

LOTTERY

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“Wow,” the man says, framing my lottery ticket with his fingers. Then he pushed it back to me.

“It’s mine,” I say. “I won it.”

“We don’t keep it here,” he says.

“Twenty-five grand.”

“That’s something.”

“How do I get paid?”

“You have to go to the lottery commission.”

“Are they open?” I ask.

He does a really unbelievable thing. He gets on the phone with the lottery people; they have a conversation.

“Here,” he says, handing me a pen. “Sign the back.”

The two of us laugh looking at my hand holding the pen; it’s shaking. I massacre my name. I put the ticket in my wallet which I stuff into my front pocket. You should have seen it.

“You going there now?” the cashier asks.

“Sure,” I say.

“You want a cab?”

“A cab,” I say. “Great.” I pace in front of the counter.

“They’ll be here in a few minutes,” he says. “Out front.”

“I just knew it,” I say, looking from the bulge in my pant leg to the cashier.

“That’s why I bought it.”

He makes this really curious smile which just about covers it.

“Arthur,” I say, “Art.” He’s not wearing a name tag, that’s my name.

“Dale.”

We shake hands, then I throw my hands up — like a drunk in a world that rains whiskey.

“People probably win a lot,” I say.

“I’ve never seen it,” says Dale.

“You got a chair?” I ask, I feel a bit unsteady.

Dale brings a chair around from behind the counter. The cushion matches the color scheme of the rest of the place. I collapse into it.

Dale brings me a cup of water; he twitters around.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say. I feel better.

“What are you going to do with it?” Dale asks.

I know. Just as soon as he asks me, I know, and then the cab purrs into the parking lot. I stand up and find my feet. I shake Dale’s hand. I get into the cab. I jam my hands behind the cushions looking for a seatbelt — I want to live so badly.

In the cab, on the way downtown, things start changing in my mind. I can see I’ll quit my job. I’ve got options. A guy like me can make it a far way on twenty-five grand. No girlfriend and I don’t drink. I’ve got a cheap apartment that’s clean. An almost new TV. What you call “low overhead.”

It’s like you just pulled a curtain across my life and I’m coming through it. Behind me there are things that are unwholesome; people and situations. I live with this lesbian and she beats me, humiliating. But, I’m coming through this curtain and I’m going to see fresh faces. I’m going to be a fresh face.

I spent the morning sorting boxes at UPS. You should know that we throw them. I’m coming clean, when I say that. They breed monsters. Still, as a job, you could do worse. I had a job before with the company that supplies Bloomingdale’s with those complimentary gift packs they hand out. Shaving soap, hairbrush, and compact into little see-through plastic ditty bags. Even then things had to be just so.

“You drive nice,” I say to the cabby.

“What?” he says. He’s wearing a huge hat and his hair fills it like a grocery bag.

“Just running my mouth.”

The cab dives for the curb. I get out.

I make some observations. The street reeks of new asphalt. Where they patch potholes, that chemical smell burrows into your nose; it inevitably does damage. The smell of winter is evaporating in dirty puddles.

My wallet is scraping a raw spot on the meat of my thigh. Unavoidable. A tide of bodies tries to trigger some response in me. I am above the average height, I think I could belong to a different tribe. This relaxes me.

I find the Lottery building. A gray concrete structure divided into vertical stripes of glass. The marquee is spelled out in round black letters three-feet high. I walk inside.

It’s all marble and palms. There is a circular security island and a black man sits there watching me approach.

“Welcome,” he says. All teeth.

I pull my wallet out of my front pocket and remove the ticket.

“Congratulations.”

"Thank you," I say.

"You need to go to Prizes," he says pointing with a pen held like a javelin.

I follow his hand. I am acutely aware of how the weight of my wallet affects the way that my arm pendulums at my side. I come to a glass door. I push, but it does not yield. I think about that passage in the Bible, where it says a camel would have an easier time passing through the eye of a needle than a rich man would have of getting into heaven. There is a message taped to the inside of the glass: *Back in ten minutes.*

I peer through the door. There is a short hallway and then a small room that terminates at a high desk with papers on it. On one wall a corkboard, it is covered with Polaroids. I turn around. There is an upholstered bench. I put my wallet back in my pocket and sit down. The guard looks my way once or twice. On the other side of the building there is a bank of elevators and I hear the bell chime and then it belches a tight knot of people who leave through the door I came in.

The people coming out of the elevator pay me no mind. I get up and walk back over to the security guard.

"They stepped out?" he asks.

"Yes," I say, "there's a sign says they'll be back soon."

"Probably will be." He turns to watch the elevator expel another clot of people.

"I have a question," I say.

"I'm the answer man," he says.

"As a lottery employee, are you allowed to play?"

"Well," he says, "if I were a lottery employee then I would not be allowed to play any lotteries."

"Anywhere?" I ask.

"As I understand it, that is how it is laid out in their contracts. But, as I work for the management company which runs this building, I am free to gamble within the guidelines set by state law."

"So, do you play them, the scratch tickets and the drawings?"

"Occasionally."

"You ever win?"

"Free tickets," he says.

"That clears that up," I say.

"Well," he says, "if we're asking questions."

"Shoot," I say.

"How do you plan on spending the green?"

"I can tell you," I say. "First, though, let me know your name?"

"Maurice," says Maurice.

"Maurice," I say. "My name is Art and I live with a lesbian."

"Why do you do that?" asks Maurice.

"Her name is Kara," I say, "and I answered an ad in the paper."

"How does a person word something like that?"

"The person who used to share the place with her had moved out, so there

was a bedroom available. We met for coffee. She seemed very open, put the sex stuff right out front. I must have had the right face, because she felt good enough about me to show me the place. Well, it needed work, but I thought that we'd pull off some yin-yang dynamic. With a paper sack full of nails and a hammer, I figured I'd make improvements. Bedrooms at opposite ends of the place, how bad could it be?"

"Pretty bad, I'd venture," says Maurice. "Of course, I'm married."

"In all truth," I say, "Kara is lesbian in spirit and bisexual in practice. I found that out the second week, when I saw a guy come out of her room and go to the toilet. He had purple welts on his chest and his back had, you know, nail marks. That's how that is, I thought."

"You, white people," says Maurice.

"Kara has a job with Brinks," I say. "She drives around servicing ATM machines in the suburbs. When she is working she carries a gun, a clumsy revolver, a thirty-eight. Off work she carries a little chrome twenty-five automatic. She told me that a guy grabbed her ass on the street once and she marched him into an alley with the auto peaking into the waistband of the man's jeans. She took his shoes."

"I don't want to hear no illegal business," says Maurice, adjusting one of the TV's that ring around him.

"Then she busted into my room."

"Broke in?" asks Maurice.

"I had the door locked. I was half-asleep. She was drunk. I could smell the beer she breathed, otherwise it would have been a dream."

"She drinks, too," observes Maurice. "That's a bad situation."

"It's the worst when she brings women home."

"That's why she's a lesbian," says Maurice, "to use your own words."

"*What are you doing here?* That's what she'll ask if she surprises me in the kitchen, going in or out of the bathroom. Staking a finger in my chest."

"You sleeping with her?"

"Kara?"

"There's more than one of them?" asks Maurice.

"I slept with her once."

"Kara?"

"Yes," I say, "She came in a second time while I was in bed."

"Just once?"

"Listen, Maurice, she gets right up into my face, while I am doing dishes, whenever it strikes her. I'm not equipped for confrontation. She'll grab my hair, twist it in her hand and lead me around the place, you know that doesn't hurt so bad, not really. She'll strike me with the flat of her hand, trying to get a reaction out of me. I ignore her. You work certain kinds of jobs and that part of you dies."

"I know those jobs," says Maurice.

"Up until this morning I worked for UPS."

"That's when you won the money?"

"After work and so I came down here."

“And you’re going back with all that new money of yours,” asks Maurice, “to this Kara? And she has these guns?”

“She has the two guns” I say. “The thirty-eight and the twenty-five.”

“One’s for work,” he says.

“I’ve got it all figured out.”

“That’s a relief.”

“I’m going to have plastic surgery.”

“They going to change your identity?” asks Maurice.

“Here,” I say turning my profile to him, “what do you see?”

“I’m not sure,” he says, “what I’m looking for.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“You seem good looking enough for a white guy.”

“My chin,” I say.

“I see it,” says Maurice.

“I have a weak chin, but I’m going to change that.”

“Just a little bit,” he says.

“That’s what the money’s for.”

“What do you expect this chin is going to do for you?” asks Maurice.

“Model, some,” I say. “Get a serious job.”

“You think about modeling?” asks Maurice.

“I hadn’t, but with a new chin. What’s stopping me?”

“Art,” he says, “I think you got a fine chin.”

“Wait,” I say. “I’ll come back, with the new one. You won’t believe it.”