

MAQUINA

Lula Carballo

Translated from the French
by Paul Ruban

*I told the truth
and look where it got me*
LEONARD COHEN

THE PLACE WHICH SHALL NOT BE NAMED

It's been a while since I last saw the value of money. I'm a slot machine attendant in a casino. I work on call, seven days a week, twenty-four-seven, all year round.

I'm expected to pledge total loyalty to this place. If I turn down more than three replacement shifts, I risk getting fired. My work week exceeds sixty hours. I'm asked to greet busloads of retirees and hand them coupons worth twenty-five bucks in exchange for bets as big as their pensions. Thousands of dollars slip through their fingers. Seeing them deplete their savings makes me want to die young.

I prefer the night shifts, with their sleepless millionaires, lonely widows, couples looking to spice things up, singles on the prowl, groups of BFFs and of course, manic regulars.

I don't mind living on the wrong side of the day.

My colleagues go on holiday on a whim, as soon as they manage to get time off. Since they're not allowed to play in our own province's casinos, they fly off elsewhere to gamble. Las Vegas remains the destination of choice. To each his playland.

In 1989, my grandfather went to live in Colombia for a year, after landing a contract as a professional soccer player. He sent the lion's share of his salary to Regina, my mother's mother, so that she'd renovate the family home and provide for their children.

Instead, she blew everything at the roulette wheel of the Montevideo Casino. It's only when my grandfather returned that he discovered that she'd squandered it all, took out staggering loans and had debt collectors on her back.

They separated.

My grandmother lived her life as though it were an ephemeral, soul-sucking gameshow. She never stopped gambling. Her heart stopped beating when she was fifty-four.

The casino's architecture is designed to lure people in, and make it nearly impossible to escape. The escalators going up are far removed from the ones going down, forcing you to meander through each floor if you ever want to get back down. The aim of this clever detour is to entrap the casino's visitors within its shimmery spirals.

The building consists of five floors, divided up into sections: slot machines, gaming tables, poker rooms, restaurants, chill-out lounges, concert stages and private rooms, reserved for elite players.

The most enticing slot machines are laid out in parallel rows, in a freshly renovated section near the main hall — a hall of mirrors, with gilded walls multiplied to infinity. The subliminal choice of gold, just like the rest, is meticulously thought out.

The number seven, always in rows of three, is plastered on signs hanging from the wall. Images of dragons, diamonds, clovers and dollar signs flash across giant screens. The burgundy leather chairs, the dimmed lights and the conspicuous absence of clocks all just as deliberate.

I visited the place which shall not be named only once before working there. I took out eighty dollars at an ATM in the foyer, before asking an attendant to show me how to proceed.

— All you've got to do is insert your money in the slot here, and then place your bet... It's not rocket science.

The man went on his way, only to circle the floor and plod back at precise, five-minute intervals. I overheard him interact with other players in the same boorish tone he'd used with me. It made me feel less alone.

Haunted by my family tragedy, I was afraid I'd also get trapped in gambling's titillating tentacles. I lost everything in fifteen minutes flat. My palms were moist, and I had never wasted such a big amount without getting at least something in return.

The three weeks of training were meant to shape me, one catch phrase at a time, into a model employee — reliable, flawless, confident, impeccable, impenetrable, cheerful and willing, if need be, to sell the specks of dust under the moldy carpet floor.

At one point, our training supervisor asked us what the casino meant to us. Some mentioned luxury, fortune, luck, others prestige and entertainment.

“Sleazy circus,” I answered.

The man stared at me, bewildered.

He stayed silent as he pecked away at his laptop before changing the topic. I suspect him of forwarding a note to the surveillance team, to keep an eye on me: “Recruit in training. Signs of potential mole. Describes our hallowed grounds as a sleazy circus. Monitoring requested upon commencement.”

I took it upon myself to plumb the mystery of the casino, its mirage and theatrics, its smokes and mirrors, its internal workings — sleazy despite the thunderbolts piercing the hearts of the glowing, mechanical ogres, murderous but without a face. And so I did everything to land the job. I wanted to win back a bit of Regina’s lost money, and stare deep into the maw of the beast.

A few days before I began, a seamstress took my measurements behind the uniform counter. She pulled out two pairs of royal blue pants, two fitted blazers, four white shirts and six pairs of socks. The employees' clothes are designed, tailored and dry-cleaned on site.

My blazer has eight pockets, both internal and external, in which I carry around a wallet with two thousand dollars, a notebook, a few pens and a set of keys that allows me to open and close every slot machine in my designated section.

Each wing has a team of three employees. Gathering among colleagues is prohibited, so is standing still. I use a flashlight to unclog the ogres' hearts — very often, when times comes to play or cash out — the TITO slips (which show your gaming credit) get stuck between their teeth. Deep inside their bowels, the ogres know when a player gets up for a break, and when they return.

We're the only casino in the world whose slot machines operate on a reservation system.

I oversee the smooth functioning of my luminous alley, keeping a discreet eye out for seagulls — a moniker my peers came up with for the desperate souls who scavenge slot machines for forgotten credits, rack them up, cent by cent, cash them in, and try their own hand at luck.

I was taught to use welcoming body language: shoulders back, arms straight, open hands showing my palms, and head held high but without seeming arrogant.

When I'm asked questions, I should always answer in a positive way. Nothing should seem impossible, nothing out of reach.

I excel in the art of people-pleasing, and dispose of an array of means to feed false hopes: coupons for the gift shop, extra breaks if need be, free meals and tickets for shows.

I'm groomed to be a purveyor of dreams, with no holds barred — just as long as my animals stay trapped in the circus.

A bronze sculpture representing flames stands outside the casino. The car belonging to a couple of baby boomers violently smashed into it, recently, after doing a few barrel rolls under the horrified gaze of my greeter colleagues at the front door. Both passengers died on the spot. The cause of the crash remains a mystery.

A tangle of yellow tape with the word “DANGER” cordons off a large section around the main entrance. Bus number 777 swerves nonchalantly around the murderous statue, which reads “Welcome to the Machine.”

Players stumble out of the bus that drops them off at the side entrance instead. They’re intercepted by security guards who check their ID — before being whisked away to the free but mandatory coat check.

In the main hall, novelty tourist traps distract from the side rooms — discreet, yet accessible — where the high rollers go to play. Laundry rooms, some call them, to wash away dirty money.

Certain slot machines allow you to bet five hundred dollars per second.

A long hallway leads to the roulette tables, Baccarat, Black Jack, War, Craps, Wheel of Fortune. On the first floor, there are four poker rooms, a few bars, cashiers, customer service counters, carts with soft drinks, washrooms and live music that no one dances to.

Screens flash incessantly in the dim lighting. Here, every colour's been carefully chosen by addiction specialists. All is stimuli, phony pleasures and ensnarement. The elevator that leads to the fifth floor opens onto the restaurants: the convenience of a snack bar for those pining to quickly get back to their game, a buffet for those looking for distraction, a bar for the dipsomaniacs, and a five-diamond restaurant for tourists and wealthy gamblers.

On the ground floor, security guards smile to visitors as they leave. Not out of politeness, though, but rather as a memorization exercise. A way of saying: I see you, and your features are seared in the database of my brain. I recognize you now and, should you ever wish to place yourself on the list of *personae non gratae*, I will gladly carry out your request.

Rumor has it that some people disguise themselves in order to sidestep their own decision.

The 777 bus is, in fact, a free shuttle that runs all day long. The waiting time is less than ten minutes. The faces of its passengers are easily recognizable.

I was replacing a soldier in the swankiest outreach of the empire, one Saturday night, when — at the end of one my rounds, right before going on my fifteen-minute break — I spotted you for the first time.

The casino transformed itself into Milan's La Scala. A snake seemed to be writhing in your belly. Your gaze, dark and deep, foreshadowed a rebellion of birds. Your shoulders were weighed down with a double dose of despair, an electric mix of Callas and Dalida. Your silhouette appeared veiled in the magnetic phrases of Cleopatra — your chosen slot machine. The only one who speaks instead of singing.

I approached you and for a few seconds, you stopped playing.

The few people that grab my attention trigger a frantic process in me, whereby I match their physical traits to those of icons I admire. This is how my obsessions manifest themselves.

On the long walk to the staff cafeteria, I couldn't stop thinking about the vapid and artificial décor in which I had just met you. I had never seen someone so wonderfully out of place.