

IT COULD BE YOU

A short story.

Ringo sat in the park. It was another hot day. The hottest summer in living memory. He didn't believe that. Privately he believed that the English had lied about how miserable their weather was to keep tourists away. Which didn't seem to work. All around him foreign dialects bubbled up from passers-by and bounced around in groups on the grass. 'Bloody tourists.' he thought and he smiled at the irony. He was also a tourist really. Only he'd been there for seven months so maybe he wasn't. He already had a London bluntness to his voice that accentuated when he was around his London friends. Or if he wanted something from a Londoner. 'Sorry mate,' he'd say, "Wich way's Bayswa'er Stayshin?" And they'd give him a straight answer.

Lately he'd begun to feel terrified that he'd never get out. It was an easy thing to get stuck in London. So big. So draining. Exhausting. Weekends came and he almost couldn't be asked to leave the house that he shared with his girlfriend and a Northerner. The Northerner was from up near Preston somewhere. Ringo had no idea where really. It might even have been Preston itself. Ringo hadn't really left London yet. The furthest he'd got was Cambridge for a weekend. He and his girlfriend had spent most of the time in a bedroom drinking tequila and having sex. Hardly saw the town or the University.

He'd come over with a friend. A good friend. Who was now up in Edinburgh with his new girlfriend. They'd had enough money to get

a van and had cleared out of London at the earliest opportunity. After spending a last night together and listening to them having sex in the bed next to him, Ringo had decided to stick behind.

He'd lived and worked in a pub for a while then quit and had moved into the house that his girlfriend shared with the Northerner. Since then he'd had no work beyond the occasional cleaning shift and three weeks doing tele-sales. Everyone said how good he should have been at it but he wasn't. Didn't have the heart to take the orders, take the money for something that had no value that he could see. He'd realised then that his heart was not made for London. So he left the job and went back to cleaning off and on. More off than on.

He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet. It felt heavy and bulged with change but he knew it didn't amount to much. Lately he never had much. He'd become an expert in small-change budgeting. Thirty pounds for a day of cleaning bought him a weekly reprieve from absolute destitution. Fourteen gone on a weeks tube pass. Five on a phone card. Six or so on cheap food and the rest on tobacco and rolling papers. Sometimes he would only have enough for the papers and would glean the tobacco from discarded dog-ends found in the street or pub ashtrays.

He poured the change into his hand. Three pound fifty. Enough for some Rizzlas and a jobs classified. He had phone card so that was alright. Maybe get a coke. That would leave him with just over a pound. He let the coins fall from one hand to the next.

Listening to it. Thinking. Thinking. Until a resolution; 'Alright then - buy a bloody lottery ticket!'

'It could be me' he thought, and he laughed. Stupid bloody blue finger coming out of the sky. Like an unfunny Terry Gilliam animation. Raising the hopes of half the nation. Heart rates of millions of people going up in unison every week at 7.30 on a Saturday. Only to fall to a weekly low again shortly after 8. Except the lucky one, two, three or four, or more, who got so excited they up and left for Paraguay or somewhere, or died of a heart attack on the spot, or spent the money in short shift and spent the time subsequent complaining about how much misery it had brought them. Bloody poms! If he won the lottery he'd have a field day. Go wild with it. Lavish it left and right and absolutely centre on friends and family. And travel! God yes! Everywhere!

'That's it,' thought Ringo, 'I'll get one, win it and show these stupid whingeing poms how to really live it up.'

He got up off the sun scorched grass, stuffed his copy of 'On the Road' into his back pocket and sauntered off to find the nearest dealer. 'It won't be you.' he thought out loud and laughed at his own sense of irony. Pointed his finger at no-one in particular. And laughed again.

Choosing the numbers was always a bit of fun. Ringo had seen people squinting at the selection slips, as if they expected to have the numbers magically reveal themselves through half hooded eyes. Or that couple he'd read about who timed their bouts of sex

in the week and used that somehow to calculate the favourable fall of the balls. As it were. Must have had a range of low numbers. Ringo himself preferred an absolutely random approach. After all, he figured, that was the way the numbers came out. At least one had to assume so. Or else it was an enormous scam that would be discovered in a couple of years time and the Americans would get a hold of it and turn the whole sordid story into a movie. Bloody yanks. Ringo had faith though that it wasn't and his approach was simply to take the slip and scratch out the first six numbers that fell under the nib of the stumpy little pen they provided on the lotto stand. Then up to the counter and hand over the slip. Into the machine which spat out the hopeful receipt.

05 09 13 24 36 49.

'Great' thought Ringo. 'Bound to win.' He handed over his last pound and carefully folded the slip into his wallet. By custom he kept the slip where there the real money ought to have been, but wasn't. There was something of a good omen in doing so he thought. He stepped out of the shop and back into the warm of the sun.

The rest of the week was slow. No cleaning came up so Ringo lay about at home feeling the guilt of kissing his girlfriend off to work every morning seep deeper into his skin. He'd wake her up with coffee, sometimes run her a bath. Then she'd go and he'd clean the flat and read. Make some phone calls later in the afternoon. Masturbate. Mostly he'd lay in the sun, near naked, getting a fantastic tan and acknowledging to himself that it

wasn't going to get him any money. This week of course he'd spent a lot of time thinking about what he would do if he won the lottery. He could feel the expectation rising involuntarily as each day passed. Houses. Wild parties. Journeys to exotic places. Monumental gifts to all those that he loved and even to those he didn't. Imagine!

Saturday came and he and his girlfriend went down to the park and lounged about on the grass with some friends. At some point the lottery came up. As it almost always did despite everyone's feigned disinterest. Ringo noted to himself that this pretend disinterest was softly but unmistakably underpinned by each person's belief that this week it would be them. He couldn't resist making the joke apparent and he leaped to his feet in the circle and picked out a single friend and, bringing his finger down on their forehead, slowly intoned in a god-like voice;

"It won't be you..."

Everyone laughed, but Ringo could see in all of their eyes that half sly, half knowing, mostly desperate, 'Please God, let it be me.'

The sun settled slowly, longingly into the smog and skyline of the late summer evening. At some point Ringo realised that the lottery must have been drawn, it's magical combination revealed to an anxious, awaiting public. He couldn't bring himself to go and check on the numbers. He didn't want anyone to guess at his own desperation even though he knew they shared its common thread. It

was bad form, he supposed, as well. Not done in polite society to go rushing slavishly off to check whether your boat has come in. He would wait until tomorrow.

Sunday was as hot as Saturday had been and Ringo and his girlfriend had lain in bed until almost 11, talking and having sex. Eventually they got up and had a few slices of toast with some more coffee. His girlfriend ran a bath and Ringo volunteered to go down to Safeways and get some more milk as they were running low.

"Fine," she said, "There's some money in my purse."

He took some change, slipped it into his wallet and stepped out to go up to the high.

At the small corner convenience he didn't go straight to the Lottery results board. He went to the fridges and got the milk first. Delaying gratification. Then he sauntered through the wines and spirits and let that lead him to the lottery section. He ignored the board with the results as long as he could by perusing the wine. All shit. Nothing he would buy when he won. He got to the end of the aisle and could no longer avoid looking at the numbers squeaked up on the white plastic with blue marker.

03 15 16 21 32 36 bonus 18.

He smiled casually. As if he might just have won it, or a bit of it at least, but was too cool to show emotion, too used to being a winner to let on to another punter who took in the numbers and over Ringo's shoulder and turned away with the same casual

air. As if they didn't mind. But of course they did. And he did. Everyone did. They minded because they felt that they had been gently cheated but weren't sure how.

Ringo turned away and went back home with the milk.

"The cleaning people called," greeted his girlfriend as he walked in.

"Yeah?"

"They'll need you tomorrow. Fire clean-up at a factory near Willesden." She sounded pleased.

"Great. I'll give them a call."

"Did we win?"

"No. Maybe next time."

END.