

Three Dollar Ticket to Happiness

Stanley did not know he had become a millionaire when he descended the steps of his third bus in as many hours. The doors snapped shut behind him, the engine groaned, and the behemoth lurched from the curb. The sliver of daylight that usually escorted him home had taken its leave. Snow flurries stirred the air as he shuffled along the ice-slicked pavement. He silenced the shrieking wind with a heave of the door as he fled into his darkened apartment. He peeled off his iced overcoat. The polyester jacket underneath would warm him until he swapped it for his bedtime flannels. Chapped fingers dug into his pocket and withdrew a small strip of cardstock. A weary smile touched his lips. The Metro bus ticket. Unlimited transfers for three bucks a day. Way cheaper than Uber.

He browned half a pound of hamburger meat and steamed some rice while spooning out the occasional black speck that wriggled to the surface. The boiling water would kill any bacteria. After dinner, he sat on the good side of the sofa. The local news talked about the snowstorm. Almost two feet expected. They lauded the white Christmas that would be upon them in a few days. Stanley was fine with it. Not owning a car or house, he had no windshield to scrape or driveway to shovel. The gas bill might spike but he had budgeted for that.

“Next up,” the newscaster said, “the record-breaking lotto. As we announced earlier there’s a winning ticket. Stay tuned to see if anyone has come forward to claim their winnings.”

Stanley rolled his eyes, same as he had done Friday when he came into possession of his first and only lottery ticket in his forty-one years of life. Everyone had

cheered when he approached the table to select his white elephant gift at the company party. Bucking the trend of choosing the present that clanked and came in a tall narrow bag, he had grabbed one of the envelopes. Probably a gift card. He'd hock it on the web for cash minus three percent.

He tore open the envelope, peeled the card apart (it said *Meow* Christmas and had a bunch of cats on it) and looked inside. A single lottery ticket with a row of numbers stamped across the top. In the middle was a dollar sign and a three. Not even close to the ten-dollar suggested purchase price for the gift exchange.

He aimed a smile at his co-workers daring the anonymous cheapskate to cast his eyes aside or play with her hair. All he got were claps and a few oohs and ahs. The odds of getting struck by lightning exceeded that of winning the lottery. What a stupid gift.

After the commercial break, the newscaster continued. "Nobody's come forward, but we've learned the ticket was bought from a gas station right here in town. Someone will be having a Merry Christmas this year."

Stanley perked up and then scolded himself. His odds had gone from impossible to microscopic. He clicked off the TV and went to bed. He would check the numbers in the morning.

The next afternoon, he stood holding a table-sized check made payable to Stanley Chaat while camera flashes assaulted his eyes. By evening he had cleared his voicemail messages twice after reaching the maximum space on his phone. He spoke to a few callers. The last was from his coworker Marianne.

A senior customer service representative, Marianne was one of the longest tenured employees at the call center where Stanley worked. Stanley had clashed with her a couple times. Once she had accused him of stealing her lunch from the company

fridge. He had wanted to tell her someone was trying to do her a favor, but he had held his tongue.

Her voicemail message didn't state the reason for the call, but Stanley had a good guess. Marianne picked up on the second ring. She congratulated him, and he thanked her for the well wishes. She bumbled through some small talk. Crazy storm, huh? Ready for Christmas? A call center representative his entire career, he found himself critiquing the mechanics of her phone call. Adequate opening, decent attempt at rapport building. Next, she would state the reason for the call. He waited for it. And waited.

"Marianne," he said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I've had a crazy day and it's a bit late."

"Oh, of course. You want to know why I'm calling."

"That would be great."

"Well, you probably guessed from the card that I was the one who gave you the lottery ticket."

"The card?"

"You know," she said. "The cats. *Meowy* Christmas?"

"Oh. Yeah, well –"

"You know I love cats, Stanley. Remember? I'm always talking about Snowball and Snowflake?"

To deny it would be ludicrous. Everyone in the building knew about her stupid cats. She never shut up about them. "Sure."

"You believe I was one who gave it to you, right?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," he said. "It was an anonymous gift exchange."

“There was nothing anonymous about those numbers, Stanley. Remember my daughter, Becky? You met her at take-my-daughter-to-work day. Her birthday is May twenty first. And Ben. His birthday is June thirtieth. And Earl...”

A reminder on his phone flashed. Eight o'clock. Off-hours wattage rates had kicked in. Time to throw in a load of laundry.

“Marianne –”

“I know it's getting late and your day has been so *long*.” She stretched out the last word as if its pronunciation were long too. “I've been picking the same numbers every week for five years, Stanley. Earl was sick. I didn't have time to buy a gift for the stupid party. I made a mistake. That ticket never should've been in that envelope.”

“I don't understand, Marianne.” But he did. “Are you saying *you* are entitled to the winnings?”

A long pause. “I don't know about *all* the winnings.”

At least she had finally gotten to the point. He summarized. “You spent three dollars and meant to give a worthless gift. Now that it has value you want it back?”

There was a pause, and he envisioned her face turning Christmas red.

“You can't possibly spend all that money,” she finally blurted.

“So, I should give it to you? Your husband and you aren't exactly hurting for cash.”

“Everyone's hurting for cash. Why are you so stingy? I don't think I've ever seen your name on the list for the team baby gifts, wedding gifts, retirement gifts, nothing. Everyone chips in but you.”

He couldn't disagree, and he felt a bit of shame. “I –”

“If you don’t give any to me, then give some to someone.” Her voice had risen a notch. “And another thing. I know you were the one who stole my fucking lunch.” Click.

After switching his clothes to the dryer, he flopped onto his bed. He listened to a few more voicemails. He regretted not paying the extra two bucks a month to have a nonpublished number. Eventually, he ignored the continuous buzzing of his phone. He didn’t feel like a guy who had just won the lottery.

The next afternoon, about the time the snow had stopped falling, the doorbell rang. He counted out a couple tens. One for the food and one for the tip. First time he’d ever be tipping a hundred percent, but it was Christmas Eve and he could afford it.

He opened the door. The delivery driver handed him a bag tied at the top.

Stanley held out the money.

“Actually sir, this one was taken care of by your neighbor. We’re all set. Just pay it forward.”

The driver jogged off and another man stepped into view. The new man, who was not his neighbor, was wearing jeans and a parka.

Stanley grinned. “Bobby? What the heck are you doing here?”

Bobby blew into his hands. It was like a hiss of steam from an iron. “Seeing as you didn’t return my calls, I came to congratulate you in person. I’d high five you but my hand might break off.”

Stanley invited him in and started a pot of coffee. He offered the good side of the sofa to Bobby. They shared the sandwich Stanley had ordered.

“Can I still call you Stanley?” his friend said. “Or is it Mister Chaat now?”

“Your Excellency will do.”

“I’m glad to see the money hasn’t gone to your head, *Your Excellency*,” Bobby said. He took a sip from the mug and grimaced. “You need to have one of your servants fetch some better coffee. What’s this, the Ninety-Nine Cent Store special blend?”

He wasn’t far off. “It works.”

Bobby removed his snow-caked beanie. Wavy strands of blond hair fell across his eyes. “Dang. Look at you. A millionaire. What’s it like?”

“Not much different. Everyone’s coming out of the woodwork. You know, to congratulate me.”

“And ask for money, I bet.”

“That too,” Stanley said. “You’re not here to tell me you’re the one who gifted the lottery ticket, are you?”

“Me? Fuck no. I gave the Crown Royal party pack with shot glasses. The only one moronic enough to give a lottery ticket is Marianne.”

“Funny you should say that,” Stanley said.

“What? Ha! She already called you, didn’t she?”

“Sure did.”

“That chick’s crazy,” Bobby said. “Always writing her name on her lunch and dotting the ‘I’ with a little heart. Do you know she packs a bologna sandwich, juice box, and a twinkie? Like a six-year-old.”

“How do you know that?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Bobby feigned seriousness as he scooted closer. “I stole her lunch one time.”

“You’ve got to be kidding –”

“Oh yeah. At first, I just wanted to see how she’d react, so I hid it. Then I got hungry.”

“You’re terrible.” Stanley shifted a little so that the zipper from the flipped cushion stopped digging into his leg.

“Good times,” Bobby said. “Hey, not to be sentimental – I mean you are kind of an odd bird – but I’m going to miss you.”

“Miss me?”

“Yeah. I guess we can still hang out outside of work, but I’m assuming you’re not coming back to that shithole.”

“I don’t know,” Stanley said. He hadn’t decided whether to quit his job. “What would I do all day?”

“Anything but take calls from idiots,” Bobby said. “You can’t be planning to stay?”

Stanley shrugged. “What would *you* do if you won the lottery?”

“Me? I’d wait for a good call to come in. A real juicy one where a customer has their panties in a bunch. I’d wait, real patient-like, for them to finish yapping about God knows what. Then I’d tell them to go fuck themselves. After that, I’d flip Josephine the bird and stroll out the front door. Maybe do one of those kicks on the way out. You know, where you jump up and click your heels together.”

“Sounds like you’ve given it some thought,” Stanley said. “So you quit your job. Then what?”

“Hookers and blow.”

Stanley waited for him to say he was kidding, but Bobby gave a thoughtful expression as if he were envisioning the very thing.

“I could use the money,” Bobby finally said. “We all could. Shit. If I won the lottery, I’d make a list of my friends and give each a piece of the pie.”

Thankfully, that was as close as he came to asking for money.

Over the next week, Stanley’s phone buzzed with wishes of a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. He had to give them credit – always building rapport before they asked for something.

He rang in the new year with a pledge to do what lottery winners are supposed to do starting with a call to his boss. As he dialed the phone, he tried to recall the words he had rehearsed.

“Hello?”

“Hi Josephine, it’s Stanley.”

“It’s about time,” she said. “I thought you would’ve called on your way to the bank last week.”

As far as bosses went, she was better than most. Stanley met his targets and Josephine left him alone. “I’d like to come in and talk,” he said.

“I assume you’re giving your resignation?”

“Well,” he paused. “yes, but –”

“That’s fine. You don’t need to come in for that.”

He had planned to say he appreciated her leadership and enjoyed working there and was sorry to leave her shorthanded. She had disrupted his chain of thought. “What about my resignation letter?” he said instead.

“Can you email it to me?”

“Sure, I guess. Should I come by for my stuff?” With no close family, he didn’t have any photos. In fact, his personal items consisted of a Yoda coffee mug that said *Coffee I Need, Have it I Must*, and a glass figurine with a faded Employee of the Quarter inscription. He didn’t care about either. He just wanted to say his goodbyes.

“Sure. Or we could box it up and mail it to you.”

“I’ll come in.”

“No problem. I’ll let security know. Any time after six o’clock is fine.”

“That late?”

“Yep. Company policy, we don’t like terminating employees disrupting work.”

“I’m not being terminated,” he said.

“Oh, honey, of course not. I meant *voluntary* termination. Same policy either way.”

Too late to back out now. “Oh, okay. Sure. I’ll be there then.”

“Sounds good. Oh, can I call you in a few weeks? I have an investment proposition for you. A little side business I’m starting. I need funding to get it off the ground.”

He rolled his eyes. “Sure. Thanks Josephine. It was nice –”

“Great. Talk to you then.”

He arrived that night at a locked door. The security guard said Stanley’s badge access had been terminated, and why would anyone tell him to come in? They usually boxed and mailed personal belongings. After two calls to HR, the guard gave him a large box and escorted him to his desk at the empty call center. The man hovered over Stanley who dropped the coffee mug and award into the box.

“Sorry, man,” the guard said. “I have to make sure you don’t steal customer information.”

“Steal customer information?” Stanley’s cold-numbered fingers curled into a fist. “Do you know who I am?”

“Uh, yeah. I hope you’re Stanley Chaat or I’m in big trouble.” He had mispronounced the last name as “shat”.

Stanley rushed out the door, his two small chotchkes jostling inside the box. Minutes later he watched the back of the Metro as it pulled away. He took an Uber home.

He busied himself the next week watching television until he was *re-watching* re-runs. It was time to upgrade his cable plan and buy a TV that could stream. He cleaned his apartment until it was spotless – and then he cleaned some more. He hassled with the paperwork to enroll in continuing health care coverage. At the end of the week, he met with a financial advisor.

“Brock Harland, Esquire,” the man announced as he pumped Stanley’s hand and offered him a seat. In case Stanley forgot, Mr. Harland, *Esquire* was kind enough to hang four framed certificates on the wall behind his desk. Harland appeared to be in his forties and had a patch of hair below his lower lip. A striped dress shirt clung to his muscled frame and bowed out between each button. He explained that when it came to money everyone was motivated by fear or greed.

“Which one are you?”

Stanley thought he was motivated by the desire to make wise financial decisions, but he sensed that that was the wrong answer, so he was silent.

“Exactly,” Harland said. “A little of both.” He tapped his pen. “How much are we talking?”

During their conversation, Stanley asked several questions. Harland never failed to say how good each question was and how glad he was that Stanley had asked. Most went unanswered. The question that got the wheeziest laugh was: *Can't I just put the money in the bank?*

After Stanley remained quiet, the man said, “you serious?”

The advisor explained that he got paid by fees rather than commissions. Then he paused until Stanley mumbled how great that was. Harland couldn't give away all his secrets, but if Stanley were to pay for a financial plan (one of the fees), his money would be well-managed. Perhaps motivated by fear, Stanley wrote a check for a thousand dollars for the plan.

When he got home, a wave of buyer's remorse struck, and he soon found that the “no hassle” money back guarantee was not as advertised; it came with hassles. He canceled the check and blocked Harland's calls.

He couldn't block everyone's calls, and his phone continued to ring. Since the time for congratulating him had passed, the callers were becoming bolder in their requests. Marianne was among them. She now threatened to sue and go to the press.

Bobby called again. Stanley invited him over. It was a test of sorts to validate his colleague's intentions; if Bobby didn't ask for money, then Stanley would give him some. If Bobby asked, well that was a different story.

“What's up bro?” his former coworker said after Stanley let him in.

“Hey Bobby. How are things going?”

“I’d say I was living the dream, but that’s all you, man. Why are you still in an apartment? Shouldn’t you be in a mansion or something?”

“I don’t know. Still adjusting, I guess.”

“What’s there to adjust to? You can pretty much have anything you want.”

“I guess,” Stanley said. A growing self-awareness about his relationship with money had begun to fester. “Can I ask you a question?”

“The answer is yes; that shirt looks like it’s from the eighties.”

Stanley sighed. “A different question?”

“Shoot.”

“Do you think I’m cheap?”

Bobby didn’t hesitate. “Biggest cheapskate I’ve ever met. Is that a trick question?”

Stanley laughed. “No but the next one is. Why do you think people like me are tight with their money?”

Bobby thought for a moment. “A means to an end? If they pinch pennies now, they can live comfortably in the future.”

Stanley was quiet.

“What man? You can talk to me.”

“I’m worried that for me, being frugal is the end. Like no matter how much money I have, I’m going to be afraid to spend it.” It sounded ridiculous and he braced for the insult.

“Look,” Bobby said, “there’s a reason they say money doesn’t buy happiness. I feel you. Have you thought of donating it?”

“Yeah. I’d like to get to a place where I can give most of it away, but I’m not ready. Right now, the thought makes me feel like I’m going to shit myself.”

“Well, we can’t have that. Maybe you could start with baby steps.” Bobby twiddled his fingers like a baby stepping. “My homework assignment to you is to buy something. Like a car. Buy me one too.” He smiled.

Stanley blew a sigh of relief. Bobby had just failed the test.

The next day, Stanley found himself wandering inside a local car dealership. He craned his neck to take in the high ceiling, and he wondered how the glass walls supported it. Somehow, he took comfort in the smell of rubber and Armor All emanating from the new vehicles on the showroom floor. Customers and salespeople sat at small tables in the open room smiling and talking.

Stanley took a couple deep breaths as a salesperson approached.

“Hi, I’m Chelsea,” she said. She wore glasses that framed a babyface. She reminded Stanley of a child playing grown-up. “You looking to buy a car?”

Stanley said he was. They spent the next couple hours walking the lot, talking about features and benefits, and test-driving cars. Despite her young appearance, Chelsea was knowledgeable and professional. When they returned to the showroom, she grabbed Stanley a water bottle and they took a seat at one of the tables.

“What do you think?” Chelsea said.

Stanley told her which car he liked best.

“Will you be financing?”

“No, I’ll be paying by check.”

“Even better,” she said. “That saves us the step of pulling a credit report.”

Chelsea handed him a sheet. “We’re a no haggle dealership. This takes away the stress of negotiating and ensures you get a fair price. Here is the invoice price of the

vehicle, what we paid the manufacturer, and here is the price you pay. The difference here is the commission.”

Stanley’s heart started racing. Did he even need a car? He’d gotten by fine without one. “This is the price I pay?”

“That’s it. If you’re good with that then I’ll hand you off to the finance manager who can talk about things like the service plan and extended warranty. Obviously, those are extra.”

“You don’t just throw those in?”

“Well, no. The finance manager can talk about different plans with different price points though.”

This was starting to feel like a bait and switch. First, Chelsea had said there was one price and now there was another. “Can I decline the warranty and service plan?”

“Of course. The service plan offers discounted oil changes though, so in the long run you save money by including it.”

“That’s not *saving* money,” Stanley said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Saving money is putting it in the bank. You just described *spending less* money. It’s still spending money and not saving it. There’s a difference.”

“Sure, sorry,” Chelsea said. “Hey, are you okay? You look a little pale. Can I get you another water?”

“I’m fine. I just don’t know if I really need a car.”

“Okay. Is it the price? Because we have less expensive –”

“I said I need to think about it,” Stanley said.

“Sure.” If she cared about losing a potential sale, she didn’t show it. “Let me give you my card.”

As Chelsea reached into her jacket, Stanley launched himself from the table as if the woman were drawing a gun. He knocked the chair over and almost tripped on it as he fled to the door.

The absurdity of owning a car brought forth a chuckle as Stanley waited at the bus stop. What had he been thinking? Wrestling traffic, pumping smelly gasoline, scraping the windshield. All for a depreciating asset that would be worthless in a few years. No thanks. He dared anyone to convince him otherwise. Crafty Bobby with his *buy-us-each-a-car* baby steps or fast-talking Chelsea with her bait and switch tactics. At three dollars a day, nothing could beat the Metro. Why should he waste money on things he didn’t need?

Sunlight winked off the windshield as the bus arrived. It was one of the sleek articulated ones with tinted windows and an accordion center. Right on time as always. Stanley reached into his pocket, found the familiar strip of cardstock, and palmed the flat side. The bus lowered with a hydraulic hush so that the first step was flush with the curb. Meeting me at my level, Stanley thought. The doors parted, beckoning him. He strolled up the steps and flashed the ticket to the driver. The bus’s only passenger was a smiley face someone had drawn onto a fogged window. Stanley smiled back. Just like having his own personal chauffeured limousine. He stood because he could. No need to contort his body in this luxury coach. He closed his eyes drawing comfort from the scent of Armor All on the faux leather seats. As the bus pulled away from the curb, a gentle draft from the overhead vents warmed his neck like the breath of a lover. A lazy smile

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crossed his lips. Holding a vinyl strap in each hand, he swayed to the familiar rhythm of the bumps and turns and squealing stops.

END