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## The Deal

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The room feels brighter than it should. My ears are conquered by the off-beat rhythms of table taps and leg fidgets. The faces that surround the table are weathered and worn from the lives lived. One man mutters to himself as a woman expresses the woes of the intense conversation she had with her sister. She persevered through her challenge, and was rewarded with another coin.

“Lisa, that was fantastic work. You were able to maintain control in a situation you felt powerless in, and that’s the best we can do. Everybody, let’s give her a round of applause.” The organizer spoke with pride. He smiles looking around the room. Standing confidently the man gestures over to my place at the long, instant-coffee-stained plastic table.

“We do have someone new joining us today. Now remember, this is a safe place. If anyone understands, it’s us. That’s why we are here. Please, tell us about yourself and why you decided to come here tonight.” He spoke as if reciting a proven script. I recited my version of the intro, which was really just my name and the admission of guilt.

“I remember my first drink like the romantic is reminded of their first kiss.” The room’s eye contact was strong, a few sets of eyebrows raised like hands with questions. “I was eleven, it was my uncle’s wedding day. He must have thought it was a sort of initiation into manhood. Most likely expected me to call it gross, and surrender the frosted can of Miller Genuine Draft. It felt different though.”

My mind flashed back to a dream I had shortly after that first taste. A flame conceives a raging red light that vanishes quickly in a cloud of smoke.

“All you have to do to forget is to keep drinking,” a stranger spoke.

“I won’t remember the bad stuff?” I asked with desperation. The stranger grinned, and inhaled another drag of smoke.

“My friend, you won’t remember a thing,” his voice echoed in my head. I looked around the room to notice the group’s impatience growing. I explained to them the feeling that they all knew. How that first feeling of catching a buzz is like the embrace from an old friend. But with every shot, every can, every glass of booze, the grip gets tighter and tighter until eventually it pulls you off the ledge along with it.

“By thirteen whiskey was a regular drink, by sixteen my blackouts were creating gaps in my months. The kids at school would whisper in class about how the smell leaked from my pores. Bullies thought the fat drunk kid was an easy target. I couldn’t help it, I didn’t know there was a way to stop, or even that I needed to.” Even as I vented to the room, I could feel the stranger’s hands on my shoulders.

“When did you choose sobriety?” a voice called from four chairs down.

“My twentieth birthday,” I replied. “But I’ve relapsed twice since. It’s funny, I remember co-workers begging me to drink with them again like addiction was a facade. As if there could always be one last time. Their excitement from

college dorm parties would bleed into the summer work months. Bragging over conquered kegs and beer pong tournaments, they would see me as a fool who hung their jersey too soon. They’d bring drinks within arms reach in hopes of my weakness to take the bait.”

Looking back, older users were the worst. They couldn’t imagine that someone could crawl out of the abyss, leaving them behind. Comments would get personal, my heart would mourn these false friendships. My brother-in-law actually said if I relapsed I needed to invite him. Some said I was better as a drunk. Others remarked there was no such thing as a better version of me. The room all took a moment to shake their heads in disapproval. One man spoke up,

“The most important thing you can have is a clean, and sober life. Alcoholism is a disease, and the cure is not to feed it.” He preached as others clapped at his devotion.

“I’ve started to realize that,” I gave a shaken half smile. “I’m just now realizing I have to stop taking these pills too, but it’s hard to have nothing. It’s been a couple weeks since my last downer.” I could feel the energy in the room get deeper.

“So, what made you find us tonight?” the organizer questioned.

“Earlier today, I was having a rough time. I thought that if I could find some non-alcoholic beers, maybe a placebo effect might help.

“You cannot have non-alcoholic beer!” one man shouted.

“Did you know there are trace amounts of alcohol in NA beer?” a lady on the other side of the room prodded me. “If you drink that, you are giving into temptation and you will backslide. More voices hurled their disapproval at me.

“If he’s taking drugs this is the wrong place for him anyways,” an elder in a veteran hat stated his claim.

“He’s right,” the organizer spoke up. “Son your problems are more than alcohol, you’re better off finding another meeting,” his statement felt final.

I witness many dancing with what weighs my soul. They have the power to control the steps and can even choose the length of the song they move to. I watch from the side with the stranger’s hands on my shoulders, hands that brand the skin beneath to mark the struggle I can never shake. The memories I sacrificed, and will never get back. My skewed perspective that clouds the world before my eyes. The label that has meant many things for many different people, but has only ever meant one thing to me. The burden of a deal made young.