

Lucky Man

by Caspar von Wrede

It started with a ring. Not a very remarkable ring, nor even valuable. Just a plain, smooth metal ring which had three black stones set into its surface. I found it on the seat of a bus and put it into my pocket, without thought or hesitation, before I sat down. There it remained, forgotten, for the rest of the day.

That evening I went on an errand for my sister, who was in hospital. She insisted that I send her a copy of an obscure magazine on classical music every other week. She asks me to do a lot of favours for her, and I do my best to not disappoint her. She has terminal leukaemia.

I was walking back to the tube station, having completed my task, the esoteric journal wrapped in paper and clutched in my hand, when I passed a woman of around my age who was walking in the opposite direction. I stopped abruptly and turned to look at her, and found that she had done the same. She had short black hair, was wearing a multi-coloured top, and I noticed that she had a small stud through her right eyebrow. She took a few hesitant steps towards me, and her mouth was twitching into a smile.

"Richard?"

"Joanna! Oh my God!" I closed the gap between us and there was an awkward moment where we both considered giving the other a hug but deciding against it. She laughed and reached out to put her hand on my arm.

"Don't tell me you're working in London too."

"No, studying..." We rapidly passed through the formalities of establishing what the other was doing, what they were hoping to do, and what they had done since we had last seen each other, three years ago, at school. Back then her hair had been long and had usually served to hide most of her face. I thought the short hair was a big improvement.

"Listen, I have to go, I'm late as it is. Give me your phone number, I'll call you tomorrow." She sounded like she really meant it. Magically she had produced a small notebook and a pencil.

"Er, let me see...seven, two, no, seven, three, uh...er...damn. You see, my flat has just been reconnected and we have a new number..."

"...and you've forgotten it."

"Well, no. I don't think I knew it in the first place". I shrugged sheepishly and thrust my hands deep into my pockets, as if I might find the answer there. What I found was the ring. Momentarily distracted, I took it out and examined it.

Looking up again I saw her pencil hovering expectantly over her notebook. "You might as well write down the Lottery numbers," I offered, but then I was rescued by an inspiration. "Wait! There's a chance after all," I pulled out my wallet and began to rummage through the countless faded scraps of paper and cards that filled it, until I triumphantly held up a grubby till receipt. A hastily scribbled number was visible. Distaste briefly crossed her face but then she snatched the piece of flimsy paper and dazzled me with a smile.

"Well, I'm sure you won't mind if I take *that*. Speak to you later." And then she was gone. No goodbye. I had once had a habit of looking at peoples' teeth when they talked to me and realised in that instant that it had returned. She had perfect teeth.

I returned to my flat, deep in contemplation of the fact that maybe multi-coloured clothing and eyebrow studs shouldn't always be used as a judge of character. Two and a half hours after I got home she phoned me, a fact I later calculated. Her voice sounded different. Breathless. For a moment she almost sounded as if she was about to sob. "Richard," she said and paused to pull herself together. "I don't know how to tell you this,...but... you know what you said about your phone number, you said —" she cleared her throat, "what I should write down instead of it."

I hesitated and then replied. "What...you mean the lottery numbers?"

"Richard.... OK. OK, I'll slow down a bit. You probably think I'm a little mad," a nervous laugh, "you wouldn't be the only one. You see, when you couldn't remember your telephone number, you said I should use lottery numbers. Well, being the person I am — I have a hyperactive imagination— I had to find out what the lottery numbers *really* were." She laughed more naturally this time. I thought of her teeth.

"And?" I already knew what she was about to tell me, but my mind refused to accept it.

"And tonight your numbers came up. On this Saturday, the lottery numbers are the *exact digits of your telephone number!*"

"My telephone number came up in the lottery?!" It was half question and half exclamation. I felt a strange emotion, the feeling that I was on the verge of something immensely important but that I did not know what it actually meant. Imagine a castaway who lives on a tiny desert island, certain in the knowledge that he is alone on his world. One day he finds a message pinned to the door of his home-made shack, which reads, "Happy Birthday." I felt like this castaway.

"I, I..." Nothing could possibly express the depth of my confusion. Thankfully Joanna rescued me.

"OK. This is really important. I have a little theory. And I need to see you right now. Give me your address," — I complied — "right. I can be there in 20 minutes. And Richard..." she concluded mysteriously, "don't touch anything!"

She rang my doorbell exactly 22 minutes later. As I went to open the door I must confess I felt an unexpected twinge of affection. She burst through the door. *Hi!* Smile. Teeth. Then she grabbed my arm in a manner that made it clear who was in charge and we marched up the stairs. I showed her my room; she shut the door she spoke in a low voice.

"Listen. I've replayed the scene a hundred times where you said I should use the lottery numbers instead of your telephone number, and I think I know which is the crucial element. Richard, show me the ring that you were wearing."

I remembered that I had indeed briefly slipped the ring onto my finger during our conversation. Needless to say I felt slightly ridiculous as I searched through my pockets and with as little ceremony as possible produced the ring.

She reached out and held my elbows with noticeable pressure. "OK, I know you will think this sounds totally loony, but I want you to humour me. All I ask of you is this tiny little favour." Smile. "Now, I want you to put on that ring and make a statement,... something like, the phone will ring in the next minute, or there'll be a power cut, something like that..."

"OK, uh....within the next minute a 10 foot rubber chicken will—"

She squeezed my elbows and I winced. "Please, something serious. Come on, just this one favour." She smiled again but there was unmistakably a certain weight to her words as well. Acquiescing graciously, I took her over to the window which overlooked the street. I paused for thought and then solemnly spoke.

"Three white limousines are about to drive past this window." To my slight embarrassment I have to confess that even I then craned to look out of the window onto the wet and busy street below. We watched in utter silence and continued to stare for at least five minutes after the gleaming ivory and chrome automobiles had cruised by the window.

I finally straightened up and breathed out very deeply. I took off the ring, held it up and peered at it with childish amazement.

"Please tell me that was a coincidence."

Joanna spoke very quietly. "It *could* have been a coincidence. Just like your telephone number. But it's a lot of coincidences for one day..."

Suddenly I started. "Wait, this little stone has just fallen off the ring. Now there's only one left. There were originally three!"

Joanna shook herself out of the trance that she had appeared to have fallen into. "One stone is one coincidence," she said matter-of-factly. "One coincidence left. Or let's put it another way: *one wish....*"

She looked into my eyes for a long time, and I found that I could return her gaze without feeling that urge to look away. I noticed that she had extremely pale freckles. I wondered how many other people had noticed this, and under what circumstances.

"You're saying I have one wish left, any wish, anything I want in the whole world."

"There's probably some things that you can't have in this world," she was squeezing my elbows again, "but given time..."

Her words didn't really register. I felt drunk. There was the feeling of pressure behind my eardrums.

"What are we going to do?" I finally managed to croak. Looking back on it now, it would have been difficult to have said something more lame.

"Well..." she inhaled deeply and seemed to see the whole world through the walls of my bedroom. "The words *Lottery*, *jackpot*, *fabulous* and *wealth* spring to mind in no particular order."

"Yes, yes. Good idea." I sounded like I had just absent-mindedly responded to some trivial suggestion, something like, *should I put pepper in the salad dressing?* But as I've said, I was having problems dealing with the situation. Then gradually I began to think more clearly, and I became aware that there was something buried deep in my mind that was trying to surface. It was like the feeling you have when you know you've forgotten something, but you have yet to realise what it is.

"Hold on..."

"What? *What?*"

I took a step back. We had been standing very close. I turned around and grabbed a journal from my desk, and held it up for her to see. It was entitled *Medical Advances in Leukaemia Treatment*. The idea had surfaced.

"My sister has leukaemia. She needs a bone marrow transplant. Desperately. If she doesn't get one she'll be dead within two months. The chances of finding a donor are one in twenty thousand..." my voice trailed off momentarily, "yet, if this ring— if it really...works, then..."

I think I saw disappointment in her face, in that moment after she had fully grasped what I had said. I couldn't really blame her, and it was there for only an instant.

"Of course, of course," her voice was almost soothing, "I shouldn't always be so.... egoistic. Is that the right word? ...This is such a bizarre situation. I feel like I'm in some very very strange dream." A sad but beautiful smile. "Of course you have to help your sister. Do it right now..."

She clasped my hands and slipped the ring onto my finger. Her hands remained folded over mine. I was aware of their warmth.

"A donor will be found for my sister, and she will live...for a long time, at least." I said it quickly without meeting her eyes. Her hands began to squeeze mine, but we were interrupted from our thoughts by the penetrating ring of the phone.

"Bloody hell!" I said, "there really isn't any time wasted, is there?" She let go of my hands and I picked up the receiver. The conversation was short, and I merely grunted once or twice. I felt incredibly tired. I put the phone down.

"Guess who that was. A doctor. They found a matching donor this morning. They've just operated and she seems to be absolutely fine. She's...going to make it." I voice sounded hollow, without conviction. I sat down on the bed, and began to talk, to myself, it seemed.

"It's strange, but I feel neither happy nor sad. I feel nothing, just feel...drained. These last two hours have been...out of this world. But my sister's *life* has just be saved, I should be elated. I don't know, it'll take a long time to cope with this whole thing." I rambled on some more and Joanna listened patiently. About half an hour later she left; I can't remember when we agreed to meet again, or even if. But I remember that she took the ring with her. I didn't need it anymore. I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling.

The phone rang after what seemed like days to me. It was my father; he had just been to the hospital with my mother. Luckily I did not have to talk much. I pretended to be tired and promised to call in the morning. Again I lay motionless. I'm sure that at least an hour must have passed.

The phone rang again. It was Joanna. She was almost speechless with excitement, and instantly I was infected with it, my apathy forgotten.

"Richard. Oh my God, how am I going to explain this? The ring, the last stone...it hasn't fallen off...it's still attached...you realise —"

"Joanna, the last wish came true. My sister..." I wanted to believe her.

"*No!*" she actually screeched. There was a moment of silence as she collected herself. "Your sister was operated — no the donor,...the donor was found this *morning*. You understand. By the time you made the wish, she'd *already* been operated on. It had already happened —"

"So? How do we know how this whole ring/wish thing works? Are you trying to invoke some kind of scientific argument? This *whole thing* is not scientific, so there's no point in questioning any particular part of it. I mean, think of the limousines...they must have must left and been driving down the street before I made *that* wish. And it still came true..."

"Yes, but then stone fell off, and this time it hasn't..."

"OK, maybe the stone didn't fall off this time, but the still came true. A donor was found for my sister and I found out immediately after having wished for it. That's enough to convince me." Even though what I was saying sounded right, a tiny seed of uncertainty had been sown.

"No, you're wrong. You may have wished for it, but your sister already had a donor before you even found the ring. *That's* the one coincidence of this whole day. A big coincidence admittedly, but a coincidence. They do happen you know...that's why they have a n—"

"I don't believe you."

"I think you do Richard. Come on, just this once in your life believe in something simply because it feels right. I know you think of yourself as a scientist, but there's things that even science can't explain. Think of your telephone number and the limousines. You believed in that, so why not believe in a coincidence. What did you say the chances were? One in fifty thou—"

"Joanna, I..." Dear God, I really wanted what she was saying to be true.

"OK Richard. The stone is still on this ring. I can make it fall off right now if you want. I'll just slip it on and say something like...like, a ten foot rubber chicken is about to—"

"Stop." I laughed a false laugh. "I...I...I believe you. Yes. I can't believe I do, but I believe you. What the hell." I believed her. Totally. Something still felt wrong about it, but it also felt so right. As if some switch in my brain had finally clicked shut.

"Richard. I going to give you some very simple instructions, and then I'll see you in exactly 35 minutes. I want you to buy a copy of *The Times* and I want you to have a look at page six. I also want you to go to the nearest cash machine and withdraw as much money as possible. Empty your credit card if you can; you'll need at least 300 pounds and anything over that won't lie around unused. Then take the tube to Victoria Station. I'll meet you on the platform in exactly 35 minutes. We're going on a little journey. You and me. Any questions? No. Well I'll see you there then." And she was gone. No goodbye. I put the phone down and looked up weakly. Almost immediately the phone rang again. Somehow I knew it's wasn't Joanna. I ignored it, put on my coat and headed for my local newsagent to buy a copy of *The Times*.

Just before the train entered the station I managed to find the article that Joanna must have meant. The headline said, *Unprecedented \$80 Million Rollover Jackpot in New York State lottery*. The pressure was behind my eardrums again. I think several people heard me gasp, and then the carriage was already stopping. The train doors slid back and I was on the platform, and immediately I spotted Joanna and my heart leapt. She had seen me too, and began to push towards me. Everything else faded away and I only saw her. Her smile, her teeth, her freckles, and her eyes. Her eyes were the best thing of all.

In those few moments before she reached me, three utterly lucid lines of thought materialised in my mind, in contrast to the emotional turmoil that had reigned seconds before. First I abruptly realised that Joanna needn't have told me about the last wish at all. She had the ring, and I would never have known what she chose to do with it. But she had told me and had shown that my participation was just as important to her as the ring itself. Whatever else she wanted, she also wanted *me*.

Secondly I suddenly knew with delicious certainty that this time we would fall into the other's arms, without hesitation or awkwardness, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Lastly I felt something that I had never felt before, a feeling that I immediately understood could either be the best or the worst thing any person could experience. For me it was beyond all doubt the best feeling I had ever known.

It was the feeling that my life would never be the same again.

Comments very welcome: caspar_wrede@yahoo.com