

Lottery President

by William Arthur Holmes

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for Dad

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Good Luck!

Benny sat at a table by the door, alone, in a recently opened Asian restaurant. The plastic-laminated menu offered dishes from Mongolian to Indonesian cuisine, and everything in between, with each item written in its native language and alphabet. He had been meaning to check this place out, but had no idea what he was looking at until he flipped it over to find the English version.

He was taking his therapist's advice, "throwing caution to the wind and letting the chips fall where they may." Several months earlier, she suggested he get out more. Try new things, she said. "Socialize! Experiment! eXult!" like the tag line on her business card. Primarily a sex therapist, now branching out into grief counseling, she was all about the clichés.

Benny laughed when he first read that tag line, and he laughed again now. "Socialize, experiment, exult. Seriously?" He had to agree with the "get out more often" part, though. It had been a year and a half since the accident, and he could feel himself turning into a hermit. He was now "re-connecting, with the world," as per his therapist's advice, getting out and going to strange new restaurants with indecipherable menus.

When the fortune cookie arrived, he cracked it open. One side of the ½-inch-by-2-inch slip of paper displayed his "lucky numbers." The other side read, "*You will be a great leader someday.*"

"Ha! Who writes these things, my therapist?"

That night at home, watching the news with his cat Flaky curled up at the end of the couch, the winning lottery numbers scrolled across the bottom of the screen. He ignored it until remembering he had bought a ticket. It was not a regular thing, but he would occasionally buy one when the mood struck. He found his wallet now, pulled out his latest (probably losing) ticket and flopped back down into the couch.

“You can’t win unless you play!” he said to Flaky. “Play responsibly,” he added, quoting the commercial, as his eyes went back and forth from TV screen to ticket as he read each number.

He could not believe it. His ticket matched every number. Not the usual one or two... or none... but *all* of them, including the “bonus” number.

The winning numbers were somehow familiar, too. He wondered why random numbers would be familiar. The lottery machine at the gas station quickie mart chose the numbers for him. “Quick pick,” they call it. He had glanced at the numbers at the time, but would not have expected to remember them.

Then he recalled the fortune cookie. Pulling it out of his pocket, he saw that *those* numbers matched, too. “No way!” he said aloud.

Was he dreaming? Was he asleep on the couch right now? A trick his father taught him to keep from peeing in his dreams, wetting the bed in real life, was to do something in the dream physically impossible in reality, like maybe jump off a cliff and float in mid-air.

If you could do that, his father said, you were dreaming and needed to get up and go to the bathroom. It occurred to him now that that sort of advice might get someone killed, so he opted for simply touching his toes. *That* had been physically impossible since at least high school. As he bent over now, the sheer pain of it all told him he was definitely not dreaming.

His breath came in gasps, but not just from the stretching exercise. It was from *winning... the... freaking... lottery!* Giddy and grinning despite the pain now coursing through his body, he lurched toward his computer in the guest bedroom.

This was the room his wife had hoped to turn into a nursery, but now served as Benny's "office." Setting himself gingerly down into the high-backed desk chair, he hit a few keys on the computer keyboard, clicked a few icons on the screen, and got online to check the lottery's web site.

Sure enough, Benjamin Franklin Reed had just won the lottery! *Holy crap!*

"You don't *sound* sick," his boss droned the next day as Benny called in sick to work.

"I'm not," Benny was honest. "I think I won the lottery, Jim. I just need to go down to their office and make *sure* before I, uh... say *so long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, goodbye!*" he sang the words from *The Sound of Music*.

On the other end, his boss choked and sputtered a bit but no actual words came out. With a smile in his voice, Benny then hung up the phone. He finished getting dressed, ran a comb through his hair, made sure Flaky had food in his feeder, and drove downtown to the lottery of-

fice. It was the building with the big purple “L” on top. He had seen it often enough on the news, and always thought it was a bit cheesy, but that’s where he was going.

Walking across its lobby toward the young female receptionist, a back spasm hit him. A sympathetic look came across the woman’s face as she peered over the top of her celebrity gossip magazine.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Back spasm,” he gasped, thinking, *That’s what I get for trying to touch my toes last night.* “It’ll pass,” he tried to sound tough. “It sucks getting old.”

“I’ll bet,” she agreed.

She was supposed to say “You’re not old!” but he let it go. “I’m here to verify a winning ticket. You might be looking at a rich man!” His attempt at projecting a winning demeanor was betrayed by another flash of pain shooting through his body and making him wince.

“Please, sir, have a seat,” she used the condescending tone that members of the younger generation often used with the old and infirm as she gestured toward the seats in the waiting area. “Someone will be with you shortly.”

There were eight or nine people there already, and this made him feel less special than he had just moments earlier. Her condescending tone, combined with calling him “sir” didn’t help. He wasn’t *that* much older than she was.

“And,” she added, “please sign the back of your ticket.”

“Do you have a pen?” he asked.

She handed him one of hers as she picked up the ringing phone. He *assumed* it was ringing, flashing, or whatever, though he hadn’t heard anything. She whispered and

giggled with the caller a moment before she stopped and looked up at Benny. He was just standing there, halfway between her desk and the waiting room chairs. She gestured for him to take a seat.

Seeing none available, he shuffled over and sat on the floor with his back propped against the wall. It felt good to sit, actually. The pain in his back was already subsiding.

While he waited, two well-dressed men – one white, one Hispanic – worked the crowd. Smiling, handing out business cards, the men were shaking as many hands as possible. Seeing Benny sitting on the floor, they must have assumed he was a loser, for they ignored him.

He could hear what they were saying to the others. They were either lawyers or financial advisers or ambulance-chasers-turned-lottery-winner-chasers. They spent their entire day trolling for lottery winners to “represent.”

Eventually, the receptionist called Benny’s name. He rose slowly and followed the armed guard – a muscular young black man – through a door reading “YOU ARE A WINNER!” in big multi-color letters.

Three lottery officials, two women and one man, sat at the far end of the conference table inside. The man and younger woman each held magnifying glasses while the older woman had what appeared to be a microscope. Benny took the only available chair, across the table from them, near the door.

When they asked him to give his ticket to the security guard, he hesitated. *What’s to stop this minimum wage security guard, he wondered, from taking my winning ticket and running?*

Once Benny relinquished the ticket, the guard, as if reading his mind, smiled mischievously and made a feint toward the door. Benny turned in his chair and almost said something, but the man turned back and laughed uproariously as he handed the ticket to the younger woman official at the end of the table.

With a bashful smile, the woman shook her head and accepted the ticket from the guard. Benny got the impression there was something going on between these two, after hours, but they were all business from that point forward. She and the male lottery official then took turns examining it under a magnifying glass. After this initial inspection, the man placed the ticket under the microscope in front of the senior woman.

This woman openly glared at him. For whatever reason, this was apparently the wrong move. She pulled the ticket back out from under the lens, stared at it briefly, then placed it back under the lens.

Benny could only guess she was demonstrating that *she* – and only she – had absolute control of that ticket. Several excruciating minutes later, the three officials all nodded their heads and muttered to each other. The elder woman leaned forward, folded her hands together on the table, smiled and announced, “Congratulations, Mr. Reed! You have just won the lottery!”

Without thinking, Benny jumped up in excitement, only to hit his legs underneath the table, slamming him awkwardly back down into his chair. He immediately attempted to regain composure as he cleared his throat and asked, “Um... how much?”

“Two hundred and ninety-six *million* dollars!” the normally stern woman betrayed her excitement. It was such a large number. “I think that’s a record, isn’t it?” she asked her colleagues, who all nodded in agreement. “That’s before taxes, of course. I would suggest hiring a financial consultant to explain all that to you, Mr. Reed. There are usually several out in the lobby.”

“Like sharks circling, yeah, thanks, I saw them.” Benny was not going to use any of those. “Am I the only winner? No one to split it with?” he was afraid to get his hopes too high.

“Just you,” the woman smiled. There was a look in her eyes now – lust? – that Benny would not have expected from a woman her age. Not directed at *him*, anyway.

The sole male lottery official picked up the phone and announced to the room that he was calling the Lottery Director down for the requisite publicity photo. Several uncomfortable moments passed as Benny tried to avoid eye contact with the older woman while they all awaited the director.

She came in through the back door, and Benny recognized her from local TV news stories. She was much scarier in person, he thought. Way too much make-up, obviously dyed hair, and a pained smile embedded into her nicotine-wrinkled face. Behind her, two flunkies entered the room, carrying a huge cardboard mock-up of a check along with an identically sized sheet of transparent plastic. Behind *them* came a graphics artist and photographer, each with their own assistant.

The artist wrote Benny’s name and the amount on the transparency. Placing that over the “check” and using clear

packing tape to hold it in place, everyone then posed for a picture.

The director explained the process to Benny. She then had him sign several documents, gave him a receipt – which she told him to treat like gold – and sent him on his way. He was to return here tomorrow, she said, for an actual check, press conference, another publicity photo or two, and a security escort to the bank of his choice.

He was uncomfortable leaving now without his ticket or winnings, but that’s how it worked. On his way out, the director smiled and advised, “Drive carefully, Mr. Reed. We don’t want anything to happen to you before you collect your winnings!”

Was that a threat? he wondered on his way out of the room. How many winners died – accidentally or otherwise – in the time between making their claim and cashing that check?

His paranoia, however, gave way to excitement, which eventually settled into a surprising calm as he digested it all on his way back to the car. He thought he’d be giddy. Instead, it was like he was floating, in utter bliss, as he made a mental list of everything he would buy: a new house in the country on a hundred acres with lots of trees, horses, cows, maybe even alpacas; a new car *and* truck; several big-screen TVs; two or three dogs; maybe even another cat to keep Flaky company.

Going back over the list in his mind, he realized that these were all the things his wife had wanted, almost verbatim. And that’s when something inside him snapped. A torrent of grief that had been pent-up over the past eighteen

months let loose at the thought of her missing out on his stroke of luck.

He began to cry, openly sobbing, not caring who might see him. He would later have no recollection of getting into his car; leaving the parking lot; running that red light; barely missing and causing the driver of that gray sedan to crash into another car. His tears kept him from seeing physical objects clearly. His emotions kept the world around him from fully registering in his mind.

An alert homeless woman witnessed the crash, and got a good look at Benny's license plate. Lucky for Benny, she had a lousy memory and nothing to write it with.

Oblivious to the cars colliding in his rearview mirror, it occurred to Benny he could easily be kidnapped and held for ransom now that he'd won the lottery.

Get a grip, dude! he tried to stop the tears. *I could use that security escort right about now,* it then occurred to him, which immediately sobered him up. Nothing like the threat of physical harm to calm a person down.

Back home, he found Flaky – the last vestige of his former happily married life – waiting for him. He picked him up and hugged him. This sweet moment was soon broken, however, when his older brother Toby showed up. Benny's mood darkened considerably.

Toby let himself in, unannounced. Benny hated that. Then again, he hated pretty much everything *about* Toby. The two were polar opposites. Benny tended to be a very sober, serious and responsible person, especially since the accident took his wife. Toby was a wisecracking, irrespon-

sible jackass. Benny loved a good joke as much as anyone did, but not when it came from Toby.

Because they were brothers, though, Benny could not bring himself to get rid of him. Family came first... or at least somewhere near the top. He had not planned on telling Toby about his lottery win, but the jackass somehow already knew.

“So, you won the lottery,” Toby said as casually as he could manage.

“How’d you know?”

“You just *told* me!” Toby almost squealed with delight. “Besides, I saw you there. How much?”

“What were *you* doing there?”

“I... uh... had a thing. So, how much did you win?”

Benny didn’t care enough to ask what “thing” Toby had there, but did reluctantly reveal how much he had won. There was no point hiding it. He would soon be doing a news conference and holding up that big fake check announcing the amount to the world. “Two hundred and ninety-six million!” He couldn’t help but smile wide and let the excitement show, if only briefly, as he spoke.

“Whoo-hoo!!” Toby shouted. “How much do *I* get?”

Benny stopped smiling, and furrowed his brow. “What makes you think *you* get anything?”

“Dude! I’m your brother. You gotta give me *something*.”

“No, I don’t, actually,” Benny shook his head. “How much would it take to never see you again?”

Toby shot him a hurt look, and then very seriously suggested, “Ten million.”

“I’m calling some friends,” Benny changed the subject. “Dinner and drinks are on me at the Magyar. You can invite some of your loser friends.”

Benny grew somber as he drove, alone, to their father’s assisted living facility. Benny hated the place, it was so depressing, but he loved his dad, so he went as often as possible. Toby had made an excuse to avoid the place. He would meet them at the Magyar Café, a wildly overpriced yet still very popular hangout that Benny had always wanted to check out.

Benny found his father, Rudy, in the “great room.” He was in conversation with another elderly man on a couch. Benny guessed the man was a fellow tenant.

Rudy smiled at the sight of his son, stood, and met him halfway. As they hugged, Rudy exclaimed, “Benny! I didn’t know you were coming! Why didn’t you call?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“Never surprise an old man, Benny,” his father scolded with a smile. “It might be fatal.”

“For me or for you?” Benny asked with a smile before announcing, “I’ve got some great news.”

“Great! What is it? Have you found your mother?”

“What?! No! Dad, she’s gone.” Had his father finally gone senile? “She’s no longer with us. I don’t know how else...”

“Just kidding!” Rudy laughed.

“Very funny, Dad,” Benny grumbled, “pretending to be senile, making me think you didn’t know mom is dead. Hilarious.”

“Oh, lighten up!” Rudy scolded him, winking at his elderly friend. “Get a life!”

Benny rolled his eyes. His geriatric father living in an old folks’ home was telling him to lighten up and get a life. Great.

“Aaannnyway, Dad, that good news I had?”

“Oh yeah,” his father now listened intently.

Benny looked around, not wanting to be overheard. “I won the lottery.”

“You won the lottery?!” Rudy repeated it loudly. Benny again rolled his eyes as everyone in the room turned and started moving toward them.

“Who broke the pottery?” a deaf old woman nearby complained. “Dammit! Why do they keep breaking the pottery?!”

Her companion corrected her.

“Highway robbery?!?” she screeched. “It *is* highway robbery, the bastards!”

Corrected again, she smiled, nodded and joined everyone else moving toward Benny and his father.

“Why do I suddenly feel like lunch,” Benny wondered aloud, “and we’re it?” Grabbing his father’s arm, Benny said, “Let’s get out of here. Now.”

“Can my friend Becks come?”

“Sure.”

Rudy’s friend, Becks, smiled and followed along.

Magyar Café

The Magyar Café was a popular local brewpub downtown, not far from the old folks' home or the Lottery building. Slipping a \$100 bill into the *maitre-d's* palm, Benny snagged a much-coveted corner booth. The owner himself came to their table and gave his spiel about how this was the only Hungarian brewpub in the United States.

Toby's response was a terse, "Yeah, so?"

"I don't like him," the owner said to Benny.

"Most people don't," Benny assured him. "But, I didn't know Hungarians made beer."

"Hungarians *invented* beer!" the man replied defensively.

"Actually," Benny corrected him apologetically, "I think the Egyptians did."

"And who are the Hungarians' ancestors?" the owner countered. "That's right, the Egyptians!"

"No..." Benny couldn't help but reply, "I don't think so..."

"I will send Glynnis," the owner changed the subject, "our *best* waitress, to your table."

"Thank you," Benny didn't want to argue, so he was happy to see the man go away.

When Glynnis – a tall, buxom, dishwater blonde woman – showed up and asked, "Will this be on separate checks," everyone laughed. Now self-conscious, she asked, "What?"

Nodding at Benny, Toby announced to anyone within earshot, “This guy here just won the lottery! *He’s* buying!” His gaze never strayed long or far from Glynnis’s ample bosom. She barely noticed.

Men staring at her, or at least her breasts, was a cross she had to bear. She only noticed when it *didn’t* happen. Now studiously avoiding Toby’s stare, she kept her attention upon Benny.

After all orders were placed, a long-time friend and co-worker of Benny asked, “So, what are you going to do with all that money?!”

“I don’t know yet,” he said. “I guess pay off all my bills. Buy a new car, a new house, some property out in the country.”

“Wow,” Toby replied sarcastically. “You live on the *edge!*”

“Well, what would *you* do with the money?”

“I wouldn’t pay *any* bills! I’d fly to Vegas and put a million dollars on Red 17. Then I’d fly to Bangkok and have a week-long orgy!”

“With girls?” Benny quipped.

Toby ignored the jibe and continued, “Then I’d fly to Kentucky!”

“Ooh, Kentucky!” Benny dripped with sarcasm.

“To buy a fleet of racehorses,” Toby explained.

“A ‘fleet?’” Benny asked but got no answer.

“Why Red 17?” someone asked.

“That’s my lucky number and color!” Toby snapped, as if everyone should have known that. “Hey, Red 17 should be the name of my stable. Stable! That’s the word, not

‘fleet!’” As an afterthought, he then added, “And then I’d hire a hit man.”

An awkward silence fell upon the table.

“To kill your horses and collect on the insurance?” Benny guessed, confused, looking at his brother as one might look at a psychotic person. There was no answer.

“Killing anyone in particular?” their father pressed, “or just a random innocent person for sport?” He almost spat that last part. Rudy was not proud of how Toby, his first-born, had turned out. He would not put it past him to kill someone for no good reason.

“Where’s our waitress?” Toby changed the subject. “Where’s my drink?” After a moment spent looking around, he got and went to get it himself.

“Aaannnyway,” Benny continued, “I’ll give money to charity. I’d like to help finance any small businesses that people might have in mind for which they can’t find financing. You know, help them with their dreams.”

Wanting to hear a young person’s opinion, he then turned to a teenage girl – he could only assume she was the daughter of one of his guests – and asked, “What do *you* think I should do with the money?”

“Oh, you can do whatever you want, Mr. Reed,” she answered shyly. “I wouldn’t want to tell you...”

“No, I mean if *you* had won it. What would you do?”

“Well,” she began, looking into the distance, “I would buy land all over the world, wherever the poorest people lived, and build them some apartments, with room for a community garden, and a school so they can learn a skill and get out of poverty.”

Everyone sat back and just stared at the girl, some with mouths agape. They all then burst into applause.

“That’s beautiful!” Benny was genuinely impressed. “I’ll give you some money to do just that!”

There was another round of applause before everyone started coming up with his or her own ways to spend *his* money.

“I’d build no-kill animal shelters in every major city,” said one woman.

“I’d donate to children’s hospitals all over the world,” said another.

“I’d start my own bank,” said one man who didn’t *quite* get the spirit of giving. Everyone stopped and stared. “...and make interest-free loans to the needy!” he added unconvincingly.

Noticing that his father had remained silent, Benny asked, “What would *you* do with the money, Dad?”

“Probably buy a new house and car, like you, Benny. I don’t have any bills...” His voice trailed off, and his friend Becks leaned in and whispered something. “Oh, right! I could take over the payments of friends at the old folks’ home.” Everyone nodded their approval. “Then I’d donate the rest to cancer research.”

“Cancer research?” Toby was aghast as he returned with his drink from wherever he’d been. “What the hell for? You can’t trust those people to actually cure cancer. They *need* cancer to justify their existence!”

“Do you even *know* what your mother died of?” Rudy snarled at him.

“Oh yeah,” Toby suddenly remembered she had died of breast cancer.

Benny snorted in disgust.

“Sorry!” Toby shot back. “It was a long time ago. I don’t think about it. It’s not healthy to dwell on the past.”

“It was only seven years ago!” their father growled at him.

“Here’s what you should do, Benny,” Toby joked in an effort to deflect attention, “take that money, all of it, and run for president. You use *your* money to finance your campaign. That way, you’re not beholden to anyone. But you’ll need *all* your money. Do you know how much it *costs* these days to run for president? Then you can do all the things that everyone here wants to do, with *government* money after you’re president, which means you’ll have a thousand times that amount to play with.”

Everyone was shaking their head until Benny surprised them all by saying, “Toby, my jackass brother, that’s not a bad idea. I *should* do that.”

“Uh, dude,” Toby explained, “I was sorta kidding.”

“Uh, dude,” Benny replied, “I know, but, I’m serious. I know I have no shot of winning. I’ve got some good ideas, though. Maybe the ‘legitimate’ candidates will steal them and some good will come of it.”

“Bastards probably would,” someone agreed.

“No,” Benny corrected him. “That’s a good thing. I don’t care who gets credit for the ideas, as long as they’re put to use. This country has gotten so messed up, *somebody* has to do something! It might as well be me. Besides, it might be fun.”

“Fun?” Toby replied. “You’ve got a messed up idea of fun. Besides, you hate politics... and politicians!”

Ignoring this, Benny said, “I don’t know the first thing about running a campaign, or even getting on the ballot.”

“I can do it!” a middle-aged man at the next table volunteered. “Running campaigns is what I do.”

“Who are you?”

“Bart Strangent, president and CEO of B.S. Services,” he introduced himself. “Political campaigns are what we do!”

“Seriously?” Toby sneered. “The name of your company is B.S. Services and you do political campaigns? Perfect.”

Benny's campaign manager was now officially "some guy he met in a bar."

The next morning, Benny was surprised to awaken next to the waitress, Glynnis. “I thought you went home with Toby,” he said to her sleeping naked body. He stared at her for a solid minute, not because she was naked and exposed – well, not entirely – but because he could not remember having sex with her or anyone else last night. *How much did I drink?* He could only remember having a few beers. He did have a slight hangover, but those were his first beers in at least a year, so it made sense he’d have a headache. Putting that aside, he got up to make coffee.

Once in the kitchen with the coffee started, he sat down at the table, grabbed a notepad and pencil and made a list of how much money to give to family and friends.

Toby was right. He would need as much money as possible to run for president. Luckily, the government gave candidates matching funds at some point. He would give that teenage girl with the big ideas \$10 million; his father

and brother \$3 million each; and put the rest in the bank and live off the interest. It would probably also behoove him to split portions into a few foreign banks in *their* currency.

“It doesn’t look good,” he thought aloud, “running for president but afraid to keep all my money in my own country.”

He did the math. Two hundred and ninety-six million split in half for taxes, minus \$1 million for “sundry” items, \$2 million for a nice house, ten for that girl and her parents, three each for his father and brother. That left \$129 million, give or take.

Glynnis entered the kitchen, yawning, wearing one of Benny’s t-shirts and nothing else. *Why was that so sexy?* he wondered. Who cares? It just was.

“Mornin’,” Benny said amiably, still wondering if he’d had sex with her. Seeing her now, he couldn’t see how it was possible to forget being with someone like her.

Smiling but saying nothing, she found a cup and poured her own coffee. Sitting across the table from him, she took two sips, looked at him sleepily for a second and then smiled wide.

Benny smiled back, completely confused. “Uh... did we... uh... last night... uh...”

“Have sex?” she finished helpfully. “What do *you* think, stud?”

“I’m sorry, and I can’t believe I’m saying this looking at you now, but I honestly don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember these?” she thrust her boobs toward him, teasing.

“Wow...” he almost drooled. “Uh... I’m sorry, but no, I really don’t...” Then he blushed.

“Oh my God, are you blushing?” she asked. “You are just too cute! Now I wish we *did* have sex instead of me and your asshole brother.” She made a face at the thought.

“Oh, thank God,” Benny was much relieved. “I was really starting to wonder what was wrong with me, forgetting someone like you. But, what were you doing in my bed... completely naked?”

“Toby and I had sex on your couch. He left, I stayed. I didn’t want to sleep on the couch, though, so I crashed in your bed. I’m surprised you didn’t notice. You must sleep soundly.”

Looking down at his notepad now, he added “new couch” to the list of things to buy.

“Come on,” he said as he got up. “Let’s go shopping.” He poured the rest of his coffee into the sink, laughed, and said, “I’m rich now. I can afford to do that!”

The “shopping” he had in mind was at the nearest Porsche dealership. It was Glynnis’s turn to drool as Benny bought a brand new white Boxter, their sportiest model. As “proof” that he was a serious customer capable of paying for such a vehicle, Benny showed them his lottery winner’s receipt. When they still didn’t believe him, he showed them a picture of himself at the lottery office standing next to the lottery director, whom everyone recognized.

The funds were not yet in the bank, but the dealership let him have it on good faith, with conditions. They took his old car and parked it in back, out of view behind the dumpster.

Driving down the street in his hot new car, with this hot new girl by his side, Benny was happy to be alive. Then he remembered something he had to do. He should be forgiving and magnanimous right about now, he knew, given his recent good luck, but he just couldn't help it. He *still* hated his boss.

Glynnis had Benny drop her off at a shoe store along the way. Without thinking, he gave her his credit card. While she shopped inside, he sat in his car on the curbside and called his soon-to-be-former boss.

"Jim," he barked when the man answered. "You can go to hell now." A woman passing by turned and gawked at such rudeness. Benny ignored her.

Jim's response was not what Benny had expected.

"So you really did win the lottery?!" Jim was excited.

"Uh, yeah, I really did. But, Jim? You can..."

"Can you give me two hundred thousand dollars?"

"What?! No, I can't give you... did you not hear me? I said go to hell!"

A priest and three nuns walked by at that very moment, mouths agape at his choice of words.

"Oh, sorry," he apologized to them, sheepishly crossing himself as he guessed one is supposed to do in that situation. Was that really a priest and three nuns? What are the odds? It had been a weird past few days. Was it a full moon or something?

"It's just that I'm in over my head on my mortgage," Jim was still talking on the other end. "I'm going to lose the house, Benny. I know you don't owe me anything, but you can't let me be homeless, Benny!"

"Actually..."

“I’ve got a wife and kids, Benny!”

“You’ve been a jerk to me since the day you hired me, Jim,” Benny growled into the phone, though quieter this time in case a Girl Scout or Brownie troop or something equally unlikely walked by. “You never did like me. Never appreciated my work. Never gave me more than the minimum raise, if that. I’m surprised you even know my name, frankly. Why should I give you anything?!”

“Don’t give it to *me*, Benny. Give it to my wife and kids.”

Benny hung up on him. *Jerk probably doesn’t even have a wife and kids.* No, wait, he remembered seeing them at a company function once. Unless they were just hired actors. No, that’s ridiculous.

He spat out the window. A gust of wind caught the expectorant and hit the passenger in the car that had just pulled up to the stop light next to him.

Again, what were the odds? Were the Earth’s magnetic poles shifting, he wondered, causing mathematical improbabilities to become probable? His head was starting to hurt again. Out of embarrassment, Benny laughed. The victim thought he was laughing out of callousness.

“Son of a bitch!” the man shouted as he wiped his face.

“I’m sorry!” Benny apologized between cringes and laughter. There were no cars ahead of him in the space along the curb between him and the corner. As always, when given the choice of “fight or flight,” Benny chose “flight.” He was a lover, not a fighter.

He started the car and took off around the corner up ahead to the right. He barely missed an oncoming biker

who flipped him off as Benny zigzagged his way through traffic to escape.

Pulling into another open curbside parking spot a safe distance away, he called his old boss back. In a more pleasant tone, Benny said, “Hey, Jim. Benny. I’m giving your wife and kids the money.”

“How much?”

“One hundred grand,” Benny growled into the phone, “half of what you asked for. I’m assuming you’re asking for more than you need. And, it’s a loan, not a gift. You have to pay me back!”

He then hung up and circled back to pick up Glynnis. Benny did a double take as she got into the car. “Is that a new dress?”

“You noticed! You like it?” she struck a pose, showing off the red, tightly fitting dress with several white buttons drawing focus to the cleavage area.

“Yeah...” he struggled for words. “I mean, it’s very nice.” *My God, she’s hot*, he thought. *What is she doing with me?* Then his wife came to mind and his lust evaporated.

“And a new purse and shoes and...” she looked around, hoping someone, anyone was looking. Seeing a group of businessmen coming toward them, she smiled, unbuttoned a couple of those buttons at the neckline, and finished her sentence, “... and a new bra, too!”

The businessmen cheered. Her little peep show took Benny aback. Aloud, all he could say was, “Damn!” Privately, feeling like a prude, he berated himself. *It’s been long enough! Why can’t I enjoy a beautiful girl without feeling guilty?*

It had been a year and a half, but whenever he looked at a woman how he was starting to look at Glynnis, his first thought was of his wife. He still felt weird about sex.

As expected, everyone who was anyone in local government was there for the lottery jackpot photo-op. The lottery director, mayor and governor all said a few words. The director then asked Benny to speak.

“Thank you, thank you,” he said to the crowd of reporters, political and lottery staff. Glynnis, beside him, hammed it up for the cameras. “I don’t know what to say, really.” He glanced, apologetic and helpless, at the lottery director.

“Well,” she stepped in and spoke, “what are you going to do with all that money!?”

“Right,” Benny laughed. “I’ll pay off all my bills...” to which everyone nodded in bored approval. “I’ll buy a new house. Already bought a new car. Oh yeah... and I’ll be running for president.”

Everyone, including Glynnis, laughed at that last one. It was not the response he expected. Then again, he had not really thought it through.

“President?” the governor furrowed his brow and gave a derisive smile. “Of what? Your homeowners association?” The mayor and lottery director laughed along with him.

“President of the United States,” Benny replied defiantly. “Why not?”

“Whatever, dude,” the governor waved him off, adding, “Good luck with that.”

“‘Whatever, dude?’” Benny said to Glynnis beside him. “‘What kind of grown man says ‘Whatever, dude?’”

That’s when the lottery director once again stepped in and grabbed the microphone. “Thank you, Benny. Thank you, Governor Kartazian... dude. Thank you, Mayor Wilson. Thank you everyone for coming out today and sharing another lottery success story with us! Good night!”

Benny did not appreciate the derision with which his announced candidacy was greeted. On the limousine ride to the bank of his choice, he asked the two large security guards what was so ridiculous about his running for president.

“Nothing wrong with that, man,” said one. “Go for it.”

“Rock on!” said the other.

The two of them – one white, the other black, across from and facing him in the limo’s back seats – then smiled at each other. It was obvious they thought it was ridiculous, too.

“Thank you for your input,” Benny replied insincerely. No one cared, but if there was one way to inspire Benny into action, ridicule worked every time. Thanks to those two security guards, and the politicians before them, he decided right then and there to learn as much as he could about politics. He became a regular at the local library as he sought out every book, article or video clip on the subject. There was no *How to Run for President* manual that he could find, though he made a mental note to write one after the election, time permitting.

The Campaign Begins

A few weeks later, Benny and B.S. Services were ready for action. B.S. Services informed Benny that he was now on the ballot in all states and voting territories, as promised.

“That was way too easy,” he replied, joking at first, before realizing that maybe it *was* too easy. He *had* met this Biff Strange dude in a bar. Maybe he should call a few of those Secretaries of State listed on B.S. Services’ web site. He needed to verify first-hand that he was in fact on their ballot.

After a couple hours’ worth of phone calls, he was both relieved and surprised to learn that he was a legitimate candidate for President of the United States. Candidate, anyway. His legitimacy remained to be seen.

His people – he loved having *people* – first booked him on a few radio talk shows. They explained that he needed to “break his cherry” there before progressing to TV. “Such a lovely phrase,” Benny replied sarcastically before it occurred to him that such a phrase never would have bothered him before. Now that he was a presidential candidate, though, he had to beware being too easily offended. Can’t become pretentious, either, like the rest of “them.”

On his first radio talk show, Benny brought his “posse” – Toby, Rudy, and two B.S. Services people – along with Toby’s latest in a long line of girlfriends. Now that Toby was the brother of a presidential candidate, and a rich man himself – Benny had already divvied up his winnings – the

women flocked to him. Toby, of course, had no compunction taking full advantage.

Benny had expected – *hoped* – to never see Toby again, but his brother insisted on following him around like a groupie as he ran for president. Their father, too, though Benny was perfectly happy with *his* company.

Glynnis would not be joining them. She just stopped showing up, and Benny had no idea why. He consoled himself with the knowledge that she was out of his league, romantically, anyway. Oh well.

As Benny made his way into the studio for his first-ever interview, he saw that there was not enough room in the booth for his entire entourage to fit. They had to watch from the other side of the glass.

While Benny spoke with the show host, his brother on that side of the glass kept placing his hand on his date's leg. She kept slapping it away and giggling, until they finally hurried off to find some privacy somewhere.

The show's host, John (don't call me Dr. Johnny) Foevher, was the type of radio host who spent a few seconds after each commercial break banging on cowbells, cymbals, triangles and bongo drums.

Benny still had his ears covered when the man asked his first question. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "could you repeat that?"

"Are you deaf?!" the host joked. "Pay attention!"

"I might be deaf after this," Benny replied, already starting to dislike this guy.

"I *said*," the host repeated loudly, "Your slogan is 'Power to the People.' Right out of the 60's. I'm guessing you're a Democrat." At normal volume, he continued,

“What my listeners are wondering is, are you a left wing hippie radical? A communist? Where’s your flag lapel pin?”

“One question at a time, please, John,” Benny said affably. “May I call you John? Do I look like a hippie? Do I look like a radical?”

“No,” John agreed, “but...”

“Well, I’m not. I’m not a Democrat, either. I don’t know who is worse, Democrats or Republicans. They are two sides of the same coin, if you ask me. I’m an Independent. As to ‘left wing,’” Benny put air quotes around that phrase, “I don’t subscribe to the left-right dichotomy promulgated by the mainstream corporate media. It’s all part of their ‘simplify, stupefy, divide and conquer’ mentality.”

“Whoa, whoa, *whoa*, there pardner,” the host interjected. “‘Corporate dichotomy. Promulgated. Divide and conquer.’ I’m not so sure we – and by ‘we’ I mean my listeners – know what all that means!” He tried to make it sound like a joke, but Benny guessed that this host really did think his listeners were idiots.

Like an English teacher working with a difficult student, Benny explained slowly and calmly. “Dichotomy: two opposing sides. Promulgated: disseminated, promoted. Anyway, in the purest sense of the word, you might say I’m a communist if communism means believing in community and people living and working together for common goals.”

When it looked like John might choke on his bagel, Benny added, “That’s communism with a small ‘c,’ John, a small ‘c.’ Maybe ‘socialism’ would be more palatable, but again only in the purest sense of the word. All the best ‘isms’ have been taken and perverted. I’m against the

‘pseudo-Communism’ that was practiced in the Soviet Union and China. That’s actually totalitarianism, and I’m against any system that gives anyone something for nothing. I want a democratic meritocracy. Is that even a form of government? I guess I’ll just create my own.”

“You’re a freaking communist?!?!?” the host heard what he wanted to hear and now, after swallowing his bagel, was on the verge of convulsions.

“I just explained...” Benny began before changing tack. “Look, you grew up in a *family* that lived in a *neighborhood*, I presume, John?”

“What? Of course! You think I’m a farmer?”

“Implying that there’s something wrong with farmers? Never mind. Assuming everyone more or less cooperated with each other, *that* is a comm-u-nity,” he sounded it out. “A sort of communism. Maybe that’s the wrong word to use. But, growing up, you had your own family members living together; several families living next to each other in a neighborhood; all, in one way or another, together making things work. Sharing each other’s tools. Babysitting each other’s kids. In the purest sense of the word, if that’s not communism it’s at least socialism. You’ve been brain-washed by the corporate media into fearing such labels, but in their purest sense they pretty much describe the environment in which we all grew up.”

“Not in *my* house. Not in *my* neighborhood,” John disagreed. “We had a fascist dictatorship,” he said with pride. “My father ran that household with an iron fist! And we never really knew our neighbors, never mind getting along with them!”

“Your father never consulted with your mother on things such as how to run the household or how to raise the kids? Or asked you kids where you wanted to go on vacation?”

“Nope. With him, it was ‘my way or the highway.’ And the neighbors be damned!”

Benny was flummoxed. All he could say was, “Well, no wonder you grew up to be such an asshole.”

They went to commercial, during which Benny was escorted out of the building.

Toby and his girlfriend missed it, though they did hear most of the show thanks to the speakers in every room. Tucking in his shirt as he caught up with Benny and his entourage, Toby “helpfully” pointed out to Benny, “You’re not much of a politician.”

“That’s probably my best quality,” Benny agreed.

“Hey, you should use that line! *A lot*. I’m just wondering how you think you’ll hold up in a debate. You’ve had no training, which is obvious after your philosophical rambling back there. Communism with a small ‘c’? Democratic meritocracy? What the hell was that?”

“We’ll train him,” said one of the B.S. Services people.

“See there?” Benny replied happily. “They’ll train me.”

“I could probably teach you a few things, too,” Toby added.

“I doubt it,” said Benny. “Dad, yes. You, no. Anyway, I guess I’ll just wing it. That’s another one of my best qualities.”

“No, it’s really not,” Toby shook his head. “This could get ugly.”

For his next interview, also a radio show, they all piled into their new campaign bus and drove to the nearest large city. On the air, the host asked, “*How*, exactly, would you give power to the people?”

“Simple!” Benny replied happily. “I’d give everyone a vote! I’d setup a web site and, on every important issue, ask for the entire country’s input. I want a *true* democracy.”

“But this is a republic, not a democracy,” the host corrected him.

Benny ignored him and continued, “Also, my entire cabinet will be on a rotating schedule so that as many people as possible have a say. No more entrenched political hacks! Just people making government work *for* the people and *by* the people as it was meant to be!

“Speaking of ‘hacks,’ the host interjected, “what about hackers hacking into your web site and changing votes?”

“You mean like what already happens in most elections nowadays? I’ll hire a team of nerds to protect the system, but no one from the voting machine companies. Anyway, I want a roadocracy.”

“Huh?”

“A roadocracy, as in traffic. We’re in radio’s ‘drive time’ slot right now, right? Well, while we were out on the road driving down here today, it occurred to me that everyone has to follow the rules of the road. Nobody, not even the rich and powerful, gets a wider, faster lane than is available to everyone else, right? Roadocracy.”

An open-mouthed stare was the response.

On their way back to the bus, Toby advised, “You have *got* to stop coming up with these stupid terms. Roadocracy? Geez.”

On a local television show in a small town somewhere in the Midwest, Benny stated, “I hope this is the last presidential campaign.” He liked saying that for dramatic effect.

“Come again?” this host, like so many before, was baffled.

“After I’m elected, all future politicians, including president, will no longer be nominated by mysterious ‘men behind the curtain.’ There will be a lottery for every position. People will have to pass a series of written tests first; fill out a job application; *then* they’ll be entered into the lottery for that position. If they’re randomly picked, they’re in.”

“Are you serious?” a TV host in the next town asked. “You seriously want to decide by random lot our Congress and President of these United States?”

“Yes. A lottery is what put me where I am today. A lottery can decide our next president. You have a better idea?”

“Yes, they’re called elections.”

Shaking his head, Benny said, “No good. Too easily rigged. Unverifiable without a paper trail, which the election commissions have all made sure of. Then, if the ‘right’ candidate isn’t selected, the Supreme Court steps in and picks him for us. No. Besides, with a lottery, we don’t have to put up with all that campaigning – and the corruption that goes along with it – and all those damned com-

mercials! I want this to be the last presidential campaign as we know it.

“We’ll have to amend the Constitution, of course, which I hate to do, though I doubt anyone will miss the ‘electoral college.’ *That* was an ingenious way of making sure each state’s presidential vote is represented, but remember, I want a true democracy, not a republic, and *that* has to be the least democratic thing the Constitutional Congress ever did.”

“So, you’ll get rid of the electoral college?”

“Yup. And candidates will only be eligible for this lottery if they have passed mental, emotional and physical tests. There will also be tests on the Constitution, history, speech, reading, writing, logic, math and comparative religion.”

“Comparative religion!?”

“Sure. People need to understand where others are coming from.”

“How about ‘animal husbandry?’” the host suggested sarcastically.

“Good idea!” Benny retorted with equal sarcasm. “Kindness toward animals promotes kindness toward humans. I’ll add that to the list. And when I’m elected, I’ll push for death-by-attack-dogs for convicted dog fighters.”

The host was shaking his head.

“Just kidding about that last one,” Benny continued. “That’s kinda disgusting, actually. Sorry. Anyway, candidates are disqualified if they’ve ever been forcibly removed from public office. Everyone serves just a one or two-year term, so they don’t get entrenched. They have to skip at least one year, too. Of course, electronic lottery machines,

like voting machines, are too easily rigged, so the old ping-pong ball way of doing it will be used.”

“Great,” the host said, still sarcastic. “Our next president will be decided by a ping-pong ball.”

“At least I’m *smarter* than a ping-pong ball, unlike some of my predecessors,” Benny instantly regretted saying that. “I’m sorry, that was not nice. I get caught up in the argument sometimes. I’ve got to watch that.”

“You’ve got some crazy ideas, Mr. Reed.”

“This country *needs* someone who’s secure enough in his own mental stability to *not* be afraid of ‘crazy’ ideas. All the best ideas started out as ‘crazy.’”

Returning to the bus after the interview, Toby opined, “You were doing well back there until you apologized at the end. Never apologize!” Toby advised. “It makes you look weak. John Wayne said that.”

Benny shook his head. “I always liked John Wayne, but I’m not going to follow that advice. I don’t believe in that macho b.s. I’m not afraid of *appearing* soft on crime or soft on terror or soft on anything. Some problems *require* a soft touch.”

“Wimp!” Toby said with a smile. “Flip-flopper! Tax-and-spend liberal!” he hurled all the tried-and-true insults. “What else?”

“Terrorist appeaser,” their father added.

“Ah, yes,” Benny laughed. He then noticed a man in the shadows of the nearby parking garage, frowning, watching him. “What’s *he* staring at?” he asked, openly pointing at him.

“I don’t know,” Toby replied as he looked over there.

The man stared harder now that he'd been spotted. Benny stared back for a second, then ignored him.

A few yards farther along, a young mother struggling with a fidgety child looked up from her stroller, frowning at Benny.

"You see that?" Toby said sarcastically. "*She* was frowning at you, too!"

When the woman's child also gave Benny a dirty look, they both laughed out loud. Between laughs, Toby said, "You're getting paranoid, man."

In an ivory tower somewhere, a much more powerful man was also frowning, having just watched a "highlight reel" of Benny's shows. The fact that he had even heard of Benny, let alone gotten access to the tapes from these obscure local radio and TV interviews was a mystery.

"This Mr. Reed," he set down his drink, "is an idiot. Unfortunately, so are most of the public. What he's saying might resonate with them. It's early yet. But I want to keep a close eye on candidate Benny Reed."

"Yes, sir," a young woman replied. "We have someone on him."

"Good."

Benny's people tried to get him on the major televised debates, but there were no national debates for independent candidates. They had to create their own. All they could manage for a venue was some country music has-been's theater in Branson, Missouri. The only "live" coverage it got was from a local channel and an obscure satellite-only network.

Toby used his status as “candidate advisor” to get access backstage just before they all went on stage. Thinking it would be funny, he spiked the debaters’ water, including Benny’s, with thiopental sodium, a.k.a. “truth serum.” He always tried to have a supply on hand. It came in handy in his former line of work.

Tricia Lemapalong was a smart, ambitious, raven-haired beauty working her way up, she hoped, to a job someday with one of the major networks. Of Thai descent on her father’s side, at the top of her class everywhere she went; she was also the first- ever Thai-American named moderator of a presidential debate. Sure, this particular debate was a pathetic excuse for a one, but being selected as the moderator was still quite an achievement.

“Councilman McIlhain,” she began, “what is the first thing you would do in office as President of the United States?”

“I would find the best male prostitutes in town, Tricia.”

Her eyes lit up and she stifled a giggle. “Really?”

Benny and the audience laughed out loud. The thought of the inevitable media response to this gaffe, and what it would do for her career, caused Ms. Lemapalong to involuntarily rise up on the balls of her feet.

“I’m sorry,” McIlhain corrected himself. “That didn’t come out right.”

“No?” Ms. Lemapalong said teasingly.

“I meant to say best *escort service*,” he added, at which point *everyone*, including the other candidates, burst out laughing.

“Seriously, Councilman?” Ms. Lemapalong replied condescendingly. Quoting a popular TV game show line, she added, “Is that your final answer?”

McIlhain nodded. “What!? I like sex... with men. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“No,” she agreed, fighting back tears of laughter as she moved on to the next candidate. “And you, Congressman Spechter? What would be *your* first act as president?”

“In order to continue American dominance around the world and ensure a proper future for the children of this great Christian nation,” Mr. Spechter began, “I am hereby putting on notice *any* country populated by mongrels and half-breeds that the US of A will put a boot in your ass if you get in our way as we go in and steal your natural resources!”

Disturbingly, this received some applause. Being a “half-breed” herself, Ms. Lemapalong cut him short and quickly moved on to the next candidate. “Mr. Wexford, how would you answer this same question?”

“Are you going to give me more than two seconds like you did Spechter?”

“As long as you’re not a racist warmonger, yes,” she replied with a firm smile.

“OK,” he accepted her terms. “Here’s what we’ll do. We’ll put into place a series of sweetheart business deals that bleed the budgets dry and personally benefit me and several of my best friends...”

Tricia cut him off. “Is this a joke?!? Are you people putting me on? Am I being Punk’d?” She looked around for the host of that more modern version of the *Candid Camera* show.

“I’m serious,” Wexford added helpfully. “But I don’t like sex with men. You and me... in the Oval Office, baby. You’re hot... for an ethnic girl.” He was completely serious.

Now confused, insulted, and on the verge of tears, Tricia stared angrily into the camera until the show producer went to commercial... a very long commercial break.

Once back from break and having regained her composure, she asked Benny, “How would you improve the economy? And please be serious.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Benny agreed obediently. “One thing the previous administration ‘accomplished’ is that the US can no longer feel superior to some of the ‘banana republics’ south of us. Most of them are now much more financially stable than we are. I’ll unfortunately be spending a lot of time undoing the mess that my predecessor made.”

Toby and Rudy looked on proudly backstage. “He’s really come a long way in such a short time,” Toby noted, “thanks to me.”

“You?” Rudy corrected him. “If by ‘you,’ you mean B.S. Services, then maybe. Then again, no, even that’s not true. He’s done this pretty much all by himself.”

Benny’s water was spiked, too, but he usually spoke the truth, anyway. One effect of the drugs, however, was that he seemed to be more animated, almost theatrical. Other than that, he was fine.

“I’ll take the money saved by *not* waging war for oil, and I’ll invest it in research,” he said, then added more forcefully, “*real* research on alternative fuels!”

Polite applause came from the audience, and the host was allowing him much more time than the others were.

She must like me, he thought hopefully, now wondering if she was single.

Other than at the lottery news conference, Benny could not remember ever receiving applause, feeble as it was. Encouraged by this, and now wanting to impress the host, he continued with a new resolve.

“I would make corporations actually *pay taxes*.” He said this in the same way that Oprah Winfrey sometimes emphasized things. It wasn’t quite shouting or singing, but it wasn’t quite normal, either.

Toby cringed. Rudy said, “He must’ve gotten that... um... flourish from you.”

Benny then continued normally, “Did you know that if corporations paid their fair share in taxes, actual humans wouldn’t have to? No kidding! Run the numbers! That’ll greatly improve the average Joe’s personal economy.” More audience applause. “To protect legitimate U.S. companies, I would enforce tariffs on foreign-made goods, including those made by supposedly American companies who are in fact American in name only. There will be no more *incentives*,” he used that dramatic booming voice again, “for companies to move their factories out of the country! We need manufacturing in *this* country and citizens who can afford to buy their products!” The applause was more enthusiastic now.

“Please hold your applause until after the debate is over,” the host scolded the audience.

“If products are made by workers earning less than a living wage,” Benny continued, “I won’t allow those goods into the country. I will rescind NAFTA and all the ‘free

trade' agreements made by previous administrations. Such agreements only undermine the working man!"

"OK, I'm sorry," Tricia interrupted, "I must interject. Business works in a certain way. The free market, if left alone, would almost certainly be self-regulated. It would, through market forces alone, be a self-correcting system. Those trade agreements came after years of hard work. You're not seriously suggesting we undo all the great work accomplished by many generations of businessmen, not to mention presidents, who've come before you? People, I dare say, who are much better than you."

"God, I hope so," Benny replied, "if it means removing corruption and elitism and letting the average honest person have a chance to succeed without sucking up to those already in power!"

Huge applause now. Tricia shook her head.

"You've read too much Ayn Rand," Benny continued, fired up by the audience and the fact that people were actually listening to him. "Don't for one second believe that the so-called free market is self-regulated or self-correcting! Without government regulation, it's every man for himself, and may the biggest prick win. Pardon my language, but speaking of pricks, I will put a cap on the allowable income of CEOs of publicly traded companies. There will be no more companies filing for bankruptcy while the CEO rakes in millions!"

The crowd was going wild now.

"And one final point, if I may?"

"Go ahead," she laughed. "I've already given you way too much time, what's another few seconds?" She was actually enjoying this.

“Thank you,” Benny continued. “In answer to your last dig about me being better than those who came before me: no one is better than I, and I am better than no one.”

“Keats?” Tricia asked with slight condescension in her voice, though she did genuinely want to know who he was quoting.

“Benny Reed,” he replied with his most charming smile, “as far as I know.”

With the debate now over and the effects of the drugs having worn off, Benny was confronted by the media after accusations that he was responsible for the water being spiked. Benny’s initial reaction was to laugh out loud. With a sarcastic but playful smile, he said, “Oh, that’s terrible. Terrible!” and laughed again. “Seriously, though, I wasn’t behind it, but you gotta admit it was pretty funny. I think it should be required in *all* debates. Maybe that’s the only way we’ll ever get any honesty out of politicians.”

His comments were caught on camera and quickly spread across the Internet, “going viral,” as they say. Still, none of the “major” TV news outlets invited him onto their shows after. That simply was *not done* for candidates not pre-approved by their owners. He *was* invited, however, to appear on several shows outside of the mainstream.

Still wondering if Ms. Lemapalong was single, Benny instructed one of his staffers to find out for him. Unfortunately, the staffer to which he assigned this task just happened to be the best-looking man on his team.

“Dude,” his brother advised. “Have you forgotten how it’s done? If you want to go out with a girl, you ask her

yourself. You don't have Brad Pitt ask her for you. She'll want to go out with Brad Pitt."

Benny shrugged it off, watching as the young hunk went and asked her, as instructed.

"I can't watch," Toby said as he walked away.

Benny watched the intercourse, so far non-sexual, between his staffer and Ms. Lemapalong. At first, she shook her head, no. The young man nodded and glanced back at Benny. Then he asked her something else, to which she very enthusiastically said yes.

Just as the young man was returning to give Benny her answer, one of the other candidates stepped in front of them and pulled back his jacket lapel, revealing the gun tucked away there. Benny grabbed his staffer by the elbow and speed-walked toward the exit.

"You see that?!" he asked "Brad Pitt."

"Pfft," said the young man. "It was probably fake."

"But you saw it," Benny said. His young advisor shrugged, completely uninterested.

"Would you even *care* if I was killed?" Benny wondered aloud as they met up with Toby and Rudy in front of the exit.

"Honestly? Not really. You're just another politician."

"I am *not* just another politician!" Benny took offense. "I'm not a politician at all!"

"Whatever, dude. Nothing personal."

"Don't 'whatever dude' me, you little..." Benny snapped before stopping himself. After all, this guy had asked Ms. Lemapalong out for him.

Toby was trying hard to stifle a laugh. Their father shook his head.

“Hey,” Benny changed the subject as he adopted a more friendly tone, “so, what did Ms. Lemapalong say when you asked her to dinner?”

“She said no,” the kid replied happily.

“You don’t have to be so happy about it.”

Ms. Lemapalong then showed up, as if on cue. Nodding hello at Benny, she asked the younger man, “You ready?”

“Let’s go!” Benny’s staffer said and quickly pulled her away.

“Wh... wh...” Benny protested, but they were walking away. To rub it in, the kid waved at Benny as they left.

“Well,” Benny sighed. “That didn’t go as expected.”

“Actually,” Toby corrected him, “it went *exactly* as expected.”

Assassination

In Dallas for another local television news show, the host was a man named Clarence. He asked Benny, “How would you heal the deep political divide we see now in this country?”

“Well, I’m an independent, so I’ll be crossing party lines all the time. Plus, I won’t be quite the asshole that our current and past several presidents have been. One phrase that I will *never* use is, ‘You’re either with us or against us.’”

The host raised an eyebrow but let Benny speak.

“It’s funny how people vote, though,” Benny continued. “In person, Republican voters are often some of the nicest people, but they vote for the meanest and stupidest candidates. *They* aren’t personally stupid, they just vote stupidly. Maybe it’s out of fear... a fear that Republican politicians have become expert at playing up and using to their advantage.”

“You just lost half the voters with that one,” Clarence, a Republican, intoned.

Benny literally shrugged it off, and continued his train of thought, “Democrats, on the other hand, while often globally and politically kind and voting for the better candidate, are often personally mean. You ever notice that? It’s weird.”

Clarence shook his head, in no mood to agree with anything Benny said.

“You know what I hate the most that voters do?” Benny continued. “Instead of voting their conscience – for the person they like the best – they vote ‘strategically’ for the one they think they *have* to vote for so that the *other one* doesn’t win. They think the one they *really* like has no chance, so why vote for him? But *that* is a wasted vote. If they only knew. The reason an otherwise good candidate has ‘no chance’ is because the media *decided* ahead of time that they had no chance, and the uninformed, apathetic voters go along with it! I like what Eugene Debs said: ‘I would rather vote for something I want and not get it, than vote for something I *don’t* want and get it.’”

“I don’t follow,” Clarence interjected.

“You and everyone else, unfortunately. To answer your question, though, I would bring people together naturally in a shared appreciation of the good job I’m doing. My policies will make sense. If people are confused about an issue – probably purposely confused by the media – I’ll go on television and explain it.

“Part of what I’ll do will actually be what I’m *not* doing. I won’t allow the Office of the President to be a puppet of the military-corporate complex, stirring up trouble all over the world for no real reason other than for *their* profit. I’ll stop waging this bogus ‘war on terror,’ not to mention the ill-conceived and ill-defined ‘war on drugs.’ I might want to wage a war on stupidity. No, I’ll stop waging war, period. War is the ultimate human stupidity. Too many people confuse patriotism with being pro-war. Only idiots and psychopaths are pro-war. We need an intelligent, balanced, long-term approach to things.”

“You mean like the former Soviet Union’s ‘5- and 10-year plans?’” the snarky host replied.

“Nice try,” Benny laughed it off. “On another subject, I’ll stop all foreign ‘aid’ until further review.”

“You sound like an isolationist,” Clarence interjected.

“No, not at all. I’ll talk to and engage with all foreign countries. The flow of free money will stop, though.” With a laugh, he then added, “But that’ll probably get me shot.

“I will declare this policy of ‘preemptive war’ a crime. It already is, of course, but you know how that goes. I’ll get Congress to pass a law with those specific words, so there’s no confusion.”

“You sound like a conspiracy theorist,” Clarence opined, “talking about military corporate complex. Assassination.”

“I’m just paraphrasing Eisenhower on the first one. As for the second one, well, we all know it happens. It happened right here in this city. I don’t consider myself one, but if that makes me a conspiracy theorist, so be it. Actually, what’s wrong with being a conspiracy theorist? If I think one or more people are conspiring, I’m going to theorize about it. Conspiracies happen every day, you know, especially in politics. Ask any cop or lawyer trying a case. Half of their cases are based on alleged conspiracy.”

Temporarily distracted by an electronic voice in his ear, Clarence nodded and said, “Uh-huh, uh-huh,” to someone on the other end. Returning his attention to Benny, he was strangely excited and cheerful when he asked, “Anything else you’d like to add, before we wrap things up?”

“Yes, Clarence – and this is very important to me – I’ll make sure beauty contestants actually *work* toward achieving world peace and eliminating hunger. No more of this simply *wishing* for it!” He paused to see Clarence’s reaction, but all he got was a blank stare. “And the death penalty for telemarketers!” he added. To no one in particular, he then said, “Just kidding! I swear sometimes, people just don’t get me.”

On their way back to the bus, Benny was feeling especially good. He was really enjoying himself, enjoying life. He was running for president! How many people could say that? Oh, and he was rich! It would be nice to have a girlfriend, but other than that, life was good.

“I think that interview went well, don’t you?” his question was directed at his nearest staffer, who happened to be a girl named Mindy, though he said it loud enough for all to hear. Mindy and several of his professional yes-men nodded strongly in agreement.

“Pretty good,” Rudy answered evenly.

“Not bad,” Toby’s lack of sarcasm surprised even himself. “You might actually be getting better at this politicking. You’re still an idiot,” he added with a smile, “but you’re getting better.”

They all laughed, though Benny’s yes-men first waited to see that Benny was laughing.

Then someone shot at them. The bullet ricocheted off a concrete pillar of the parking garage just a foot above Benny’s head. They never saw the shooter, and didn’t stick around looking for him.

Mindy noticed a camera crew in a dark corner of the parking garage. They were apparently filming Benny and his entourage leaving. The show host Clarence stood nearby, calmly smoking a cigarette. She thought nothing of it. It never occurred to her to mention it to anyone.

Climbing over the top of each other trying to get back into the bus, Toby shouted, "Isn't the Secret Service supposed to provide you with protection?"

"For all we know," said Benny, "that was *them* shooting at us."

"Not 'us,'" Toby corrected him. "*You*. They were shooting at *you*."

Mindy somehow ended up on Toby's lap in the bus. Toby instinctively grabbed her by the waist and said, "Don't move!" He completely forgot about being shot at. Well, almost completely. She made a face and quickly climbed off him when she felt his erection growing underneath her. "Just celebrating life, baby. Happy to be alive," he explained as she got quickly away from him.

There was nothing on the evening news about it that night as Benny, Toby and Rudy all relaxed in Benny's hotel room. Mindy did not join them. She insisted on being dropped off at a bar along the way.

At first, Benny was insulted by the lack of television coverage. Then he decided such lack was probably a good thing. There was no point giving other would-be assassins any ideas.

"What is it about Dallas and assassinations?" Toby spoke after a moment. "Is that what they *do* around here for fun? We should hire some bodyguards."

“A whole *bunch* of bodyguards,” Rudy added. “Isn’t the Secret Service supposed to provide candidates with protection?” he repeated Toby’s earlier question.

Benny shook his head. “Only ‘viable’ candidates, I’m told. I don’t qualify.”

“You need to start carrying a gun,” Toby suggested.

“Don’t you need a badge or special permit or something?” Rudy asked.

“Not in most states, unless it’s concealed,” Toby replied. “You just need a license to own it. Technically. In reality, if you walk around with a gun on your hip, you’ll probably be arrested.”

“I’d be afraid someone would just take it,” Rudy said, “and shoot me with my own gun.”

“Good point, Dad,” Benny agreed. “I guess I should wear a bullet-proof vest, too.”

“What if they shoot you in the head?” Toby countered.

“Then I guess I’ll be dead, Toby! You can’t go through life worrying about dying!”

“You could wear a bullet-proof helmet!” Toby joked.

The next morning as they walked through the hotel lobby, the media swamped Benny and company. Benny assumed it was simply because he was a presidential candidate. In fact, they were there because the assassination attempt *had* made the news, complete with video shot by the news crew who had conveniently set up in just the right spot waiting for something to happen.

Benny and crew, tired from the rigors of the campaign, had gone to bed too early and missed the news. The attempted phone calls to their rooms in the middle of the

night had, unknown to them, been graciously parried by the hotel staff.

“Benny, Benny, Benny!” they all shouted, wanting to be the first to ask a question. Benny found it amusing how the world was now on a first name basis with him.

“How are you? Was anyone hurt? What sort of weapon did they use?”

“I’m fine. We’re all fine. They missed!” Benny added with a laugh. “I don’t know what they used, exactly,” he added with a yawn. “Excuse me. All I know is that a bullet came whizzing past my head and hit a pillar in the parking garage behind me.”

“Do you think it was terrorists?” one reporter asked, predictably.

“What?” Benny was incredulous. “No. Although, I guess, technically someone like that is a terrorist...”

“You think it was *Al Qaida*?” another asked. Benny just laughed.

“Al Qaida?!” Toby joined in. “You mean ‘Al CIA duh?’”

When no one seemed willing to follow what Toby was implying, Benny replied, “No, I don’t think it was *Al Qaida*. Why would *they* want to kill me? I’m guessing it was one of my opponents or their supporters behind this. They’re the only ones with anything to gain from killing me.”

“You can’t be serious,” one slightly familiar face asked. “Wouldn’t it make more sense that it’s just some crazed lone gunman?”

“That lone gunman crap you people try to sell with every assassination is just bullshit. You know it. I know it. Give it up!”

They all knew better than to follow up on *that* train of thought. And that pretty much ended the “news conference,” as the press then sort of just wandered off. That happened a lot, Benny noticed. As soon as he got warmed up, speaking the truth no one else spoke, the media suddenly lost interest and scattered.

On a college radio station in Sacramento, in a rare friendly interview, the young student host – an attractive young brunette named Marni – gushed, “You are so smart, Mr. Reed! Why can’t all the candidates be so smart?”

“I’m not that smart,” he replied, simultaneously blushing while wondering if he should ask her out.

“You got *that* right,” Toby said from the other side of the soundproof studio glass.

Marni did not believe him, or at least pretended.

Always a sucker for flattery, Benny lapped it up, but could not help but make fun of himself. “Quite frankly, I am often kicking myself for being an idiot. My brother calls me one on a regular basis.” He looked over to see Toby raising his fist triumphantly. “In his case, though, it’s of course just jealousy.

“It’s all relative,” he continued. “I know I’m an idiot. *All* humans are idiots sometimes, as I’m sure the rest of the animal kingdom would agree. Unfortunately, compared to most people, I’m a genius. I know that sounds conceited, but these other candidates and media folks make me look good by comparison. The most irritating people are those

so sure of themselves they refuse to consider the possibility they might be wrong. Anyway, a smarter person would never run for president. I'm only running because this current pack of egomaniacs is just so pathetic. How would you like to join me on my speaking tour?"

Toby turned to his father and asked, "Did, um, he just hit on this girl, right on the air?"

"Sure, why not?" Rudy replied, not surprised by anything anymore.

"Uh..." Marni was caught off guard. "I... I don't know... I'll have to... uh..."

"Just a thought," Benny helped her out of the question. "Never mind. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah, most people who run for office," he adopted a more professorial tone now as he continued more seriously, "are severely flawed individuals who have no business leading anyone anywhere. I personally believe the desire to be a leader is a character flaw."

"O... K..." Marni stammered, not sure what to do with this philosophical turn. Also, she was still not fully recovered from this "old guy" asking her out... on the air... with all of her friends probably listening.

"Sure, sometimes you have to lead by example," Benny continued. "Or lead when no one else knows the way and they ask for your help. But in a healthy person, that's just temporary."

"Interesting," she pretended to listen while preparing for her next question. "Your latest poll numbers are, by some accounts, around 30%. That's incredibly high for an independent candidate. Aren't you afraid of being a spoiler, another Ross Perot or Ralph Nader, taking votes

from a more viable candidate who might have gotten your votes if you weren't running?"

"So much for the friendly interview, eh?" Benny laughed. "Am I afraid of being a spoiler? Not at all. Spoiler is a term used by losers who hate competition. Let the best candidate win. It'd be hard *not* to be the best candidate as long as I'm not a Republican or Democrat. In fact, I wouldn't have a problem if people voted for Ralph Nader instead of me. He's running again, you know. But I know people won't. Besides, I'm running, too, so you'd might as well just go ahead and vote for me!" he added with a laugh.

"Speaking of running," Marni asked, "who's your running mate?"

Benny had not really thought about that. On the other side of the glass, his "people" looked at each other and mouthed "Oh shit" at each other. Out loud, one of them said, "I *knew* we were missing something!" They were new at this sort of thing. Toby and Rudy both turned and raised their eyes at them.

"Hell, I don't know," Benny gave an embarrassed laugh. "Do I have to pick one now?"

"Soon, I should think."

"Um..." Benny tried to buy time. Then a "brilliant" idea came to him. "How would *you* like to be my running mate?"

On the other side of the glass, Toby fell out of his chair, which was hard to do because they were theater-type seats that a person really sank down into.

Before she could answer, he quickly added, "Just kidding. Unless you *want* to be my running mate, in which

case I'll have to put you through the vetting process," he lied about having a vetting process. "But, really, no, I haven't seriously started looking for a running mate yet."

"Whoa, shit!" Toby exhaled. "Scared the crap out of me with that one!"

"You're still hoping he picks you, aren't you?" his father said.

"Well, it only makes sense," Toby replied. "I'd be the perfect running mate! I've got the looks, charm and brains, and he's got... he's got..."

"The common sense and likability?" his father helped.

"No," Toby countered. "He's got his name on the ballot."

On their way back to the bus, a very handsome man in a business suit stepped out of the shadows of the parking garage and walked toward their group. He was staring right at them. Benny thought he might be a Secret Service agent. Everyone was caught off-guard when he pulled a very large knife out of his suit coat. *Secret Service agents don't carry knives, do they?* Benny remembered thinking at the time.

The man pulled the knife out just as he passed Rudy from the opposite direction. Rudy surprised everyone when he came back toward the assailant and tripped him from behind. The man went down. *Not much of an assassin letting that happen,* Toby later remembered thinking. As the assailant fell forward, he literally made one last stab at Benny's mid-section. The bulletproof vest kept it from doing any damage.

Benny's newly hired bodyguards then pounced, prying the weapon loose and holding the attacker down as everyone else hurried back to the waiting bus.

As the bus pulled away, Benny nodded his head in the bodyguards' direction and said, "Not very good bodyguards. If not for Dad and my vest, I'd be dead right now."

"Probably not *right now*," Toby corrected him, still breathing heavily. "People don't die as quickly when stabbed as they show in the movies. Unless it's directly into the heart, it actually takes quite a while for a person to bleed out and die."

Benny just glared at him. "Do you have to argue with *everything* I say?"

"Stop saying stupid things," Toby muttered under his breath.

Media Exposure

The so-called “mainstream” media, this time in the form of a cable TV news show, finally took note of Benny a week before the general election. They didn’t fly him in to appear live “in studio,” but did at least send a crew to his home for a remote interview.

Benny’s home was an old style – but newly built – 6,000 square foot two-story farmhouse on one hundred acres somewhere in the countryside of South Carolina.

“This,” Benny pointed at the crew as they set up, “*had* to cost more than flying just me to *them*.”

“They want to be able to pull the plug,” Toby explained cynically, “then blame it on technical difficulties if you say anything they don’t like.”

Paul Jones, an old familiar media face at least a decade past his prime, was the host. He used to be a network news anchor. After that, he had his own news magazine show. He technically still had such a show, but this was nothing like before. He used to be one of if not *the* biggest news personalities on the air. Now in his declining years, he was relegated to this no-name barely-heard-of-or-watched cable news network. At least he was still on the air, he consoled himself.

He tried softening Benny up a bit to start the interview. “Very pretty young running-mate you have there,” he began. “What’s her name? Marni Tornquist? I hope she’ll be joining us.”

“No, that was just a joke,” Benny replied. “I haven’t declared a running-mate yet.”

“Oh... well...” Jones was genuinely surprised. “*Will* you be announcing a running-mate?” he spoke in that deep, scratchy-yet-comforting grandfatherly voice of his. “There’s only a week to go.”

When Benny gave no indication that he would be answering the question, Jones continued. “I haven’t read much, if anything, about your family, Mr. Reed. Your brother and father have been fixtures on the campaign trail, I’ve noticed. However, I see that you’re married, and we haven’t seen your lovely wife at all. Where have you been hiding her?” Jones asked in that TV news jocular tone.

“She’s...” Benny stammered, “she’s no longer with us.”

“Ooh, I am so sorry. Strike two for me,” he said sympathetically, privately fuming at his research staff. *Someone is going to pay for this*, he thought. Realizing that this interview was sinking fast before it ever left the dock, he dispensed with the preliminaries and just started asking questions.

“Let’s just get right to it, then, shall we?” He straightened the stack of papers in his hands. “What uniquely qualifies you, a virtual unknown up ‘til now... what qualifies you as our next president?”

Benny normally liked this question, and usually smiled when asked, but thoughts of his wife were now nagging at him. With an edge of sadness, he replied, “I’m not a politician.”

Expecting more of an answer, Jones said, “And....? That’s it? Your best qualification is that you’re not a politician?”

“That and the fact that I have some good ideas, yeah, basically,” Benny replied lackadaisically. Here he was on live national television, his biggest chance yet in front of the American public, and he just wasn’t in the mood.

Not in the mood? a voice inside his head shouted. *Well, get in the mood!*

Then something unexpected happened. He was tugging on his collar because the microphone was irritating, when a gentle voice and soft pair of hands caressed his neck from behind.

“Hiya, stud. Remember me?”

“Glynnis!” Of *course* he remembered her. His approval ratings with both sexes just went way up, too. “I thought you got bored with me.”

“I couldn’t get a hold of you, thanks to your brother and your ‘people’ and the Secret Service.”

“Hello? Excuse me?” Paul Jones was trying to regain control of the interview. “We’re in the middle of something here! This is live television, people!” This never would’ve happened in his heyday, he thought.

“Oh, sorry, Paul,” Benny said, suddenly on a first name basis with Mr. Jones. “Go ahead. I’m sorry. What was your question?”

“Here’s your credit card,” Glynnis handed it back to him, though he had forgotten all about it.

Toby made a mental to check the records of that card and see what she had bought for herself.

“Oh, thanks,” Benny grabbed it. “See there? Fiscal responsibility! Hey, can someone get her a chair?”

“Who is this vision of beauty joining us?” Jones tried to be gracious despite the interruption.

“Oh, this is an old friend,” Benny explained.

“More like a publicity hound,” Toby mumbled to anyone within earshot.

“Glynnis...” Benny realized he never did learn her last name.

“Tierney,” Glynnis helped.

“My running mate,” Benny added, once again surprising everyone, including Glynnis.

Toby fell out of his chair... again.

“Your running mate?” Jones was shocked. “This is an awfully cavalier way to choose a running mate, don’t you think?”

“Sure, why not? She’s not a warmonger or corporate lobbyist. That immediately makes her better qualified than most, which brings me to my next point: The main problem with this country is the people who *run* it. They’re politicians.” He stopped to smile at Glynnis again. “They usually start out as lawyers. When they find *that* unfulfilling, they turn to politics. Sure, you *might* find people in those professions who are in it for all the right reasons, but they are few and far between. We need *real* people in positions of power, no more elites.

“The next biggest problem,” he continued, “is campaign finance. It costs a lot to get to this far, so they have to beg, borrow and steal to finance their campaigns. Unfortunately, that makes them beholden to their financiers. Unless they’re independently wealthy as I am now, luckily, they’re almost certainly corrupted by the system. They *owe* people favors, some very rich and influential people.”

Jones was shaking his head as if he had never heard of such a thing. He then asked, “Whom do you consider your constituency?”

“The people. The people of the United States. Aren’t they *every* president’s constituents?” Benny was trying to be funny with that last line, but it came across sarcastic.

Jones hated when his guests did that. How dare Benny, he thought, an unknown until a few minutes ago, speak to him – Paul Jones, a scion of the news media – that way?

“Average ordinary everyday people,” Benny now tried to sound more sincere. “They’re the ones who actually make this country work. Definitely not the scum at the top.”

“Scum!?! That’s an ugly term.”

“They’re ugly people,” Benny replied simply. “Some barely qualify as human.”

Jones took a few deep breaths. He was starting to dislike this Benny person, but could not help but enjoy looking at Glynnis. Maybe having her as his running mate was not such a bad idea, after all.

He soldiered on. He was a consummate professional, he reminded himself. “How do you feel about guns?” he asked.

“Oh, I hate guns,” Benny replied quickly.

“So you’re in favor of gun control.”

“No. We should do like Switzerland and require everyone to own a gun.”

“I’m confused. Are you for or against handguns?”

“I hate guns, but as long as the technology to make them exists, I intend to own one and know how to use it to

defend myself, if necessary. And trust me, lately it's been necessary."

"Oh?" Jones said hopefully, now relishing the thought of Benny being shot.

"I heard!" Glynnis interrupted. "I was so worried."

Toby made a face as he sarcastically mimed, "I was so worried."

"Yeah," Benny said with a laugh, "there have been a couple of assassination attempts."

"Seriously?" Jones asked. "You're laughing. I can never tell if you are serious."

"I am serious. But am I famous enough for it to be called 'assassination'?" he added with another laugh. "I mean, I knew I had no *shot* at winning, but didn't think people would literally be *shooting* at me! Hey, that's a good one!"

"No, it wasn't really," Jones replied. "But, I've heard nothing about this. You sure are taking it well."

"Hey," Benny smiled, "if you can't joke about your own assassination, what *can* you joke about?"

Jones dropped the subject. He would have been more interested if the assassination had been successful. How could his research team not have told him about this? His entire staff was going to be fired for allowing him to go on the air so ill-informed.

"Anyway," Benny continued, "'gun control' will never work. The only thing that *would* work would be to destroy all guns, outlaw the technology to make new ones, and then erase the memory of everyone who knows how to make a gun. But, since that is impossible, or at least improbable, we're stuck with guns."

“You are saying that erasing human memories is ‘improbable’ but not impossible?”

“I hate to say that *anything* is impossible. Just ‘cuz we don’t know how to do something now doesn’t mean we’ll never know. Actually, unfortunately, there are those who *do* know how to erase a person’s memory. The trick is in knowing whose to erase.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. But, moving on, what about the energy crisis?”

“Develop alternatives to petroleum-based fuels,” Benny suggested. “Make it illegal for oil companies to buy out competitive alternatives only to bury those alternatives from ever reaching the light of day. Alternative technologies are more expensive starting out, sure, but it needs to be done as soon as possible!”

“What about nuclear energy?”

“Hell no. Until someone figures out how to *safely* dispose of its waste, it needs to be outlawed.”

“Some would say we don’t know how to safely dispose of *any* fuel’s waste. Should they *all* be outlawed?”

“Good point, but no. None of the others is quite so scary as radioactive waste. Replace fossil fuels as soon as possible? Yes. Outlaw them immediately? No. See? I’m a reasonable person!” he attempted to lighten things up, but got no reaction from Jones.

“What is your religion?” Jones changed the subject.

“None,” Benny replied. “... of your business,” he added when Jones’s jaw dropped.

“So you’re an atheist?”

“That’s a common misconception. I don’t believe in religion, or at least no organized religion that I’ve ever heard

of. But I have no problem with you believing whatever you want so long as you're not hurting anyone."

"Everyone probably assumed you were a Christian," Jones sounded disappointed.

"As usual, 'everyone' is wrong."

"What *do* you believe in, then?"

"I believe in being a good person. I believe in life and all of its possibilities. Organized religion is the most destructive crowd-control device ever invented. It's the Taser for the soul. Hey, another good one!"

Shaking his head, Jones changed the subject. "What about terrorism?"

"Yes, religion is a form of terrorism."

"No, I meant, how will you wage the war on terror."

"I won't. This 'war' is not only bogus, it's stupid. It's counterproductive."

The host was visibly taken aback. After all, he owned stock in several war-profiteering companies.

"What about immigration?"

"I'm in favor of it, as long as it's *legal* immigration. The illegals come here because their own country's economy is so bad. Of course, the brutal dictatorships that some of them live under don't help. I'll support the overthrow of all the world's dictators."

There was an audible gasp from the studio crowd. Up until that moment, Benny had not realized that there *was* a studio crowd.

"Oh my goodness," the host was genuinely shocked, but he played it up for entertainment value. "That's the most irresponsible thing I think I have ever heard a presidential candidate say."

“The most *honest* thing you’ll ever hear a candidate say,” Benny was not backing down. “Overthrowing tyrants would be the responsible thing. Irresponsibility is what allows dictators to exist. Defeating tyranny used to be what America was all about.”

“You just said you were against war,” Jones protested. “War is stupid, you said. Isn’t that a bit hypocritical?”

“Overthrowing dictators, or any government, doesn’t have to be done militarily,” Benny explained. “War is not the answer.” He then sang a couple lines from Marvin Gaye’s song, “What’s Going On.”

*You see, war is not the answer.
For only love can conquer hate.*

Jones looked at him like he was crazy.

“Not a Marvin Gaye fan, eh?” Benny teased.

Rudy looked at Toby and asked if he had spiked Benny’s water again.

“I didn’t do anything,” Toby shrugged. “He’s crazy all by himself.”

Jones continued the interview. “Let’s talk about abortion. Are you for it or against it?”

“I’m against it, in general...”

“Finally! Something we can agree on!”

“Let me finish. I’m against abortion, but I’m even more strongly against someone bringing an unwanted child into the world and letting them grow up abused and neglected only to become a criminal adult.”

“So, are you for or against abortion?!?!?”

“I’m personally against it, but who the hell am I to tell someone what to do with their own body?”

“You are the...” Jones began, then changed tack. “In this *very* hypothetical context, you would be President of the United States. That’s who you are. You’re allowed to tell people what to do.”

“I disagree,” Benny countered.

“You disagree that the president can tell people what to do?” Jones was incredulous.

“Absolutely. He can tell his staff what to do. He can tell his generals what to do. He can’t tell the American people what to do. He works for *them*, not vice versa! And *that*, my friend,” Benny added with a triumphant slap of the knee, “is the crux of what’s wrong with this country.”

He looked over at Glynnis with a smile.

“It’s gotten to the point where people actually believe the government can tell them what to do, when in fact the opposite is true. All government employees – the President, Congress, the military – are public servants working for us, the people!”

Jones shook his head in exasperation. “My oh my,” he said finally. “Your positions defy description. You’re on the left... *way* on the left here, *way* on the right there, the middle elsewhere.”

“Left/right labels are for idiots, Paul. There are no sides – that matter, anyway – among the people! We the people are all in this together against you (the media) and them (the current government) who are all run directly and indirectly by the corporations.”

Paul shot Benny a nasty look, but said nothing other than to mention his next guest just before cutting to commercial.

“And... we’re out,” the director at Benny’s location said to everyone. He was shaking his head and laughing, but said nothing further.

“Holy shit, Benny,” Toby exclaimed once they were off the air. “Did you see the look on Paul Jones’s face?”

“I saved it for the very end, so they couldn’t cut me off,” Benny said, rather proud of himself. “I just get sick of the media constantly trying to pit the people against each other. Like I said before, you know, the old ‘divide and conquer.’”

“But, really,” Toby then changed the subject with great disapproval. “Glynnis for vice president? Really? A girl?”

“Bite me, porn boy,” Glynnis said to Toby.

“Oh, real mature,” Toby retorted angrily.

“Porn boy?” Benny asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Glynnis smirked.

Meanwhile, in an ivory tower somewhere, some very powerful people were furious that anyone, even a lowly rated cable show, would give Benny airtime. Several people were fired. No one in particular, just several random, token people.

Likely Voters

People started to like this brash, no-holds-barred non-politician dude, Benny Reed. On the tour bus one morning after a pit stop somewhere, Toby brought in the local paper and asked everyone, “Have you seen today’s paper!? They say he’s brash!” He then read the article aloud, “‘Some polls put Reed at 40% among likely voters, unheard of for an independent candidate.’ We might actually win this thing!”

And that’s when people *really* started trying to kill Benny. He and his entourage took the tour bus to a private airport to board their chartered jet. Toby said to this week’s girlfriend, Shasta, as they climbed aboard, “I’ve always wanted to join the Mile High Club.”

Shasta laughed. “Been there, done that.” Glynnis laughed at Toby’s expense. When he looked genuinely hurt, Shasta consoled him, “Oh, don’t worry, baby. I can always do it again.” He smiled, but a little bit of the specialness was irretrievably lost in that moment. Somehow, Toby would get over it.

Feeling hypocritical for taking a chartered jet while campaigning as a “man of the people,” Benny tried to enjoy the flight nonetheless. He had to admit it beat the hell out of flying commercial.

Just a hundred nautical miles from “beautiful downtown” Burbank, while Toby and Shasta were joining or re-joining the Mile High Club, there was engine trouble. One of the engines felt like it wanted to stall.

“What’s that?” the staffer Mindy asked Rudy, as if he would know. “Turbulence?” Immediately after asking, the engine resumed its normal soothing drone. All was well again.

“I was in the Army, not the Air Force,” he said with a wink and smile at Mindy. The engine then sputtered again, more dramatically this time. With genuine concern in his voice, Rudy said, “Now, *that* sounds like engine trouble.”

Over the intercom, the pilot told everyone to immediately take their seats and fasten their seatbelts. “We’ll be landing... somewhere...” he said bluntly, “sooner than expected, people.”

“Not much of a bedside manner,” Benny opined.

“My number two engine is not cooperating,” the pilot continued. “We’re going to make an emergency landing.”

“How many engines do we have!?” Mindy screamed, panic-stricken.

“It’s okay, don’t worry,” Toby said as he and Shasta returned from the rear of the plane. His fly and the vent in his boxer shorts were both open, dangerously close to exposing everything. Shasta hadn’t even bothered to put her pants back on. “These things have six or eight engines,” Toby lied to calm Mindy.

“No plane has six or eight engines,” she spat. “You think I’m stupid just because I’m beautiful?”

“I never said you were beautiful,” Toby argued. He shook his head, smiled and shrugged his shoulders at Benny and his father.

“We’re going to crash land,” Benny scolded his brother, “and you’re arguing and insulting people?!”

“Zip up your pants!” Glynnis yelled at Toby, afraid of what might pop out. “Your penis is *not* going to be the last thing I see before I die!”

Sure enough, the engine, one of only two, then cut out completely. Wobbling dangerously, the pilot did his best to keep them from going into a spiral. The emergency air masks came down. The pilot yelled, “Everyone! Get your masks on!”

His mayday calls were answered by a small private airport just a few miles away. Luckily, this was southern California where there are private airports every fifty miles.

It was a rough ride. The pilot descended rapidly to an altitude at which people could breathe without masks. All the passengers were scared to death. Some passed out. Mindy *completely* snapped. She got out of her seat and crawled to the back of the cabin. A few seconds later, she returned wearing a parachute.

“What the hell?” one of her fellow staffers said, though no one heard him.

“Hey,” Rudy yelled from inside his mask, realizing what she was doing and the effect it would have on them.

She braced herself, grabbed the emergency door handle, and flung it open. Anything not bolted down or strapped in, Mindy included, was immediately sucked out the door.

The pilot handled the sudden loss of pressure surprisingly well, and quickly got the plane level again. Spying the landing strip just ahead, he extended the wheels. A few minutes later, he was landing. No, wait, he bounced right back up again. Another several hundred yards farther, he touched down again, this time for good.

The pilot informed the control tower that they'd had a cabin breach, losing a door, and asked permission to enter the hangar. Permission was granted. He then noticed a car coming from the opposite direction, also headed for the hangar. There were a couple hundred yards between the plane and car. It appeared as though the car would reach the hangar first, and it did.

The moment the car entered the hangar, the hangar exploded. Now just fifty yards away from what used to be the hangar, the concussion spun the plane completely around on the tarmac.

"What the hell?" the pilot asked no one in particular. "Tower?" he asked. "What the hell was that? Are you all right?" No answer. "Tower?"

He parked the plane a safe distance to one side of what used to be the hangar, and proceeded to check on his passengers. Several of them were unconscious, but at least everyone remained strapped into their seats... everyone but Mindy.

He checked on the old guy, Rudy, first. He didn't look good as he felt for a pulse. It took a moment, but the pilot was finally able to detect one. A few of the others were now stirring. Benny seemed to be the only one fully conscious, though he was still strapped in.

Everyone appeared to be alive, thankfully, so the pilot was content to wait for the professionals who were surely on their way. Fifteen minutes later, when the medics arrived, he had them tend to Rudy first.

In the hospital emergency room, between exclamations of shock and dismay at Mindy parachuting from the plane,

they all learned from an EMT on-scene that the explosion had killed the driver of that car as well as the tower controller whose last act in life was to help them land safely.

Toby, ever the conspiracy theorist, asked the pilot, “So, *we* were supposed to be taxiing into that hangar, but the car beat us to it?” The pilot nodded. “And you say that as soon as the car entered the hangar, the whole thing blew up?”

The pilot nodded again.

“Sounds to me,” Toby continued, “like *we* were meant to be the first ones into that hangar...”

“... and be the ones who blew up,” Benny finished for him.

“Anyone know who was in that car?” Toby asked, looking around the room.

“The tower operator’s wife,” the EMT replied. “From what I hear, she was just come back with dinner for them both, like she did every night.”

“It would be easy to plant the charges in a small out-of-the-way airport hangar like this one without anyone seeing you,” Toby was thinking out loud. “And then setup a motion detector, like one of those infrared garage door devices that keeps it from accidentally hitting anyone while it’s closing.”

“The wife’s car,” it was the pilot’s turn to finish Toby’s sentence, “tripped the bomb that *we* were meant to trip!”

“Would you people quit finishing my sentences?” Toby snarled. “We’ll probably never know, but it would be interesting to see what sort of bogus ‘repair man’ had shown up at the airport just before us.”

Leaving Rudy at the hospital, the rest of them made it to the television show on which Benny was scheduled to appear. Although it was a late night show, it was videotaped in the middle of the afternoon.

With Benny, Toby and Glynnis having all just sat down – after getting a look at Glynnis, the host decided they should all be on the show – he asked, “So, tell me, Mr. Reed, any last pearls of wisdom before we vote tomorrow?”

“Is it tomorrow already?” Benny asked.

“No, it’s today right now,” the host joked. “Tomorrow comes after that.”

Laughing along with the crowd, Benny answered the question. “Yes, here’s some advice: Vote for me! And stay out of small airplanes.” He then explained what happened to them on their way there.

Toby injected his own conspiracy theory into the conversation.

“How could they have known,” the host asked, “that you’d be landing at *that* airport?”

“Good question,” Toby admitted grudgingly.

“Unless the pilot...” Glynnis began. This time Toby finished *her* sentence.

“There never was any engine trouble!” Toby exclaimed. “That whole thing was faked!”

“The hangar explosion was real,” Benny chimed in.

Shaking his head, Toby explained, “The pilot was going to point the plane toward the hangar and let it roll in on its own, after he jumped out and ran like hell in the opposite direction!”

No one else was buying this latest plot twist of Toby's. Too far-fetched.

In an ivory tower somewhere watching the show, the mysterious man was dumbfounded. He picked up the phone to make a call. "What the hell do we have to do to get rid of this guy!?" he screamed into the phone as soon as it was answered. He then hung up before anyone could reply.

In bed and watching the show from a hotel room, the pilot asked "Who was that?" to his companion hanging up the phone.

"Our boss," the young woman replied, setting her cell phone back down.

"What'd he want?"

"Just to scream at someone, apparently. He hung up before I could say anything."

"You were quite the little actress," the pilot seemed genuinely impressed, "back there on the plane."

"Thanks," Mindy said with a smile. "I coulda been a star!"

The Election

Word spread that Benny was leading a charmed life. Someone “up there,” they said, must *want* him to be president. Maybe he was *meant* to be president? Others, of course, warned he was the anti-Christ and *not* to be trusted, at all costs. That was the gist of the national blogosphere conversation.

Midway through voting day, Benny had, according to exit polls, was at a very respectable 30% of the popular vote. With the voting machine “mishaps” redistributing their usual 7%, however, his official count put him at 23%. The mainstream press, of course – somehow privy to the official numbers, but trying to sway the voting public right up to the very last minute – projected him at 13%. It wasn’t until the very end that they had to report his actual numbers.

Even in Florida, Ohio and Texas where Benny mysteriously was *not* on the ballot, a large number of people had written in his name. It was the best a write-in candidate had ever done in the history of those states, or would have been if they had been included in the total. B.S. Services had done their job and gotten him on all of the ballots except for those three states.

He *should* have been on those, as well, but his people did not anticipate the states’ refusal to put him on the ballot, and then brazenly toss out those write-in votes as “invalid.” They were all following the same game plan, citing a “law” drafted especially for them by the “ivory tower”

man's lawyers. This "law" was then backdated so the states could claim that it was already on the books. Vote Theft 101.

The Republican candidate, Tom McSwain – not to be confused with the Democratic candidate, Councilman McIlhain – unsurprisingly won in a plurality. The Democrats blamed Benny for taking away votes that were "rightfully" theirs, as if anyone was *entitled* to votes.

At one point after the election, a reporter literally jumped out of the bushes as Benny was out for a morning jog. "Any regrets, Benny?" she asked.

"What?" Benny stopped to catch his breath. "Are you crazy?! Get lost!" After a moment, he added, "Sorry. You startled me. I do regret my bad manners just now. But I'm sure we'll both get over it."

President-elect McSwain had not even been inaugurated yet when a man in a crowd "congratulated" him with one hand, pulled out a gun with the other, and shot him twice in the head at point-blank range. McSwain was dead. The assailant was then shot dead by the Secret Service.

The vice-president-elect/now-president-elect then selected an earlier Republican primary candidate as his own vice president. A week later, this new president-elect was also assassinated; this time, in a cloud of some sort of toxic dust. People in the FBI are still trying to figure out what it was, while others in that same FBI keep obstructing them.

A few right-wing radio talk show hosts openly laughed about this string of assassinations, even though the victims were from their own party. The latest surviving vice-presi-

dent-elect declined the “honor” of being named president-elect, and instead suggested they suspend the Constitution and allow the lame-duck president to continue in office until further notice. The status-quo-loving mainstream media, not surprisingly, picked up that idea and ran with it. The sitting president “graciously and reluctantly” accepted this “very sensible” offer.

Online conspiracy theorists started writing that it was the lame duck himself who must have been behind his successors’ assassinations. A counter theory then opined that it was more likely the sitting *vice*-president behind it all because the president himself was not smart enough to be “behind” anything.

Bloggers then pointed out that, with the election winner and his running mate killed, the runners-up, the Democrats, were the rightful “heirs,” not the incumbent. Someone then suggested Councilman McIlhain should be appointed because “McIlhain is almost the same as McSwain.”

No sooner had that idea gotten popular when Councilman McIlhain and the Democratic runner-up, as well as the latter's running mate were all killed.

One of the less experienced people in the ivory tower said, “Hey. This is a great way to get people we actually want into office, no matter who the voters vote for. If we don’t like their choice, we keep killing them until we get to someone we *do* like and make *him* president! It’s genius!”

A more senior person rolled his eyes and replied. “Ya think?”

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About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for the past 20+ years. I am married, with a young daughter, an old pug and one cat.

Available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, and *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, which can all be found at williamarthurholmes.com

