

THE BILLION DOLLAR LOTTERY

It was a just casual reference made by his friend, Joey, who stopped by for a cup of coffee and a couple of hits on a joint:

“So what do you think of this guy who won the billion dollar lottery?”

“What about him?” Larry asked.

“He hasn’t cashed in his ticket.”

“In that case, how do you know it’s a guy?”

“Well... uh... you know... what else would it be?” Joey laughed heartily at his own chauvinism.

Larry shook his head. “So I guess you didn’t win?”

“No, but I thought about it a lot,” Joey quipped.

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“I’m sure you did. I can just hear you and Angie discussing what you would do with the money, while the kids watch R-rated movies.”

Joey laughed knowingly.

“So what did you decide to do with the money?” Larry prodded.

“Well, first thing I’d put \$100 mil aside for charity.” Joey was Italian Catholic. He cast off the \$100 million almost as an aside: Done. End of guilt.

“Did you have any particular charity in mind?” Larry insisted.

“I’ll figure that out after I get the first check,” Joey chuckled.

“That’s what I figured,” Larry said, getting up and going to the sink to wash his cup. “You wouldn’t know what to do with one million dollars, forget a thousand of them.”

“A thousand million,” Joey sighed, practically singing the words. His glow returned.

“So, what would you do with a billion dollars?” Larry insisted.

“I’d give it all away, and I’d keep a million for myself. I’d pay off my bills, take a hundred thou to build a little cabin out back of the house and put the rest in the bank. I’d retire to my cabin with a few pounds of ganja and probably never be heard from again.”

“Yeah, right. Except you’d call Angie to do the wash.”

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They both laughed.

“I can see it now,” Larry said. “In about two weeks, they’d have to call an ambulance to have you carted away.” He turned to look at his friend. “Let’s face it Joey, any amount of money would destroy you.”

“Yeah, I guess it would,” his friend said wistfully, resting his elbow on the counter and leaning his head into his fist. “So what would you do?” he asked Larry. “I suppose you didn’t buy a ticket? You wouldn’t have any idea what to do with all that money.”

“As a matter of fact,” Larry said, “I did buy one. It’s the very first lottery ticket I ever bought. The checkout woman at the market goaded me into it.”

“I’ll bet it took a lot of convincing,” Joey said, laughing at his own joke. Larry shook his head in mock disgust. “So,” Joey paused, “how’d you do?” He held out his hand questioningly.

“I don’t know. I haven’t looked,” Larry said. “In fact, until you arrived I completely forgot about it.”

“Where is it?” Joey asked. He was suddenly anxious, disbelieving.

“I think it’s in here,” Larry said, digging into his pockets and pulling out his wallet, a stack of papers, and a few bills. “And calm down,” he said, sensing Joey’s agitation. “You don’t have to worry. I’m not the winner.”

“How do you know?” Joey asked, incredulous. “Somebody has to win.”

“Joey, what are the odds? About a billion to one, I’d say.”

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“Hey!” Joey interrupted. “Aren’t you the one who’s always saying, ‘You get on a plane, the odds are fifty-fifty you’ll make it or you won’t.’” Joey spoke in a mock Jewish accent that always made Larry laugh, because he didn’t know anyone who was Jewish who spoke that way. “Besides,” Joey went on, “how many people are there who haven’t checked their tickets yet? There’s a good chance you’re the winner. Let me see it.”

Larry sorted through the pile of papers on the counter until he found the ticket, folded in half. If Joey hadn’t been there, it probably would have been tossed in the garbage, or lost in the wash. Joey unfolded the ticket and stared at it as only an experienced lottery buyer could,

“This is it,” Joey said, confidently. “This is the winning ticket.”

“Great! When do we collect?” Larry asked, playing along.

“Do you have the newspaper,” Joey asked, ignoring him.

“Today’s?”

“No, no. It would have been in yesterday’s.”

“Gone,” Larry said.

“Maybe Angie still has it,” Joey said, brushing the ticket aside and going to the phone at the end of the counter. “How’d you pick the numbers?” he asked, dialing.

“Oh, that was interesting,” Larry said. “After this girl... woman... young woman... I don’t know, whatever she was... convinced me to buy a ticket, I said, ‘Okay, what do I have to do?’ and she told me I had to pick seven numbers. I thought, How am I going to do that?’ I’m standing on the grocery line,

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and I'm supposed to pick the seven numbers that could represent a billion dollars. Suddenly, I'm having this major crisis. Besides, I don't even want to be on line. I want to get out of the damn market before I start meeting people I know and get stuck even longer, when suddenly I get this idea..."

Joey held his hand up to signal Larry to be quiet. "Angie, do you have yesterday's paper, the one with the winning lottery number. And don't say no, go look."

Joey cupped his hand over the receiver. "She's going to look," Joey said, secretively.

Larry laughed. "Why are you whispering?"

Joey looked at his hand covering the phone, then pulled it away, laughing. "Habit, I guess. "I'm usually talking to people..." he paused, struggling for the words, "...who I don't want to know what's going on?" His language skills deserted him, so he finished the sentence with a question mark, as in "You know what I mean?"

Larry knew what he meant all right, the way he knew so much about what Joey thought, the way they each knew what the other was thinking, even though they were so different. But all Larry could think about now was Joey's way of crucifying the English language. He decided to let it go and instead he said, "You know you're really nuts."

While Joey was waiting on the phone Larry took the opportunity to discard the junk that was in his pocket, clear the counter, and load the dishwasher from the breakfast dishes that were in the sink.

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“Why don’t you have it?” he heard Joey scolding, as he scraped a plate encrusted with dried egg yolk.

“Joey, leave her alone,” Larry yelled, shutting off the water. “You bother that woman all day long. She’s allowed to throw out yesterday’s paper.”

“Larry says I should stop bothering you, you’re allowed to throw out yesterday’s paper,” Joey said, repeating Larry’s words verbatim.

“You’re such a masochist,” Larry said.

There was a brief silence, then Joey laughed.

“What did she say?” Larry asked.

“She says I should listen to you.” He was enjoying the attention from the two of them.

“Give me the phone!” Larry said, grabbing the receiver from Joey’s hand.

“Angie, how many times a day does he call you?” Larry asked.

“Too many,” she said, her voice bristling.

”I don’t know how to stop him, Larry said. “He just goes on and on.”

“I’ve given up trying,” Angie said. “He can’t help himself.”

“She says you’re not capable of helping yourself,” Larry repeated out loud for Joey to hear. Joey laughed, knowingly.

“She says you think she’s your mother, but she’s not,” Larry continued, translating.

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This time it was Joey's turn to grab the phone.

"Listen, you think I'm crazy," Joey said, speaking into the receiver, "but he's holding the winning billion dollar lottery ticket and he doesn't even know it.

"That's right... he bought a ticket and hasn't even checked the number.... And they still haven't found the winner.... Right.... There's only one winning ticket.... Yeah.... Right.

By the third "right" Larry knew Angie had shifted to Joey's side. There wasn't much the two of them agreed on, but on their desire to win the lottery, and win it big, they shared a burning passion.

"She says we're both crazy," Joey said, hanging up the phone. "But she agrees that we should check the number. Where are we going to find a paper?" He went into the living room and started rummaging through a bunch of old magazines piled in a basket.

"Joey, there aren't any newspapers in there!" Larry yelled, trying to cut him off before he started turning the place upside down.

"We've got to find it," he said, frantically, tossing a bunch of magazines onto the couch.

"What about the radio?" Larry said. "If there's someone out there waiting to collect a billion dollars, this has to be a big media event."

"Good idea. Where is it? And where's the ticket?" he asked, returning to the kitchen. He was practically in a frenzy.

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“Joey, how many times have you been in this house and you don’t know where the radio is?” He walked over to the ancient portable on the counter and switched it to an all news show. The static from the AM broadcast pierced the air.

“You give us ten minutes, we’ll give *you* the world,” the announcer said, repeating a litany of reasons to stay tuned all day, all the time, 24 hours a day. “The top story this hour: America’s newest billionaire is still missing. The details after this.”

“Here it is,” Larry said, adjusting the dial.

“And here’s the ticket,” Joey said, bending over and picking it off the floor. Larry shook his head at Joey’s absentmindedness.

“They’ll probably announce the number after the commercial,” Larry said.

“All right baby, come on,” Joey shouted, kissing the ticket. “This is it! Our free ride.”

“What do you mean *our* free ride?” Larry asked.

“I know you’ll give me some if you win,” Joey answered, shamelessly. “Not too much. A couple of hundred thou maybe.”

“No problem,” Larry said.

The announcer returned.

“The top story this hour. The winner of Tuesday’s multi-state lottery, with the largest prize in U.S. history — a billion dollars — is still a mystery. The drawing Tuesday night produced a single winning ticket, according to gaming authorities

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in New York State, but as of this hour the winner has still not claimed the prize. Officials speculate the winner may not even know he's carrying the winning ticket."

"See, what did I tell you," Joey said, exuberantly.

"He said the winner *may not know*. Just because you heard an announcer on a news broadcast quote an official who doesn't know anything doesn't mean it's so," Larry cautioned.

"...47, 51, 67, 71." The announcer's voice caught their attention simultaneously.

"What did he say?" Joey cried out. "Did you hear the numbers?"

"Only the last four," Larry said. "I think they were 47, 51, 67 and 71."

"Forty-seven...yep, you got it. Fifty-one, yes. Sixty-seven, yes, you've got it. Seventy-one, yes. Yes! Yes! That's four out of seven. I knew it. I knew it. Just one more and you're in the money." He was jumping up and down with excitement.

"Let me see that," he said. Joey was right. Four of the seven numbers matched. "Fine, he said, it's one thing to pick four numbers. It's another thing to get all seven. The odds against getting just five are overwhelming."

Even as he said it, Larry's heart was racing with the possibility of actually winning anything. Inexorably, he was being drawn into the trap he had resisted for so long.

"We've got to find out the other numbers," Joey said, ignoring Larry. "Let's call someone."

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Joey, calm down, will you,” Larry said. “You’re getting yourself all worked up over nothing.”

“Call someone,” he insisted, sounding like a child.

“All right, I’ll call the newspaper if that will make you happy.”

“Yeah, make me happy,” Joey said. He held the ticket up to the ceiling in his outstretched hands. “Please, Lord, I’ll even go to church for this.”

“I’d like to win just to see that,” Larry said, reaching for the phone book.

“What are you doing?” Joey asked.

“I’m looking up the phone number,” Larry said, annoyed.

“Why?”

“Why what? Why am I looking up the phone number?”

“You’re about to become a billionaire, and you want to save 10 cents on a phone call to information?” Joey said, incredulous.

“It’s not 10 cents, it’s 75 cents to call information, and that’s beside the point. I’ve got the phone book right here.”

“Lord, forgive him, he knowest not what he does,” Joey said, praying to the ceiling again.

“What are those numbers you picked anyway?” Joey asked, glancing at the ticket as Larry started to dial.

“Oh yeah, I didn’t finish the story. Prime numbers. They’re all prime numbers... except one.”

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“What the hell are prime numbers?” Joey asked, with a look of disdain.

“Did you go to school, or what?” Larry said.

“Yeah, I went to school, but I stopped thinking about prime numbers the day I got out.”

“That figures,” Larry added. “Prime numbers are... hold on a minute.” He turned his attention to the telephone. “May I have the editorial department please. Thank you.... Prime numbers,” he resumed his conversation, “are numbers that are divisible only by themselves and one.”

“Like three?” Joey said, trying it out.

“Very good,” Larry commended him.

“Only you,” Joey said.

“Actually, that’s not true,” Larry said. “I would think a lot of people might pick prime numbers just because it’s a system. But one of the seven numbers I chose isn’t a prime number. I figured if I was going to win, I didn’t want to have to share the prize, and in my crazy way of thinking... Hello.” A voice at the other end of the line interrupted Larry’s story. “Oh, hi. Listen, I was wondering if someone could tell me the winning numbers from the lottery the other night. No, not that one. The big one. Yeah, that’s right. Sure, I’ll hold.... He’s getting it,” Larry said, turning to Joey. “Let me have that pencil over there, will you,” he said, pointing to the other end of the counter.

Joey pushed aside some papers to reveal a pencil. Joey handed it to him.

“Give me the ticket,” Larry said. “I’ll circle the numbers.”

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Joey handed him the ticket.

“Hi. Yeah, go ahead,” Larry said, cupping the phone to his ear with his shoulder. Uh huh, uh huh, yeah, yeah... wait, could you do me a favor, I’m having trouble hearing you with this ear.” He put the pencil and the ticket on the counter and transferred the receiver to the other ear. Could you run that by me again?”

“Come on,” Joey said, exasperated.

“You want to do it?” Larry said, handing the phone to Joey.

“No, no, you do it,” Joey ordered, impatient.

“One more time, please,” Larry said, getting ready to write. Okay, yeah, yeah, okay, uh huh, uh huh, right. Yeah. Got ‘em. Thanks. Thanks a lot.” He hung up the phone.

“Well?” Joey asked. “What’s the story?”

Larry stared at the piece of paper. “I think I have to call them back,” he said.

“Why?” Joey asked.

“Because I circled all seven numbers.”

For a fleeting moment, as the two men stared at each other, a hole dropped open in the universe and Larry and Joey fell through. For a few seconds, they moved into that place people visit week after week on TV reruns of the “Twilight Zone”, a place where nothing and everything exist side by side, where fear and joy cross paths. In that brief moment, Larry and Joey experienced it all: the jubilation, the sadness, the ups

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and downs, the beauty and the deprivation, the complete and utter irony of life.

It was a gift, and when it was over and the two men regained their composure, Larry was elated.

“Show me the ticket,” Joey said.

Larry handed Joey the ticket. All the numbers were circled. His hands were shaking.

“I think I need to sit down,” Larry said.

“I don’t fucking believe it!” Joey said. “I told you. I told you. You’re shitting me, aren’t you? Aren’t you?” He didn’t need to wait for Larry to answer. “I knew it. I knew it!” He started racing around the kitchen, waving the ticket over his head. “Holy shit, I don’t believe it.” He sat down on a stool. “I gotta roll a joint,” he said, putting the ticket down on the counter and searching for a pack of rolling papers. His hand was shaking as he sprinkled the coarse weed onto the paper.

“It can’t be right,” Larry said, looking at the ticket again, then into space, then at the ticket again. “I don’t believe it. It can’t be right.”

“What do we do now?” Joey asked, lighting up a cigar-sized spliff. “Where’s Rita? You’ve gotta tell Rita.

“She’s in the office,” Larry said.

“Let’s go tell her,” Joey said, heading toward the door.

“No. Wait. Not yet,” Larry said. I have to think. Give me a hit.”

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Joey handed Larry the joint, and he took a long drag, inhaling deeply and holding it until he thought his lungs would burst. He exhaled and the rush nearly knocked him off his feet. "I can't think," he said, regaining his composure.

"A billion fucking dollars," Joey exclaimed. "A billion dollars. You're a fucking billionaire."

"It can't be," Larry insisted. "It's not possible."

"Listen," Joey said, suddenly becoming serious. "You've got to turn in the ticket, just to be rid of it. Right now, it's like carrying around a billion dollar bill."

"The ticket! Where is it?" Larry asked.

"You were just holding it," Joey said. "You must have put it here," he said, rummaging through the papers on the counter.

"Here it is," Larry said, finding it stuck to his elbow. "I think I'm in shock," he said, sliding the ticket toward Joey. "I need something to drink."

He went to the refrigerator, poured himself a glass of juice, and drank it without stopping. All the while Joey kept mumbling under his breath.

"All right," Larry said, setting his glass on the counter with a thud, "we've got to do something!"

"Maybe you should call a lawyer," Joey suggested. "You're going to need some help with this."

"What the fuck am I going to do with a billion dollars?" Larry complained, ignoring his suggestion.

"Anything you want," Joey said.

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“What about the IRS?”

“You’ve got to get an accountant.”

“A lawyer *and* an accountant,” he complained some more.

“And a financial adviser and a banker,” Joey said. “Let’s face it, you’re one of the richest men in the world. You can afford to buy this house...and a lot of others.” He laughed.

“I only need one house,” Larry said.

“What about winters?” Joey countered. “You don’t want to be here in the winter if you don’t have to, do you? You can buy anything you want, do anything you want. You can even hire somebody to wipe your ass if you want to.”

The thought left Larry repulsed. “That’s just what I want to do with my billion dollars Joey, hire somebody to wipe my ass. That’s great. That’s really great.”

Joey was enjoying his little joke. “It’s just a euphemism,” he said. “The point is, you can do anything and everything you might ever want to do. And you can take your kids and all your friends along with you.” He laughed nervously.

“What if they don’t want to come?”

“Who?”

“The kids?”

“Oh them. You give them fifty mil each and you tell them they’re on their own.”

“Fifty mil, huh? It’s that easy?”

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“In fact,” Joey continued, ignoring Larry, “if you want to hire me, I’ll take care of all of that for you?”

“Would it mean we’d have to see each other every day?” Larry inquired.

“No, not necessarily every day,” Joey replied. “but we’d have to talk on the phone a lot. Buy, sell, you know, that kind of thing.”

They were like Abbott and Costello. The only thing lacking was the audience.

“Oh, you mean like you and Angie, he said, knowingly.

“Well yeah, kinda,” Joey shrugged, ever the straight man.

“That settles it then,” Larry said, sitting down on a stool next to Joey.

“Settles what?” Joey asked, confused.

“I don’t want it.”

“Don’t want what?” Joey prompted.

“The money. I don’t want the money.”

“Right,” Joey said, chuckling.

“No, I mean it, Joey. I don’t want the money.”

“What are you talking about?” Joey said, shrinking in horror at the mere thought of Larry’s words.

“I don’t want the money,” Larry repeated. He stood up.

“What are you fucking crazy?” Joey shrieked.

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“This money’s going to be nothing but trouble,” Larry said.

“You know, I always thought you were crazy,” Joey yelled, looking at him suspiciously, “but now I know it. If you don’t want the money, give it to me. I’ll put a little aside for you and Rita for a rainy day, and Angie and I will take the rest.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do with it,” Larry said.

“Try me,” Joey pleaded. “I’ll know. I’ll know.” He was being Jewish again.

“So tell me what you’d do with it.”

“We had this discussion already,” Joey said, exasperated.

“Yeah, but you never really told me. All you said was that you’d give some magical, biblical amount to some as yet unknown charity, and something about a cabin out back.”

“Okay. What would I do? First thing, I’d pay up the mortgage on the house, or sell it. Maybe buy some big, old farmhouse in Vermont, far from everything.”

“Oh yeah,” Larry said, flicking an imaginary cigar, “the old house in Vermont routine. Know it well. Know it well.” Then, in his normal voice: “I’d like to be a fly on the wall when you tell Angie and the kids that plan.”

“Oh, them,” he said, acting the part of their Minnesota friend, who solved problems the way Paul Bunyan felled trees. “They don’t want to go to Vermont. They’re off to private school.”

“Of course. I forgot,” Larry said. “With money you have options.”

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“You bet,” Joey said, emphatically.

“Have you stopped to think that with all this money Angie might just decide the hell with you, take her share and split. With all that money, what will she need you for?”

“Who said anything about Angie?” Joey asked.

“Right,” Larry said cynically.

“Hey, if she wants to go, let her go,” Joey said, with a sudden, new confidence. “I got along without her before I met her, I can get along without her now.”

Larry wondered if Joey actually knew the old tune, or if this was an original thought. He decided to let it go for now.

“Oh yeah, I remember how well you were doing before Angie. How long did you live on your own?”

“Before Angie or before Linda?” Joey asked.

“I hadn’t even thought about B.L. What about B.A.?” Larry replied.

“Before Angie. Let’s see. About three months,” Joey said, thinking.

“Three months! Let’s try three weeks,” Larry countered. “And that’s being generous. You lived with us before that.”

“That is true, isn’t it?” Joey said, a sudden revelation. He sighed in defeat.

“And what about B.A.?” Larry asked, continuing the assault.

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“Oh, I never lived alone when I was in college. I moved in with Linda a week after I started school. From my mother’s arms into Linda’s pants.” He laughed at his own witticism.

“Oh, so maybe it won’t be so great without Angie?” Larry reminded him.

“First of all, who says she’s leaving?” he objected, “and in the second place, this time I’ll have money.”

“Ah, so you can afford to buy any woman you want,” Larry said, pushing Joey’s hand away.

“You bet your ass,” Joey insisted. He sat down, tasting victory.

Larry sat quietly for a moment, then, without saying a word, got up and walked down the hallway.

“Where are you going?” Joey said, trotting after him.

“To the bathroom,” Larry shouted. “You want to come and watch?”

“Just be careful,” Joey said, embarrassed, “you’re worth a lot of money.” He started back to the kitchen as Larry reached the bathroom door. “And that’s another thing,” he said, “you’re probably going to have to hire security guards.” He broke into a smile. “You know, a couple of goons with semiautomatics.”

Larry slammed the bathroom door in disgust.

* * *

When Larry returned to the kitchen, Joey was dialing a number on the phone. “Who are you calling,” he asked.

“Angie.”

“What for? You just spoke to her fifteen minutes ago.”

“Well, I figured I’d tell her about your good fortune.”

“Don’t you dare say a word. I haven’t even told Rita yet.”

“So you go tell Rita and I’ll tell Angie.”

“No!” Larry said. He was emphatic.

“You know you’re acting fucking stupid,” Joey argued.

“No! I don’t want you to tell her.”

“Jesus,” Joey said angrily. “Angie. Hi. Nothing. Nothing. Larry’s acting his crazy fucking self. He doesn’t want me to tell you.”

Larry made a fist and directed it at Joey. “Don’t tell her or I’ll pull the fucking plug,” he sputtered. There was a threatening tone in his voice that convinced Joey not to say anything.

“Listen, Angie,” Joey said, anxious to get off the phone, “I’ll call you back.” He hung up before she had a chance to say goodbye.

“You really are fucking crazy,” Joey said. “You need to see a doctor.” His voice was rising. “What the hell are you doing? This is your fantasy. Remember the commune you were going to start for you and your friends.”

“Community, not commune,” Larry interrupted.

“Commune, community. Who the fuck cares?” Joey said, shaking his arms wildly. Papers flew onto the floor.

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Just then, the door opened and Rita walked in.

“Hi Joey, what are you up to?”

He tried to sound casual, bending to pick the papers off the floor. “Oh, hi Rita. Nothing much. Just stopped in for a cup of coffee. Hear you’ve got some exciting news,” he added, looking at Larry.

Larry glared at Joey. “Rita, would you be very angry with me if I asked you to go somewhere else for a few minutes. Joey and I are having some words and I don’t want to drag you into it.”

Rita looked at the two of them. She held her hands up as she walked between them. “I just came in to get something to drink,” she said. “If that’s okay?” She hesitated before advancing to the refrigerator.

“Yeah, sure,” Larry said, awkwardly.

The old maxim was true. The air was so thick you could slice it. There was an unbroken silence between them that gathered in intensity as Rita poured herself a glass of juice.

When she left, the two men retreated into their thoughts. When they decided to speak, it was together: two people of the same but different minds, each one floundering in a different universe of their own design.

“I can’t do it.

“You have to...”

“Give me the ticket,” Larry insisted.

“I don’t know where it is.”

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“You just had it a few minutes ago.”

Joey fumbled on the counter. “Here. What do you want it for?”

Larry took the sheet of paper, looked at it and folded it along the crease he had made when he first put it in his pocket. He sharpened the crease with his nails, then turned the ticket sideways ninety degrees and folded it in half again.

“What are you doing?” Joey asked.

“Origami,” Larry said.

“Origami!” Joey exclaimed. “You’re holding a billion dollar lottery ticket and you’re going to make a toy hat with it?”

“Not exactly,” Larry said, continuing to fold the ticket into smaller and smaller squares.

Joey watched silently, disgustedly, as Larry shaped the paper into a tiny catamaran.

“You see this?” Larry asked. “Like Siamese twins joined at the waist. They pull and pull and don’t get anywhere. They’re stuck! He tugged at two corners of the paper tucked inside each of the miniature boats and lifted them out.”

“Jesus, will you be careful with that!” Joey said nervously.

Once again, the piece of paper shrunk in size, until, with a tug at the sides, the boat was transformed into a square box.

“Voila!” Larry said, handing it to Joey.

“Unbelievable,” Joey said, holding out his palm to receive the gift. Inside the box, the winning numbers covered the base.

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“So what do you think Joey, is it empty or full?”

“Looks full to me,” Joey said, staring at the numbers.

“Figures,” Larry said, taking the box from Joey and turning it upside down.

For a third time, Larry began to manipulate the tiny piece of paper. He folded it in half backwards and carefully pulled the edges out from the bottom. The box did not give up its shape easily.

“Dammit! You’re going to rip it,” Joey said.

The paper finally yielded, and when Larry turned it over it had taken on an entirely new shape.

“What is it?” Joey asked.

“Hold on, don’t be so impatient,” Larry said. He reached into the object and freed the two corners that previously were tucked inside the catamaran, and folded them to create a canopy over what was obviously another kind of boat. He held it in the palm of his hand for Joey to see.

“A Chinese junk,” he said. “It actually floats.”

“Let’s not try it,” Joey said, looking genuinely impressed. “Now what?”

“Now nothing,” Larry said, rocking the junk gently in his hand. “You know, when I was a kid, there was a couple that lived on a junk out in Pelham Bay, near the Whitestone Bridge.”

“So?”

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“So, nothing. I always think about them when I make this. There’s something exotic about a junk.”

“And now you can afford to buy your own. You can buy an ocean liner. An air liner. A whole fleet of boats and planes. Anything you want is yours for the asking. You can be President if you want. You can buy power.” He said this last slowly.

“Power, eh?” Larry said, intrigued. “What kind of power?”

“Power to shape the world,” Joey exclaimed.

“You want to see power?” Larry asked, looking at Joey intensely, “raw unbridled power?”

Joey didn’t respond.

“This is power,” Larry said, holding the Junk high in his outstretched hand. “This is real power.”

With that said, Larry clenched his fist, crushing the junk. Joey grabbed his arm, powerfully.

“No, you asshole!”

Larry tightened his grip on the ticket.

“You’ve gotta stop this shit, man!” Joey screamed. “This is too crazy.” His face was flushed.

“It’s too late,” Larry said. “You said it. This is about power. Well, I’m deciding now this insanity has got to stop. Do you realize how many people who really need this money the government can distribute it to if I don’t collect the winnings?”

“And how many who don’t need it?” Joey asked, tightening his grip on Larry’s arm.

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“You’re a fucking cynic,” you know it, Larry said. “I can’t make the world over with money. Show me somebody with a lot of money who’s made the world a better place.”

“Who says you have to make the world a better place,” Joey replied. “Make your own life better. Make the life of the people around you a little better.”

“A little better,” Larry said, mimicking him. “By giving my kids fifty mil, right? How many more things does everyone fucking need? You’ve already got everything. All everybody does is complain. ‘Give me more money and everything will be perfect’. It’s all bullshit. A billion dollars isn’t going to buy me anything but grief.” Larry tried to pull his arm free, but Joey held fast. “Let me go, will you!”

“I’m not letting go until you give me the ticket,” Joey said.

“Why do I have to give you the ticket? I bought it, I can do what I want with it.”

“You’ll thank me for this tomorrow, believe me,” Joey said, using his other hand to try to unclench Larry’s fist.

“Fuck off!” Larry said, struggling to free himself from Joey’s grasp.

“No way I’m letting you destroy this ticket,” Joey said, pushing Larry backwards into the refrigerator. “Rita will fucking divorce you. Rita!” He yelled out her name. “Rita!” But she was too far away to hear, and besides, even if she had heard, she probably wouldn’t have gotten in the middle between them. She had seen them nearly come to blows before.

MARC ERDRICH

Their sparring turned to earnest, and it was only a matter of time before one of them gave up or succumbed to an injury. By rights, it should have been Larry who lost in the fray. Joey had it over Larry in height and weight. But Larry waited, knowing Joey wouldn't hurt him. He collapsed into Joey's arms, and in the instant that Joey loosed his grip, Larry pulled his hand free and shoved the paper into his mouth. It was all Joey could do to keep from screaming as Larry swallowed the winning ticket.

"I don't believe it. I don't fucking believe it." He pushed Larry away and turned to leave, banging into a stool that was sticking out from the kitchen counter. He picked up the stool and tossed it aside. It crashed into a table, pushing over a vase full of flowers that tumbled onto the floor alongside the stool, creating a mess.

"Typical," Larry said. "I suppose you'll leave that for me to clean up?"

Joey ignored him and made his way toward the front door. He stopped in the hallway for a few seconds, leaning against the wall lost in thought.

"Everyone's gonna know how fucking stupid you are," Joey said, turning around to face Larry. "I'm going to tell everyone I know. Everyone. And I'll never fucking talk to you again."

Joey's rage was subsiding. But Larry could see it would be a long time before he would calm down. It was Joey's loss as much as Larry's.

"We'll see," Larry said.

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With those final words, his friend left. As he walked to his car Larry watched Joey who was shaking his head, talking to himself.

“I’m sorry,” Larry said, whispering. “I’m really, really sorry.

* * *

The story about the unclaimed ticket was in the news for several days. Eventually, it went the way of every other story in the frenetic news cycle. Larry never told his wife about the winning ticket and apparently Joey didn’t either.

Larry never saw Joey again; but about two years after the lottery incident, Larry heard through a friend that Joey moved with his wife and kids to Fort Lauderdale where Angie found a good job in real estate. About six months later their teen-aged daughter was killed in a tragic car accident. The insurance company settled the case with Joey and Angie for ten million dollars.