All Prayers End in Bingo  
by Shawn Jacobson

“I-22,” the caller said over the white noise of the machine that drove the game, and a third of the people sat down. These were people who’d not won all night: who’d waited in taught anticipation for the number that would give them bingo joy. But now, their number got called at the worst of times sealing a day without winning.

Among these was Alice, who’d waited for I-22 to make bingo three games before. She’d waited, ready to explode out of her chair while I-21 was called. With the call of I-23, her neighbor got to shout in her place.

N-38 was called and more people sat. Vince remained standing knowing that this was his last chance to win. It wasn’t that he wanted the prize: football memorabilia for a team he loathed. It was the winning, that was the thing, really, the only thing.

For Vince Lumbardi Packer, winning had always been the only thing. He’d been named after a winner by a dad who’d wanted him to have the success to lift the family from its plodding mediocrity: success that still eluded the family despite the name of the son.

It wasn’t that Vince was bad at things; it was just that he was average, fair, merely satisfactory, an “honorable mention” type of guy in a world that didn’t appreciate honorable mentions. He was good enough to compete, but victory always, always, escaped him.

Failure had curdled them both, causing son to resent father, and father to feel disappointed in son. In time, the son had changed his football allegiance to the hated Vikings: an act to spite his father once and for all. Vince would watch the Vikings play the Packers and yell “Thor!” at the television venting his frustration at dear old dad with every blasphemous scream.

Following the Vikes taught him the hard fate of those predoomed to live forever on the wrong end of somebody else’s “Hail Mary.” With every disappointment, his primitive self would howl against a world that would not give him heart’s desire.

O-67 was called and Ken found himself with a chance to win. Ken scanned the room as numbers were called thinning out the assembly of the upright. Unlike most people in the room, Ken would not find it ironic if the number he’d waited for should fell him. Ken understood that this game, as all such games, was ruled by chance: by whatever inscrutable God ruled probability. He played knowing that everyone’s lucky number had the same chance of coming up.

Having no delusions about chance, Ken had no superstitions about numbers. When the man selling 50-50 raffle tickets came by, and the only number remaining was “13”, Ken went ahead and bought the ticket. Statisticians like him were on good terms with all the numbers; it was part of the job.

Ken sat across from a lady who dominated the table with a vast spread of cards: an abundance of extra chances that did her no good. The fourth number called matched a number on the G-column of her card, and she shrugged as she sat. In this game, everyone had one card: one equal chance at redemption.

After the tenth number was called, Vince looked around and was glad. He still stood, and only two others stood with him. With the 11th number, a chunky woman plopped down on her chair sighing with disappointment. It was just him and some nerd across the hall.

Vince would not have called himself religious. He was familiar with the rudiments of faith though its celestial mechanics were beyond him. Just the same, he sent up a little prayer to the almighty for the chance to be a winner tonight.

Vince remembered times when jests about religion were acceptable. One jest he remembered held that all prayers sent up by people of his faith ended in bingo. Thinking about it now, Vince felt that this was true of all prayer, not just his. You prayed for something until you got it or fate snatched it out of your hands. Then it was finished, done, case closed, and there was nothing left to pray for.

“O-62,” the caller said and both Vince and Ken sat down. For a while the caller scanned the suddenly silent room to see if anyone still stood. Seeing no one, he said that anyone who’d sat for O-62 should stand. Vince and Ken arose once more, reprieved from that last loss of the night.

Ken was not devoted to the game. He was here for the cause, to help his blind friends in whatever way he could. He knew enough about blindness from his friends to tell the man who’d jostled him in the bathroom about the shortcomings of his cane technique. Ken kept silent, understood, with wisdom that often eluded him, that this wasn’t really the time or the place for criticism.

Of course, part of supporting the cause was buying the food. As volunteers pushed between the tables hawking hot dogs, pizza, potato chips, cookies, cake slices, nutty bars, and sodas, Ken bought copiously. In the moments between games, he ate what he’d bought as a shield against conversations that he really didn’t want.

As Ken awaited the next number, he received a strange sending. It was less a vision than an impression of something out of the more bizarre writings of the prophets, Or Lovecraft. The creature, or whatever, seemed intent on saying something, but Ken couldn’t understand. He couldn’t put the strangeness of his experience into coherent thought. ‘I’ve got to stop with the sweets,’ Ken thought as the strange interlude faded.

The caller told out the next number and then the next. Ken wondered if, by some mischance, the two of them had the same card. He’d seen it happen. Finally, the caller said “B-13” and the statistician was brought low by a number that he alone didn’t fear. But then, he saw no irony in this; in the end, one number was as likely as another.

With exultant joy, Vince saw the nerdy guy sit. One of the volunteers maneuvered through the crowded hall to bring him the prize he’d won. Vince thanked the boy as he accepted the basket with its despicable load. ‘Winning was good,’ he thought as he left the building; ‘winning was the only thing.’

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The probability sculptor surveyed its work from its far medium: a place where man be the alien. No human could live there save with protective armor to keep the environment at bay. Nor would any sane person want to brave that frigid, darkness full of weird sounds and stinks.

The sculptor’s folk would also seem strange to the bingo players. They were a race of beings with uncanny senses and unfathomable arts. And as for its form, if someone were in its presence and could find a light to see by, that person would see a huge many-armed creature that swam through its medium in a twisting manner not seen in the oceans of Earth. Most humans would find it repulsive.

Yet, if a person could be in its presence, and appreciate it for what it was, that person might find the creature less strange than it seemed. For it had an appreciation of art though the sculpting of chaos, of chance and probability, would be beyond human understanding. It shared with man the idea that art was to be appreciated, especially by the artist.

The creature also shared with man a drive to seek companionship. So, as it observed what it had made, it sought out those it saw as participants in its creation. When doing so, it always felt the need to comprehend these frantic, care-warn, folk: beings roiled with drives it did not understand.

But all its efforts were for naught. It knew the words these beings used to describe its flourishes: “twist of fate”, “God’s cruel jests”, “coincidence”, miracle.” However, it could not map these words back to its experience of the universe.

Yet it persisted in its quest, and this night, it found a kindred spirit; a worker in chance. Though this creature, it called itself a “statistician”, worked on a level the sculptor found primitive to the point of savagery, it felt a commonality of purpose with this being. The sculptor sought out other common ground, but the statistician’s life was just too strange. Shaken, the sculptor removed itself to the realm of its kind.

Recoiling from its attempt to bridge this gulf, the sculptor turned to one of its parents. Thy talked as their bodies moved against each other, arms interlocking, caressing, reaching for each other as if to join their souls together. They talked of art and beauty in the most intimate language of their folk: a language of touch and taste. In that language, the old one assured the sculptor of the beauty of its creation and the power of its art.

Thus reassured, the sculptor returned to complete its project with the last finishing touches that would bring the work to its final glory. The sculptor hoped the beings, especially the statistician, would appreciate the final twist it felt inspired to add to the piece.

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“Nice stuff,” Ken said looking at the basket that Vince had won. “My nephew is a real sports fan.”

“Have it,” Vince said. “It’s all junk: a picture of their star quarterback before he switched teams; a football signed by their star running back before his drug problems got aired out in the press; stuff from other players who fell from grace. They fob their junk off onto charities to look like they care about the community and all; but they’re just dumping stuff no one else wants. I’m sure there’s a truckload of that crap they need to dump.”

“Just the same,” Ken said, “Toby would really like it. He doesn’t get out much, and this is his link to the outside world.”

“Doesn’t get out much?” Vince asked.

“He’s sick,” Ken replied, “just real sick.” Ken hoped that Vince would not press him for details. He did not feel like bearing his soul to the man. Helping him jumpstart his car was the right thing to do, and Ken was glad to do it. Just the same, Ken was crowd weary and just wanted to go home.

Ken didn’t want to talk about how he was better with numbers than with people: how crowded nights wore him down. He didn’t want to talk about how Toby’s sickness intimidated him: making him feel like whatever he did was not enough. He didn’t want to share the darkness in his head with this fierce man.

“Well, have it then,” Vince said shoving the basket at him.

Ken thanked the man and drove off into the fog-obscured night. As he reached the highway, he had another of those, maybe, visions where the strange being tried to communicate. This time, Ken got a feeling that the, whatever it was, had achieved something though Ken could not discern what the achievement was.

For a while, Ken thought that this might be some bizarre angel in charge of granting prayers. ‘Did Toby pray?’ Ken wondered and decided he didn’t know. He’d never felt the need to ask.

By the time Ken reached his house, he’d convinced himself that the whole thing was just a sugar high; that was the sanest, safest, least terrifying thing to believe. The uncanny was too far beyond the comfortable rationality of numbers for Ken to be at home.

‘At least,’ Ken thought, he would not be visiting empty handed the next time he saw Toby. He had something for his nephew, a gift that would make Ken feel useful, a person who could answer prayers.