

Winner Takes All

Sarah Richman

In a world where the uninsured must gamble for blood transfusions, people play for keeps.

The blood bank teller slides a one-pint withdrawal ticket to the woman on the other side of the glass. "Room 44, down the hall and to the left." The woman nods. Her slashed cheek drips a red line down her face and onto the counter.

An orderly in black scrubs hurries over and wipes the laminate clean.

"Next."

A fat man limps to the counter. Smiles at the teller like he doesn't know how bad his teeth are. He has blue eyes, bluer circles beneath them, and brown hair to match the stubble.

"Deposit or withdrawal?"

"Withdrawal. Two pints."

"Insurance?"

"None."

The ticket slides through the slot. "Room 44, same as her."

The fat man follows the slashed woman down the hall.

She hears his footsteps and turns. "You too? No insurance?"

The fat man shakes his head. His leg oozes.

"Nasty system, if you ask me," says the slashed woman, unasked. "I just need one pint. What do you think happens? If we lose, I mean."

The fat man says nothing.

They slouch into Room 44, squinting and blinking against the neon. Room 44 smells like strawberries. Strawberry perfume. The cheap fake sweetness of it mixes with whatever the cleaners tried to use to cover the stale stink of iron; iron and piss and fear.

"Sit," says the dealer.

They sit. They sink into the seats around the table, holding their parts that ache and drip onto the linoleum. An orderly in black scrubs takes away the chair to the fat man's right to make room for the burned man. He rolls the bed up to the table and steps back into the corner.

"Make your bets."

"Four pints", says the old man with the oxygen tank. He pushes four poker chips into the center.

"One pint", says the slashed woman. One chip.

"Two pints", says the kid holding her ribs. Two chips.

"Six pints", whispers the burned man. He struggles to push his six chips.

The dealer turns to the fat man.

"Two pints." He pushes the chips forward.

The burned man is the first to go. No surprise there. Playing with his eyes half closed, bandages wet under his burned eyelids. The orderly rolls him away.

"Hit," wheezes the old man.

The dealer smacks the card down. A seven. Safe.

"Hit," says the slashed woman. Her upper lip is sweating.

A three. Safe.

"Hit," says the kid.

The dealer flicks over the card. A ten.

The kid counts her stack. Eighteen. She turns pale. She's safe, but close. Too close.

"It's alright, honey," the slashed woman says. "You're alright."

“Shut up,” snaps the kid.

The dealer turns to the fat man.

“Hold.”

The dealer stares down at him.

“I hold,” repeats the fat man.

“Your turn,” the dealer tells the old man.

“Fine. A hit.” His face turns red when he sees the nine. “That would have been yours, Fatty.”

“But it’s not,” replies the fat man.

“Um, hit,” murmurs the slashed woman.

The dealer turns over her card. An ace. She nods to the orderly.

“Oh no. *No.*”

The orderly pulls her from the chair.

“Please, no. I’ll get insurance. I can pay. I can pay it! Please!”

The orderly drags her, kicking limply, out of the room.

The kid looks down. “Hit,” she says to the felt tabletop.

A two. Safe.

“Hold,” says the fat man.

“What are you playing at?” demands the old man in a hoarse voice.

“The same thing you are,” says the fat man.

The old man draws himself as tall as he can, tube and all.

“Hit.”

The dealer turns the card, her face unchanging as the eight flips into view.

The orderly steps out of the shadows.

“You *motherfucker*,” snarls the old man.

The dealer says something into the wire in her vest pocket, and two more orderlies enter Room 44.

The fat man watches them hoist the old man and his oxygen tank out of the chair.

“I quit,” bursts the kid.

The room turns and stares at her.

“Don’t you quit, child,” the old man rasps. “Don’t let Fatty win. Don’t let him be the one to get your blood. Our blood.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s going to win, anyway.” The kid pulls her hand away from her ribs, showing the ripped skin and the bone. Her muscles gleam raw under the lights.

The fat man stands. His blue eyes glitter, hungry.

The old man fights for air. “You’re... you’re so young.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the kid.

The dealer pauses, then bends her neck towards the wire again.

More orderlies come.

The fat man watches the orderlies take them away. He smiles. He turns to the dealer, smiling like he knows how bad his teeth are. He knows. He doesn’t care. Winners don’t have to care.