

TIMOTHY ZIEGENHAGEN

COOL PORCELAIN

A T 3 A.M. THE CASINO WAITS.

Near the front entrance, the coat check woman has fallen asleep listening to the cascading water of the fountain. Ten feet away from her a security guard inspects his stomach through the gray cotton shirt of his uniform; he wonders if a man actually grows fatter standing all night long thinking about getting fatter. The guard doesn't know that a cocktail waitress is standing twenty feet behind him, leaning against a wooden carved pillar, trying to figure out how he's arranged his comb-over. She's sold one drink in the past hour and is waiting for the 5 AM red-eye from Winnipeg, for the big rye-drinkers with their colorful money.

In a Unisex bathroom near the money room, a dead man sits on cool porcelain. He is holding twenty-dollar bills in his hands, but some have spilled onto the tile at his feet, like leaves. His stomach is still at this moment digesting a late dinner of lamb, and skillful CPR might actually bring this dead man back to life. But no one will enter this room for another two hours. A last flicker of an image from the man's childhood—a fishing boat and an arm holding a string of sunfish—flashes in the remotest corner of the man's cerebral cortex, then the electrical switch in his brain is flipped off forever.

A woman in loose-fitting jeans sits in an adjacent room, putting stacks of twenty-dollar bills into a money counting machine. The woman some-

times reads the things people write on the money, and she wonders what kind of person would write "Jesus is a Guy" on Andrew Jackson's forehead. There are no windows in this woman's workroom, which is soundless, except for the buzz of the clock and the whirr of the money machine as it counts bills. Above and behind her, the woman knows that a camera is recording every move she makes, and she knows that the security guard sometimes takes liberties with his zipper when he watches her count the money. Don't you dare, you son of a bitch, she thinks to herself. Don't you goddamn dare.

It's 3:03 a.m.