

The Gamblers

Donald R. Fried





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THE GAMBLERS

COLONEL WILLIAM and ANGIE are seniors who meet in a casino.

COLONEL WILLIAM is strongly opposed to gambling or taking risks of any kind -- he's in the casino for the exercise. As his relationship develops with ANGIE, including an unexpected turn, he's forced to change the habit of a lifetime.

CAST

WILLIAM: Age mid 70s or older. Ramrod straight, inflexible.

ANGIE: Age mid 70s or older. A slightly zany old lady.

Place

A slot machine area of a casino. The only stage piece is a stool.

Time

The present.

THE GAMBLERS

At Rise: The sound of a casino, mainly slot machines takes over. ANGIE is seated on the stool, facing the audience. She is wearing a T-Shirt which says 'Ask Me About My Grandbabies' and there is a large purse or bag sitting on the floor next to her. She is holding a cup of coins and playing an imaginary slot machine. WILLIAM enters, dressed for walking in the mountains and carrying a walking stick. He is striding purposefully across the stage when ANGIE leans toward her bag and drops something.

ANGIE: Oh bother! Would you be a dear and help me pick that up? *(he does.)* Well, aren't you going to?

WILLIAM: Aren't I going to what?

ANGIE: *(indicating her chest.)* Ask me about them?

WILLIAM: What??!!

ANGIE: *(more clearly indicating the writing on her shirt.)* My grandbabies.

WILLIAM: Oh!...I'd rather not.

ANGIE: Please. It'll only take a minute. I promise.

WILLIAM: All right. What about your grandbabies?

ANGIE: Not like that. Ask as though you mean it.

WILLIAM: OK. Tell me about your grandbabies. *(beat, while she looks at him skeptically.)* Please?

ANGIE: What would you like to know?

WILLIAM: What would I...!

ANGIE: You're doing fine. Don't spoil it.

WILLIAM: Alright... How many of them are there?

ANGIE: That wasn't so hard, was it?

WILLIAM: Well?

ANGIE: Well what?

WILLIAM: How many of them are there?

ANGIE: You're not really interested. Anyway the youngest is thirty-three years old. *(She laughs hysterically. WILLIAM gives a look of exasperation and starts to continue walking.)*

ANGIE: *(starting to sniffle.)* Please, don't go.

WILLIAM: Why not?

ANGIE: I couldn't stand it if you did.

WILLIAM: Oh, come on.

ANGIE: No, really. Everyone here's in such a hurry to sit for 10 hours at a stretch and gamble. Nobody's got the time for a little common decency. I thought maybe you'd be different.

WILLIAM: *(taking out a tissue and offering it to her awkwardly.)* Oh, no! Please don't do that. *(Awkward pause while ANGIE soaks his tissue and blows her nose in it.)*

WILLIAM: Are you feeling better now?

ANGIE: I think so. You're very good at this. Your wife's a lucky woman.

WILLIAM: I'm not married.

ANGIE: Widower?

WILLIAM: No.

ANGIE: Divorcee?

WILLIAM: I've never been married.

ANGIE: *(She hands the snotty tissue back to him to him. He grimaces and tries to figure out what to do with it.)* Oh! Here I've soaked your tissue, and I don't even know your name, Mr....

WILLIAM: Colonel.

ANGIE: Colonel!

WILLIAM: Colonel William.

ANGIE: It's nice to meet you, Colonel William. I'm Mother Angie.

WILLIAM: Mother? Are you a nun?

ANGIE: No. Do you usually wear a white suit and cook fried chicken? *(She laughs hysterically. William looks annoyed and starts to walk away again.)* Hold on. I was just teasing.

WILLIAM: I worked hard for that title.

ANGIE: I'm sure you didn't work any harder at being a Colonel than I did at being a mother. But I don't sign my name with it. *(he looks annoyed again.)* Were you heading for the roulette tables?

WILLIAM: No.

ANGIE: Black jack?

WILLIAM: No.

ANGIE: Craps? Keno?

WILLIAM: I don't gamble.

ANGIE: Well you've certainly picked an interesting place not to do it in. So what are you doing here?

WILLIAM: I'm hiking. *(she looks at him with surprise.)* These places are perfect. They're huge and air conditioned. And there are toilets, lots of toilets.

ANGIE: What more could an old man want?

WILLIAM: Only four to go, and I'll have hiked every casino in six states.

ANGIE: Did you start when you were ten?

WILLIAM: No, but I've been at it for twenty years. Every few months, I take out enough cash from my pension check (*he pats his pocket.*) to get me to the next group of casinos and back. The people at the home are trying to make me stop. They don't think I should be out on my own any more. But I made a deal with them. I can go on as long as they don't get any emergency calls telling them to come get me.

ANGIE: Aren't you ever tempted? To gamble, I mean?

WILLIAM: Never. I come from a long line of addicted gamblers, including both my parents. Some of my earliest memories are of being awakened by the bookie's men breaking things in our house. Including my father's face. It didn't take me long to figure out I preferred a quieter life.

ANGIE: And being a career soldier was a sure path to a quieter life?

WILLIAM: I was in the supply corps.

ANGIE: I guess the odds are better there than in a foxhole, huh? So you spent your whole career standing behind a counter handing out candy bars.
(*she starts to giggle.*)

WILLIAM: It wasn't a counter.

ANGIE: I'm so relieved.

WILLIAM: Actually, it was more of a cage. You know, with a slot to pass things through. That was just the first ten years, though. After that, I had an office and a desk.

ANGIE: So you handed out candy from behind a desk for thirty years.

WILLIAM: Thirty-six. And it wasn't only candy.

ANGIE: Of course not. There must have been lots of foot-powder too.

WILLIAM: Tons.

ANGIE: I'm surprised you didn't end up as a general!

WILLIAM: Or at least a full colonel. *(embarrassed.)* I never made it past lieutenant colonel.

ANGIE: And you introduce yourself as a Colonel!

WILLIAM: That's how it's done. You write Lieutenant Colonel, but you say Colonel.

ANGIE: Yeah, sure. Well, you can call yourself Colonel. I won't tell anyone.

WILLIAM: I spent all those years getting checks in all the boxes - except, of course, for the one requiring combat experience. It was pretty narrow-minded of them to keep passing me over for promotion for something trivial like that.

ANGIE: Is that the way you thought it was going to work? You get enough checks and you get the candy-distribution merit badge? And when you get enough merit badges, you get to be an eagle soldier? *(starts to laugh, and stops herself when she sees his reaction.)* So now, instead of military merit badges, you're collecting casinos.

WILLIAM: At least no one will be able to stop me from finishing it.

ANGIE: What happens when you've got the whole lot? You start on shopping malls? *(she thinks she's making a joke, but...)*

WILLIAM: I tried that. There are too many.

ANGIE: Have you ever gambled? Even once?

WILLIAM: A few times, but I hated it.

ANGIE: Did you ever win?

WILLIAM: You mean other than the billion dollars from the super power-ball lottery? It took me a long time to lose that much back on penny machines. Yeah, I won a few times, but nowhere near as much as I lost.

ANGIE: I'll bet you're one of those people who cry when they lose, aren't you? I can see why you stopped. It's not a pretty sight to see a grown man cry. Especially one in uniform. Sorry. But didn't you find it a huge kick? For me there's no bigger thrill than when the bells start ringing and the lights start flashing, and all that money starts pouring out.

WILLIAM: Attractive, yes. Irresistible, no. There are people who love to win and people who hate to lose. I hate to lose a lot more than I love to win. Anyway, look around you. Do these people look like they're having fun? Most of them are having a terrible time but they can't help themselves. That's the same look I used to see on my parents' faces.

ANGIE: I'm not addicted. OK, maybe I am, in a small way. And there's always the possibility that I'll win big.

WILLIAM: Yeah, right!

ANGIE: Come on, every time you get out of bed you're taking a risk.

WILLIAM: Yes, but I've got a better chance of making it to the bathroom in the morning than I do of winning big at a casino. And at this point in my life, there's nothing I want or need that would make it worth throwing money away.

ANGIE: Nothing?

WILLIAM: No.

ANGIE: How about if I let you play with my money?

WILLIAM: When I first started these walks my mother sent me five dollars to gamble for her. I sat down at one of the penny machines and went to work. Ten minutes later, I was so stressed and angry I stopped and waited a half hour until the change lady came to give me back the thirty-seven cents that was left from the first dollar.

ANGIE: I take it that's a 'No.' I guess it's hard to change the habits of a lifetime. Well, I'm going to get back to throwing my money away. Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to an 'addicted' old lady.

WILLIAM: That's all right. It was time for a break anyway. *(he sees that she's offended.)* No, it's been a pleasure. Really.

ANGIE: Goodbye, Colonel William.

WILLIAM: Goodbye, "Mother" Angie. *(He holds out his hand to shake hers.)*

ANGIE: We can do better than that. Come give Mother a big hug. *(he's reluctant, but she hugs him.)* Can I ask you a big favor? I've been feeding this machine for over an hour. It's about ready to explode, but so am I. I need to go to the ladies room, and I don't want someone else to win all my money. Would you save the machine for me? *(She gives him the cup of coins. WILLIAM hesitates.)* It's OK, I don't think what all these people have is contagious.

WILLIAM: All right.

ANGIE: I'm not as quick at this as I used to be, so this may take a few minutes. Don't go anywhere. And if you can't resist the temptation, go ahead and give the machine a few pulls. If you win my jackpot, I'll give you ten percent.

(She laughs hysterically, picks up her bag and exits or goes to a corner of the stage where she does an unobtrusive wardrobe change. He settles himself to wait. WILLIAM shows signs of impatience, looking around, checking his watch, taking a few steps away from the machine and then back, etc. Angie crosses out of his line of vision. She looks much younger, having changed her clothes, put on a wig and put on sunglasses. Eventually, WILLIAM pats his pocket and notices that his wallet is gone. He checks the rest of his clothes, and it dawns on him that Angie has picked his pocket. He looks around in panic, and then in resignation he takes a cell phone out of his pocket and makes a call.)

WILLIAM: Hello, Rebecca, this is Colonel William. No, I'm fine. It's just that... well...I've lost all my money...No, not gambling! Someone picked my pocket...That's uncalled for! It could happen to anybody...This doesn't count for our deal...But...But...*(a pause while he goes from disappointed to angry to resigned.)* OK. No, you don't have to send anyone. Just wire me some money. I can make it back on my own--for the last time. *(he notices the cup of coins.)* Hold on, Rebecca. I've still got money. I was just kidding; I wanted to see how you'd react. Didn't think I had it in me, did you? I've got to go now. I've got another four laps to get in before I head over to the Golden Sands. I'll stop in and see you when I get back. Bye.

(He hangs up. Then starts to play the slot machine. Nothing. He tries several more times, looking more and more discouraged. One more time, and bells start ringing and lights flashing. He scoops the coins into his cup and starts to walk away. Then he is drawn back to the machine. He starts playing the machine again, looking more and more maniacal.)

(Lights down.)

THE END

