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## The Natural

THE MAIN FLOOR of the MGM in Reno was a world in itself. There was no sunrise or sunset or even a sense of time passing, things aging. It was a nonstop, cacophonous world of bells and shouts and the chugging, grinding metronome of ten thousand slot handles being pulled and released and pulled again. A man in a blue baseball cap worked at a mechanized pace at three machines<three coins a pull, three coins a pull, three coins a pull, back and forth, the payoffs desultory and uncounted. Nearby, an elderly couple worked a nickel machine with slow, practiced grace, the man dropping the coins, his wife jerking the handle, releasing the eager reels. Lives were lived in that tiny, spinning world of the slot machine, whose blurred fruits answered dreams and hopes with a shuddering, sudden silence. The reels boiled life down, sharpened its tensions and never qualified its conclusion. You won or you lost. You lived on, or you died.

Ross Durham played a quarter machine. He dropped in the coins one at a time and slowly brought the arm down. He scarcely noticed how the reels stopped, for his eyes were on another machine nearby, where a short, frail-looking man--a boy, really--was hunched over, fussing with a wire jammed into the side of the machine. Although no one seemed to notice the boy, Durham thought that any second everyone else in the packed casino would stop playing and crane their necks to see just what the hell this guy was up to. They'd see the magnet pressed against the side of the machine, see that the reels were spinning drunkenly. And then they'd see the security guards rush up and grab the guy by the arms, see him spin around and point at him and scream, "Ross, get me out of this, man!" That would be just like Cushing, to totally crack under the pressure and sell the rest of them out because he'd fucked up....