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STICKY FINGERS

So maybe it wasn't the right thing to do. Okay. Fine. I knew it was the wrong thing to do the whole time. But I did it anyway, because you do what you have to.

I remember it perfectly. It was one of those sticky days, late August, when it's so humid outside you feel like you're living underwater, and every time you try to talk all that comes out is fish talk—glub, glub, glub, man. Despite the mugginess, I was dying of thirst. I reached for my wallet. I choked a little then, seeing that all I had was two soggy dollar bills. At least it was enough for a Coke. Clutching my waterlogged money in a slippery fist I swam to the Seven-Eleven across the street.

I pushed open the door, and it was like being touched by God. The water evaporated as cold air rushed over me; ice cold soda called my name. But in the same instant that he blessed me, he cursed me; inside were about twenty kids all clamoring about the broken Slurpee machine. I'd never seen a person so close to committing suicide as that cashier. I felt bad for him, putting up with all those kids—and I've dealt with some real despicable creeps at McDonald's.

But I didn't feel bad for long; my thirst beat all. Shoving some of the kids out of the way I made straight for the rows of Coke on the back wall. Now all I had to worry about was whether I wanted cherry, vanilla, or original and how much change I'd have at the end of it.

While I was picking out a Coke, some creeper came in and demanded, "A pack of Marlboros and two scratch tickets, by God". He was higher than a Spiderman kite in the park on a Saturday afternoon. Not that it was any of my business. But quick as he came in, he was gone, and it was my turn in line. I paid for my Coke, smiled a little at the cashier and continued my swim home.

Rather than my normal route down 12th, I decided it'd be faster if I cut through the parking lot and went through the park on Washington Boulevard. As I walked behind the building, I saw some ratty tennis shoes sticking out from behind the dumpster. Not that I don't live in a decent neighborhood, but I wanted to be sure that it wasn't some victim of a hate crime or anything. So I almost passed out when I saw that it was the whack job from inside the store. I wasn't surprised he was down; I was surprised that he only made it this far. Besides that, opportunity rarely knocked on my door these days.

I pushed on the creep's shoulder with the toe of my shoe. Naturally, nothing happened. So I bent down and started checking his pockets.

I found the smokes right away, and with that the two scratch tickets. But I decided to let him keep those—expecting something better. When I found that his Velcro wallet was as empty as mine, I was more than disappointed. But I was not about to walk away emptied handed—I would take anything; an old man's bellybutton lint was worth more than my savings account. So that's how I ended up with the tickets.

I drifted home in silence. Not that I was regretting ripping off that jerk—it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't gotten wasted and passed out—but scratch tickets? What a whack job.

Ten minutes later, I climbed all of the fifty-three stairs leading up to my apartment. At the top, I huffed and puffed like the big bad wolf, on the verge of blowing my own building down. But just as I pushed my key into the lock Jackie Lawrence's seventeen-year-old came out to make eyes at me—as if I didn't have enough problems already. Ignoring her too-tight shirt and too-short skirt, I bolted into my apartment before I did something stupid. Once I was inside, I locked the door behind me. Then I pushed a cardboard box in front of the door for good measure. Stupid girl.

I caught my breath as danger and exertion subsided, so I lit up a Marlboro and took a seat (the only seat) at the Formica table in the center of the room. The table's a real lovely shade of puke green, and cracked from one side to the other, but it's mine.

There wasn't anything else to do, so I pulled out the scratch tickets from earlier and laid them face up on the table. I just looked at them for a second—studied the patterns and the fancy letters and the waxy stuff that hides the numbers underneath—just looking. I sighed.

Well, good luck man, blow on the dice and watch 'em roll.

With a dirty fingernail, I scratched away some of the mystery. I got two sevens out of four, then pitched the card. No good. I pulled the other card across the table and scratched away. One seven, two seven—it was nothing. At three sevens, I took a shaky breath—then scolded myself for getting my hopes up; luck doesn't come my way. But there I was—four lucky sevens later, and I wasn't breathing. I checked the prize again and again. Seven hundred thousand, seven hundred seventy-seven dollars. Goddamn. I won. *I won*. Then my conscience came into play.

The rusted pipes under the floor groaned disapproval from the floor below. Unpaid bills whispered together on the table, the fridge started buzzing to protest its years of service... suddenly perturbed by my poverty, I grabbed the ticket off the table and stumbled into the half size kitchen—just as the leaky ceiling started closing in. When I set the ticket down on the counter, I heard it crack, like it couldn't hold anything up anymore. I reached for the faucet, but as I started to turn it on, it trembled under my dirty hands. *Was this for real?* Taking in air like a beached fish, I picked up the ticket again and dove into the bedroom.

I clutched the thing between my hands and flopped onto my mattress. I shoved it under my pillow and tried to steady my breathing. No such luck. With every breath I took the room got smaller. More air pushed into my lungs and wouldn't come out. Pretty soon I was expanding, a big puffer fish out of water, bloated with wealth and shame and fear and lust...

Then I noticed what was happening to the room. With every breath I took, my stinking, moldy walls leaned in—if those walls could talk—they would have told me I was caught. I focused on breathing—on living. With every breath, I lost more air—like I was a diver, finishing off my last tank of oxygen—slowly suffocating. I inhaled, inhaled the musty smell of mold, the stale scent of sweat, mothballs and dust, and I exhaled tainted fish air.

Then it stopped. With the vacant fish eyes, I saw that I had the ticket in my fist: as sweaty as the two dollars that started it all. It was now or never. For as much as never tugged at my sleeve—I knew it was now. I shredded the ticket, and let the pieces plummet the ground in silence.

Maybe luck doesn't come so often, but I'd rather no tell-tale heart in a stolen coffin.

