



The Lottery Ticket

A Short Story by Robert Collinson

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Michael was feeling melancholy and sad as he walked down the street, heading towards the local shop to buy his Saturday requisites. People he knew looked at him and said good morning, but he nodded recognition without speaking.

Trying to overcome his misery was difficult for him, they had been together for nearly two years and Sandra was gone, she had packed her things and walked out the night before, without giving any reasons or proffering any explanation.

He had tried to find out what was wrong, he didn't know and she wouldn't tell him. He had tried to argue, but it only seemed to make her demeanour deteriorate even further and her determination more resolute.

He thought that perhaps he had taken her for granted; they had become very close during their time together and their lives had almost become a routine. Perhaps she was bored, or maybe she had simply fallen out of love with him? He couldn't decide and he realised despondently that he would probably never know.

He pushed the door of the shop open and picked up a newspaper and a bag of six morning rolls.

"Good morning Mike, how are you?" asked the shopkeeper.

"Ahh, eh... not bad, I guess Alec, could be worse," he replied wearily.

"Oh dear! Did you get out of bed on the wrong side this morning?" asked Alec.

"No mate, just confused. Sometimes life can be a test and I feel like I just failed. She took off last night, no reason, just walked out. What am I supposed to do?"

"Affairs of the heart my friend, never easy," replied Alec pensively.

"Two years we were together and I thought we were happy, then this! I don't get it, everything seemed fine, then out of the blue she up and leaves me. I keep thinking maybe she found someone else or there's a good reason, but I can't figure it out. A packet of cigarettes please Alec, Benson's..."

"I thought you had quit?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did but it seems like a good enough time to start again," Mike replied.

"You don't want to do that Mike. Just because you're feeling a bit down, you shouldn't start smoking again," said Alec.

"What the hell? Just give me the fags Alec will you..."

"Okay, sorry!" replied Alec as he put the packet on the counter.

"A bottle of Grouse too, I might as well do this right," declared Mike.

"Blimey! You shouldn't go drowning yourself in Scotch either Mike, it's not going to help..."

"When did you become my mother?" asked Mike angrily. "Just give me the Scotch or I'll go down the road and get it from the Paki's."

"Careful mate, you can't say that any more. You have to say you'll buy it from the Asian store, we must be politically correct you know," Alec replied, smiling wryly.

"Jesus! You know, if a man from Afghanistan is called an Afghani, and a man from Turkmenistan is called a Turkmeni, a man from Azerbaijan is called an Azeri, then surely, a man from Pakistan is called a Paki. Indians from India have called them Pakis for hundreds of years so what's wrong about it? I suppose they'd prefer to be called Pakish or something, but who really gives a fuck anyway? Call a spade a fucking shovel! Who cares?"

"Okay Mike, keep your shirt on! Listen, do you want a lottery ticket? It's a rollover tonight and the jackpot stands at thirty million, it could be you!"

"Seriously? I never win anything, I never have! Some lucky bastard will rake it in but I'm damn sure it won't be me!" replied Mike.

"You have to be in it to win it!" exclaimed Alec.

"Yeah, right. Are you on commission or something?"

"No, of course not, I was only saying... you never know!"

"All right, go on then, you've talked me into it," answered Mike reluctantly.

"You have to pick the numbers..."

“Nah! Make it one of those lucky dip things, I don’t believe in lucky numbers anyway.”

“Yes sir! Whatever you like,” replied Alec sarcastically as he pressed buttons and printed the ticket and took it from the machine, then handed it to him.

Mike paid him then walked out of the shop and returned to his gloomy state as he began to think about Sandra again. Saturday was the day that they always spent together. He would cook breakfast for her and they would laze around for a while, then tidy up the flat and do the laundry. It wasn’t exciting at all, but they were together. She usually went into town in the afternoon and he would go and watch the football and when he got back afterwards, they would decide whether to go out for dinner somewhere or get a takeaway and stay in and watch TV. Sometimes they would set off downtown and go to the cinema, or just spend the evening in the local pub. He was never overly concerned about what was decided, they were always together and that was all that mattered to him.

Now he was alone.

As he walked back towards his flat, he wasn’t really paying attention to anything in particular, as he mused on the death of his relationship with her.

He thought about the warmth of her, the touch of her skin, the sweet smell of her, the smile that she always seemed to display no matter what was happening. She laughed all the time, she was a happy person, whereas he considered himself to be more serious, perhaps moody or gloomy, perhaps even a bit depressive?

Maybe that was why she left...

“Can you help me young man?” asked a scruffy old woman on the street. She was pushing a supermarket trolley with her things wrapped in black plastic trash bags and she looked at him dismally.

“Eh? Sorry, I was miles away, yes, eh, just a moment...”

Mike fumbled around, patting his jacket pockets in search of his wallet, then finally pulled it out from the back pocket of his jeans.

“I’ve got nothing and I’m hungry!” she declared.

“Yes, I understand,” he replied sadly as he pulled out a five-pound note. The lottery ticket was stuck to it and the two came out together.

“You’re very kind,” she said as she held out her hand.

“Here you go lady, get something to eat,” he replied as he smiled and handed her the money, then noticed the lottery ticket. “You can have that too, maybe you’ll get lucky and your life will change? It’s a rollover and Alec said it was a thirty-million-pound jackpot. Good luck!”

“Thanks son, you’re a good lad!” she replied, smiling at him.

He walked away and laughed.

“Stupid fucking lottery! I really hope she wins! That would be amazing! She’ll be living in a mansion and driving a Ferrari!”

He laughed again as he walked down the road, trying to come to terms with the miserable feeling that still haunted him.

He wondered if perhaps Sandra would come back...

The routine that he had become accustomed to fell apart very quickly. She always drove it, she had a way of making things work out perfectly, even the simple things, like doing the laundry or cleaning the flat. He stopped caring about it. There was no reason to continue with the schedule that she had set, he was alone, nobody ever visited him and he quickly lost himself in a haze of alcohol. The condition of his environment deteriorated and his respect for his flat and himself fell away. Bottles disappeared quickly, cases of beer seemed to last a couple of days at most, and he fell into a deep depression. His demeanour had slipped from being mostly affable and almost friendly, to one of misery and despair.

His colleagues at work avoided him, they didn't speak to him and if one of them tried to make conversation, he was rude and more often abusive towards them.

He had noticed one of the girls in the office that had seemed to take an interest in him, she always smiled when he looked at her. She was very pretty, she had long dark hair, beautiful blue eyes and she always dressed smartly. Her clothes seemed to cling to her and define the voluptuous shape of her body, she always looked elegant, sophisticated, and was obviously inspired by the latest fashions. He considered it briefly, as a passing thought, and realised that she wasn't Sandra; she could never take the place of the girl he had fallen in love with. Even with her style and her looks, she could never replace Sandra and he had immediately decided that he didn't want anything to do with her.

He was sitting at his desk, working away on the boring and tiresome data input that was his job, as he realised that his life was worthless. All meaning had been lost and there was nothing he could do. He had no idea where Sandra had gone or what she was doing now.

"Hi Mike! I'm sorry to interrupt you, how are you doing?" she asked.

"Absolutely crap but thanks for asking. You?"

"I'm okay, but what's wrong with you? You always look so sad!"

"I'm sorry, I don't even know your name and you're asking me questions about my life? What business is it of yours? Why do people always have to interfere?" he questioned.

"I'm sorry, I was just trying to be friendly, that's all! My name is Alison and I wish I hadn't bothered! I made a special effort to come over here just to talk to you, you know, ask you if I could help in any way, and you accuse me of interfering? Well, fuck you!"

"I'm sorry Alison, I'm just a bit low at the moment, things aren't exactly going my way," he answered.

"You've been like this for a while now and I remember what you were like before. Something has changed, so what is it?"

"My girlfriend left me, no reason, just walked out," he replied.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed, "That's awful, oh, I'm so sorry..."

"It is what it is. It's over now," he answered dismally.

"You've really let yourself go, you don't even shave, it's like you don't care anymore," she proffered.

"Yes, you're correct! What's to care about? This place? This job? This fucking life?"

"Oh Mike, please don't be like this! Why don't you ask me out? I would like to get to know you, perhaps we would get on well together?"

"I doubt it. You wouldn't like me at all. Look at you! You're smart, you're very beautiful, and you could have any guy you wanted. What makes me so interesting? I'm not what you think."

"How do you know what I think? I know life can be cruel sometimes, but you should never just give up! There's always someone out there who cares, maybe there's someone who can perhaps turn your life around and make you happy? Look at that old woman on the news! Did you see that? It's one of the most wonderful things I've ever heard! She was a beggar on the street and she asks this guy to help her, to give her money because she was starving, so the guy gives her a fiver and there's a lottery ticket stuck to it. He wishes her good luck and walks off. It was a big interview they did with her on that talk show on TV, did you see it?"

"No, I don't watch TV much and if I did, I wouldn't be watching talk shows. I like movies, thrillers, but I never watch soaps or gossip shows. It doesn't interest me at all, but tell me, what happened?"

"Well... as it turned out, she won the jackpot! A thirty million rollover and she was the only winner! Camelot were happy because the ticket was one of those lucky dips and they had her on the show the next week. She explained what had happened and it seems that they're looking for the guy. He gave her the ticket down on Hope Street and they've been trying to find him but there's nothing to go on, just that it was a Saturday morning and the guy was carrying a paper and a carrier bag. Imagine that! A complete stranger gives you a winning lottery ticket. Isn't it amazing?"

"So, what did she do?" asked Mike.

"It seems that she's bought a house and she said she was going to make a new life for herself."

"Great!" exclaimed Mike. "Just my luck! I wonder if she got her Ferrari..." he laughed.

"What do you mean?" asked Alison.

"Nothing, just my little joke..."

"Ferrari? Why would she want a Ferrari?"

"She probably wouldn't. You know, people have dreams and most people know what they would do if they won the lottery. I saw a guy on TV before and he said that if he won the jackpot it wouldn't change his life. Then, when he actually did win, he bought a huge house, two new cars, another house in Spain and got married to a girl half his age. No, it didn't change his life at all!" He laughed as he identified with the irony of it and how people could be so hypocritical.

"So, what would you do if you won?" she asked.

"I could never win it because I never take part. I've only ever bought one lottery ticket in my whole life and..."

He stopped himself and looked into her eyes. He realised again how beautiful she was as she smiled at him.

"And?"

"I lost it somewhere," he lied as he realised that he couldn't admit that he had been so stupid and given away the winning ticket.

"Why are you lying?" asked Alison.

"What makes you say that?"

"You're lying! I can tell! Your eyes told me the truth, so what was it?" she asked.

"Okay, okay. It was me. I bought the ticket and I gave it away. Happy now?" he asked miserably.

"You're kidding!" she replied.

"Listen Alison, you said I was lying, you found me out, so I told you the truth and now you don't believe me? It was me. It was the day after Sandra left. I went to buy some rolls and a paper and Alec persuaded me to buy a ticket. He asked me to choose the numbers and I said I didn't care so he gave me a lucky dip. I walked down the street and this old woman asked me for money because she was hungry, so I gave her a fiver and the ticket was stuck to it. I told her to keep it and wished her good luck, then I thought I hope she wins, she can buy a mansion and a Ferrari, so there you go! See? I'm an idiot!"

"It was really you?"

"Yes, it was really me. Now, I've got work to do so..."

"You're not going to ask me out then?"

"No," he answered.

"Suit yourself!" she exclaimed angrily as she walked away.

He shook his head at his own stupidity as he considered what his life would have become if he had kept the ticket. Ironic, yes, definitely, he thought. The circumstances were clear and the realisation simply made him more resolute in his despair. The way things happen in life is always so cruel, he told himself as he moved the input sheet into the tray, then picked up the next one and started to type.

If I had been destined to win the fucking lottery, I would have kept the ticket, he thought. It doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things because if I was destined to win, I wouldn't have given the ticket away. It doesn't matter at all and I'm glad that old woman won it! He jumped up from his desk and punched the air.

"Yes!" he screamed in jubilation, "Yes!"

Everyone in the office looked at him as if he had lost his mind but his happiness overwhelmed him as he put on his jacket and walked out, thinking about the old lady and how her life would change.

"I'll have a pint of the eighty-shilling ale please," said Mike to the barman.

"Coming right up sir," he replied.

"Today is a good day!" he exclaimed.

"Happy to hear it," answered the barman sternly as he pulled on the handle and the beer gushed into the glass.

"I'm not happy for myself you understand, I'm happy for someone else! It's brilliant!"

"So, you're celebrating for somebody else?" he asked.

"Absolutely!" he exclaimed as he took his pint and sat down at a table, laughing.

The afternoon seemed to drag by and every time he looked at the time it seemed that it had only been ten minutes since he last looked. The atmosphere in the office was a miserable drudgery that seemed to hang in the air like looming storm clouds. Nobody liked being here, and nobody enjoyed their work or gained the slightest bit of job satisfaction from doing it. Dull didn't cover it, boring was an inadequate description and the only reason that people worked here was for the money, which wasn't bad as a reward for being terminally brain-dead.

Mike considered his options and decided that he wanted to change his life. This wasn't a life at all, it was simply a means of paying the bills. He wondered what was out there waiting for him to discover, and he considered that there had to be something better than this. Perhaps there was a better life out there somewhere, just around the corner? Maybe, there was a rainbow somewhere, with a crock of gold at the end of it?

"Probably just a crock of shit!" he mused, as some of his co-workers looked at him curiously. The more he thought about it, the more the effect of it grabbed him. Sandra had left him, but he owned his flat and all he really had to do was pay the bills every month. There was really nothing to keep him there; he didn't have any friends at work, they were all just mindless robots the same as him. They clocked in every morning then clocked out at five in the afternoon, every day, the same. Verbal interaction was non-existent and Alison had been the only other person to speak to him in a very long time. He decided that he shouldn't have been so rude to her, so he got up from his desk and walked over to her workstation.

"Hi Alison, how are you?" he asked.

"Honoured," she answered.

"Eh? Why?"

"Because Mike MacLeod finally decides to speak to me!" she replied sarcastically.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have been so rude to you. You were kind and genuinely concerned, which shows that you care. Can I take you out one night? Maybe you'd like to have dinner?"

"No thanks! I don't think we'd get along," she answered curtly.

"Oh, okay then... sorry," he said as he turned and walked away.

He was confused. She had seemed interested but now she had changed her mind. He shrugged it off and wondered why he had bothered, then it struck him that he had been rude and stupid as he sat down and continued on the mind-numbingly boring data input.

The next morning as he walked towards his desk, she was there, waiting.

"Good morning," she said politely, "found your razor? You look very nice without the stubble, much younger, very handsome!"

"Yes thanks, beard gone. Good morning to you," he replied.

"I'm sorry, I have to apologise before you find out," she declared.

"Find out what?" he asked.

"I couldn't resist it! I told you yesterday that they were looking for you, so I told them you were here. I wouldn't be surprised if you got a visitor today..."

"Told who? What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Camelot! I would imagine there will be reporters too, you're going to be famous!"

"Oh no! I don't want to be famous, I just want to be left alone! Why would you do this to me? I don't want any of this! You have no right to interfere in my life! What makes you think you can

make decisions like that for me? If I had wanted it, I would have contacted them myself!"

"There's gratitude! I thought you would be pleased!" exclaimed Alison.

"Why would I be pleased? It wasn't me who won the lottery and I don't want to be famous! Just go away and leave me alone!" he yelled.

It was just after eleven o'clock when the TV crew arrived with some talk-show host woman directing them. Alison stood up and pointed at him as they moved towards him.

"You're Mike? You're the guy who gave Millie your lottery ticket?" asked the reporter.

"No, I'm sorry, you've got the wrong guy," he replied.

"No, you're the guy, we tracked you down! You bought the lottery ticket from the shop in Hope Street, we've got the time and the date and even the shopkeeper identified you. Why are you arguing when we know it was you?" she asked.

"Listen lady, I gave the ticket away, I don't want to be on TV and I don't want to talk to you, now... please just go away and leave me alone!"

"You don't understand! Millie wants to share the money with you! She said she thought you were an angel that came down from heaven to change her life! She wants to give you half of her winnings!"

"You're nuts! Who would do that? Listen, just go away and leave me alone, okay? If you're not out of here in ten seconds flat I'm calling security, so bugger off!" Mike yelled.

"Come on Suzanne, let's just go," said the cameraman.

"Please Mike, it'll take five minutes, that's all!" she begged.

"Fuck off!" he screamed as he noticed Alison standing behind the partition.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "They're here to talk to you and you'll be on the news. How could you not want this you idiot? You'll be famous!"

"I told you already Alison, I don't want to be famous. I just want to be left alone!"

The woman and her crew promptly left as quickly as they had arrived, and he sat down to continue his work. The weekend loomed before him as he thought that in a few hours the week would be over and he would be facing yet another two days of loneliness in his flat; wondering about Sandra, where she was, what she was doing, hoping that she would come back soon, when he knew deep in his heart that she would never return. He knew how resolute she was; when she made up her mind, that was it, she never faltered, reconsidered or ever changed her mind.

His Friday night began in the local pub as usual, and he drank pints of his preferred ale until he was full. It was easy, there was no gas in it and he marvelled at the way the beer just slid down so easily, as he ordered another, then another.

He decided to treat himself to a takeaway and he walked towards *The Light of Bengal*, trying to persuade himself that he was going to enjoy his evening. He resigned himself to the fact that it was impossible, but he would make the most of it anyway, and there were still a couple of bottles of decent red wine in the cupboard.

"Butter chicken please, spicy, pilau rice, garlic nan bread and some of those vegetable pakora things," he mused.

"Yes Mike, watching telly tonight?" asked Rashid.

"Yeah, looks like it my friend..."

"Mum has made a special curry tonight with lady fingers, I'll put some in the bag for you to try, it's very good! Free of charge for you, maybe you will like?"

"Thanks Rashid, you're a pal, I always like to try something new," declared Mike.

"Yes, I know, it's why you always order the same thing every time you come in here!" he replied, laughing.

"Ahh, but your butter chicken is the best! Why change anything when you know what you like best?"

Rashid laughed and hurried away into the kitchen as Mike sat down and waited.

The door opened and Alison walked in with another girl beside her and he looked at them curiously. He wondered why, of all the places they could go, they had to choose the same restaurant as him.

"Oh! Hello Mike! This is weird! What are the chances...?" she asked.

"Hi Alison, yeah, the Friday night special," he replied, as if he was totally uninterested.

"This is my friend Denise, we're going back to mine for a quiet night and a movie," she stated.

"Oh, that's nice," replied Mike sarcastically as he imagined some sappy chick-flick and the two of them wearing quilted dressing gowns and fluffy slippers.

"Hey! Why don't you join us? It'll be fun!" she offered.

"No thanks, you're very kind but Bridget Jones doesn't do it for me," he replied curtly.

"Wow! I bet you've seen it before anyway!" she retorted, laughing.

"More times than I care to remember. Girls always make us suffer when it comes to these things and we sit there quietly and don't complain. If we fall asleep, we don't have to worry because you're always there to wake us up in time for the romantic bits, or give us a nudge to pass the tissues when the film gets to the sad part. Poor Bridget! Well, she gets the sappy guy in the end, so they all lived happily ever after..."

Denise and Alison laughed hysterically, and he wondered why. It wasn't that funny, it was simply his perception of the standard girlie movie and a recollection of his past experiences on many occasions, when Sandra had demanded that they watch some dreary film starring Hugh Grant or Julia Roberts. As he considered it further, he decided that he would be prepared to surrender once again, just to be sitting on the sofa beside her.

"So, what are you going to do?" asked Alison.

"Well, I was thinking Four Weddings and a Funeral tonight..."

"What? You're kidding!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, of course! To be honest, I don't know. All I'm really certain of is that the remote control is going to be busy. I tend to flip around a lot," Mike replied.

"Oh no! I can't stand people who do that!" cried Denise.

"You can't stand me then! You have to understand that when you're alone it doesn't matter if you flip around, but when you're with someone else, you don't. You must be patient and observe the wishes of others," he answered.

"So, you're very considerate then?" asked Alison coyly.

"Hmmm, maybe, I don't know..."

"Listen Mike, I'm really sorry about those TV people, it wasn't my business and I shouldn't have interfered..."

"That's okay, don't worry about it," he replied.

"You're a strange guy! Most people would jump at a chance like that!" she declared.

"I'm not most people. I prefer to be private in what I do, and I couldn't stand it if people approached me in the street saying you're that guy! Yes! It was you! All that crap would just annoy me," he stated calmly.

"What about the money?" she asked.

"What about it?"

"Well, that's a life-changer right there! Imagine what you could do with fifteen million!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Denise.

Alison explained the story to her as Mike's thoughts turned away from all of it and he started to think about tomorrow's football match and following his newly-revised Saturday routine. It simply wasn't the same without her, everything had changed and all his reasons for being happy had disappeared with her the night that she had walked out the door.

It seemed like a long time ago and he realised just exactly how much he missed her. It was her funny little ways; the way she sprayed deodorant under her arms by changing hands, the way she put tomato ketchup on the plate before she added any food, the way she stored her shoes backwards in the cupboard. It was just Sandra. He never complained or questioned any of it, he laughed at her and she always asked him what he was laughing at. He never answered. He could see her face, her eyes staring at him as she ran her fingers through her hair, tying her scarf around her neck in the

funny way she did it, watching in the mirror to ensure that it was perfect, then smiling with satisfaction at her own proficiency. She was wonderful, she was everything. She was gone.

The tears welled up in his eyes and Denise looked at him in amazement as Alison concluded her rendition of his story.

“Fifteen million? Jesus! I could spend it all!” exclaimed Denise.

Alison laughed and Mike slumped further into his depression.

“Money! Why is it always about money? Do you think that a load of money would make you happy?” asked Mike aggressively.

“Yes, of course! It means you could do anything you wanted! Imagine the great holidays, a fabulous new house, giving up working in that shitty office, never having to worry about paying the rent or going shopping! It would be incredible!” exclaimed Denise.

“Then what? Tell me what you’d do then! You’ve done the holiday, bought the house and the car, gone shopping until you got bored of it all, then what do you do?” he asked.

“I don’t know, I’d find something...”

“Take up golf? Join the Country Club? Hob-nob with the toffs and brag about the Gucci shoes you just bought that cost three hundred quid? Have grand parties with champagne and caviar and a load of people you can’t stand? Think about it! What about your boyfriend Denise?” he queried.

“That’s easy! I don’t have a boyfriend,” she answered defiantly.

“So... during the process of trying to find one, you see a guy and you think he’s nice. Then you’re faced with the question... does he really love me or does he just want the money? Will he just use me to buy him that brand-new Kawasaki and a full set of racing leathers, or maybe the sports car that the two of you could pose around in?”

“Wow! You’re so cynical! Are you ever happy with anything?” asked Denise.

“I used to be, but not anymore,” he replied as Rashid delivered his carrier bag onto the table. He paid, lifted the bag and thanked him, then turned towards the door, desperate to be away from them.

“Mike?” said Alison.

“Yes, what?” he asked irritably.

“I’m sorry about what I said before, I would really like to go out with you. Can we meet up, tomorrow maybe?”

“I usually go to the football, but afterwards if you want, maybe we could go out for dinner?” he offered.

“I always go to the football too, I’ve got a season ticket and my seat is in the South Stand,” she replied.

“Really? That’s amazing, I didn’t think...”

“I’ll meet you in Ryrie’s Bar after the game if you like and we can take it from there?”

“Yeah, okay then, good idea! I’ll see you then,” he agreed.

She stepped towards him and kissed him on the cheek as Denise giggled.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered.

“Yes, have a good night and enjoy your movie,” he replied.

“You can still join us if you’d like...”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said as he marched away as quickly as he could.

He walked into the flat then proceeded to put his food onto plates as he noticed the pile of dishes in the sink. He cursed himself and made a promise to clean the place up tomorrow and try to put a new schedule in place. Saturday morning was always the time for exerting the domestic effort, the way Sandra used to do it, he thought. His efforts could never be as good as hers, but he would try, nonetheless. Yes, clean the kitchen, organise the laundry and do a load, vacuum, change the bed, make the place nice, the way it used to be...

He sat down and put the plates on the coffee table, then switched on the TV and began to eat. He

liked the lady fingers, this was something new and the curry was a different taste to his butter chicken. He remembered the wine, then decided not to bother. The real ale had taken its' toll, given him an appetite, and he felt happy enough as he dipped the nan bread into the sauce and continued to demolish the generous servings of Indian food in front of him.

There was some drama on the TV and he wasn't paying much attention to it as he sat back and lit a cigarette. Sandra wouldn't have liked that at all. He laughed.

"Fuck it! There's nobody here to tell me what to do! It's my flat and I'll smoke in here if I want to!" he declared defiantly, realising that he was arguing with himself and there was nobody else there. As he thought about it, he discovered that he had been talking to himself ever since she had left. He considered the reason and the answer was simple enough, he was lonely.

He started to think about Alison and decided to try to do it with an open mind as he began his "question and answer session" with himself, which led him to conclusions, or sometimes occasionally allowed him to make positive decisions.

"She's very pretty..." he mused.

"Yes, too pretty for a mug like you!" he answered himself.

"She's smart though, she's not some bimbo and she has nice manners. Mum would like her..."

"Mum likes all the girls you take to meet her. She just wants you to be happy and settle down! She just wants grandchildren!" he argued.

"Fuck that!"

"She's got a season ticket? Girls don't do that! They go shopping on a Saturday afternoon!"

"So, she's a special girl then?"

"Yes, she must be if she goes to the football! Ryrie's?"

"Yeah... strange one. Girls don't drink in Ryrie's, it's an old man's pub..."

"She kissed me!"

"Yeah, she's very sweet..."

"So?"

"One step at a time. It depends what happens tomorrow, let's just wait and see..."

"Fucking coward! No commitment! You either like her or you don't!"

"I like her. She's single-minded. She seems to know what she wants and she goes for it!"

"Careful now... maybe she's hunting and she's got you in her sights!"

"Maybe..."

The news came on and he turned up the volume on the TV and decided to drink some wine after all. There was still some food left on the plates and he would nibble on it as he drank. He turned his attention to the TV and then he saw his picture appearing on the screen.

"What the f...?" he yelled.

"This man has now been identified as Michael MacLeod, the man who charitably gave a poor starving woman money for food, along with what turned out to be the winning lottery ticket in the mega-rollover draw which netted thirty million pounds. Our team tried to interview him today but he shunned them, denying his involvement at first, then threatened to have them removed from his office by force."

The video showed him in the office and his speech had been "beeped out" as he cursed at the woman and her camera crew.

"Very strange behaviour indeed, we had hoped to interview him and have him as a guest on the show, to meet with Millie again and talk about his reasons for giving away his lottery ticket. Perhaps he is an angel after all? I guess we'll never know because he has flatly refused to comment or be interviewed. Perhaps our report will spur him into action? This is Fiona Macdonald, reporting on the strange case of such generous charity that has turned the heads of the nation!"

"Thanks for that Fiona, I can only add now that the Director of Camelot has commented on this

himself..."

"We at Camelot are amazed by this selfless act of charity and compassion. A young man who decided to help another person, by giving her money to buy food because she was starving, and was simply begging on the streets. He saw an opportunity to help her and as a result, also gave her the chance to win big in our mega-rollover draw.

There have been claims in the past where people have lost their tickets and the finder has claimed the winnings, only to result in court action by the purchaser of the ticket. I mean, this is no small amount of money, and most people would be clamouring to try to recover what they could. It restores my faith in human nature that Mister MacLeod has acted in this selfless way and has refused to make any claim whatsoever on Mrs. Millicent Anderson, who was widowed ten years ago and left with nothing. I would ask Mister MacLeod to contact us directly as a priority, so that we can take the appropriate steps to ensure that he is rewarded for his kindness."

"Thank you very much..."

Mike reached for the remote and switched off the TV, then threw it down on the sofa.

"They just don't get it! Why don't they understand? I gave the old woman money so that she could eat something! I don't care about any fucking lottery ticket and I don't want any fucking reward! Arseholes!"

It was just after noon the next day when he completed his domestic chores. He flopped down on the sofa as he realised how very tiring it was. He looked around with a certain pride and a sense of satisfaction at his efforts, as he sat with a cup of coffee and then started to prepare himself mentally for what was to happen after the game.

He would meet Alison again and he realised immediately that his attitude towards her had changed. The anticipation of it started to make him nervous and he wished he hadn't agreed to it. She would realise all his faults, she would know that he wasn't what she expected and she would be disappointed, then refuse to see him again. It was inevitable. Nobody could ever understand him the way Sandra had, and she had found out eventually anyway, after living with him for two years, then she had decided to leave. It was pointless.

He wondered if he should even show up at all, then he thought it would be terrible for Alison to be stood up after he had agreed to meet her. No, that was the worst! He had been stood up before and he remembered the awful feeling. It was cruel and it was a betrayal, he couldn't do that to her. She was a nice person, kind and caring, she was sweet and of course, she was very beautiful. He tried to imagine what it would be like if she was his girlfriend and he couldn't. A wonderful girl like her wouldn't want to be with him. Then he remembered that it had been her idea in the first place, so perhaps there was some hope after all?

His sense of disappointment overwhelmed him again as he walked up the side street away from the stadium. They had lost three games in a row now and it didn't seem like they would ever win again. The performance was poor, every refereeing decision went against them, the visitors were awarded a penalty for no reason at all, and the final score of three-nil was painful. The usual comments would be made, the same excuses as always would be proffered, and the pundits' remarks would be exactly as they were last week.

"Poor performance, weak in defence, lack-lustre attacks, inability to score a goal, sadly so close but yet so far..."

"Bollocks! Well, at least they've got good ale in Ryrie's," he told himself.

"Aye son! Is that where you're headed?" asked an old man who was walking beside him in the crowd.

"Yeah, nothing else for it. What a fucking disgrace..."

"Aye, piss-poor, they're getting worse," he replied.

"It makes you wonder if it's even worth the money," stated Matt.

"There's always the pies at half-time," he answered, grinning.

"Yes indeed! The pies are great but you can buy them from the baker's without paying for a ticket!"

"Keep the faith son, they'll come around!"

"Let's hope so. You come every week?" asked Matt.

"Aye, when I can. Sometimes I even get to go to the away games if my son is up for the driving."

"That's great! I used to go but it was about the travelling time and I always got home too late so my girlfriend complained."

"I don't have that problem anymore, since the wife passed," he declared.

"Tell me something, I'm curious. How long were you married?" asked Matt.

"Forty-two years," he answered.

"Do you miss her?"

"Every day..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"No son, it's okay, dinnae worry," he answered as he smiled sadly. "Funny really, we lived our whole lives together, saving money, scraping by and then after she dies my sister wins the lottery and she gives me a million quid! God knows what I'm supposed to do with it!"

Matt's face fell as he thought of a retort.

"Your sister... her name's not Millie is it?" he asked.

"Aye son, how did you know?"

Mike immediately picked up his pace and marched away from the old man as quickly as he could. He didn't look back or hesitate, he almost ran.

Ryrie's Bar was packed with people and as he opened the door he realised that making polite conversation with Alison was going to be nigh-on impossible. The noise level was set at fever pitch as he tried delicately to wind his way through the hoards, in an attempt to avoid spilling anyone else's beer over himself. He ordered a pint then looked around as Alison moved towards him, shimmying gracefully through the crowd.

"Mike!" she cried.

"What would you like?" he called.

"Pint please!" she cried, twisting and turning her way towards the bar. She looked beautiful with her hair tied up on top of her head and her football scarf knotted around her neck loosely. She beamed a huge smile at him as she arrived beside him, then stretched up and kissed him on the cheek.

"You look lovely," he commented.

"I wondered if you'd even show up, I wasn't sure..."

"I would never do that to you," he replied as he remembered his thoughts from earlier in the day.

"I saw you on telly!" she declared, giggling.

"Yes, thanks for that..."

"These TV people are very determined. Once they get a hold of you, they never let go!"

"Yeah, I noticed that too! They were filming in the office and I didn't even know," he replied.

"Don't worry, it'll all be forgotten quickly. Everyone's famous for fifteen minutes! There will be something else to muster public attention soon, it's always the same. They call it news cycle, it never lasts."

"Good, I don't want any of it," he stated emphatically.

"That's what I like about you," she answered.

"What?" he asked.

"Well, you could have fifteen million in your hands right now but you don't want it. Your life would change and that's the reason you don't want it. You're happy the way you are, miserable and sad because your girlfriend left you and you believe that nothing, including such a large sum of money, could ever make you as happy as you were when you were with her. It's almost as if you enjoy the sad loneliness that you feel, but apart from that, which is relevant in its' own way, you

don't place any value on the money at all. It's what you said to Denise last night that really got me. You place value on relationships, people, you are kind and selfless, and you have love in your heart, so that's what makes you special. You're a lovely guy Mike, if only you could see it."

He looked at her then stared into her deep blue eyes, wondering when anyone had ever said anything like that to him before. They hadn't. He turned towards her and put his hand on her shoulder then kissed her passionately.

"Sorry, I..."

"What do you have to be sorry about? You kissed me. I wanted you to kiss me and you did. Don't think about it Mike, just know that all I want to do is make you happy."

"I... I..." he stammered.

"Shut up and pass me my beer..."

Mike enjoyed the best weekend he could ever remember. They spent all their time together and neither of them wanted to be parted from the other. They had dinner on the Saturday night but couldn't decide where they wanted to go. Eventually they flipped a coin to decide between a Chinese restaurant that Alison liked, and his favourite steakhouse. She won the toss and they both enjoyed the food, as they talked and laughed together.

When the evening was over, he felt awkward about raising the subject of what would happen next, so he decided that he would hail a taxi and take her home.

Alison immediately sensed his feelings and she looked at him confidently and put her arm in his.

"It's simple Mike, it's a question of where. You come to mine or I come to yours," she declared, smiling at him.

"What would you like to do?" he asked.

"I would like to come to your flat tonight, then tomorrow you can come to mine?"

"Okay, fine with me," he answered as he silently thanked God that he had spent the morning cleaning the place.

Monday morning came around too quickly and he jumped out of bed at 5am and dressed quickly.

"What's the hurry?" she asked as she yawned and stretched herself, then looked at him.

"I have to go back to mine and get changed for work, and if we arrive at the office together it'll start all kinds of gossip. You know what they're like!" he exclaimed.

"I don't care! I'm happy to be with you and I don't give a damn about what anyone says or thinks! I know, I understand, it's your way of dealing with things, mister private person!"

He laughed as he looked at her.

"Yes, you're right! How did you know?"

"You wouldn't be ashamed of me Mike, would you?" she asked calmly.

"No, of course not! How could I? I love you, you're beautiful and I'm very proud of you!"

"So, you'll be telling everyone then?"

"Eh, no, I hadn't planned on it," he answered.

She laughed again.

"That's okay, just leave it to me! I'll do it!"

"Alison..."

"Okay, sorry. Next week then?"

"Unbelievable!" he said, shaking his head in disbelief as he slipped his jacket on.

"See you in the office then secret squirrel," she replied, chuckling to herself.

"I love you Alison, and this bed is so comfortable," he declared as he stooped down and kissed her passionately.

"I love you too, now go!"

Suddenly, over one short weekend, his life had changed. He hadn't thought about Sandra once, and he decided that now he could let her go completely. He realised that she hadn't exactly been fair the way she had left him, she had acted cruelly and hadn't once considered his feelings or his love for her, but he decided to forgive her. He could never make comparisons between them, but Alison

was incredible. She had a way of making things right. It was never awkward being with her, it was natural, as if they had known each other their whole lives and she knew all the answers before he even asked the questions. She was perfect.

The days passed quickly as they were both content to look forward to the weekends and the nights they could spend together. Alison's flat was much bigger than his, but she rented it, so they agreed that she would move into his flat so that they could be together. His place also had two bedrooms and Alison only had a few items of furniture to move, and it would fit in perfectly. They agreed that they would do the move in five days' time and he would borrow Dave's truck so that they could do it all in one run.

It was Wednesday night the following week when Mike was cooking spaghetti and working on making the sauce to go with it, when the doorbell rang. Alison sprang up and called to him.

"I'll get it!" she cried as she bounded towards the door. "We don't want you burning that sauce!"

She pulled the latch and as she opened the door, she realised there was nobody there.

"Pranksters!" she muttered. "Probably kids thinking that they're funny! Little devils!"

She laughed as she closed the door then noticed the envelope on the floor. She picked it up and looked at it. There was no stamp on it, just handwriting that said "*Michael*."

She walked back into the living room then turned in towards the little kitchen and handed him the letter.

"Hand delivered," she stated as she walked away, back towards the living room.

Mike was curious and he opened it immediately and began to read:

Dear Michael,

I am so sorry to approach you like this, but please bear with me as I try to justify my actions. I had to do a bit of investigating to find out your address and rather than just show up on your doorstep, I thought it would be best to write you a letter.

First of all, I have to thank you for your kindness. I was truly starving and the first thing I did was to go to the little café on Hope Street and have a huge breakfast. It was wonderful! Sometimes the simple things in life make you realise how life is meaningless without having someone to love.

My main reason for writing this was to try to address the subject of the lottery win. Please believe me when I say that I was truly shocked at what has happened, it has probably surprised both of us?!

I never thought it was possible for this to happen and because it has, I must share it with you. You are a young man, you have your life ahead of you, whereas I am an old woman and only God knows how much time I have left. I have enclosed a cheque made out in your name and I insist that you take it in the spirit in which it is given. I could never use this amount of money in two lifetimes, therefore it is only fair that you have half. I will give a portion of my half to various charities in the hope that I can do some good in this world before I pass away. I know you are reluctant to take any of this money, as I have been told, but if you decide not to take this cheque, or you don't pay it into your bank within one month, I will have the amount transferred into your account anyway, so there's no point in refusing it. I am a very stubborn old woman and on this I will stand firm and see it done!

Take it, enjoy it, use it to make a better life for yourself and those you love.

Thank you always for your kind generosity, God bless you and keep you.

All my love to you dearest Michael,

Millie.

X

"Alison? Come and see this!" he cried. "You must read it, crazy old woman!"

She took the letter from his hand and began to read it, then folded it and laid it down on the worktop. He placed the cheque on top of it and looked at it in wonder.

"So? What will you do?" she asked.

"Now there's a question!" he exclaimed as he smiled at her. "What would you do?"

"It's not my decision Mike. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other," she replied calmly.

"That's it then, I'll put the cheque in the bank tomorrow," he decided.

"After all this, now you decide to take the money? Why?" she asked.

"Well, this is the third time she's offered and now she's determined. If I don't bank the cheque, she will anyway, so one way or the other, it still comes to me. The other reason is you and what you just said. Most women would be insistent that I take the money, thinking of all the things they could buy, how it would change their lives, but you never did. You never mentioned any of the possibilities, or thought about what you could do with a sum of money like that!"

"Why would I? It's not my decision!"

"That's exactly what I mean! You just said it again! Let's buy a new flat to start our new life together," he declared.

"Flat? Why?" she asked, laughing. "We'll need a house with a garage for your car!"

"Hmmm, yes, I guess you're right. So how many bedrooms?" he asked.

"I think three! Yes, a nice big bedroom for us, and another two for wee Michael Macleod and his little sister Morag!" she decided.

"Oh no! Not Michael and Morag!" he argued, laughing.

"Why not?" she objected.

"Not Michael like his father, oh no... what about Monster? That's a good name!"

She laughed as he stirred the sauce again and declared it ready.

"Garlic bread?" she asked.

"In the oven..."

They ate dinner as Alison watched a talk show on TV. Mike wasn't paying any attention to it, he was daydreaming about what they were going to do, where they were going to live, what type of car he was going to buy, then he realised he had just become someone else. He had already decided not to do this, but now there was a reason. Her name was Alison, she was beautiful, he adored her, and he knew that she had changed him so much, even in the short time they had been together.

"Now we follow up on the strange story of the mega-rollover lottery win from last month. The winner was Mrs. Millie Anderson and we have her here with us now. Good evening Millie! Don't you look lovely? What a beautiful dress! I suppose that life is treating you very kindly now after your fantastic luck?" the interviewer asked.

"Oh No! Not again... for God's sake! When will they leave this alone?" cried Mike.

"Shhh! Let's listen to her!" insisted Alison.

"Yes, you could say that!" she exclaimed. "I've got myself sorted out and I decided to help my brother. He's really never been the same since his dear wife passed away, so I gave him some money to help him," she declared.

"That's a lovely thing to do Millie, but what about you?" she asked.

"Well dear, I bought a house and to be honest, I didn't know it would be so complicated! I had to arrange for curtains and carpets, then there was something wrong with the central heating but they sent a wee man to fix it, then there was the furniture. What a nightmare! They delivered the wrong stuff and I had to send it all back. They were supposed to deliver it yesterday, then today, now it's tomorrow..."

"I see... not so simple then..."

"No dear, very awkward and the woman in the shop was such a bitch! I've got a good mind to go down there and slap her!" exclaimed Millie.

"Oh Millie! You are awful!" laughed the interviewer.

"I'm just not used to it dear. They told me at Camelot it would take time for me to adjust to being a winner and they were right!"

"So what else have you been doing?" she asked.

"No Millie! Please... Don't Millie, please don't!" cried Mike in anticipation.

"What's wrong?" asked Alison.

Mike didn't answer and he waited eagerly, with his eyes fixed firmly on the screen.

"I managed to find out where young Michael lived, so I popped a letter through his door on my way here. I just told him he needed to accept the money and I wrote him a cheque," she declared.

"Oh, fuck no!" cried Mike in disbelief. "That's torn it!"

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Alison.

Mike dropped his head into his hands as he considered the implications of what she had done. The publicity so far would be nothing compared to what was about to happen. One of his main reasons for refusing the money was the ensuing media circus, and now it was going to happen anyway.

"Publicity Ali, reporters, cameras, never-ending questions, there will be no peace now..."

"We'll get through it, don't worry. It'll pass soon enough," she replied.

"That's great Ali, and the begging letters? The phone calls? The hate and jealousy? It's what always happens when people find out you've won the lottery. There was a programme on TV about it and you should have seen what people were saying. One woman moved to France just to get away from all the hassle and another man moved from Glasgow to Cornwall. I mean Cornwall? Jesus! Why would anyone move to Cornwall? There's nothing there!"

"It's supposed to be very beautiful," she answered.

"It's in England for Christ's sake!"

She laughed heartily, "Yes Mike, it's in England..."

Mike cleared away their plates and then washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen. When she cooked it was always clean and tidy. When he cooked it looked like downtown Baghdad after a drone strike.

"Would you like some ice cream?" he called to her.

"No thanks love, coffee will be fine. I'm full!" she replied.

He loaded the tray with the coffee pot, some little biscuits that she liked, then reached up and pulled the whisky bottle out of the cupboard.

"Dram to finish!" he said, smiling as he reached for two tumblers.

They sat with their coffee then she switched the TV off.

"So...? Is it really that bad, mister doom and gloom?" she asked.

"No, I suppose not, but it might be a bit difficult for a while," he answered.

"I'll protect you," she said, smiling at him.

"Jesus! I'm so glad I've got you," he replied seriously as he leaned over and kissed her.

"Such a baby! Adorable, but such a big baby!" she laughed as the phone rang.

Mike reached across and took the phone in his hand.

"Hello? This is Gentle Friends Retirement Home for the Aged and Infirm. We're too busy to take your call at the moment, but if you'd like to leave a message, just leave your name and number and we'll return your call after the medication has been distributed. Please wait for the beep... Beeeep!"

"Mike? Is that you?"

His face fell as he recognised her voice.

"Yes Sandra, it's me. What do you want?" he asked.

"I've been thinking and over the past couple of weeks I came to realise how much I miss you. Have you been thinking about me?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, no, not at all. I just got engaged last weekend and we're getting married in July," he answered as Alison looked at him quizzically.

An awkward silence followed and he decided not to break it.

"Well, that didn't take you long!" she declared.

"Long enough," he answered.

"So you've forgotten all about me?" she asked.

"Completely. When you left without any explanation I realised it was over, so I moved on with my life. I've met a wonderful girl and we're very much in love. She's sweet and very beautiful, I adore her, and we've just recently moved in together. Your call comes a bit too late if you were hoping we could get back together."

"Oh! I... I wasn't, I just... eh, I... eh, I just wondered how you were doing," she stuttered, as if she was stumbling on her own words.

"I'm fine, thanks for your concern," he replied sarcastically.

"You're lying! There's nobody there with you!" accused Sandra.

"Alison? This is Sandra, would you like to talk to her? Maybe we could invite her to the wedding?" he asked as he passed the phone to her, smiling contentedly.

"Hello Sandra! I feel like I know you already, Mike's told me so much about you! How are you, is everything okay? Perhaps you just called because you're lonely and you're missing Mike? He told me about your relationship and it's so sad when you break-up in this terribly hurtful way. Can you tell me why you decided to leave him? He's such a great guy, I can't imagine how you could bear to be separated from him. Or perhaps you just called because you would like us to send you some money?"

The awkward silence returned and Alison smiled at Mike as the line went dead.

"Looks like quite a few people were watching Millie on TV," declared Mike.

"It would seem so my love, probably the first of many calls..." she mused.

"Remind me to buy an answering machine tomorrow at lunchtime, will you?" he asked.

She laughed then smiled at him.

"I will my darling, you can put your message on it, you know, the one from the old folks' home?"

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