles looking for gaps where I might espy the faces of the enraptured patrons. I looked upon several of them, trying not to appear so obvious in my voyeurism. There was a woman, late 50s or so, playing the slots. Her face was all aglow in the pinkish light, her eyes chilled me. Her dark eyes were opened wide, agog one could say, as if looking upon a sacred apparition, like I'd once seen in Turin. I naively believed only religious iconography could elicit such a struck gaze. I'd had my transcendent passing in the Sistine.

Her entire presence of being sat rapt before that machine. Had I struck a lighter I doubt it would have distracted her gaze. I need not go into the complex neurochemistry of deep human wiring connected to rewards. For it's deeper than that. Most certainly these bedazzled patrons don't win every night – so what lure summons them into that glow?

It must be in remembering how it felt when they won. Then, reinforced however many times becomes the imprinting of chemical reward. The idea of reward lingers in memory, reinforces the idea of winning again and eases the pangs of loss (is this a pale faith). Prior experiences are reinforced whether one loses or wins; it's the rush of odds, the 'what if' moment. Thus, the hook is deeply sunk.

But there was something else in her gaze that drew me in – it's nearly out of reach of language. It's somewhere in the ephemeral range of all things spiritual. I was mistaken to believe that a rapt gaze was solely related to religious or spiritual experiences. A moment of transcendence for me was upon gazing up at M. Angelo's Sistine ceiling. I wrote in my diary that night in '97, "My soul pushed against my flesh in its struggle for release. It wanted to rise."

What am I saying, that to look upon a machine, a machine predicated on the odds of probability, and to look that way deep in the eyes, nearly worshipful – damages the soul and places it in great hazard. This is what the chill inside my core revealed to me.

Further, that after she, the bedazzled patron, had become so conditioned to the powerful effects, what difference could it make if Gabriel appeared before her, his sword radiating its most powerful glow? Would she seek to press his hand the way she does the blue button? Might she too late recognize the lethal difference? What are the odds? I saw that gaze upon most of the patrons in the high church of probability. Until I came upon a man.

He was about mid-to-late 40s, a little heavy set. He wore a yellow long-sleeved shirt. He did not sit up close like the woman had. He seemed to lean away, his body tilted to one side of the short stool. His posture held that same awkward angle; his face was the shape of disappointment or maybe disbelief. A look of skepticism – I wondered if he'd ever won. He just looked sad, yet he played on. His gaze fixed on the screen and his right hand on the button. 'Maybe it's his first time.'

Had he any winning memories to draw him closer to the machine, deeper into that glow? It never occurred to me that there would be different personae, like the decal imagery on the machines, in the valley of the slots; each tether either thickly or thinly woven into the glow; machine and human playing their parts. I did note the gold band on his finger; bills overdue, sick spouse, clothes for his children? It all set me to wondering. Suddenly, he noticed me studying him. I moved on.

I passed the blackjack tables and paused near a roulette game. Two heavy set black men were playing, as was a tall white man with all white hair. They threw the dice. They rolled, hit the green backing, and eased into stillness. "Boxcars, Snake eyes, Lucky 7" and on. I understand a few things, but all else they spoke – I was clueless.

I just watched the roll of the dice, looked at the players eyes and sifted – trying to understand the playing of the game and a few other things. I'd seen craps played against many a liquor store wall in the Bronx and elsewhere. It never interested me; I never made enough to lose. I became lost in the roll of the dice, daydream like; it takes control, seduces the eyes.

“Hey, Buddy!” I heard it, kind of, but I didn’t think they were talking to me. “Yo, bud!” I woke up and looked his way. The white-haired man spoke, “Move from there. You’re bringing me bad luck.” “Sorry.” I moved on.

I came upon the dark-haired lady from the restaurant. She was standing beside the white-haired lady who was playing the slots. She took a few steps towards me and smiled warmly. “Thought you didn’t play.” She flashed her best smile. “I don’t. I’m just here to learn.” Her head cocked to the side, a pale purple glow on her face making the lipstick seem black. “Learn something,” she quipped. “In this place? What?”

I looked around at all the machines, all those rapt gazes, the sirens and all, and then looked at her. “Not important. Just something I do.” She stepped closer, her soft breast against my arm. I could feel the heat. She leaned against me. ‘Oh brother.’

“We’re gonna play another hour or so. Stick around, let’s have a few drinks.” I frowned, “I don’t drink either.” I looked down at her, into those dark pools boiling with endless need. The vacuity in her depths seemed simply this; no light where a human light should be. I meet them. They are the misfortunates who reside in the vestibule inside the doorway of Dante’s *Inferno*. Souls fled from the denigration of their host-being’s existence. We are not created to wallow -

“I’m really a very boring person.” She smiled and set her drink down. “You don’t have to drink. You’re different. We can talk. I’ll drink. Then, you can, um, drive me home.” I stepped back and looked toward the exit.

“Wait.” She grasped my arm. “Don’t drink. Don’t smoke. Don’t gamble in a casino town. I don’t get it. What’s your poison? Gals?” She licked her lips on the final term. Suddenly she looked older. I quickly turned for the exit. I have learned this in life; When a demon calls you out, asks what your poison is: Never answer.

Stepping into the crisp evening air, my mind was rolling, roiling, and tossing with so many ideas. I’m not sure what any of it meant. I know I felt lighter. Cleaner under natural light. I looked back once at a place to lose one’s soul and life. Like places I once stumbled upon when I didn’t know any better.

“It’s better to know when one is on top,” I shouted to the stars, walking up the hill to the Gold King. I’ll have more to say later, after the sift-storm passes but I wanted to get down what I could. I’ll reflect well. If the odds are with me.