

Money

By A. C. Zito

The stale smell of cigarette smoke that left stains on the wall spanning back to the 70's excited me as I stepped onto the floor. The bright color floor; the other old geezers sat at their usual slot machines. Where was mine? Over next to Bill and Susanne's... empty, of course. No one hasn't sat in that seat since Henrietta Samuels did that one time back in '95 due to *her* slot machine being taken by a couple of drunk fraternity brothers for an entire thirty-seven minutes and twenty-two seconds. The only reason I knew this was because Henrietta couldn't help but count out the minutes as each one passed us by. And how many minutes was she sitting in *my* seat? It took her seventeen minutes and forty-eight seconds before she left my slot and went back to her own. But the real question is: Can I tell you when I started my stay at the Plaza? I can't seem to remember. Maybe it had to do with Joanne divorcing me and leaving me with nothing but my pension. Or maybe it had to do with Robert and Clarissa telling me that they didn't want to be my children anymore. I was a good dad to them. All the baseball games with Robert and dance recitals with Clarissa, they had no idea the strain those words had on my mental capacity.

We don't love you anymore. That was OUR money, OUR stuff you stole from us to help with your... your... gambling problem. Don't expect us to ever talk to you again. I can still see Robert's face as he stood awkwardly to the side while Clarissa did all the talking. She always was a go-getter, taking charge of her life like the independent, self-sufficient woman she always was, is, and always will be. But how would I know the 'is' and the 'will be?' I'm not part of her life anymore. I never *will be* a part of her life ever again. How am I supposed to know if she's dead or alive? I won't. It's not like Joanne would tell me. Maybe Robert would; he sent me a letter one time. No words. Just a baby picture; I never hit the bottle that hard that night ever before in all my life. I ended up in the emergency room on one of their floors having them telling me I was an alcoholic and needed to go to rehab.

Never been to rehab before, never plan on going EVER! Was what I told them; and in a matter of days, after lying and telling them I had a place set up to go, I was back in my old, reliable seat hitting the slots like I never left.

Where've you been? Bill and Susanne were asking me once I was back. I shrugged my shoulders as I pulled out that crumbled up baby picture and showed it to the two of them.

Went to see my grandchild I lied to them. They smiled and said congratulations and all that jazz. They seemed surprised to hear that I was back on good terms with Robert. I shrugged it off and went back to talking about the sports game the other night with Bill, and they eventually stopped bringing Robert and his kid up over time as they saw that it made me antsy and a little irritable.

CLICK The slot rolled and rolled. I licked my lips feeling lucky.

Money I whispered to myself. *C'mon, give me money*

“Look Bill, look Jon, that woman’s been at that slot for *four* straight days.” Then Susanne, looking to me, “Jon, you should go talk to her. She looks awfully cute!” Bill chimed in:

“Yeah, Jon, go talk to her; there’s an empty slot next to her.” I wasn’t exactly winning at this slot. Maybe they were right. But a feeling of unease took over me, and I said:

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. Were you two talking to me?” They both looked at me, angrily, as I pulled the lever of my slot machine down again.

“Asshole,” Bill remarked as he gave me one last look with those haughty eyes of his before going back to his slot.

“Yeah, asshole,” Susanne chimed in as she kept her stare fixed right at my skull. “We’re just trying to get you laid, Jon, that’s all.” Bill let out a grunt. It was his way of agreeing with Susanne. But I didn’t want to listen. I hadn’t been with a woman since Joanne left me.

“Well... wish me luck, I guess.” Susanne let out a *whoop, whoop* while Bill said a:

“*ATTABOY,*” I heaved and huffed as I made my way out of my chair, picking up my coat jacket before making my way over to the mystery woman.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Is this seat taken?” She looked up at me from her seat and smiled.

“Why no, it isn’t.” She had long, black hair that showed to be graying at the roots. It was obvious that she dyed it but who didn’t in this joint.

“So, I see you’ve made yourself comfortable at the Plaza. It’s a fine establishment, you know. If you’d like to meet the regulars I’d be happy to introduce you to them. But let me introduce myself first: I’m-“

“Jon Malcom Williams; I know, Jon. I’m your guardian angel.” I looked at the woman feeling a little shaken as she held out her hand: “I’m Barbara Ann... and that’s you.” She pointed over to where a man who largely resembled me lay flat on the ground with Bill and Susanne hunched over his body. Susanne seemed to be going ballistic as tears ran down her face. Bill kept yelling out 911 over and over again until it suddenly became muffled, Barbara Ann directed my attention back to her. “You died trying to get up to meet the nice woman who I am speaking to you through. Let’s face it, Jon. You had no chance with the real Barbara Ann. The only reason she’s been here for four days was because her husband just passed away. They had no kids and all of her friends had already passed away too. She was only going to be here a couple more hours before you suddenly died, to her startlement. Now, she has been awoken from her delirium and will go back to what she does best: reading romance and mystery novels while, at times, gives her two cats some loving attention. She’ll also bake many pies and dessert dishes like she has always done for her neighbors and their families. And the children of the families will bring light, love, and laughter back into her heart because that is why we are so blessed to have the youth as a part of our lives. And I’m so sorry you never got to meet your grandchild, Jon. But it’s time to

go. And it's time to bring light, love, and laughter back into your life once more." Jon didn't know what to say. But he felt comfortably at ease. But, at the same time:

"But my two friends," he asked, looking back over at Bill and Susanne as they stood watching as his body was taken away.

"Come," was all Barbara Ann was able to say as Jon was led out. She looked back at Bill and Susanne, her eyes on them not at all soft. But hardened; hardened like a rock...

"What will happen to all of that money, Bill?" Susanne asked. Bill licked his lips.

"I want it, Susanne. I want that money Jon left behind." They looked at each other, their eyes nonetheless but fidgety. Then, slowly turning their eyes back to their slot machines, they sat back down. All the while, as they turned the lever, they whispered to themselves:

Money, money, money