

One More Good Hand

by Michael J. Solender

Yellowed ceiling tiles stained with years of nicotine practically dripped on me as I lay on my back and lent my own contribution to the layers of grime, blowing smoke rings from my Camel up towards the low overhang. My head was flat and dull with an ache I'd experienced almost daily after too much Mad Dog and not enough caffeine. I just need one more chance with the deck. One more hand.

I could make out the blue neon sign four stories below the dive I currently inhabited as its pulsing and irritating off/on/off/on never-ending dance extolled the virtues of a Jazz parlor I had a vague familiarity with - Birdland.

I might have even been there last night, I'm not sure. It's hazy like most of my memories of late. Like who I owe money to and how much. It's easier to forget and easier still to never make a point of remembering in the first place. Funny, when people owe me some dough, I can't get their markers out of my mind. But when it's the other way around, I'm just as happy to never see the bums again.

It's been like that of late. One bad beat after another. I used to hold all the cards, kick some ass, be rolling in it and buying the Crystal at Birdland for all my special ladies. Now I can't get in without a steep cover and my markers are no good in the game in the back. Guys with last names ending in vowels threaten to break my legs and worse.

One more good streak, even one more great hand, and I'm back on top.

Last night must have been a real pisser. I just can't remember for the life of me.

So here I lay, 2:00 A.M., on my back in room 457 at the Continental Arms. Rooms by the hour.

Hiding from my debtors. Trying to figure out my comeback. My back is wet, pasted to the sheets. But it's not hot, ferchrissakes, it's January in Chicago; it's freeking freezing.

No, the wetness soaking the bed is blood. Lots of it, too. The blonde in between the sheets next to me is quite dead. There is a bullet between her eyes I'm quite sure was meant for me. I'm trying to figure out a way out of this mess as I light up another smoke.

My head still aches. The Birdland sign still throbs.

I'm gonna need more than one good hand.

