

A Cigarette of Defeat
By George Vedder

A man that wins the night on slots has no excuse to break his streak and step outside for a smoke. If his night of victory is over, he'll smoke his cigarette on the drive home so he can show his wife and kids—God forbid he has them—the night's winnings as fast he can.

But anyone who's down a couple bucks and sober enough to accept that the gambling gods aren't in their favor for the night will make their way outside, around a corner, and into a patch of rocks and mulch where the LED lights of the casino don't reach. There they join a lineup of losers who light each other's cigarettes and say, "I'm down one-fifty but up three Newport," over a single speaker playing Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car".

A man leans against the wall with an arm around his companion. A few old Vietnam vets stand sharing their thoughts on the landscaping job beneath their feet. Three women sit on a block of concrete touching up their concealer in the window's reflection. They'll take their cigarette of defeat, and when their confidence is recharged, they'll reenter the revolving door of the casino, trading places with the gambler who just threw a ten-times bet on the NFL slot machine hoping that the face of Jerry Rice would pay his water bill. He accepts his fate for the night and promises to leave. But when he finishes his last smoke and has no change left for another, he'll pray to Jerry Rice again.