

The Road To Happiness

Someone said the road to happiness is hard to tread. Don't ask me who said it because I can't remember right now, I think it was a guy called Jeff but don't quote me on that. The thing is he was right. Take this as an example.

Last month I won a tenner on the lottery. Not a huge amount obviously but better than nothing. Still if I'd saved all the money that I put on the lottery I would have made more than I won, but as they say you've got to be in it to win it. So I won a tenner, no big deal, but still not too bad. The thing was what to with it? Too little to invest. Not enough for a CD. I don't buy tapes anymore and cannot, for the life of me, be bothered to attempt to download them off the Internet. A few beers wouldn't go amiss but again, a tenner's only going to go so far. Obviously being the nice guy that I am I decided to give the money to charity.

No not really, down to Ladbrokes to whack it on the horses. I'm not much of a betting man normally but every now and then when the fancy takes me...

As I walked in I was surprised, as always so I'm not sure why, by the low level lighting in there. Almost as if to give it a seedy looking air. You could spot the full time gamblers a mile off. Sat around the place staring at the TV screens with a look of bewilderment on their faces. Occasionally one of them would get all excited and start yelling at a horse or a jockey and it scared the bejesus out of me, not the full timers though. No, they're all too used to that sort of thing.

Now being a bit of a novice at this sort of thing I don't get all the rubbish about form and what the going is like. I just plump for the first horse that grabs my attention. Hadn't made me any money before but then what the hell you've got to have some sort of system, however flaky.

Thursdays for two.

Stupid name really but it was a Thursday so ten pounds on the nose. I did think for a moment that I shouldn't do it, I can never really get the hang of Thursdays.

It came in. I was shocked. Rank outsider twenty four to one. I waltzed out with two hundred and forty quid in my pocket plus my tenner stake back. Nice one. Made even better by the fact that there's no tax to pay anymore.

As I walked out I could almost feel the eyes of the full timers burning a hole in my back. If looks could kill...

Two hundred and fifty quid better off than I had been earlier, well actually two hundred and forty nine if you discount the initial pound I spent on the Lottery.

Two hundred and fifty quid!

Two hundred and fifty quid!!!

It was more than I had ever won in the past, and I was feeling rather impressed. Off to the snooker club then for a quick one and give a few of my mates a call on the way I'm buying and I'll even pay for a couple of frames on the baize. Can't say fairer than that.

I had been sat in the pub for about ten minutes, still waiting for the others to come. I had thought that the offer of free booze would have had them running, but not yet. If you've ever been in a pub on your own you'll know

that without a paper or anyone to talk to it gets a bit boring after a while. It was during this period that out of the corner of my eye I noticed some beautifully attractive flashing lights. A beautifully attractive flashing lady would have been better but beggars can't be choosers.

I picked up my pint and sauntered over to the fruit machine. I had passed it on the way in but hadn't really paid any attention to it as there were a couple of guys using it at the time, but they'd long since gone. I couldn't believe the price of the damn thing fifty pence a go! As I think I mentioned earlier I'm not much of a gambler but the way the day was going I thought it was worth a couple of quid.

So in they went. It's funny how the lights on these machines work. Before the money goes in they seem to give of a feeling of fun and joy but as soon as you push the coin through the slot they get to business and start to make you feel as if you don't know what you're doing. Well they make me feel as if I don't know what I'm doing you may be different.

First press of the start button elicited nothing more than two bars, a cherry and a lucky seven symbol. I stopped to check that it wasn't a win because sometimes even just one cherry will give you twenty pence. Not on this machine though the only time you would get money from a single cherry on this machine was if it was on the first line. Ok then, I thought, try again. I pressed the start button again and was rewarded this time with absolutely nothing again. Two goes left and I can't say that I was feeling all that lucky anymore, still only two quid out of my winnings. The third go started well. I had managed to get four numbers along the trail which meant that I could go for a lucky strike and attempt to enter the path of wonder. Don't they put some bollocks on these machines? Anyway the lights were flashing randomly so I struck the start button to stop them.

It didn't work, they were still flashing away.

I tried again, still no luck.

I decided to try once more and this time I hit the wrong button.

To my surprise they stopped, as I looked down I realised I had been hitting the wrong button. The outcome, however, was not a surprise I hadn't managed to get onto the path of wonder. One go left then. This time I had a winner, not much of a winner but a winner none the less the first icon up on the reel was a cherry. I checked and that was a twenty pence win, nice. I figured that I would just collect it and sit back down to wait for my mates to come in. So I pressed the collect button and bent down to retrieve my winnings. I remember thinking, as I bent over, that they must have made machines quieter since I last played as there was no chunka chunka as my money was expelled. A quick delve in the hole revealed that in fact there was no money there. So I stood back up pressed the button again and went through the whole process once more.

Still no money.

Standing back up again I pressed the button three times in quick succession and checked the hole once more. I wasn't wholly surprised to find that my money wasn't there. Now a lesser man may have walked away at that point, after all it was only twenty pence. I am, if nothing else, a man of principle and that was what kept me going at this point.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, bang as I lightly pressed the button four times and then, giving into frustration hit it for the fifth.

Still no money!

It was at that point that one of my mates turned up and happily pushed me into the machine as I had my back turned towards him. We exchanged pleasantries and I explained the situation to him ending up with me not getting my money out of the machine. It was at that point, during another press of the button, to demonstrate my annoyance, that he explained exactly where I was going wrong. I had been pressing the wrong button. The button to collect my winnings was in fact on the other side of the machine. He then went onto explain that, in order to make more money out the machines, the manufacturers made them as confusing as possible. In this instance switching the collect and gamble buttons at the time when you are ready to collect your winnings.

So I had gambled away my twenty pence. No big deal, I thought and turned from the machine. It was at this point that I realised that the lights on the machine weren't all friendly and fun. I checked the fascia of it and had to take a double take when I looked at the bank section.

Where before it had read £0.20 it now read £350. I won't write down exactly what my friend called me at that point but it began with 'You lucky..', I'm sure you can add the rest if you want.

What a stroke of luck.

A few more beers down the throat coupled with several games of snooker, against which nobody would bet with me, and I couldn't work out exactly how much I had won but I knew it was close to six hundred notes. I think I was in a state of shock.

The next morning I woke up with the mother of all headaches and vague images of a night of hedonism. An empty can of coke lay on the floor next to a half eaten Kebab and a few French fries. This in itself was odd as I don't normally have a view of the floor when I'm in bed. I closed my eyes and then slowly opened them again. Having come round a little more I noticed this time that in fact my legs were raised higher than my head and torso.

I was far from comfortable.

I realised that I was half on and half off the settee in the lounge dressed only in boxer shorts with the curtains wide open. My house, for those of you who don't know it, is Victorian and the lounge is directly next to the footpath that runs in front. I wouldn't like to think about what any passers by would have thought if they had let their eyes wander in. Still their problem not mine.

I pulled myself up and quickly rushed into the kitchen as an old lady walked by with her dog. She had a sneaky glance, I wonder what she thought?

Two hours later I was dressed and walking around the shops looking at clothes, stereos, DVD recorders and just about anything else I could see that would remove the burning sensation that the money was making in my pocket. Another couple of hours later I was in a pub enjoying a nice lunch. I hadn't actually bought anything, well obviously other than a beer and my lasagne and chips, so again found myself in a similar situation to the day before.

There was even a fruit machine.

This time however I decided not to push my luck and instead found a discarded newspaper that someone had left in their haste to leave. I won't go into the name of the publication as that's not important to this tale let's just say that it wasn't one of the classier publications that churns out from Fleet Street on a daily basis. Actually having written that I am forced to deviate from the narrative and pose a question, do they still publish newspapers on Fleet Street? Maybe they do, maybe they don't I'm suddenly not sure. Anyway I digress, the story on the third or fourth page (again not important and I forget the specifics) caught my eye. You know how sometimes on what they call 'a slow news day' the papers are filled with stories that are there primarily to plump out the pages. You know the sort of thing I mean "Dog saves man from infectious blister!" etc, etc. Anyway I read the story, as I recall it was about an old woman who had fallen over a slightly raised kerbstone and broken her wrist. It was accompanied by a picture of her propped up in her hospital bed holding up her plastered arm to the photographer. She still managed a smile though, probably thinking of all the money she would get for compensation. It was, however, something entirely different that prompted me to write down these events.

When I had first opened the paper all the advertising chaff had fallen out onto the table top, you know the sort of thing, those glossy bits of paper with promises of low cost loans, pizza menus with free delivery, conservatories, garden supplies, free quote home maintenance with work quality guaranteed. Well amongst this little lot was a business card that caught my eye.

The card was simple enough, plain white and printed in the nice friendly Comic Sans MS font size 18, it simply read, "Are you bored with Life? Want to make more money than you could possible need? Phone 090 65***** for details." Now I'm not the sort of person who normally pays much attention to these sorts of things. They're normally some hair brained, get rich quick scheme that makes no money for you but loads for the person selling the idea. But this time somewhere deep within my subconscious, a chord struck. I'd been reasonably lucky the last couple of days or so, I thought what the hell, I'll give it a ring, and come to think of it I was bored with life!

I didn't ring the number straight away, but got another pint in, sat back down, took a long sup of beer then dialled the number into my Nokia.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"Hello, yes?"

"Oh Hi, erm I was erm calling about the advert."

"What advert?"

"The one I found in the paper."

"What paper?"

"Erm, the one in the pub."

"What pub?"

"Look I was having lunch, erm in the pub and...."

"What'd you have?"

"Sorry?"

"For lunch."

"Lasagne and chips."

"Any good?"

"Yeah, not bad, but as I said erm I was in the pub and...."

"Are you bored with life?"

Silence. This train of conversation had totally thrown me. I hadn't expected this. I think as they say, the cat had got my tongue.

"I asked if you were bored with life?"

"Yes erm I think I maybe."

"You think you maybe? Well you're either bored with life or you're not. What is it to be? Or was it the money that intrigued you?"

"I don't really know."

"What don't you really know?"

"Look, can we start again please?"

"Go on."

"Well as I was trying to say, I was in the pub, having lunch, reading a news paper and...."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes"

"Good, carry on."

"Yeah erm, I noticed this card had fallen out of the paper with this number on it, and I thought erm I'd give it a call."

"Have you any idea how many people have called this number?"

"Erm, no."

"Forty two, including you."

"Is that all?"

"That is all. I'm sorry about this but I am going to put you on hold for a minute or so, don't go away."

"Ok."

And with that some nice classical music came on the line, Vivaldi I think it was.

"Sorry about that, I just had to pop to the toilet."

"That's ok."

"Now where were we?"

"You said that forty two people had called this number."

"Oh yes, that is correct, now are you bored with life?"

"Erm..."

"Look its quite an easy question, yes or no, are you bored with life?"

"Yes."

"Good now we're getting somewhere. And do you want to make more money, and I mean make more money you could possible need?"

"Erm..."

"Again its quite an easy question, yes or no, do you want to make more money you could possible need?"

"Yes."

"Excellent!"

"What do I have to do?"

"We'll come to that in a minute, but first I'm going to have to put you on hold again, just for a couple of minutes."

"Ok."

I sat there in the pub with my Nokia against my ear listening to Vivaldi for what seemed like an age, but something told me to hold, I was intrigued, I wanted to know where this was leading.

"Still there?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

"Look about this card, this advert about making...."

"Are you tall."

"Eh?"

"You're not very good at answering simply questions are you?"

"Why do you want to know how tall I am?"

"I didn't ask *how* tall you were, merely if you *were* tall."

"Surely that's a matter of perspective isn't it?"

"Yes"

"Oh ok.."

"So are you tall or not? Yes or no simple answer to a simple question."

I thought about it for a few seconds and then realised it must be one of those is the glass half empty or half full sort of questions so I answered.

"Tall."

This train of conversation went on for a while and to be honest I was starting to get a bit pissed off. I was put on hold twice more and by this time I had listened to three of the four seasons.

"Still there?"

"YES!"

"I'm sorry, did I detect a bit of anger there?"

"NO! Look I was just interested in the card I found, you haven't told me anything yet, you've asked me my shoe size, where I go on holiday each year, do I have a fish tank, what car do I drive, etc etc etc, Now I'd like to know SOMETHING about YOU!"

"There is no need to shout. Please be calm. This is a test, you are doing very well, not long now."

"I'm sorry."

"That's ok, it happens, now I'm going to go now but I have your mobile number and you will receive a text shortly."

"That it, look what's going on?"

"Goodbye." Click

I sat there in disbelief. What the hell was all that about? I kept looking at my phone waiting for the text to come. Should I ring back, he said it was a test, no I'll wait for the text.

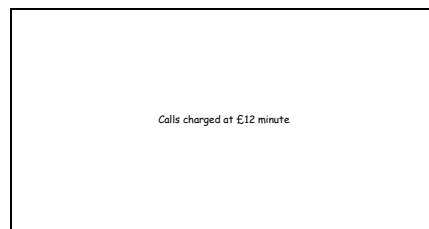
Beep Beep.

MESSAGE RECEIVED. SHOW MESSAGE.

THANX 4 CALL FIND 2COND CARD 4 ANSA.

What the heck does that mean? I had a look through the chaff littering the table and after looking through all the crap I found it. It was well hidden, tucked inside an Indian takeaway menu, free bottle of house wine with orders over £15, out of sight.

Comic sans MS, font size 4.



Shit. I quickly grabbed my Nokia. Menu – Call Register – Call Duration – Last Call Duration. 00.30.00.

Thirty minutes exactly!

Twelve times thirty...

THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY POUNDS!

Fuck.