

# **The Fever**

**by Rod Serling, 1924-1975**

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It was this way with Franklin Gibbs. He had a carefully planned, precisely wrought little life that encompassed a weekly Kiwanis meeting on Thursday evening at the Salinas Hotel; an adult study group sponsored by his church on Wednesday evening; church each Sunday morning; his job as a teller at the local bank; and about one evening a week spent with friends playing Parcheesi or something exciting like that. He was a thin, erect, middle-aged, little man whose narrow shoulders were constantly kept pinned back in the manner of a West Point plebe and he wore a tight-fitting vest which spanned a pigeon chest. On his lapel was a Kiwanis ten-year attendance pin and, above that, a fifteen-year service pin given him by the president of the bank. He and his wife lived on Elm Street in a small, two-bedroom house which was about twenty years old, had a small garden in back, and an arbor of roses in front which were Mr. Gibbs's passion.

Flora Gibbs, married to Franklin for twenty-two years, was angular, with mousy, stringy hair and chest measurements perhaps a quarter of an inch smaller

than her husband's. She was quiet voiced though talkative, long, if unconsciously, suffering and had led a life devoted to the care and feeding of Franklin Gibbs, the placating of his sullen moods, his finicky appetite, and his uncontrollable rage at any change in the routine of their daily lives.

This background explains at least in part Franklin Gibbs's violent reaction to Flora's winning the contest. It was one of those crazy and unexpected things that seem occasionally to explode into an otherwise prosaic, uneventful life. And it had exploded into Flora's. She had written in to a national contest explaining in exactly eighteen words why she preferred Aunt Martha's ready-mix biscuits to any other brand. She had written concisely and sparingly, because her life was a concise and spare life without the frills or the little, flamboyant luxuries of other women, a life of rationed hours and budgeted moments; thin, skimpy, unadorned, unpunctuated, until the contest, by the remotest hint of variance or color. And then she got the telegram. Not the first prize—that would have been too much. (It happened to be fifty thousand dollars, and Franklin, with thin-lipped impatience, suggested that perhaps had she tried harder she might have won it.) It was the third prize, which involved a three-day trip for two, all expenses paid, to Las Vegas, Nevada, a beautiful room in a most exceptionally modern and famous gambling hotel, with shows, sightseeing tours, and wonderful food all thrown in, along with an airplane flight there and back.

The announcement of the trip fell into Flora's life like a star shell bursting over a no-man's-land. Even Franklin was momentarily taken aback at the suddenly animated appearance of his normally drab-faced wife. It gradually dawned on him that Flora was quite serious about wanting to take the trip to Vegas. There was a scene over the breakfast table the morning after the telegram's arrival. Franklin told his wife in no uncertain terms that gambling in Las Vegas was for the very rich or the very foolish. It was not for the stable or the moral and since morality and stability meant a great deal to Mr. Gibbs, they would have to telegraph back to the contest people (collect, Mr. Gibbs parenthetically noted) to acquaint them with their decision about Las Vegas, Nevada, and, as Mr. Gibbs put it, "its decidedly questionable roadhouse vice-dens."

When Mr. Gibbs returned from the bank that noontime for lunch, there wasn't any. Flora was crying in her room and, for the first time in a rooster-pecked, subservient, acquiescent life, she took a stand. She had won the trip to Las Vegas and she was going, with or without Franklin. This information was imparted through heavy sobbing and a spasmodic rendition of a biblical quotation something about whither thou goest I shalt go; something some lady in the Old Testament had said to another lady, but sufficiently close in its application here to cover a husband not accompanying his wife on a trip to Las Vegas. But actually it was a combination of a long Memorial Day weekend and the fact that the trip was free that finally made Franklin Gibbs change his mind.

A week later, Franklin, in his shiny, tight, blue Kiwanis Officer's Installation suit with vest and lapel button, and Flora, in a flower-patterned cotton dress with a big green sash and a flowerpot hat with a large feather, took the six-and-a-half-hour flight to Las Vegas, Nevada. Flora spent the entire six-and-a-half hours gurgling excitedly; Franklin remained petulantly silent with only an

occasional remark about any state government so totally immoral as to permit legalized gambling.

They were met at the airport by a hotel car which drove them to the Desert Frontier Palace—a gaudy, low-slung, sweeping structure emblazoned with nude girls in neon. Flora spent the automobile trip telling the driver all about Elgin, Kansas, in a high-pitched, ludicrously girlish way. Franklin remained silent except for a single comment on a platinum blonde who passed in front of the car when it stopped for a light. This was to the effect that she seemed typical of a town of decidedly questionable virtue.

Their room was air-conditioned, very modern and comfortable in a highly chromed way. The management had left a bowl of fruit and a vase of flowers which Flora nervously rearranged three or four times, while she chattered at her husband. Franklin sat glumly reading a Chamber of Commerce booklet from the City Fathers of Las Vegas, punctuating the few silences with negative comparisons between Vegas and much more solid, if smaller, Elgin, Kansas.

An hour later there was a knock on the door and the hotel public relations man entered with a photographer. His name was Marty Lubow and he wore the professional greeter's smile with competence.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs," Lubow asked, "is your room comfortable? Is there anything at all you need? Anything I can do for you?"

Flora's voice trilled nervously as her hands darted around her dress, pulling up, yanking down, straightening, smoothing. "Oh, it's lovely, Mr. Lubow, just lovely. You make us feel—well, you make us feel important!"

Lubow laughed jovially back at her, "Well, after all, you are important, Mrs. Gibbs. It isn't every day we can entertain a celebrated contest winner!"

The photographer at his elbow looked glum and whispered over his shoulder, "Not every day—maybe every *other* day."

Lubow's laugh covered the photographer's voice and pushed its way through the room. There was something enveloping about Mr. Lubow's laugh. It was his own special weapon for every emergency.

"I think," he said, "we should take our pictures right here. I think standing in the middle of the room would be best, don't you, Joe?"

The photographer heaved a deep sigh which was a combination of agreement and resignation. He stuck a bulb in the flash section of the camera, then leaned against the door lining up the shot. Lubow ushered Flora to a spot in the center of the room, then beckoned to Franklin who remained silently dour in his chair.

"Right over here next to your lovely missus, Mr. Gibbs," he said happily.

Franklin let out a long-suffering sigh, rose and walked over to stand close to Flora.

"Wonderful," gushed Lubow, looking at the two of them with amazed eyes, as if by joining them in the center of the room he had performed a feat only a degree less amazing than climbing the Matterhorn all alone. "Just wonderful," he repeated. "All right, Joe, how's that look?"

The photographer responded by taking the picture and left both Flora and Franklin blinking in the aftermath of the flash—Flora with her fixed, nervous smile, and Franklin staring malevolently and challengingly toward the photographer. Again Lubow's laughter shook the room. He pounded on Franklin's

back, wrung his hand, patted Flora's cheek and somehow, in the same motion, headed toward the door. The photographer had already opened it and was on his way out.

"Now you folks just keep in touch with us—" Lubow was saying as he left.

"It's *The Elgin Bugle*, Mr. Lubow," Flora called after him.

Lubow turned. "How's that?" he inquired.

"That's our home town paper," Flora answered. "*The Elgin Bugle*."

"Of course, of course, Mrs. Gibbs. *The Elgin Bugle*. We'll send a copy of the picture right out to them. Enjoy yourselves, folks, and welcome to Las Vegas and the Desert Frontier Palace."

He winked happily at Flora, grinned manfully at Franklin and was only momentarily nonplussed by the frozen petulance on Franklin's face. He recovered sufficiently to wave as he walked away. His laughter was a twenty-one-gun salute honoring nothing in particular, but in an odd way pulling the curtain down on the meeting.

It was another fifty-five minutes before Flora could persuade her husband to go out to the gambling room and see what it was like. It took the bulk of those minutes for her to persuade him that there was nothing immoral in just *watching* people gambling. And in the intervals between argument she was forced to listen to Franklin's own personal critique on the miserable weakness of human beings who threw away money on dice, cards and machines. In the end he suffered himself to be put into his Kiwanis Officer Installation coat once again and led by Flora into the main building of the hotel, and then into the principal gambling room. It was a plush, noisy, people-loaded room, crowded with crap tables, a long bar, roulette wheels and three rows of one-armed bandits. It was a room full of noises that rose up from the heavily carpeted floor, touched the acoustical ceiling, and though softened by both, nonetheless hung in the air. The noises were gambling noises. There was the spinning clatter of roulette wheels. The tinkle of glasses. The metallic clack, clack, clack of the one-armed bandit levers being pulled down. There were the droning voices of the croupiers calling out numbers, red and black, and underneath all of this the varied pitch of human voices—the nervous squeals of the winners, the protesting groans of the losers. The sounds fused together and hit Franklin and Flora Gibbs with the force of an explosion as they entered the room and stood there on the periphery of the activity, staring into the strange, gaudy and noisy new world.

The two of them stood at the door trying to feel at ease, conscious for the first time of how they looked—Flora, a fluttery woman, in an unfashionable dress with a corsage that did nothing but emphasize dullness; Franklin, a little man in a 1937 suit, with slicked-down hair, pointed shoes and a look of midwestern primness, worn defensively like a badge. They were two foreign elements at this moment, joined together in a bond of inferiority closer, perhaps, than they ever shared in Elgin, Kansas.

They stood there like that for ten minutes, watching the tables, the games, the stacks of chips and silver dollars; the glamorous-looking women and the impeccable men. Flora's eyes grew wider and wider. She turned to Franklin.

"It has such a flavor, this place!"

He looked at her, fishy-eyed, then turned up his nose. "Flavor, Flora? I'm surprised at you. You know how I feel about gambling."

Flora smiled appeasingly. "Well, this is different though, Franklin—"

"It is neither different nor moral. Gambling is gambling! It's your vacation, Flora. But I must, in good conscience, repeat to you what I have been saying all along—that it's a tragic waste of time. Hear me, Flora? A tragic waste of time!"

Flora's lower lip trembled and she reached out to touch his arm. "Please, Franklin," she said quietly, "try to enjoy it, won't you? We haven't had a vacation in such a long time. Such a very long time. A vacation—or even a good time together."

Franklin's left eyebrow shot upward and his voice was that of a wounded Congressional Medal of Honor winner who had suddenly been told he had to go back on the line. "It is a matter of record, Flora," he announced, "that I work desperately hard and I have very little time—" It was the opening paragraph to a tailor-made speech that Franklin delivered at least once a month. It was when he branched off into a new tack, alleging that he felt unclean in this kind of room with semi-clad girls and dice throwers, that he realized Flora was no longer listening to him.

Across the room a one-armed bandit had lit up, a bell clanged, and a woman screamed hysterically. After a moment, a long-legged blonde in tights, carrying a basket of money, walked over to the woman by the machine, called out its number to a floor manager and then handed the woman the basket of money. She was immediately surrounded by members of her party who took her to the bar, all chattering like happy squirrels.

Flora left Franklin's side and went to the one-armed bandits spread along one whole side of the room. From where she stood it looked like a forest of arms yanking down levers. There was a continuous clack, clack, clack of levers, then a click, click, click of tumblers coming up. Following this was a metallic poff sometimes followed by the clatter of silver dollars coming down through the funnel to land with a happy smash in the coin receptacle at the bottom of the machine.

Franklin was studying the long-legged blonde with sour disapproval, and was unaware that Flora had taken a nickel out of her purse until she dropped the coin into one of the machines. Flora was reaching for the lever when she realized that Franklin was glaring at her. She flushed, forced a smile and then looked supplicatingly at him.

"Franklin, it's—it's only a nickel machine, dear."

His high-pitched voice sandpapered against her. "Just a nickel machine, Flora? Just a nickel machine! Why don't you just go out and throw handfuls of nickels into the street?"

"Franklin, darling—"

He moved closer to her, his voice low, but full of a carefully closeted fury. "All right, Flora, we go to Las Vegas. We waste three days and two nights. We do it because that's your idiotic way of enjoying yourself. And it doesn't cost us anything. But now you're spending our money. Not even spending it, Flora—you're just throwing it away. And it's at this point, Flora, that I have to take a hand. You are obviously not mature enough—"

There was the suggestion of pain in Flora's eyes. Her face was edged with a nervousness that Franklin recognized as a prelude to several hours of quiet handwringing, and deep, spasmodic sighs. It was Flora's only defense over the years.

"Please... please, Franklin, don't make a scene," she whispered. "I won't play. I promise you—" She turned to the machine and then, with a kind of hopeless gesture, back to him. "The nickel's already in."

Franklin heaved a deep, resigned sigh and looked up toward the ceiling. "All right," he said. "Throw it away. Pull down the lever or whatever it is you do. Just throw it away"

Flora kept her eyes on Franklin as she pulled the lever down, listening to the sound of the tumblers and then the empty poof and then the silence. The corners of Franklin's mouth twitched in a righteous smile, and for one fleeting moment Flora hated him. Then habit took over for her, and she stood quietly at her husband's elbow and heard him declare that he was going back to the room to get ready for dinner. "I guess I'm not very lucky," she said softly.

He didn't answer. At the door she looked straight into his face.

"Franklin, it was only a nickel."

"Twenty of them make a dollar, Flora, and I work hard for those dollars!"

He was about to open the door when a drunk standing by a dollar machine turned and saw him. The drunk grabbed Franklin, pulled him over to the machine. Franklin recoiled as if exposed to something infective, but the drunk held Franklin firmly with one hand, a glass in the other.

"Here, old buddy," the drunk said, "—you try it." He put down his glass and took a silver dollar from his pocket. "Here, go ahead. I'm one hour and thirty minutes on this miserable, crummy, money-grabbin—!" He forced the silver dollar into Franklin's hand. "Go ahead, old pal. It's yours. You play it."

A woman at the bar waved frantically at them. "Charlie," she screamed, "are you gonna come over here or am I gonna come over there and get you?"

"I'm coming, honey, I'm coming," he answered. He smiled at Franklin, burped out a shaft of Johnny Walker-flavored air, patted Franklin on the back and then guided his hand, still holding the silver dollar, into the slot on top of the machine.

Franklin looked like a small animal caught in a trap. He looked wildly left and right, searching for aid, embarrassed, discomfited, frightened.

"Really," Franklin said, "I'm not at all interested. Please, I'm in a hurry—"

The drunk chortled happily as the silver dollar was deposited in the slot, then walked unsteadily toward the bar.

Franklin glowered at the machine. His first thought was the possibility of getting the silver dollar back without having to play it. He studied the machine intently. It was like all the others. Big, gaudily lit, with a glass-covered compartment in the center, showing an incredible number of silver dollars inside its big metal gut. Two lights over this compartment had an odd similarity to eyes and the slot at the bottom filled out the picture of a monstrous neon face. Franklin raised his right hand to the lever. Over his shoulder he saw Flora smiling hopefully. Then, as if taking a big decisive step, he yanked down the lever, watched the whirling tumblers that one after another came to a stop, showing two cherries and a lemon.

There was a loud metallic clack and then the sound of the coins as they arrived in the receptacle at the bottom—ten of them.

Franklin was only faintly aware of Flora's delighted squeal. He looked down at the coins and slowly, one by one, took them out. A strange, warm sensation was running through him; an odd excitement that he'd never experienced before. He saw his reflection in the chrome strip on the machine and was surprised at what he saw—a flushed, bright-eyed little face, cheek muscles twitching, lips stretched tight in a thin smile.

"Oh, Franklin, you *are* lucky."

He looked at Flora, manufacturing a grimness of face and tone, and held up the silver dollars in his palm. He said, "Now, Flora, you'll see the difference between a normal, mature, thoughtful man and these wild idiots around here. We will take these, put them in our room, and we will go home with them."

"Of course, dear."

"These baboons here would throw it away. They'd compulsively put it back into the machine. But the Gibbses don't! The Gibbses know the value of money! Come on, my dear, it's late. I'd like to shave for dinner."

Without waiting for her, he turned toward the door. Flora padded after him like a diffident pet. A look of pride was on her face as she watched the tiny, erect figure ahead of her pushing his way through the crowd with a resolution and a strength that seemed to reaffirm the status of Elgin, Kansas. Neither of them saw the drunk return to the machine and put in another silver dollar. But Franklin heard the sound of coins landing in the receptacle.

He whirled around, startled. He had heard coins all right, but he had heard something else too. He had distinctly heard his own name, a metallic, raspy jumbled rendition—but, nonetheless, his name. The coins had landed in the receptacle and had called out, "Franklin." He rubbed nervously at his jaw and turned to Flora.

"Did you say something?" he asked.

"What, dear?"

"Did you call my name, Flora?"

"Why no, dear."

Franklin looked over toward the machine again, puzzled. The drunk was weaving his way back toward the bar and the machine was unattended.

"I could have sworn—" Franklin began. Then he shook his head. But he studied the machine for one more moment. It did resemble a face, the two lights were eyes, the glass-covered square in the center with the silver dollars inside—that was the nose. And the opening at the bottom where the money came down—that was the odd little mouth with the protuberant lower lip.

"Like a face," he said aloud.

"What is, dear?" Flora asked.

"That silly-looking machine. It's like a face."

Flora turned to stare at it blankly then she looked back at Franklin. "A face?" she inquired.

"Never mind," said Franklin. "Let's get ready for dinner."

All the way back to the room Franklin pondered over the experience of hearing a machine call out his name. It was ridiculous, of course, he realized. It hadn't really

happened. It had been a combination of voices and sounds and his own imagination, but it had been real enough to startle him, to jar him at that moment. But he was not the least bit frightened by what had happened. Indeed, he felt a sensation of strength and accomplishment. He'd beaten that ugly machine.

He, Franklin Gibbs, had walked into the arena of the enemy, spit in the eye of immorality, turned his back and walked away. It was a triumph of Good. What he didn't admit to himself as he shaved his severe little face, was that the victory had been too ephemeral. Too quick. Too fleeting. Franklin Gibbs, though he would never admit it aloud at this moment, wanted to go back into the arena!

They had dinner and saw part of the early show. Franklin was upset because the waiter had put chives in his baked potato without asking him and he'd always hated chives. They never got to see Frank Sinatra because the opening comedian was too dirty. Flora giggled nervously at some of the things he said, not fully understanding them, then glancing at Franklin apologetically. Franklin sat stiffly upright, unsmiling and disapproving. When the eight girls in black sequins were halfway through the second dance number, he arose, nodded tersely at Flora, and started out. Unquestioning, Flora followed him.

At ten o'clock they were in bed; Franklin had delivered a most comprehensive critique on foul-mouthed comedians and dirty little sluts off the street who became dancers. He had brushed his teeth, performed the ritual of an alcohol rub in his hair using a special medicine prepared for him by their Elgin druggist, brushed off perfunctorily Flora's suggestion that they might visit the gambling room once again, just to observe, and gone to bed. Flora fell asleep almost immediately as she always did. Franklin, on the other hand, lay with hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. There was a small night light by the door and it sent a very low orange gleam into the darkness of the room. The silver dollars were stacked up on top of the dresser in front of the mirror. At intervals Franklin's eyes would move down so that he could look across the foot of the bed to the stack of coins. He was getting drowsy and was almost asleep when he heard the sound again.

"Franklin!"

It was coins tumbling together out of a machine and calling out his name, "Franklin!" It happened three times in a row before he sat upright in bed looking around. It was an odd indefinable kind of sound. The closest thing to it Franklin could imagine was if his name had been pronounced by a robot. He looked at the coins on the dresser and was mildly surprised that the pile seemed to look higher, more than ten coins now. It was as if there were twenty silver dollars piled on top of one another. And the longer he looked at them the higher the pile seemed to grow.

He got out of bed and walked over to the dresser. He picked up the coins and juggled them in his hand. There was a nice feeling to silver dollars in the hand, he decided. A nice heavy feeling. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, and felt vaguely disturbed by what he saw. The Franklin Gibbs that stared back at him wore a face of greed and avarice, of a compulsive hunger, a lecherous, naked desire. It was not his face at all except in broad outline.

Flora was suddenly awake. "Is anything the matter, dear?" she asked.



“There is nothing the matter,” he said, forcing an evenness to his tone, “except—” He held out the silver dollars in his hand. “This is tainted money, Flora. It is absolutely immoral. Nothing good can come of money won like this. I’m going back inside and feed it back into the machine. Get rid of it.”

Flora slowly lay back in bed, dulled by sleep. “All right, dear,” she murmured. “You do what you think best.”

She was asleep by the time Franklin had put his clothes back on and was combing his hair in front of the dresser mirror. “If there’s one thing that I understand extremely well, Flora,” he said to his sleeping wife across the room, “it’s morality! And I will not have tainted money smelling up our pockets. I am definitely going back in there and get rid of it.” He turned to her, “Now go back to sleep, Flora.”

She was breathing regularly in measured rhythm. Franklin turned back to the mirror and straightened his coat, picked up the silver dollars, smiled at them, and then, feeling the excitement rise in him again, walked out toward the big room that never went to sleep.

Three hours later Franklin stood by the machine, his tie knot pulled down, his shirt, unbuttoned, his coat open. He was unconscious of time or noise or the way he looked or anything else. His whole existence had resolved itself into a simple set of actions. Put the coin in. Pull down the lever. Watch and wait. Put the coin in. Pull down the lever. Watch and wait. Study the tumblers and hold your breath. A cherry always meant something in the way of a return. Lemons were death. The strip of writing like a label appeared only in a few winning combinations. The bells were hopeful, but you needed three of them to make it worth your while and the plums weren’t any good at all. He didn’t know or care that all of his carefully wrought and conceived standards, his entire frame of reference, everything he’d ever stood for or purported to stand for, had now been shoved down a drain some place. What was important to him were cherries and bells and plums and the combination of them as they appeared when the tumblers stopped. He kept feeding the machine the coins and pulling down the lever and studying the machine and pulling down the lever and feeding and pulling and feeding and pulling. Three times he went to the cashier’s desk to break bills, always nervously watching over his shoulder to make certain no one would take his machine. Each time, after he’d collected the silver dollars, he would literally run back over to the one-armed bandit, and even this didn’t register with him as not being the sort of thing Franklin Gibbs would have done in Elgin, Kansas, twenty-four hours earlier.

At two in the morning Franklin Gibbs still didn’t know what was happening to him. The clammy sweat of fatigue ran down his face and clung to his pores. He found his body jerking spasmodically as the tumblers came up one after another. His stomach felt empty and drained. He was aware that he was losing a great deal of money. How much he wasn’t sure—he didn’t allow himself to figure it out. All he knew as a certainty was that he, Franklin Gibbs, would never be defeated by a filthy, immoral machine. And beyond that, he wanted silver dollars. He wanted them desperately. He wanted to listen to the click of the machine and then the exciting clatter of coins rubbing against themselves as they flooded out of the

machine. He wanted to load his pockets with them and feel them, bulky and heavy, against his body. He wanted to reach into his pockets and run his sweaty fingers over them.

So he continued to play and at three-thirty in the morning Franklin Gibbs was a desperate little man with a stiff, sore right arm and an obsession that blocked out the rest of the world and left him standing by a one-armed bandit feeding it coins. Winning three, losing five. Winning two, losing three. Winning six, then losing ten.

A half-hour later Flora came, her face a contradiction of sleep and concern. She had awakened to find the bed empty and hadn't remembered her conversation with Franklin prior to his leaving the room. Her eyes went wide when she saw him standing close by the machine. She had never seen her husband look this way. His suit was rumpled, his shirt sweat-stained, his face, under a growing beard stubble, was oyster white. There was a glazed quality to the eyes and it was almost as if he were looking through her rather than at her. She nervously approached him in time to hear him scream.

"Well, damn it!"

The tumblers showed a plum, a lemon and a bell. There had been the loud metallic click of defeat and the intense somber face of her husband had a wild quality.

Flora touched his sleeve and said softly, "Franklin, dear, it's terribly late."

He turned to stare at her, taking a moment to identify her, having to reach back into his subconscious to reconstitute a world that he had left several hours before and which no longer seemed very real to him.

"Stay here, Flora," he said. "I have to get some more silver dollars. Don't let anybody use this machine, understand?"

"Franklin, dear—" her voice half-heartedly chased him, and then died out as he left her behind.

She watched him take a bill out of his wallet, hand it to the cashier, and get a large stack of silver dollars in return. He carried them back, brushed past her and started to feed them into the machine, one by one. He'd gone through five of them with no result when Flora touched his arm again, this time much more positively, and with a grip sufficiently tight to keep him from depositing yet another silver dollar.

"Franklin!" her voice carried a rising concern. "How much money have you lost? Have you been playing this machine all night?"

Franklin's voice was terse. "I have."

"You've lost a great deal of money then, haven't you?"

"Very likely."

Flora wet her lips and tried to smile. "Well, darling, don't you think you ought to stop?"

He looked at her as if she'd just suggested that he drink a bucket of paint. "Stop?" he half shouted. "How can I stop, Flora? How in God's name can I stop? I've lost a great deal of money. A great deal of money! Look! Look at this."

He pointed to the big sign over the machine. "Special jackpot \$8,000," it read.

“See that?” he said. “When it pays off, you make eight thousand dollars!” He turned to the machine again, speaking more to it than to his wife. “Well, it’s got to pay off. If a person stands here long enough, it must pay off.”

As if to emphasize the logic of his remark, he slammed another silver dollar in the slot, pulled down the lever and stared intently at the tumblers as a cherry came up with two lemons and three silver dollars dropped into the receptacle. Again he lost himself with the machine and became oblivious to Flora. He lost five more silver dollars and felt the gnawing bite of irritation that comes with defeat.

“Franklin, darling,” Flora began, you know how awful you feel in the morning when you’ve been up too late at night—”

He whirled around at her and screamed, “Flora, why don’t you shut your mouth.”

She drew back, white-faced, feeling the shriveling shame that was always caused by Franklin’s temper. He noticed it and it egged him on. It always gave him a kind of perverse satisfaction to yell at Flora. She was so plain and so weak; she was such a piece of dough to be pulled and kneaded and pounded. and she was worth screaming at, because she would react. Not like this machine that had been his enemy for so many hours, his tormentor. He wanted to kick the machine, to scratch it, gouge it, make it feel pain. But the machine was impassive and invulnerable. Flora wasn’t. Flora with her mousy little face. For a passing, exploding moment he wanted to hit her, to smash his fist into her face. But it was almost as good to scream at her and get a reaction.

“I hate a shrew, Flora,” he shouted.

Several people turned to stare at them.

“I can’t stand a woman who hangs over your shoulder and sees to it that you have miserable luck.”

He heard her sobbing intake of breath and it poured kerosene on the fire that flared inside of him.

“That’s what you’re doing to me now, Flora—you’re giving me miserable luck. You and your Las Vegas. You and your Goddamned contests. Get out of my sight, will you? Will you get out of my sight now!”

She made one more weak, pitiful protest, “Franklin, please, people are watching—”

“The hell with people,” he shouted. “I’m not concerned with people. People can go to hell.”

He turned and, with sweaty palms, clutched at the sides of the machine, his lips compressed. Burning on his face was the anger of frustration, mixed with the high fever of the bad gambler.

“This is what I’m concerned with,” he said. “This machine! This damned machine.” His anger burned hotter, his frustration took over. He pounded his knuckles against it. “It’s inhuman the way it lets you win a little and then takes it all back. It teases you. It holds out promises and wheedles you. It sucks you in. And then—” He slammed another silver dollar into the slot, pulled down the lever with both hands, then watched as two plums and a lemon showed up on the tumbler and there was the dull click once again, with silence following it.

He was unaware of Flora now, unaware of the people who stood watching him behind her. He was unconscious of the noises, the lights, the sweat on his body,

the fact that his mouth twitched. There was this machine in front of him. There was this machine that had a face on it and it had been cheating him and he had to pay it back. He had to revenge himself on it and the only weapons he could use were silver dollars. He put them in, pulled down the lever, watched, listened, waited.

He didn't see Flora, handkerchief to face, walk away from the machine and disappear out the door. He didn't hear a man in a cashmere sport coat comment loudly to his wife that, "the little prune-faced guy was a real nut with that machine." A waiter asked him if he wanted a drink and he didn't look at the waiter or answer him. There were only two things left in Franklin Gibbs's world. Himself and the machine. Everything else had ceased to exist.

He was a sour-faced little man in an old-fashioned suit and he stood at the machine gorging it with silver dollars, trying to make it vomit back at him. He was a dope addict now, in the middle of a long and protracted needle, and he never really knew, even at five in the morning when the room was empty save for one blackjack game, one dice table still operating and himself, that in every clinical sense, he'd lost his mind.

Everything that he'd used to sustain himself through his lifetime his willfulness, his pettiness, his self-delusions, his prejudices—he'd whipped together like a suit of armor and this is what he wore as he battled the machine on into the morning. Slip in the coin, pull down the lever. Slip in the coin, pull down the lever. Slip in the coin, pull down the lever. Keep it up. Don't stop. Don't break the routine of hand and arm and eye and ear. This was the new chronology of his life function. Sooner or later the machine would pay off. It would surrender to him. It would acknowledge his superiority by suddenly spewing out eight thousand silver dollars. This was all he thought about as he stood there, oblivious to the dawn outside, to anything except that he was alone in the world with a one-armed bandit that had a face.

When the night cashier left and yawned a good morning to his replacement, he made mention of the funny little duck by the machine who'd been there something like seven hours.

"I seen them get hooked before," he said to his replacement, then shook his head, "but never like him. Never like that buggy little guy over there!"

That was the epitaph to Franklin Gibbs's first night at Las Vegas, but only to that night. At eight-thirty in the morning, when Flora came in to find him, he was still at the machine.

Marty Lubow had a brief talk with the resident manager of the hotel about eleven in the morning. They talked in passing of a couple of public relations stunts in the offing, the nature of the ad campaign for Sammy Davis, Jr., who would start at the hotel two weeks hence, and, just before Lubow left, the manager asked him about Franklin Gibbs whom several people had mentioned. There is a grapevine of no mean proportions in the Las Vegas hotel circuit. Let a man make seven straight passes at a crap table and within five minutes the information is known all over town. Or let a movie star drop a bundle and make a scene and a gossip columnist has phoned it in within an hour. But even in a town full of characters and caricatures, there was always room for one more. And a sour-faced

little man in a 1937 suit was obviously setting a new record for time spent and money lost at one silver buck machine. The manager queried Lubow as to the nature of the beast and Lubow laughingly told him that if Gibbs could hold out till six that evening they could probably set up some picture stuff. This might be a natural for *Life* magazine.

But at three o'clock that afternoon, after Lubow had seen Franklin, he was no longer interested in any kind of press coverage. Quite the contrary. One look at the little man's face was quite sufficient to have him phone the house physician to inquire somewhat obliquely how long a man could live without sleep.

At five-thirty, Franklin Gibbs had lost three thousand, eight hundred dollars, cashed three checks, downed one glass of orange juice and one half of a boiled ham sandwich, and had come close to striking his wife across the side of the face when, with tears rolling down her cheeks, she had pleaded with him to come back to the room to take a nap.

Franklin Gibbs's life was entirely funneled into the slot machine in front of him. At this point he had no recollection of ever having done anything but feed in coins and pull down levers. He felt neither thirst nor hunger. He knew he was desperately tired and that his vision seemed out of focus, but there was no question of giving up.

It wasn't until nine o'clock that evening, after the hotel manager had told him he would be unable to cash another check and Flora had telegraphed his brother in Iowa—a rambling, incoherent telegram which spoke of disaster—that Franklin Gibbs got an ice-cold, clutching feeling in his gut. He had three silver dollars left and he'd reached the point where he kept mumbling to the machine that it was now time to pay off. He was owed eight thousand silver dollars and there wasn't any question about it. What was the matter with the machine, anyway? Didn't it know the rules? He kept talking to it, urging it, arguing with it—sweaty, sodden, obsessed. It was just twenty-one minutes after eleven when Franklin Gibbs put in the last silver dollar. The machine made a strange kind of whirring noise and the lever stopped halfway down on its arc, clanked noisily and then stuck. Franklin Gibbs stood stock-still for a long, unbelieving moment and it came to him that right then, right at that instant, he was being taken. This was the moment of the big cheat. Obviously this was the coin that was to have brought him the eight-thousand-dollar jackpot. He had no doubt about it at all. He was supposed to have won this time, and the machine, the machine with the ugly face, the machine that had hounded him by calling out his name, had now stooped to the nadir of deceit and was refusing to pay off.

Franklin felt ripples of anger rise up from deep inside him, anger that began as a trickle and built to a coursing flood. Anger that bubbled and seethed and boiled. Anger that suddenly pinched at him and clutched at him and tore at him.

"What's the idea?" he shouted at the machine. "What's the idea, you bastard! Goddamn you. Give me back my dollar. That's my last one, you miserable, crummy, dirty—" His breath caught up with him and for a moment all he could do was wheeze. "Give me back my Goddamned dollar."

He hit the machine. He punched it. He clawed it. He shoved it. Two floor men, a cashier and the assistant manager, headed toward him from opposite points of the room, but not before he had broken the knuckles of his right hand and not before

he had pushed the machine off its stand to go crashing down to the floor, and not before he had thrown himself on it, tangling himself up in it, cutting his arm against the broken glass that was its nose and bleeding all over the carpet.

They led him out of the room, screaming, crying, sobbing, shouting and fighting. Flora ran after them, wringing her hands and weeping.

The house physician set and bandaged Franklin's hand, put three stitches in his arm and gave him a sedative. They undressed him, put him to bed, then stood over him while he fell into an uneasy sleep.

The doctor told Flora that it would be best to take him home the following day and that Franklin should have a long session with his own physician when he returned to Elgin, Kansas. He even murmured something about the possibility of psychiatric help later on. Flora kept nodding at him, her face pale and tear-stained. After they had gone she sat silently staring at her husband.

Somewhere in the nether land of Franklin Gibbs's subconscious he heard a voice clear and distinct. It was produced by coins rubbing against themselves. It was a metallic, clanking, "Franklin!" that suddenly was shouted into the air. He woke with a start and heard it again. Then again. He got out of bed and walked past a frightened Flora toward the door.

"Franklin!" It came from the hall outside. It mocked him. It assailed him. It spit at him. He flung open the door. There was the machine in the corridor, its eyes blinking on and off.

"Franklin," it cajoled him. "Franklin, Franklin, Franklin."

He screamed and slammed the door.

"Franklin, Franklin, Franklin."

The noise of it filled the room and then he saw it staring at him in the bedroom mirror. He screamed again and, turning, saw it behind the chair. He backed against the closet door and mistaking it for an escape route, flung it open. There was the machine inside the closet blinking at him and calling his name. He tripped and sprawled on the floor, banging his head against the corner of the dresser, and there was the machine looking at him from the center of the room.

"Franklin, Franklin, Franklin," it called out to him.

He couldn't scream any more. He had no voice left. All he had to clutch was his terror. A silent, voiceless terror. He scrambled to his feet and ran this way and that way, now bumping against furniture, now falling into the arms of Flora who scrabbled at him, shouting his name. He opened the door to the hall and there was the machine grinning at him.

The last moment of Franklin Gibbs's life was spent in a mad dash across the hotel room toward the window. He went through it, taking most of the glass with him, to land two stories below on the concrete walk that surrounded the big swimming pool. He hit it, forehead first, and the loud snap that separated his vertebrae at the back of his neck bore no relationship to any sound that Flora had ever heard before. But she heard this over the sound of her own screaming as she stood at the broken window and looked down at the crumpled figure of Franklin Gibbs in his pajamas, his head tilted at an odd angle to his body. He was quite dead.

No one was allowed to touch the body. Someone had tastefully and compassionately covered it with a blanket. A sheriff's deputy had phoned for the

ambulance and was just now succeeding in getting most of the people out of the pool area.

Mr. Lubow, white-faced with anxiety, was in Flora's room helping her pack. He was telling her there was a much more comfortable little sanitarium at the other end of the town and he was quite certain she'd be able to rest there much more easily. She sat on the edge of the bed while he talked to her in low, nervous gusts about how sad and sorry they were that this had happened. She was a dough-faced, catatonic sphinx whose life had suddenly drained away. She had a vague passing thought that she should telegraph Franklin's brother again and she thought additionally that Franklin hadn't believed in insurance, but both thoughts were dulled and stifled by a blanket of neutral dullness that she let settle over her. She didn't want to think any more. She was too tired.

Down by the pool Franklin Gibbs's body lay cold and broken. One lifeless hand extended from underneath the blanket, resting on the concrete. In the dark shrubbery beyond, there was a rattle of noise. A silver dollar fell to the ground and rolled unerringly across the walk to spin to a stop right next to Franklin Gibbs's hand.

No one in the hotel could explain what the one-armed bandit was doing near the pool where they found it the following morning. It was in pretty bad shape, dented, scratched, with the lever stuck tight and most of its glass broken, but they sent it to the factory for a repair job and it was due back on the line within a week or two. The pool boy found the silver dollar also the following morning and put it in his pocket and Flora Gibbs flew back to Elgin, Kansas, to pick up the broken crockery of her life.

She lived a silent, patient life from then on and gave no one any trouble. Only once did anything unusual happen and that was a year later. The church had a bazaar and someone brought in an old used one-armed bandit. It had taken three of her friends from the Women's Alliance to stop her screaming and get her back home to bed. It had cast rather a pall over the evening.

#### NARRATOR'S VOICE

Mr. Franklin Gibbs, visitor to Las Vegas, who lost his money, his reason, and finally his life to an inanimate metal machine variously described as a one-armed bandit, a slot machine or, in Mr. Franklin Gibbs's words, a monster with a will all its own. For our purposes we'll stick with the latter because we're in The Twilight Zone.

FADE TO BLACK

