

HS HM Story 3

Winner Sold Here

By Evie Hall

Edward loved to see people lose.

He owned the gas station at the corner, and his proudest practice those days was hawking scratch off lottery tickets to anyone who seemed down on their luck. First introduced to the world in the 70's in Massachusetts, they had fast become a sensation among grumpy old men like him, and a fact of life to their children, who would begrudgingly pull them out of their stockings every Christmas. Edward was not blind to the fact that the rush of hope as one scraped a coin against their ticket was the same rush that came from a hit of cocaine, and that, just as desperation inseparably correlated with addiction, it was linked to the scratch off lottery as well. To this end, he silently appreciated cruelty, poverty, and darkness, because it all circled back to him, lonely strangers on random grey Tuesdays seeking a hit of something bright, putting their \$2.00 down on his counter, and receiving nothing in return (to which end they would feel quite worse than they did before, and buy five more- Edward was the sun, and the hoi polloi Icarus).

But, like a nuclear bomb, on one of those random grey Tuesdays, a 20 something young woman, scratching her ticket as she walked out the door, was unable to suppress her scream. And on the next grey Tuesday afternoon, Edward found himself on a ladder sullenly putting up a big new, bright purple sign: '\$70,000 winner sold here!' With the horrid thing up, the place was not quite the same, more carnival than the cannibal coldness which Edward had worked so hard to instill in the place. His immediate thought upon taking it in was to kill himself.

On the other side of town, the newly rich young woman sat on her bed, staring through her window at a brick wall. To make seventy thousand dollars in 30 seconds was a disgustingly incredible feat, a sickening miracle, and her only solace, her only slice of the ordinary in comparison, was this brown brick wall. It had been a week and she had not spent a penny, not with intention to save it, but rather because she was terrified. She was happy too, of course, anyone would be happy, but there was a pit in her stomach that would not go away.

Why had she bought the ticket? She was not the type.

She had simply felt like it. It had been one of those days, a bad shift, a huge, rude table that barely tipped, and a stumble that left her with coffee spilled down her shirt. She stopped for gas on the way home, and went inside to hand her cash to the man at the register. 'Edward,' his nametag read.

"Feeling lucky?" he suggested with a raised eyebrow.

She was not. She bought a ticket anyway (she did not know why). She scratched it as she waited for her change, and as she began to walk away. She had used her fingernails, although the scrape of the grey grime was disgusting on her skin. Now, as she sat on her bed, she examined her nails, squinting to notice a hint of the grime that had stuck around. Upon first comprehending the ticket, she had screamed, and the employee jumped out of his skin. She turned to him, wide eyed, a deer in headlights. An understanding flowed between them, like lasers were shooting from their retinas, and both of them frowned.

Now a black Tuesday night, Edward poked at cold spaghetti with a mock silver fork. His wife sat across from him. They were silent.

They'd been living in an empty nest for 3 years now, their son in Ohio getting his doctorate, and their daughter having run off to Wisconsin with her husband, where her father was nothing but an occasional phone call. Edward spent most of his time at work. At this point, spending more time with the gas pumps than his children, it was everything to him. He didn't quite know what his wife did all day. She didn't work and for all he knew, she could be off with another man while he was at his store (this was not the case- in reality, she spent much of her time sleeping). Every night, they sat together and ate dinner with the animatedness of rocks. Their kitchen was cluttered full of dirty dishes, pots, pans, near rotted bananas, lint covered sweaters, piles of mail, old receipts, all the things that they had ever left in there and hadn't the energy to pick up again. Every night the bulbs in the overhead lights would dim by a fraction of a lumen until they finally burned out, Edward replaced them, and the cycle started again.

But tonight, the kitchen felt messier, the lights felt dimmer, his wife's eyes looked emptier and Edward was no longer content with it all. He didn't quite understand why the winning ticket had hit him so hard, it's not as if it had changed anything, but it had put things so deeply in perspective that he felt sick. In fact, the night he found out, he had vomited six times, worrying his wife into making him chicken soup.

"Who would buy a scratch-off from my joint if someone's already won?" He broke the silence. His wife looked at him quizzically.

"I mean," he continued, "It was so astronomically unlikely that it would happen, so how could it ever happen twice? Who'd be so stupid to buy a ticket at my place when their odds now are even worse than before?"

"Well," his wife said, tilting her head slightly, "Well, so, well, are you getting fewer customers now, is that what you're saying?"

“No,” he mumbled, “More.”

Edward’s great grandfather had come over to California in 1849 along with what seemed like half the rest of the world, in hopes of striking gold. But instead of becoming rich, he became trapped. With no money to get back home to Denmark, lost in a sea of fools just like himself, he settled down, and his bloodline had hardly left California since.

He had died before Edward was born, but he thought about the man a lot, and his curse of California. Even more now, with his own children settled halfway across the country. He remarked that, in his gas station, he had always been a God, not a miner.

It felt very yellow outside the gas station, the sun beating down, the grass drying up, and the expanse of sidewalk crumbling beside it. The young woman stood by a gas pump and looked up at the sign, embarrassed, as if her face was printed on it. All night she had been thinking, spiraling, wondering why she felt the way he did. She had been working since it was legal for her to do so, and her parents before her had slaved away to pay rent, to feed their daughter. She had never been so prosperous in her life as she was at that moment, and she hated that it had fallen into her palm like a raindrop. Breaking her back every day at the diner had been a waste of time, and all the rest of her life too, perhaps, and, what the hell was she going to do with the money? Nothing she could spend it on could ever be as miraculous as winning had been. She once saw a news story about a man who bought a scratch off ticket every day for five years, and only ever won \$20. She had thought of him often the past few days, every time her neighbors shot her envious glances, looking like they could almost cry. It seemed that all any of them had ever wanted was to win the lottery, to get rich quick, and her heart broke now to realize that even after winning, she still cried, she still ached, and she still yearned for something better.

She noticed someone looking her way through the window of the gas station. As she caught his eye, he walked out from behind the counter, out the door and onto the scalding pavement in front of her.

“Hey, weren’t you the girl with the winning ticket?” he called from a few pumps away, heading towards her, “What’s that like?”

This man was Edward, she remembered, who had sold it to her. “Oh... you know, it’s a whole lot of nothing,” she laughed artificially.

Coming up next to the girl, Edward felt a knot inside of him release. She was a few inches taller than him. He hadn’t noticed from behind the counter. She looked awfully tired.

He looked up at her. “Sounds about right. What’re you going to do with the money?”

She shifted uncomfortably at the question which she had been asked 50 times that week, but something about this man’s smile demanded her honesty. “I don’t really know.”

Edward nodded. “I don’t know either. Or, I mean, I wouldn’t know, ‘fi was you.” he looked up at the sign. “Maybe I’d buy a plane ticket.”

She followed his eyes. “Where would you go?”

He considered for a second. “Ah... Scandinavia. My family was from there, a long time ago.” He looked back at her to find that she had been looking at the sign too. As much as he hated the damn thing, it certainly was eye catching. “You do know my whole scratch-off business model relies on people losing, right?”

She chuckled, eyes still fixed upward, reading the brightly colored text over and over like it was holy. “That’s my bad.”

Edward smiled. His \$70,000 winner was friendly, at least, and it made him glad.

The two of them stared up at the sunlight reflecting off of the sign until their eyes stung.