

JUST MY LUCK

I don't know exactly what it was, but I just had a good feeling about it. I go to do the numbers every Friday about half eleven in the morning, you see. No one minds me taking five minutes just to go down the road to the newsagents if Will's there to look after the phones. It's nice to get out of the office for a bit and I do the firm's while I'm there- I run a firm for the office. It's one of those things that you've done it so many times you don't even notice it any more, it's just a part of the routine. I said to Will

I'm just popping out to do the lottery all right

and went out. It was a lovely day, perhaps that had something to do with it. Clear, and a bit warmer than it's been so long as you stayed in the sun. I got this feeling, and it come on quite sudden, that this time I was going to win, win big. It was a rollover; I've forgotten the exact amount but it was I don't know at least fifteen million, more money than you could spend anyway. I've been doing the lottery, or the Lotto as they call it now, since it started. I've won £25 a couple of times and about two or three years ago I won £160 with four balls and the bonus ball. We've won some money with the firm too, but never as much as all that and once you split it between everyone it doesn't come to much more than the price of another ticket. I've never done the scratch cards they have really, I wouldn't want to get addicted or anything. Because the temptation there is just to buy another one immediately. This way I have my set time every week when I do it and then I watch the results on Saturday at home. Because you do hear about these people getting addicted.

What with having done it for so long I know all the usual feelings you get. I still get excited on a Saturday night and I hope I'll win but I don't expect it. I don't really get disappointed as such either because I know that even if I lose it makes it more likely that I'll win next time because I always choose the same numbers 18, 02, 21, 11, 01, 10 and 47. That's my birthday, Joe James's birthday and my husband Ray's birthday. 47, the bonus ball, is the number of our house. And I always think those numbers must come up eventually because they've come up for me once before. But you might say that makes it less likely, it depends on how you look at it.

But that day was different. I had a new sort of feeling, a feeling that I can only describe as "expectant". I'll try and explain how it was different: it was like I actually knew that I was going to win. That I knew in advance that I was going to win but also, because I knew, I shouldn't really think about it too much too directly I suppose because that wouldn't be modest in a way. It felt like if I wasn't sort of modest about it even to myself then that would be like taking it for granted and if I took it for

granted that would mean then I wouldn't win, as a kind of punishment. So I was very careful as I made my way down to the shop that I wasn't too presuming in the way that I thought about it, even though I basically knew in advance that I was going to win this time, or at least I thought I did.

All the same I couldn't help my mind from wandering on to some of the things I would do with the money when I got it. I wouldn't be one of those people that would just go mad. Because you hear about a lot of those lottery winners that do that, they just go mad buying cars and boats and houses and all sorts. They always end up in more debt than they had in the first place, they can't handle it, all that money. I'd try to be a bit calm about it. You have to be generous, you have to look after your family, but there comes a point where you're doing more harm than good if you just starting giving it away willy-nilly. I always think that you have to make sure that you're all right before you can really help people. And otherwise you end up giving the whole lot away to a lot of spongers. So obviously I'd give some to Mary, that's my sister, and I'd spend a bit on having the house done up but I don't think we'd move anywhere. I mean, we're quite happy where we are, it's near enough to everything, it's only ten minutes from Asda in the car. We might go on holiday too, not anything really fancy, we wouldn't need a five star hotel or anything like that but just to go somewhere hot like Spain for a couple of weeks. Then I'd try and invest the rest of it so that Joe James can have some for when he's older. That would be the best thing to do I think.

So I was thinking all this as I was on my way to the newsagent. And I must have been smiling when I went in because Rajiv, he's the son of the man who owns the place, said to me

Hello Chris you in a good mood today or what?

and I just smiled and said that I thought that maybe it was the weather, because obviously I didn't want to say that I was about to win the lottery because of the reason I already said. But I didn't feel that bad about lying either, because I thought I probably give some of the money to Rajiv. Him and his wife have just had a little boy only he's not very well. He's told me before about how he's not very well, that there had been something wrong with the development of heart. Now I think in that case it would be OK to bend my rule a little bit. It's not like he's a complete stranger after all. And when you've got all that money. So I said to Rajiv

I'll just get my usual and then five of the lucky dip for the firm.

OK Chris

Rajiv knows my numbers because I've been going there for so long. That's what I mean, he'd be part of it anyway. After the machine has printed out my numbers he says

Anything else for you today Chris then?

I'll have 20 Lambert and Butler as well please Rajiv.

He turned round to get them and I thought, sort of while his back was turned, about how pleased he'd be with the money when I gave it to him. Because I knew he'd say

But really I can't accept this

and I'd have to tell him that it was more for his baby than for him. I'd have to insist. I paid for the fags and the lottery and said

Goodbye

Hopefully without letting on too much what it was that I was thinking about, about winning and everything.

I'm very sorry to have to do this but I'm afraid I have to stop writing this story- or at least come out of the story and perform just the kind of helical, McSweenyish, here-I-am-really-talking-to-you trick that I usually deplore as gauche, late nineties and just lazy art. But in this case I am willing to lay aside all considerations of taste because I find real-life has collided with my story in a manner that I find frankly disturbing, leaving me with no other option if I am to finish it (which I now feel I must) in such a way that it's not diabolically crass, as will become clear.

So, to recap: As has probably become all too obvious to you the reader, this short story was intended as an exploration of the concept of individual fate. When I talked about the work in progress to friends and to the writing group at Shepherds Bush Library, for whom it was originally intended, I said that it was about the way we all consider ourselves, whether we admit it or not, to be special or particular in some way. The unique, unusual, the downright unlikely fact that, for each and every one of us, our own consciousness is central to our experience of the universe means that we really can't help it. That it is one of life's ironies that what seems like an incontrovertible fact, perhaps *the single incontrovertible fact there is*, proves to be totally untrue. I wanted to use the National Lottery as a kind of metaphor then- "It could be you"?

Isn't it weird that it is?

The other theme that I was hoping to bring out was to do with faith and expectation. That because of the weird unlikelihood of each one of us being whoever he or she is rather than anyone else (after all how many of you were there in your father's half-teaspoon full?) we also expect our various hopes or aspirations to be realised. We all believe in what has been called "the oxymoronic attainability" of our dreams. But this too, as it turns out, is one of life's little jokes.

The scene is taken from life. I work part-time as a receptionist in an NHS Unit for Alcoholics in West London. I do this because the hours suit me, I can walk into work and, since most of a secretary's job is done by a computer these days, I have plenty of time to read. I don't read anything too serious, but maybe Muriel Spark or early Waugh, always novels.

All of the patients, "clients" as they are known in Substance Misuse, come in for appointments, there's no drop-in. The clinic can handle around 120 clients but at the moment there's more like 60. When I started I thought this was a seasonal thing- no-one wants to give up booze just before Christmas, but even now, in February, there are very few. The unit is housed a small terraced house, the NHS must have bought up most of the street at some point because next door we have Adult Psychology and across the road Child and Family Psychology. The house is of exactly the same design and period as my own flat. So similar are they that I feel sure they must have been built by the same people, around the turn of the century before last. The reception area where I work is at the front of the building, in what would have been the front room, on the left of the little corridor that would once have been the vestibule where there would have been a hat stand and mirror and so on. To reach reception you have to pass a glass panel in the wall, which gives the receptionist time to hide *Scoop* spine-up, over his knee, under the desk. There is still the plaster moulding around the ceiling's border and there is also a fireplace. In fact, apart from the filing cabinets, the two work stations and the NHS Health and Safety posters it is very much like the room I'm sitting in now. So you can see that, as day-jobs go, this is a real touch. I'm being paid to read novels in a simulacrum of my own front room. I even get the NHS pension. Occasionally I have to answer the phone and listen sympathetically to alcoholics telling me about how they can't make their appointment because of thieves, and I have to enter information into the very arcane Substance Misuse Database, known as DAISY.

I also have a supervisor, Chris. Chris sits behind me at her desk which is by the window. She is a tall, very thin woman of indeterminate age, somewhere between 35 and 45. She wears rectangular, metal-framed glasses that she rarely takes off and when she does her eyes are small, watery and blue. She has that off-white, papery-looking skin you get from smoking very heavily and for a long time. I think she also suffers from some kind of eczma and she has grown her yellowed nails long, I can only assume, for scratching. She does the kind of scratching you can hear.

Often when addressing some tricky piece of filing she will array the papers on the floor and squat or kneel to deal with them, and this process is accompanied by a terrible clicking of joints. But despite this there is something strangely childlike and disarming about the way that she squats or sits crossed-legged amongst her papers on the floor. She seems to like tassels, she appeared one morning wearing a pink, zipped cardigan whose sleeves ended in thick woollen tassels that formed a kind of avian ruff around each wrist. There is something birdlike about her generally, although not in the normal sense of the word, which clearly connotes small hopping birds. She would be one of those slow, long-legged birds with unwieldy backward jointed legs that patrol mudflats, fishing in bursts with a long, curved beak. She also has a gold ring with a small hanging tassel of fine gold thread and she wears several gold bracelets, which add a metallic jangle to our working environment. So you can see I am never unaware of her presence, even when she isn't talking.

Something that surprised me at first is that it is much harder to indicate to someone that you have stopped listening whilst your back is turned. If your interlocutor is facing you you can end a conversation by turning away slightly, but if someone has begun addressing your back, you have to turn round in order to disengage from the conversation. This means I can sit, reading or checking my e-mail quite intently while Chris talks incessantly to the back of my head. She mostly talks about football, which is something I have absolutely no interest in. Furthermore it's something I cannot even feign interest in. People talking about football really brings out the snob in me, if you know what I mean. Much better not to engage.

There's also something about being truly bored that deters one from engaging in conversation. It's one of those strange counterintuitive phenomena- real boredom resists distraction. Because boredom is not simply the absence of anything to do, it is more commonly characterised by the inability to focus on any one occupation. Boredom, for me at any rate, is usually accompanied by a seething, barely-restrained irritability. Obviously I can't write in work (perhaps I could, but the idea is distasteful somehow) and although I say I read it's virtually impossible to focus entirely on a book with the phone ringing intermittently, the door buzzer buzzing and Chris talking to the back of my head about football. This means that to read at all requires a massive effort of the will, since I have to exclude all of these distracting sounds and this disturbs the experience of reading so much as to make it dissatisfying and hence boring, which in turn jacks my already quite high levels of irritability up a couple more notches etc. etc.

It's not that I don't, like Chris and I do make an effort, some of the time. We talk about her son Joe James and I talk about my niece and nephews. I was genuinely touched when she gave me a boxed set of Adidas shower gel and deodorant for Christmas. This was a thoughtful gift based on my having mentioned that I liked running (I believe, rather than an oblique comment on my personal hygiene- I'm quite fastidious personal hygiene-wise). She is also strangely protective of me as an administrative resource. For instance, she provides admin support for the Women's Session on Thursday afternoon when I have to make myself scarce, but she will on no account allow the women of the Women's Service to pass on work to me, work I would be fairly happy to do.

At any rate I do not feel any hostility toward her. I regret not being able to join in, or even interrupt her endless monologue about football, or make more of an effort to sound as aggrieved as she is by the fact of someone's leaving half an inch of water with coffee in it in the bottom of the plastic washing bowl in the staff room over the weekend. I realise that this kind of office interface is meant to be social grooming rather than an exchange of information. I am quite willing to admit that my inability to participate is my problem, not hers. In fact this is one of the reasons I wanted to use her for this story, in order to develop more empathy with this woman, a fellow human being, someone I have to spend fifteen hours a week with. The situation is hers: going to get the lottery tickets on a Friday morning when she will often pick me up a luxury almond croissant from Starbucks (when I give her the money) on her way back. And the more obvious tics of diction- presuming for presumptuous, come for come are hers. I don't think that she's stupid, by the way. It's not really a can of worms I want to open

here, suffice to say it's something I'm sensitive to. Also in terms of what it says about me, as a person, or the ethical issues that crowd around approximating the voice of a colleague and then using it to articulate ideas of my own, that this could be seen to constitute the worst kind of intrusion, well, I just don't know, and I wonder whether what has happened has been a kind of object lesson in regard to these things.

I had got as far as with the story as I had without definitely deciding on the ending. This is usually the way- I will begin something and then write the first half or three quarters then leave it for a few weeks until an ending occurs to me or I am forced to finish for some kind of deadline. I didn't anticipate the story being much longer and I had decided on a few of the particulars. Namely, that she was not going to win the lottery, at least within the timeframe of the story, and that there needed to be some other accident of fate to reinforce or counterbalance the established motifs of fate and/or premonition. I also considered just mounting up a whole raft of these strange, but strangely everyday quirks of fate, like the reference to a genetic disorder or, as she buys the cigarettes, the way that some people can smoke their lungs black and never get cancer and some people can't. But I needed something that would demonstrate that feeling that one is bound to win the Lottery is no different from feeling that one is bound to be happy in the end, whenever that is, or that one is not the kind of person who gets cancer, or gets hit by a car. I'd even thrown it open to the writers' group at the library "What do you think should happen?" and the suggestions had ranged from her winning and living out her years in pampered luxury to her not winning and developing a fixation that Rajiv had tampered with her ticket and so prevented her from winning. But I was already leaning towards an ending: she would leave the shop and witness some sort of car accident. The accident would be serious but, importantly, not involve her. It would not make her day into an especially unusual one or constitute a twist in my story. It would be the kind of thing that one might see, be moved by and walk on. Thinking about it now it might have been better if the accident had occurred outside the shop, at the very moment that she bought her ticket so that she would go out to discover it. It would distract her from her reverie, but she would return to it before very long. She would not rationalise the accident through comparison with the lottery but it would be obvious, perhaps too obvious, to the reader. This is about as far as I'd got with the ending. I might still have surprised myself and changed tack but, in the margin at the point which I'd reached so far I had written "she witnesses the accident". That was to be my jumping off point at the next opportunity I had to write.

It so happened that Chris had been off sick for nearly a fortnight by the time I'd reached this point in the story. She'd caught pneumonia and called in sounding impressively breathless. I'd spoken to her again in the second week of her illness and mentioned how much better she sounded whereupon her breathlessness dramatically increased. She had booked three days off as annual leave toward the end of the week and I was beginning to think vaguely ungenerous thoughts related to "sickie culture" and half-term. I wasn't unduly worried though and the temp the agency had supplied was a very quiet man with as little interest in football as I have. Chris called again on the Friday of the second week. When I asked her how she was she said "I've been better." She wanted to talk to James, the Team Coordinator, only for some reason I had trouble putting her through. I got her back on the line and said:

"I don't know what's wrong with phone but I can't get through."

"What- is he on the line?"

"No, I just can't get through. I just get a continuous tone."

And then I noticed that some was really wrong because she said:

"Well. What's wrong Will? Will try and put me through? Will you just put me through?" it sounded like she was about to cry.

I tried again and this time managed to get through to James.

I got on with whatever I was doing for five minutes or so, feeling all the time slightly aggrieved, interpreting Chris's emotional state as an access of irritation with me for some reason that I did not understand. I even began to feel guilty about this story and speculated improbably about how she might have seen it. James came downstairs, he had his eye on me from the moment he opened the fire door to the moment he reached my desk. It was obvious that whatever he had to say was not a spontaneous comment, in which case he might have merely looked up *while* saying whatever he was going to say, but the product of deliberation. I mean his look signified intent, what he said being the thing, as it were, on the tip of that intention:

"I just spoke to Chris."

"Oh. How is she?"

"Terrible. Her husband has been killed in a car accident."

We both engaged in a kind of careful scrutiny of one another's faces. It was a lot like we were each checking to see if the other was about to laugh. I did suspect that James was joking but I was trying to work out exactly what kind of joke this could be. I may even have said:

“You're joking.”

But he wasn't joking at all. He explained, slowly and clearly (James is a clinician, a nurse) that Chris's husband had been killed in a car crash by a drunk driver as he drove to pick up their son. Her sister had also been in the car and had survived the accident although she was now in hospital with “broken bones”. Chris had not yet told her son, James said. There was still a strange feeling of unrelieved hilarity, as though there was a possibility that this was *still* really a joke that James was about to disenchant me of.

This left me in a bit of quandary as to how to finish this story. I worried about it, I asked my friends. Someone said “Why not write a story about a writer, writing a story...” but this seemed to be adding an extra layer of artifice to something that was odd, disturbing even, because it was real. I chose instead to raise my hands, defeated. I intend the rest of this story as a record. I know precisely two things about Chris's husband, Ray, apart from the circumstances of his death. I record them here.

He was “disabled” (I quote Chris), one of the features of his disability (into which I did not enquire further) being agoraphobia centring on a fear of driving in the rush hour. He could not drive in heavy traffic as this caused panic attacks.

That he had the Crazy Frog ringtone on his phone and that “it had been funny for the first couple of days.”