

Dustin M. Hoffman

Scratch

Morris waits in line at the Extreme Express Way gas station, rubbing one of the last dollars inside his pocket. Rubbing for good luck. He needs it. The pontoon factory where he works, bending aluminum sheets to look like giant bullets, pays on Fridays. But today is Wednesday.

Outside the glass windows of the station, his girlfriend, Allison, slides her credit card at the pump. They've been together four years, since they were nineteen. He still enjoys watching her, like now as she leans to ease the gas hose into her '92 Grand Prix's tank, her bright orange waitress skirt lifting to reveal the milky white of her upper thigh. This is the view her customers get at Cha-Cha's. Her pockets are always full of dollars and coins, but Morris would never ask for that money. He doesn't have a credit card, and when she asked him to pick up some things while she pumped, he didn't tell her he was down to his last two dollars.

He holds a loaf of Wonder Bread and a carton of Michigan farm-raised eggs, which he doesn't have enough cash for. That's not what he wants anyway. He wants to surprise Allison with something nice, like the Hostess cupcakes she loves so much. And he wants a forty of Steel Reserve. He'd sleep better, be armed to return to the factory tomorrow morning to bend more aluminum—endless sheets of shiny metal he must curve, mold, manipulate into cylinders, then start the geometry over again from flat, punch-in to punch-out. Morris decides he needs that forty to flatten himself out again; he needs to surprise Allison with

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something extra and unexpected.

He's one person away from checkout, and he eyes the scratch-off lotto tickets hanging over the cigarettes in long, arcing strands: Dollarama, Giraffe-tastic, The Good Life, Golden Showers, Summer Spectacular. Behind bulletproof security glass, the Amish sales clerk scoots a candy bar and bottled water under the red laser scanner. From frequent stops, Morris knows his name is Zachariah, knows how precisely he wields the scanner, as if he were a machine at the pontoon factory made of turbine and steel. Zachariah's navy-blue Extreme Express Way vest hangs open over a second black vest and lilac shirt. Two vests. Two uniforms. Morris only has to wear the one pontoon factory shirt.

Morris steps up to the security glass, asks, "What's my best bet on the scratch-offs?"

"I'm here to work," Zachariah says, "not to encourage gambling. Let's speed this up."

Morris and Allison have spent many commutes idling behind Zachariah, riding his black horse to work. On those days, Morris wishes Zachariah would just stay home to churn butter and not use electricity. But now his pale knuckles squeeze around the handle of the red laser scanner as if it were a hammer or a sickle or whatever tool the Amish are allowed to use. Zachariah encapsulated in the security glass makes Morris imagine a museum display with a plaque reading, *The modern day Amish hard at work*.

Morris swings the bread onto the counter, places the eggs next to the loaf. "I know what I want. Give me a Giraffe-tastic."

Zachariah shoves a scratch-off through the slot at the bottom of the glass. "And the eggs and bread?"

Outside, Allison has finished pumping. She waits for the receipt. Her orange-painted fingernails rub her lower back in small circles, massaging lumbar. Morris wants to rub that spot for her, work away a nine-hour shift, his calluses against her soft skin. Wearing heels all day is killing her back. He wishes he could surprise her with gel insoles for those treacherous heels.

"Let's hold off on the bread and eggs for now."

"Suit yourself." Zachariah turns to the line of customers. "Next."

The next customer files forward, crowds Morris aside. He nabs a dime from give-a-penny-take-a-penny to scratch off his ticket and reads the instructions: *Scratch to reveal your lucky safari captures*.

Match any animal to one of your three lucky captures, claim bounty shown. Find the giraffe, win three times the amount. He dons his imaginary safari cap the color of sand and takes aim with the dime—his long-barreled rifle that funnels at the end, like they used in the old days to shoot elephants. He captures a cobra, hippo and lion. But nothing matches. They all escaped. A loser. He's even further from being able to afford eggs.

Morris slides in front of the next customer, orders another Giraffe-tastic, and he's scratching again, deep on his safari, aiming into tall rustling grass. And then he's back, staring at himself in security glass with no matches. There goes the bread. He jingles change in his pocket, pulls out forty-nine cents plus the dime. The give-a-penny is full today. It's a generous world that wants Morris to win. He fishes out the change in one scoop. Zachariah glares behind the glass, so Morris *tinks* the extra pennies he doesn't need back into the give-a-penny. Before he has a chance to get his last shot, another customer slides in.

"I'll try my luck," the next customer says in a deep voice. "Give me ten bucks' worth." He's got thick black-framed glasses and a full head of spiky gray hair. He wears a dark blue suit, wrinkled and a size too small over his tall frame. Zachariah is smiling, sneering. He could give the customer in the suit any scratch-off, but of course he gives him the next ten Giraffe-tastics. Morris feels like this is one of those commutes when he and Allison are stuck behind Zachariah and his horse and Morris just wants to lay on the horn, but he has three DUIs and can no longer drive in Michigan.

The man pays in cash, walks out without even scratching, his slacks too tight to the contours of his ass. Morris imagines a shiny new hunting rifle slung over the man's back.

"One more time," Morris says, watching the suit pass by Allison outside. The suit's neck cranes to get a better view of her Cha-Cha's uniform.

Zachariah tears another scratch-off. Morris scratches another hippo, a penguin, a wolf—his lucky captures. He feels good about the penguin. Allison loves penguins. She's in the car now, probably picking at the NASCAR stickers on the dash with her orange fingernails. He imagines her in a camouflage-painted Jeep, waiting with extra ammo. Scratch. No hippos. She's gazing into the dusty rearview, her eyes sparkling like they do with gold flakes in her brown irises that make Morris think of some magical kind of tree, like a baobab or something great like that. Scratch. No wolves. Allison cheers him on with strained, silent telepathy. She tightens her fist, waiting for the last shot to fire from his elephant gun.

Bang! Nothing matches.

* * *

“Where’s the bread and eggs?” Allison asks, rubbing her ankles in the dome light.

Morris settles into the passenger seat of her Grand Prix, his eye on the suit’s Lexus in front of them. He can see the back of the man’s head through the rear window. He’s looking down, long enough to be scratching.

“Baby, I realized, once I got to the front of the line.” Morris watches the suit toss a few tickets out his window. They flutter to the oil-stained concrete. “My cash, I must have left it at home.”

“Jesus, Morris.” She shakes her head. “Grab some money out of my pack then.”

He glances into the shadows of the back seat. There it is, a black fanny pack full of Allison’s dollars.

“No time. Listen, I need you to follow this Lexus in front of us.”

“Why would I do that?”

The brake lights on the Lexus glow red. It could take off any minute and be lost. “That’s an old buddy of mine. Used to be foreman at the pontoon factory.”

“Why didn’t you say hi in the store?”

“I wasn’t sure yet.” He wishes he still had his license. That third DUI ended it all. If he was behind the wheel, he’d be started and in gear. “Now I know for sure. See that, baby.” He touches the shoulder of the jean jacket she’s put on over her Cha-Cha’s tank top and points with his other arm. “That’s old Larry Wallace’s signature. Always adjusting the rearview to look at himself, that pretty son of a bitch.”

They watch the man in the Lexus readjust the rearview.

“I had a long day. Do you really need me to do this?”

Morris thinks about what he needs, how his needs could help him help her. “It won’t take long, babe.”

She sighs, shifts into drive. He really does appreciate her support. Like when he suggested they move to the city. Forty miles from her family’s farm, her blue-ribbon 4-H goats. And even though he took another factory job for the same pay he’d been making before, stuck at nine bucks an hour, never able to jump to those sweet double digits, she didn’t complain.

“It’ll make Larry’s day. Mine, too.”

“I only put in enough gas to make it to work and back the rest of the week.”

“No problem. I’ll flag him down quick.”

The Lexus pulls out. As Allison follows, Morris sees Zachariah’s black horse tied to the telephone pole in the small grass lot of the sta-

tion. The horse has torn up the sod around the pole. It follows a circle of dirt with its head down, pacing, waiting to carry its master back out of the city and into the country.

A mile down Jolly Road, back into the city, Morris's eyes lock on the Lexus, a decent-sized dent in the bumper he hadn't noticed before. A bit of bad luck. The suit rests a bare arm out the window, a faded gold watch tapping softly to the beat of a song lost to Morris in the moaning traffic. They approach their first stop light, and a herd of commuters wedges its cars behind the suit's. Now he will have a chance to scratch more tickets.

Beside Morris, Allison flicks the key chain dangling from the ignition, and it makes a *ching ching*. She looks tired, exhales a low hum through her lips. Morris watches her eyes wander to the gas gauge needle balancing at just over a quarter tank. Allison's exhaustion is another lucky strike for him. Her distraction will give him more time to plan how he'll get the winning scratch-off he deserves.

A semi grinds by in the cross traffic, spewing black exhaust, transmission growling to second gear. Truckers make good money, better than factory workers. If he were a trucker he could buy something better than cupcakes for Allison. Now he's not even sure she likes those. They just always split the pair wrapped in cellophane when he buys them. How much was the maximum winning amount for Giraffe-tastic? Two thousand? Five thousand? He'd buy a dozen pairs of insoles for Allison's tired feet, a crate of cupcakes. They could take a week off work, drive up to the Mackinac Bridge, cross that great expanse of metal-grated road, whirring under their tires, and watch the leaves change color from sickly yellows to fiery oranges and reds. But that bridge always did scare her—way up there, floating over miles of frigid water, Huron and Michigan pounding into one another. And there are a lot of pine trees up north. They don't change color. Always green.

The light changes. The Lexus lurches forward. More tickets sail from the suit's window, twisting and flipping against the inertia of traffic. More losers. Definitely not Morris's winner.

"Which one was Larry Wallace again?" Allison picks at her fake gold hoop earring. "Not sure I remember you talking about him."

She has an amazing memory. Last week, she remembered the birthday three years ago when he'd been broke and gifted her coupons for back rubs and dish-washing duties. She said the hand-drawn coupons decorated with little penguins and goats were her favorite presents ever, but the memory only made Morris feel pathetic. The less he can say about Larry the better. "You know, old Larry Wallace. We used to have lunch together."

“Didn’t his wife leave him?”

She’s thinking of Thomas Handley, an actual man he used to work with. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“Why’d they split anyway?”

“Wife was sleeping around.” Best to stick to the Handley story. Maybe it will ring true to her memory.

“Poor Larry.” She reaches over and puts her hand in his. Her palms are warm.

“Yeah, he caught her in the act even.” Morris starts to feel in control for once, as if fingering the edge of the steering wheel. “Walked into their apartment out of work early on a Friday. Found them right there on the couch. Met at the door with an ass thrusting between his wife’s spread thighs. In his own place, like she didn’t even have the decency to sneak around. Shoving it right in his face.” He squeezes her hand. The RPM needle bounces. “Larry used to have it all. Not anymore.”

“Terrible. Did he ever find out why she did it?”

“Nope. They only talked again with attorneys present, how they’d split the estate, the kids. Can’t really blame him.”

“What a shame.”

Morris shakes his head. The story has her distracted from realizing they’ve already gone five miles out of the way, will have to do at least that on the way back.

“What a shame they didn’t talk. If she would have told him there were problems, probably none of it would’ve happened.” She grips his hand now. His knuckles grow cold against the plastic center console. “Seems couples just give up, cheat, and divorce rather than putting in the work these days. Marriage is a commitment, you know.”

“Sure, baby, commitment.”

Commitment. They’ve always had that. He would marry her if he could, but that takes a lot of money, a dozen top-winning scratch-offs. And what is gained by some ceremony? They’d still be Morris and Allison. It’s not something they need to survive their jobs, this city.

“That wouldn’t happen to us, though.” Allison says. “Right, babe? We know how to work.”

“Work, yeah.”

They approach another stoplight. The city has almost hit twilight, and around them red glows: brake lights and stoplights and a slit of setting sun.

“Oh, here we go.” She switches lanes as the traffic slows, creeps up along his side of the Lexus. “Now you can say hello to poor Larry Wallace.”

His window parallels the man in the Lexus. He rolls down the window. The man looks straight ahead. Manilow’s “Mandy” blares from his

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open window. He thinks he sees a tear bulging in the suit's eye, as if he has actually become Larry Wallace, remembering his broken love. This cannot be the case, because Larry Wallace is not real.

"Hey, buddy," Morris calls. He glances back at Allison, who watches with concern.

The suit looks, waves, then withdraws his hand awkwardly—the gestures of a man too often recognized, who probably often receives compliments on his rousing PowerPoint presentations. He's no one to Morris but a jerk with his lucky scratch-off.

Morris leans out the window, but he can't escape Allison's earshot. "I know all about your problems."

"Do I know you?" The suit looks worried, scared. The wetness in his eyes might break into pitiful tears at any moment.

"It has been a while," he says loudly for Allison's sake. Then quieter he says, "Your back tire's looking flat. Better not press your luck."

"Okay. Sure. Thanks." The suit looks away, retracts his arm inside his car.

The light changes to green. Morris slides back inside. Now he's making things happen, winning it back. This will lead to something.

"What did he say?" Allison asks. "How's he doing?"

"He doesn't look good. I can sense it. Larry always did wear his heart on his sleeve." Morris takes Allison's hand from the steering wheel, touches it to his lips. "We're gonna follow him so we can catch up real quick."

"Grab a beer or something?" Allison's eyes flit between the road and the gas gauge needle. "You told him somewhere close, right?"

"No beer," he says, thinking of how he could be drinking that forty if the suit hadn't hijacked his scratch-off, how he could go to a bar if he hadn't been court-ordered to stay away from places that serve alcohol. "Larry doesn't drink, so it won't take long. And it would be better to stop somewhere quiet where we can talk."

A few more miles down the road in the opposite direction from home, and the Lexus has sped up, swerving through three lanes of traffic, in and out, the suit likely too busy scratching to pay attention to the road. Or maybe he's trying to lose the Grand Prix, its muffler rattling and roaring close behind. Allison stays on him. She's always been a daring driver, but has never received a ticket. A pretty smile and a tight tank

top can go a long way with a cop. Morris has never caught a break. Ticket after ticket, three strikes, no license.

“I think maybe he doesn’t want to stop,” Allison says, punching the cigarette lighter into the dash.

“Well, yeah, I mean, it must be hard to talk about losing so much.” Morris plucks a cigarette from his pack and holds it in front of her lips until they pucker around it. “I wouldn’t even want to think about losing you, baby. Let alone recall it if it happened,” he says. “Let’s hang back a ways. Give him some space.”

She eases off the gas, swings in behind a big black van. She’s an expert tracker and doesn’t even know it. She could drive his safari jeep anytime, as long as he calls the shots, a ghost in the steering column, like now.

“Just don’t lose him.”

Morris predicts the suit will stop to check that tire any minute now. They’ve already passed two other Extreme Express Ways, both with signs proclaiming, WE HAVE AIR. Concealed behind the van, Morris sticks his neck out the window to track the Lexus. The last Extreme Express Way is ahead. So many of them in the city, at least these three on Jolly alone. Their red glowing sign with the checkered flag frozen in a plastic mid-ripple, popping up over and over. They’re unavoidable.

The dash lighter pops and the Lexus pulls into the last Extreme Express Way. Another sign of luck for Morris, the way the lighter popped in sync with his plans.

“Here we go. He’s pulling into the station on the right up here.”

Allison brings the lighter to her face, washing her nose and mouth in hot orange. She pulls into the station behind the Lexus, which has parked by the air machine.

“Keep going a bit,” he says. “Just park up by the side of the store so Larry and I can talk in private.”

“Good luck,” she says, parking beside the building. The gold flecks in her eyes sparkle, hold him there for a second, amid his exit, half in and half out of the car, and he wonders if she knows how much they need him to be lucky. “Hope it goes well with Thomas.”

Morris trips and stumbles out of the car. His heart thumps. She called the suit Thomas instead of Larry, and he’s not sure if her great memory dredged up the name on reflex, or if she knows he’s been lying. His gut drops, like two months ago when he went to pay rent and the leasing agent who always pops her gum like rifle shots told him it had already been covered. Allison never said anything, and he never asked.

As Morris rounds the corner of the storefront, he faces the suit. He didn’t expect to confront him like this, so soon, not part of the plan.

He feels it now, metallic, in the back of his throat, like sucking on copper wire with a live current. His blood is charged, his bones quaking. There's a beast in the brush ahead. He can feel it in his teeth.

Morris puffs out his chest, cracks his knuckles, but the man just smiles, lifts his chin. "We keep running into each other. What are the odds," the suit says. "Thanks for telling me about the tire."

Morris tries to smile back, but can't. He is recognized in a way that makes him feel naked, which is still better than a too-tight suit.

The suit passes through the glass doors of the storefront. Morris wonders if he's calling the cops after being chased for miles down Jolly. Or maybe he just needs change for the air machine. Surely the suit must have looked when he stopped, found his tires fully inflated. Could he be that blind?

The suit saunters toward the counter, and Morris sneaks to the Lexus. The driver's side window is all the way down. A moment of weakness for the suit is a stroke of luck for Morris. He feels it now, metallic, in the back of his throat, like sucking on copper wire with a live current. His blood is charged, his bones quaking. There's a beast in the brush ahead. He can feel it in his teeth. The hunt is back on. He leans through the window, but doesn't see the ticket. Morris rattles through the center console: three pairs of sunglasses, bank deposit receipts, half a protein bar. On the floor, he finds three losing Giraffe-tastics. These are the suit's bad luck, not his. There has to be a winner somewhere.

Framed in the bright white window of the store, he can see the suit standing in line, gazing at the ceiling, deep in thought, nothing in his hands. The trunk of Allison's Grand Prix peeks out from the side of the store. No one notices him. He's on his own finally. Lonely hunters have a greater chance of success.

He dives in the window, immersing his torso so his legs flail behind him. The glove compartment is annoyingly orderly: registration, road map, owner's manual. No ticket. Up to his ankles in the Lexus, he finds nothing but a track suit crumpled on the floor. He checks all seven cup holders. Nothing in any of them. The Grand Prix has one cup holder. Two if you count the passenger's crotch.

He squirms back out, feet on the concrete again. If he had a winner, where would he stash his trophy? Above him. Mounted. In the visor, of course. Things are looking up. He pulls it down and out tumbles a Giraffe-tastic. His ticket. His bounty. There's the giraffe. He knew it. Five-dollar prize, tripled, that's fifteen bucks. Enough for the forty, the eggs, the Wonder Bread, some gas, and even the cupcakes Allison may

or may not like.

When he turns back to the store, Morris sees the suit standing outside talking to Allison. He creeps away from the Lexus. Allison faces him, and the suit is turned toward her, his back to Morris. She smiles at the suit, and for a moment, her eyes slide to Morris. Her smile fades and her hand moves to her tired lumbar. He looks back at her helplessly, trapped, caught. Morris tries to think of another story about Larry Wallace to tell her later, one that will explain it all. But he can only think of the real Thomas Handley story—how Thomas had stood in the doorway watching a stranger make love to his wife, and all he'd done was back away silently.

Allison's eyes move back to the suit, magnetizing his attention. Her hip lulls against the storefront glass, back arching so her chest sticks out.

This is work for her.

Allison and the suit might as well be at Cha-Cha's. Morris feels like he just snuck money from her fanny pack, squeezed her feet into heels.

Morris dashes through the gas pumps, crouches midway to see Allison brush her fingers through her curls, still smiling, a smile she doesn't make at home, one that's rehearsed, effective for tips. The suit smiles back stupidly. In his hand, Morris sees more shiny scratch-offs, dozens of them. He won't even miss the one from his visor. How can Morris compete against this man's fat wallet obscenely protruding through his tight slacks? He wonders if Allison is impressed by the suit. She is faithful, he thinks, he hopes. He wishes he didn't have to wonder.

Morris circles the last gas pump, watches the suit reach toward Allison, whose back is now facing Morris, and touch somewhere near her heart. The suit flashes his bright teeth, looking lower than her eyes, aiming at the low-cut neckline above the logo of her Cha-Cha's tank top: *come to us, where it's twice as fun*. He can't stand to watch any longer. He tries to console himself by whispering, Commitment, that word they say, now bent and strained like a poorly rolled pontoon float.

On the way home, Allison is quiet. She turns up the radio. Morris leans against the window. He wishes he could think of something to say. Sorry? Thank you? How dare you? Think of poor Larry Wallace? None of them work. He'd like to explain the thrill of the hunt, but every time he looks her way, he is frozen by the metallic cardboard that sprouts from the breast pocket of her jean jacket. Giraffe-tastic, unscratched. On the back of the ticket, where losers can write their contact info for another chance to win, there is the suit's phone number, his name scrawled in sloppy black ink. She has her own ticket now. It could have lucky giraffes or not. What matters is the suit's number that will ride

home with them, enter into their trailer, perch on their coffee table, unscratched, suit-side up.

Ahead of them is the Extreme Express Way where they started. Allison shows no signs of slowing, no chance for him to cash in his winning ticket. He'd spend it all on her if he could.

As they pass the station, Morris looks to the telephone pole that sprouts from the patch of green sod, where Zachariah's horse is now gone. Shift change. Commuter rush over. Everyone is home from work, out of the stampede, relaxing, through another day of survival. Zachariah's commute will take longer on horseback, a slow, steady trot home. He hopes they will get stuck behind Zachariah and his black horse, slowing their return home to a crawl. Zachariah will be back tomorrow. Allison will pump more gas.

In the sideview mirror, he watches the black circle of torn-up sod, the horse's perpetual pacing route, getting smaller and smaller.