

THE LOTTERY TICKET
(A Short)
Bob Young c2019

Jake is a thirty-something who loves to play the lottery. A dollar in, millions out; that's his outlook. The same numbers rattle in his head each time he fills out a form – 9393 – the date of his birth. He plays those number relentlessly. Although Jake, his wife and two kids are more than comfortable, his sense of self-worth always cries out for more.

It has been a long day at the office, and Jake was finally headed home. Into the dark night he drove his convertible top down to enjoy the cool, fall air. The hour for the lottery drawing had arrived, and Jake turned up his radio so he could clearly hear the numbers as they were read out. The jackpot had risen steadily in recent weeks, having climbed into seven figure range on this night - \$1,000,000!

With his lottery ticket clenched in his left hand and right hand firmly planted on the wheel, Jake turned an ear to the radio. "9. 3. 9. 3," the announcer proclaimed. It took a moment to sink in. The numbers rattled around in his head for what seemed like several minutes, but in actuality was only a few seconds. "I'm a millionaire," Jake screamed over the noise of passing traffic. "I just won the lottery!"

Gathering his wits, he grabbed the steering wheel with his left hand, still clinching the lottery ticket, and fumbled for his cell phone somewhere on the passenger seat. Mindful of the whizzing traffic around him, Jake carefully held the phone with his right hand and hit a button to call his home number.

"I've got to share this news with Suzie," he thought to himself. "She won't believe this." The phone rang several times with no answer. As Jake reached to lay down the phone, a car suddenly cut in front of him. Frantic, his left hand instinctively cut the steering wheel in the opposite direction, and as it did, the grip on the lottery ticket was loosened and the paper went flying out into the night air.

Panic set in. Jake regained control of the car with both hands, maneuvered onto the shoulder and parked. As he released his grip on the wheel, all tension left his body. He slumped down into his seat like a deflated balloon. The realization quickly set in. One million dollars gone in just an instant – out somewhere into the night air.

Jake regained his composure, retrieved a small flashlight from the glovebox and retraced his path along the shoulder of the road. Each wave of the wand of light revealed scraps of paper of all sorts – trash, but not a lottery ticket. He had no choice but to give up and resume his trip home, all the while wondering what he would have done with that one million dollars.

Suzie was rather indifferent when Jake finally reached her with the news. "Reverend Jones told us at bible study tonight, that our church is going to be forced to close our homeless shelter, if we don't come up with some money and fast," she said. "We help so many families, many of them with children. I don't know where they would go or what they would do without our shelter." The seriousness of her concern was not lost on Jake. "If I had a million dollars," Suzie declared, "I'd give it to the church!"

The morning sky was beautiful, filled with lingering orange rays from that bright sunrise. Only a few clouds hanging around to greet the day. Billy and Joanne were up early this

morning; it was the day for them to do their volunteer work – pick up trash along the highway near their home. In their retirement they looked for ways to volunteer their time and help the community. Adopting the highway for regular cleanup seemed like a worthwhile contribution.

In their bright lime-colored vests, it was impossible to miss these two silver-haired senior citizens filling their orange trash bags with all manner of debris from along the roadside...drink cans, paper cups, even a diaper or two. “Darn,” Billy called out. “I spilled some of the drink from this beer can on my shirt.” He tried to brush it off with his gloves, but it had soaked in. “Don’t worry, dear; I’ll take it to the cleaners for you after we finish, Joanne said. The stench from day old beer was so irritating, Billy was ready to call it quits on the spot.

But, he didn’t. Something caught his eye among the scraps of paper. A lottery ticket. “Might just be worth something,” Billy thought. He and Joanne had found some coins and a few bills, but never anything of much value. He stuck the ticket in his shirt pocket as he joined Joanne to head back home.

At the laundry Billy’s red shirt was tagged and tossed into a bin with many other soiled shirts that would all soon be as clean as new. As the workers were pulling the shirts from the bin, they noticed a scrap of paper. “It’s a lottery ticket,” one of them exclaimed. Another said, “We need to put this back with the shirt it fell out of.” But which shirt? “I think it’s the blue one, because the ticket was near the pocket,” the one worker offered. The other replied, “I’m not so sure, but let’s put it with that one.”

Andrew made his weekly stop at the laundry to pick up his shirts, all nicely pressed and starched for another day of wear at the real estate office where he worked. But he immediately noticed something different about this collection of shirts. In a small plastic bag tabled to the next of one of the hangers was a piece of paper. Andrew looked closely at it, twisting the bag for a better view. “A lottery ticket? Why a lottery ticket stapled to my shirts,” he wondered as he walked out of the store. He certainly had not interest in it, so as he passed by a trash can on the street, he ripped off the small plastic bag and dropped it into the receptacle.

The city made regular collections of its public trash cans that dotted the downtown district. Big trucks with automated arms would arrive with precision to scoop up the can, dump into the cavernous vehicle, and thrust it back down onto the sidewalk with a loud “thud.” The driver never got out of the vehicle to check his work, and sometimes small pieces of trash, like a plastic bag with a lottery ticket inside, would slip from the tilting can and fall into the gutter.

Edward was no stranger to the need to clean up after the trashman. He had lived on the streets for months. Bad relations with family, coupled with escapes to alcohol and drugs, pushed him to one of the lowest places in his life. He had lost everything that meant anything to him. Edward’s new home was the street. Edward spent his days looking for a shelter for the night and a square meal at the soup kitchen.

The sun glistening off the plastic bag is what drew Edward’s attention to the gutter. “Can’t leave the streets untidy,” he mumbled to himself as he picked up the bag and opened it. “A lottery ticket,” he exclaimed. “Well. I’ll be.” Edward knew he would need more – a lot more - than a winning lottery ticket to change his life. But he tossed the plastic bag back into the trash can, he tucked the lottery ticket into the side pocket of the green, frayed windbreaker he was wearing. He looked rather odd to passersby, this disheveled man in his 50’s, scraggly beard,

deep-seated dark eyes, wearing a green jacket with an Augusta National logo on it. Undoubtedly, someone else's hand-me-down.

For the men and women who found shelter at the gothic-style church in one of the city's more affluent areas, they must have felt that they had come close of Heaven on earth. Rev. Robert Jones started the shelter more than a decade ago, as he saw hard times hit, in the words of Jesus, "the least of these" in his community. Hospitality became a cornerstone of the church, and the congregation would have it no other way.

Each night, in a special wing of the parish hall, cots would be set up with clean blankets and pillows for whoever needed a place to stay. No questions were asked and nothing was expected of the visitors, other than they attend an evening prayer service to offer their personal thanks for God's gift of a place to lay their head for the night.

Edward was a fixture at the shelter. He knew the pastor well and joyously participated in the evening service. Reverend Jones always included in each service an offering – an opportunity for those attending to contribute from their meager means, to put in a written prayer request, or in some other way to just express their gratitude. Over the years many odd things had been placed in the collection plate, but the reverend accepted each item with the good intentions with which they had been offered.

As the plate was passed on this night, Edward found himself with nothing to offer. Then it hit him – the lottery ticket! He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the now-crumpled piece of paper and dropped it into the plate as it was passed along his pew.

Reverend Jones was a patient man and knew that if God wanted his church to continue to offer a homeless ministry, the resources would be provided. Yes, he had plenty of patience, but was running out of hope. He knew the doors would close the following weekend without a large cash infusion. Both he and the congregation had done all they could, pouring out their hearts and resources in abundance.

Seated in his study on the second floor of the parish hall, Reverend Jones began to go through the offering plate. His eye caught a glimpse of something familiar. It was a lottery ticket. Now, why would anyone put a lottery ticket in his collection plate?, he wondered. Curiosity quickly set-in and the preacher fired up his desk top computer. "I'm going to check the numbers on here to see if we won anything." The screen came to life and the website for the lottery was pulled up.

Reverend Jones quickly saw that there had been a winning number drawn; indeed, someone won a million dollars! The box of print across the top of the screen said the prize had yet to be claimed. His brown eyes looked down on the number box on the ticket and with his right index finger he touched each as he checked the numbers on the screen. "9. 3. 9. 3."

The numbers match was unmistakable. Emotion quickly overwhelmed this humble man of God. "A miracle!" he proclaimed. "A million-dollar miracle to save the church's homeless shelter." Tears streamed down the clergyman's face. "Thank you, Jesus. Thank you."

Jake and Suzie were with their two children in their regular pew on Sunday morning. Suzie had been well aware of the church's dire challenge with the homeless shelter. Jake was still stewing over his careless loss of his lottery ticket.

Reverend Jones began his announcement with the exciting news about the bonanza of money that had come to the church to keep the homeless shelter running. Suzie was beside herself when Jones broke the news. "How had this come to be?" she wondered. The pastor didn't waste any time explaining. "God dropped a winning lottery ticket into our collection plate," he stated. "The winning numbers were 9-3-9-3. Those numbers" he continued, "will forever have a special place in this house of worship."

Jake's ears perked up! He could not believe what he was hearing. That was *his* lottery ticket number the minister had just called out! But, it didn't take long for reality to sink in and for Jake to understand that his special number now belonged to God. He took Suzie's hand and squeezed it; she turned and smiled. Then Jake looked up silently with closed eyes. His lips appropriately mouthed an "Amen."