

Unusual Circumstances

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Luck

Niles Reddick

After we moved into our forty-year old Cotswald cottage, I decided to do some yard work and clipped my finger, instead of the boxwood, with the pruning shears. I scrambled into the house in search of a Band-Aid. My wife Lauryn would have known if there were any Band-Aids in the house, but she was spending my money getting her nails done at a salon. Quite frankly, I was glad she was out of my way because she had been flitting about the house, singing, and she couldn't carry a tune. I didn't know why she was so happy, but I resented it.

The white carpet with blood spots looked like Chicken Pox and reminded me of Lily Tomlin on *Laugh-In* when she connected the dots. I wrapped my finger with half a roll of paper towels, knowing if I would have bought the quicker picker-upper instead of the cheap brand, I would not need so many. I noticed the mailman's jeep at the mailbox and walked out the front door and down the sidewalk, cursing the pruning shears that still lay by the boxwood. I gathered the bundle of junk, but was intrigued by a letter from a doctor. I opened it first, and as an attention-getter to get newcomers' business, he had stapled a Band-Aid at the top.

I promptly used the bandage and thought for the first time in twenty-five years that my luck might be changing. I had always identified myself with the guys in coveralls on *Hee-Haw* who moaned, "If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all," because of marijuana and losing the Florida lottery.

Before getting married and taking a sales job in Miami, where I had to learn Spanish before making any sales, I was in college at a university in Georgia. One drawback to being white and middle-class was that I was unable to get federal grant money for college. My parents made too much money, although I never knew it. I had to work full time to pay tuition and living expenses. When I left campus for the 3-11 shift at the Ramada in my '78 Buick Regal, I was embarrassed because the silver paint flaked and the tailpipe left clouds of choking smoke behind. I had bought the car because the electric windows and gray velvet seats made me feel like I was moving up in the world. Although the car was already ten years old and needed major engine work, it was as comfortable as a coffin, except for the lack of air conditioning. In the middle of dog days in South Georgia, no air conditioning can be a death sentence, but I was able to take extended cold showers in the dorm, which kept me from pouring sweat on the way to work.

Before the electric door opened at the motel, I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass: Hush Puppy loafers, Duckhead khakis, and a plaid shirt. I looked more like a golfer than a motel clerk. I dreaded talking to Sam, the day clerk and assistant manager who had formerly been a minister. That is, until he got caught with his hand in the Baptist church's cookie jar and in his secretary's blouse. He loved giving unsolicited advice.

"How're you, Logan?" Sam plopped on the counter, his imitation gold Rolex glittering under the recess lighting above the maroon counter.

"Pretty good," I said. "Sure is hot out there." I had learned early on in life the weather can be a great topic of discussion when you want to avoid talking.

"You know what?" he asked.

That was his favorite question because he knew any polite Southerner would respond, giving him the ammunition to ramble.

"What?"

"It's never been this hot before," Sam said. "I honestly believe it's getting worse. It's in Revelation. All this evil in the world is rotting us away. One day, there won't be nothing left."

Sam's eyes rolled in their sockets, focusing beyond the windows. I knew he had spaced-out because there was nothing to look at except the dumpster behind the Sewanne Swifty; I also knew that the evil he enjoyed talking about so much was within himself.

"You're probably right." I knew the best way to reach success was to agree with others even when you didn't. You never know when you might need a reference.

"I'm convinced that the root to it all is drugs. It's just so easy to get hooked, and they can destroy a person." Sam's hands trembled. I had often smelled alcohol on his breath when I came to work, and I figured he probably had a drinking problem. I also knew he could only help himself.

"Lot of drugs out there," I said, taking the cash drawer out and counting the money. Although it wasn't required that employees check the money when changing shifts, I had been told by the manager, a former Baptist follower, to check Sam's drawer every time. I did. Lord knows I couldn't have paid a shortage, which was company policy.

"You ever do drugs, Logan?" Sam's eyes were piercing, and I felt my face flush.

"No," I nervously laughed. It wasn't that I had done drugs and was lying, but I had been offered drugs at fraternity parties, and I had seriously considered it. No matter how innocent I was, I always felt guilty in the presence of one who claimed to know God better than me. I was too busy studying, working, and socializing. "But I did find a field of marijuana once."

"Whose was it?"

I wondered why he wanted to know. "That's the funny part," I said. "It didn't belong to nobody."

"What do you mean?" Sam grimaced, and I knew he didn't want to hear me talk.

"Well, me and Felton, my friend from childhood, went through this cornfield to fish in the woods, and we discovered all this marijuana. We ran home and called the police. We were told we'd get a reward, so we went to the hardware store and got new bikes. The police sent the marijuana off to the GBI lab in Atlanta, and about a week later, the chief came to tell us the marijuana wasn't marijuana. It was some wild weed that looks just like marijuana. Our parents made us return the bikes since we weren't going to get any reward money."

Sam chuckled, and his belly shimmied. "I better get on out of here. Money check out?"

"Yeah, perfect."

Sam nodded and gathered his newspaper. "Give me a call if you need anything."

I knew it would be a slow night because we didn't have many reservations: a regular Frito-Lay trucker, shampoo salesman, and three unknowns. The unknowns were booked by the central reservation system, and I could bet money they were either Yankees or Canadians on their way to Disney World. I could also bet money they would ask me to repeat myself, delighting in the cuteness of my Southern drawl and reinforcing their notion that Southerners are stupid. It was them, however, that had been suckered off the interstate and would pay prices too high for everything. My grandmother had been right in the sense that the South would rise again, at least in their ability to take Northerner's money for cholesterol-laced food, uncomfortable beds in cockroach infested rooms, and tourist attractions like mosquito-breeding alligator farms or chigger infested moss gardens.

I turned on the lobby TV to CNN and hoped I didn't need to call Sam since he never answered his phone and didn't have an answering machine. Sam did usually call back shortly after I would call though just to check on things. The evening passed slowly, and I found myself being amused by bugs hovering around the outside lights and the repetitive headlines. My eyes grew heavy, and each time a car pulled under the awning, my body, like a robot, managed to find the energy to lift itself up and check the weary traveler in only to shuffle back to its position in front of headline news. At 9:00 p.m., I got up, locked the door, and opened the venetian blinds covering the night check-in window. Although some desk clerks opted not to use the half-moon window, I did for fear of being robbed. I positioned myself in the desk chair, listened to the hum of the portable fan, and closed my eyes.

In the dream, a man dressed in a business suit stood at the counter and said, "3-2-2." The numbers echoed about the lobby, and I kept asking him what he meant. And he repeated them over and over, and they continued to echo. When I was pulled away by a banging noise, I jumped up and sprinted to the glass door to unlock it for the graveyard clerk, Bill. He looked half-asleep, and although I didn't know him well at all, I had heard he worked the audit shift because he got nervous around people.

"You been sleeping?" He poured day old coffee into a styrofoam cup.

"No, just resting my eyes." It was a lie and the response I learned from my Dad.

"Anything happening?" He began straightening folios in the tray and seemed bothered by the ones that were not perfectly aligned with the metal separators; then, Bill moved to the circular phone stand where last names and room numbers were alphabetized. He straightened those, too.

"Quiet night," I said. "You gonna count the money?"

"No," Bill said. "You can go on."

"Thanks." I headed out the door, looking back at Bill who was straightening the pen attached to the desk by a chain rope. He lifted the pen into the air and made the chains form a circular pattern like the lines on a conch shell.

I felt most people were screwed up in one way or another, and I looked forward to the day I was out of college with a real job, making lots of money. I

sunk into the velvet seats, cranked the Regal, and watched the smoke roll out and upward into the lights, confusing the bugs. I pressed the button and the window came down, and I breathed in the humid night air. As I drove down the street, I thought about the dream and the man's echoing numbers. On one level, I knew the dream was important and intuitively felt the numbers were the key to the Florida lottery, which was up to sixty million.

I was off the next day, and after class, I sat in my room, scribbling 322 onto a note pad and thinking about my new BMW, beach house, and all the European trips I would take. I told my roommate, David, "You watch. These numbers are my ticket out of here."

He smirked and replied; "All that partying your freshman year has had an effect on you."

I knew David would be jealous when I won, and I drove the twenty miles down Interstate 75 to the Florida line and spent my last twenty dollars on tickets. I picked various numbers and included combinations from my dream numbers. That night, I couldn't sleep. I knew I did not have the right number combination. So, when I got paid on Friday, I cashed my check, and instead of making my car payment, I drove back to the Florida line, stood in line for two hours, and spent my entire week's pay on more tickets. I told others in line: "You're wasting your time; I've got the numbers." They politely smiled, but I could see fear in their eyes.

When 10:00 p.m. came on Saturday night, I used the courtesy phone in the lobby to call my parents to tell them I was going to win the lottery.

"That's nice," my mother said. "Don't forget about us." I knew she didn't believe me, and when she asked, "Are you okay?" I knew she thought I was crazy.

When 11:00 p.m. came, Bill was obsessively straightening, and I plopped down onto the sofa in front of the TV. I watched the painted ping-pong balls float upward in the plastic bubbles. My heart raced, and even though the air conditioning was on in the lobby, beads of sweat rolled down my side from my armpits. As the carnival music played, the blonde lottery woman with breasts bursting at the seams of her blue sequined dress said the numbers into the camera. My heart sank. Although I had over 150 tickets, I knew the winning numbers were not on my tickets. Still, I wrote them down and reassured myself.

I stayed up until 2 o'clock in the morning, checking and rechecking my tickets and wondering how I would ever make my car payment. On Sunday morning, I ate breakfast in the university cafe and read in the paper that a homeless woman in Tampa, living in her station wagon with three children, spent her last dollar on a lottery ticket and won. I laughed and rationalized she needed it more than I did. The BMW became a Regal, the beach house became my dorm room, and the European trips became trips to the Ramada.

When Lauryn came back from the beauty salon, I told her about cutting my finger, finding the Band-Aid in the doctor's marketing letter, and how I believed my luck might be changing.

"Sit down," she said, smiling.

I sat in the green wicker chair. "What is it? Did you win some money?"

"No," she laughed. "I'm pregnant. I didn't want to tell you first thing this morning because you were so busy in the yard."

I had the same sinking feeling I had the time I found out the marijuana wasn't real and the time I didn't win the lottery.

"Sure is hot in here," I said, wiping my forehead.