

The Sure Bet

“What am I *doing*? Just *stop* now.” The rattle of the spinning wheel begins again. In his damp hand, he recounts the six red chips. “I could do all sixty right now and double it. Then work my way . . . no, play it safe. Just ten. Red? Black? It was red three times, so black.” He plucks one chip and places it on the felt table. The white ball streaks around the rail of the wooden wheel. “There’s no way it will be red four times. It’s a sure thing.”

Panic creeps over him. “It’s a sure thing! I need to bet more!” He compels his hand toward the table as the dealer calls, “No more bets. No more bets,” and deflects offenders with his wooden crop. The white ball tumbles across the silver sprockets and comes to rest on black. The victory is sour.

“Now what? Black? Red? I had it. I blew it!” His head spikes with frustration. “*Now* what?” The wheel begins to scuttle around. “Okay, 20 this time. Red. Just a feeling. Red.” He watches the white ball counter the rotating wheel. This is the perfect moment. He could stay in this moment and never have to face the outcome. Never have to make another agonizing decision.

The wheel slows. “No more bets. No more bets.” Black again.

“Damn,” he exhales.

He counts the five chips. “Okay. Put one on a color, and one on odd or even. I could win both, but probably won’t lose both. That’s a good bet. That’s a high percentage bet.” The wheel begins. “Okay. Black twice, so red. Red-odd. It’s a good bet.”

He places 10 on each, and takes a pack of cigarettes from his starched, white, shirt pocket, and inserts one into his mouth, eyes fixed on the white orb, then negotiates his shirttail and retrieves the lighter from his black slacks. He lights the cigarette, drawing deeply. The smoke stings his eyes, and intrudes abrasively into his stale mouth.

“No more bets. No more bets.” The silver topper glints as it slows. Dropping from its circuit, the ball rattles over the ridges and trickles in. Red, even.

He draws on the cigarette as one chip is collected and one chip is doubled.

“Okay. Didn’t lose. Now which?” The wheel crackles to life. “I’ve got nothing to work with here.” He rearranges the chips in his hand. “Which now?” He pulls out one chip, hovering it over his options. The wheel treks on without him. Ignoring him. “Decide, just decide!”

“No more bets. No more bets.”

“Ah! That could have been the one. The right one, and I did nothing!”

The intrepid wheel begins its revolution.

“I can’t keep doing this. It’s pointless. Give one! Get one!”

“Rack-ka-ka-ka!” The wheel heckles him like a squawking crow.

He forces his cigarette into a dust-caked tin ashtray, and swigs the backwash from his empty beer glass. “Just do it. Don’t think about it.” He snaps two chips onto black, and crouches over the table, willing the ball to obey him.

“Red 3. Red 3.”

His breath slips away.

He looks into the eyes of the man collecting his chips. They are empty, looking back at him, and tell him nothing.

He touches each of his remaining chips on its edge, hoping for some oversight in his reckoning. “What’s the point? Walk away with something.” He turns and leaves the taunting wheel behind. “It’s over.”

Passing the busy cashier, he checks his watch. 5:30. Almost dawn.

In the brass-gilded bathroom, marble and glass, he washes his face at the automatic faucet. He dries his hands and face with the automated paper towels. He avoids the mirror.

The silence resounds in his ears. They throb with phantom echoes of slot machines, busy in his head, chanting their seduction. BING BING BING BING BING!

Near the cashier, he stops at a craps table, amused for a moment. Detached.

A roll.

His hand in his pocket tumbles the chips.

Another roll.

He assembles the chips.

“Coming out!”

His fist thrusts out with a spasm, slamming the small stack onto the Field.

A roll. Eternal. Final.

The carnival turns to shadow. Bright smiles distort maniacally. His chips are swept into the coffers by a gleaming-eyed madman with a stick.

He stands interred at the barren Field.

“Drinks anyone?” plagues a spirited voice.

He conceals his wounds, which are seeping.

“Coming out!”

His fingers locate two quarters in his pocket.

“Yeah, I’ll have a Bud.”

Feigning interest in the shooters, he waits for her return, forthwith bequeathing to her his very last cent.

He drifts irrelevantly through the casino like a fallen superhero, sipping his glass of flat beer. He discovers a dim lounge, empty, with a water-ringed glass table beside a pleather chair. He falls into the cushions. Silent, but for the distant BINGs.

A sigh.

A sip.

“Well. That was dumb.”

Another sip.

“Aagghh!”

Another sip. The last.

“God, what is the matter with me?”

He leans to put the empty glass on the table.

There is a glossy paper stuck between the cushions. He disregards it.

“Seriously! What is the matter with me!”

His head melts between his hands.

Sniff.

The glossy paper intrudes.

Sniff.

He wipes his eyes.

He pulls out the message. He reads:

The thief comes just to steal, kill, and destroy.

Sniff. “Yes, he does.”

Jesus said “I am come that you might have life, and that more abundantly.”

He reads on, slowly.

“He who believes in me has everlasting life.”

Intently.

For God is love.

An awareness pierces his heart.

That there is something outside himself.

More excellent than himself.

He who believes

That could restore him.

Has everlasting life

He sees a door open, leading out.

He arises, and steps through.

God is love.

Outside, dawn is breaking.

Golden and new. with a simple promise.

God is

He walks beside the lakeshore, refreshing and clean.

So inviting.

He wonders.

“Should I?”

Love

“Go all in?”

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