



All or Nothing

Preston L. Allen

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P is a bus driver in Miami. He's got a wife, and two kids, and two big-screen TVs, and two cars, and an addiction. Smoke cigarettes, and you might get cancer. Shoot heroin, and you might O.D. Drink, don't drive.

But what's the consequence of gambling? You might get broke. Or you might not. "There are only two kinds of gamblers," protagonist P says, "the lucky and the broke."

While P still lives with his family, he is shameless. He calls in sick and sneaks out to the casino. His kid has an asthma attack and he leaves his cell number with the nurse at the emergency room desk. "The kid is safe. The kid is at a hospital, right?" There's a hurricane, and although the dealers have the sense to stay home, the players show up. Dealers aren't addicts.

When P leaves his family and moves to Las Vegas, the shame of hiding losses and making up stories—two stories, one for winning and one for losing—also disappears over the horizon. No one cares about your shame in Las Vegas. No one wants to hear your story. They just want you to get out there and win. P starts out on a new foot, leaving the slots for the poker table. The first night, he wins nearly \$300,000. The next day, he wins again. He buys a black cowboy hat.

A casino can fix all the problems, it can smooth over all the ugly parts of one's past. P sends money home to his wife and sons. *Getting* lucky has changed to *being* lucky. He knows how to wait. He knows when to fold. He lives in the Presidential Suite. He's lost everything five times over and he's still a whale. He could put a dollar on every drop of rain that falls for fifteen seconds, thirty seconds. Even though money doesn't have value in a casino like it does at a Wal-Mart. "Money is a toy." P quits gambling. He plays solitaire in his room.

Of course, the story doesn't end there: the lonesome cowboy looking into the mirror, cards spread out on a hotel room dresser. "Gambling is the most addictive addiction of them all because there is never a reason to stop," Preston Allen writes. Not shame, not assault, not even murder is enough reason to stop. Allen's second novel, *All or Nothing*, is funny, relentless, haunting, and highly readable. P's inner dialogues illuminate the grubby tragedy of addiction, and his actions speak for the train wreck that is gambling.

HEATHER SHAW (December 11, 2007)

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