

The Goldfish

He awoke from a dream of gold and ivory magnificence to the usual mild hangover and sour stomach. It has been a true dream, a fine, strong dream, he had them on occasion. He had been an admiral. Or a lord, or perhaps poet laureate — riding in a carriage drawn by magnificent black stallions to a heart-shaking event of stunning import. Perhaps the dream was an omen foreshadowing the recognition of his genius? Or the final, ultimate lotto win?

He yawned, stretched and considered. Yes, that was it, the long-awaited win which he knew with every fiber of his being lay just around the corner. Clearly the dream was a portent, a sign of fine times to come. His spirit soared, it was going to be a wonderful day.

The sun poured like molten metal through the cracked kitchen window. Its dazzling rays highlighted the graceful sculpture of egg-stained dishes, dirty pans, moldering cardboard tubs of Chinese take-out which awaited his august attention. All in his great good time. He lit one of his last cigarettes and lay back.

Time. How it tumbled by, buzzed by, here then gone! He sensed a slight buzz around the back alleys of his brain, but that was customary. Background noise, like the fly - flies actually - buzzing around the pile of crockery. It was going to be a great day. He just had to remember why.

Aha! Fifty dollars, that was it. A lovely kiss of fresh money, wind-tumbled along the sidewalk to his very feet yesterday evening - a personal endowment from the gods. A crisp, new fifty dollar bill.

He rolled over on the stained mattress (the sheets were in the laundry room, as far as he could remember, sidelined by an unfortunate accident) and blew a kiss at the sky. With fifty dollars he could buy a new notebook, one of those high-class ones with a smooth dark cover and creamy white pages. Maybe even a fountain pen. Much more important, he could buy the all-important lottery ticket.

And then — he felt it in the depth of his being — he would be a millionaire, no point even trying to plan beyond that. He had had these premonitions of a win before, of course, but never as powerfully as now. Always the tide rose, then crested. This was the high tide of his luck, he felt it in his soul.

So then! Fifty minus a lotto ticket and a notebook left plenty of cash, easily enough for a few beers, cigarettes, and whatever was on special at Metro: maybe one of those tasty pre-roasted chickens, grease shining through its plastic shell? His mouth watered at the thought.

He struggled to his feet and braced himself against the wall until the spins diminished. That was part of the morning fun, the whirligig inside his brain. Low blood pressure the doctor had said when they brought him to the ER last winter. Or was it high blood pressure? Hard to get the pressure just right. His blood vessels were like the pipes in the old rooming house he was nominally in charge of maintaining. Rusty, clanging, cranky things.

Never mind. Just take care of the three S's. That was what Sarge had said, back in another lifetime. Three simple acts and you're set for the day. Sergeant Wilson had taken a bullet in Normandy, God rest him, but he died shaven and well evacuated. Not that it had helped him, but still...

From its bowl, the goldfish watched him with eyes like tiny black buttons. Of course it was not really watching him, or watching anything. Fish did not watch, they saw whatever was in front of them — in this case, a wall of glass. The goldfish and its bowl was a legacy from one of his tenants, a young woman who had done a runner one day, leaving behind the goldfish, a soiled pink pillowcase and a half-empty bag of potato chips. And a mess which it took him three days to clean up. Some people did not know how the basics of decent living. They had never even evolved to the three S stage. Disgraceful really.

An hour later, the three S's completed with varying degrees of success, dressed in his cleanest blue jeans and a green-striped shirt, he let himself out, disregarding the reproach of the mop and pail by the front door.

The mop and pail were begging for his attention because the entry way was filthy. Odd in summer. Where did his seedy tenants find mud to track in? A clean, wholesome portico was the thing. He would do it later, with his winning ticket safe in his shirt pocket. It would be amusing, the secret millionaire mopping up after the riff raff, the wretched of the earth.

He let himself out, noting that the door hinges needed oiling. The squeak brought back a half-forgotten resolution from some previous time. Put that on the list as well. Actually it was on a list, but where was the list? He would have to start another.

First things first however. Everything in proper order. You didn't seat your guests and then set the table and shop for the foie gras. Before you could be a millionaire you had to buy the winning ticket. Before buying a ticket, or doing much of anything, you had to clear the fog. A smoke and a coffee. Or perhaps even a quick glass of beer. His stomach did feel sour, no doubt because he had forgotten breakfast. Fortunately, there was a cure close at hand.

Two blocks away was the Minerva Restaurant — raucous after dark, but at this time of the morning a lovely quiet place to have a beer. Which would be pleasant, indeed medicinal. His legs felt weak and watery, he needed something to put a spring back in his step.

"The gods have sent me a gift," he announced to Sue, the faded waitress as he took a seat by the window - near enough to gaze through the glass, but not to be seen from the street. "The usual medicine please."

Sue returned with the day's first golden glass, set it down with a tired smile. "What's this about gods Virgil?"

He clapped his fifty down on the table with a flourish, enjoying her quick flash of surprise. "They sent me gold. Which I shall make multiply like butterflies in summer," he added after the first sweet, sweet draught.

"How's that?"

"I shall work. I shall compose. I shall create." With a flourish, Virgil pulled out his little pad and a Bic pen, its plastic end splintered and chewed and put them on the chipped green table top. He did not want to share his secret about the lottery. Let her find out later when he left a thousand dollar bill as a tip. Two. Ten, what did it matter when you had a million?

Sue made a clucking noise, not unkind, and turned away.

Four hours later Virgil was still at the window. A dozen pages of his notebook had been torn out and crumpled, little paper explosions beside a scatter of empty glasses, a full ashtray and cold cup of coffee for energy. And his change. He poked at it absently. Thirty one dollars and a few coins. Always best to keep count.

He poised pen over paper and re-read his latest effort:

*When he buys the golden ticket
Will an angel
In Heaven sing?*

It did not seem quite as compelling as when he had first jotted it down. Damn silly really. Somehow the early morning glow was slipping away. Perhaps he should go home and tackle his chores? But there was something he had to do first. Something important...

He thought hard for several moments, staring through the glass at office workers swimming by on their lunch hour, poor dull creatures. Was it still lunch hour? The red and white Molson Canadian clock over the kitchen door said ten after two.

That other thing? Ah yes, buy the ticket, the lottery ticket, the magnificent passport to.... Something magnificent. Just one more beer to cement his luck. And perhaps a cheeseburger. He hesitated, aware of some earlier reflection about food. Had he not planned get a barbeque chicken at the supermarket? Indeed he had, he remembered it

clearly now. But the chicken was there, and he was here, and hunger was now. A cheeseburger and delicious greasy fries, that was the way to go.

Just at that moment, he spied Loose Dave entering the Minerva, blinking in the gloom. He owed Dave a beer, several beers in fact, from previous occasions when the pesky finances had been at a low ebb — and recently Dave had made several rather pointed allusions to the fact. Now would be the perfect chance to even the score.

He waved and called, in a voice that sounded in his own ears oddly hoarse and discordant. But no matter, Dave had heard the summons and was weaving towards him through the obstacle course of green-top tables, a huge fat frog negotiating lily pads. The image made him grin. He raised a hand in a gesture Julius Caesar would have been proud of. “My dear fellow! Allow me to buy you an infusion.”

Several infusions and a few dollars later (who was counting?) he was at one with the dazzling late afternoon sun flowing in at the fly speckled windows. Dave had thanked him profusely before limping off to see his social worker. He felt wonderful. Perhaps he had even dozed off for a few moments? It happened. Fortunately they knew him well in the Minerva, they were used to the little eccentricities of an artist like himself.

Beyond the glass, the passers-by on Saint Catherine marched with noble purpose on a thousand unknown errands, going home, hastening to meet a girl, a man, friends. There was another poem bubbling somewhere in his thoughts, he was sure of it. But it would keep while he took in the twilight hour. All was well.

He had been paying and tipping generously as he went. He was free to go any time, free as wind and flame. He rose to his feet, steadying himself against the table, conscious of the buzz again. Blood pressure obviously not in the groove. The nearest place to buy a lotto ticket was the tatty convenience store down the street. Of course he could go to the supermarket for that barbeque chicken and get the ticket there as well, but it was six blocks away — a veritable route march when you were tired and hungry. Besides, the convenience store felt luckier. Who had ever bought a winning ticket in a supermarket?

He would get his ticket, buy a six-pack as well for good luck, proceed to his own abode for some well-deserved rest and recovery. And then, he would mop the swamp of the portico, do the dishes, retrieve and iron the sheets. Clean up, tidy up, that was the thing. Finish his poem. Sleep to wake a millionaire.

Saint Catherine seemed to be wobbling and melting away under his feet as he exited the Minerva. The blood pressure again no doubt. Age, haggish age. He stopped to lean on the concrete wall outside the restaurant, pleasantly cool and shady. A police car slowed and the uniform inside looked at him meaningfully, a move-on look that he knew too well. The boys in blue would treat him differently when he was strolling along in his fine suit, oh yes. Twirling a silver cane, by God. Maybe he would even affect (there was a fine word, *affect*) a monocle, like the Monopoly Man.

He reached the convenience store on unsteady feet, plucked a chilled six of Heineken (only the best) from the glass case, grabbed two cans of spaghetti as he passed the shelf and made his way to the cash, where the lottery tickets were kept under a slab of glass, like rare and valuable pieces of jewelry. Ignoring the sniff of the pudgy cashier (*you're no treat yourself honey and your roots are showing*) he pointed at a ticket tucked in the upper left corner of the display, three in, three down. His lucky number times two.

The total was more than he had calculated. Much more. A fumbling for his remaining cash, a humiliating minute while he hauled quarters, dimes, nickels from the pockets where they had been stashed and the other customers (suddenly there was a line) stared. A sudden panic seized him. Did he have enough? He did not. Forget the spaghetti then, he would dine on whatever was in the cupboard — there must be some macaroni surely, or a can of tuna?

The cashier, muttering under her (no doubt foul) breath, re-entered his total, transferred his crumpled bills and coins into the cash drawer and turned to the next customer. He was dismissed. But he had the ticket, the winning ticket, and six cold beers. Head high, he left the store. Mission accomplished.

The walk back home seemed endless. His feet hurt, and he was very thirsty. Twice he reached into his paper sack to open a beer, but the thought of the police cruiser deterred him. If he was picked up, that would be the end of his six pack, and he would get no dinner — not that he was very hungry. He let himself into the rooming house, passed with eyes averted through the filthy entry way (he would certainly mop it out, spic and span, clean and bright tomorrow) and to his flat.

All was as he had left it. The dishes still tumbled across the sink, the flies were still buzzing around them, the goldfish circled placidly in its bowl — but the golden sunlight had departed. For a moment, he felt oddly oppressed by the twilight. Nothing a beer would not chase away. He peeled one off its plastic moorings, put the remainder of the six pack in the old fridge, and opened the cold can with a practiced flip of his swollen fingers. Turn on the television, rummage in the jumbled kitchen cupboard for that elusive can of tuna. Or had he eaten it the other day? No matter, there was some peanut butter left in the jar, and some crackers. That would suffice for now.

He sprinkled some fish food flakes into the bowl (must get more soon), collapsed into the striped easy chair in front of the television. *Who wants to be a millionaire* was playing. Another sign obviously, it was an antique from another era, a re-run to underline his coming good fortune.

Of course, nothing was 'on the air' these days, it was all by wire or over the Web. Or Net. Steaming. Streaming. Whatever you called it. His eyes were very heavy, and he was pleasantly relaxed. His feet had stopped hurting and there was an open beer to guard against thirst. And tomorrow he would be a millionaire. Visions of prosperity danced before him, as he slipped down and down into the land behind his eyelids. Tomorrow would be a wonderful day. Even better than today. He slept.

In the dim apartment, the goldfish swam around and around, pausing now and again to peer through the glass at the incomprehensible world outside.