

All In

BY PETER ATWOOD

IN WHICH THE
STAKES ARE HIGH
AND THE POT IS
MULTICELLULAR

T

HE PANEL SLID open with a *shunk*. Two eyes peered out.

“Diagnosis?” the voice asked.

I could smell the cigarette smoke, thick behind the closed door. I nodded.

“Show me,” said the voice.

I pulled the creased papers from my shirt pocket, unfolded them against my chest with my free hand, and held them out so the St. Jerome’s Infirmary logo was clearly visible at the top. The eyes took in the sealed ice-cream tub hanging from my left hand, then studied the top sheet of the stapled pages long enough to read it twice. The panel shut. I counted my heartbeats as I waited in the dim corridor. The locks on the other side turned. The door creaked open wide enough for me to slip through.

Inside, four players sat around a low wooden table, its veneer cracked and yellow. A matching cloud of yellow cigarette smoke ghosted the visored lamp above.

The eyes behind the door, it turned out, belonged to a gaunt face that fronted a bald head on a tall, gangly frame. He now sat at a tiny metal desk against the wall and extended a hand to take my paperwork. Under the desk was a row of cold boxes: two vacuum cases with handles, two more silver insulated containers, and

a large, wide-mouthed thermos. Beside them, a small butcher's scale.

Baldy laid the papers on his desk and lifted his chin toward my tub. "Anything in there?"

From the center of the room, I heard the ruffle of cards. I shook my head.

Baldy looked at me with surprise.

"It's empty," I said, handing him the tub. A white vapor stream from the dry-ice inside escaped through a crack in the lid and slid down the side like an evaporating snake.

Baldy set the tub under the desk with the other containers, then flipped to the last page of my stapled paperwork. "Everyone here is lung cancer," he commented.

I shrugged.

He examined the signature above my doctor's typed name, with the aid of a double-jointed finger pressing the paper to the desk. Satisfied, he asked me how much.

"You tell me," I said. I stretched my hands out, palms up. He examined my right hand closely, then pushed my sleeves up to my elbows.

"Hmmpf," he said, and counted out twenty-three round, white chips from a tray. I took them in two short stacks, and he waved me to the table.

At the back of the room, a man in a wrinkled tan suit was signing a clipboard held out by a man in green cottons. They stood by a door with a small square window. Tan Suit handed back the pen and watched me. His jacket hung from his shoulders, limp with misery. A green tie was stuffed halfway into its pocket. He looked as if he had some shame to hide, but was too curious to turn away. His eyes stayed on me until I reached the table, scraped back an empty chair back, and sat.

I coughed. "Hello."

In response, a card slid towards me. A second slid past to the player on my left. The dealer continued in silence until a pair of cards lay facedown in front of each of us. The four others all anted up with a clatter of chips, and I added mine.

It was two weeks since my doctor had recited my diagnosis to me, my feet dangling in their socks as I listened from his paper-lined exam table. It was sadly common. You hit a certain age and everyone knows someone with an expiry date. Two months, two years — two weeks. But the shock of looking into your doctor's pale brown eyes, your senses numb, as he delivers death's personal ETA — you sweat, your stomach hollows out.

The cool hospital air brushed my ankles. I took a breath. "So what happens next?" I asked him.

It's like being let into a club. The chemical acronyms, the therapy nicknames, the test-result shorthands. And after, all these passwords open new corridors of conversation. "My blood work is up." "My husband's serum count is down." "They bumped my sister to category 4B." Therapy-group comfort offered over coffee.

It only took a few days before I heard the stories. "Mary's father gave his leg for his wife. Well, from the knee down. She's past remission now. Fully healed." The medical profession doesn't talk about the Treatment. It came from Argentina, but the scientist was from Mumbai — or the other way round. The incubation was developed in Korea. A virid is populated, distilled, and injected. It can take two or three tries, but success is eighty-plus percent. It's the donation that's problematic. The virid incubates in living flesh and marrow, enough to make the whole process unethical. Donors must be genetically distant.

I looked at the player to my left. He was a mountain of a man in a short-sleeved, avocado-print shirt. He stretched forward to stub his butt out against the table. His fat arm jiggled. The pile of chips in front of him would easily last till morning. He inspected his cards and dropped them to the table. His cigarette pack lay on the table beside his cards, and after shaking out a fresh white smoke, he slid the carton in my direction.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm leukemia."

"Well if that don't beat shit," he said, and cupped his lighter to the cigarette between his lips.

The others looked at me. To the left of Fatso was a bearded, narrow-eyed man in his fifties. Vertical wrinkles creased the middle of his forehead. Beside him a player hid behind eighties' Ray-Bans as if this were some Vegas casino. No one was here for the thrill. We rotting players imagine we keep our desperation close to our chest, but all we do is parcel out despair in round pieces of plastic. On my right sat a hunched, gray-haired lady, so thin, shadows cast in the hollow of her collarbone. She coughed and sucked on a cigarette.

This was a lung-patient game — they're the only ones who don't care about smoking. I was here 'cause I needed a new table, desperately. My luck had been bad all week. I lifted the corner of my two cards: diamonds, a jack and queen.

When the betting came around to me, I called, and tossed my one chip in. Fatso beside me did the same. Mr. Beard was dealing this hand. He picked up the deck and peeled off three cards, laying them out face-up. Two low spades and the nine of diamonds. The betting went around again noncommittally. I managed to stay in with only one more chip at risk.

Mr. Beard pulled off another card and turned it up. Eight of diamonds. My stomach did a leap.

Ray-Bans reached forward with a pair of chips, and said "Two."

The lady to my right tossed her cards forward. "I fold," she wheezed, then pounded a fist against her chest until she hacked out a long cough.

I resisted the urge to check my cards again. I counted four chips from my pile and tossed them forward. "Raise."

"Leukemia Boy is here to play," Fatso deadpanned. The two others still in grunted.

I kept my expression relaxed, and stared at my two cards, still facedown before me. If the final card came up diamonds, I was sitting on a flush. A ten, and I was holding the miracle of a straight flush.

Fatso turned up the corners of his cards

again, then considered my sixteen remaining chips as if there were some math involved he hadn't encountered before.

"You in?" Ray-Bans asked him finally.

"Well of course I'm fucking in. I'm one treatment from getting clear and clean, so I'm not leaving here without my pound of flesh."

A heavy thunk and a sharp yell came from beyond the square-windowed door. I looked around. Tan Suit and Clipboard were gone.

Fatso laughed. "Sounds like my first eight ounces are being prepared."

For a moment, we all sat listening to the quiet whimpering coming from the next room.

"Just place your bet," Ray-Bans said.

"I'm gonna raise us all another six." Fatso separated out six chips with his chubby index finger and slid them into the pot.

Mr. Beard folded, but Ray-Bans stayed in.

I considered the pile in the center of the table. I turned in my chair and looked back at my tub, leaking CO2 under the desk. It was empty, a scary thought. If anyone had been paying attention when I came in, they would know. I had the unsettling impression Fatso would take special delight in the fact that I was wearing all my collateral on my bones. The thing is, when leukemia strikes late in life, it's swift. How much time did I have left? Your doctor sees your lips tremble, and his eyes soften. He stresses that it's not precise. Could be more, could be less. Some people live . . . who knows? But all you remember is that first hard and fast date. Mine was up tomorrow.

I pushed my remaining chips into the pot. "I'm all in," I said.

The dealer picked up the deck and lifted the top card. He paused to note it for himself before laying it down. It was the four of clubs.

My teeth clenched. I had nothing! Not even a pair. Not even, not even . . . shit!

"Well, that's a kick in the sweet bits," Fatso chuckled.

I stared at the chips in the pot, going from one to another trying to count the twenty-three specific chips that were mine.

The back door opened and Clipboard escorted Tan Suit back through the room. We all watched. His steps were unsteady. His suit jacket was draped over his left arm, supported in a sling, and at the end of his arm, a round bundle of white gauze was growing a red stain. Clipboard helped him out the door with the locks and then closed it behind. The sound of the latch brought us back to the table.

"I'm out," said Ray-Bans.

I looked at Fatso. His high forehead was greasy; his eyebrows overhung his bloodshot eyes.

"You're all in, aren't you?" he stated.

I ignored him. I needed to see his cards right then. I had to know. "What have you got? Show us what you got."

He shrugged, leaned back with a hand behind his ear, and stretched the other forward to flip over his cards. I stared at them. I looked at mine, and then looked back, disbelieving.

A two of diamonds and a jack of spades. Fatso had nothing!

"Jack high," he said.

"Ha!" I burst out. I leaned forward, my ass lifting right off the chair, and flipped my two precious, wonderful, sweet little cards over. The last one to show was the queen of diamonds. Her Mona Lisa lips smiling serenely for everyone to see.

"Queen high!" I said. "I won. I've got queen high!" I immediately gathered the pot with both hands, scraping the chips towards me. I was laughing out loud and couldn't stop. "I'm cashing out," I declared.

They all looked at me as if I was stupid. The pot was nothing substantial—just a modest beginning to a promising night. But for me, it represented a big enough chunk to get my first treatment incubating. Like I said, luck had been turning on me all week. I wasn't going to risk losing this pot, or anything else, again.

I carried my chips to the desk, grinning. Clipboard was standing beside Baldy, going over papers. "Cashing out?" Baldy asked.

I nodded and handed him my winnings. He returned them to his tray, counting carefully. Clipboard retrieved my ice-cream tub and one of the insulated containers from under the desk and placed them on the floor, the scale between.

"He gets eleven ounces," Baldy announced.

"Eleven," Clipboard repeated, pulling a pair of latex gloves from his green cotton pants and stretching them over his fingers with a snap. A cloudy bath of dry ice overflowed the lip of my tub when he lifted the lid. He packed the CO₂ to the sides, making a pocket inside. Then he unzipped the insulation on the larger container and unclasped the lid, releasing a gasp of pressurized air. Someone shuffled cards back at the table, and Fatso laughed. Clipboard reached inside the container and clattered a handful of bluish-pink digits onto the metal pan of the scale. Three fingers, a thumb, four toes, and something I couldn't identify—a wrist?—frozen and stubby. Their bloodied ends red like the lipstick stain on a half-consumed cigarette.

"Here, you have to sign this," Baldy said.

I stepped to the desk, and I signed where he showed me, holding the pen carefully. He returned my papers and I slipped them into my pocket. Baldy had finished measuring out my salvation, and held my tub up for me, its lid in place, still leaking CO₂.

"You should fix that crack with something."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm going right to the clinic with this."

I took it from him, gripping the handle as securely as I could with the two remaining fingers of my right hand. ☺

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