



Fortune Smiles
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Lie back now, and I'll tell you a story. No, with your arm over your head like this. Perfect. *Obrigado*. You are perfect. God, I love the women in Rio.

Let's see where to begin: with a moral, I guess. One small act of kindness can change your whole life. How's that? I know because I performed the tiniest possible kindness one night, and everything changed. I simply knocked on old Powell's door to ask if he wanted anything from the QuikTrip up the street. That was all.

Powell had the apartment just below mine and was this friendless, gross older guy who floated from job to job spending most of his free time reading science fiction and watching Cardinals games. I had only talked to him a couple of times before, so it was quite a nice gesture to do that errand for him.

The Cardinals? They're a sports team we have in St. Louis. Yes, like a soccer team, sort of.

Powell. He opened the door wearing a sweat suit, the tops and bottoms unmatched and tattered, and was so happy that I had considered his needs that he could barely contain his joy. He wanted only a six-pack of Busch and a lottery ticket.

Busch? Like Antarctica.

Anyway, I remember when he leaned over to get his wallet from within a pile of clothes on the floor that I had to look away from the sickly strip of lower back flesh that flashed into view. Yes, gross. It was certainly at the other end of the spectrum from your tanned beauty, my dear.

I suppose I felt sorry for Powell, a guy 20 years older than me, living in what most people considered a shithole apartment even to start out in. Knowing that this was the best he would ever do must have been a tough pill to swallow.

Of course, I felt even sorrier for myself. At the time I was waiting tables in an upscale chain restaurant after four years of college had crapped me into the worst economy in 80 years. My parents had been hit hard by the market crash and their business was cut in half by the lack of disposable income floating around. I had always assumed they would just write a check for the student loans I had accumulated. No such luck.

So I was in a bad apartment in a seedy part of St. Louis. Yes, a very bad neighborhood. Lots of crime and poor people. I'm sure you're familiar with these places. They even called

it Dogtown. The folks in the *favelas* here would think our poor were rich, of course, but it's all relative. Let's see. A bad apartment, a stupid job, and no girlfriend. The last one was the hardest to take because I knew I was wasting my prime years of wild oats sowing because I was too poor to get a truly gorgeous girl to go out with me.

Wild oats? That's what we've been doing for the last two hours and will resume shortly.

Even girls at work who were not particularly gorgeous, just passable, were looking for guys not driving 10 year-old Accords, who could afford to spend some money on them—big money or little money, just not no money. Yes, big money rings a bell with you, doesn't it? Anyway, considering all of this, it's surprising that I ever asked Powell if he wanted anything, but I did.

At the QuikTrip I bought a deli sandwich, two six-packs, a Red Bull to drink on the way to work the next day, and two lottery tickets. There was a pretty long line to check out since it was a Wednesday, and the deadline for Powerball tickets was fast approaching. The girl at the counter was pretty cute and had a Mizzou t-shirt on, but she gave me the "forget it" look. Even to an undergraduate working a dumb summer job, I looked pathetic. I was buying my dinner at QuikTrip and wasting money on stupid lottery tickets, a sucker's game. I didn't even try to flirt with her. Yes, it was very sad, sweetie.

When I dropped off the beer and ticket at Powell's, he was so grateful I wanted to vomit. He invited me to come in and listen to the Cardinals who were just starting a game with the Braves or some team or other. I could not have cared less. All the fake identification that life's losers make with sports heroes who wouldn't stop if they ran over them in their Mercedes is so pathetic. I said maybe I'd check in after I ate and did some work. He didn't protest much. Losers get used to being rejected. I waved at him with my sandwich and took off.

One thing I should explain about myself is that I have this uncanny ability to memorize things like all my friends license plates or phone numbers you see on billboards. It's just one of those strange things that I do. Among others that you've already participated in. So, it was not unusual then that walking back from QuikTrip, I committed Powell's lottery number to memory. It just happened. Anyway, after I ate my dinner, did email for a while, played some time-murdering computer game, it was almost ten o'clock. Just to show you how foolish I had become, I clicked on the Powerball web site to see if I'd won.

And there it was. Powell's number. It sat there on the screen like a tumor that suddenly declares itself. You realize that you are one of the unlucky ones in life—the lucky one is the geek upstairs. I sat there staring at the numbers praying I was wrong, but I wasn't. Without another thought I went up to Powell's apartment and knocked on the door.

I had no plan at all. I don't really know what I was thinking. Maybe I thought it would be a good idea to be his best pal until he found out he was stupid rich and decided to buy me a new car. I don't know. I wasn't going to slit his throat or anything the way some of your boyfriends might, especially that one who dropped you off. Just kidding.

As soon as he answered the door, I knew he didn't know anything yet. He was so happy that I had come back to watch the end of the game that was a real pitcher's duel or whatever. He didn't own a computer, so he was blissfully unaware of his new millionaire

status—sixty times over unless someone else had the same number. He gave me a beer and we settled into watching the game like old buddies.

His living room was a total mess with books and magazines covering all but a narrow path to the two threadbare chairs and the TV. The walls were decorated with these Star Wars posters that were stuck up with scotch tape. It was claustrophobic and disgusting. Powell kept droning on and on about what happened in the second inning, what he thought would happen next, who was due for a hit, who was making too much money. Blah, blah, blah.

I looked around for anything that would help me. On top of one of the stacks of magazines was a hammer which seemed like a sign from Fate, but I ignored it. I drank my beer and brooded. What would Powell do with all that money? Did he have any living relatives? Maybe he was already the most successful person in his family, and the whole rest of the brood would hit him up for houses and cars and operations for their uninsured brats. They would drain him dry in two years. It's a fact. It always happens to these losers who become suddenly rich and have nothing but loser friends, and none of them have any understanding of money or any taste at all.

Speaking of taste, would you like another glass of this? It's 200 bucks a bottle. That's half a million *Reals* to you. Drink up. Pretty good, huh?

Now where was I? Ah, yes watching baseball in hell. The eighth inning had just ended which meant that unless the other team scored, the game was over. Then the news would come on, and Powell would become the richest person I'd ever met. I decided to get drunk, drained my beer and steered my way through the debris to help myself to another one from his filthy kitchen. That's when I saw it. The ticket. It was pinned by one of those praying hands magnets to the old, noisy refrigerator, the number just as I remembered it. I stroked it with my finger as I slowly read each gorgeous digit. Five seconds ticked by on the stove clock. I took out a beer, shook it hard, and opened it.

After it exploded onto my shirt and everywhere, I cursed and yelled until Powell came in. He got some kind of towels out of a drawer and seemed genuinely upset that his beer had attacked me. We mopped up the mess on our knees together, he apologizing and blaming QuikTrip. I was also apologizing and suddenly became absolutely convinced that I owed him some damn beer to make up for my clumsiness. I wouldn't take no for an answer. In fact, I had to leave right away to get some before the exciting ninth inning started.

I ran up the steps like Rocky in the first movie only with more motivation. I grabbed the carton with its remaining beers, retrieved the losing ticket from the waste basket and set another record getting back down to his apartment just as the pitcher was throwing his final warm-up toss. I didn't knock and just zipped by my beaming host into the kitchen.

Once again it appeared before me, a tiny scrap of paper making or mocking my fate. Do you like that turn of phrase? In a flash it was in my pocket replaced by my normal brand of luck. The rest I don't really remember. I sat there watching the tedious pitches and foul balls, the conferences on the mound, the change of pitchers, with an overwhelming desire to scream or sob. When the game was over, I left immediately. Got to get up early. Hit the old grindstone. Powell bought it all saying how much fun it was watching the game with a friend. He shook my hand limply.

Don't give me that look. Everything in life is about luck. If you, my beauty, had been born almost anywhere in America, you could easily have your current level of income by doing next to nothing. It's not like Powell earned it or anything. It was just dumb luck. Luck. Look, if you open these curtains, you can see that giant statue of Jesus opening his arms to bless the worst slum in the world. How many of those residents are ever saved? It's all luck, and sometimes you have to make your own. Keep that arm above your head. I'm almost finished.

That night I drove away and got a motel room until morning just in case Powell noticed the crease on the ticket was different or if he had also memorized the number. He hadn't. I assume he saw the Powerball announcement on the news, peeked at what was stuck beneath the praying hands magnet, and got another beer. Lost again.

Well, enough story time. I'm rested and rearin' to go. That means come over here, girl, in case you're wondering. Oops, a long face. Did my story upset you? What have we here? Money! One of these yellow ones and a couple of blue ones should do the trick. Ah, that brings the fire to your eyes. Just remember the customer is always right. I'll teach you all about capitalism before we're done.

What happened to Powell? I have no idea. I never went back to the apartment. I hired some people to clean it out and told them to trash anything they didn't want. I gave them an envelope for Powell with \$1000 cash in it. They said Powell was thrilled. I wonder if they ever actually gave it to him.