

Taking A Gamble

Plastic. How did we ever survive in a world without plastic? This plastic chair is killing me, grinding the edge of my edginess to a sharper spike. How the hell did I end up here? Bradshaw was right. I'm here because he said this was the last straw, and now I wish I was in a hay bale, sneezing, with watery eyes looking up at a starlit night.

Instead, my butt is in this green, plastic chair and my nerves are frayed. I look into the red-eyed, weepy faces around me in this infernal circle and I want to scream. Instead, I breathe in and hold it. I can't breathe out because I might actually come loose at the seams.

"Hi, my name is Amanda, and I'm a gambling addict" the middle-aged woman across the circle declares in a loud, clear voice. "I lost everything. My family, my home, my job, my children - because I couldn't stay away from Atlantic City. That was 25 years ago and, praise Jesus, I came to my senses."

Yeah, praise friggin' Jesus. Who is she kidding? She has no idea. Clueless, really. Somebody's mother who played black jack until she maxed out her husband's credit cards.

"My name is Mike, and I'm a gambling addict" the banker states, with a business-like matter-of-factness that teeters on the brink of smugness. "I used to work on Wall Street, and I gambled with millions of dollars seeking the biggest bonus at any cost. I never considered that I was gambling with other people's lives until God struck me down, down to my knees during Occupy Wall Street. The Lord told me that I was facing hell and damnation. That I must change my ways and repent. That a good Christian life was not about greed, but about giving."

I see heads nodding, and murmurs of agreement solidifying the pact these people share. Enough. Enough of this bullshit. I don't care what Bradshaw says. I've endured enough of these plastic, phony people and this plastic, phony chair. I may need to change, but I don't need this. I stand up, squeezing between the chairs and start towards the door.

"Wait!" a voice yells from inside the circus ring. I look back over my shoulder and see her out of the corner of my eye. With ten more steps, I am out the door.

"Wait!" Amanda pleads again, "Tell me your story." Should I turn or should I go? Inside my head the awkwardness of the moment tics and tics. The tension between explosion and diffusion lingers another moment. I choose explosion.

“Wait for what? Jesus? The Lord? God? You people are really unbelievable!”, I snarl at them. Looking around the circle. Looking each one in the eye. I can feel the spittle from my anger dribbling on my chin. Shit. I wipe my chin with the back of my hand. And then, I look at my hand, and slowly curl my fingers towards my palm into a fist. Pow! I throw a punch towards them, and then unfurl my index finger. “You people are unbelievable, really. This was supposed to help. But you are pathetic!”

A perky woman with stylish hair folds her hands on her lap, interlacing her manicured fingernails. “The first step”, she says cheerfully, “is to admit we are powerless. The second step is to turn to our Higher Power. God loves you.”

God? God? What God? God isn’t dead because God was never alive. “There is no higher power”, I state flatly. “We are tiny specks, freaks of nature, in a vast universe. The universe doesn’t care. We mean nothing. We are nothing.” My tone has moved from defiance to indifference.

“Dear child,” the old man croaks. “That is simply not true. God loves us. I used to spend my paycheck on lottery tickets. It ruined my life. You too, can be a recipient of God’s love.”

“Well”, I declare. “If God’s in, then I’m out.” The door is now my primary focus as I anticipate the relief I will feel when I am on the other side. As I am making my escape, I can’t believe what I hear. “God is dead and always has been”, someone says. My hand is on the doorknob. I turn it and hear it click. In side my head the phrase “God is dead” reverberates over and over again.

This is a moment. One of those moments. You know the ones. My life will go this way or that way depending on what I do in this moment. I let go of the doorknob. I take a step backwards. I turn around. “God is dead”, I reply.

“God is dead”, he echoes. “But you are not. Tell me how you got here.” I cross my arms and feel my ribs. I am holding my breath again, and I notice my foot is tapping with nervous energy. I take a step forward. The room is silent.

“God is dead”, Mike jesters towards an empty chair. I take another step forward. “God is dead”, the old man says as he points his cane towards the empty chair.

Amanda, the mother who used to frequent Atlantic City, says “God is not dead to me, but I want to hear your story.” Her eyes meet mine with a look of infinite patience. “I don’t care how long it takes. I want to hear everything.”

“You have no idea”, I say. “Atlantic City is nothing these days. The Sugar House Casino has buses that will pick you up at 15th and Race.” “Really”, she says, “I had no idea.”

What the hell. At least Bradshaw will be off my back. I walk toward the circle, and the chairs pull away, making an opening. I gingerly step between them and sit down.

“I knew God was dead when I realized that the Valley Forge Casino is less than two miles from the King of Prussia Mall.” This is how I will begin the story I will tell hundreds of times. My story, just one of millions. A star like any other.