

WINNER OF \$174 MIL

Norman Waksler

1.

I began playing the lottery after my ex remarried. Like any man who's been divorced because the very virtues his wife married him for became the reasons to leave him, I'd have hated to have to share possible winnings with her. This may seem small-minded, but we were married four years and I paid support four more, so I believe I fulfilled my obligations.

Not that I ever won anything substantial. Seven dollars a few times, three now and then. Once I thought I won \$150, but I had read the sequence of numbers wrong. What I was hoping for was a twelve million dollar jackpot, which, taken in one lump and after taxes, would amount to about five million or so. Depending on interest rates at the time and along with my

city pension, this would generate enough money to retire, buy a small house, live in comfort, subscribe to a number of concert series and travel now and then to different cities with great and small art museums, paying as well for my woman friend Margaret (don't call me Maggie) Fisher.

Around the corner from my apartment was Calvin's Convenient. Ostensibly a snack food, bread, milk and sudden need store, over time it had given more than half its space to a collection of inferior wines and a surprisingly decent selection of beers and ales. So every couple of weeks I bought a six-pack of Harp Lager, and twice a week a Quick Pick lottery ticket on my way to work as Assistant City Clerk in charge of birth certificates, death records, and marriage licenses for Carbury, Mass, one of the small, densely populated cities around Boston.

Not all petty bureaucrats like me are bitter, dissatisfied individuals whose only desire is to protect their fiefs and exploit to the fullest the little power they have. I considered my quiet, orderly job both necessary and useful, an essential contribution to civil society. My salary was decent, and once I had only myself to support, even comfortable, allowing me to save, then spend moderately during vacations, buy the odd book and CD, go out to dinner, join the Museum of Fine Arts. So playing the lottery was just a two dollar a week indulgence leading to pleasant fantasies and no expectation of actually winning.

Instead, I won.

As usual, I read the paper that morning with breakfast (orange juice, French Roast coffee, muesli, whole wheat toast and strawberry jam). From childhood habit I always started with the funnies, but then I went on to the editorial page, the front page, through the major U.S. and world news and on to the Metro section where the lottery numbers were in a box on the second page.

Ordinarily I'd compare the winning numbers with my pink and white Quick Pick slip, see one, perhaps two uselessly matched numbers, accept the expected with a nod or a shrug, once in a while with a sigh.

This morning the numbers matched. All six. And below, the words and numbers: Jackpot \$174,000,000. One Winner.

I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I might be exaggerating, but it felt like those animated cartoons where you see the character's chest spike with every beat. I checked the numbers, rechecked my slip, the \$174,000,000. Re-read: One Winner.

The kitchen seemed to expand and contract. Now I thought I was having a stroke. Fifty-four year old men had strokes, didn't they? I remember thinking that I wished I had exercised all these years; at the same time I was wishing I still smoked.

Gradually, however, the stove and refrigerator, the dishwasher and the oak cabinets resumed their complacent solidity, my vision cleared and was left confronting the astounding figure. I knew the jackpot had been increasing, but when it hit eighty million or so, I stopped believing in the reality of the numbers. Now I looked at the 174 million and could make the kind of calculation I'd made numerous times fantasizing smaller jackpots: taken in a lump sum and after taxes it meant as near as I could figure, about \$75,000,000, which meant, given present interest rates and yearly taxes, a net income probably of \$1,500,000 or so per annum.

I noticed that I still had half a slice of toast left and hadn't finished my coffee. Ate the toast, drained the coffee, took the plate and the cup to the dishwasher. My watch said it was time for my post-breakfast wash, then off to work. But that was ridiculous. I never called in sick when I was well, but I didn't see how I could go about my job, act normally, respond to requests, answer questions, have conversations. Like the death of someone close to you, this was an event that took over the mind, occluded all other considerations. It didn't occur to me that I no longer had to go to work.

"No," I said on the phone to the City Clerk's secretary, "nothing major I'm just feeling very odd. I'm sure I'll be all right tomorrow."

"Now don't you push yourself to come in if you're not feeling well. You'll only make yourself worse."

“I won’t.”

“You take care of yourself, Saul.”

“Thanks, Audrey. I will.”

While I brushed my teeth and shaved, I considered my next step. Lottery Headquarters was a dozen miles outside the city, I could hop in my car and be there in half an hour depending on traffic. Yet I hesitated. I didn’t want to rush into this. I needed to accustom myself to the idea first. I put the teapot on to boil and ground beans for another coffee, the second of many I had in the next nine hours, hoping to clear my mind.

The rest of the day went like this.

Intermittently I thought what it would mean to have seventy-five million dollars. I could buy, not a small house, but a very large house. I could buy a house in the city and one on a lake in New Hampshire, or on the ocean somewhere. I could have a zippy little economical car for the city and an armored safety car for the highway. Heck, I could have a driver, and for that matter a cook and a housekeeper. I could buy even original art, nothing world renowned, of course, given that famous paintings were selling for more than I would end up with, but I knew a small Rembrandt etching could be obtained for \$25,000. I could give money to my university, to the MFA, the BSO, a chunk to the organization that created books for the blind, another chunk to the Young Artist’s Foundation.

Then later I planned my world's great museum tour, the Prado, the Louvre, the Rijksmuseum, the Hermitage, all the American museums. And sometime after that I thought, well what about a world's great orchestra tour. Vienna, London, Budapest, Amsterdam again, even Japan, the Tokyo Symphony. That would take some real planning considering seasons of performance and city overlap with the great museums tour, or should I keep them completely separate?

At various times I shook awake from my fantasies and thought that I should tell someone. Margaret knew I played the lottery, had been there mornings when I bought a ticket, but she deemed it so unlike me, because the odds were so impossible, that she'd probably forgotten. She herself would never play the lottery, not that she was an anti-gambling prude, but odds aside, she preferred the skill involved in her monthly poker games with colleagues from the University student housing office where she worked. I knew she would be astounded to hear my news, but would be restrained. "Well," she'd say, "that is something, Saul. Congratulations. I'm very happy for you." But not much more, because she wouldn't want me to think she was interested in or expected personal benefit from the money.

Yet I didn't call her, or Charley Cohen, my librarian friend, or Sam Randall at his bookstore, or my cousin Jocelyn, with whom I'd grown up and to whom I spoke on the phone a couple of times a week.

At one point I found myself leaning back against the stainless steel sink staring across the kitchen at the pink and white slip innocuously bright on the dull surface of the oak table. Between me and it there was a cube of silence so formal it was unnerving. I left the kitchen, went into the living room and scanned my CDs. Scarlatti appeared, Horowitz performing. Half a dozen of the sonatas broke the spell; impossible to be solemn with Scarlatti's jaunty piano (or harpsichord) rippling through a sparsely furnished four-room apartment.

Once the CD finished, and while I was making my roast beef sandwich for lunch (Boston lettuce, tomatoes, Russian dressing, chips, a dill pickle), the phone rang, and for a moment I experienced the illusion that someone was calling about the win. I didn't answer and the ringing stopped before the machine kicked in—probably a robo-call disconnect. I turned off the answering machine, ignored three or four other calls as well.

Through all this, time had a peculiar feel to it, like a heavy weather front slowly pushing the day toward the hour when Lottery Headquarters would close. I kept thinking I should sign the slip and go; yet I continued to delay, until finally it was so late that if I didn't leave immediately, I'd have to put my claim over till the next day. Well, I thought, it wouldn't hurt to have a day of peace before I made myself known. And then I thought, what would Pamela,

my ex, now living in one of the northern M states, think when she heard about it? After so many years would she be chagrined that she'd left me?

It was those last two thoughts that caused the fatal shift in my appreciation of the circumstances.

If some local friend didn't just e-mail her, my ex would find out because this was/would be news: in the local paper, Boston papers, papers across the state, papers in other parts of the country since this "game" involved many states, and those multiplicitous on-line sources. And certainly on TV. And the Lottery advertised its winners. Didn't it say on their web-site that winners agreed to the use of their image and to let themselves be publicized?

And though 174 million wasn't close to the largest jackpot ever, it was large enough to be worth a flurry of cheery stories of the type "An Assistant City Clerk in the city of Carbury, Massachusetts is a rich man today. Saul Schecter has gone from being a \$58,000 a year city worker to being a multi millionaire." And I might have to end up on TV myself, in person.

Then what? Now I could see it. Hucksters of every breed and calling, previously unheard of distant relatives expecting hand-outs, people I hardly knew or didn't know suggesting investment in their businesses, sudden acquisition of new friends, and/or change in the attitudes of present ones. Notoriety, fame: however you defined being known for winning a huge number of dollars.

For that matter, how did you deal with 75 million? All well and good to say at such and such a percent it yielded so much a year, but how did you make it do that? How did you arrange not to be swindled? How much time and attention would be required to shepherd your 75 million dollars? And assuming I'd safely stowed away the loot, what would I really do with the resulting million and half a year? Sure, I'd buy things, distribute quantities as planned, and maybe I would be able to travel. But I'd largely be thinking about how to spend the money or give it away. I'd be examining charities, listening to requests, trying to figure out who was honorable and worthy. I could spend my days writing checks. My life, even the pleasures garnered, would be all about the money. I'd be its captive.

Now I understood what had been lurking all along, why I hadn't signed the slip or told anyone, never mind rushed out to cash in. One might accuse me of cowardice or lack of imagination, but when the words, "So get rid of it," popped into my mind, I nodded a few times the way one does when one has an unexpected good idea.

Then I thought, No, what are you thinking. You can't just get rid of 174 million dollars. You can't even just get rid of the 75 million it would reduce to. That's monstrous.

Followed by the thought that this was evidence of how I was already a captive of the money.

Well then, I decided, I'd just have to think it through. I imagined laying out one of those two-column for and against charts, giving values to the pluses and minuses, subtracting the final totals one from the other, going with the mathematically determined course.

Without exaggerating I can say that a great weariness came over me at the tediousness of this approach. Never mind all that, I heard myself think, just get rid of it. Burn the damn thing up.

That unsought thought caught me. If I had a check made out for 75 million, pay to Saul Schechter in the amount of, would I have thought of burning it? Or suppose I had \$75,000,000 in hundreds (quick calculation; remove two zeros), seven hundred and fifty thousand 100 dollar bills, could I consider burning them? Probably not, considering the city's ordinances against open burning of trash. I laughed (perhaps a bit forced) at myself. But a 3x3, pink and white slip of paper with six numbers on it?

I didn't want it. I didn't want what it represented. I didn't want to be the steward of all that money. I didn't want the notoriety that would go with it, or the personal and impersonal relations it would generate. Cars and houses and housekeepers, world tours and ostentatious donations would cost much more than I could afford. Even a small, original Rembrandt sketch. This was not what I bargained for when I started playing the lottery. I was a modest man, living an interesting, quiet life, and this money would change

everything. But, Saul, you could do so much good with it. True, but among the various things I'd learned about the lottery since I'd been playing—for instance that the point of sale received .0025% of the cost of every ticket—was that unclaimed winnings reverted back to the states from which the money had come and by law had to become part of their education funding—more than adequate good as far as I was concerned.

At first I couldn't remember where I had matches. My stove is electric, I hadn't smoked for twenty years, I didn't barbecue, and I wasn't a candle romantic. I asked myself why I needed to incinerate the ticket when I could flush it, shred it, even chew it up and swallow the little spitball. Yet reducing it to ashes seemed the most appropriate way to destroy the evidence, more definitive and serious than a flush or a chew. So I was relieved to finally remember the emergency candles with the box of safety matches stored deep in a cabinet for blackouts, last used three years before.

In an emergency one acts quickly or not at all. Best to remain calm and move with clear purpose. Cabinet. Red and blue box of matches. Small porcelain bowl in stainless steel sink. Pink and white slip between thumb and forefinger. Strike match, hold flame to corner of slip, drop flaming slip into bowl. Shake out match. Push at blackened slip with meat fork to get last corner.

There wasn't enough smoke to set off the hard-wired alarms, and hardly enough ash to know anything had burned. I ran a little water anyway to cool the residue, ending up with a small smear of black goo on the white porcelain. I felt unexpectedly much like when my divorce became final, as if I'd lived intense and difficult years with the ticket in that nine hour period; that one part of my life was over, there was no point in regret and it was time to move on.

2.

And I would have moved on, just proceeded with my familiar, only normally troubled, generally pleasant life, and for the most part would not have thought about the possibilities I'd discarded. I would have encountered and gotten over my unavoidable moments of regret: seeing a richly decorated, multi-hued Queen Anne for sale at two million or so and thinking, I could have bought that; reading about someone chartering a jet to Italy for the Venice Biennale, and saying, I could have done that; or my mind in its casual wandering coming across the fact that I'd burned up 174 million dollars and stopping to contemplate this fact with wonder and doubt; the occasional panic dreams in which I still had the ticket and needed to cash it before the lottery office closed; the strikingly ambiguous dream where I was in the de La Tour painting *The Cheat With the Ace of Diamonds* (1635); I didn't

know whether I was the overdressed, plump and foolish young man about to be bilked, or the cheater with his hand behind his back about to produce an illicit ace which I knew was actually the lottery ticket. They would have been isolated reminders which my daily occupations and preoccupations would have carried me past.

However, I hadn't reckoned with the world at large, or, to be more accurate, I'd made the mistake of thinking that once I'd destroyed the ticket this was my own business. Knowing that a prize that size would be news, in my naiveté, I hadn't considered that failure to claim the prize would also be news—much longer running, ongoing, repeatedly reported and rehashed news.

So after the first article on the lower right hand side of the morning paper (*174 Million Dollar Ticket Sold at Calvin's Convenient in Carbury*), a mention during the news portion of the morning concert on the classical station, and the evening TV report with pictures, not of Calvin's, but of random fingers pushing lottery machine buttons and expelling tickets; and after the story repeated for one more full news cycle with the same words and images, there was a period of silence followed by, "The winner of the 174 million dollar jackpot hasn't come forth yet." Which immediately made me think of the expectation that the driver of a hit and run would or should be presenting himself for punishment.

They just would not leave it alone. It was a news itch oh so pleasurable to scratch. Every time a smaller jackpot was won, inevitably they'd have to mention the large one unclaimed. If, on the other hand, the jackpot accumulated, began to approach the 174 million mark, they'd have to compare it to the one still outstanding. If there was a slow news day, with nothing to agitate the citizenry, they'd bring up the lump sum sitting untouched. Not to mention the riotous week in which some poor boob tried to claim the prize with a clumsily altered ticket that failed to take into account the bar code at the bottom. That news report ended, "So the question remains. Who is the mystery winner of the 174 millions dollars and why hasn't he or she claimed the jackpot?" And naturally every time it made the news, the story would be reprised in my department and among my friends.

How odd, how dislocating, to hear the news reader say "mystery winner," and know she was speaking of me. And how self-conscious I was at work or among friends when the subject was ventilated. As if they were talking about me behind my back in front of my face. It was the structure of paranoia, without the fear or the illusion. At times I felt persecuted. When a colleague wanted to discuss it with me, I would think that not only would the subject never go away, but now I was being forced to talk about it like some hapless malefactor being slyly led to confess his guilt.

Even Margaret, the most minimally mercenary individual and the least influenced by popular culture and ideas, wondered about the “mystery winner,” and for an impulsive moment I was tempted to confess. Yet I felt that once the words were spoken, they would take on a life their own, spread out of control on invisible waves through the ether, arriving willy-nilly at interested ears across the map. I must admit, I was also afraid of how she would react. Faced with another person’s judgment, for the first time it struck me that there might not be universal approval of what I’d done, that it might be best not to be known as the man who’d burned up a lottery ticket worth 174 million dollars.

And all along there was Calvin.

Shorter even than me, roundly overweight as if he ate too much of his own snack food, balding, he stumped around his long and narrow store like a man with a wooden leg, always in green work pants and a short sleeved shirt that showed his stubby arms, muscular from years of hefting cartons and flats of veggies and soda. He was chatty and personable (“Kids are growing up, Joanne. I remember when they were just babies, and now look at them. Another few years and they’ll be voting.”); opinionated (“Uh Uh. What the Sox really need is another reliever. They can get along fine with their lineup.”); and sometimes gruff (“No. No bananas today. Period.”), probably from overwork since he rarely had a stand-in—usually one of two younger

men, nephews or cousins—never his wife, whose only presence behind the counter was a photo of her, looking rather stern with four children, in a static pose reminiscent of the days when sitters had to stay still for minutes while the camera recorded their image.

Calvin called many of his neighborhood customers by given name, though I wasn't among those so favored; I'm sure that to him I was beyond anonymous, just one of those faces that came and went without calling up a thought beyond association with a semi-weekly lottery ticket and a six pack of Harp.

Certainly when I woke up the morning after destroying the ticket, when memory returned, the first thing I thought of was not Calvin. A sickening suffusion of remorse forced my head back on the pillow, eyes wide open to the quadrangle of light projected onto the ceiling past the window shade. My god, I thought. What have I done?

Saved yourself a lifetime of aggravation, I rushed to answer myself.

Kept yourself to yourself, I said as I swung my feet onto the floor, toes creeping around for my slippers.

Besides, I added as the tide of regret did not hasten to recede, there's absolutely nothing you can do about it now.

That flat fact should have been the beginning of adjustment, which at least would have been aided by avoiding Calvin's: buy my lager elsewhere,

and my unexpectedly needed, overpriced English muffins, box of sugar. But when I saw the store's name in the paper, I was overcome by a compulsion to find out what was going on there. This was followed by a sudden irrational fear that if I stayed away on a normal day, or for an undue length of time—in short if I didn't act normally—it would seem suspicious, mark me as the winner.

Calvin was joyous. In his rotundity he was like a little tethered blimp half floating up over his counter, and behind him, black magic marked on white cardboard “WE SOLD THE TICKET WORTH \$174,000,000!!!”

“We get the official sign in a few days,” he was saying to a guy I didn't know. “And I get \$50,000.”

Seeing me, he said, “See that? I sold the winning ticket right here,” tapping the lottery machine. He seemed prouder at having sold the ticket than pleased at getting fifty thousand dollars.

“Congratulations,” I said. Now that I was in the store, I realized I had to buy something. I looked around for an object both useful and carryable to work, while Calvin said to the other guy, “I really want to know which one of my customers won it. I want to shake his hand. It's not you is it, Claude?”

“Christ, no, Calvin. Believe me, you'd know if it was me.”

I grabbed a copy of the *Carbury Express* from the previous week. Put three quarters on the counter and turned to leave.

“Hey,” said Calvin, “Don’t forget your ticket for the next drawing.”

Irony can be extremely annoying. “Oh, right.” Against my will I paid my dollar for a Quick-pick I didn’t want and hoped wouldn’t win.

“Good luck,” Calvin said mechanically as he always did, then, “Hey, Phyllis,” to one of my neighbors entering. “See that?”

His happiness peaked with the arrival of the two enormous and blatant official signs from the lottery, one for the front window, one that replaced the handmade announcement. Part of his pleasure came from Calvin’s Convenient now being seen as a lucky store, thus increasing the sale of tickets, coupled with a simultaneous augmentation of alcohol sales. A period of happy prosperity for Calvin.

But as the weeks went by and the winnings weren’t claimed, Calvin began to act as if this was a personal insult, and his pleasure in the win became tainted. At first he was simply puzzled. “I don’t understand,” he’d say to one of my neighbors. “What’s the hold-up?”

“Well, people don’t always rush to cash in,” the neighbor might reply. “Especially with that much money,” and if financially knowledgeable, might add, “They consult advisors; plan investments; maybe change a will; set up some kind of a trust. Get everything in place before they have the money in hand.”

“I suppose so,” in the tone of one accepting something he wouldn’t have thought of and didn’t think much of.

Then. “It’s been two months already. I don’t get it. What’s he waiting for?” ringing up a small sale.

“Maybe he’s traveling,” the customer might say, handing him a ten. “He could be abroad somewhere and doesn’t even know he’s won yet. Give me one of those Bruins scratch tickets, why don’t you. And a Quick-Pick for Friday.”

“How long can somebody travel?”

“Maybe it’s for work or something.”

“Well he better come home soon, that’s all I can say,” stumping along behind the counter to the rack of scratch tickets.

This was Calvin in transition from puzzlement to annoyance on his way to accusatory anger. I worried sometimes that my lack of contribution might seem suspicious, even though I remained anonymous, but sometimes I was the only one in the store, and forced to speak. “This is crazy,” he’d say. “You see how long it’s been? What’s this guy’s problem? Can you tell me that?”

“Well,” I’d say, trying to present myself as objective and uninvolved and feeling like one of those bank robbers behind a blank balaclava hiding who knows what demented expressions and nervous tics. “I bet some guy is

waiting for his divorce to become final and his wife to remarry. It happens all the time.”

“Well, I’m going to be pretty P.O.’ed if those wedding bells don’t ring pretty soon, let me tell you that.”

His complaints never stopped. Sometimes I detested him, wished I could tell him the truth just to see the look on his face. He was like a bad FM classical station that played the same old warhorses in endless rotation. “Calvin,” a neighbor said one morning, “Why do you care? You got your fifty thousand dollars.”

“That’s got nothing to do with it,” he said indignantly, looking over his chunky shoulder at the sign.

It was easy to see that his pride in being responsible for the giant win was offended by the failure of consummation. Someone could have pointed out that he’d merely pushed a button on a computer, and if he’d pushed it ten seconds earlier or ten seconds later the randomizing system would have caused another store to sell that ticket, but no-one had the heart to deflate him. Instead they did everything they could to come up with satisfying explanations.

“Maybe it’s a tax issue.”

“Maybe it’s some criminal and he can’t show himself till a statute of limitations runs out.”

“Maybe it’s someone from out of state, and they were just passing through or visiting a relative.” (Not the most encouraging supposition.)

“Maybe he’s just waiting till the fuss dies down and he can collect, like, under the radar.”

“The damned fool! Doesn’t he know he’s only got a year to collect it?”

“Maybe not.”

“That’s crazy! How could anyone play the lottery and not know the rules. How stupid can you be?”

This was Calvin near the end of his rope about the time I noticed that only a month remained until the determinant year expired, then three weeks, two, one.

My anticipation was similar to that experienced at the end of a long drive when it’s not excitement you feel, but relief at the sight of familiar landmarks, know you’re within an hour of home. No one any longer would be waiting to see who cashed in, or wondering where the winning ticket was or why it was being withheld.

Naturally that final day there were news stories everywhere. “One year will elapse tonight when Lottery Headquarters closes at 5:00 P.M...” Much the same in the paper, on radio and TV, while at work no one could talk about anything else. In those awful man-on-the-street interviews, and at the City Hall desks, beyond the expected curiosity, there was evident tension, as

if each person individually was about to finally obtain, or lose, all that money. I confess that along with my anxiousness to get through this final cloudburst of chatter, at times that day I felt bizarrely powerful being the only person in the world who knew or could know what was going to happen.

When I got to my apartment at 5:15, I locked the door behind me with a sense of relief approaching collapse. It was over. I could count on news reports tomorrow and after that, nothing, no more references, no more discussion. I'd finally be able to move on.

I celebrated with a bottle of Harp at dinner and another as I listened to Beethoven's joyous Seventh (Carlos Kleiber, Vienna Symphony), like a man who's successfully completed a long and difficult journey. That night I didn't dream.

Of course there was a story in the paper, Metro section, second page, the size of an inserted advertisement; and a brief third story on the radio after the weather and a twelve-car pile-up on I-95. It was rather as if they had been forced to report something they'd have preferred not to mention.

A similar sense of subdued disappointment pervaded the City Clerk's office as though everyone had been cheated of a day at the circus. "What a waste," seemed the most frequent valuation of the anticlimax, and more than once I had to point out how rather than being wasted, the money went back to states for educational use.

The one really bitter and condemnatory individual was Calvin. I bypassed the store on the way to work, taking a detour that added a few minutes to my walk, because I believed that the completion of the cycle freed me from the need to show myself there: never going to Calvin's again would enclose the convenience store, the ticket, the lottery, the year, all the annoyances and regrets in one disposable packet of past time.

Yet on the way home I went into the store anyway. "I've got to replenish my supply of Harp," I rationalized. But the truth was I didn't have the strength of character to resist finding out Calvin's reaction.

He was behind the counter, and there were five or six neighborhood people the length of the store, the usual pick-up-something-small-on-the-way-home-from-work crowd. I exchanged hellos with a couple of them, went to the cooler where the Harp was stored. Pulling at the cold handle, I heard one customer say, "What happened to your signs, Calvin?"

I half-turned, frosted air escaping around me, and saw that, in fact, the "We sold the ticket..." declaration was gone.

Calvin, pausing with his fingers on the register, shook his head. "The stupid S.O.B.—pardon my French, Lenore," to the only woman in the store, who shrugged her forgiveness. "The stupid S.O.B never claimed the money. It's criminal, that's what it is, and I don't want anything to do with it."

“I can understand that,” said the customer accepting his change and watching Calvin bag a quart of milk and a box of low-grade chocolate chip cookies. “All that money. It’s a real waste.”

“Actually,” I felt compelled to say, from my position by the cooler, “It’s not really a waste,” and explained what happened to the money now and how it had to be used. Then added, “It’s not as if someone took 174 million one dollars bills and just burned them up.”

“That’s not the point!” said Calvin with the kind of contempt meant to slap somebody down who’d spoken out of turn.

“Did you ever consider,” said a guy whose name I knew was Paul or Will, setting a bottle of pinkish wine on the counter, “that the winner might have died without even knowing he’d won?”

“And the ticket was never found?” said the first.

“Happens.”

“As far as I’m concerned,” said Calvin, “that would be the only good excuse for not claiming the jackpot. I’d just like to get my hands on the guy if I could ever find out who it was.”

“We could put him in the stocks on Carbury Common,” joked the wine buyer, “like they did in Colonial times.”

“The stocks?” said Calvin.

“You know. The guy is locked up between a couple of boards with his head and his hands sticking out.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“Everybody could throw tomatoes at him,” said the first guy.

“Yeah, Calvin,” said the wine buyer, “You could even sell them, make a bundle to go with your fifty grand.”

This brought a grim smile from Calvin. “Let me tell you, I’d be happy to give them away.”

“Some other soft fruit would do just as well,” said the woman, Lenore. “Squishy plums or rotten peaches.”

I took my six-pack from the cooler, and controlled the door so that it closed with a small, belatedly inconspicuous shush. Once again I’d been naïve. All along I’d thought it was about the money. But more than that, it was about the popular wish for the excitement of a gigantic win and the pleasure of an emotional and heartwarming winner who would represent everybody’s dream. And this ostensibly humorous banter made it clear that there was no statute of limitations on what I’d done.

I didn’t like the way Calvin looked at me as I put my purchase on the counter in front of him. Whether it was my unwelcome clarification or failure to join the hostile chorus or just my demeanor, I saw that he now disapproved of me—or was that suspicion I saw?

I paid for my beer bland-faced. “I don’t need a bag,” I said, taking the change and shoving it in the wrong pocket. I hefted the six-pack and walked out of the store as slowly as anyone with nothing to hide and no fear of discovery, wondering if it might not be best now to move to another neighborhood.

Norman Waksler's fiction has appeared in a number of publications, most recently *Madison Review*, *Chaffin Journal*, *Edgar*, *Epicenter*, *The Tidal Basin Review*, and *Sunsets and Silencers*. His most recent story collection, *Signs of Life* is published by the Black Lawrence Press. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For a nice picture of his Cairn Terrier, as well as further information, see his website, Normanwakslerfiction.com.