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2,000 Words



4:30 p.m. Traffic was slow, but only due to the weather; there weren't enough people living in Shelby, Montana to fashion congestion but when it snowed really hard or the rain turned to ice there was always someone going more slowly than one might prefer. One car or several cars ahead, passing would be suicide.

On Saturday, January 6th if you had been behind a champagne colored Toyota SUV on the highway just about a mile before the Old Stone Bridge you might have been secretly (*or not so secretly*) cursing me, not because I'm elderly and driving as safely as I feel comfortable driving but because I'm in my mid-forties and despite the weather I was fiddling with my cell phone and paying only limited attention to the driving portion of my moment. Or, more specifically, what was currently *driving* my thoughts was getting that stupid phone to work after feverish and repetitive pressing on the tiny keypad while making an effort not to break a nail. I was trying to call my husband, and like seemingly *everyone's* cell-phone-calls-while-driving my call simply could not wait. Exactly two hours from now there will have been a terrible crash on the Old Stone Bridge then a subsequent clean-up, but I won't be there to see any of it. Coupled with the snow, after the clean-up it was as if the accident never happened and without the local news I might not have known that it did. The bridge is named after a town founder, George Stone. Had he been fishing from of his namesake despite the weather at precisely 4:37 p.m. he probably would have died with the three other folks, including a young girl, who perished in a violent collision when the Sheriff deduced an older gentleman pulling an empty horse-trailer swerved across the line and hit smack into the grill of a minivan containing a woman and her seven year old daughter who were on their way home from the grocer's. By the time I would arrive back on what was then 'the scene', the fire crew had hosed everything down had even cleaned up the woman's tomatoes which had been squished into the pavement.

4:32 p.m. I got to the bridge, ignoring the five cars pressed tightly to my bumper due to refocusing my attention on my cell phone then on finding the weather report on local 880 a.m. and thinking that I might as well turn around, go back home and just yell at my husband face-to-face. The weather report hadn't come on and Richard Hadley,

our local radio announcer (*in no way could his monotonic reporting or song selection earn him a title of 'Disk Jockey'*) -was just reading the numbers in last night's '*Five-State Mega-Extra-Super-Lotto*' drawing, then he repeated them just to be sure that I'd heard them correctly.

"10-27-8-29-18 and Power Ball number 33."

If I was mad at Jim before, whatever that had been, now I could not breathe. *My numbers*. Every last one of them, including the sixth, the '*super-kicker*' or whatever they called it that changed the odds from a respectable billion-to-one to several trillion-to-one and the money from the mere tens of millions to the hundred million range. My husband, Jim, might be reminding me of that fact as soon as he found out; it was at his insistence that I play '33' whenever I played the lottery because, well, he grew up in Boston and claimed to have 'green blood' whatever the heck that meant. Also, '33' was some famous Celtic's number, I guess. Numb, I'm not sure if I was of mind to have called Jim even if my cell phone had reception. Heart pounding, just before I reached the bridge I executed an: *I'm-finally-the-heck-out-of-your-way-people* u-turn and sped back toward my home.

Charlotte Murphy and her daughter Amy who had been in the now crashed and neatly removed minivan would have been safely home with all of their groceries put away (*and the TV on Wheel of Fortune*) if Charlotte hadn't forgotten to buy cigarettes. This unfortunate event turned her around and cost them a most precious nine minutes of what were about to be their final twenty-two minutes alive. Amy was getting antsy and moaned when her mom had made a u-turn, but her mom told her so 'stuff it' and threatened to 'pull the car over'. Really, even the delay and return for smokes had not completely sealed their fate, more so Charlotte's lack of concentration on the road and instead focus on Richard Hadley on a.m. 880 while he read the Lotto numbers and she checked the five random lottery tickets ("*only give me winners*" -*she always told the cashier*). She always bought five tickets on Saturday when she shopped for groceries, unless she'd had a particularly bad week of tips, in which case she would buy ten.

"I told you, hush up girl. I don't wanna be out here in this weather any more'n

you do but we gotta eat, don't we?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Well then you'll just have to hold it in a little longer. I'm hurryin', you know, but we don't want to be hurryin' too fast in this weather." Charlotte lit her last cigarette, a no-name brand, an extra-long. She opened the window a crack to draw out the smoke then fished into the grocery bag for her lottery tickets. "Turn up that radio," she said aloud, really to no one as her daughter was in the back seat, then leaned and turned the dial herself. "I wanna check my numbers. Gonna win it for sure this week, Ames. Just got our tickets right under the wire..."

The last thing Charlie Singleton wanted to be doing on a stormy Saturday was driving to Kalispell to pick up his horse. Damn thing was like a cat; he'd heard that cats sometimes traveled a hundred miles or more to return to an old home when they'd recently been moved. Well he and Celia, his wife, not his horse whose name was Archie, had bought their home in Jennings, Montana, which was the next town over east of Shelby, and further east still of Drake where they used to live. Archie always wound up in Drake when he got out, three times now this year alone, well last year anyway, the New Year turning just this past week. He was a jumper that Archie, a real ornery one who didn't mind scraping a leg or two on the barbs if he had a fancy to travel. The summertime, while still annoying, Charlie could sort of understand; after all old 'Arch was no gelding- maybe he got a yen. But this was the sixth of January and it was snowing pretty darn good. Damn horse; if a whippin' would do any good he'd have one coming but horses, they were dumb like that. Or smart, maybe. Charlie scratched his head and craned forward to see through the wet, pelting snow and rapidly fogging windshield. Damned defogger hadn't worked since the sixties.

“Only way to win the lottery is not to play.”

Those words, my husband Jim’s words, kept gnawing away at my spinning brain as I neared our home. Being a purely logical thinker he figured that if you didn’t play, whatever you *would* have spent playing, you were up that much. I guess our accountant would have agreed with him, if we’d had one to begin with, but up until now we had always done our own taxes easily enough.

The back of my car fishtailed on the packed snow and I almost took out our mailbox.

Leaving the keys dangling and my purse on the passenger seat I tore inside. I imagined the story: ***Shelby Woman Wins Lottery***- the headlines would no doubt dominate the fourteen-page bi-weekly *Shelby Picayune*, but would also be surely reported by the major media outlets in the five-state area, maybe nationwide. Even the store that sold the winning ticket would be on the news having won a 3% lottery of its own, in this case more than seven-million dollars, more than the GCP (*Gross County Product*) of *Southfork County, Montana* where the convenience store resides, certain to become a fixture in Montana lore for generations to come. Few would even remember the three killed on the Old Stone Bridge the day the numbers were announced.

“Jim? *Jim!*” I yelled out, striding inside, my mind awhirl.

“What is it, Honey,” he clomped up the basement stairs wiping dirt from his hands on a shop rag.

I stammered: “Our numbers. All of them, all six. The ‘33’ too, the lottery,” I tripped over my tongue.

“We *won* the lottery?” Jim stopped wiping his hands and stood with his mouth gaping.

Now what in the heck...

Charlie Singleton had just finished wiping at the foggy windshield. Nothing worked on the old pick-up except for the engine which was usually all he needed since there wasn't wood to cut or many farming duties in wintertime, and Archie never had run off 'cept during the summer. The Brookings River, which ran about a quarter-mile lazy-wide at the point of the Old Stone Bridge, caused a low-fog which it did pretty much every time the weather changed so rapidly for the worse. The air was colder than the water but had come on too quickly for any substantial freezing to take place. As long as there was no wind you could bet on fog. And some ice on the roadways.

Charlie thought: *Better slow down...*

Charlie moved the steering-column shifter (*three on the tree*) into second gear. He eased off the clutch. The truck issued a perceptible grunt that rippled all the way through to the end of the horse trailer. Charlie Singleton had been driving since he was nine and pulling trailers since he was twelve in all types of weather and had never had any kind of problem. This problem was, Charlotte Murphy (*and daughter Amy*) and their *Dodge Aerostar* minivan, silver with part of the front bumper dangling, were just entering the Bridge from the west, and damned if it didn't seem as if they were going awfully fast? Being just shy of eighty almost everyone drove too fast for Charlie Singleton. Then suddenly the van was in the wrong place, a terribly wrong place, and time stopped for Charlie as he thought he felt his feet moving for the brake and the clutch and *thought* he felt his pick-up moving just a bit *over* the center line (*if he could have seen it on the road beneath the snow*) as his trailer started to jackknife. Then Charlie locked now peeled and panicked eyes with an overweight woman piloting the silver minivan with a young girl hanging onto the back of her seat, the woman who had been looking at some lottery tickets, not paying attention to the road, a cigarette dangling from her lip.

Then there was no more.

The next day.

“Hey Bob.”

“Yeah Deputy, what is it?”

The heavy-set deputy with a blond buzz-cut sat upright and shifted the newspaper. “You’re not gonna believe this one. Know that wreck yesterday on the Bridge? Well the old guy in it with the horse trailer, turns out it was Margret his widow that’d won the big lottery. Says right here, ‘Shelby woman, recently widowed wife of accident victim Charles Singleton’. Can you believe it? Like two hundred mil.”

“Some luck, eh?”

“Yeah, some luck

Bob.”

My husband Jim walked into the living room with the Sunday paper. “Honey did you see this? A horrible accident on the bridge yesterday. Must’ve happened just before you left the house the second time. How lucky is that? It’s right here on the second page. Says three people were killed. A minivan with a woman and her seven-year-old daughter wound up in the wrong lane on the Old Stone Bridge’. Ran smack into some poor farmer pulling a horse trailer. Wrong place, wrong time I guess, huh?”

“I’m not talking to you, Jim.

“We could have won the lottery.”
