

Movies, Lies, and Lottery Tickets

By Jerry Peterson

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“Dante, you ought to get ta hell outta here.”

Jim Daws – Dante to all who worked at the S&W Grill – glanced over his shoulder as he shoved a stack of fresh-wiped plates onto a shelf. “Someday, Mac.”

Sorrel MacDonald pulled hard on a pipe wrench – Sorrel, the S of the S&W and a big man in a Packers cap pushed onto the back of his head. “You paid your time in purgatory, friend, three years,” he said. “Time for you to go.”

Dante, a slim kid in his mid-twenties, picked up a soup bowl. A hairline crack caught his attention. No one else would have noticed, but he examined the crack. The dishes he washed and dried, like this one, had a shine on them that let customers see their reflections if they cared to look. “Mac?”

“Yeah?” MacDonald asked as he felt around the drain fitting under the new machine.

“Got a crack in this one.”

“In what one?”

Dante held the bowl down for his boss to see.

“Yup,” MacDonald said. “You know the health department rules. Throw it out.”

But the kid held onto the bowl, as if it were an old friend. “Maybe we could use it for something else, put flowers in it maybe.”

“Or those damn Power Ball tickets you keep talking us into buying.”

“Not a bad idea.” Dante rummaged in the back of a silverware drawer where he kept the stash, two hundred eighty tickets. Granted, they were dead except for the five for this week that he had rubberbanded together so he could find them when the state posted the winning numbers, but the dead ones, he never threw them away. If he put them all in the bowl . . . seeds for their garden of dreams he said each week as he collected a buck a piece from the other four employees, then added his own. Dante jiggered the number combinations they would buy – birth dates, first two numbers off driver’s licenses, last two numbers off the dollar bills, the phase of the moon plus one-two-three-four-five, somewhere there had to be a system. Somebody always won. Maybe not on the first week, but always. Eventually. That was the state’s rule. You could put it in the bank.

The tickets did look something like sprouts when Dante plumped them up on end. And the bowl, he placed that on the shelf over the flour bin.

“Mac?” he asked, looking back to where MacDonald was wriggling out from beneath the steel counter that hid the plumbing needed to make the new dishwashing machine work. “That going to do them as good as I do?”

“No, but they’ll be sterilized and hot-air dried. Health department’s been stripping our hides because we’ve let you hand-wash and dry ’em. They’re afraid of germs.” MacDonald rubbed the back of his neck, rotated his head as he did, and his vertebrae snapped like so many popcorn seeds popping. “Kid, why don’t you move on, do something worthwhile with your life? You got a brain that’s better than anyone’s here. I can get a rummy to fed this machine.”

“Like the rummies you used to get to wash the dishes?”

“Hey, I admit it. Nobody’s ever been better than you, kid, and the dishes and forks never cleaner. Why the hell aren’t you in college?”

“When we win the Power Ball and all retire to Virginia Beach, I’ll tell you.”

MacDonald laughed a deep baritone that vibrated everything that was loose in the kitchen, and he ruffled Dante’s hair as a loving uncle might a favorite nephew’s. “At least get the hell out of here for the night. I want to go home.”

“Aren’t you going to test her?” Dante asked. He glanced at the stainless-steel box that housed the engineered monster intent on making him unemployed.

“Naw. We’ll fire it up in the morning, when we’ve got the breakfast dishes to wash.”

Three years. Dante hadn’t kept track of the time until now. Three years, he thought as he shuffled up the stairs to the apartment above the S&W. MacDonald let him have the place for cleaning it up and painting. It wasn’t much, just three rooms, one a kitchen that had a hotplate instead of a stove. The refrigerator was one of those little boxes that college students get – like he had at one time – got it at the Secondhand Rose down the street. But it was enough, the dishes and silverware, and pans and mixing bowls, all extras from downstairs.

He scrounged the furniture, most of it castoffs people had placed on the curb for the trashman. The futon, though, that he had bought new with his own money, and the sheets and blankets and his one pillow. Reasonable? No, but the idea of sleeping on someone else’s bed made his skin crawl.

Supper this evening was a Tex-Mex chili he had allowed to simmer all day, so the favors would be at their richest and the peppers their hottest. Dante had tried to talk MacDonald into putting it on the menu, had cooked up a pot’s worth in the S&W’s kitchen, had him sample it. MacDonald choked. When he regained his breath and some semblance of a voice, he swore. His tears flowed for five minutes.

What Dante couldn’t eat, he put in a Tupperware bowl, and put that in the box refrigerator. He washed and put away his dishes and wiped down his cardtable kitchentable. The light on the Avalon’s marquee across the street flipped on. The Avalon, a rococo movie house long before even MacDonald was a thought in his parents’ minds, became disheveled and dowdy after the mall had been built on the edge of town and a three-plex, the three-plex replaced some years later by a six-plex and, last year, by a ten-plex. To survive, the man who owned Avalon showed second-run movies, then third, now anything he could get cheap enough so the movie house and he could live on buck admissions.

That Dante could afford. An inexpensive pleasure. An escape. And since the S&W wasn’t open for supper, he had his evenings free . . . and how many times could he read the quarto of Shakespeare’s plays? Downstairs, they had gone to calling him Will. To that he said no, call me Dante. I much prefer *The Inferno*.

He could recite most of it from memory.

Dante wandered to the front window. He looked out. “Oh my God . . .”

There in letters a foot tall read this night’s film offering, *Before Sunrise*.

He grabbed his jacket and clattered down the stairs, ran across the street almost devoid of cars and shoved his dollar bill through the opening in the box-office window. The Avalon had quit issuing tickets long ago. Whoever was in the box office just nodded as he or she put the buck in

the cash box and thumbed toward the door.

Dante went on in. He bought a bag of reheated popcorn and a box of jujubes, big spender that he was, and went through the curtain and down to his favorite seat – third row center.

The memories flooded when the music swelled under the opening scene – a train somewhere in Austria . . . Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy meet. They go to the buffet car, have some coffee and talk. “Why don’t we get off at Vienna, spend the night together before I have to catch a plane home to America?” Hawke says.

And they do. They wander the city’s streets talking about the kinds of things real people talk about – so sweet, so gentle. There is an attraction, yes, and a first kiss on the same Ferris wheel that, decades before, was used in another movie, *The Third Man*.

Dante had caught the train out of Charlottesville after he first saw the movie, to see if he might duplicate it, to see if he, too, might meet someone . . . and he did. And she asked him to come with her to Atlanta, just for a day, maybe two . . . and he did, in full knowledge that he was cutting classes at law school.

You missed a test, one of his professors said when he returned. I was sick, Dante said, too embarrassed to say he had gone to Atlanta with a young woman on a lark and love. But he told his roommate, and the word got around, and two weeks later the dean called him in, told him that he had lied to his professors in clear violation of the school’s canon of ethics. And the dean killed his scholarship, banned him from the campus.

All that and yet Dante still loved the movie, and the girl. What had become of her?

What had become of him?

He couldn’t go home and face his father, a lawyer and judge, a distinguished alumnus of the University of Virginia, the college that Thomas Jefferson had started. So he ran, and he lost himself. Dante couldn’t remember in what. Meth? Angel dust? And one morning he found himself slumped in the back doorway of the S&W, only he didn’t know what it was or in what city he was, nor did he know the towering giant who opened the door.

Dante became MacDonald’s project. MacDonald had asked almost no questions and that was comforting for the kid. Months to clean up and shape up, and now why would he ever want to leave for here he had everything one could want – a place to work, though his job had changed and he would now feed dirty dishes into a machine. He had an apartment, a movie palace.

How long had the lights been up? When had they come up? He only become aware when the ticketseller-projectionist-janitor nudged him with a broom handle. “You gotta go home now. I gotta clean up.”

Dante pushed himself up. He worked his way out to the aisle.

“You didn’t spill no popcorn or stick any gum under the seat, didja?”

“No. I never do.”

“Like the movie?”

A smile lifted the kid’s face.

“Well, you tell your friends then, all four of ’em, they oughta come see the picture. G’night now.”

* * *

Morning came early. Must have because Dante woke to the clatter of pans in the kitchen below and someone pounding on the ceiling with a mop handle.

“Get it down here, Dante! We got dishes.”

Oh damn. MacDonald.

Dante squinted at the Timex on the floor beside his futon. Seven-ten. Hadn't I set the alarm?

He pulled on his jeans and a T-shirt, stuffed his sockless feet into his sneakers and pulled foot for the door and the stairs beyond. When he slip-slid into the kitchen, Arnie, his apron tied up under his arms and his ever-present Cubs cap backwards on his head, was sweating over the grill, cracking open eggs for an order. “Git to the dishwasher, boy. We're backed up here.”

Gladys, the more buxom of MacDonald's two waitresses, bustled in with a tray of dirty dishes above her shoulder. “Here ya go, sweetie,” she said as she slung them down next to the two other trays stacked with remnants of the early breakfast trade. “How soon can we get the clean ones? We're getting desperate.”

Dante tipped the first plate up over the garbage disposal. With his free hand, he brought down a shower head and sprayed off half an uneaten pancake and a chunk of jellied biscuit. “Five minutes if this thing works like the manual says it should.” He put the plate in the washer rack and took up another.

“If we have to break out the styrofoams, you know how mad Mac's gonna be.” Gladys tickled Dante's ear, then dashed when Arnie bellowed order up.

Rinse and stack, rinse and stack. The first rack loaded, Dante pushed it through the rubber flaps and into the steel cabinet. “Here goes nothing,” he said and slammed his hand down on the red START button.

Water hissed.

Steam billowed out.

Dante mopped his arm across his forehead as he went back to rinsing, this time cups and glasses. The manual said the machine was automatic, that there was nothing to do but wait – and load more racks – while the genie inside spray washed and spray rinsed and spray sterilized, then dried the load with its jet of hot breath and ultimately expelled the rack of dishes out the other side.

MacDonald peered through the pass-through. “How's it going, kid?”

“So far, like the manual says.”

“Good. Holler if anything goes wrong.”

Arnie shoved a plate with a short stack, eggs over, and hash with gravy in front of MacDonald. “Order for Holly.”

MacDonald took the plate and twisted away. “Holly!”

And so it went. Seven-forty, eight, eight-thirty, nine. At nine twenty-three, Dante stacked the last of the machine-clean dishes, ready for the noontime rush. He went to the sink and splashed his face with cold water, then ambled into the dining area.

“Man, that kitchen was hot with Arnie's grill. Now with the new dishwashing machine in there, it's a steam bath,” he said to MacDonald, Arnie, Gladys and Holly, all seated around a Formica table, each either sucking up coffee or chewing on a cinnamon roll.

“How about I get an exhaust fan in there, pull some of that heat out?” MacDonald asked.

He slapped an empty chair. "Sit and Holly'll getcha an iced tea."

Dante did – gingerly, taking care not to lean back out of fear he would stick forever to the seat back.

MacDonald winked at his project-turned-good. "Arnie and Gladys want to know if you checked the numbers last night."

"The Power Ball? I forgot. I went to the movie."

"Well?" Arnie asked. His normal frown whisked into a scowl.

Dante pushed his chair back. He met Holly on his way to the kitchen and relieved her of the ice tea, mouthing "I love you" as he went on through the door, back into the furnace, to the flour bin. There he took down his stash. He poked and prodded through the passel of dead tickets, searching for the five he had rubberbanded.

"Dante?"

Sweat beads bumped out on his forehead. Dante dashed back into the diner, bowl in hand, flicking dead tickets to one side and the other as he ran. "The Power Ball tickets are gone! Somebody took them. Arnie?"

The short-order cook threw up his hands.

"Gladys?"

"Forget it. I'm like Mac. The odds of winning, we're just shippin' our money to the tax guys."

"Then why do you keep giving me a dollar for tickets?"

She sucked on a Virginia Slim, blew the smoke out the side of her mouth. "Because you're do damn cute. You remind me of my grandkid."

Dante turned on the one who had gotten him the iced tea, Holly, not much older than he, every customer's favorite, judging by the size of her tips.

"No. No way," she said. "I'd have to tell Father Mike at confession."

"Then who took them?"

MacDonald made a show of opening the morning newspaper to the page on which were printed the winning Power Ball numbers. He patted them, then took from his shirt pocket a pack of tickets bound together with a rubberband. "When you kept them in the drawer, I didn't worry. But when you put them out where any delivery man or health inspector might help himself, well . . . So check 'em, huh?"

Dante ripped the rubberband off. He set the stack of five beneath the winning numbers and read across, one index finger moving under the newspaper's numbers, the other under the ticket's numbers. "Got a match on one number." But he shook his head and stuffed the ticket into the soup bowl.

Again, the index fingers moved beneath the two sets of numbers. "No match . . . No match . . . Two numbers here . . ."

Four tickets gone. Four tickets dead.

Dante pushed the fourth aside for the fifth, and again his index fingers traced their lines. "We got a number . . . a second . . . a third . . ." His eyes flicked between the newspaper and the ticket. ". . . a fourth . . . We got 'em all."

He pounded on the ticket and the newspaper, grinning. He twisted the ticket and the paper to Arnie. "Check 'em. Check 'em!"

The short-order cook hooked the bows of his glasses over his ears. As he read, his lips moved. Arnie looked up, his mouth gaped open. "Sonuvabitch. We're millionaires. Mac, I quit."

Gladys pulled the paper and ticket away, turning them so she could read them. "He's right. Mac, I quit, too. I'm going to Florida where my kids are."

"And I'm going to beauty school," Holly said. She primped at her hair.

Dante put his hand over the ticket. "Can I ask you all a big, big favor?"

MacDonald scratched at his mustache. "Depends."

"Three years ago, I got kicked out of law school. Now the reason's not important. When we get the check, can I borrow it for a couple days?"

Arnie's frown returned. Gladys studied the surface of the coffee in her cup. Holly looked away. Only MacDonald gazed at Dante.

"Why?"

"I want to take Amtrak to Charlottesville. I want to wave that sweet check in the face of the dean who threw me out, then go to Atlanta."

"Atlanta?"

"Yes, see if I can find someone who remembers me."