

But, yes, I admit it, when I depart the Nirvana Hotel and Casino VIP Guest Services Lounge I'm pissed at Johnny Kim and the Nirvana Hotel and Casino. Not because they've done anything wrong, but because they've inadvertently reminded me of things I don't want to be reminded about. Like, for instance, that I'm a Bronze (with a mercy upgrading to Silver) and not a Diamond. And certainly not a *Platinum*.

So as I traverse the Nirvana Hotel and Casino lobby, ignoring the Street of Dreams and all the must-have items beckoning from behind glittering glass, I'm a little cranky. I jingle my new Nirvana Silver card in my pocket, feeling the edge of the cold plastic colliding with two warm quarters in the depths of my pants.

Two warm quarters. I don't know how they got there, or why some force greater than any of us decided that I should have them there, at hand, beside my Nirvana Silver card, at the precise moment in the history of the universe when I'm walking across the immaculately polished floor of the Nirvana Hotel and Casino lobby, heading toward the elevators, with a million unlucky thoughts racing through my mind.

But there they are. Some things can't be explained.

Get on one plane, you arrive home safely; take another one and it crashes into the sea. Stand under an oak tree and watch the thunder-showers pelt your lawn; stand beneath another one and get electrocuted by lightning. Buy one lottery ticket (or a hundred of them), nothing happens; buy a different one, you're rich.

How these things work I don't know. You could call it luck, I suppose. But I've got to believe there's a higher power at work, an omnipotent force—God, a Minister of Karmic Justice, whatever—that makes sure fortune is doled out properly, to those who deserve it. For instance, hard working and honest people who never hurt anyone. Or, for example, the patient ones like me who couldn't blend—refused to blend!—but never killed anyone in the meantime. Sure, I could have taken out a President or bombed a televised Dirk Fredericks concert, or done any number of attention-grabbing exploits that, you could argue, would have been justified to some extent. But, no, I didn't. I was good.

Nobody knew my name. I wasn't famous. But I was good.

And good things happen to good people, supposedly. Or maybe it's just luck. I don't know.

Two warm quarters. Funny how these things work sometimes.

When you're facing the gold-trimmed elevator banks at the Nirvana Hotel and Casino, on the left there's a rare statue—an abstract seashell with legs? a skinny celestial comet?—done by some old master, procured for many millions from some bankrupt European museum desperate to liquidate. (I wouldn't have paid two cents for the thing; it's not even made of precious metals, and you can't really tell what it's supposed to represent.) People sometimes take funny snapshots with the statue—pretending to kiss it, etc.—and there's usually a guard nearby, with a radio tucked into the waistband of his nightgown thing, and he discourages unwashed hands from defiling this great masterpiece. (Art. What do I know?) Anyway, on the opposite side, the right side, standing directly across from this priceless blob of enamel, is another art form dear to the desert: a bank of progressive jackpot slot machines.

For some reason, while I'm waiting for one of the Nirvana Hotel and Casino's ultra-exclusive elevators to take me back to my room, where I figure I'll order a pizza at full retail and watch a jerk-off movie on the pay-per-view, I can't stop turning to my right. The famous statue on my left may as well be an ashtray. I don't even know it's there. Because to the right, to the right—my body starts turning involuntarily. I can't stop it: My shoulders and then my hips and then my feet do a slow swivel. And now I'm looking right at them.

Down at the end of the hallway, right where the carpeting (hand-stitched in Bangladesh) changes colors, from royal gold to royal purple, you can clearly make out the outside edge of the Nirvana Hotel and Casino's world famous, Top-Rated casino. And sitting there, on the fringe, a little lonely you might say, are a bank of beautifully lurid slot machines, red and white and yellow lights, with a big digital display sign flickering red and black above them.

I'm not insane. I know this doesn't happen. But I swear—and I've got \$602,300 in cash to back me up on this—those machines start calling to me.