



Lottery President

OR, POLITICAL
WISHFUL THINKING

WILLIAM ARTHUR HOLMES

Lottery President

by William Arthur Holmes

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for Dad

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Good Luck!

Benny sat alone at a table by the door in a recently opened Asian restaurant. The plastic-laminated menu offered dishes from Mongolian to Indonesian and everything in between, with each item written in its native language and alphabet. He 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. "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. Still "on advice from counsel," he was "reconnecting with the world," getting out and going to strange new restaurants with indecipherable menus.

When the fortune cookie arrived, he cracked it open. One side of that little 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 other 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 bought one whenever 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 quoted the commercial to Flaky. "Play responsibly!"

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His eyes went back and forth from the TV screen to the ticket as he read each number. He could not believe it. His ticket matched every number. Not the usual one or two (or none). All of them, including the "bonus" number.

The winning numbers were somehow familiar, too. He wondered why random numbers would be familiar. The machine at the gas station quickie mart had chosen them for him. "Quick pick." He did glance 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 that was physically impossible in the real world, 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 in real life. It occurred to him now that that sort of advice might get someone killed. Besides, there were no cliffs nearby, so he opted to simply touch 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. It was from winning the freaking lottery!

Giddy and grinning now despite the pain 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

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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 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. That was exactly the response Benny had hoped for as he, with a smile in his voice, 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 office. 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.

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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 her.

"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.

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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 to the guard, as if reading his mind, the man 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.

The woman smiled, shook her head, and accepted the ticket from the guard. Benny got the impression there was something between these two, after hours, but it was just a hunch. She and the only male lottery official took turns examining the ticket under a magnifying glass. After their 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

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from under the lens, stared at it briefly, then placed it back under the lens.

Benny could only guess she was demonstrating that 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 cleared his throat while attempting to regain composure. "Um..." he began haltingly, "how much?"

"Two hundred and ninety-six million dollars!" the normally stern woman betrayed her excitement as she read out the amount. 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;

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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 these were all the things his wife had wanted, almost verbatim. That's when something inside him snapped. A torrent of grief, pent-up over the past eighteen months, then let loose at the thought of her missing out on his stroke of luck.

He was openly sobbing. He was not normally the type, but no longer cared 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 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. Luckily for Benny, she had a lousy memory and nothing to write it with.

Oblivious to the cars colliding in his rear-view 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. It occurred to him he could use that security escort right about now, and that sobered him up. Nothing like the threat of physical harm to set a person straight.

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.

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Benny's mood darkened considerably as 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 wise-cracking, irresponsible jackass. Benny loved a good joke as much as anyone, 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 and let the excitement show, if only briefly, as he spoke.

"Whoo-hoo!!" Toby shouted. "How much do I get?"

Benny stopped smiling. "What makes you think you get anything?"

"Dude! I'm your brother. You gotta give me *something*."

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"No, I don't, actually," Benny frowned and 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 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.

At the old folks' home, Benny found his father, Rudy, in the "great room" on a couch in conversation with another elderly man. Benny guessed the man was a fellow tenant.

Benny's father smiled at the sight of his son, stood, and met him halfway. As they hugged, he 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 smiled back 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..."

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"Just kidding!" Rudy laughed.

"Very funny, Dad," Benny grumbled, "pretending to be senile, making me think you didn't know Mom was dead. Hilarious."

"Oh, lighten up!" Rudy scolded him, winking at his 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, and whispered, "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 half-deaf old woman complained nearby. "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 in moving toward Benny and his father.

"Why do I suddenly feel like lunch," Benny wondered aloud, "and we're on the menu?" Grabbing his father's arm, Benny said, "Let's get out of here. Now."

"Can my friend Becks come?"

Benny thought that was a strange name. Was it his given name or surname? No matter. "Sure," he said and led them out the door to the parking lot, but not before Rudy stopped at the

front desk and told the smiling young woman where they were going.

Becks, smiled and followed along.

Magyar Café

The Magyar Café was a popular local brewpub downtown, not far from the old folks' home and the lottery building. Slipping a \$100 bill into the *maître-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."

"Of *course* Hungarians make beer!" said the man. "We invented it!"

"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..."

"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.

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Glynnis, an attractive young blonde, 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 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. 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 him, "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

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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."

He wanted to hear a young person's opinion, and so turned to the teenage daughter of one of his guests. "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 live, 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.

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"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 quickly, fooling no one.

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, only I'd add a live-in caregiver. Otherwise, I don't have any bills, so..." 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 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 have no shot of winning. I know that, but I've got some good ideas. Maybe the so-called 'legitimate' candidates will steal them and some good will come of it in the end."

"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."

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"Who are you?"

"Bart Strangent, president and CEO of B.S. Services," he introduced himself, business card in hand. "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 for the moment, he got up to make coffee.

Once in the kitchen with the coffee maker started, he pulled a notepad and pencil out of a drawer and sat down at the dining room table to make a list of how much money to give everyone.

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, if that was even possible these days with interest rates so low. It would probably also behoove him to split portions into a few foreign banks in their currency.

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"It doesn't look good," he thought aloud, "running for president but afraid to keep all my money in my own country's banks."

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 his dress shirts she must have pulled out of the closet, 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, it did not seem possible he could forget being with someone like her.

Smiling but saying nothing, she found a cup in a cabinet – briefly exposing her bare bottom as she reached up – and poured her own coffee. Sitting across the table from him, she took two sips, looked at him sleepily, then smiled wide.

Benny smiled back, 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 puffed out her chest, teasing.

"Wow..." he almost drooled. "Uh... I'm sorry, but no, I really don't..." Then he blushed.

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"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 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 and 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 pour perfectly good coffee down the drain!"

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 cash, 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 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 picture, made a photocopy of his driver's license, and parked his old car in back, out of view behind the dumpster.

Driving down the street in his hot new car with his hot new girl, Benny was happy to be alive. Then he remembered something he had to do. He knew he should be forgiving and mag-

nanimous right about now, 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 new Porsche at the curb 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 him. Benny ignored her.

Jim's response was not what Benny had expected. Jim was excited. "So you really did win the lottery?!"

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

"Can you give me two hundred thousand dollars? I saw what the jackpot had gotten up to. You can afford 200 grand, right?"

"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 moment, mouths agape at Benny's choice of words.

"Sorry," he apologized to them and sheepishly crossed himself. He guessed that was what one was 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!"

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"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 someone equally unlikely walked by. "You never did like me. Never appreciated my work. Never gave me more than the minimum raise, if that. Never a bonus. I'm surprised you even know my name, frankly. Why should I give you anything at all?!"

"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 car had just pulled up to the stop light next to him. Of course, a gust of wind caught the expectorant and hit the passenger in that car.

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 "slimed" 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 now-uncontrollable laughter. There were no cars ahead of him along the curb between him and the street corner. And, as always when given the choice of "fight or flight," Benny chose "flight."

He started up the car and disappeared around the corner and to the right. He barely missed an oncoming biker who flipped him off as Benny zigzagged his way through traffic in his 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. He 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 her cleavage.

"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 looked over and cheered, but her little peep show took Benny by surprise. It had been a year and a half since he lost his wife, but he still felt weird about sex, or even looking at a woman the way he was starting to look at Glynnis.

It's been long enough! he berated himself. *Why can't I enjoy a beautiful girl without feeling guilty?*

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 forced a laugh. "I'll pay off 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."

"What kind of grown man," Benny asked Glynnis beside him, "says 'Whatever, dude?'"

That's when the lottery director 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 candidacy was greeted. On the limousine ride to the bank of his choice, he asked the 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, both extra large and sitting across from him in the back of the limo – then smiled at each other. It was obvious they, too, thought it was ridiculous.

"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 – physical and digital – on the subject of being a politician. There was no *How to Run for President* manual that he could find, though he made a mental note to write one, time permitting, after the election.

He realized his chance of winning was slim to none and might have plenty of time for such things, but didn't want to assume.

Let The B.S.-Campaign Begin

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

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"That was way too easy," he said, joking, before realizing maybe it was too easy. He had met this Biff Strange dude – no, Bart Strangent, that was the name – in a bar. Maybe he should call a few of those Secretaries of State listed on B.S. Services' web site and verify first-hand that he was in fact on their ballot.

After a couple hours of phone calls – with most of that time spent on hold – he was relieved and surprised to learn that he was in fact 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" on radio 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 was more sensitive to such things. Maybe too sensitive? 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 a young man and woman from B.S. Services – along with Toby's latest in a long line of short-term 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, took 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 did, too, though Benny was happy to have him around.

Glynnis would not be joining them. She just stopped showing up one day, and Benny had no idea why. He consoled himself with the knowledge that she was out of his league, 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 entourage. They had to watch from the other side of the glass.

While Benny spoke with the show host, Toby, on the other 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 a little privacy somewhere.

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

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. "'Divide and conquer. Corporate dichotomy. Promulgated.' I'm not so sure we – and by 'we' I mean my listeners – know what all that means! Big word alert!" He tried to make it sound like a joke, but Benny guessed 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. 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, he 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 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. Again, in the purest sense of the word, if that's not communism it's at least socialism. You've been brainwashed 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."

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They went immediately 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."

"Thanks!" Benny agreed. "That's probably my best quality."

"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 the new campaign bus Benny had just bought, 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."

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"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, even here in this country? I'll hire a team of nerds – but no one from the established voting machine companies – to protect the system. 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 in my new campaign bus, 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, Benny. 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.

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"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 a candidate."

"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 commercials! As I said, 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 actually an ingenious way of making sure each state's presidential vote is represented. Have to give the framers credit for that. 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 the presidential lottery if they pass mental, emotional and physical tests.

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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 shot back. "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-flop! 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 man much more powerful than President of the United States was also frowning. He had just watched a "highlight reel" of Benny's shows. How he had heard

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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 this Benny Reed."

"Yes, sir," a young woman replied. "We already 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 with one of the major networks. Of Thai descent on her father's side, and at the top of her class everywhere she went, she was also the first-ever Thai-American to be named moderator of a presidential debate. Sure, this particular one was a pathetic excuse for a debate, 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 my predecessor made."

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**The rest be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via
[William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).**

About William Arthur Holmes

Originally from Sacramento, California, I have been calling Tennessee home for almost half my life now. I am married, with a young daughter, an old cat, an even older pug, and now a Boston terrier. My available titles are *Temporary Insanity*, *Lottery President*, *Operation Detour*, *Last Train Out*, *Another Way: Beyond the Status Quo*, and *The Lazy Pug Cafe*. They can all be found at Amazon, SmashWords, Apple, etc. via [William Arthur Holmes.com](http://WilliamArthurHolmes.com).

