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Prologue:
Good Vibrations

Where anything begins is always a matter of guesswork, but if I had to put my finger on a date when this book took root, it would be in May 2004. That month, an article appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "The Tug of the Newfangled Slot Machines," written by journalist and *Times* tech specialist Gary Rivlin. I was at the time, and remain, a regular player of slots at assorted casinos, usually within reasonable driving distance of my home in Buffalo, New York, but sometimes as far east as Atlantic City and Foxwoods and as far west as Las Vegas and Reno. Rivlin was scouting the Atlantis hotel-casino and the headquarters of International Game Technology (IGT), both in Reno.

Any casino-goer who's ever played Wheel of Fortune has laid hands on an IGT machine. "IGT," according to Rivlin, "is to the slot industry as Microsoft is to computer software, and no product contributes more to IGT's bottom line than what industry insiders simply call 'Wheel.'" This slot machine takes in, the article informs us, a billion dollars a year. Of course, I've played Wheel. I enjoy it more for its choral war cry, "Wheel! Of! Fortune!," than for any notable jackpots I've won from it. In fact, I don't call it Wheel of Misfortune for nothing.

In a remarkably candid piece of writing, Rivlin takes the reader into the back lots of slot-machine design and shows the wizardry of deception built into it. I call it remarkable, because it's not every day an industry that makes its livelihood by hoodwinking the public is quite so forthright about its trickery.

For example, "The slot machine version of 'Wheel,' like many of IGT's most popular slots, is designed to produce … near misses, lots of them: Though the wheel is divided into 22 pie slices of equal size, the odds are weighted so that a player is likely to land on some wedges far more often than on others."

Any slot player who visits a casino even just four or five times a year, as my wife and I do, already knows that the "near miss" isn't just a random click of the reel or the wheel, but a tool of the illusionist's repertoire.

Rivlin watches a couple firing up a Wheel slot. "After a couple of minutes, an older woman, dressed in a sparkly pink sweatsuit ensemble, reached the bonus round. She groaned when the wheel nudged past the '250 times bet' wedge and landed on '10 times bet.' Her male companion cried out, 'Honey, you were so close!'

"Baerlocher's starchy mien melted away, revealing an amused smile. 'You can see it on their faces every time,' he said. 'They feel they came soooo close. They're ready to try it again, because next time they're going to get it.'"

Here, the reader is granted the privilege of watching a con man in action, first pulling off the charade,

then congratulating himself for its success with the woman in pink. Part of IGT executive Anthony Baerlocher's job is to spend time on the floor of casinos to see how his machines are doing, particularly in the areas of seduction and capture.

The article then recites the extraordinary figures of the casino cash cow. "Every day in the United States, slot machines take in, on average, more than $1 billion in wagers," accounting for $7 out of every $10 wagered in casinos nationwide. This was in 2004.

From the world of cash flow, Rivlin and Baerlocher escort us into the IGT workshop to show us "more than 800 designers, graphic artists, script writers, and video engineers [who] find ways to surround the unromantic chips with a colorful matrix of sounds, chrome, garishly painted glass, and video effects, which include the soothing images of famous people from Bob Denver (the actor who played Gilligan on 'Gilligan's Island') to Elizabeth Taylor, many of whom receive hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars to lend their identities to the machines."

We meet Joe Kaminkow, then-chief designer for IGT and generally credited for the company's rise to dominance in the slot-machine industry, thanks to his pioneering of games based on television shows like "The Price is Right" and "The Munsters." Kaminkow also had a hand in the now-familiar ecosystem of slot machines: multi-coin multi-line games that offer twenty-five ways to win; multi-screen games that move the action from the main reels to a second bonus screen; unpredictable multipliers that increase the normal

payout; high-hit-frequency machines with frequent small payouts; and the near-miss programming—in short, all the techniques in the behavioral book to keep people playing a losing game.

The article goes on to indicate, via psychologists and psychiatrists, that slot-machine gambling is, indeed, as seductive as the machine designers want it to be. Joe Kaminkow and his associates are in effect the gaming equivalent of dope dealers and slot machines are akin to a gateway drug.

My first response to Rivlin's article was that for all its acumen, it was both credulous and reckless with the English language. It was as though he'd never heard corporate self-congratulation before. Talking points were fobbed off as insights. I imagined following him through a Studebaker factory in 1954. All of them—game designers, CEOs, and shrinks—were referring to gamblers in the white-coat language of lab technicians. And to what other "drug" could slot machines possibly be a gateway? The blackjack table? Craps? As my daughter might say, "Whoa, dude."

Was there no psychologist in America who might say something like, "What's wrong if you can afford it?" or "Forty million people think this is innocent fun"?

Was there no journalistic duty, or even a writerly impulse, to interview at least a handful of the users, the slot-machine meth heads, as the case may be? If there was another side to the story, wouldn't they be the ones to tell it? Then again, there's no love lost on

the part of *The New York Times* when it comes to gambling and gamblers.

As you can see, I had a visceral reaction to the article, which seemed to call for an intellectual response, but it needed to germinate. I'd never thought through my relationship to slot machines. I was always aware that it had little to do with being a helpless victim of a gateway drug, though I didn't know much beyond my own experience. Maybe I hadn't gambled enough. Maybe I needed to gamble more! But I had too many other obligations, not the least of which was full-time teaching.

One of the other things going on in my life in 2004 was substantial time spent in the car. I'd been driving between my home in Buffalo and southern California, where my parents lived in a senior housing complex, every summer for more than twenty years, and this was not in spite of the distance, but because of it. Had they lived in Alaska, I'd have driven there too. Hawaii? Well, put me on a highway and show me a sign. I'll have occasion to go into more detail later in the book, but these road trips were all about the music. I'd become something of a demon music collector in my middle years, owing largely to the advent of the digital and Napster revolution. I might have started packing music in order to fill the time on the cross-country jaunts, but it wasn't long before I planned these trips in order to immerse myself in my growing collection without interruption. Of course, I also organized the itineraries to have pit stops in Las

Vegas and Reno. The road to Nevada was paved with good vibrations.

So I thought about it, singing along to "Tripe Face Boogie" (Little Feat) at the top of my voice at 3 a.m. to keep myself awake during all-nighters through the Corn Belt and stopping at casino destinations along the way to try to come to terms with this slot-machine phenomenon, both personal and cultural. And my conclusion was this: There may be no greater con in the world than the con of expert testimony. Too many of the experts, including their designers and manufacturers, are peddling prefab talking points under the guise of research, playing fast and loose with the details of other people's experiences. Psychostimulants? Gateway drug? Whoa, dude, just whoa. Slow down while I label this urine sample.

That said, in the process, I realized that one man's experience—mine—hardly qualified as a rebuttal to the august *New York Times*. But where do you turn to learn more about the slot-playing experience? Not a lot has been written about it. Unlike poker, for example, slot play is without any history. Poker has a huge bibliography, a pantheon of legendary gamblers, a deep and rich lore. There are no equivalents to Doyle Brunson's *Super/System* or David Sklansky's *The Theory of Poker* or A. Alvarez's *The Biggest Game in Town* or James McManus' *Positively Fifth Street*. Slot play has none of this: no history, no heroes, no theory or strategy, no books that blow us away with great showdowns with guns or cards or both. How could it? The contest of human and computer chip is unequal—

asymmetrical, as they say—and the sums of money won or lost are commonly too small for folks to reach for their sidearms over. There have been major jackpots to be sure, but what's there to say about them? "I put in three dollars, hit the spin button, and wound up with Triple Diamond symbols across my payline. The casino people told me it was the biggest jackpot of the week."

No. Though inspired to write about slot playing, I had to rely on whatever background I had. Driving to Nevada thirty times, forty, more, is part of that, a whole-life experience in which the casinos are whistle stops, though by no means the only ones. This book is as much about cars, music, deserts, oxygen bottles, flat tires, noodle bars, and national parks as it is about jackpots. That's the way it has played out—especially over the past eleven years, since the abrasive note of disdain in Gary Rivlin's article set it in motion.

Within the gaming industry, those of us who feed the beast and endow it with its enormous wealth are spoken of with derision. To quote P.T. Barnum, one of us is born every minute. And it's true. The casinos are in business because they know how to extract money from us without violence: with flashing lights, music (including an endless foreplay of electronic crescendos), voices that entice (Wheel! Of! Fortune!) and congratulate us, symbols that take on magical powers in the casino's shamanistic universe (the seven, the diamond, the cherry)—a full aesthetic of seduction. In a sense, gambling immerses us in theater, a cunning participatory theater in which we are both the audi-

ence and the actors. The manufacturers of sucker bait are the masters of designing games that charm, transfix, and excite, arousing the sucker expectations that "today just might be my lucky day."

But gambling of any kind involves learning to manage your fantasies and the difference between a successful night out and a dismal one has as much to do with your state of mind as your state of finances.

Cherry Picker is written in defense of being a longtime incorrigible sucker for the casino who has no desire to give up that small dimension of recklessness that gives spice to his life.

Let's see if I can show you why that is.

Chapter One
Driving to Las Vegas

Why? Because I like it there, that's why.

And I've been liking it there on and off for more than 50 years. Having grown up in Los Angeles, I started taking off for Vegas in high school, not long after I got my first car, a 1951 Mercury.

What did I tell my parents? "So long, folks. I'm going to Las Vegas."

They answered, "Bye, son. Drive carefully. Did you finish your homework?"

It was a hang-loose kind of childhood, as they were working people and didn't have time to hover.

Of course, at age seventeen, I was too young to drink, though the waiters, bartenders, and casino hostesses never bothered to ask for ID. In those days, you played the dollar slots with real silver dollars, the sound of heavy coins in the tray rattled your heart and not just the machine, and you carried a payout in a heavy bucket to the cage. I still have a few of them, with the head of Liberty on the face and an eagle on the reverse. They were called Morgan dollars after the designer, George T. Morgan, and they contained 0.77344 troy ounces of nintey percent-pure silver. I was a high-school student, away from home deep into the night, carrying these silver coins to and from the collection window, and when I was done I went to the

Folies Bergère where women walked around on stage wearing a good deal less than they did even on the beach in Malibu.

I traveled with a friend who looked—and acted—older than I did. We approached the maître d' at the *Folies* and my friend asked for a seat down front.

"Sorry, fellas," he invariably said. "We won't have anything near the stage for maybe an hour. Can you come back then?"

"Thanks for your time," my friend said and shook the man's hand, neatly transferring three of the Morgan dollars from his palm into the maître d's.

"Excuse me for just a second, fellas," the maître d' said. "I think something just opened up. Come with me."

And we were promptly installed in front-row tables, with drinks in front of us. In those days, I went for a Singapore Sling, a fruity concoction that originated in the Raffles Hotel. Did I mention I was seventeen? Well, as Las Vegas' most famous headliner himself sang, "When I was seventeen, it was a very good year."

Now, maybe I did exaggerate a bit about my parents' nonchalant send-off. They weren't that blasé, but what were they going to do with me? Once my homework was done, that was that. And wasn't I sometimes under foot, like all other kids are? What they really said was, "Bye, son. Drive carefully. And look up Uncle Harry if you run into trouble."

There was a family connection in Las Vegas, thus the sense of safety in letting me go there. Uncle Harry

was my father's uncle and a favorite one at that. The two men had taken the red-eye out to California together in 1950, in search of what men were in search of, or perhaps more accurately, in flight from what men were in flight from. They went out as a team and pretty soon others followed.

Some businesses fell through for Harry and he eventually moved to Las Vegas, where the Strip was starting to flare up from the desert floor and the Sands, which opened in 1952, was the hottest place on the Boulevard. On any weekend, you might find Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, or Sammy Davis, Jr., not only performing there, but hanging around the casino or taking a sauna at the spa. Somehow, Harry had gotten in on something close to the ground floor and he had a position of responsibility as the superintendent of grounds.

So, was Uncle Harry a mobster? Come on. Would I tell you?

Clearly, he wasn't. I visited his house a couple of times and it was strictly desert bungalow. In Oklahoma, it would have been prime tornado bait. No mobster ever lived like Harry. No driver, no bodyguard, no pinstriped suits. He wore khaki jeans with those western arrow pockets and an open shirt and bolo tie with a polished agate on it.

That's the short answer, anyway, but in Vegas, especially at that time, there had to be a longer one. Harry was from north Jersey and everyone in north Jersey knew someone who knew someone. I have no doubt that at some point, with things going sour in

Los Angeles, Harry called someone who called someone who said, "You can trust Harry. He's from Pompton Lakes. Give him something to do."

As for my '51 Mercury two-door, initially it came equipped with fender skirts, but I ditched them as dowdy relics of a middle-American dreamboat fantasy. It was a heavy beast; they called them "lead sleds." But it was beautiful, and ripe for customizing. The low riders loved them. They shaved off the door handles, the trunk and nose chrome, and the hood ornaments, then lowered the rear end and chopped the roof supports so that they accommodated only shorter passengers or drivers hanging an elbow out the driver's-side window. They pinstriped or flamed them. They put exaggerated Buick-like buckteeth in the already-toothy grille. They finished off by taking them to upholstery shops in Tijuana for a sharp interior.

Mine was stock and still had the flathead V-8; it was the last year Ford Motor Company produced that engine before going for the overhead-valve design. And what wasn't done to those engines! Those were the days of neighborhood custom shops. They bored and stroked them, ported and relieved the valves and valve seats, installed a racing cam to give the valves a more radical lift, bolted in Hedman headers, customized the exhaust manifolds to show big-time chrome along the car's frame, and added a second or third carburetor, a Holley 94 or a Stromberg 97, to cure the engine of its asthma. They might even put in cast-aluminum cylinder heads with the manufacturer's name,

Edelbrock, embossed in the cooling vanes, and how sharp looking was that? Specialists built in a 4:11 gear ratio in the differential for better take-off from the light during a street race and added for good measure a whiny McCullough blower—a supercharger—to ram air into the combustion chambers at trans sea-level pressure.

I was into none of that. Yes, they yelled "Stocker!" at me. I thought, "Fuck 'em," and I wasn't "Stocker" when they needed help with their homework.

Listen, when Chuck Berry recorded "Maybelline" in 1955 and sang, "Cadillac a-rollin' on the open road, nothin' will outrun my V-Eight Ford," he was talking about his customized flathead, bored and stroked, ported and relieved with Stromberg carbs and Edelbrock heads. Mine, even just a stocker, with its metallic green with hints of powdered aluminum in the lacquer, after a wash and wax was still queen of the road, even in the late 1950s, when Ford lost its sense of design (remember the Edsel?) and its pride in the beauty and grace of the American automobile.

Mine was equipped with a standard three-speed manual transmission with an extra gear that you engaged with a lever. It was a classic "overdrive," the equivalent of a fourth gear that allowed the car to cruise at close to 100 mph. In those days, 100 wasn't considered unsafe (though it depended on what the California Highway Patrol deemed safe at any moment), even without seatbelts.

So there we were, my friend and I, cruising in the Merc to Las Vegas on one of our weekend excursions.

These were one-day affairs, leaving in the morning, gambling through the afternoon, having an incredibly cheap chuckwagon (the buffet of the day) dinner, then heading home by about 7 p.m. and getting into West L.A. around midnight. Once in a while we stayed for the early show and arrived home around two.

But the lead sled had a flaw; it was a gas guzzler and you had to fill the tank three times on the L.A.-Vegas round trip. One time, it happened that both my friend and I had blown our cash reserves and even at 33 cents a gallon, we couldn't afford the gas to get home. I'd anticipated this eventuality by bringing along my checkbook, figuring I could take it to a bank for extra cash, but the banks were closed on Saturdays. So we tried the cage at the Sands.

"Sorry, young man, but your personal check isn't accepted here."

I said to her, "Call Harry."

"What, sir?"

"Call Harry, the Sands' head groundskeeper."

"Sir, we don't—"

"Shall I call him myself?"

She relented and in five minutes, Uncle Harry was standing next to us at the cashier's window.

"This is my nephew," he said. "His money is good here." And then, "Say hi to your folks. I owe them a call." Not a word about my age or my drinking and gambling and running out of money. Just, "Say hi to your folks."

In short, Las Vegas isn't, and has never been, an alien civilization to me. Walking into a casino still

feels like an ordinary afternoon or evening out—that is, ordinary with a drizzle of high expectation, though I do miss the cascade of those silver dollars tumbling into the trays. It's one of the great sounds known to man, right up there with waterfalls and the wind in the willows and the laughter of children, though it can turn the most stable and upright of citizens into problem gamblers.

By contrast, getting paid off in the form of a barcoded receipt is the sensual equivalent of eating matzo and washing it down with motor oil. If any trend will turn compulsive gamblers into homebodies and pillars of the community, it's the TITO—ticket in, ticket out—system. What the modern slot machine has gained in efficiency, it has lost in mortgage-guzzling home-wrecking mojo. Machine designers know this and have built in the sound of tumbling coins every time you hit a jackpot, even for fifty cents (though to me, it's the casino equivalent of a laugh track). Hit for a dollar and sirens go off and pixilated gold coins cascade down an upper screen in an ejaculation of riches.

Las Vegas is about money—duh—and it beckons you from every street corner. If you're in the habit of thinking of money as vulgar—from the Latin *vulgus*, the common people—that's what you'll think of Las Vegas. It's also a city of crowds—the Latin *volgōrum*, or of the masses—and we the *vulgī* are there to be anointed by the Messiah of Moolah, the almighty American buck. "Luck Be a Lady Tonight" is the common theme song and by sheer chance, a few will come home blessed beyond their dreams. Out of the *hoi*

polloi—Greek for the many, the masses—and into the penthouse.

More likely, however, the *hoi polloi volgōrum,* to mix tongues, will wind up like the couple my wife and I encountered one morning on an elevator as we were coming up from breakfast. She was red-faced, her mascara was smeared, and she sagged in the shoulders as she said, "We blew it, didn't we?"

His jacket was rumpled and, looking like last night's martini, he responded, "But we had fun. You have to admit that."

I don't know what they lost. It could have been anything from the week's groceries to a lifetime's savings. But he seemed to be taking it well, which indicated a serious cognitive disconnect. Blowing the mortgage should occasion some grief and recrimination, like hers, and a vow never to go back, Jack.

What about me? After fifty years, how have I done? Simple answer: not well enough to think of making a living that way and not badly enough to check myself in for counseling. You go to Las Vegas expecting a slow leak in your wallet, patched by moments of spectacular windfall, and that expectation is usually met. When those blazing sevens and double diamonds start lining up on the payline, you experience one of the great legal highs in life and when they don't, you say, echoing the man in the elevator, "But we had fun. You have to admit that."

A good casino sees to it that you come away with short-term thrills bleeding into long-term chills. You're supposed to say to yourself, "If only I'd quit

when I was ahead," so the disappointment is really your own damn fault. But as every gambler knows, quitting when you're ahead is like jumping out of a window and changing your mind halfway down.

And that's the dirty little secret of every player who's left behind some hard-earned capital. "It was my fault. If only I'd only … [fill in the blank]."

Las Vegas is a lavish Temple of Alibi: the Chartres Cathedral of Alibi, the Blue Mosque of Alibi, where the *volgōrum* worship the gods of remorse, Woulda, Coulda, and Shoulda. "I Woulda gone to the other casino, but she had dinner plans." "I Coulda walked out of there a winner, until that last hand." "I Shoulda quit while I was ahead."

Woulda, Coulda, and Shoulda are the chief constellations of the gambler's firmament, the Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva of the guilty conscience. And then, after you've shaved your head, fasted for weeks, lit incense, donned the sackcloth of debt counseling, torn up your credit cards, and sworn at your bedside, down on your knees, with your hands clasped at your forehead that it will all be different this time, so help you W, C, and S, you go back, Jack, do it again, wheels turnin' round and round, you go back, Jack, do it again.